

TAPI pipeline  
gas transit  
WTO  
military withdrawal  
nuclear power  
remittances  
creative industries

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# STRATEG**EAST** WESTERNIZATION REPORT 2025

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U.S. partnership  
rearmament  
NATO integration  
referendum  
EU breaking off  
political prisoners  
Russian influence

# ABOUT STRATEG EAST



StrategEast is a leading independent institution developing Eurasia's digital economy, in collaboration with international financial institutions, development agencies, global tech companies, and Eurasian governments.

StrategEast is a non profit organization with offices in the United States, Ukraine, Georgia, and Kyrgyzstan.

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# INTRODUCTION



As the war in Ukraine enters its fourth year, Eurasia remains in a state of flux, with every country in the region seeking new sources of stability. The defining theme of this year's report is **balance** — the ongoing recalibration of alliances, economic partnerships, and security commitments as regional actors navigate a landscape reshaped by conflict.

The war has disrupted traditional geopolitical alignments, forcing governments to reassess long-standing dependencies and explore alternative partnerships. Countries that once relied on Russia for economic and security guarantees are now looking elsewhere, while some that previously saw Europe as their primary strategic partner are strengthening ties with the United States. At the same time, Eastern European nations that depended on American military protection are shifting their focus toward Europe. This evolving geopolitical landscape highlights a broader reality: no single power can offer absolute stability, compelling governments to diversify their alliances in an effort to hedge against future uncertainty.

These shifts are evident across multiple sectors. **Uzbekistan** and **Kyrgyzstan**, traditionally close to Moscow, are actively expanding economic engagements with the West. Uzbekistan is pursuing **WTO membership** as a pathway to modernization and global market integration, while Kyrgyzstan has launched a **Creative Industries Park**, aiming to attract foreign investment and position itself as a hub for digital entrepreneurship.

Meanwhile, **Kazakhstan** is carefully navigating its energy policy. As it prepares to construct its first nuclear power plant, Astana is opting for a **multi-partner approach**, involving **Russia, China, and Western companies** in a single project to balance competing interests while ensuring strategic autonomy.

In the **Caucasus**, both **Armenia and Azerbaijan** are forging new alliances following the resolution of their long-standing territorial dispute. Armenia, which for years balanced between Moscow and Brussels in search of a Karabakh settlement, has now signed a **strategic cooperation agreement with the United States**, signaling a major geopolitical shift. Azerbaijan, having successfully removed Russian military forces from its territory, is strengthening **energy partnerships with Europe**, positioning itself as a key supplier of natural gas.

Yet, not all nations are aligning more closely with the West. In a surprising move, **Georgia**, which has spent decades pursuing European integration, has opted to **pause its EU accession talks** in favor of a more pragmatic approach toward Moscow. This shift marks a significant recalibration in Georgia's foreign policy and raises questions about its long-term strategic direction.

Beyond the former Soviet sphere, broader **security realignments** reflect similar balancing efforts. **Lithuania**, uncertain about the future of U.S. military commitments to Europe, has turned to **Germany** as its primary defense partner, welcoming the **permanent stationing of a German brigade** within its borders.

Perhaps the most striking example of Eurasia's balancing act came in **Moldova**, where a **national referendum on EU membership** underscored the country's deep internal divisions: **50.35% voted in favor, while 49.65% opposed**. This razor-thin margin reflects a broader struggle faced by many nations in the region — torn between historical ties, economic pragmatism, and aspirations for a more secure future.

As Eurasia undergoes these profound transformations, the coming years will be defined by how effectively its nations manage the delicate art of balance. Whether in **diplomacy, security, or economic policy**, the choices made today will shape the region's trajectory for decades to come. This report will closely track these developments, analyzing how governments, businesses, and international actors adapt to a world where stability is no longer guaranteed — and where balance becomes the key to survival.

*Sincerely,*  
*Anatoly Motkin*  
*President of StratEast*

A handwritten signature in dark ink that reads "Anatoly Motkin". The signature is fluid and cursive, with the first name and last name clearly distinguishable.

# ARMENIA:

## Strengthening Western Ties with a U.S. Partnership Deal

### Richard Giragosian

Through 2024, Armenia has continued to adapt to a difficult and painful post-war reality. This new reality was shaped by Armenia's recognition of its own vulnerability following the devastating defeat in the 2020 war with Azerbaijan. Azerbaijan's victory not only marked a military defeat for Armenia but fundamentally reconfigured the geopolitical landscape and marked an end to Armenian complacency and overconfidence.

After a series of painful concessions to Azerbaijan in tense diplomatic negotiations throughout 2021-2022, Armenia's vulnerability was further exacerbated by Azerbaijan's forced expulsion of the Armenian population from Nagorno-Karabakh in 2023. Yet against

this backdrop of national trauma and geopolitical recalibration, Armenia adopted a new geopolitical strategy designed to meet the demands of the post-war reality. This new approach rests on an unprecedented deepening of ties with the West, while simultaneously reducing the traditional Armenian dependence on Russia as its primary security partner. The results of this strategic shift are already evident in the successful conclusion of negotiations through December 2024 with the United States, culminating in the signing of a groundbreaking bilateral Armenia-U.S. Strategic Partnership Agreement. This agreement is particularly significant as it established an expanded and deeper framework for cooperation and U.S. assistance.



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In the words of then-U.S. Secretary of State Antony Blinken, the strategic partnership reflected an American commitment to “working with Armenia in the realm of security and defense, and in particular, to support its efforts to assert its independence and sovereignty over its own territory.” The Strategic Partnership Agreement comprises programs and activities in four main areas: promoting economic cooperation, enhancing security and defense, strengthening democracy, justice, and inclusion, and increasing people-to-people exchanges.

Highlighting the agreement’s expanded scope, it also includes professional military education and training for the Armenian armed forces, technical expertise, and assistance from a U.S. customs and border patrol team focusing on developing border security capabilities, cooperation in cybersecurity, and negotiations related to civilian nuclear energy cooperation.

## REDEFINING ARMENIAN STRATEGY

Driven by the necessity to redefine and readjust the country’s geopolitical strategy, Armenia has introduced a bold and forward-looking approach to defense, national security, and foreign policy. Designed to replace the outdated and failed strategy of complementarity — whereby Armenia sought to balance a pro-Western perspective with reliance on Russian security guarantees — this new geopolitical strategy is driven by the pursuit of additional and alternative security partners.

Defined as strategic diversification, this policy shift is characterized by three core elements. First, it entails a pronounced pivot to the West, with a particular embrace of the European Union (EU) and the United States (U.S.) as priority partners. Second — and more strikingly, Armenia is now pursuing new, non-traditional security partners, including India among others. Third, there has been a profound rejection of Russia as a primary security provider, serving as a critical component of Armenia’s geopolitical diversification strategy.

## ARMENIA’S PIVOT TO THE WEST

For post-war Armenia, the strategic turn to the West represents both the culmination of years of deepening relations with the United States and Europe and a natural reaction to Russia’s failure to fulfill its security obligations to Armenia. Armenian relations with the U.S. have been both consistent and longstanding, due in part to the presence of a large and politically sophisticated Armenian-American community.

With the foreign policy shifts implemented by the Trump Administration, questions have emerged about the potential impact on Armenia from the second Trump presidency. Yet for Armenia, there are few direct implications from Trump’s return, especially as Armenia’s political influence in Washington is centered in Congress, not the White House. This influence has generally transcended partisan divisions in American politics. Nevertheless, Armenia may experience indirect impacts from Trump’s policies, most likely stemming from the spillover of changes in U.S. policy toward Russia, Turkey, and Iran.

Additionally, Armenia is less concerned about Trump’s policies due to the January 2025 signing of a new Strategic Partnership Agreement with the United States. Although the partnership agreement was deliberately timed to enter into force before the start of the Trump Administration, it was concluded with the consent of then-incoming Secretary of State Marco Rubio.

**Thus, the strategic partnership — complete with specific areas of cooperation ranging from nuclear energy to military assistance — serves as a foundation for deeper relations between Armenia and the United States. As an agreement that culminated from a well-established trend of deepening Armenian-U.S. relations, it stands as the most symbolically significant achievement in Armenia’s Westernization during 2023-2024.**

Moreover, Washington benefits from Armenia’s position as both a reliable partner and a vibrant democracy, endowed with the rare commodity of legitimacy from two consecutive genuinely free and fair elections. For American policy in the region, the 2020

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war and the more recent Azerbaijani attack and military victory present two dangerous precedents: first, an apparent validation of the use of force, and second, a triumph of authoritarian power over democracy. These factors drive the U.S. closer to Armenia and further from autocratic Azerbaijan.

## EU ENGAGEMENT IN ARMENIA

Beyond the important strategic partnership with the United States, Armenia also benefits from robust European engagement — which is both less provocative to Moscow and more practical than U.S. support. Specifically, the EU's policy response to developments in Armenia consists of two significant initiatives: the unprecedented deployment (and recent two-year extension) of an EU civilian monitoring mission to Armenia and the first-ever development of EU security assistance to Armenia.

These developments are particularly significant as pioneering efforts of engagement with a country like Armenia, which still hosts a Russian military base and remains a member of both the Russian-dominated Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO) and the Eurasian Economic Union (EEU). As the EU moves to penalize Georgia's flagrant disregard for democratic principles, the EU is expected to increase its engagement with Armenia, focusing on efforts to reward Armenia's hard-won democratic gains and bolster resilience to prevent any possible democratic backsliding.

For the EU, Armenia's resilience is most impressive. Despite an array of challenges, the country remains resolute and committed to democratization and reform. Armenia also holds a strategic advantage over the longer term, stemming from its rare commodity of legitimacy based on democratic credentials and free elections, as well as a hard-won degree of stability greater than that of its neighbors. Thus, the outlook for Armenian democracy, reform, and resilience remains strong.

## RESISTING RUSSIA

For over twenty years, Armenian foreign policy was defined by complementarity — a struggle to maintain a strategic balance between its security partnership with Russia and its interest in deepening ties with the EU and the West. This policy became increasingly difficult to sustain, especially given the underlying trend of Armenian dependence on Russia driven by security and military ties. Since the 2020 Nagorno-Karabakh war, the limitations of Russian security guarantees to Armenia

have become increasingly obvious. With the Russian invasion of Ukraine, Armenia now faces an even more imposing challenge in meeting Moscow's expectations for loyalty and support regarding Russian aggression against Ukraine.

## DISPELLING THE MYTH OF RUSSIAN POWER

Since Russia's unjustified and unprovoked invasion of Ukraine, the failure of the Russian military campaign has revealed that Russian military capabilities are much weaker than previously thought. The repercussions of this unexpected weakness have fostered a new realization among many of Russia's neighbors: although they may face threats from Russia, the limits of Russian power and influence are now undeniable.

More broadly, President Putin's failed invasion of Ukraine has gravely — if not fatally — weakened Russian power and influence. With the demonstrable defeat of the vaunted Russian military, we now see an isolated, angry, and vengeful Putin, particularly sensitive to any signs of weakness. For other frozen conflicts, from Georgia to Moldova, Russia may seek to assert its declining power through shows of strength. Though driven by desperation, Russian failure in Ukraine may only encourage a more dangerous, isolated, and resentful Russian leadership to demand greater loyalty from its allies like Armenia and the Central Asian states, while increasing pressure on other neighbors.

In strictly military terms, Russia's invasion of Ukraine has little to no direct impact on the Russian peacekeeping mission in Nagorno-Karabakh. In diplomatic terms, however, Azerbaijan has already leveraged the situation by increasing pressure on Armenia and Karabakh, as demonstrated by its blockade of Karabakh in December 2022. Azerbaijan's strategy goes beyond simply exploiting the distraction presented by the war in Ukraine or increasing pressure on Armenia — it represents a bold defiance of Russia. Bolstered by Turkish support, this Azerbaijani approach is likely to continue.

Beyond Russia's clear unreliability as a security partner, Armenia has also lost confidence in the Russian-dominated Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO) as a security provider. This stems from the CSTO's failure to adequately respond to Azerbaijani attacks on Armenia, which has only confirmed the organization's emptiness and bankruptcy as an alliance. In the current context, the organization is sometimes derided as the "Collective Insecurity Treaty Organization." This

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motivated the Armenian government's decision in January 2023 to refuse to host CSTO military exercises — a rare display of Armenian frustration with, if not rejection of, the organization. For Armenia, Russia now presents a new and more serious challenge: that of an unreliable partner. Russia's failure to respond to Azerbaijani incursions and continued illegal presence of military forces within Armenia proper<sup>10</sup> marked a pre-existing crisis in relations well before the 2020 war and the subsequent collapse of Nagorno-Karabakh.

## ASSESSING ARMENIA'S NEW GEOPOLITICAL STRATEGY

**For Armenia, the need to diversify security partners replaces past efforts at balancing between Russia and the West. The greater risk lies in not altering strategy, while the benefits of pivoting toward the West are both demonstrable and popular in Armenia today. This is evident from the crisis in relations with Russia, which is now correctly perceived as a dangerously undependable “partner.”**

As Armenia struggles to overcome years of dangerous overdependence on Russia, the question of how far and how fast it can move closer to the West becomes strategically critical. Beyond challenging Russia, Armenia's strategy is driven by a defense of the country's national interests — or more fundamentally, a commitment to reassert Armenian independence and sovereignty.

Moreover, Armenia is seeking to resist the gravitational pull of the Russian orbit, and timing is essential for two reasons. First, there is a window of opportunity due to Russia's distraction and preoccupation with its failed invasion of Ukraine. Second, there is an unprecedented level of Western (particularly European) interest in

Armenia. In this context, Armenia is now viewed as a partner that is both a more reliable democracy and endowed with greater strategic significance than before.

The key is not to replace Russia with the West, but rather to offset Russia through a diversification of security partners and allies. This requires a more sophisticated transactional strategy by Armenia — a policy approach of bartering and bargaining with both the West and Russia, and where possible, playing both power centers against each other. While Yerevan lacks the leverage to directly challenge Russia, it can change the terms of that relationship. Armenia's advantage stems from its increased strategic significance, greater stability and resilience, and the rare commodity of democratic legitimacy.

Looking forward, the West faces two looming challenges: the risk of Azerbaijan's continued reliance on force and threats of military aggression against Armenia, and the possibility of a vengeful, resurgent Russia seeking to restore its waning regional power and position. Bolstered by Armenia's commitment to embrace the West, the most effective Western response will be to regain deterrence through connectivity or economic interdependence centered on democratic Armenia.



# AZERBAIJAN:

## Azerbaijan: Balancing Foreign Policy after Russia's Military Withdrawal

**Ahmad Alili**

### INTRODUCTION

Since April 16, 2024, Azerbaijan has become the only Eastern Partnership country with no foreign troops on its territory, having fully restored its territorial integrity and sovereignty along all of its borders. This is an unprecedented achievement for any country in the Eastern Partnership and the post-Soviet region.

The withdrawal of Russian troops from Karabakh, announced<sup>11</sup> late in the evening on April 16, 2024, was a landmark event for the entire South Caucasus, especially for Azerbaijan, given the history of conflict in the region. This development not only defined 2024 but also marked a pivotal moment in three decades of Azerbaijani-Russian relations.

It reshaped the geopolitical landscape of the South Caucasus, influencing not only ties between Baku and Moscow but also the broader dynamics involving Armenia, Turkey, and Iran. The legacies of the Armenian-Azerbaijani conflicts of the 1990s and the 2020 Karabakh war have been instrumental in shaping the course of Russian-Azerbaijani relations, culminating in this decisive shift.

### BACKGROUND OF AZERBAIJANI-RUSSIAN RELATIONS

The separation of Azerbaijan from the Soviet Union significantly impacted relations between Moscow and Baku. Azerbaijan considered itself an exemplary loyal republic during Soviet rule,<sup>12</sup> especially in the final years of the USSR, when it was among the countries



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that voted to preserve the Soviet Union.<sup>13</sup> Nevertheless, both the Communist Party leadership in Baku and the nationalist government that followed belief that the Center (Moscow) could have prevented the emergence of the Armenia-Azerbaijan conflict.<sup>14</sup> Azerbaijani public opinion turned strongly against the Kremlin, particularly due to its decision to send troops to Baku to suppress the national movement in a bloody crackdown on January 20, 1990.<sup>15</sup> As a result, in 1992, Azerbaijan was among the first nations to demand the withdrawal of Soviet/Russian troops from its territory,<sup>16</sup> alongside the Baltic states — a bold move, considering that no Eastern European, South Caucasian, or Central Asian nation had succeeded in doing so.

Relations between the two countries worsened during the presidencies of Heydar Aliyev in Baku and Boris Yeltsin in Moscow, largely due to their long-standing personal rivalry dating back to their time in the Soviet Politburo.<sup>17</sup> Consequently, Moscow provided full military support to Armenia in its war against Azerbaijan.<sup>18</sup> By the early 2000s, according to Azerbaijani sources,<sup>19</sup> Armenia had received a large quantity of Russian weapons, which strengthened its military capabilities against Azerbaijan despite being a smaller country.

Relations improved with the presidency of Vladimir Putin in Moscow. His first visit to Baku in 2000, where he met Heydar Aliyev and promised Russian neutrality in the Armenia-Azerbaijan conflict, significantly boosted ties between the two countries.<sup>20</sup> Nevertheless, Azerbaijan remained firm in demanding the withdrawal of the remaining Russian troops,<sup>21</sup> who by then had signed a military alliance with Armenia.<sup>22</sup> This effort culminated in the closure of the strategic Gabala Radar Station — a strategic facility built by the Soviets capable of monitoring missile launches throughout the Middle East, Iran, and Southeast Asia — in December 2012.<sup>23</sup>

Under Ilham Aliyev's presidency, positive trends in Russia-Azerbaijan relations continued. Azerbaijan's balanced foreign policy — keeping a certain distance from the Trans-Atlantic community and maintaining limited engagement with Eastern Partnership initiatives — was among the key factors contributing to stronger ties between Moscow and Baku. Russia appreciated Azerbaijan's foreign policy approach, which it viewed as being “based on national interests” — a term recently used for other post-Soviet republics as well.<sup>24</sup>

Nevertheless, Azerbaijan remained deeply dissatisfied with all three OSCE Minsk Group co-chair countries — Russia, the United States, and France — due to their failure to achieve tangible progress in negotiations on

the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict.<sup>25</sup> Baku also saw Russia as the country with the most leverage over Armenia, yet unwilling to use its influence to pressure Armenia into withdrawing to its internationally recognized borders. This prompted Azerbaijan to deepen its strategic partnership with Turkey, a NATO member with significant autonomy within the alliance — a dynamic that Moscow viewed favorably. Additionally, Azerbaijan expanded its cooperation with Israel, focusing on defense modernization and military development.<sup>28 29</sup>

As a result of these defense-building efforts, Azerbaijan achieved military victory over Armenia in 2020, reclaiming control over Karabakh. However, the scenario most avoided by both Armenia and Azerbaijan — the deployment of Russian troops in Karabakh — materialized as part of the Tripartite Statement signed by the leaders of Armenia, Azerbaijan, and Russia on November 9-10, 2020.

For 26 years, negotiations between Yerevan and Baku had maintained one consistent principle — no presence of Russian (or any external) peacekeepers in Karabakh. Yet, Azerbaijan ultimately found itself in the very situation it sought to avoid: Russian troops returned for the first time since 1992. Given that Azerbaijan's foreign policy identity had been built around maintaining a balanced approach and keeping its territory free of foreign military presence, Baku was now faced with the challenge of restoring its previous status.

## WITHDRAWAL OF RUSSIAN PEACEKEEPERS

The opportunity arose with Russian troops being engaged in the war in Ukraine, Armenia miscalculating Russia's power on the ground at the time, and increased interest from the European Union and the United States in military engagement in South Caucasus affairs.

Between 2022-2023, Yerevan presented its own interpretation of the Tripartite Statement and continued using the strategic Lachin corridor to militarily supply Karabakh Armenians,<sup>30</sup> which was in direct contradiction to Azerbaijan's reading of the agreement. Azerbaijan sought to leverage Russia's presence on the ground to ensure Armenia complied with the terms of the Tripartite Statement. However, Moscow's reluctance to address Azerbaijan's concerns — as it sought to remain undistracted from its war in Ukraine — led to renewed public criticism of Russia in Azerbaijan.<sup>31 32</sup> Additionally, Russia obstructed direct EU- and US-led mediation efforts between Karabakh Armenian leaders and Azerbaijani authorities.<sup>33 34 35</sup>

Tensions further escalated in 2022 following the public comments of Russian generals<sup>36</sup> on the Karabakh issue and the use of the Lachin Corridor, as well as the emergence of Russian-Armenian billionaire Ruben Vardanyan in Karabakh as a Moscow-backed political figure under the protection of Russian peacekeepers. These developments prompted Azerbaijan to take bolder steps in response. As a result, in December 2022, Azerbaijani civil society representatives blocked the Lachin corridor near the Russian peacekeepers' post at the strategic Shusha entrance.<sup>37</sup> By the end of April 2023, they were replaced by Azerbaijani military personnel. In September 2023, after the failure of EU- and U.S.-mediated efforts to unblock Karabakh Armenians and Russia's refusal to allow Karabakh Armenian leaders to leave the region for negotiations, Azerbaijan launched a "counter-terrorism operation." The operation lasted less than 24 hours and concluded on September 20, 2023, with the defeat and complete dissolution of Karabakh Armenians' de facto Republic.

