

Under Russian Influence

Armenia, Georgia and Moldova



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Foreword

At *The Opportunity Institute for Foreign Affairs*, we believe that rigorous analysis is a tool for both understanding and shaping Poland's role in the world. This report, *Under Russian Influence: Challenges and Future Directions for Armenia, Georgia and Moldova*, addresses a question of direct relevance to our country: how Russian pressure on Europe's eastern neighbors affects the stability, security, and choices of the entire continent.

For Poland, which has long championed the European aspirations of its eastern partners, the stakes are clear. Developments in Armenia, Georgia, and Moldova reverberate beyond the South Caucasus and the Black Sea, influencing the resilience of the European Union, the credibility of its enlargement policy, and the security architecture to which we belong. In a moment when Moscow's influence is being contested yet remains potent, these countries' trajectories present both risks and opportunities.

It is precisely in this duality that we see the value of opportunity. Each challenge – whether related to energy dependence, political vulnerability, or disinformation – creates space for constructive engagement by Poland and the broader West. By supporting resilience and democratic choices, we not only counter external threats but also strengthen our own security and capacity for regional leadership.

This publication, prepared by Stefania Kolarz from the Polish Institute of International Affairs inspired by our **Expert Seminar held in January 2025**, exemplifies our mission: to bring together diverse voices, generate debate, and turn insights into strategies. We are proud to share it with you and trust it will spark reflection on how Poland can transform today's uncertainties into tomorrow's opportunities.

I wish you an inspiring read.

Zuzanna Nowak

Executive Director

The Opportunity Institute for Foreign Affairs



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Summary

Kremlin uses a variety of tools to influence countries of the "near abroad."

Russia tailors its influence methods to local contexts and needs.

Russian language gives Moscow an edge in spreading propaganda.

The vulnerability of Armenia, Georgia and Moldova is due, among many others, to separatist conflicts.

Armenia's dependence on Russian energy and trade deepens its vulnerability.

Georgia's occupied territories and its government's compliance to Russia hinder its Western integration.

Moldova struggles with Russian disinformation and a kind of ignorance of its own potential.

Effectiveness of resistance to Russian influence depends on internal stability and credible foreign support.

Europe's focus on a pro- vs. anti-Russian divide overlooks local agency.

Greater EU involvement curbs Russian influence but fuels geopolitical competition.

Russia is a major destabilizer, but not the sole source of regional problems.

Building resilience requires local empowerment, democracy, and international cooperation.

Summary of main reports findings.



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Streszczenie

W 2022 r. Mołdawia otrzymała status kandydata do UE, a rok później w jej ślady poszła Gruzja. Również w 2023 r. Azerbejdżan siłą odzyskał pełną kontrolę nad Górskim Karabachem, co dało Armenii kolejny powód do ponownego rozważenia oparcia swojego bezpieczeństwa na Rosji i zdominowanych przez nią strukturach. W 2024 r. prorosyjskie Gruzjińskie Marzenie nie oddało władzy w kraju i zamroziło rozmowy akcesyjne z UE, podczas gdy Mołdawianie opowiedzieli się za europejską przyszłością swojego państwa w wyborach prezydenckich i referendum konstytucyjnym. Wpływy Rosji w Mołdawii zostały dodatkowo ograniczone od 2025 r., kiedy odcięto dostawy gazu do wspieranego przez Rosję separatystycznego Naddniestrza. Wspólnym mianownikiem wszystkich tych wydarzeń i decyzji politycznych jest rozpościerający się nad nim cień Rosji. Przyjmowany przez unijnych partnerów reżim polityczny, demokratyczny bądź nie, ma coraz bardziej geopolityczny charakter – podążania za zachodnimi standardami albo zaznaczania rosyjskiej obecności lub przynajmniej wpływu. Z tego powodu Gruzini nazywają nowe antydemokratyczne prawa „prawami rosyjskimi”, choć dla obozu rządzącego antyzachodnia retoryka nie jest jednoznaczna z prorosyjskością, a mieszkańcy wszystkich trzech państw straszeni są odejściem od tradycyjnych wartości w przypadku zbliżenia z Zachodem. Jednocześnie remedium pozwalającym ograniczyć szkodliwe wpływy Rosji w Armenii, Gruzji i Mołdawii jest większe zaangażowanie polityczne i ekonomiczne UE w tych krajach, jednak przez to stają się one areną starcia dwóch mentalności i modeli integracji – europejskiej i rosyjskiej.