Azerbaijan's military victory in September 2023 led to the mass exodus of Karabakh Armenians from the region. With very few Karabakh Armenians remaining, the purpose of Russian peacekeepers in Karabakh became highly uncertain. Their presence, originally justified in November 2020, no longer served its initial role, raising questions about the legitimacy of Russia's continued military presence in Azerbaijan's internationally recognized territory.<sup>38</sup>

Baku and Moscow engaged in a series of both public and behind-the-scenes discussions regarding the future role of Russian peacekeepers in Karabakh. Russia sought to justify its continued presence under the pretext of mine-clearance operations,<sup>39</sup> but Azerbaijan strongly and publicly objected when the Russian Ambassador to Azerbaijan announced this intention to Russian media.<sup>40</sup>

Finally, on April 16, 2024, during late-night hours, Azerbaijani media announced an agreement for the withdrawal of Russian peacekeepers from Karabakh — causing a significant shift in the region's security landscape.<sup>41 42 43</sup>

## CONSEQUENCES OF THE WITHDRAWAL

The withdrawal of Russian peacekeepers from Karabakh, which occurred much earlier than the originally planned November 2025, had several key consequences. First, it significantly strengthened Azerbaijan's regional and global standing. Since the departure of Russian

troops from Karabakh, Baku has intensified efforts to integrate the region into its administrative structure, including implementing resettlement programs for Karabakh Azerbaijanis.<sup>44</sup> Additionally, Azerbaijan has pursued an increasingly independent foreign policy, further deepening its cooperation with Israel and Turkey.<sup>45</sup> Moreover, Azerbaijan's image in Europe and the United States has shifted, as it is no longer perceived merely as a country mirroring Russian geopolitical moves but rather as an actor pursuing its own strategic interests.<sup>46 47 48 49</sup>

**Azerbaijan's foreign policy model has become a blueprint for other regional nations. Traditionally Western-aligned Georgia has started adopting a more "balanced foreign policy" approach, particularly in its relations with Russia and China. Meanwhile, Armenia, despite its membership in Russian-led political, economic, and military blocs, is actively working to deepen ties with the European Union and the United States.**

The concepts of "multi-vector," "complementary foreign policy," and "balanced foreign policy" — long central to Azerbaijan's diplomatic strategy — have now become key buzzwords across the South Caucasus and Central Asia.<sup>50</sup>

Both Turkey and Israel emerged as key beneficiaries of these developments. Turkey's geostrategic influence expanded eastward, extending from the South Caucasus to Central Asian nations along the eastern shores of the Caspian Sea.<sup>51</sup> This created new opportunities for large-scale infrastructure and connectivity projects, such as the Middle Corridor initiative. Furthermore, Turkey's Bayraktar drones and other advanced weaponry gained international recognition, receiving a significant public relations boost following Azerbaijan's military successes

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in Karabakh in 2020 and 2023 when these drones were effectively used.

Conversely, Russia and Iran experienced a decline in influence in the region. Iran, in particular, reacted with frustration, largely due to the increased presence of Turkey, which Tehran perceives as a key facilitator of Western/NATO influence in the region.<sup>52 53</sup>

The withdrawal of Russian forces further weakened Moscow's geopolitical position in the South Caucasus, a region traditionally considered part of its sphere of influence. Russian mediation efforts between Armenia and Azerbaijan became increasingly irrelevant, marking a significant shift in the balance of power. Moscow has attempted to retain its role as a mediator — the Russian Ambassador to Azerbaijan expressed a vision to keep Russian peacekeepers in the region as part of a land-mine clearance team,<sup>54</sup> also opening a consulate in Karabakh<sup>55</sup> — but Azerbaijan's growing assertiveness and Russia's ongoing war in Ukraine have significantly diminished its influence in the region. Additionally, Baku has not forgotten Russia's previous role in obstructing its direct contacts with Karabakh Armenians and preventing Karabakh Armenian leaders from engaging in EU- and U.S.-mediated dialogues with Azerbaijani officials.

Moreover, these events significantly altered Russia-Armenia relations. For Armenia under Nikol Pashinyan, a strong Russian-Armenian alliance was previously justified by the expectation that Russia would help Armenia maintain control over Karabakh. However, once Russia failed to fulfill this role, the Pashinyan government underwent a substantial foreign policy shift: Yerevan became more independent and increasingly pro-Western in its strategic outlook.<sup>56</sup> The withdrawal of Russian troops also left Armenia in a more vulnerable security position. Feeling betrayed by Moscow, Armenia began seeking alternative ways to ensure its security. Having relied on Russian security guarantees, Armenia found itself isolated after their departure, prompting the government to forge new security partnerships, including engagement with the West.<sup>57</sup>

This shift allowed for closer ties between Yerevan and Western capitals. The EU and the U.S. supported Armenia's efforts to reduce its dependence on Russia, encouraging domestic reforms aimed at strengthening its independence.<sup>58</sup> Additionally, the withdrawal of Russian troops provided momentum for Turkey-Armenia normalization efforts, fostering diplomatic engagement between the two nations.<sup>59</sup>

From the perspective of Karabakh Armenians, Russia failed to guarantee their future in the region. Culturally,

Karabakh Armenians had closer ties to Russia than even the population of the Armenian Republic itself. However, Russia's inability to prevent Azerbaijan's victory and maintain a peacekeeping presence further demonstrated its weakening influence, attracting international attention and raising questions about Russia's status in the new geopolitical landscape.<sup>60</sup>

## CONCLUSION

The events in Azerbaijan of April 2024 have radically transformed the geopolitical landscape of the South Caucasus. Azerbaijan has strengthened its position, while Russia's loss of its peacekeeping role has become a symbol of its weakening influence in the region. Despite the complexity of relations between Azerbaijan, Russia, and Armenia, and the ongoing uncertainty surrounding the region's future, Azerbaijan's "balanced foreign policy" approach has gained widespread recognition and is increasingly being adopted by other nations in the region. Furthermore, Azerbaijan has become the only nation among the Eastern Partnership countries and post-Soviet republics without the presence of foreign troops — a status it has successfully restored.



# BELARUS:

## Releasing Political Prisoners and Testing the Waters with the West

### Artyom Shraibman

Since mid-2024, Minsk has been undertaking its first sustained efforts since the 2020 crisis to signal a willingness to reopen dialogue with the West. The most notable of these initiatives was the release of over 200 political prisoners in multiple waves.

Before initiating this outreach, incumbent Aliaksandr Lukashenka implemented several domestic political changes. In April 2024, he finalized a constitutional reform that had been in progress since 2022, establishing and taking control of a powerful new state body — the All-Belarusian People's Assembly. By June, he had reshuffled key government positions, replacing the ministers of

information and foreign affairs as well as the head and first deputy head of the Presidential Administration (PA) with more dynamic and proactive officials. One of the most notable appointments was Natalia Petkevich as the PA's first deputy head. Petkevich had previously served in the same role during Belarus's initial thaw with the West (2008–2010), overseeing both domestic and foreign policy.

With the constitutional reforms complete and key personnel reshuffled, Lukashenka appeared confident enough to experiment with sensitive topics in his relations with the West. One of the most pressing issues remains the imprisonment of more than a thousand political opponents.



Melnikov Dmitriy / shutterstock



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## THE RELEASE OF POLITICAL PRISONERS: TIMING AND MOTIVATIONS

The first wave of releases (18 individuals) occurred on July 3, Belarus's official Independence Day. Some were freed through an amnesty procedure, while others were pardoned directly by Lukashenka, as the amnesty law excludes individuals convicted of "extremism-related crimes."<sup>61</sup> On August 16, he pardoned another 30 political prisoners.<sup>62</sup> This was followed by two waves of releases in September (67 people), two more in November (63 people), and another two in December (49 people). The pattern continued into 2025, with two more edicts pardoning 31 political prisoners in January.

Lukashenka consistently framed these releases as humanitarian gestures, claiming they were intended for severely ill and elderly prisoners.<sup>63</sup> He repeated this justification multiple times, insisting that his decision was not made to appease the West. However, this rationale failed to hold up under scrutiny. While some early releases did include seriously ill and elderly prisoners — such as 67-year-old Grigory Kostusev, a cancer patient and former leader of the Belarusian People's Front; Pavel Kuchinsky, who has stage 4 lymphoma; 74-year-old trade union activist Vasily Beresnev, who has only one kidney; and journalist Ksenia Lutskina, who has a brain tumor — as further details about the released individuals emerged, it became evident that most did not fall into the categories of seriously ill, elderly, or otherwise vulnerable groups (such as mothers of multiple children). According to a report by Belarusian news outlet Zerkalo.io, which analyzed data from the first four waves of releases, the average age of those freed was 42, with 70% being men.<sup>64</sup> The majority had no known health issues. At the same time, many political prisoners with well-documented medical conditions remained incarcerated. These findings challenge the claim that humanitarian concerns were the primary reason for the pardons.

The key factors for release appeared to be a prisoner's willingness to request a pardon and a sentence considered short by Belarusian standards (typically under four years). In some instances, prisoners were also required to participate in televised propaganda broadcasts. This approach reveals a different motive behind these releases and suggests they were a political move aimed at generating Western reaction rather than a purely domestic act of goodwill.

Minsk likely began these efforts in 2024 because Lukashenka anticipates shifts in the regional political

landscape stemming from potential peace negotiations over Ukraine. Lukashenka has expressed a strong desire to participate in any future talks.

**Therefore, some preliminary groundwork needs to be laid to repair broken relations with the West. At the very least, Minsk wants to avoid being excluded from discussions about lifting war-related sanctions imposed on Russia and Belarus. The expectation of a regional reset, combined with a renewed sense of control over domestic affairs following the constitutional reform, likely prompted Lukashenka to experiment with releasing political prisoners.**

## OTHER SIGNALS

Another tactic Minsk used to signal its willingness for dialogue was publicly showcasing political prisoners who were either well-known internationally or particularly significant to the West. In September, state TV aired an interview with U.S. citizen Yuri Ziankovich, a political prisoner, who appealed to then-presidential candidates Donald Trump and Kamala Harris to facilitate his release.<sup>65</sup> On November 12, Maryia Kalesnikava, one of the key figures in the 2020 protests, was seen in public for the first time after more than 600 days of complete isolation. Lukashenka personally allowed her to meet with her father and later stated that he would consider granting her a pardon if she submitted a request.<sup>66</sup> Her father later confirmed that she was weighing this option.<sup>67</sup> The pattern continued in early 2025 when authorities released photos and videos of Viktor Babaryka, another imprisoned 2020 opposition leader who had been in total isolation for almost two years.<sup>68</sup> From January 14 to 17, just before Trump's inauguration, state TV aired a series of interviews featuring Ziankovich and three other political prisoners with ties to the U.S. through their past work with Radio Free Europe.<sup>69</sup> These public displays were apparent

attempts to signal to the West its openness to renewed dialogue about these notable political prisoners.

In addition to these symbolic gestures, Minsk also leveraged the migration crisis — a significant issue in its relations with Western neighbors and the EU as a whole. Since mid-2021, the Belarusian government has facilitated large waves of migrants, primarily from the Middle East, attempting to cross into Latvia, Lithuania, and Poland. Minsk has openly admitted that this was retaliation for Western sanctions.

In May 2024, the crisis escalated dramatically, with weekly illegal border crossing attempts exceeding 2,000 — reaching record levels since 2021. This escalation led to a tragedy when a migrant fatally wounded a Polish soldier<sup>70</sup> — and triggered a sharp reaction from Poland, including threats to close the border entirely to cargo transit. Minsk then substantially reduced the migrant flow.<sup>71</sup> In June, Belarusian authorities also began demonstratively detaining groups of illegal migrants throughout the country.<sup>72</sup> Over the following seven months, except for a brief surge in September, the migration crisis did not return to its May levels, and the average weekly attempts to cross the country's western border illegally remained under 600.

On October 31, Lukashenka declared that Belarus would resume securing its border against illegal migration into the EU if the bloc ended its “economic war” against Minsk.<sup>73</sup> The following month, Belarus hosted an international conference on illegal migration.<sup>74</sup> The MFA later confirmed that the event was explicitly organized “to encourage the neighboring EU countries to establish a dialogue with Belarus,” but lamented that this “outstretched hand for cooperation” was ignored.<sup>75</sup>

## THE WEST'S RESPONSE: NO ENGAGEMENT

Western reactions to Minsk's diplomatic overtures were largely symbolic — or entirely absent. After the first wave of pardons, the U.S., EU, and several European countries welcomed the move but stressed that far more needed to be done.<sup>76</sup> As the releases continued, official Western responses became less frequent, each reiterating that most political prisoners remained behind bars. Western participation in November's migration conference was limited to the Hungarian ambassador and representatives of the UK and Swiss embassies.

Meanwhile, the overall direction of the sanctions policy remained unchanged. In early June, Lithuania imposed stricter rules on car imports and food exports from Belarus.<sup>77</sup> Later that month, the EU synchronized sanctions

against Belarus and Russia, leading to extensive restrictions on exports and imports of various goods, including their movement across the border by ordinary tourists.<sup>78</sup> Marking the anniversary of the 2020 elections, the EU, U.S., UK, Canada, and Switzerland expanded personal sanctions against Belarusian officials and propagandists, an aircraft owned by Lukashenka, and individual companies mostly seen working with the Russian military-industrial complex.<sup>79</sup> In December, the EU adopted a package of personal sanctions against Belarusian judges, businessmen benefiting from the regime, and their companies.<sup>80</sup> Also in December, Lithuania expanded its national sanctions against dual-use goods, and Poland targeted Belarusian fertilizer suppliers.<sup>81</sup>

There are several reasons for the West's firm stance. First, Minsk's signals are clearly insufficient at a time when 2024 saw a spike in repression compared to previous years,<sup>82</sup> along with a continuation of the migration crisis — even if its intensity subsided. Seeing that fundamental problems are not being resolved, and that Minsk could always revert to the same number of political prisoners simply by intensifying arrests or reviving the migration crisis at its previous scale, the West remains unwilling to consider reciprocal concessions.

Second, the political will for dialogue is blocked due to the war in Ukraine and Minsk's participation on Russia's side. This support is evident in the continuing provision of Belarusian infrastructure for Russian military operations, assistance in circumventing sanctions, cooperation with Russian military industries, and hosting Russian nuclear capabilities aimed at deterring the West. In 2024, Minsk carried out exercises of non-strategic nuclear forces in coordination with Moscow. And in December, Lukashenka and Putin announced that Belarus would host new Russian Oreshnik medium-range ballistic missiles. Against the backdrop of the region's growing securitization, these actions have overshadowed Minsk's limited political gestures, such as releasing some political prisoners.

Third, Minsk is increasingly perceived as lacking meaningful geopolitical autonomy. With Belarus so closely tied to Moscow, the West sees little reason to develop a separate strategy for dealing with Lukashenka.

Despite these current obstacles, geopolitical dynamics remain unpredictable. Many observers and stakeholders, including, evidently, Lukashenka himself, expect a peace process in Ukraine to begin in 2025 and to establish a new security architecture in the region. Although Minsk's outreach to the West has so far failed to meet Western expectations, 2024 marked the first time Belarusian leadership began initiating a sustained diplomatic signaling effort to gauge potential Western responses.

# ESTONIA:

## Removing Russian Influence from Schools, Public Life, and the Power Grid

**Dmitri Teperik**

### INTRODUCTION

Over the past three decades, Estonia has worked actively to dismantle the legacy of Soviet occupation and reduce its dependence on Russia, especially given Moscow's history of interference and intimidation towards its neighbors. Intensified in the wake of Russia's unprovoked aggression against Ukraine, Estonia's de-Russification strategy reflects a broader effort to align more closely with the West, enhance its societal resilience, and secure its national sovereignty in these geopolitically turbulent times.

The following cases exemplify the decisions taken in 2024 to advance de-Russification in Estonia. These

decisions encompass both softer areas, such as education, public culture, and religion, and harder areas, including energy — most notably manifested in the de-synchronization from the Russian grid system.

### EDUCATION

Although Estonia's education system has been consistently ranked among the best in the world in various international assessments,<sup>83</sup> there have been notable differences in the quality of outcomes between Estonian- and Russian-speaking students. This disparity between Estonian- and Russian-language based schools has been repeatedly acknowledged by education authorities and experts, who attribute it to the legacy of the Soviet occupation.<sup>84</sup>



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Estonia's education system has historically been characterized by its bilingual nature, with both Estonian and Russian serving as mediums of instruction in schools. This duality can be traced back to the country's Soviet past, during which Russian was the dominant language in many spheres of public life, including education. Following the re-establishment of its independence in 1991, the Estonian government prioritized the restoration and promotion of the Estonian language as one of the cornerstones of national identity. Nevertheless, the lingering presence of Russian-language schools, supported historically by political forces resistant to language integration, has resulted in a persistent linguistic divide. Students enrolled in Russian-medium schools frequently face difficulties in achieving proficiency in Estonian – a prerequisite for accessing higher education and employment opportunities.<sup>85</sup>

The ruling coalition of three political parties has agreed to accelerate the education reform that began decades ago with the aim of Estonizing Russian-language schools. The coalition has unveiled a major transformation plan to improve the quality and inclusiveness of the education system. A key component of this reform is the transition to Estonian as the primary language of instruction in all schools from September 2024. This policy shift is seen as part of a broader effort to strengthen national identity, improve educational outcomes, and ensure equal opportunities for all students, regardless of their ethno-linguistic background.<sup>86</sup>

The present government's initiative to transition to Estonian as the primary language of instruction aims to address disparities in educational outcomes and promote equal access to opportunities.

**The 2024 language transition policy is rooted in the belief that a unified language of instruction will foster greater social cohesion and ensure that all students, including those from ethnic minority backgrounds, are equipped with the linguistic skills necessary to succeed in**

**Estonian society. Research has demonstrated that language proficiency is a critical determinant of academic achievement and labor market integration in Estonia and elsewhere.<sup>87</sup>**

The education reform comprises several key components designed to facilitate a smooth transition to Estonian-language instruction. Firstly, the government is investing in teacher training programs to ensure that educators are adequately prepared to teach in Estonian. This includes professional development courses, language immersion programs, and the provision of teaching materials in Estonian. Secondly, the reform emphasizes the importance of early language learning, with increased resources allocated to Estonian language instruction in preschools and primary schools. Furthermore, measures have been implemented to support students and parents during the transition period, and the government has initiated public awareness campaigns to inform parents about the advantages of the reform and to address concerns about the potential impact on ethnolinguistic minority cultures in Estonia.<sup>88</sup>

The transition to Estonian-language instruction has garnered significant support from the general public; however, the new policy has also faced criticism. Critics warn that the reform could marginalize Russian-speaking communities and erode cultural and linguistic diversity in Estonia. According to the results of a public opinion survey conducted in late December 2024, 71% of respondents expressed general support for the ongoing education reform, while 53% of local Russian-speaking individuals expressed opposition to it.<sup>89</sup> Concerns have also been raised regarding the practical challenges of implementing the reform, particularly in regions such as North-East Estonia or Tallinn, where there is a high concentration of Russian-speaking students.<sup>90</sup> Educators have voiced concerns regarding their capacity to teach effectively in Estonian, while others have expressed apprehensions about the possibility of students experiencing a decline in academic performance due to difficulties with the language transition.<sup>91</sup>

Estonia's education reform and the accelerated transition to Estonian-language education in 2024 represent a bold and ambitious effort to strengthen



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the country's education system and promote social cohesion. Moreover, the political and ideological impact of the reform is perceived as fostering a shared sense of national identity in Estonia.

## PUBLIC CULTURE

In 2024, Estonia also intensified its efforts to reduce Russian cultural and religious influence as part of its broader policy of de-Russification.

The Russian Theatre in Tallinn, a cultural institution with historic roots dating back to 1948, announced discussions to change its name in 2024. The theatre, which has long served as a hub for Russian-language performances, faced increasing public and political pressure to align itself with mainstream Estonian politics following the escalation of the war in 2022. Supporters of the name change argue that the current name perpetuates a Soviet-era identity and fails to reflect the theatre's evolving role in Estonian society. Critics, however, are concerned about erasing cultural heritage and alienating Russian-speaking audiences in Estonia. By considering a name change, the theatre has signaled its willingness to adapt to Estonia's changing cultural landscape while maintaining its artistic mission.<sup>92</sup>

In the summer of 2024, Tallinn municipal authorities decided to remove all remaining Soviet-era symbols from public and private property. The initiative centers on the elimination of symbols viewed as symbols of oppression and foreign domination. While the initiative has been welcomed by many as a necessary step toward historical reconciliation and cultural sovereignty, it has also raised concerns about the preservation of architectural heritage and the potential costs of restoration. This reflects the complexities of post-Soviet identity politics in Estonia.<sup>93</sup>

Many other cases during 2024 showed how institutions, places, and even products have been renamed, rebranded, or reimagined as sites for strengthening national identity. Language, as a key marker of identity, has become a focal point of these efforts, as almost anything containing the word "Russian," "Moscow," etc. is perceived as undesirable or even toxic.<sup>94</sup> A new civic movement has recently emerged in Estonia, known as Keelemalev (roughly: 'language patrols'). This civic movement was initiated to encourage the public to report instances of Russian language usage in public spaces. Members of Keelemalev actively encourage individuals and private businesses in Estonia to refrain from using Russian in any public communication. Their efforts particularly target those who use Russian in speeches, advertisements, and other public domains. Several major retail chains

have already received official requests urging them to discontinue advertising in Russian.<sup>95</sup>

In 2024, the Estonian government made a landmark decision to sever the legal and canonical ties between the Russian Orthodox Church in Estonia and the Moscow Patriarchate, constituting both a symbolic and strategic move in the country's broader de-Russification efforts. This decision was rooted in both historical context and contemporary geopolitical concerns, as the Estonian government viewed Patriarch Kirill's statements as a threat to Estonia's national security and therefore sought to strengthen its national sovereignty and reduce Russian religious influence within its borders.<sup>96</sup> The primary justification for the Estonian government's decision was the Moscow Patriarchate's statement in support of Russia's military aggression against Ukraine.<sup>97</sup> The process of severing the canonical link involves several key steps, both to ensure religious autonomy and to give the Russian Orthodox Church in Estonia legitimacy within the wider Orthodox Christian world while distancing it from the Moscow Patriarchate.

The decision drew mixed reactions. Supporters praised the government for taking a bold stand against Russian spiritual influence and for protecting Estonia's cultural and religious autonomy. They argued that the move was vital for national security. Critics, however, including some members of the Orthodox community, expressed concern about potential divisions within the church and the risk of alienating parishioners who have personal or spiritual ties to the Moscow Patriarchate.<sup>98</sup> At the end of December 2024, 59% of all respondents in Estonia supported the government's decision to sever all links between the Estonian Orthodox Church and the Moscow Patriarchate. This has become another polarizing issue between the two major ethno-linguistic communities in Estonia, with 60% of the local Russian-speaking population opposing the decision.<sup>99</sup> Nevertheless, the Estonian government has remained firm in its commitment to its decision, seeing it as a necessary measure to safeguard the country's independence and align religious institutions more closely with Western values.

## ENERGY

In recent decades, Estonia has worked to diversify its energy sources. At the same time, it has reduced its dependence on Russian gas through increased investments in renewable energy, LNG infrastructure, and alternative suppliers. In addition, Estonia, along with Latvia and Lithuania, has been working to disconnect



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from the Russian-controlled electricity grid and synchronize with the Continental European Network. In 2024, major preparations were made to advance the desynchronization from the Russian grid.

Concurrently, a series of undersea cable disruptions occurred in the Baltic Sea in 2024, with several incidents attributed to Russian-sponsored sabotage, thereby underscoring the region's complex geopolitical landscape. As previously reported, at least 11 cables in the Baltic Sea have been damaged in the last 15 months, highlighting the critical importance of energy security and data connectivity.<sup>100</sup> The incidents have significantly reduced the Estonia–Finland cross-border electricity capacity and highlighted the vulnerabilities of essential infrastructure. In response to these events, Estonia intensified naval patrols in the Baltic Sea to safeguard its critical infrastructure. NATO also announced plans to bolster its military presence in the region, aiming to deter further acts of sabotage and reinforce the security of undersea cables and pipelines. These measures underscore the heightened awareness and proactive stance adopted by regional and international actors to protect vital infrastructure amidst escalating geopolitical tensions.<sup>101</sup>

In June 2024, Estonian officials confirmed that the desynchronization process will culminate on February 9, 2025, when the Baltic states will formally join the European grid. This transition, facilitated by infrastructure upgrades and supported by European Union funding, is expected to increase energy security and reduce vulnerability to external pressures. Additionally, Elering, Estonia's electricity transmission system operator, has stated that the country is ready to proceed with desynchronization even if Russia attempts to disrupt the process. Estonia has developed contingency plans to maintain energy stability during the transition.<sup>102</sup>

The energy desynchronization process also symbolizes a broader shift in Estonia's approach to energy security, as it seeks to mitigate vulnerabilities exposed by Russia's use of energy as a geopolitical weapon. This shift not only reduces Estonia's reliance on Russian energy infrastructure but also aligns the country more closely with European energy networks, reinforcing its integration into Western systems.

## CONCLUSIONS

The process of de-Russification in Estonia has been pursued as a means of reinforcing a sense of belonging to the Western cultural and political sphere. Measures implemented as part of this process include a policy of

promoting the use of Estonian as the dominant language in education, administration, the public sphere, and the media. Furthermore, there has been a historical re-evaluation and cultural re-orientation to remove or relocate Soviet-era monuments and symbols, thereby reflecting a rejection of the Soviet-imposed narratives.

In 2024, Estonia implemented a series of strategic decisions aimed at advancing its de-Russification policies, encompassing both soft and hard measures across various sectors. In the sphere of softer measures, significant endeavors were undertaken in the domains of education, public culture, and religion to accentuate the use of the Estonian language, freedom of religion rooted in democratic values, and the promotion of Western democratic principles. Furthermore, a concerted program of re-naming has been initiated across various domains, including toponymics, with a view to fostering a shared national identity. By severing ties with the Moscow Patriarchate, the Orthodox Church in Estonia not only reinforced its sovereignty but also sent a clear message about its determination to resist Russian interference in religion. This decision underlined the interconnectedness of faith, geopolitics, and national identity in the ongoing struggle for influence in the post-Soviet space.

In addition to these soft measures, Estonia has also sought to eliminate dependencies in hard domains, particularly in energy, to reduce vulnerability to potential Russian energy blackmail. On the more strategic front, Estonia has taken decisive steps in the energy sector, most notably through its complete de-synchronization from the Russian grid system, which marked a critical move toward energy security.

These multifaceted decisions in 2024 reflected Estonia's broader commitment to distancing itself from Russian influence, both symbolically and practically, while strengthening its societal resilience, national sovereignty, and alignment with European Union values and standards.

# GEORGIA:

## Postponing EU Integration and Suppressing Mass Protests

**Nika Chitadze**

### INTRODUCTION

The international non-governmental organization Amnesty International has published a report on the developments in Georgia in 2024. The report highlights systematic human rights violations by the state aimed at suppressing protests. In particular, the document states that on November 28, 2024, the ruling party, Georgian Dream — which recently declared victory in the parliamentary elections — decided to postpone all negotiations with the European Union until 2028. At that time, according to surveys conducted by the International Republican Institute in 2023, 85% of Georgians wanted to join the European Union. This figure increased by 10 percentage points after Russia's large-scale invasion of Ukraine in 2022.<sup>103</sup>

### THE ANTI-WESTERN POLICY OF THE “GEORGIAN DREAM” GOVERNMENT AND PROTEST DEMONSTRATIONS

In response to the decision of the de facto government of Georgia to postpone all negotiations with the European Union, mass protests erupted in Tbilisi and across the country on November 29, 2024. In the capital, thousands of people demonstrated peacefully in front of the parliament and on several central streets; similar protests gained momentum in other regions. In response, the police used water cannons, tear gas, and rubber bullets, which intensified the confrontation. As a result, many people were injured, and video footage captured scenes of brutal beatings of peaceful demonstrators and journalists. The police continued to persecute protesters



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outside the demonstrations, searching their homes and offices and detaining them. More than 460 people have been detained<sup>104</sup> so far, of whom 430 face administrative charges and more than 30 face criminal charges.<sup>105</sup>

According to available information, the majority of those arrested — more than 300 demonstrators — were reportedly subjected to torture and ill-treatment by special police forces.<sup>106</sup> The vast majority of these incidents are classified as torture. More than 80 people have been hospitalized with serious injuries, including facial fractures and concussions. The scale of unlawful force and torture by the police indicates that these actions are being carried out with impunity under government sanction.<sup>107</sup>

Courts have largely ignored evidence of torture and violations of the right to a fair trial. More than 160 people have been fined and sentenced<sup>108</sup> to administrative detention. The police and the criminal justice system appear to have been weaponized to intimidate protesters and suppress peaceful expression, indicating a pattern of institutionalized repression.<sup>109</sup>

Accordingly, it can be stated that in 2024 Georgia officially rejected European integration.<sup>110</sup>

## THE OPENLY ANTI-WESTERN POLICY OF THE “GEORGIAN DREAM” SINCE 2022 AND THE POSITION OF THE EUROPEAN UNION

The Russia-Ukraine war exposed the pro-Russian policy of the Georgian government as early as 2022, when the administration refrained from condemning Russia as an aggressor state,<sup>111</sup> while simultaneously advancing the narrative to Georgian society that “Ukraine was seeking to drag Georgia into the war against Russia” and similar claims.<sup>112</sup>

At the same time, in 2022, Georgia applied for membership in the European Union as a result of public pressure;<sup>113</sup> however, when granting Georgia candidate status was being considered, the Georgian government began to criticize and personally insult EU representatives.<sup>114</sup> As a result, unlike Ukraine and Moldova, due to the absence of strong democratic institutions, Georgia failed to receive EU candidate status.<sup>115</sup>

**Despite the fact that the EU Commission issued a statement outlining twelve priorities which Georgia needed to address to advance on its EU path,<sup>116</sup> it became evident that the Georgian government had no intention of implementing them. Thus, Georgian Dream demonstrated an unwillingness to assume additional responsibilities toward the EU. A clear confirmation of this stance was the draft law “On Agents of Influence of a Foreign Country” submitted by the Georgian Parliament in March 2023.<sup>117</sup>**

The purpose of this draft law, submitted by the government-backed opposition political party “People’s Power,” was to undermine the civil sector and discredit government critics in the public eye by portraying them as organizations promoting foreign interests rather than Georgian ones. Following protests by Georgian and international communities, the 10th convocation of Parliament withdrew the draft law and pledged never to reintroduce it.<sup>118</sup> Nevertheless, on December 14, 2023, despite the Georgian government’s failure to meaningfully address any of the 12 EU recommendations,<sup>119</sup> the European Council granted Georgia candidate status for EU membership and proposed nine steps to bring the country closer to European structures.<sup>120</sup>

## IVANISHVILI’S OFFICIAL RETURN TO POLITICS AND CURRENT EVENTS IN 2024

In late 2023, Bidzina Ivanishvili, the founder of the Georgian ruling party, officially returned to politics,

assuming the role of “Honorary Chairman” of Georgian Dream.<sup>121</sup> This move can partly be attributed to Ivanishvili’s recognition of Georgian Dream’s declining popularity.<sup>122</sup> With the 2024 parliamentary elections scheduled to be conducted under a fully proportional system, various polls indicated that Georgian Dream’s support did not exceed 35%.<sup>123</sup> Under these circumstances, securing a majority through democratic elections would prove challenging for the ruling party. Consequently, the ruling party allegedly decided to discredit Georgian civil society and the West.<sup>124</sup>

Ivanishvili himself was acutely aware that conducting the pre-election campaign and elections in violation of democratic standards would trigger strong criticism from both Georgian NGOs and Western institutions, while Russia would simply overlook such transgressions.<sup>125</sup>

This perception led Georgian Dream to view authoritarian Russia, rather than the democratic West, as an ally aligned with its interests. To secure electoral victory and suppress critical voices, Ivanishvili, reportedly at Russia’s behest, moved to reintroduce the “foreign agent’s law” in 2024. Additionally, Georgian Dream adopted a strategy to confuse voters and curry favor with Russia. Specifically, the party fabricated conspiracy theories about a “Global War Party” fighting against Georgia (and Ukraine), allegedly “run by Freemasons”<sup>126</sup> in the West, and subsequently introduced the concept of a “Deep State”.<sup>127</sup>

The Georgian Dream began to assert that it was the “true defender of Georgian national and religious values”,<sup>128</sup> while claiming that the West, by pursuing its policies in conjunction with the Georgian opposition, was “fighting against family and traditional values” in Georgia and “threatening Georgia’s sovereignty”.<sup>129</sup>

Using controlled media outlets<sup>130</sup> and orchestrated online campaigns,<sup>131</sup> Ivanishvili and Georgian Dream directly accused the West of instigating the 2008 war, claiming it was “incited by foreign forces” that prompted the previous Georgian government to initiate the conflict and subsequently cede territories to Russia. They even suggested that “the Georgian people should apologize to the Ossetian and Abkhazian peoples”.<sup>132</sup> Notably, the Georgian government made no mention of Russia’s role in initiating the 2008 war or its ongoing occupation of Georgian territories.

According to the Media Development Foundation’s interim report, media outlets with pro-government editorial policies predominantly cited Western conservative and Chinese sources, as well as Ukrainian voices critical of the Zelenskyy government, while openly

pro-Kremlin publications relied on Russian and Belarusian sources.<sup>133</sup>

At the same time, the Georgian Dream, recognizing the fact that according to various sociological polls, more than 80% of the Georgian population supported the country’s integration into the European Union and NATO,<sup>134</sup> falsely declared that “it is thanks to the wise policy of the Georgian Dream that Georgia will join the European Union”.<sup>135</sup>

To win over voters, the government deployed multiple levers of influence.

It intensified pressure on private businesses, compelling them to financially contribute to Georgian Dream’s<sup>136</sup> pre-election campaign. Corporate compliance was largely secured through government tenders and associated financial benefits.<sup>137</sup>

The government extensively leveraged church influence to further its agenda. Notably, budget funding for the Patriarchate was increased from 25 million GEL to 60 million GEL in 2024.<sup>138</sup> Consequently, high-ranking Patriarchate officials subtly encouraged their congregations to vote for Georgian Dream in their sermons.<sup>139</sup>

Pressure on the public sector escalated significantly. In 2024, public sector employment increased to approximately 300,000 people.<sup>140</sup> Additionally, public sector employees received nearly 900 million GEL in bonuses, while police officers saw salary increases of about 45%.<sup>141</sup> In exchange, the government compelled public servants to vote for Georgian Dream and expected police forces to employ harsh tactics against protestors.

To intimidate government critics, the ruling authorities once again mobilized criminal networks.<sup>142</sup> These elements were tasked with targeting civil activists at their homes or in public spaces for physical assault.<sup>143</sup> Throughout 2024, numerous instances of physical violence were documented, yet no perpetrators faced prosecution despite video evidence capturing many of these attacks.<sup>144</sup>

## PARLIAMENTARY ELECTIONS OF OCTOBER 26, 2024

A comprehensive assessment of the October 26, 2024, parliamentary elections require examining the entire electoral process, including the pre-election period, election day activities, and post-election developments.

Violations documented during the pre-election and election day periods — including voter intimidation, confiscation of identity documents, unauthorized collection of personal data, and widespread voter bribery

— severely undermined electoral integrity. On election day, the monitoring organization ISFED identified serious infractions such as ballot stuffing, multiple voting, unprecedented voter bribery, expulsion of election observers from polling stations, and systematic voter manipulation through data collection and controlled voting outside polling stations. Based on these findings, ISFED concluded that the election results likely failed to reflect genuine voter intent.<sup>145</sup>

**According to the final report of the Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe's Office for Democratic Institutions and Human Rights (OSCE/ODIHR) on the October 26, 2024 parliamentary elections in Georgia, released on December 20, 2024 the mission documented multiple forms of voter intimidation, coercion, and bribery. These factors significantly hindered voters' ability to make decisions freely and without fear.**

Particular pressure was exerted on opposition party representatives, local activists, economically vulnerable groups, and public sector employees, significantly restricting their freedom of choice.<sup>146</sup>

## **EUROPEAN COMMISSION'S REFUSAL TO CONTINUE NEGOTIATIONS WITH GEORGIA ON JOINING THE EUROPEAN UNION**

Shortly after the elections, it became apparent that the European Commission would not recommend initiating EU accession negotiations with Georgia.<sup>147</sup> The annual enlargement report stated that the Commission could not issue such a recommendation until Georgia altered its current political trajectory.<sup>148</sup>

Both the European Union and the United States announced suspensions of various financial assistance programs to Georgia. In a joint statement on December 1, 2024, EU High Representative Kaja Kallas and Commissioner for Enlargement Marta Kos declared: "The European Union regrets Georgian Prime Minister Irakli Kobakhidze's statement on the Georgian Dream's decision not to pursue the opening of EU accession negotiations and to reject EU financial support until 2028".<sup>149</sup> The financial impact is already evident in Georgia's budget planning — the draft budget for 2025 shows EU grant funding reduced from 92 million to 15 million GEL. Additionally, Georgia has forfeited 121 million euros in EU assistance due to democratic backsliding.<sup>150</sup>

## **CONCLUSION**

There is reasonable concern that the government's hostile rhetoric toward Georgia's traditional partners represents a calculated strategy to provoke Western disengagement, leaving the isolated country with no alternative but to align with Russia, China, and Iran. This approach enables the government to deflect responsibility by claiming, "I wanted integration into the West, but you held me back — it's your fault you lost me".<sup>151</sup> On October 28, 2024, de facto Prime Minister Irakli Kobakhidze stated, "We, Georgians, are a proud and self-respecting nation with a great history. Accordingly, it is categorically unacceptable for us to consider integration into the European Union as a mercy that the European Union should give us... We see that European politicians and bureaucrats are using the allocated grants and loans for blackmail against Georgia." He further declared that Georgia would not consider reopening EU accession negotiations until the end of 2028.<sup>152</sup> This rhetoric serves the interests of Georgia's ruling elite rather than the country itself, with government officials dutifully echoing this position. For instance, Secretary General of Georgian Dream and Tbilisi Mayor Kakha Kaladze proclaimed, "We want the kind of Europe that every Georgian dreams of, where there is justice".<sup>153</sup>

Furthermore, it should be noted that the Georgian government signed a strategic partnership with China that acknowledges China's territorial integrity while making no reference to Georgia's own territorial integrity.<sup>154</sup> Additionally, the Prime Minister of Georgia attended the funeral of Iran's President alongside representatives from Hamas and Hezbollah.<sup>155</sup>

In essence, to curry favor with the Kremlin, Georgia's de facto authorities continue to inflict further damage on already strained international relationships.<sup>156</sup>



# KAZAKHSTAN:

## Navigating the Nuclear Power Debate amid Geopolitical and Economic Considerations

**Dr. Kuat B. Akizhanov**

### INTRODUCTION

On October 6, 2024, a nationwide referendum was held in Kazakhstan on the question: “Do you agree with the construction of a nuclear power plant in Kazakhstan?” The results showed that just over 71% of voters supported<sup>157</sup> the project. However, the issue remains highly contentious, revealing tensions within Kazakhstani society and drawing protests from several non-governmental organizations (NGOs). Despite public debate, only a small group of specialized experts can provide a comprehensive technical, economic, environmental, and industrial assessment of the project’s feasibility.

For instance, in mid-2024, the National Network of Environmental NGOs of Kazakhstan (“Ecoforum”) issued a joint statement warning of the potential environmental

risks associated with nuclear power plant construction. The organization also accused the executive branch of interfering in the free expression of citizens’ will,<sup>158</sup> further fueling public debate.

### POLITICAL AND GEOPOLITICAL CONSIDERATIONS

One of the primary political concerns surrounding Kazakhstan’s nuclear power plant project is which countries will be involved in its construction. The Kremlin has already submitted its proposals, prompting discussions on whether Russia will take the lead. However, Kazakhstan’s leadership remains committed to its multi-vector foreign policy, indicating that an international consortium could be formed for the project. Negotiations are currently underway with Russia, China, and Western countries,<sup>159</sup> demonstrating Kazakhstan’s effort to diversify its strategic partnerships.



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The debate over nuclear energy in Kazakhstan is not new; discussions about the necessity of a nuclear power plant have been ongoing for years. The Concept for the Development of the Electric Power Industry of Kazakhstan (2023–2029) highlights that the country will face a significant electricity and power generation shortage<sup>160</sup> in the near future. The document notes that many developed economies address such deficits by expanding their civilian nuclear energy programs.

For example, France has prioritized nuclear energy for long-term energy security. By 2050, it plans to add 14 new nuclear reactors to its existing 56 reactors, with construction beginning in 2028.

The United States accounts for 25% of the world's nuclear power capacity, with nuclear plants generating about 40% of its electricity. American energy firms are actively exploring converting coal-fired power plants into nuclear facilities.

Japan has moved to restart nuclear power plants that were shut down after the Fukushima disaster.

South Korea currently operates 25 nuclear reactors, with three more under construction, two of which will be commissioned by 2029.

China, the world's second-largest economy, aims to add 4–6 new reactors annually by 2030, reaching a total of 110 nuclear plants.

Vietnam, Malaysia, Thailand, and the Philippines have also outlined plans to incorporate nuclear power into their long-term energy strategies.

India currently operates 21 nuclear reactors and has announced plans to build ten more.<sup>161</sup>

Kazakhstan is already facing an energy crisis, with projections estimating that by 2030, the country's power deficit will exceed 6 GW, while the overall deficit in Central Asia will reach 9 GW.

## KAZAKHSTAN'S NUCLEAR POWER STRATEGY

To address the energy shortage, Kazakhstan will need to build at least two nuclear power plants, each with a capacity of 1,200 MW, by 2030. By 2035, a third plant will be required. However, the current focus is on constructing one nuclear power plant, scheduled<sup>162</sup> for completion in 2035.

Kazakhstan's thermal power plants (TPPs) are also aging, with an average lifespan of 62 years, making their continued operation increasingly unsustainable. Despite

having one of the world's largest coal reserves, reliance on coal is becoming problematic due to environmental concerns and Kazakhstan's commitment to the UN Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs).

Moreover, Western investors have declined to finance the construction of three coal-fired thermal power plants in Kokshetau, Semey, and Ust-Kamenogorsk. In contrast, Russian investors have expressed<sup>163</sup> willingness to participate.

Kazakhstani experts argue that nuclear power is the cleanest energy source, and given Kazakhstan's status as a global leader in uranium reserves and production, it makes strategic sense to invest in nuclear energy. President Kassym-Jomart Tokayev, ahead of the referendum announcement, underscored the need for nuclear power,

"Given the growing global energy deficit, we urgently need reliable and environmentally friendly energy sources. Nuclear energy can meet the rapidly increasing demands of our economy. Currently, nearly 200 nuclear power plants operate<sup>164</sup> in 30 developed and developing countries."

## CONTRADICTIONS IN KAZAKHSTAN'S ENERGY STRATEGY

Despite the push for nuclear energy, Kazakhstan's National Development Plan (2024–2029)<sup>165</sup> — approved by President Tokayev and prepared by the Agency for Strategic Development and Reforms — places greater emphasis on renewable energy sources (RES) to meet the country's energy needs.

The "Energy" section of the plan does not mention nuclear power but instead prioritizes wind and solar energy. According to government estimates, by 2030, the average cost of wind energy (including storage and maneuvering) in Kazakhstan will be \$47/MWh, making it comparable to, if not cheaper than, traditional and nuclear energy.

The document also envisions 100% renewable energy in newly developed capacity, reflecting Kazakhstan's growing reliance on Western financing and Chinese-manufactured technology for wind and solar projects.<sup>166</sup> This contradiction highlights not only an environmental debate but also a deeper geopolitical struggle<sup>167</sup> over the future direction of Kazakhstan's energy sector.