Wszystkie te trzy państwa stoją zatem przed wyborem, czy pogłębić więzi z Zachodem, czy też zdefiniować na nowo swoje stosunki z Rosją. Z ich perspektywy każda z tych ścieżek stwarza zarówno szanse, jak i zagrożenia, które znacząco wpłyną na ich stabilność i rozwój w nadchodzących latach, a od Zachodu zależy, w jakim stopniu wesprze je w podjęciu właściwej decyzji. By na nią wpłynąć Kreml wykorzystuje narzędzia ekonomiczne, finansowe, energetyczne, bezpieczeństwa, jak również dezinformację, wdrażane przez jego agentów, lokalnych polityków, a czasami nawet nieświadomie przez same społeczeństwa. Jego zaangażowanie występuje z różną intensywnością i widocznością w każdym z omawianych państw, a same te kraje są w różnym stopniu podatne na te działania. Dla Armenii kluczowymi problemami są kwestie związane z zależnością energetyczną od Rosji, współpracą handlową i rosyjską soft power, dla Gruzji – okupacja Abchazji i Osetii Południowej i synchronizacja rządzącego Gruzjińskiego Marzenia z agendą polityczną Rosji, zaś dla Mołdawii najważniejszą zmienną są wpływające na krajową gospodarkę i poziom życia ceny energii, a także rosyjska dezinformacja i propaganda podsycane swoistą nieświadomością własnego potencjału.

Spółeczeństwo odgrywa istotną rolę zarówno w rozprzestrzenianiu, jak i przeciwdziałaniu wpływom rosyjskim, ale nie wydaje się być dostrzegane przez władze jako partner w budowaniu odporności kraju na rosyjskie wpływy. W przypadku Armenii opinie społeczne determinują zwrot kraju w stronę Zachodu, w Gruzji przekładają się na konflikt między społeczeństwem a antyzachodnim reżimem, zaś w Mołdawii oferują potencjał integracji europejskiej, który należy pielęgnować. Dlatego Rosja stara się wpływać na wyniki wyborów we wszystkich trzech republikach. Pod względem odpowiedzi na jej ingerencję swoimi działaniami w związku z wyborami prezydenckimi i referendum konstytucyjnym w 2024 r. oraz wyborami parlamentarnymi w 2025 r. pozytywnie wyróżnia się mołdawski obóz rządzący, negatywnie – władze Gruzji, zaś Armenia już staje się polem bitwy w związku ze zbliżającymi się wyborami parlamentarnymi w 2026 r. Natomiast handel, który był tradycyjnie narzędziem wykorzystywanym przez Rosję do wywierania presji na byłe republiki radzieckie, staje się obecnie nie tyle przysłowiowym kijem, co marchewką. Podczas gdy Armenia chętnie po nią sięga, UE udało się skutecznie oddalić Mołdawię od Rosji w tym zakresie. Z kolei Gruzja próbuje balansować między nimi. To samo dotyczy dostaw energii; są one słabym punktem Armenii, Mołdawia uniezależnia się od Rosji dzięki pomocy unijnych partnerów, podczas gdy dla Gruzji wszystkie karty pozostają na stole.

Choć rosyjskie zagrożenie dla bezpieczeństwa Armenii, Gruzji i Mołdawii pozostaje nieustannie obecne, rosyjska koncentracja na pełnoskalowej agresji na Ukrainę stwarza możliwość osłabienia jej szkodliwego wpływu na te państwa. Celem niniejszego raportu jest zatem zdiagnozowanie obecnego stanu rzeczy i sformułowanie rekomendacji na najbliższe lata w celu zwiększenia odporności Armenii, Gruzji i Mołdawii na rosyjskie wpływy.



Abstract

In 2022, Moldova was granted EU candidate status, and Georgia followed suit a year later. Also in 2023, Azerbaijan forcibly regained full control of Karabakh, giving Armenia yet another reason to reconsider basing its security on Russia and Russian-led structures. In 2024, the pro-Russian Georgian Dream did not relinquish power in the country and froze accession talks with the EU, while Moldovans backed a European future for their republic in presidential elections and a constitutional referendum. Russian influence in Moldova was further curtailed on January 1, 2025, with the cutoff of gas supplies to separatist Transnistria, a Russian client state. The common denominator of all these events and policy decisions is the shadow of Russia looming over them. Political regime, democratic or not, is becoming increasingly geopolitical; it is a symbol of following Western standards or Russian tactics of marking its presence, or at least influence. For this reason, Georgians call the new anti-democratic laws „Russian laws”, although for the ruling camp, anti-Western rhetoric seems not to be synonymous with pro-Russianism, and the inhabitants of all three countries are threatened with a departure from traditional values in the event of rapprochement with the West. The remedy enabling limiting Russian harmful influence in Armenia, Georgia, and Moldova is greater political and economic EU involvement in these countries. In doing so, however, they become an arena for the clash of two mindsets and models of integration – the European one and the one dominated by Russia.

All three countries are thus at a crossroads, deciding whether to deepen ties with the West or redefine their relationship with Russia. They view each path in terms of both opportunities and risks that will significantly affect their stability and development in the coming years, and it is up to the West to support them in making the right decision. The Kremlin, in turn, uses economic, financial, energy, security, and informational tools that are implemented by its agents, local politicians, and sometimes, even subconsciously, by the societies themselves to affect those choices. Its involvement occurs with different intensity and visibility in each of the countries discussed, and these countries themselves are to various degrees susceptible to them. For Armenia, the key problems are issues related to energy dependence on Russia, trade cooperation, and Russian soft power. In the case of Georgia, the key concern is the occupation of Abkhazia and South Ossetia, and the synchronization of the ruling Georgian Dream with Russia's political agenda. For Moldova, the crucial issue are current energy prices affecting its economy and living standard of its inhabitants, as well as Russian disinformation and propaganda fed by a kind of ignorance of Moldova's own potential.

Society plays a vital role in both spreading and countering Russian influence, but it does not seem to be sufficiently perceived by the state authorities as a basis for building the country's resistance to Russian influence. In the case of Armenia, these opinions determine the country's U-turn towards the West, while in Georgia, it translates into a conflict between society and the anti-Western authorities, and in Moldova it offers the potential for European integration, which should be taken care of. That is why Russia is trying to influence the outcome of elections in the three republics. In this respect, the Moldovan ruling camp stands out positively with its actions in connection with the presidential elections and the constitutional referendum in 2024, as well as the parliamentary elections in 2025; negatively – the Georgian authorities, and Armenia is becoming a battlefield with a view of incoming parliamentary elections in 2026. Trade has traditionally been a tool used by Russia to exert pressure on former Soviet republics but nowadays becomes a carrot rather than a stick. Armenia is eagerly taking it, and the EU was successful in decoupling Moldova from the Russian sphere of influence, but Georgia, in turn is somewhere in between trying to balance economic considerations. The same is true for energy supplies; they are a weak point for Armenia, but Moldova is becoming the more and more resilient due to the Western support, while for Georgia all cards remain in play.

While the security stick is always present, Russian focus on its full-scale aggression on Ukraine creates the possibility of weakening its harmful influence on Armenia, Georgia, and Moldova. The purpose of this report is thus to diagnose the current situation and to formulate recommendations for the coming years, with a view of enhancing the resilience of Armenia, Georgia and Moldova against external threats, particularly those of Russian origin.



Shared Neighbourhood In The Near Abroad

The designers of the EU's Eastern Partnership in the late 2000s could not have foreseen the different trajectories that the countries in what Russia calls the „near abroad” and the EU perceives as the „shared neighborhood” would take in its third decade as Russian influence in the Eastern Partnership countries has fluctuated. After another rigged presidential elections in 2020, Belarus suspended its participation in the program in 2021, and its difficult relations with the EU in 2022 were further aggravated by its support for Russia's full-scale aggression against Ukraine. In the same year, Moldova was granted EU candidate status, and Georgia followed suit a year later. Also in 2023, Azerbaijan forcibly regained full control of Karabakh, giving Armenia yet another reason to reconsider basing its security on Russia and Russian-led structures. In October 2024, the pro-Russian Georgian Dream did not relinquish power in the country and froze its accession talks with the EU the following month, while Moldovans backed a European future

for the country in presidential elections and a constitutional referendum in 2024. Russian influence in Moldova was further curtailed on January 1, 2025, with the cutoff of gas supplies to separatist Transnistria, a Russian client state and consolidated by the results of September 2025 parliamentary elections.

Russian concept of 'near abroad' – The term encompasses the entire post-Soviet space except Russia and distinguishes the post-Soviet republics from more distant (in Russian perception, „truly foreign”) states. For Vladimir Putin, it is synonymous with Russia's sphere of influence and therefore of particular interest.



Dokneys, at the road, Sno Valley, Georgia



May | **EU launches Eastern Partnership.**
Moldova, Georgia and Armenia join.

2009

January 12 | **Moldova begins Association agreements (AA) and Deep and Comprehensive Free Trade Area agreement (DCFTA) negotiations with EU.**

2010

July | **Armenia and Georgia begin AA and DCFTA negotiations.**

2013

September–November | **Armenia breaks off negotiations of Association agreements.** Pursues Eurasian Economic Union (EEU) candidacy instead.