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## BEYOND ECONOMICS: THE GEOPOLITICAL IMPLICATIONS

Two key aspects stand out in Kazakhstan's nuclear energy decision.

**Holding a referendum on nuclear energy — a move that politicized what is typically a technical and strategic decision. While Kazakhstan's government could<sup>168</sup> have approved the project unilaterally, the referendum process intensified societal tensions, particularly among NGOs,<sup>169</sup> environmental activists, and opposition groups.**

**The debate over the nuclear power plant contractor — which appears to be less about the need for nuclear energy and more about which country will construct the facility.**

## KAZAKHSTAN AND THE EAEU ENERGY MARKET

In 2019, Kazakhstan signed an international agreement to establish a common electricity market within the Eurasian Economic Union (EAEU) by 2025. However, the deadline was later extended to 2027. This agreement aims<sup>170</sup> to create a unified energy system, integrate infrastructure development plans, and establish joint investment mechanisms. Given that Russia is the dominant economic and geopolitical force within the EAEU, there is concern that Moscow will control the energy sector within the bloc.

During President Tokayev's first official visit to Moscow<sup>171</sup> in 2019, he received a proposal from the Kremlin for Russia's state nuclear agency, Rosatom, to build Kazakhstan's nuclear power plant. In the current geopolitical climate — particularly against the backdrop of the Russia-Ukraine war — it is increasingly difficult to imagine Kazakhstan rejecting Moscow's offer outright.

## CONCLUSION: KAZAKHSTAN'S MULTI-VECTOR BALANCING ACT

Even after the referendum, the choice of a nuclear power plant contractor remains undecided. President Tokayev's strategic approach underscores Kazakhstan's commitment to multi-vector diplomacy,<sup>172</sup> balancing Russian, Chinese, and Western interests.

Following the referendum, Tokayev reaffirmed his preference for an international consortium,<sup>173</sup> stating,

"During my discussions with Vladimir Putin in Astana, we agreed that Kazakhstan, as the project's customer, would act as the general operator. While Rosatom is a strong contender due to its expertise in nuclear construction, we are also negotiating with a leading Chinese company and exploring interest from Western firms."<sup>174</sup>

This statement reflects Kazakhstan's ongoing risk diversification strategy, ensuring that no single power dominates its energy future.

Kazakhstan's decision on nuclear energy is not just about economics — it is a geopolitical choice.<sup>175</sup> As the country maneuvers between Russia, China, and the West, its ability to maintain strategic autonomy will be a key factor in shaping its energy policy for decades to come.

# KYRGYZSTAN:

## Launching a Creative Industries Park as a Gateway to the Global Market

**Emil Dzhuraev**

### BACKGROUND: THE TROUBLING TRENDS IN ECONOMIC GOVERNANCE

The administration of President Sadyr Japarov, who rose to power in late 2020 following post-election protests that toppled the ineffectual government of President Sooronbay Jeenbekov, promised a strong, centralized government that would deliver results. In 2021, Japarov's government pushed through a new Constitution, significantly expanding presidential powers. While the Constitution formally retained key civil liberties, including freedom of speech, assembly, enterprise, and protection from arbitrary search and seizure, its highly centralized executive structure lacked effective safeguards to

limit governmental overreach. As a result, despite the formal preservation of civic freedoms, the unchecked concentration of power soon led to their gradual erosion,<sup>176</sup> as the absence of institutional guardrails made the trade-off between strong governance and individual rights increasingly one-sided.

Outwardly, Kyrgyzstan's economy seemed to be performing exceptionally well, with President Japarov noting during a public appearance that the country's GDP had been growing at no less than 7% for three consecutive years.<sup>177</sup> His economic reforms captain, Prime Minister Akylbek Japarov (not a relative), reported to parliament that the Kyrgyz economy had surpassed the trillion mark in Kyrgyz soms.<sup>178</sup> The prime minister — who resigned in December 2024 — was indeed the main figure in fostering economic governance reforms, especially committed to bringing the large shadow



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economy into the light through fiscal transparency, digitalization, and discipline in revenue collection.

However, government expenditure showed the opposite trend — non-transparency, minimal accountability, and random, undisciplined, often whimsical expenses, such as numerous fancy buildings for government agencies including a new main government building, purchases of airplanes and helicopters for the government, or construction of elaborate sports facilities.<sup>179</sup>

The most worrisome economic trends, however, were emerging in the operations of the State Committee for National Security (SCNS) in tandem with the prosecutor's office, courts, and often, most notably, the Presidential Administrative Directorate within the Presidential Administration. Under the rubric of efforts to uproot corruption, tax evasion, smuggling, and other economic crimes, the SCNS became<sup>180</sup> an omnipresent and unchecked institution preying on business entities. The SCNS activities were generally labeled as “kusturizatsia” — an informal term in Kyrgyz denoting government acts of making those who got rich through corruption and other illegal means pay back. Among agencies joining the SCNS in obstructing a fair and free market economy has been the Presidential Administrative Directorate, a notorious unaccountable entity that came to handle an enormous number of state assets, including constantly growing numbers of de-privatized property. Besides being the main asset and property handler, the office gained control over the State Mortgage Company and — using privileges the state gave to its own venture and funds, the sources of which were never clear — turned it into a giant construction company unfairly competing with private construction firms.<sup>181</sup>

It is important to remember that all these changes in economic governance were happening simultaneously with a similar or worse situation with civic space.<sup>182</sup> Key civic freedoms, such as freedoms of speech and assembly, were drastically suppressed; independent civil society organizations and media, let alone political opposition, were essentially induced to go silent or self-censor.<sup>183</sup> Protests, dissent, and criticism could put anyone under arrest.

## CREATIVE INDUSTRIES PARK — AN UNLIKELY ARRIVAL

It was against this backdrop in Kyrgyzstan that an unlikely development occurred — the Creative Industries Park (CIP), the first and only such park in Central Asia,

was established and successfully launched in Kyrgyzstan in 2024. Despite the broader erosion of democratic freedoms, the creative economy has remained a policy priority across Central Asian countries for several years. Recognizing its global significance, the UN General Assembly designated April 21 as the World Day of Creativity and Innovation. On this very date in 2022, President Sadyr Japarov reaffirmed Kyrgyzstan's commitment to this priority by signing a decree<sup>184</sup> on the development of the creative economy, establishing a framework for its sustained growth. According to the decree, the creative economy was identified as a key pillar of Kyrgyzstan's state policy, aimed at driving innovation, expanding entrepreneurial opportunities, creating jobs, boosting export revenues, and increasing labor productivity. The president mandated the adoption of a national creative economy development concept and the classification of creative industries. Kyrgyzstan's official statements emphasize the creative economy's immense potential for sustainable development and youth retention, a vision embedded in the National Development Program of the Kyrgyz Republic until 2026.<sup>185</sup> The Concept for the Development of the Creative Economy (2022-2026)<sup>186</sup> outlines priority initiatives, including improving monitoring and support systems, upgrading educational curricula, launching creative spaces and collaborative platforms, and promoting the national brand “Creative Kyrgyzstan.” In April 2022, President Japarov took a decisive step toward realizing this vision by initiating the development of CIP.

**CIP is a special economic zone officially established in Kyrgyzstan in 2024 to support businesses in design, media, marketing, IT development, architecture, and other creative industries. It provides tax incentives, simplified business regulations, and access to international investments for its residents. It is a virtual institution — no physical building or park is**



## **involved. Residents of CIP may be located anywhere around the world and still be able to claim the benefits offered by the Park.**

CIP is designed to attract both local enterprises and foreign businesses looking to expand into Kyrgyzstan and the broader Central Asian market. For its residents, the main attraction of the Park is its special low tax regime — a unified 1% tax on profits, a 5% income tax, and a flat rate fee to the Social Fund. Residents also pay a fee of 1% of their revenue to the Park as a residency fee. Altogether, this package is a highly attractive alternative to the common tax regime, where, depending on the specific type of commercial activity and revenue of the firm, cumulative tax rates may vary from about 20% to above 30%. The package is meant to boost the growth of the creative industries sector and lend support to firms that would otherwise be competing against companies in non-creative fields.

The idea<sup>187</sup> for CIP was spearheaded by the Association of Creative Industries of Kyrgyzstan, founded by members of the Creative Central Asia Network (CCAN) — a coalition of cultural and creative entrepreneurs from Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Uzbekistan, Tajikistan, and Turkmenistan. This group previously participated in Creative Central Asia forums, held annually from 2017 to 2019 with financial support from the British Council. The association's chairman, businessman Daniyar Amanaliev, played a key role as a co-author of the legislation that established the Creative Industries Park.

In April 2022, the Association of Creative Industries and UNDP organized Kyrgyzstan's first-ever "Create4" creative industries festival, with President Sadyr Japarov attending the opening ceremony, where he pledged his support for the sector.<sup>188</sup> Just a week later, he signed the law on the Creative Industries Park (CIP),<sup>189</sup> officially launching this promising initiative. With the president's backing, Prime Minister Akybek Japarov also lent his support to the initiative. At various points, opposition emerged, with efforts to compromise the initiative, including a public dispute involving one of the vice-prime ministers. This became evident<sup>190</sup> when, following a directive from Deputy Chairman of the Cabinet of Ministers Edil Baisalov, a decision was made to include the Deputy Chairman overseeing the social sector in the CIP Supervisory Board. Additionally, a new requirement

was introduced, granting the board the authority to determine the "creativity" of business activities based on a government-approved list. The Deputy Chairman justified<sup>191</sup> these directives by citing ambiguities in defining business sectors eligible for tax benefits. In response to Baisalov's directive, one of the CIP initiators, businessman and Association's chairperson Daniyar Amanaliev, personally appealed to the Prime Minister and the President, requesting that this directive be withdrawn from public discussion. As a result, several months later, Amanaliev announced that all the problematic aspects had been removed from the draft resolution, and the final list of "creative" business activities was adopted in a highly reasonable form with minimal compromises. He expressed his gratitude to the President and the Prime Minister for their support.<sup>192</sup>

The argument for CIP and development of creative industries, in general, was pitched, economically, as supporting a highly underdeveloped sector and laying the ground for large future growth and investments. Providing such a generous tax regime was possible because the potential beneficiaries were a small cohort, insignificant for government revenue, and — if supported — they would bring much larger dividends down the road with innovations, investments, and promotion of the country. From initiating the idea for CIP to seeing its first residents, the process took about two years of busy work. CIP is now the only one in Central Asia, a unique initiative that provides a framework for targeted support, such as the low tax regime, while keeping the industry still autonomous from overly close government interference.

## **WHY CIP MATTERS NOW**

The economic weight of creative industries in Kyrgyzstan — for whom CIP is established — is minimal, estimated at 1% of national GDP according to the Ministry of Economy, and it is unlikely to become a major sector of the country's economy very soon.<sup>193</sup> Hence the question arises as to why CIP ought to be viewed as of any significance right now.

The Creative Industries Park (CIP) represents a commitment to freedom of enterprise and creativity. It is both a symbolic and significant victory for those who advocate for a free market economy and the right of creative individuals and groups to operate without government interference. At a time when government expansion has intensified, often under the guise of anti-corruption efforts and improved governance, the private sector has faced growing arbitrary pressure, with property

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rights and investment security increasingly undermined. Against this backdrop, the CIP provides entrepreneurs with a degree of protection and stability, offering a space where innovation can thrive. The very fact that CIP was launched demonstrates that, despite serious challenges to democratic principles, there is some government support for a free market economy and confidence in the potential of the creative economy's development in Kyrgyzstan.

For civil society, CIP represents a broader promise — the potential of the creative industries to safeguard civic freedoms and autonomy in Kyrgyzstan by building connections within the business community and linking it to the outside world. One key factor in CIP's successful launch was its strictly apolitical positioning throughout the process. In the long run, the very nature of creative industries demands freedom as a fundamental condition for their existence. The famous American jurist Oliver Wendell Holmes defended freedom of speech through the concept of the "marketplace of ideas" — arguing that open discourse requires an environment where ideas can compete freely. In a similar yet more literal way, the Creative Industries Park is poised to become a marketplace of ideas and initiatives. Just as Holmes' defense of free speech relied on the principles of an open

market, a properly functioning creative economy is only possible with freedom. The vision for CIP has always been international and potentially global, as its creators have consistently emphasized. Residency is already open to anyone interested, including foreigners, allowing artists, writers, programmers, designers, actors, educators, and many others to join, regardless of their actual place of residence. CIP is designed to be a hub and a dynamic community, bringing together free-minded creative entrepreneurs. Over time, this collective would evolve into a strong and influential voice, advocating for civic and human rights and freedoms — both domestically and internationally.

## CONCLUSION

Amid government pressure on economic and civic freedoms, the Creative Industries Park (CIP) offers a rare window of opportunity for Kyrgyz businesses and the creative sector to engage with the West through investment, innovation, and cultural exchange. While broader state policies restrict independence, CIP provides a space where creative industries can operate autonomously. If sustained, it could help preserve and expand global connections, gradually fostering greater openness in the country.

# LATVIA:

## Increasing Military Spending and Integrating Civil Society into Defense

**Sigita Struberga**

### INTRODUCTION

As a frontline state in European security, Latvia possesses a historical legacy marked by Soviet occupation, contemporary Russian aggression in Ukraine, and hybrid threats originating from both Russia and Belarus. Consequently, the country remains increasingly alert against potential security threats. Latvia faces a broad spectrum of security challenges, encompassing hybrid threats, cyberattacks, disinformation campaigns, and economic vulnerabilities. In response, it has prioritized the reinforcement of national defense capabilities, the enhancement of regional cooperation, and the bolstering of NATO's collective deterrence strategy. Public awareness regarding the shared responsibility in

countering potential aggressor threats and the necessity of preparedness for various security scenarios has grown substantially. Moreover, there is a heightened recognition of the imperative to increase financial allocations for defense.

Between September and October 2024, Latvia conducted the large-scale national defense exercises "Namejs 2024" across the country.<sup>194</sup> These exercises marked a significant milestone in the development of total defense in Latvia, integrating an active civil society into military training for the first time. The concept of comprehensive national defense has been designated as a key priority, aimed at enhancing national defense capabilities through a coordinated approach that aligns military readiness with societal resilience, self-organization, and crisis response capacity. Thus, this article aims to critically evaluate the progress in



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implementing comprehensive national defense from 2014, when Russia launched its aggression against Ukraine, to October 2024, when the military exercises “Namejs” signified the full-scale adoption of the total defense concept.

## COMPREHENSIVE NATIONAL DEFENSE

Comprehensive national defense in Latvia is structured around four key dimensions — military, civil, informational, and psychological — creating a robust security framework. The State Defense Concept (2001) established five fundamental principles: total defense, territorial defense, compulsory military service and mobilization, civil-military cooperation, and international collaboration, emphasizing a holistic approach to national security.<sup>195</sup> While the initial approach has been reviewed several times and defense development has faced setbacks during the financial crisis, efforts to enhance military capabilities resumed in 2014, driven by evolving security threats, technological advancements, and deeper integration into NATO’s defense structure. These efforts were further intensified by Russia’s full-scale invasion of Ukraine in 2022, prompting Latvia to accelerate its military adaptation and resource allocation.

**In response to these challenges, Latvia has adopted a multifaceted strategy that includes the reinstatement of compulsory military service, the modernization of land forces, and the expansion of regional and international air defense. Strengthening electronic warfare capabilities has become a central priority, supported by a sustained political commitment to increasing defense expenditures. In 2024, Latvia’s**

**defense budget stands at 3.2% of GDP, with plans to rise to 3.65% in 2025,<sup>196</sup> ensuring continued investment in critical infrastructure and fortifications along the eastern border.**

While several of these initiatives were initially planned before 2022, the war in Ukraine expedited their implementation, securing additional financial resources and reinforcing political resolve.

Despite significant advancements, Latvia and the broader Baltic region continue to face strategic capability gaps, particularly in air and maritime defense, which remain key priorities for future development.<sup>197</sup> The evolving security landscape necessitates a defense strategy that not only builds upon past experience but also integrates modern capabilities to address contemporary threats. Given the decentralized nature of comprehensive defense governance, where multiple governmental institutions share responsibility, the process requires time for stakeholders to adapt, redefine their roles, and ensure effective coordination in crisis response. Through sustained investment and strategic planning, Latvia continues to strengthen its national defense posture while reinforcing regional security within the NATO framework.

## MILITARY PREPAREDNESS

The military dimension encompasses the development and readiness of the armed forces, including their integration with allied structures and capabilities. Russia’s full-scale invasion of Ukraine on February 24, 2022, accelerated Latvia’s defense adaptation, reinforcing efforts initiated in 2014.

Special emphasis has been put on personnel. Latvia, after abandoning conscription in 2007, has reinstated compulsory military service again in 2022 with the aim to address several challenges. First, it mitigates recruitment shortages and fulfils the growing demand for specialized personnel in cybersecurity, electronic warfare, and other technical domains. Second, it enhances societal awareness of crisis management and strengthens national resilience by fostering a culture of preparedness.

Additionally, a significant policy shift occurred in 2024



when Minister of Defence Andris Sprūds announced the political intent to extend conscription to women, underscoring a broader commitment to inclusive national defense. Expanding public participation in defense not only reinforces societal resilience but also enhances defense awareness, provided that reservist training programs are consistently maintained and effectively implemented.

Beyond the reinstatement of conscription, Latvia remains committed to addressing critical capability gaps, many of which were prioritized prior to 2022. Investment efforts are concentrated on enhancing medium-range air defense, strengthening coastal defense missile systems, and expanding long-range rocket artillery capabilities. Additionally, the development of unmanned aerial vehicle (UAV) systems, modernization of transport vehicles, and acquisition of infantry fighting vehicles are integral components of Latvia's defense strategy. Emphasizing logistics, rapid response mechanisms, and advancements in electronic warfare, these initiatives align with Latvia's broader strategic objectives to enhance operational readiness and resilience within the evolving security landscape.

In terms of strengthening NATO presence, Latvia prioritizes military infrastructure development, aligning with NATO's initiative to expand its presence to brigade level. Canada is significantly increasing its military support to Latvia both via personnel and via placement of necessary weaponry, thus reinforcing Canada's leadership in NATO's enhanced Forward Presence battlegroup in Latvia — the most multinational under the brigade level. The battlegroup comprises personnel from Albania, the Czech Republic, Iceland, Italy, Montenegro, North Macedonia, Poland, Slovakia, Slovenia, and Spain. Additionally, Canada is committed to integrating multinational forces, strengthening Latvian armored capabilities, and advancing gender equality through initiatives such as the appointment of a gender advisor within the Latvian Armed Forces.

## CIVIL DEFENSE & POPULATION INVOLVEMENT

A fundamental aspect of comprehensive defense is the recognition that security is a collective responsibility, requiring active participation from the entire society. Unlike traditional defense strategies, which are typically centralized, and state-driven, comprehensive defense is characterized by a legally mandated and institutionalized engagement of civil society. This

approach fosters a decentralized, transactional model of defense, integrating cooperation between the armed forces, government ministries, public and private organizations, the private sector, and the general population. Consequently, governance plays a pivotal role in total defense frameworks.<sup>198</sup> It means that the civil dimension involves the preparedness of state institutions, emergency response mechanisms, and the ability of civilian infrastructure to support defense efforts in times of crisis.

The implementation of the Latvian comprehensive defense has undergone several structural, political, and strategic transformations. However, the most relevant period for meaningful analysis in this context is the time frame following 2019, when Latvia formally adopted the Comprehensive National Defense framework. It underscores the collective responsibility of state institutions, the private sector, and civil society in safeguarding national security.

Crisis management responsibilities under Comprehensive National Defense have been decentralized, with each ministry overseeing its respective sector and local governments responsible for regional crisis response. To coordinate implementation, two interagency working groups operated: a ministerial-level group led by the Minister of Defence and a state secretary-level group chaired by the Ministry of Defence's State Secretary. These bodies facilitate strategic cooperation, ensuring an integrated national defense posture. At the same time, 2024 marked the establishment of the crisis management center SITCEN within the State Chancellery, which started its work in January 2025. Its mission is to coordinate civil crisis management in the country.

The SITCEN will operate in continuous collaboration with national emergency response institutions, ensuring 24/7 situational monitoring and threat assessment to enhance proactive crisis preparedness and response.<sup>199</sup> Its core function is analytical risk evaluation, systematically processing data to identify, assess, and mitigate potential threats. Functioning at two levels, SITCEN will provide situation-based decision proposals to the Crisis Management Council at the strategic level, while at the operational level, it coordinates stakeholders and executes direct crisis management decisions.

SITCEN will ensure the timely dissemination of accurate information to relevant institutions, enabling effective decision-making within their areas of competence. Additionally, it is aimed to play a crucial role in crisis communication, facilitating clear public messaging on crisis developments and required actions. To strengthen

this capability, the center enhances inter-institutional communication, both for government coordination and public outreach during emergencies.

Daily, SITCEN will cooperate with ministries and local governments to improve crisis management processes and enhance inter-agency coordination. It will conduct scenario-based exercises to simulate potential civil crises, testing institutional response capacities. While the resolution of localized crises, such as floods or wildfires, remains under municipal and sectoral jurisdiction, SITCEN will intervene in nationwide or multi-sectoral crises, ensuring a coordinated and effective national response.

Thus, through a decentralized crisis management approach that integrates multiple civil-military cooperation mechanisms, inter-institutional collaboration is enhanced, public-private partnerships are reinforced, and societal resilience is strengthened. A central priority is ensuring the continuity of essential services, safeguarding critical infrastructure, and fostering a culture of preparedness at all levels. Recognizing defense as a collective responsibility, the Comprehensive National Defense Framework incorporates deterrence strategies, capacity-building initiatives, and public engagement programs. These range from participation in military service or the paramilitary organization National Guard to involvement of the non-governmental sector in crisis management exercises and military drills.