June 27 | **Moldova & Georgia sign the Association Agreements (AA) & DCFTA with EU.**

2014

February–April | **Russia annexes Crimea** in the aftermath of the Revolution of Dignity. Donetsk's and Luhansk's Peoples Republics are established.

December | **Armenia begins negotiation of revised AA without free trade provisions.**

2015

January 2 | **Armenia joins Eurasian Economic Union.**

July 1 | **DCFTA with Moldova and Georgia fully enters into force.**

2016

November 24 | **Armenia & EU sign Comprehensive and Enhanced Partnership Agreement.**

2017

November 15 | **Maia Sandu is elected as a president of Moldova.** Pro-Russian candidate Igor Dodon is defeated, and new pro-EU shift in Moldova begins.

2020

September – November | **Azerbaijan captures parts of Nagorno-Karabakh.** In accordance to the ceasefire agreement Russia sent a "peacekeeping" mission to the region.

3 March | **Moldova & Georgia apply for EU membership** as a reaction to the Russian invasion.

2022

June 23 | **Moldova is granted EU candidate status.**

February 24 | **Russia launches full scale invasion of Ukraine.**

December 14 | **Georgia is granted EU candidate status.**

2023

September 19–20 | **Azerbaijan takes over Nagorno-Karabakh.** Russian role in Karabakh collapse, in response Armenia distances itself from Moscow.

March | **Armenia deepens EU ties after the loss of Nagorno-Karabakh.**

2024

June 25 | **Moldova's accession talks formally begins.**

May 14 | **Georgian government passes the 'law on foreign agents'** despite mass protest. Legislature rises concern about Georgia's candidacy to EU.

November 28 | **Georgia suspends its EU negotiations.**

2025

January | **Partial withdrawal of Russian troops from Armenia.**



While the common denominator of all these events and policy decisions is the shadow of Russia looming over them, this report will focus on Russian influence in Armenia, Georgia, and Moldova. Their selection is by no means accidental: in the midst of dynamic geopolitical changes in Eastern Europe and the South Caucasus, Armenia, Moldova, and Georgia find themselves at the forefront of the political rivalry for hearts and minds of their societies between Russia and the West¹. Despite their different cultural, historical, and political contexts, the three nations share common challenges rooted in their complex relations with Russia arising out of Soviet legacy to mention but a few. Their attempts to strengthen their sovereignty and independence are often met with resistance and pressure from Moscow, which manifests itself in political, economic, and military dimensions. At the same time, their strategic location makes them crucial to the stability of the region and an essential component of the policies of the European

Union and NATO. Yet the three countries differ from each other: two are located in the South Caucasus, two do not border Russia directly, two are torn by separatist conflicts, only two are currently governed by politicians who support limiting Russian influence. Nevertheless, a comparison of their cases is useful in mapping Russia's actions and the possibility of assisting them in countering its harmful influence with Western support. And the West has not only an important role to play, but also a window of opportunity to do so. Armenia, Moldova, and Georgia are not merely victims of geopolitical games, but active agents in shaping their future in a complex international environment. They are at a crossroads, deciding whether to deepen ties with the West or redefine their relationship with Russia. Each path presents both opportunities and risks that will significantly affect their stability and development in the coming years, and it is up to the West to support them in making the right decision.

The purpose of this report is not only to diagnose the current state of affairs, but also to formulate recommendations for 2025 and beyond, with a view to enhancing the resilience of Armenia, Georgia and Moldova against external threats, particularly those of Russian origin, and strengthening their positions on the international stage.



Victoria Nemerenco

The Republic of Moldova has become a frontline in a broader hybrid strategy employed by the Russian Federation. Through exploitation of energy dependence, electoral corruption, and a disinformation campaign amplified by digital platforms, Moscow seeks to reverse the country's European course. The orchestration of an artificial crisis in Transnistria, the mobilization of criminal networks during last year's Presidential elections and Constitutional Referendum, as well as the manipulation of vulnerable populations – all serve one purpose: to weaken Moldova from within. Despite growing resilience and support from the European partners, the road ahead remains steep as the stakes of the 2025 Parliamentary elections intensify.