The Ministry of Defence has developed educational resources such as the updated 2024 “How to Act in a Crisis” booklet, which provides practical guidance on emergency preparedness, and the “How to Act in War” handbook, incorporating lessons from Ukraine’s resistance against Russian aggression. Additionally, the State Defense Education Program for secondary school students, introduced in 2024, integrates national defense training into general and vocational education curricula, equipping youth with foundational knowledge and practical skills.<sup>200</sup> To enhance public awareness, the defense news portal Sargs.lv serves as a key platform for security and defense-related information.

A fundamental aspect of Comprehensive National Defense is economic and infrastructural resilience. The Ministry of Defence, in collaboration with sectoral ministries, is identifying and securing these infrastructures to ensure their continued functionality.

To strengthen preparedness, Latvia prioritizes large-scale defense exercises. The “Pilskalns” civil defense training tests municipal crisis response, while national-level readiness is evaluated through “NAMEJS” and “AMEX” exercises. Strategic decision-making within

the government is refined through “Kristaps” training, which assesses crisis management procedures at the Cabinet level.<sup>201</sup>

Another key focus of the extended public discussions on comprehensive defense is the allocation of financial and human resources in response to military threats, and the reinforcement of material reserves, as well as the establishment of bomb shelters. There is a need not only to identify the most suitable premises for the bomb shelters but also an urgent necessity for early engagement with industry actors responsible for constructing shelters, securing communication networks, and ensuring reliable supply chains. Most of these activities are either at the initial consultation level or in the early stages of construction.

## INFORMATIONAL DIMENSION

The informational dimension pertains to the protection of the information space, countering disinformation, and strengthening strategic communication to maintain public trust and societal cohesion. In previous years, significant advancements were made in developing Latvia’s strategic communication capabilities, enhancing media resilience, and strengthening public resistance to manipulation in the information space. Key achievements include the establishment of an inter-agency coordination mechanism, the expansion of monitoring and analytical capabilities, and the institutionalization of crisis communication training.

Efforts to safeguard the integrity of Latvia’s information space have been reinforced through inter-institutional cooperation, real-time information exchange, and the enhancement of monitoring tools under coordination of the State Chancellery. For example, in 2023, the State Chancellery produced 66 analytical reports with policy recommendations for government officials, contributing to evidence-based decision-making in information security governance.<sup>202</sup>

Media resilience and literacy initiatives have been expanded through regulatory improvements, journalist support programs, and initiatives promoting high-quality content, particularly in border regions. A unified media and information literacy database was established, consolidating educational resources for public awareness campaigns.

Despite what has been done, one of the key vulnerabilities in Latvia’s socio-political and informational landscape is the ethnically divided environment and the linguistically segmented information space. Another

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critical issue is insufficient media literacy. It is integrated into the national curriculum across all schools in Latvia; however, research demonstrates weak skills of media literacy in Latvian society in general and youth in particular, despite the popular stereotype about the older generation being more vulnerable toward disinformation. The fact is that poor media literacy is characteristic regardless of age.

Latvia is increasingly grappling with growing distrust in public media, coupled with the rising dominance of social media as a primary source of news and information. This shift not only undermines the credibility and influence of traditional journalism but also facilitates the unchecked spread of misinformation and disinformation. The fragmented media consumption habits further exacerbate societal divisions, as individuals increasingly rely on algorithm-driven content that reinforces existing biases. Moreover, the decline in trust towards public broadcasters weakens their role as reliable sources of fact-based reporting, making it more challenging to counteract the influence of foreign propaganda and manipulative narratives circulating in the digital space.

Looking ahead, Latvia's continued commitment to enhancing media literacy, fostering critical thinking, and promoting transparent communication policies will play a crucial role in mitigating these challenges. By strengthening collaboration between government institutions, civil society, and independent media, the country can build a more resilient information ecosystem that fosters trust and informed civic engagement. With sustained efforts, strategic investments, and adaptive policies, Latvia is well-positioned to reinforce democratic values, counter disinformation effectively, and cultivate a media-literate society capable of navigating an increasingly complex information landscape.

## PSYCHOLOGICAL DIMENSION

The psychological dimension focuses on fostering societal resilience, national identity, and the capacity of individuals and communities to withstand external pressures and psychological operations. The psychological dimension of societal resilience in Latvia is shaped by factors such as trust in institutions, perceptions of crisis, and national identity. Data from 2023 highlights a critical divide in public trust, with only 38% of Latvians willing to cooperate with the national government in crisis situations, reflecting deep-seated skepticism towards state institutions. However, trust is considerably higher at the local community's level, as 74% of respondents express a willingness to cooperate with residents, and

68% with colleagues, demonstrating the potential for strengthening resilience through community engagement.

**Despite challenges in trust towards state structures, national identity remains a cornerstone of Latvia's resilience. Survey data reveals that 73% of Latvians consider the country their home with no intention of leaving, while 63% regard Latvian citizenship as integral to their identity, reinforcing a collective sense of belonging. This psychological attachment to the state serves as a stabilizing factor, even amidst political uncertainty.**

Yet, psychological resilience is also tested by high levels of perceived crisis and stress. A striking 74% of Latvians believe the country is undergoing a significant crisis, with younger individuals and those with lower education and income levels exhibiting the most pessimistic views. Economic concerns are particularly acute, as 72% of the population reports heightened stress due to financial instability, a higher percentage than those expressing anxiety over external geopolitical threats, such as the ongoing war in Ukraine (65%). These findings emphasize the need for comprehensive mental health and economic stability measures to bolster national resilience.

Additionally, while 80% of Russian speakers in Latvia profess patriotism toward the country, their sense of belonging is often linked more to geographic and cultural attachment than alignment with the political regime. This distinction underscores the importance of inclusive policies that bridge identity gaps and mitigate ethnic and linguistic divisions in the national consciousness.<sup>203</sup>

Thus, it might be concluded that Latvia's psychological resilience is characterized by strong local trust networks, a robust national identity, and significant stress due to

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economic and geopolitical uncertainties. However, the ability to withstand external psychological influence is closely tied to national confidence and public trust in crisis management mechanisms. The persistence of socioeconomic disparities, media fragmentation, and political skepticism presents vulnerabilities that can be exploited by hostile information operations. As such, enhancing national psychological resilience requires a multidimensional approach, incorporating economic stabilization policies, community-building initiatives, and strengthened strategic communication efforts. For this reason, enhancing institutional trust and addressing socio-economic disparities will be essential in fostering long-term societal cohesion and resistance to external psychological operations.

## CONCLUSION

Latvia's comprehensive defense strategy has evolved significantly in response to contemporary security threats, integrating military, civil, informational, and psychological dimensions into a cohesive framework with marking two significant events in 2024 — establishment of the crisis management center and integration of non-governmental institutions in military drills in Autumn 2024, for the first time in the history

of this type of exercises in Latvia. The reinstatement of compulsory military service, the modernization of defense capabilities, and the expansion of NATO cooperation underscore the country's commitment to enhancing military preparedness. Simultaneously, civil defense measures have reinforced crisis management mechanisms and increased public participation, reflecting a broader societal engagement in national security.

The informational and psychological dimensions play a critical role in maintaining societal cohesion, countering disinformation, and fostering national resilience. Despite persistent vulnerabilities, such as media fragmentation, political distrust, and economic stress, Latvia has taken decisive steps to bolster strategic communication, media literacy, and institutional trust. Strengthening local and community-based resilience networks remains essential for mitigating external psychological pressures and hybrid threats.

Looking ahead, sustained investment in defense, strategic planning, and cross-sector collaboration will be vital in ensuring Latvia's long-term security and stability. By continuing to refine its comprehensive defense approach, Latvia is well-positioned to adapt to evolving security dynamics while reinforcing democratic values, public trust, and regional cooperation.



# LITHUANIA:

## Hosting a Permanent German Brigade and Deepening NATO Integration

### Laurynas Jonavicius

Since Russia launched its full-scale invasion of Ukraine in early 2022, Lithuania's foreign policy objectives have been primarily focused on enhancing national security in response to threats posed by Russia and other authoritarian regimes, strengthening societal resilience, and eliminating dependencies on autocratic states. Recognizing the detrimental consequences of inaction amid growing authoritarian aggression, Lithuania's leadership in 2024 continued the policy trajectory set since Russia's 2014 occupation of Crimea, guided by several key principles: minimizing Russian influence in Lithuania while maximizing engagement with the West; ensuring a stronger and more unified Western front against authoritarian challenges; and making Lithuania as secure and resilient as possible in the face of security threats. This strategic approach in foreign policy can be aptly summarized by a paraphrase of NATO's first

Secretary-General Lord Ismay's dictum, "Russians out, Americans in, and Germans up."

Building on this strategic framework, the year 2024 was particularly significant in Lithuania's efforts to reinforce the "Germans UP" element. The principle of "Russians OUT" had been a cornerstone of Lithuanian foreign policy for decades — this is evidenced by the persistent dissatisfaction expressed by numerous European capitals regarding Vilnius' unwavering stance in relations with the Kremlin. Many European governments, by contrast, remained committed to maintaining political, economic, and energy ties with Moscow. Similarly, the principle of "Americans IN" had long been an observable feature of Vilnius' strategic efforts to bolster national security and, most importantly, deter Russian aggression by ensuring maximum attention from Washington's decision-makers on regional security issues. Lithuania's status as a "super-Atlanticist" state has been well documented in



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academic research, as well as in its security discourse and strategic planning. However, the logic underpinning the “Germans UP” principle remains relatively new and has not been extensively examined.

The question of why Germany has increasingly emerged as a crucial player in Lithuania’s strategic calculations regarding deterrence against Russia and deeper integration into Western security and economic structures can be answered from multiple perspectives.

The first explanation is “because of Russia.” Although seemingly paradoxical — given that Berlin has long been known in Europe as a capital keen to maintain working relations with Moscow, shaped by its historical “Ostpolitik” approach and economic interest in trade and energy ties<sup>204</sup> (embodied in the “Wandel durch Handel” policy) — this very tendency played a role in shaping Lithuania’s deep reliance on Washington rather than the often vague or inconsistent visions of European strategic autonomy in security matters. Furthermore, Germany’s long-standing self-perception as a “peace actor,”<sup>205</sup> combined with its slow progress in increasing defense capabilities and assuming greater responsibility for European security,<sup>206</sup> remains a significant challenge for countries like Lithuania, where the perception of the Russian threat is acute, and policymakers demand radical and swift measures to counter it.

Despite these challenges, Germany has been given a leading role in implementing NATO’s Enhanced Forward Presence (EFP) initiative, approved at the 2016 Warsaw Summit, aimed at bolstering defense capabilities in Eastern Europe. The importance of Germany’s role in ensuring the security of NATO’s eastern flank increased significantly following Russia’s escalation of aggression in Ukraine in 2022 and, notably, after Chancellor Olaf Scholz’s landmark “Zeitenwende” speech. Responding to these strategic realities, NATO allies at the 2022 Madrid Summit further strengthened the EFP initiative and expanded Germany’s responsibility by agreeing to the deployment of a brigade-sized military unit.

In the autumn of 2022, the German Army’s 41st Brigade Forward Command Element was stationed in Lithuania, and in December 2023, the German and Lithuanian defense ministers signed an agreement formalizing the deployment plan for a German brigade in Lithuania.

Thus, although Germany’s role in Lithuania’s security was still largely formal in 2022, it nonetheless saw a significant increase. However, 2024 marked a true breakthrough in forging stronger security ties between Lithuania and Germany. While the legal frameworks

established in 2022 and 2023 laid a solid foundation, it was in 2024 that the first concrete measures were implemented, solidifying this evolving strategic partnership.

## THE TEN-DAY DEBATE

It is not without reason that the saying goes, “the devil is in the details.” The question of Germany’s military presence in Lithuania can be divided into formal and practical aspects. While formal actions — NATO decisions and intergovernmental agreements between Germany and Lithuania on defense cooperation — were significant, the resolution of practical matters proved to be even more crucial: under what conditions, to what extent, and precisely where the German-led brigade would be deployed in Lithuania. Agreeing that a brigade would be stationed in Lithuania was one level of discussion; specifying the number of troops, the type of equipment, deployment timelines, logistical conditions, and precise locations constituted another, equally important dimension. The significance of this issue was already highlighted in Lithuania’s domestic political debates in 2022. These discussions revolved around a fundamental question: how quickly German troops could and should arrive in Lithuania in the event of a Russian attack.

During her visit to Vilnius in the autumn of 2022, German Defense Minister Christine Lambrecht stated that the German brigade would be ready to deploy to Lithuania within ten days, but only the brigade’s command element would be permanently stationed in Lithuania, while the main combat force would remain in Germany and rotate through Lithuania for regular exercises.<sup>207</sup> This seemingly innocuous statement, later reiterated by then-Lithuanian Defense Minister Arvydas Anušauskas, sparked intense debates in Lithuania: was the country doing everything possible to ensure its maximum security? Observing the course of military operations and Russia’s behavior in Ukraine, many Lithuanian policymakers were deeply dissatisfied with the “ten-day” guarantee. Their concern was that within ten days, Russia could occupy significant portions of Lithuanian territory and inflict irreversible damage — both in terms of casualties and destruction of critical infrastructure. In other words, the deterrence-by-punishment approach implied by the ten-day guarantee was deemed unacceptable by a significant segment of Lithuanian politicians, who instead advocated for deterrence-by-denial. In their view, this could only be achieved if a full German brigade were permanently stationed in Lithuania.

As questions arose about why the brigade could not be permanently based in Lithuania, several “devilish details” emerged, fundamentally impeding the country’s ability to fully safeguard its security. These challenges can be categorized into three main groups.

First, there was simply no adequate infrastructure to accommodate the German troops. Permanent deployment would not only mean the presence of soldiers but also their families, necessitating urgent solutions for housing, education, and basic living conditions. While these may seem unrelated to external security, social, infrastructural, and other “low politics” issues exposed Lithuania’s lack of preparedness for deeper integration with Western allies. A similar problem emerged regarding the training capacity for the stationed brigade. Lithuania’s existing training infrastructure — both in terms of the number and size of military training grounds — was insufficient to ensure that deployed forces could maintain the highest level of operational readiness. Addressing these two issues required a high degree of political coordination and compromise across Lithuania’s political spectrum. Following intense discussions and negotiations, a resolution was reached in 2024: in June, Lithuania’s State Defense Council approved the establishment of two new military training grounds, a decision that was subsequently formalized by the Lithuanian Parliament through legislation mandating their construction along with the necessary supporting infrastructure.<sup>208</sup>

A second major issue — concerning social guarantees and housing for German troops and their families — was also eventually resolved. Lithuanian Defense Minister Laurynas Kasčiūnas and Deputy Foreign Minister Jonas Survila signed an agreement on Lithuanian-German defense cooperation, regulating the legal status of German military personnel, civilian employees, and their families in Lithuania, as well as the provision of key civil services, including healthcare, transportation, and education for military children. From the German side, the intergovernmental agreement was signed by Defense Minister Boris Pistorius and Parliamentary State Secretary at the Federal Foreign Office Tobias Lindner.<sup>209</sup> The Lithuanian Parliament ratified the agreement on October 3, 2024, while the German Bundestag followed suit on January 31, 2025.<sup>210</sup>

**By proactively addressing the practical challenges surrounding the German brigade’s deployment,**

**Lithuania significantly deepened its integration with the West in multiple dimensions throughout 2024. From a technical standpoint, seemingly minor yet practically crucial logistical issues were resolved, thereby strengthening the role of Western allies in ensuring Lithuania’s security and deterring Russian aggression.**

On the political level, Lithuanian leaders, even amidst an election year (with parliamentary elections taking place in October 2024), demonstrated unity and a strong commitment to addressing complex and, at times, contentious security issues. The speed and decisiveness with which these difficult decisions were made underscored a collective understanding among Lithuania’s political actors that deep and seamless integration with Western partners — beyond mere political declarations — was a matter of existential importance for national security and survival.

Perhaps even more importantly, Lithuania’s proactive stance on the brigade issue also had an indirect yet meaningful impact on Germany. Traditionally characterized by cautious policymaking — especially in matters of military buildup and the expansion of its armed forces — the question of the German brigade in Lithuania helped reinvigorate Germany’s internal political debate about its responsibility for European security. While significant efforts and policy steps are still required before Chancellor Olaf Scholz’s vision to “strengthen Europe’s ability to defend itself and deter would-be aggressors regardless of who wins the upcoming US elections or how the war in Ukraine unfolds”<sup>211</sup> can be fully realized, the very fact that discussions on enhancing Europe’s collective defense capabilities have gained traction is a promising sign. This was further demonstrated by the legislative package approved by the German Bundestag in early 2025, aimed at strengthening the Bundeswehr’s ability “to fulfill its tasks for national and collective defense without restrictions in view of the new security threat situation.”<sup>212</sup>

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## THE TRUMP FACTOR

A second, less obvious but equally significant reason why Germany's role in Lithuania's security has expanded so rapidly in recent years is linked to the United States — particularly Washington's increasingly explicit attempts to reduce its direct involvement in European security affairs. It's time for Europe to stand on its own feet, especially when it comes to guaranteeing its security — this was the message Donald Trump championed throughout his first presidential term and one he reiterated unambiguously throughout the 2024 election campaign. For Lithuania, one of the most staunchly pro-American countries in Europe, this stance sent a clear signal: we will help ensure your security, but only if you take primary responsibility for it yourself.

This message was well understood in Lithuania. Since the start of Russia's invasion of Ukraine, the country has taken significant steps to enhance its defensive capabilities. Defense spending nearly doubled, reaching a record-high 3.2% of GDP in 2024 — the fourth highest among NATO member states. Lithuania also acquired or planned acquisitions of a wide array of new military equipment, including infantry fighting vehicles, HIMARS missile systems, NASAMS, MSHORAD air defense systems, Black Hawk helicopters, and Leopard 2 tanks. Additionally, the government launched the development of the Baltic Defense Line, established a wartime commandant system, and reformed military conscription policies, among other measures.<sup>213</sup>

However, despite these substantial efforts, it became evident that even a twofold or threefold increase in Lithuania's defense capabilities would not be a panacea — Europe's collective military strength also needed to increase. With this realization, Lithuania took proactive steps to encourage Germany to "wake up" and take on a more substantial role in European defense. The objective was not only to bolster Lithuania's own security but also to send a clear message to Washington: we are doing our part; we are strengthening our defense capabilities — please, honor your commitment to Europe's defense.

**It is evident that rebuilding Europe's independent defense capacity will not be a rapid process. However, Lithuania — along with other NATO and EU countries on the alliance's**

**eastern flank — continues to push this agenda forward, advocating for greater synergy and a more balanced distribution of security responsibilities between the U.S. and Europe, particularly concerning NATO's eastern defenses.**

## STRENGTHENING ECONOMIC TIES AS A SECURITY STRATEGY

Last but not least, 2024 can be considered a pivotal year for the German UP policy in Lithuania, not only due to enhanced military cooperation but also because Lithuania achieved another strategic objective — strengthening Germany's economic footprint in the country, thereby increasing Berlin's incentive to remain engaged with Lithuania and its security situation.

In 2024, after prolonged negotiations and extensive efforts, Lithuanian authorities successfully formalized agreements with the German defense industry giant Rheinmetall for the construction of a 155mm ammunition production plant in Lithuania. Under the agreement, Rheinmetall committed to investing over 180 million euros and creating at least 150 new jobs. In return, Lithuania pledged to allocate a 340-hectare land plot for the project and agreed to purchase a portion of the ammunition produced at the facility.<sup>214</sup>

This agreement represents another crucial link binding Lithuania and Germany together — one that extends beyond military affairs into economic cooperation. More importantly, it further integrates Lithuania into Western Europe's broader defense-industrial and economic framework, reinforcing the country's position within the European security architecture.



# MOLDOVA:

## Advancing EU Accession after a Divisive Membership Referendum

Mihai Mogîldea

### KEY STEPS FOR ADVANCING MOLDOVA'S EU ACCESSION PROCESS

In the last three years, Moldova has made significant progress on its European integration path. Once considered to have no accession prospects, Moldova is now preparing to begin negotiations on individual chapters of the EU acquis. A shifting geopolitical context and Moldova's political will to advance reforms have been key drivers of progress. The EU's increased technical and financial assistance — directed at both governance and institutional development — has further supported reforms across national and local institutions.

However, this path has faced numerous challenges. First, Moldova still lacks broad social cohesion in support of the country's European integration.

The EU accession referendum, which took place in October 2024, was backed by only 50.4% of voters. While the referendum produced a **positive result**, it clearly indicated that society remains **divided and vulnerable to Russia's disinformation campaigns and false narratives**. Second, the **political establishment is**



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## fragmented and includes a wide range of actors aiming to undermine Moldova's pro-European ambitions.

These political structures — financed either by Russia or oligarchs connected to the Kremlin — are currently seeking to regain power through vote buying, attempts to destabilize public order, and illicit media financing.

Nonetheless, Moldova's EU accession prospects depend on the country's readiness to align with the EU acquis and implement a comprehensive institutional and policy reform process. Equally important is its ability to counter Russia's hybrid warfare operations across various domains, including politics, energy, security, and societal resilience. This analysis explores these aspects and provides insights into the key challenges and opportunities facing Moldova as it prepares for accession negotiations.

## APPROXIMATION OF THE EU ACQUIS AND OPENING OF THE ACCESSION NEGOTIATIONS

In June 2022, the European Council granted EU candidate status to Moldova.<sup>215</sup> Following the unanimous vote of EU member states, Brussels outlined a list of nine conditions<sup>216</sup> that Moldova needed to fulfill in the coming years — including accelerated reforms in justice, electoral law, anti-corruption measures, and the fight against organized crime, among others. At the national level, the government approved an Action Plan comprising 60 policy measures designed to address these conditions. In December 2023, Moldova received the “green light” from the European Council to open accession negotiations after implementing the vast majority of these measures.