Human Factor

Influence starts in society; the nostalgia of older generations, as well as the ambitions of youth and its dreams of a better life can easily be exploited in political games. To win local support, Russia fuels these emotions through various means of influence, including the media or the Church. This allows it to use soft power to draw countries into its sphere of influence in a more discreet way than overt military, energy, or trade activities. The resilience of a country's influence thus depends on the receptivity of its society to stimuli from the East, but also from the West (building up civil society, exchanging ideas through diaspora). Although society plays a vital

role in both spreading and countering Russian influence, it does not seem to be sufficiently acknowledged by the state authorities as a basis for building the country's resistance to Russian influence. In the case of Armenia, these opinions determine the country's change of course to a more pro-Western one, but this is more related to the ruling camp's desire to remain in power. In Georgia, it translates into a conflict between society and the anti-Western authorities, while in Moldova it offers the potential for European integration, which should be eutrophicated.



Traditional dolls, Yerevan



Contribution to building resilience	Armenia	Georgia	Moldova
Public Sentiments	+	+/-	+/-
Media	-	-	-
Church	-	-	+/-
Civil Society	-/+	+/-	-/+

Factors contributing to building resilience in Armenia, Georgia and Moldova

Armenian disappointment



„Although the disengagement from Russia was based on **anti-Russian public sentiment** and may seem promising to supporters of European integration, at least half of this success is due to the **populistic approach** adopted by the government.”

The instance where Armenians may be better off than Georgia and Moldova now is in their clearer views on the political direction the country should take. Russia's influence on the country has been declining since the war with Azerbaijan over Nagorno-Karabakh in 2020, which was a turning point in these relations. It was Russia's passivity in the face of Azerbaijan's attacks on Armenia,



Streets of Yerevan

and not really Russia's full-scale attack on Ukraine, which made Armenians revise their approach to their

former partner. In the opinion poll commissioned by IRI in early 2023, 50% of respondents rated Armenia-Russia relations as bad, while 49% assessed them to be good. In 2019 this ratio was 6 to 93%². While Armenians with pro-Russian views account for approximately 30%, this group is smaller by 30% than the anti-Russian group³. However, this is not a solid foundation for systemic change and still requires some kind of institutionalization, supported by strategic communication and concrete actions, such as ensuring the economic growth of the country. Although the disengagement from Russia was based on anti-Russian public sentiment and may seem promising to supporters of European integration, at least half of this success is due to the populistic approach adopted by the government. Domestic analysts thus warn against losing this momentum due to a change of government or through a change of public sentiment – factors that may be relatively easily exploited by Russia implementing disinformation and propaganda campaigns to convince Armenians that their true enemy is their own government rather than the Kremlin.



This risk is exacerbated by the presence of Russian soft power in Armenia. Russia strategically utilizes experts, politicians, and journalists who exhibit pro-Russian leanings, or even individuals within the leadership of the Armenian Church. A significant challenge is the presence of Russian media outlets on Armenian public television. Following Armenia's defeat in the war, Russia compelled it to sign a new agreement, obligating it to broadcast several Russian television channels. However, Armenia has taken measures to block certain Russian programs, such as the Solovyov and Kiselyov shows, as they are utilized by Russia to disseminate an anti-Armenian narrative. Yet another issue are the actions of domestic authorities of Armenia and the erosion of public media due to the tendency of those in power to abuse or misuse them for political purposes, including presenting facts selectively and amplifying narratives that align with their agenda⁴.

„Russia fuels Armenia's country-specific prevalent concern about the potential loss of national identity.“

The division of mainstream private media reflects political affiliations or, at the very least, the preferences of their owners, who tailor facts to their current needs⁵. While their narrative may not be overtly supportive of the Russian perspective, their actions have the potential to create uncertainty within public discourse, exacerbate existing divisions, and render the public more vulnerable to disinformation.

In this complex informational environment, the pro-Russian narrative is disseminating through Armenian society via various channels, predominantly among conservative, far-right ethno-nationalist circles. Like the situation in Georgia and Moldova, this pro-Russian sentiment does not necessarily stem from direct Russian involvement, but it often aligns with Russian interests. In both Armenian and Russian societies, this narrative emphasizes the importance of safeguarding traditional values, in contrast to the promotion of LGBT rights by Western nations. Additionally, Russia fuels Armenia country-specific prevalent concern about the potential loss of national identity attributing it to increasing influences from the West. Paradoxically enough, another track of propaganda is to present Armenia as incapable of existing without Russian support, including a negative assessment of its shift toward the West and the role of Russia in the Karabakh and Ukraine wars⁶.