As a candidate country, Moldova's progress is currently assessed through annual reports developed by the European Commission as part of the EU Enlargement Package. To date, two reports have been published — at the end of 2023<sup>217</sup> and 2024.<sup>218</sup> According to the latest report, out of 33 negotiation chapters, Moldova has been assessed with an early stage of preparation (1 out of 5 scale) for 7 chapters, some level of preparation for 21 chapters (2 out of 5 scale), and a moderate level of preparation for 5 chapters. On average, Moldova has met 38% of EU criteria across individual chapters. Compared

to 2023, Moldova did not register any backsliding and made progress on eight chapters: consumer protection and health (chapter 28), education (chapter 26), transport (chapter 14), environment (chapter 27), customs union (chapter 29), regional policy and coordination of structural instruments (chapter 22), intellectual property rights (chapter 7), and statistics (chapter 18).<sup>219</sup>

In February 2024, Moldova began the screening process — the first stage of EU accession negotiations. The screening of all chapters is expected to be completed by the end of 2025. In parallel, Moldova may open negotiations on Cluster 1 (five chapters labeled as the “Fundamentals”) by April/May 2025, once the EU institutions approve a decision to this effect. At the national level, the government has drafted two roadmaps for democratic institutions<sup>220</sup> and rule of law,<sup>221</sup> which should serve as benchmarks for Moldova's EU accession process and guide interaction with the EU on these matters. Both documents should be approved by the time accession negotiations for Cluster 1 begin.

Overall, Moldova has taken important steps toward progressive and simultaneous alignment with EU standards across various fields. The institutional framework for this process is well-established, enabling the participation of civil society and the business community in the negotiation process. However, the government still needs to expand its technical and financial resources to strengthen the capabilities of public servants who will be responsible for the upcoming negotiations.

## ENHANCED SECURITY COOPERATION FOR COUNTERING RUSSIA'S HYBRID WAR

In December 2023, the Moldovan authorities approved a new National Security Strategy<sup>222</sup> (NSS). This document identifies Russia and its proxies as the most dangerous and persistent source of threats to Moldova, manifested through illegal military presence, hybrid operations, corruption, and kleptocratic practices. It also highlights Russia's ambition to establish a military land corridor toward Moldova and the persistent threat of a conventional military attack aimed at changing Moldova's constitutional order.

To address these challenges, the Moldovan government has established several priorities for enhancing national security and defense in the NSS. These include: long-term investment in equipping and modernizing the army's supply, logistics, and material base, equivalent to 1% of GDP over the next decade; diplomatic action to end

the illegal military presence of the Russian Federation on Moldova's sovereign territory and deploy an international civilian mission along the administrative boundary with the Transnistrian region; and harmonizing national legislation with European regulations in tackling financial offenses, organized crime networks, and corruption. The NSS frames EU accession not only as imperative for modernization and economic development — but also comprehensive security.

In recent years, several important steps have been taken to enhance security cooperation between Moldova and the EU. In November 2020, the EU Council announced the possibility for third countries to participate in Permanent Structured Cooperation (PESCO) projects,<sup>223</sup> providing an opportunity for collaboration in up to 60 existing initiatives. Later, the EU's increased interest in this field was reaffirmed in the 2021 Eastern Partnership Summit Declaration,<sup>224</sup> with emphasis on training, knowledge-sharing, and capacity-building activities within and beyond Common Security and Defense Policy (CSDP). Supported by the newly established European Peace Facility (EPF) budgetary instrument and its Assistance Measures Pillar<sup>225</sup> — designed to upgrade the military and defense capabilities of third states — EU-Moldova security cooperation has reached a new stage of strategic cooperation.

Other strategic advancements include the launch of the EU-Moldova high-level political and security dialogue at the latest EU-Moldova Association Council in October 2021,<sup>226</sup> the signing of the EU-Moldova Security and Defence Partnership in May 2024,<sup>227</sup> and four assistance packages for Moldova under the EPF, totaling 137 million euros.<sup>228</sup> The EPF could thus lay the groundwork for boosting EU budgetary support for reforming Moldova's military, cyber, and intelligence institutions, advancing the security sector reform.

## ECONOMIC INCENTIVES PROVIDED BY THE EU ACCESSION PROCESS

In October 2024, the President of the European Commission, Ursula von der Leyen, presented the Economic Growth Plan (EGP) for Moldova<sup>229</sup> — a 1.9 billion euro initiative for the period 2025-2027. This instrument is built on three pillars: increased financial assistance for infrastructure and modernization projects in Moldova, enhanced access to the EU's Single Market, and support for Moldova's socio-economic and fundamental reforms. The first tranche of funds, amounting to over 300 million euros, is expected to reach Moldova by the end of April 2025.<sup>230</sup>

The EGP follows a project-based approach, which presents both opportunities and challenges for Moldovan authorities. On one hand, well-structured governmental projects can generate much better medium and long-term impact — addressing the country's development priorities. On the other hand, developing these projects requires immediate substantial efforts from central and local authorities. In this context, the EGP must be tailored to Moldova's current needs and provide financial support for developing energy interconnections with the EU market, small and medium enterprise sector, transport infrastructure, and education and health systems.

## CONCLUSIONS

Moldova is now successfully anchored in the EU accession process and benefits from broad openness and support from Brussels. At the political level, there is no opposition among EU member states to continuing Moldova's step-by-step integration into the EU. This merit-based accession path offers Moldova a window of opportunity to advance the domestic reform agenda and capitalize on the current regional geopolitical context.

A crucial step for securing Moldova's European ambitions will be establishing a genuinely pro-European government after this year's parliamentary elections. However, this goal will be difficult to achieve. Russia, working in tandem with fugitive kleptocrats from Moldova, is already preparing to undermine the elections by corrupting various political, media, and religious actors. Their ultimate aim is to regain control of Moldova — diverting Chisinau from its European course — similar to what happened in Georgia. To prevent this outcome, Moldovan authorities — backed by the EU — must act decisively to protect the integrity of the electoral process and more effectively counter electoral corruption schemes.

Furthermore, the governing authorities should ensure implementation of the NSS and carry out a comprehensive security sector reform, considering the significant impact of Russia's hybrid warfare currently affecting Moldova. Throughout this reform process, Moldova could benefit from EU financial and technical support, including through the European Peace Facility and the EU Partnership Mission (EUPM), deployed in May 2023.

# TAJIKISTAN:

## Responding to Russia's Anti-Migrant Campaign with a Multi-Vector Strategy

Umejon Majidi

### INTRODUCTION

The March 22, 2024, terrorist attack at Russia's Crocus City Hall near Moscow resulted in 145 deaths and 551 injuries. While the Afghan branch of the Islamic State - Khorasan Province (ISIS-KP) claimed responsibility,<sup>231</sup> the identification of the perpetrators as Tajik nationals triggered significant political, economic, and social repercussions for Tajikistan, affecting its international reputation, diplomatic relationships, and — most critically — the status of Tajik citizens abroad, particularly in Russia. Despite Tajik President Emomali Rahmon's firm condemnation and assertion that "terrorism has no nationality or religion," the tragedy severely strained Tajikistan's relations with Russia, where approximately one million<sup>232</sup> Tajik citizens work to financially support their families at home.

Even before the Crocus City Hall attack, Russian authorities had been conducting an aggressive anti-migrant propaganda campaign to demonize migrant communities, providing justification for the forced mobilization<sup>233</sup> of migrant workers to the Ukrainian front and diverting Russians' attention from more pressing domestic issues, such as rising crime rates among returning soldiers and war-induced economic decline. Following the terrorist attack, these anti-migrant measures intensified dramatically, evolving into more extensive propaganda campaigns and severe legal restrictions targeting foreign workers.

**While Tajikistan's strategic partnership with Russia and its economic dependence on**



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**Moscow have enabled the maintenance of cooperative relations, the documented torture of Tajik citizens accused in the terrorist attack, combined with a widespread campaign of hatred against migrants and a marked increase in violence against Central Asian workers — predominantly Tajiks — compelled Tajik authorities in 2024 to issue several formal diplomatic protests to Moscow and accelerate their multi-vector foreign policy approach.**

## **AFTER THE TERRORIST ATTACK: TAJIKISTAN AND RUSSIA**

The revelation that the Crocus City Hall attackers were Tajik nationals predictably damaged the country's international standing. In a public address, President Emomali Rahmon condemned the attack while emphasizing that terrorism recognizes no "nationality or religion." He acknowledged the severe blow to Tajikistan's reputation and pledged comprehensive measures to prevent similar incidents. During his call with Russian President Vladimir Putin following the attack, Rahmon assured that Tajikistan stood ready to collaborate actively with Russia and the international community to address terrorism. Nevertheless, the incident significantly affected diplomatic relations between the two nations.

Tensions escalated after the Kremlin used the attack to dramatically intensify its large-scale anti-migrant campaign, launched in May 2023, wherein Kremlin propaganda systematically highlighted<sup>234</sup> migrant-related crimes to legitimize the often-violent coercion of migrant workers into military service in Ukraine,<sup>235</sup> while simultaneously deflecting attention from economic challenges and the increasing incidence of crimes committed by returning soldiers.<sup>236</sup>

Reports of torture, physical abuse, and humiliation of detained Tajik nationals by Russian law enforcement agencies further strained bilateral relations and precipitated diplomatic friction. Tajik Foreign Minister Sirojiddin Muhridin condemned such practices as "unacceptable"<sup>237</sup> and called for adherence to international human rights standards. International human rights organizations have expressed concern that such violence and repression could potentially drive radicalization among migrant communities.<sup>238</sup>

A comprehensive Tajik response to Russia's persistent anti-migrant campaign did not immediately materialize, given Russia's importance as both a labor market and strategic ally. However, on September 10, 2024, Tajikistan's Foreign Ministry issued an advisory<sup>239</sup> urging its citizens to "temporarily refrain from traveling to the Russian Federation unless absolutely necessary." In October, Tajikistan's Human Rights Commissioner Umed Bobozoda publicly expressed<sup>240</sup> grave concerns about the mistreatment of Tajik migrants in Russia. In a formal letter to his Russian counterpart Tatyana Moskalova on October 10, 2024, Bobozoda detailed allegations that Russian law enforcement officers were employing illegal methods against migrant workers, subjecting them to verbal abuse, physical assault, and harassment. Earlier, on October 4, 2024, Tajik Prime Minister Kokhir Rasulzoda had similarly voiced alarm regarding violations of migrant workers' rights in Russia, stating, "We cannot but be alarmed by the trend of widespread violation of the fundamental rights and freedoms of our citizens committed in carrying out measures to streamline the migration field in Russia."

The Crocus City Hall terrorist attack catalyzed rising xenophobia in Russia, particularly targeting Tajik nationals, who constitute a substantial portion of Russia's migrant workforce. In the aftermath of the tragedy, attacks on migrants increased significantly,<sup>241</sup> perpetrated by both citizens and local authorities, severely worsening conditions for Tajik workers in Russia. Their legal status has been particularly affected, with many Tajiks facing entry denials or heightened scrutiny during their stay.<sup>242</sup> Tens of thousands have been subjected to deportation proceedings.<sup>243</sup> This situation has jeopardized Tajikistan's economy, which heavily depends on remittances from migrant workers — a significant component of the country's GDP — and any reduction threatens economic instability and increased unemployment.

The Kremlin's anti-migrant policies and propaganda campaign represent a substantial risk to Tajikistan's economic stability, both through mass deportations from Russia and through the voluntary departure of



Tajik workers in response to increasingly restrictive anti-migrant regulations and violence against foreign workers. Constraints on labor migration threaten Tajikistan with significant financial losses. According to the Asian Development Bank, remittances to Tajikistan totaled 5.7 billion U.S. dollars in 2023, constituting 47.1% of the republic's GDP. Russian Ministry of Internal Affairs data indicate that as of September 1, 2024, approximately 3.985 million Central Asian citizens resided in Russia. Uzbekistan leads with over 1.792 million migrants, followed by Tajikistan (more than 1.231 million), Kazakhstan (606,900), Kyrgyzstan (262,800), and Turkmenistan (92,000). Despite Russia experiencing an unprecedented labor shortage,<sup>244</sup> throughout 2024, authorities across many Russian regions continued implementing increasingly restrictive limitations on migrant employment, prohibiting foreign workers from sectors including taxis, retail, finance, and even libraries. Nevertheless, expert projections<sup>245</sup> of acute labor scarcity in Russia suggest that mass deportations and repression of migrants may subside when the Kremlin's need for large-scale diversionary tactics diminishes.

## SECURITY MEASURES AND INTERNAL SITUATION IN TAJIKISTAN

Following the Crocus City Hall attack, Tajik authorities conducted operations to apprehend terrorism suspects linked to extremist organizations.<sup>246</sup> Concurrently, the government intensified domestic anti-radicalization efforts, implementing additional security measures and strengthening oversight of religious institutions. A key initiative has been the development of educational programs designed to counter extremist ideologies among young people. In autumn 2024, government officials conducted<sup>247</sup> door-to-door outreach campaigns, urging vigilance against online groups recruiting for terrorist organizations.

Tajikistan has also strengthened its international counterterrorism initiatives. During an official visit to Kuwait on November 4, 2024, President Emomali Rahmon advocated for the adoption of a Convention on Combating International Terrorism.<sup>248</sup> "Today's security challenges require not only a strong will but also the ability to cooperate internationally. Only through coordinated efforts can we succeed in combating terrorism and its threats," the president stated. Rahmon emphasized that no nation can independently address terrorism and extremism threats, underscoring the growing importance of integrated international efforts.

In his policy statement on December 28, 2024, President Emomali Rahmon identified "maintaining commitment to the principles of a multi-vector foreign policy" as a central priority.<sup>249</sup> As the President acknowledged following the Crocus City Hall attack, the tragedy damaged the nation's reputation, making Tajikistan's global positioning as a steadfast ally in counterterrorism efforts particularly significant.

## RELATIONS WITH THE WEST

The United States, Turkey, and the European Union unequivocally condemned the Crocus City Hall terrorist attack, but unlike Russia's anti-migrant campaign, Tajikistan's international partners demonstrably strengthened their cooperation with Dushanbe and other Central Asian nations throughout 2024, spanning both economic and security domains. This enhanced engagement is evidenced by numerous high-level international visits and meetings.

In May 2024, approximately six weeks after the terrorist attack and Turkey's revocation of visa-free travel for Tajik citizens<sup>250</sup>, a delegation from Dushanbe met with Turkish Vice President Cevdet Yilmaz and Turkish Trade Minister Omer Bolat. "Ankara considers<sup>251</sup> Tajikistan as one of the key partners in the strategically important region of Central Asia," Vice President Cevdet Yilmaz stated during discussions with the Tajik delegation led by Tajikistan's Minister of Industry and New Technologies Sherali Kabir.

On June 24, Tajikistan hosted<sup>252</sup> a delegation from the U.S.-Tajikistan Business Council, bringing together executives from diverse American industries in Dushanbe for the USTJBC conference. This gathering represented a historic milestone in bilateral commercial relations, bringing the largest U.S. business delegation<sup>253</sup> ever to visit the Central Asian nation and highlighting Tajikistan's commitment to business-friendly reforms and policies. In September 2024, Secretary of State Antony Blinken convened with foreign ministers and representatives from Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan, and Uzbekistan under the C5+1 framework during the 79th UN General Assembly. Participants specifically addressed measures to enhance regional security cooperation, aligning with their shared vision for a peaceful and stable Central Asia.<sup>254</sup>

On July 16, 2024, Dushanbe hosted the 11th Tajikistan-EU Cooperation Committee meeting, where Minister of Economic Development Zavqizoda Zavqi Amin engaged with an EU delegation led by Luke Devin, Head of the Central Asian Countries Department at the



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European Union Commission. Discussions centered on EU funding for key sectors, including trade, investment, energy, healthcare, digitalization, border security, and hydroelectric development. The EU pledged<sup>255</sup> 141 million euros, including 101 million euros in grants, to support Tajikistan's priority economic sectors.

Tajikistan's multi-vector foreign policy is yielding tangible benefits, particularly against the backdrop of Russia's anti-migrant policies, which are compelling Central Asian governments to explore alternative employment opportunities for their citizens. According to Galiya Ibragimova, a Central Asia and Eastern Europe specialist, "Central Asian governments are actively working to help their citizens find jobs elsewhere, facilitating labor migration to new destinations and negotiating reduced entry barriers to foreign job markets. Officials are even assisting workers with visa applications. These efforts aim to mitigate the economic impact of declining remittances from Russia."

A Carnegie Russia Eurasia Center analysis indicates that hundreds of thousands of Central Asians now work in Turkey, South Korea, and Gulf states, with Europe emerging as a growing destination. The European Union increasingly relies on Central Asian labor, particularly in Eastern Europe, where many local workers have relocated westward seeking higher wages. For instance, 75% of Slovak companies report worker shortages, and the Volkswagen plant in Bratislava employed over 1,500 Uzbek workers in 2023, offering monthly wages of 1,400 euros — significantly higher than comparable positions in Russia. Migration from Central Asia to Poland,

Czechia, Lithuania, and Bulgaria is also increasing. However, Ibragimova notes, "For now, Russia remains the primary destination for Central Asian workers, and no Asian or European labor market will replace it anytime soon." Nevertheless, she adds, "Just a few years ago, it was unthinkable that hundreds of thousands of Central Asians would seek work in Asia or tens of thousands would head to Europe. Russia is undeniably losing its appeal for Central Asian migrants — yet another unexpected consequence of the war in Ukraine."

## LONG-TERM CONSEQUENCES

The Crocus City Hall terrorist attack represents a tragedy with far-reaching political implications, affecting not only Russia's domestic politics but also its relations with Tajikistan and neighboring countries. This calamity and its political aftermath have catalyzed shifts in Dushanbe's domestic and foreign policy approach, as Tajikistan confronts multiple challenges: rebuilding its international reputation, diversifying diplomatic and economic relationships, and ensuring social stability and security while protecting its citizens from both terrorism threats and recruitment by radical groups. Economically, Tajikistan faces the imperative of finding new pathways to diversify its economy by reducing dependence on remittances from Russia — thereby diminishing its vulnerability to external shocks — or by identifying new labor markets where Central Asian migrant workers can find employment without facing governmental persecution.

# TURKMENISTAN:

## Boosting Regional Connectivity with the TAPI Pipeline

**Naghi Ahmadov**

### INTRODUCTION

The Taliban's recapturing of power in Afghanistan in August 2021 has had a profound impact on Central Asia, with both opportunities and risks for the region, particularly for Turkmenistan. Sharing a long border with Afghanistan, Turkmenistan faces concerns over security, including cross-border violence, terrorism, and refugee influxes that have previously destabilized the region. Despite strict internal control, the potential spillover of radicalization and extremism from the Taliban's ideology, especially in border areas, creates a complex geopolitical environment in which Turkmenistan may find itself entangled.

Amidst these complexities, Turkmenistan appears to be seizing the opportunity to strengthen its economic ties with Afghanistan through proactive measures. In

2024, Turkmen and Afghan authorities made significant progress in strengthening their economic and bilateral relations by formalizing several major infrastructure projects. These initiatives, primarily focusing on energy, transport, and communication, are set to bolster both nations' regional economic integration. Notable projects include the Turkmenistan-Afghanistan-Pakistan-India (TAPI) gas pipeline, along with various railway and infrastructure efforts designed to promote mutual growth and stability.

The TAPI project will make a significant contribution to diversifying Turkmenistan's gas exports, reducing the country's dependence on supplies to Russia and China. As early as October 2024, the Chairman of the state-owned Turkmenneftgaz, Maksat Babayev, emphasized the need for diversification, explaining that gas deliveries to Russia had been halted due to rising demand from various countries. The issue of export diversification also took center stage at the International Conference "Oil



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and Gas of Turkmenistan” in the fall of 2024, where the TAPI project was a key focus. The project has received strong backing from Western countries, which advocate for deeper political and economic engagement between Central Asia and Afghanistan, as well as enhanced connectivity to South Asia, recognizing it as essential for regional peace, stability, and sustainable development.

## BACKGROUND

The TAPI project, originally envisioned in the early 1990s and officially agreed upon in December 2010, has a long history. It began during the first Taliban regime between 1996 and 2001, and now, with the Taliban back in power in Kabul, the project has been revived. The groundbreaking ceremony for the project took place on December 13, 2015, in the Mary region of Turkmenistan, near the Galkynysh gas field. The construction of a 214-kilometer section on the territory of Turkmenistan was reportedly completed by mid-2019, fully preparing it for operation.

The TAPI pipeline will originate from Galkynysh, the world’s second-largest gas field, and stretch to Fazilka, an Indian city near the Pakistan border. The pipeline, stretching 1,821 kilometers — 816 of which run through Afghanistan — is designed to transport 33 billion cubic meters of natural gas annually from Turkmenistan to Pakistan and India, positioning it as one of the largest regional infrastructure projects.

As seen, the TAPI project had, in fact, been on Turkmenistan’s agenda for a considerable time. However, it has long been hindered by unresolved issues, conflicting interests of major powers, an unstable political landscape, and delays caused by security concerns, geopolitical tensions, funding challenges, and bureaucratic hurdles.

## KEY DEVELOPMENTS IN THE TAPI PROJECT

The year 2024 saw a surge in high-level diplomatic engagements between Turkmenistan and Afghanistan, paving the way for deeper collaboration on the advancement of the critical TAPI gas pipeline project.