Wreath with Russian flag by the Eternal Flame, at the foot of the Mother Armenia monument



Armenian stele in Yerevan

The role of the Armenian Apostolic Church in shaping public opinion is also noteworthy. Despite its structural separation from the Russian Orthodox Church, there are some commonalities in their respective narratives. The relations between the Church and the government have been severed since the Velvet Revolution in 2018. The Church opposes the pro-Western shift of the government, citing the need to protect the aforementioned traditional values. This stance aligns it more closely with Russia. Notably, Archbishop Bagrat Galstanyan, who has had temporally gained publicity in recent months with his plans to run in the 2026 parliamentary elections, had presented himself as an important ally. He had advocated for the rapprochement of Armenian politics with Russia and has gathered significant support from opposition groups, including pro-Russian and the so-called Karabakh clan. Although his candidacy highlights a particular aspect of Armenian politics, the bishop

is currently no longer competing for support with the ruling party because he has been imprisoned on charges of participating in a conspiracy to seize power and destabilise the state.

Another variable is the role of the Armenian diaspora. Armenian communities in European countries have their own agendas. Yet Russian Armenians align with the agenda of the Russian government due to the level of integration within the nation's political and social structures. However, on a positive note, the number of Armenians residing in Russia is decreasing, and the country's influence over the Armenian diaspora worldwide has reached its historical minimum. This is partly due to the diaspora's more aggressive stance compared

to Armenians within the country, which continues to encourage them to confront Azerbaijan; the Armenian diaspora's stance on the conflict is not aligned with the overall sentiment of the Armenian population, which is characterized by a sense of exhaustion and fatigue.

Last but not least, there is also Armenian civil society. In recent years Armenia achieved stable score of 4.7/7 in CSO Meter; its results are best in terms of guaranteeing freedom of association and peaceful assembly, and worst – for state support (4.1). Though this may seem promising as a building block for developing activities countering Russian interference in the country, that is not necessarily the case. Armenian CSOs focus on assistance to Nagorno-Karabakh refugees, including providing psychological, social and legal support, documenting on human rights violations, and raising funds to provide them with accommodation and fulfill their basic needs⁷ rather than on building resilience to Russian influence.

„The number of Armenians residing in Russia is decreasing, and the country's influence over the Armenian diaspora worldwide has reached its historical minimum.”



Georgian dissonance



The situation in Georgia is less straightforward. There is a noticeable degree of hostility towards Russians in Georgian society. For instance, marriages with Russians or having a Russian as a neighbor is not welcome, and the majority of the Georgian population disapproves of communication with Russians in cultural areas. Conversely, the Russian presence and influence in Georgia is pervasive, manifesting in various domains, including language and cultural ties. According to a 2023 opinion poll, Georgians are divided on further dialogue with Russia: 34% of respondents strongly and 9% somewhat oppose it, while 26% and 27% respectively fully or somewhat support it⁸.

Russia's relatively strong performance on a societal level can be attributed to its significant investment in soft power and the Georgian leadership's openness to such influence. Among Georgian society, this hesitancy stems from two primary factors: fear and economic considerations. The prevailing sentiment in Georgia is one of apprehension towards Russia. The full-scale invasion of Ukraine by Russia has revived what some analysts call Georgian PTSD after 2008 and raised fears that their country could be next. While this experience is a primary driver, Russia's actions also play a significant role. For example, it uses the territories of Abkhazia and South Ossetia to set up stations broadcasting Russian radio. Moreover, Russia strategically allocates significant resources in a broader, indirect pro-Russian narrative (openly pro-Russian powers have been marginalized in Georgia so far, so they are a less interesting target for

„Georgians are divided on further dialogue with Russia: 34% of respondents strongly and 9% somewhat oppose it, while 26% and 27% respectively fully or somewhat support it.“

Russia). Its objective is to normalize relations with Georgia, which comes at the expense of Georgia's resilience towards Russian influence. Georgian politicians and their electorate are unaware of the potential implications of these actions. Moreover, also economy – what is to be developed later – is a powerful factor. While Georgians perceive Russia as a primary existential threat (with over 80% expressing this view in public opinion polls), more than 70% approve of economic cooperation with Russian businesses in Georgia or with Russian businesses in Russia.



Street vendor, Kutaisi



There are, however, other issues that affect relations between Georgians and Russia. Orthodoxy is a major factor. The shared religion gives Russia another opportunity to influence Georgian society. In 2023, the Orthodox Church was the second most positively evaluated institution in the country after the army (72%), and the Patriarch of the Georgian Orthodox Church, Ilia II, was the most esteemed public figure (91%)⁹. The current religious leadership of the Church in Georgia is very close to the leadership of the Church in Russia and while Georgian priests are educated in Georgia, their training is heavily infiltrated from Russia. Any decoupling is difficult to implement, especially in the short term. As religion is deeply rooted in Georgian identity,

it is a matter of changing mental maps; consequently, any potential shift would not depend on who is in power. Nevertheless, political elites may play on religious sentiments and abuse people's tendency to think in simplistic ways about complex ideological issues, such as Christians versus Muslims or traditional values versus LGBT, to foster their political agenda.

Civil society in Georgia is quite strong in terms of numbers, resilience, and capacity. Currently it seems to be the country's savior as the most significant component of resistance against the Georgian Dream party.



Nino Samkharadze

CSOs in Georgia—long known for their vocal, effective, and professional advocacy—are facing an unprecedented assault from the increasingly authoritarian-leaning Georgian Dream government. Suffering from the scarcity of domestic as well as international legitimacy, the GD party has accelerated its push against essential pillars for democracy such as opposition, thinktanks, watchdogs or critical multimedia outlets. The law on Foreign Influence, the Georgian version of FARA and amendments in the law on grants drastically limits the operational space for CSOs to function properly and ensure democratic principles of checks and balance. Georgian society has been protesting the authoritarian and anti-Western leaning of the government for more than 300 days, through non-stop demonstrations, different forms of activism, and advocacy for Georgian democracy. However, party strikes back through arrests, punitive fines for protest activity, and the dismissal of pro-Western public servants.

Against the backdrop of an authoritarian and anti-Western U-Turn, the process of conflict resolution in Georgia takes on an even more ambiguous outlook. The likelihood that Georgia under the GD finds itself under the Russian sphere of influence makes the fate of Georgia's territorial conflicts more silvered than ever before. Isolated from Western allies and aligned with a club of illiberal states—including Russia—Georgia under the GD party risks losing the geopolitical leverage necessary to assert and restore its full sovereignty. Considering Russia's intensified hybrid threat, the perspective of conflict resolution remains uncertain.



Anti-government protests, Tbilisi

In recent months, the repression used by the ruling camp against independent media has intensified – there have been physical attacks on journalists, arbitrary imposition of penalties (fines, imprisonment), censorship¹⁰. In April the government passed a bill further limiting media freedom.

The most visible problem in Georgia, compared to Armenia and especially to Moldova, is the influx of Russians. One of the factors that facilitate this movement is the resumption of flight to Georgia. Again, Georgians are divided on this issue – 34% of respondents strongly and 12% somewhat opposed it in 2023. On the other hand, 23% strongly and 25% somewhat supported the idea¹¹. This fits into the Russian regime decision to drop the visa requirement for Georgian citizens entering Russia. The impact on Georgians is, however, limited. While Armenians living in Georgia are benefiting from this by joining their relatives in Russia, Georgians are not using it too much. This can be explained by the weakened Russian economy or looking at the aggravating situation of the workers from Central Asia in Russia (fear of being treated in the same way), but it also has to do with the confrontation between Russia and Georgia.

The consequences of this movement are gloomy. The number of Russian immigrants has increased after

the outbreak of Russian full-scale invasion on Ukraine, but the narrative that incoming Russians are against the war in Ukraine remains unconvincing. Some of them do business that is connected to the Russian state (or to the Georgian Dream), for example, in the construction sector, food production, all branches of import. Interestingly, however, while many have moved to Georgia, even more have left the country. Especially those with strong ties to the Russian authorities who did not feel safe in

„The number of Russian companies registered in Georgia in 2022–2024 has almost tripled compared to the previous 20 years.“

the country, whose authorities cooperate with the Russian security services. At the same time, many do not plan to stay there for a long time; they buy real estate in Batumi or Kakheti region, but they treat it more like



a dacha, a place for weekend trips, with no view to gaining permanent residence in Georgia. On the other hand, the influx of Russians is accompanied by money which makes their presence much more digestible to both Georgian society and authorities. The number of Russian companies registered in Georgia in 2022–2024 has almost tripled compared to the previous 20 years, even if they decide to leave Georgia at some point. The authorities

effectively use their money; it is especially important in the context of the recent weakening of the Georgian currency – Lari – to keep the state economy running at an acceptable level. This, in turn, is a convenient justification for the Georgian authorities' relatively liberal policy of not checking who is coming and how – most Russians violate Georgian law on occupied territories, as they enter the country through Abkhazia or South Ossetia.



Closed gate in Kutaisi

Moldovan indolence



The resilience of pro-Russian sentiment in Moldova is greatly exaggerated. It is about the lack of socio-economic progress, the fatigue of the ruling party, the false illusion that Russia is still very important for Moldova and that the country cannot survive without it. Interestingly, these perceptions show that public discussion in Moldova is seriously lagging behind the developments on the ground. For example, more than half of Moldovans believe that Russia is Moldova's main economic partner, which is not the case.