On February 26, 2024, a crucial meeting was held in Ashgabat between Turkmenistan’s Minister of Foreign Affairs, Rashid Meredov, and the Acting Minister of Foreign Affairs of Afghanistan, Amir Khan Mottaki.<sup>256</sup> Accompanied by Afghan officials, including representatives from the Ministry of Mining and Petroleum, Da Afghanistan Breshna Sherkat

(Afghanistan’s national energy company), and the Afghanistan Railway Authority, the talks focused on accelerating the implementation of joint energy and transport projects. These discussions reaffirmed both countries’ commitment to advancing the TAPI pipeline, TAP power transmission line, and the rail link between Turkmenistan and Afghanistan.

On March 4-6, 2024, an exhibition and business forum were held in Turkmenistan’s Chamber of Commerce and Industry, attracting over 300 representatives from government agencies, the Chamber of Commerce and Industry, and banks, as well as about 170 companies and enterprises of Afghanistan.<sup>257</sup> The forum discussed a broad range of areas including oil and gas, trade, agriculture, and electric power. Special emphasis was placed on projects that boost bilateral cooperation, including the TAPI gas pipeline and TAP power transmission lines, which aim to create jobs, attract investment, and stabilize the region’s energy infrastructure.

**On August 30, a Turkmen-Afghan meeting in Ashgabat resulted in bilateral documents being signed to advance cooperation in energy and transport sectors.<sup>258</sup> This included agreements related to the construction of the TAPI gas pipeline and TAP power transmission lines, as well as the establishment of fiber-optic communication lines.**

The Afghan delegation was led by Hidayatullah Badri, Acting Minister of Mines and Petroleum, while the Turkmen delegation included Deputy Chairmen of the Cabinet of Ministers and senior officials from various ministries.

On September 11, 2024, Turkmenistan and Afghanistan kicked off several important construction projects at their shared border.<sup>259</sup> Among the noteworthy moments was the unveiling of the Serhetabat-Herat section, known as ‘Arkadagýň Ak ýoly’ (Bright Path of Arkadag), a vital part of the TAPI Transnational Gas Pipeline Project.

Additionally, the commissioning of the “Nur-el-Jahad” power plant in Herat marked a key milestone in the first phase of the TAP power transmission line project. Other projects included the opening of the Serhetabat-Turgundi railway bridge, the foundation-laying ceremony for the “Shatlyk-1” gas compressor station in Mary region. Work also began on the Serhetabat-Herat fiber-optic line, the Turgundi dry port warehouse complex, and the Turgundi-Herat railway section.

To note, Chairman of the Halk Maslahaty (People’s Council of Turkmenistan) Gurbanguly Berdimuhamedov attended the events in person, joined by Acting Chairman of the Cabinet of Ministers of Afghanistan, Mullah Mohammad Hasan Akhund at the Islim-Cheshme checkpoint.

At the ceremony, Mullah Mohammad Hassan Akhund remarked, “We have been waiting for this day for years. There might have been many problems and challenges for the people of Turkmenistan and Afghanistan until these major projects reached this point, which we are inaugurating today.” In line with this, President Serdar Berdimuhamedov of Turkmenistan emphasized, “The start of these projects demonstrates the good neighborliness of our countries. These projects are beneficial not only for the people of Afghanistan and Turkmenistan but also for the countries of the region. Our cooperation with Afghanistan has reached a high level.”<sup>260</sup>

On December 9, President Serdar Berdimuhamedov chaired an expanded session of the Cabinet of Ministers, attended by Turkmenistan’s diplomatic heads and representatives to international organizations.<sup>261</sup> The meeting focused on key foreign policy priorities of Turkmenistan, emphasizing its neutral stance in the global arena. A major highlight was the discussion on the commencement of the Serhetabat-Herat section, a crucial stage in the implementation of the TAPI transnational gas pipeline project, as well as the Herat power plant as part of the first phase of the TAP power transmission project.

In a bid to further enhance energy collaboration, Turkmenistan’s state-owned energy corporation, Türkmenenergo, was granted permission by President Serdar Berdimuhamedov to enter into additional agreements with Afghanistan’s Da Afghanistan Breshna Sherkat.<sup>262</sup>

On December 15, 2024, a Turkmen delegation, led by the Minister of Foreign Affairs Rashid Meredov, visited Afghanistan for a working trip.<sup>263</sup> Accompanied by Afghan officials, including Acting Foreign Minister Amir

Khan Muttaqi, the visit aimed to evaluate the progress of the large-scale energy, transport, and infrastructure projects launched on September 11.

## PROGRESS AND ECONOMIC IMPACT OF THE TAPI PROJECT IN AFGHANISTAN

At the end of 2024, according to Homayoun Afghan, spokesperson for the Ministry of Mines and Petroleum, nearly 3 kilometers of the TAPI pipeline have been completed in Afghanistan, with an additional 3.5 kilometers prepared for installation.<sup>264</sup> He added that Turkmenistan will finance 85% of the project’s total costs, while Afghanistan, Pakistan, and India will each cover 5%. Turkmenistan has committed to covering Afghanistan’s share.

The Ministry of Mines and Petroleum reports that the TAPI project, extending from the Turkmenistan border to Guzara District in Herat Province, spans 153 kilometers and is expected to be completed within two years. Preliminary details from the ministry suggest that the cost of the TAPI project up to Herat Province is 600 million U.S. dollars, with Turkmenistan bearing the financing.<sup>265</sup>

The 10 billion U.S. dollars TAPI project is set to transport Turkmenistan’s gas through Afghanistan to Pakistan and India, with Afghanistan expected to earn a substantial 400-450 million U.S. dollars annually in transit fees, in addition to receiving a share of the gas supply. Over time, if the project proceeds smoothly, Afghanistan will gradually receive 500 million cubic meters of gas in the first decade, 1 billion cubic meters in the second, and 1.5 billion cubic meters in the third.<sup>266</sup>

Moreover, according to TAPI project officials, once completed, the project is expected to create employment opportunities for 12,000 people in Afghanistan, while yielding nearly one billion dollars in annual revenue for the country.<sup>267</sup>

Worth noting that the TAPI project is part of a broader regional development effort that embraces several key infrastructure projects. In addition to the gas pipeline, a 500 kV power transmission line will transfer electricity from Turkmenistan to Pakistan via Afghanistan, generating up to 110 million U.S. dollars annually in transit fees for Afghanistan.<sup>268</sup> Fiber optic cables will also be installed, connecting the countries and enhancing communication networks. Furthermore, a new railway line will link Pakistan and Turkmenistan through Afghanistan, strengthening regional trade and transportation connections. These interconnected

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projects aim to facilitate the construction of the TAPI pipeline while enhancing economic integration and regional stability.

These developments underscore the significant economic impact the TAPI project will have on Afghanistan, further emphasizing the mutual benefits of the ongoing collaboration between Turkmenistan and Afghanistan. The importance of these projects cannot be overstated, as they are designed to integrate Afghanistan into a larger regional economic framework, fostering greater stability and growth in the region.

## LONG-TERM STRATEGIC GOALS

The leaders of Turkmenistan and Afghanistan have demonstrated a clear commitment to expanding the scope of their cooperation in critical infrastructure and energy projects. Several notable agreements were signed in 2024, signaling progress on major infrastructure developments, with Turkmenistan considering the implementation of TAPI as strategically important.

As Turkmenistan actively works toward integrating Afghanistan into regional economic initiatives, these large-scale projects offer a pathway to both nations' prosperity. The energy and transport initiatives, including TAPI and TAP, hold particular significance as they promise to reduce energy shortages, create employment, and stimulate long-term economic development in Afghanistan, while positioning Turkmenistan as a key player in regional energy security. In addition, this project not only reduces Turkmenistan's dependence on China by diversifying its energy markets but also offers Afghanistan the opportunity to enhance its global economic standing, attract foreign investment, and serve as a successful example of large-scale initiative implementation.

Turkmenistan's ongoing support for Afghanistan's political and economic stability is evident in its commitment to the country's development. This is reflected in initiatives such as preferential electricity and liquefied natural gas transfers, the construction of essential social infrastructure, and the continued advancement of the TAPI and TAP projects. These efforts not only aim to promote Afghanistan's prosperity but also align with Turkmenistan's national interests, ensuring a stable and secure neighbor, which is critical for both regional stability and Turkmenistan's economic and security goals.

In this context, the Turkmen-Afghan relationship is moving into a new era of collaboration, with a shared

vision for regional connectivity and sustainable economic growth. Through strategic infrastructure projects, both countries are positioning themselves as key stakeholders in the broader Central Asian and South Asian economic landscape. As these projects progress, they will contribute to regional stability and foster an environment conducive to greater trade, investment, and long-term prosperity.

In the end, the partnership between Turkmenistan and Afghanistan is strengthening, with both countries working closely on major infrastructure projects in energy, transport, and communications. From the TAPI pipeline to new railway connections, these joint efforts are set to transform the region's economy and society. This growing collaboration is further supported by high-level diplomatic talks and tangible, on-the-ground progress, offering a hopeful future for both nations and their neighbors.

However, despite the progress between Turkmenistan and Afghanistan, the future success of the TAPI project remains uncertain. While Afghanistan and Turkmenistan are collaborating on TAPI, doubts persist regarding its feasibility in Pakistan and India. Therefore, the future of TAPI will likely be influenced more by geopolitical considerations than by purely economic factors, particularly given the complex regional dynamics at play.

## WESTERN ENGAGEMENT WITH THE TAPI PIPELINE PROJECT

The EU and the United States, along with international institutions such as the World Bank, the ADB, and the EBRD, are working together to support regional integration in transport, trade, and energy, with the broader aim of enhancing the strategic autonomy and sovereignty of Central Asian countries. Within this framework, the TAPI pipeline is regarded as one of the key contributors to regional integration and cooperation.

As part of its strategic vision, the EU sees the TAPI pipeline as contributing to stability and security in Central Asia. Though it does not directly supply gas to the EU, TAPI fosters regional cooperation, aligning with the EU's Central Asia strategy, which identifies stability and security as 'strategic European interests.' Furthermore, as the EU's policy toward Central Asia links security and development, the TAPI project is likely to reinforce its 'security-development nexus' approach in the region.<sup>269</sup> The European Council also emphasizes that deeper political and economic engagement between Central Asia and Afghanistan, along with stronger connectivity to South Asia, is crucial for peace, stability, and sustainable development in the region.<sup>270</sup>



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**The EU particularly supports Turkmenistan in its efforts to diversify its gas export policy. With the sharp decline in Russian gas supplies to Europe, the Trans-Caspian pipeline has re-emerged in EU political discussions as a potential alternative. Both the EU and Turkmenistan appear committed to collaborating on the project, which aims to transport Turkmen gas through Azerbaijan to Europe.<sup>271</sup>**

The U.S. has endorsed the TAPI pipeline for nearly three decades, viewing it as a means to strengthen Central Asia's economic resilience and independence. However, despite its strategic backing, the U.S. is not providing direct financial assistance for the project.<sup>272</sup> In October 2020, during Donald Trump's first term in office, the United States hosted its first trilateral meeting with Afghanistan and Turkmenistan, where the countries agreed to cooperate on infrastructure projects, including the TAP power project and the TAPI gas pipeline project.<sup>273</sup> The U.S. government considers the successful completion of the project crucial to limiting Russia and China's influence in the region.<sup>274</sup>

## CONCLUSION

Turkmenistan's growing partnership with Afghanistan, especially in the energy sector, highlights a complex balancing act. By providing crucial energy resources through initiatives like the TAPI pipeline, Turkmenistan stands to gain not only economically but also strategically. While the energy projects promise long-term benefits for both nations, Turkmenistan is essentially making a calculated bargain. It is willing to extend vital energy supplies in exchange for assuming the risks of regional instability, terrorism, and the potential spillover of extremism from Afghanistan. This precarious relationship illustrates Turkmenistan's delicate position: seeking to expand its influence and secure its economic future while carefully managing the uncertainties of Afghanistan's political landscape. Ultimately, Turkmenistan's engagement with Afghanistan reflects a pragmatic approach to regional cooperation, one that requires careful negotiation between economic gain and security challenges. Additionally, the TAPI pipeline provides Turkmenistan with an opportunity to position itself as an energy partner independent of Russian or Chinese routes.

Moreover, this development aligns with the broader geopolitical and economic interests of Western countries. The TAPI pipeline has long enjoyed the EU and U.S. support as an alternative route, facilitating Central Asia's access to global energy markets and reducing the region's heavy reliance on the Chinese energy market. As a result, TAPI's route could serve as a lasting stabilizing corridor, driving long-term economic growth and prosperity for neighboring countries — an objective the EU and the U.S. have consistently championed as part of their broader regional strategies.

# UKRAINE:

## Ending Russian Gas Transit, Integrating into the EU Market

**Olga Yurkova**

Throughout its post-Soviet history, Ukraine's energy dependence on Russia has served as one of the Kremlin's most powerful geopolitical leverage points. Natural gas functioned not merely as a commodity but as a tool of influence, a wellspring of corruption within Ukraine, and a fundamental barrier to Ukraine's Western integration. The termination of Russian gas transit through Ukraine on January 1, 2025, signals the end of a half-century era in East-West energy relations, with far-reaching implications for Ukraine's economic and political sovereignty, its continued trajectory toward Westernization, and the fate of neighboring countries, particularly Moldova and the Russian-backed breakaway region of Transnistria.

### HISTORICAL BACKGROUND

To understand the depth of this issue, we must examine its historical roots during the Cold War. Initially, gas flows in the USSR moved westward to eastward, with gas from Ukraine's Dashava and later Shebelynka fields supplying various regions of the Soviet Union. During the 1960s, the USSR shifted its energy policy toward the West as part of its détente strategy amid deteriorating relations with China, seeking to avoid conflict on two fronts. This strategic pivot led to a 20-year contract with West Germany in 1970 and the construction of extensive gas transportation infrastructure to Western Europe, with Ukrainian fields providing the first supplies. The



Mr. thanyatsep / shutterstock

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agreement included provisions for West Germany to supply large-diameter pipes and other equipment to the USSR for pipeline construction, in exchange for gas from Western Siberian fields.

Experts note that increased oil and gas exports were designed to create Western European dependence on the USSR, drive a wedge between Europe and the United States, and improve relations with neutral states like Austria and Finland.<sup>275</sup> As gas production developed in Russia and Central Asia, alongside the depletion of Ukraine's indigenous gas fields, Ukraine's strategic value evolved into that of a key transit corridor for Russian gas bound for European markets.<sup>276</sup> The early 1980s saw the construction of a robust gas transportation system that remains the second largest in Europe and third worldwide in storage capacity. However, by the time of the Soviet Union's collapse, Ukraine could meet only 20% of its gas needs through domestic production, creating critical dependence on Russian imports. Today, existing Ukrainian fields are depleted by 75%-90%.<sup>277</sup>

## UKRAINE'S JOURNEY TO ENERGY INDEPENDENCE: FROM CRISIS TO TRANSFORMATION

Since gaining independence in 1991, Ukraine's dependence on Russian gas emerged as a central vulnerability. The former Soviet pipelines traversing Ukrainian territory supplied Europe with Russian gas, while Ukraine's reliance on Russian imports left it susceptible to political coercion. Multiple gas disputes over the years, most notably in 2006 and 2009, highlighted the dangers of this dependency. Russia's strategy was predictable: manipulate gas prices and supplies to pressure Ukrainian leadership, particularly those pursuing European integration.

These Kremlin-orchestrated gas crises aimed to deepen Ukraine's energy, economic, and political subordination to Russia while persuading European countries to invest in bypass pipelines, undermining Ukraine's credibility as a reliable transit nation. However, when Gazprom halted gas supplies to both Ukraine and Europe in 2009, Ukraine's Naftogaz management implemented a creative solution by reversing the gas transmission system (GTS). This tactical decision provided the country with domestically produced gas and reserves from underground storage facilities for a crucial two-week period during peak winter conditions. This episode demonstrated to both Ukraine and the EU that the system could maintain functionality even without transit

flows. Subsequently, Ukraine began initiatives to reduce gas consumption and employ alternative fuel facilities.

Underground gas storage facilities (UGS), developed from depleted gas wells, became a critical asset of Ukraine's GTS, enabling both Ukraine and its EU partners to manage seasonal demand fluctuations and mitigate energy crises.

The 2014 Revolution of Dignity, followed by Russia's annexation of Crimea and military intervention in Eastern Ukraine, compelled Ukraine to accelerate its energy diversification efforts. Facing an urgent need to end its dependence on Russian energy, Ukraine implemented decisive measures with support from the EU, the United States, and international financial institutions. Among the most significant early initiatives was the establishment of reverse gas flows from Europe. By negotiating agreements with Slovakia, Poland, and Hungary, Ukraine created alternative import routes, bypassing direct purchases from Russia in favor of European market sources. This strategic shift substantially diminished Gazprom's influence over Ukrainian energy security.

Perhaps the most emblematic step toward liberation from Russian energy control came in November 2015, when Ukraine discontinued direct imports of overpriced Russian gas and began sourcing from European traders instead. This decision neutralized one of Russia's most potent geopolitical tools against Ukraine, even as the country maintained its role as a reliable transit corridor for gas destined for EU markets.

The struggle against Russian energy dominance extended to the legal arena as well. In 2014, Ukraine initiated proceedings against Gazprom in the Stockholm Arbitration Court, challenging the Russian company's unfair pricing practices and violations of previous transit agreements. Ukraine secured a landmark victory in 2018 when the court mandated that Gazprom pay 2.56 billion U.S. dollars in compensation. This ruling not only provided financial restitution but also demonstrated Ukraine's capacity to successfully challenge Russian economic pressure through international legal mechanisms. As part of the settlement, Ukraine agreed to withdraw other pending gas-related claims.

Meanwhile, between 2010 and 2021, Gazprom constructed Nord Stream and TurkStream pipelines while preparing to launch Nord Stream 2, developments that threatened to render Ukrainian transit routes obsolete. However, in 2019, Ukraine and Russia negotiated a new transit agreement for 2020-2024, fundamentally changing the operational principle from "take or pay" to "pump or pay," obligating Russia to pay fixed fees

regardless of actual transportation volumes. This provision proved critical, as Russia consistently underdelivered on contracted volumes, except in 2021 when transit volumes slightly exceeded projections — 41.6 billion cubic meters versus the planned 40 billion. Over the five-year term, Moscow ultimately transported approximately 66% of the contracted capacity.<sup>278</sup>

## ANTI-CORRUPTION ENERGY SECTOR REFORMS

Gas dependency and corruption have been historically intertwined in Ukraine. The notorious RosUkrEnergo scheme — a shadowy intermediary between Ukraine and Russia characterized by opaque ownership structures and offshore registration — enabled politically connected oligarchs<sup>279</sup> to divert billions while maintaining Ukraine's dependency on Russian gas supplies. This arrangement persisted for years, allowing influential figures within Naftogaz and the government who allegedly profited from the corrupt system to control gas distribution and revenue streams through non-transparent pricing and insider arrangements.

Throughout the 1990s and 2000s, gas contracts with Russia typically emerged from behind-closed-doors negotiations that enriched a select group of powerbrokers while saddling the country with energy inefficiency and systemic corruption. This framework also left Ukraine vulnerable to political pressure, as Moscow could manipulate gas supplies to coerce both Kyiv and the EU through several interconnected mechanisms. The lack of transparency prevented Ukraine from thoroughly assessing or challenging contractual terms, resulting in inflated prices and disadvantageous conditions, including take-or-pay provisions that forced Ukraine to pay for gas regardless of actual consumption needs, creating significant debt pressure. These pricing structures enabled Gazprom to present Ukraine with contested debt claims, exemplified in 2013 when the company demanded 7 billion U.S. dollars for unused gas based on the 2009 'take-or-pay' contractual obligations.<sup>280</sup> Intermediary entities like RosUkrEnergo created convoluted transaction networks that obscured financial flows and facilitated potential abuses.<sup>281</sup> Moreover, Russia exploited the interdependence of supply and transit contracts to launch information warfare, accusing Ukraine of "stealing" gas and triggering the 2006 and 2009 gas crises, which damaged Ukraine's reputation as a transit country.<sup>282</sup> Within this system, Russia's ability to manipulate gas flows — through price adjustments, supply restrictions, or complete cutoffs — served as a

powerful instrument of political leverage.<sup>283</sup>

The post-2014 energy sector reforms, driven largely by pressure from Western partners and the International Monetary Fund, sought to dismantle a deeply entrenched corruption ecosystem where political influence, financial interests, and geopolitical leverage were thoroughly interwoven. Naftogaz underwent comprehensive restructuring to enhance financial transparency and operational efficiency. The government introduced market-based pricing mechanisms and began the unbundling process of Naftogaz, separating gas transportation functions from production and supply operations. Additionally, the government adopted a competitive gas market model, implementing third-party access provisions and allowing European traders to enter the Ukrainian consumer market.

## IMPLICATIONS FOR REGIONAL ENERGY SECURITY AND EUROPEAN INTEGRATION

By the time of Russia's full-scale invasion in 2022, the EU had become heavily reliant on Russian gas (accounting for over 40% of imports<sup>284</sup>), and the recently completed Nord Stream 2 pipeline was expected to deepen this dependency. However, following the invasion, the EU dramatically redirected its energy strategy, replacing Russian supplies with alternatives from Norway, the United States, and Qatar. Substantial infrastructure investments, including expanded LNG terminals in Poland and Germany and the Southern Gas Corridor project, facilitated this transition.

When the transit agreement between Ukraine and Russia expired, Kyiv faced a strategic choice: negotiate new terms with Moscow or terminate transit operations entirely. Ukraine opted for the latter course. This decision not only symbolically cemented Ukraine's independence from Russian energy influence but also contributed to Moscow's growing isolation from European energy markets.

EU officials maintain that member states previously importing Russian gas via Ukraine — primarily Austria and Slovakia — can manage without these supplies, though Slovakia and Hungary continue to pursue negotiations for alternative arrangements. Slovakia's Prime Minister Robert Fico has gone so far as to threaten suspending electricity exports to Ukraine, critical for a country dealing with systematic Russian attacks on its energy infrastructure. Such actions, however, would contravene single European energy market regulations and likely



trigger strong opposition from Brussels. Hungary's Viktor Orbán has similarly advocated for transit restoration, despite Hungary's primary gas imports coming through Turkey.

## MOLDOVA'S TRANSITION AND TRANSNISTRIA'S CHALLENGE

Neighboring Moldova has pursued comparable energy diversification initiatives, increased Romanian imports, and expanding its energy infrastructure. The country secured access to non-Russian gas through the Iasi-Ungheni-Chisinau pipeline, operational since 2022. Moldova has also established agreements with the European Bank for Reconstruction and Development and the European Investment Bank to enhance its gas infrastructure and further integrate with EU energy markets.

This transition, however, creates significant complications for Transnistria, which has received Russian gas at no cost since 2005. Following the cessation of transit through Ukraine, Gazprom discontinued supplies to the region. Until February 10, Transnistria received gas through European assistance programs. However, according to Moldovan authorities, under pressure from Moscow, Transnistria declined the next 60 million euros aid tranche and instead sought Russian credit financing. Chisinau offered to permit transit in exchange for humanitarian concessions from Tiraspol, including the release of political prisoners held in Transnistria, continued broadcasting of Moldova 1 television within the region, and removal of checkpoints established in 2022 that restricted movement between Transnistria and the rest of Moldova. Nevertheless, Tiraspol rejected the essential condition — gradual implementation of market-based tariffs.

The situation is further complicated by Moldova's electricity supply dynamics, with up to 80% of the country's power historically generated by the Kuchurgan power station (MoldGRES) in Transnistria, which operates using free Russian gas and is owned by Russian energy giant Inter RAO. The shift to imported Romanian electricity has increased utility costs for Moldovan consumers, eroding government popularity. The Kremlin appears to be exploiting this vulnerability ahead of the 2025 parliamentary elections, undermining President Maia Sandu's administration and bolstering pro-Russian political forces.

Despite these challenges, Moldova's successful transition away from Russian energy dependence could

serve as a blueprint for other post-Soviet states still under Moscow's influence, while Transnistria's economic difficulties might compel it to negotiate reintegration with Chisinau under new terms. Such developments would significantly alter the geopolitical landscape in Eastern Europe. Through coordinated efforts by Chisinau, Kyiv, and the EU, Transnistria's reunification with Moldova under favorable conditions represents a realistic possibility.<sup>285</sup> While the economic disruption inherent in this process carries stability risks, it could simultaneously weaken Russia's regional control mechanisms.

## LOOKING AHEAD: GREEN ENERGY AND EUROPEAN FUTURE

Ukraine's decision to end Russian gas transit defines its long-term energy strategy and aligns with Western efforts to reduce dependence on Russian fossil fuels.

**The GTS development roadmap for 2024-2033 incorporates infrastructure modernization and preparations for "green" hydrogen transportation, reflecting European decarbonization priorities. As of 2021, the Energy Community identified Ukraine as having the highest potential for hydrogen industry development among member countries. Under the EU hydrogen strategy approved in 2020, Ukraine is expected to develop up to 10 GW of hydrogen production capacity by 2030.<sup>286</sup>**

This watershed decision represents the culmination of Ukraine's extended journey toward energy sovereignty, made possible through sustained collaborative efforts between Ukraine and the EU. Energy independence from Russia strengthens Ukraine's European trajectory in



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several critical dimensions. Despite short-term economic losses from foregone transit revenues, the long-term strategic advantages are considerably greater. Ukraine no longer needs to balance gas negotiations against broader security considerations, enabling full integration into EU energy and security frameworks. The transition toward European energy markets, investments in renewable energy development, and expansion of domestic gas production align Ukraine with EU Green Deal objectives. Additionally, without financial incentives to maintain gas cooperation, Russia loses another significant lever of influence over Ukraine and its neighbors.

While the cessation of gas transit presents technical, financial, and security challenges for Ukraine, none are insurmountable. From a technical perspective, maintaining the GTS becomes more complex, and financially, increased maintenance costs will likely drive tariff increases. However, the previous transit agreement had disproportionately benefited Gazprom rather than Ukraine. Expectations that continued transit operations would shield infrastructure from military targeting proved unfounded when Russia began striking gas facilities in March 2024, indicating that for the Kremlin, commercial considerations remain secondary to strategic objectives of weakening both Ukraine and Europe. After failing to leverage the Transnistrian situation effectively, the Kremlin escalated its attacks, apparently seeking to pressure Kyiv into negotiating a more politically advantageous transit arrangement.

This energy reconfiguration opens pathways toward greater European integration for Moldova, reducing its dependence on Moscow's energy supplies and political influence. For Transnistria, it represents an existential challenge to its economic viability as a Russian-supported enclave.

Based on recent statements by President Volodymyr Zelenskyy and Deputy Prime Minister Olga Stefanishyna, Ukraine is evaluating potential gas transit restoration as a bargaining chip in peace negotiations. While the GTS currently transports only Romanian gas to Moldova, Kyiv has expressed interest in facilitating non-Russian gas transit via the Trans-Balkan pipeline to EU markets, despite its capacity limitations.

One potential scenario involves resuming Russian gas transit in exchange for returning the Zaporizhzhia Nuclear Power Plant — currently under Russian occupation — to Ukrainian control and halting attacks on energy infrastructure. Though Kyiv previously rejected proposals for transporting “Azerbaijani” gas (which energy analysts<sup>287</sup> suggest may actually be rebranded Russian gas

exported through Azerbaijan to circumvent sanctions and maintain European market influence — these discussions continue despite Azerbaijan's limited domestic gas surplus and its primary export commitments to Georgia, Turkey, and Europe<sup>288</sup>), and despite Orbán's suggestions to transport Russian gas labeled as Hungarian, these considerations could become valuable bargaining points in negotiations with the Trump administration and European partners toward a fair peace settlement.<sup>289</sup>

In conclusion, the implications of these developments extend beyond Ukraine's borders, reshaping Eastern Europe's energy dynamics and further isolating Russia from Western economic systems. However, outcomes ultimately depend on the political determination of key stakeholders in the affected countries and, more broadly, throughout the Western alliance.

# UZBEKISTAN:

## Advancing WTO Membership while Deepening Western Economic Ties

### Kodir R. Kuliev

The World Trade Organization (WTO), established in 1995, now has 166 member countries representing approximately 98% of global trade. Its primary aim is to promote free and fair trade by eliminating barriers and ensuring a rules-based system.

Uzbekistan's accession to the WTO is critical to its economic modernization. However, this process involves substantial legal, institutional, and trade policy reforms while balancing the interests of various global economic actors. The year 2024 marked a breakthrough for Uzbekistan in this regard. While in April 2023, Uzbekistan had only concluded WTO accession negotiations with two countries, Georgia and Moldova, by December 2024, it had reached agreements with 22 countries, including the United States and China. This article examines Uzbekistan's accession progress, the benefits and challenges of WTO membership, and the broader geopolitical dynamics influencing the process.

### UZBEKISTAN'S WTO BID: PROGRESS AND PROSPECTS

Uzbekistan's WTO accession has been a long, intermittent process. It began in 1994 but stalled in 2005 due to a self-sufficiency policy. In 2016, President Mirziyoyev initiated trade liberalization reforms, leading to a renewed WTO application in March 2018. In 2020, Uzbekistan made a breakthrough in its WTO accession process when, after nearly 15 years, the 4th WTO Working Party meeting was held on July 7, 2020 — a formal multilateral negotiation format in which WTO members engage with a country seeking accession.<sup>290</sup> The 5th working group meeting was held in June 2022, two years later. To accelerate the WTO accession negotiations, the President of Uzbekistan established a new position of Special Representative on WTO Issues within the Presidential Administration in June 2023. The role was assigned to Aziz Urunov, a member of



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the administration. At the same time, various legislative changes were initiated, and government agencies were established to ensure that the WTO accession process progresses more quickly and efficiently. By the time of the 6th WTO Working Party meeting on March 14, 2023, Uzbekistan had nearly completed bilateral negotiations with three WTO members. However, following the 8th Working Party meeting by December 2024, it had reached agreements with 22 countries, including the United States and China, and signed market access protocols with 18.<sup>291</sup>

## UNLOCKING NEW OPPORTUNITIES

**Uzbekistan's accelerated WTO accession process is already reshaping the country's trade landscape by lowering barriers and reducing tariffs, directly influencing the domestic economy. At present, Uzbekistan operates under three distinct trade regimes. It has established free trade agreements (FTAs) with eleven CIS countries, ensuring preferential market access within the region. The country also maintains "most-favored nation" (MFN)<sup>292</sup> agreements with 47 partners, including the 27 EU member states, China, the United States, and Turkey.**

Under WTO rules, MFN agreements require that any favorable treatment granted to one country must be immediately and unconditionally extended to all other WTO members. This principle ensures non-discriminatory trade policies, preventing preferential treatment for specific nations unless covered by a formal trade

agreement, such as a free trade area or customs union. For trade with countries outside these agreements, Uzbekistan imposes a full tariff rate. Currently, Uzbek exports are evenly distributed across FTA, MFN, and full tariff regimes, while imports are 42% under FTA, 55% under MFN, and 3% subject to full tariffs. These trade structures will undergo significant adjustments upon WTO accession.

While WTO accession may not dramatically alter Uzbekistan's access to foreign markets, it might lead to an average 56% reduction in tariff rates for current imports, aligning them with its MFN schedule of concessions. This transition is expected to enhance competitiveness and further integrate Uzbekistan into the global economy. Dr. Lawrence (Rui) Dang, an economist and part-time advisor to the European Union, believes<sup>293</sup> that Uzbekistan's membership in WTO will enhance its trade relationships with key partners such as the United States, Europe, and China. He argues that this membership will facilitate infrastructure investments, particularly in the energy sector, by streamlining negotiations for nuclear and renewable energy projects. Additionally, it will promote technology transfer, especially in industries and renewable energy, which will help modernize the Uzbek economy with advanced technologies from developed regions. Dr. Dang also emphasizes that reducing trade barriers will make Uzbek exports more competitive and accessible. Furthermore, he highlights another significant advantage of WTO membership: access to international dispute resolution mechanisms. These mechanisms will protect Uzbekistan against unfair trade practices and provide a framework for addressing trade disputes through multilateral legal institutions, such as the WTO Dispute Settlement Body.<sup>294</sup>

Aziz Urunov, Uzbekistan's Special Representative for WTO Accession, states<sup>295</sup> that joining the WTO will create a fairer, more competitive business environment, ensuring equal opportunities and enhancing market efficiency. Increased competition will drive local companies to improve productivity, quality, and innovation for long-term sustainability. Additionally, WTO provisions on transit freedom will benefit Uzbekistan by improving trade logistics and access to global markets.

President Shavkat Mirziyoyev has also stressed that joining the WTO is crucial for Uzbekistan's long-term economic reform. He aims for greater economic openness, a shift from protective trade practices, and enhanced global competitiveness. This integration will lead to more transparent policies, attract investment, and support sustainable growth.

## LEGISLATIVE AND ECONOMIC REFORMS

The degree to which a country's economy aligns with market principles influences the economic reforms needed for WTO membership. To meet WTO standards, Uzbekistan must revise its traditional practices, such as market controls and state-sponsored export support. President Shavkat Mirziyoyev has been instrumental in this process through several key reforms:

- **Regulatory Overhaul:** Since July 1, 2023, any regulatory acts not conforming to WTO rules are prohibited,<sup>296</sup> as per Presidential Decree No. PP-181 issued on June 2, 2023.
- **Market Liberalization:** From January 1, 2025, private internet providers should gain access to international internet channels, ending<sup>297</sup> Uzbektelecom's monopoly.
- **Government Procurement Reform:** Domestic manufacturers' price advantages (previously up to 20%) will be phased out by 2026 to ensure fair competition.<sup>298</sup>

Recent advancements also include Presidential Decree No. 85, which aims to align Uzbekistan's trade policies with WTO agreements. The decree revokes<sup>299</sup> exclusive rights of state enterprises, eliminates<sup>300</sup> various export-related subsidies and tax benefits, and accelerates market reforms. Additionally, it mandates adjustments to domestic legislation to ensure compliance with WTO standards.

In parallel, a new Law on Competition was introduced in Uzbekistan in October 2023.<sup>301</sup> The new Law outlines key state policies to protect competition, including preventing anti-competitive actions, ensuring economic freedom, and supporting efficient market functioning. It introduces antitrust compliance, a mandatory system for market-dominant companies and corporate groups to detect and prevent competition law violations. Companies with over 50% state ownership and annual sales exceeding 33 billion UZS (approximately two million five hundred forty-eight thousand US dollars) must now also implement compliance measures. The criteria for market dominance have also been revised: companies now qualify if they hold at least 40% market share and have annual revenue over 9.9 billion UZS (seven hundred sixty-four thousand US dollars). All forms of state support (tax/customs benefits, subsidies, grants, guarantees, preferential loans) must be assessed for their impact on competition, with aid that distorts market conditions prohibited.<sup>302</sup> Additionally, mergers and acquisitions now require approval from the Competition Development

Committee if they meet revised concentration thresholds. These reforms are designed to attract foreign investment, stimulate competition, and improve economic resilience while challenging domestic industries reliant on government support. Moreover, to ensure fairness and transparency for foreign entities as part of the WTO-related reforms, a special Department for Harmonizing National Legislation with WTO Agreements within the Ministry of Justice has been established.<sup>303</sup>

## CHALLENGES AND FUTURE OUTLOOK

Uzbekistan faces several challenges as it seeks to join the WTO. It still needs to finalize outstanding bilateral agreements, harmonize more domestic legislation with WTO rules, and address concerns from existing WTO members. Aziz Urunov points out<sup>304</sup> that increased foreign competition threatens small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs), which rely on government protections. With the rollback of protective trade policies, local businesses must develop competitive, export-ready models. Iskandarbek Genjaye, Chief Advisor of the Ministry of Justice, says that Uzbekistan needs to revise over 30,000 regulatory documents to comply with WTO rules and eliminate unfair advantages. This may cause temporary disruptions in various sectors. Besides, the country will have to remove export subsidies that have historically supported local industries, intensifying competitive pressures. As Genjaye points out, becoming a WTO member will also necessitate increased transparency in trade policies. Uzbekistan will be required to openly communicate its trade-related legal frameworks and establish trade information centers, ensuring that both foreign and domestic businesses have equal access to market regulations. While this transparency fosters fairness, it also adds to the regulatory workload for government agencies enforcing these changes. The transition to a more open economy could lead to short-term economic instability, particularly in sectors not yet ready for global competition.

For example, Nishanbay Sirajiddinov, a Doctor of Economics and Professor at the University of World Economy and Diplomacy, warns that industries protected by high import barriers will face challenges if tariffs are significantly reduced. Lowering import duties from 60% to 15% would make imported goods 45% cheaper, increasing pressure on local producers. The more shielded an industry is, the greater the impact will be. Companies, especially larger ones, may need to adjust their strategies, production levels, and workforce to remain competitive.



Trade liberalization can also cause contention, particularly for manufacturers accustomed to limited competition, as WTO accession increases competition and requires quality and cost-efficiency improvements. There are concerns about trade imbalances and potential deficits; however, Sirajiddinov believes that a freely determined exchange rate can stabilize the currency market. He argues that trade deficits often arise from state budget imbalances rather than liberalization.

International lawyer Lukasz Gruszczynski also noted that many countries successfully modify WTO rules to fit their local contexts. Developing nations often negotiate flexibilities during accession to maintain higher tariffs and protect strategic sectors. For example, China secured longer transition periods for certain obligations during its accession, safeguarding emerging industries while gradually integrating into the global trading system.

While WTO accession presents Uzbekistan with opportunities for economic growth and global integration, it demands careful structural adjustments and competition management.

## A GATEWAY TO TRADE OR A STEP INTO THE WESTERN ECONOMIC ORBIT?

Uzbekistan's WTO accession is not just an economic decision but also a strategic geopolitical move. De facto, major global players, especially the EU and the US, play a significant role in influencing the accession journey of non-Western nations. As Gruszczynski noted, countries must negotiate with these powers to secure their backing for trade liberalization commitments. Uzbekistan's position between Russia, China, and the West complicates its negotiations. Gruszczynski warns that the country might face pressure to balance interests from these global actors, potentially leading to slower or more politically charged negotiations as each power seeks to influence its trade policy direction. This creates a complex environment where Western countries advocate for liberal economic reforms while Russia and China may have strategic interests in the current Uzbekistan's trade policies. Balancing these competing interests requires careful diplomacy and strategic negotiation.

For example, various Russian experts argue that Uzbekistan's WTO application is driven by its reluctance to join the EAEU. The Russian propaganda outlet "Nezavisimaya Gazeta" states<sup>305</sup> that "Moscow would benefit much more if Uzbekistan became a full member of the Eurasian Economic Union (EAEU), where the

republic currently holds observer status. However, this issue is not currently on the agenda. Moreover, the U.S. has allegedly threatened Uzbekistan with difficulties in its WTO accession process if it decides to integrate with the EAEU." In another publication on the Russian Eurasian integration-focused portal "Rhythm of Eurasia", it is stated<sup>306</sup> that "the rushed transition to liberal Western laws and values in the economy and other areas does not shield Tashkent from political blackmail by the collective West." There is no public evidence of such threats or blackmail from the United States against Uzbekistan. However, these recurring narratives about Western influence and threats reflect some of the broader geopolitical dynamics that could shape Uzbekistan's WTO accession negotiations with Russia. In parallel, during bilateral meetings in June 2024 between Uzbek President Shavkat Mirziyoyev, representatives of the Uzbek government, and U.S. Trade Representative Ambassador Katherine Tai, Washington expressed "full support for Uzbekistan's firm commitment to prioritizing WTO accession and pledged support for ongoing domestic reforms to align Uzbekistan's trading regime with WTO rules and principles."

Expert Nishanbay Sirajiddinov highlights<sup>307</sup> that joining the EAEU would bind Uzbekistan to Russian tariffs, whereas WTO membership allows the country to maintain lower import tariffs and set its own trade priorities. Meanwhile, expert Umida Khaknazar notes that WTO membership provides access to international markets under standardized rules and offers an independent dispute resolution system. This flexibility enables Uzbekistan to negotiate preferential trade agreements with third countries, including Western economies. Ultimately, WTO accession represents a strategic alignment with Western economic norms, fostering global competitiveness and modernization while avoiding the constraints of EAEU membership.

## FOREIGN-BACKED EFFORTS TO FAST-TRACK UZBEKISTAN'S WTO ACCESSION

Uzbekistan has already received substantial support from various international organizations to facilitate its accession to WTO, including the EU, ITC, WTO, USTR, and IEC. The EU has launched a five-year initiative called "Facilitating the Process of Uzbekistan's Accession to the WTO," which began<sup>308</sup> in February 2020 with a budget of EUR 4,750,000. This project, implemented by the International Trade Centre (ITC), aims to modernize

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Uzbekistan's economy in line with World Trade Organization (WTO) standards. It provides technical assistance, supports the development of negotiating strategies, and helps align national legislation with WTO requirements. The initiative works closely with Uzbekistan's Ministry of Investment, Industry, and Trade (MIIT) and engages various government departments, the Uzbekistan Chamber of Commerce and Industry, as well as civil society organizations. A particular emphasis is placed on assisting small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs) and marginalized communities. Focusing on five key areas—WTO negotiations, trade policy development, capacity building, compliance with WTO standards, and stakeholder engagement—this comprehensive approach seeks to enhance trading practices and maximize the benefits of WTO membership. Ultimately, the project aims to engage a wide segment of society in the WTO accession process.

Moreover, to enhance its trade policies, the Uzbek government had several training programs under the same project with the support of the International Trade Centre (ITC). On August 21, 2024, Uzbek officials received<sup>309</sup> WTO training on Customs Valuation, Rules of Origin, and Trade Facilitation under the EU-funded WTO Accession Project. The session strengthened customs efficiency and trade compliance, equipping 25 participants, including WTO negotiators and customs officials, with practical expertise.

## CONCLUSION

Uzbekistan's accession to the WTO marks a crucial step towards global economic integration and trade liberalization. While it promises to attract investment and enhance market access, it requires careful adaptation of domestic industries and significant legal reforms. Joining the WTO doesn't guarantee economic growth; it provides opportunities that depend on Uzbekistan's ability to implement reforms and adapt to global competition. As Dr. Sirajiddinov noted, economic openness can drive growth, highlighting that without WTO membership, Uzbekistan's economic progress would likely have suffered. Umida Khaknazar adds that simply obtaining WTO membership is insufficient, especially for smaller economies like Uzbekistan. She emphasizes the importance of leveraging this membership to foster a competitive business environment. For instance, Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan benefited from reduced import duties, leading to economic growth and improved access to affordable goods. To use all the benefits of WTO membership, Uzbekistan has to promote innovation and entrepreneurship while managing trade liberalization effectively. By doing so, the country can enhance economic resilience, diversify trade partnerships, and strengthen its position in international markets. Ultimately, the impact of this accession will depend on how inclusively Uzbekistan navigates these changes.

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## WESTERNIZATION

Westernization is a process whereby societies adopt Western standards for cultural norms and codes of conduct, such as individual freedom, liberal democratic governance, respect for human rights and fundamental freedoms, rule of law, secularism, and protection of private property in areas such as industry, technology, law, politics, economics, and lifestyle.

Over the last few centuries, Westernization has served as a catalytic influence in the acceleration of global growth and modernization.

Rather than a reflection of a single society's values, however, Westernization is more than the unidirectional influence of one country over another. Over time, the process of Westernization can produce a two-sided exchange. As a country becomes more Western, it, in turn, can also produce reciprocal influence on the countries in which Western ideas originated.