Full-scale aggression against Ukraine has not affected Moldovans' opinion of Russia; the average level of support for Russia remains at 40–50% (10% difference is a margin for potentially bribed voters). However, opinions vary considerably from region to region. For example, Transnistrians and Gagauzians are more susceptible to its discourse, as they remain in the Russian

„The resilience of pro-Russian sentiment in Moldova is greatly exaggerated, more than half of Moldovans believe that Russia is Moldova's main economic partner, which is not the case.”

information space. One can even say that the situation in Gagauzia is worse; despite the efforts of the Moldovan government and the realization of many EU projects there (e.g. construction of roads and kindergartens, promotion of green transition), the inhabitants of the regions remain more receptive to Russian disinformation and propaganda than to the actual developments on the ground.



The Church of the Nativity, Tiraspol

At the same time, the level of Russian disinformation activities against all of Moldova is approaching historic heights. The fight against Russian propaganda spread through traditional media began in 2022, when the Commission for Exceptional Situations suspended the broadcasting licenses of six television channels – Primul în Moldova, RTR Moldova, Accent TV, NTV Moldova, TV6 and Orhei TV. In 2023, the Moldovan Intelligence and Security Service also blocked access to twenty-two websites for spreading war propaganda and hate speech (some of which resumed their activities at the end of 2024). Russia is not only funding traditional media (though less than in Armenia), but is also spewing venom on social media, including TikTok and Telegram. This is particularly problematic due to the ease of content creation, wide reach, and algorithms that allow for the formation of information bubbles that are difficult

for Moldovan authorities to counter. Another big issue, in all cases, is media ownership, which in many cases is concentrated in the hands of pro-Russian oligarchs¹². The problem of disinformation was particularly visible during the 2024 presidential elections and the referendum, and more is to come with the parliamentary elections scheduled for 2025, where the stakes are even higher as Moldova is a parliamentary republic.

As in Georgia, the Orthodox Church plays an important role as a traditional source of influence. Compared to its Armenian and Georgian counterparts, its approach to Russia has become more ambivalent after Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine. Although 90% of Moldovans identify as Orthodox, 90% of whom belong to the Moldovan Orthodox Church (MOC), a subordinate to the Russian Orthodox Church (ROC), this number is declining in favor of the Metropolis of Bessarabia, linked to the Romanian Church. After February 2022 least fifty priests opposed the Russian Orthodox Church's support for the war in Ukraine and its promotion of pro-Russian interests. Yet, although at some point MOC representatives protested the ROC's support for the war, they refused to even consider transferring the entire MOC from Russian to Romanian patronage¹³. MOC's senior clergy defended Russia as the „guardian of Christian values” in contrast to Western policies promoting LGBT rights. This resonates well in a society that, despite its pro-European stance, tends to be conservative.

In recent years, the political climate for CSOs in Moldova has improved (4.8/7 according to the CSO Meter¹⁴), thanks to the country's EU integration ambitions, especially in terms of equal treatment, participation in decision-making and state support. While there is still much to be done, for example in terms of funding or the right to privacy, the direction seems promising and could contribute to improving societal resilience to Russian influence.

„The level of Russian disinformation activities against all of Moldova is approaching historic heights.”



Political Factor

Similar to its approach to Armenian, Georgian, and Moldovan society, Russia is trying to influence the outcome of elections in the three republics. It does so directly, but it can also count on pro-Russian groups on the domestic political scene in Armenia, Georgia, and Moldova. This way, domestic politicians who promote a narrative aligning to Russian interests become another tool of influence that brings these countries closer to Russia at the expense of their Western integration.

In this respect, the Moldovan ruling camp stands out positively with its actions in connection with the presidential elections and the constitutional referendum in 2024 (the efforts that had to be repeated during parliamentary campaign and elections in 2025); the Georgian authorities did not follow this example, and Armenia's reaction is yet to be observed in the coming months.



Victory Arch, Chisinau



Armenian disillusionment



The 2020 iteration of the conflict with Azerbaijan affected all spheres of life in Armenia – social, political, economic. After the defeat, Armenia faced a very serious political crisis, which was in line with the Russian interest to impeach the Pashinyan government (since he came to power through the 2018 Velvet Revolution and has positioned himself as a democrat with a pro-Western course, he is not Russia's favorite). Although the Armenian leadership managed to confirm its legitimacy in the early parliamentary elections in the spring of 2021, it was not a confirmation of strong support for Pashinyan. The Armenian electorate voted not so much for him, but against the alternative – groups gathered around former presidents associated with corruption and authoritarianism. The next parliamentary elections are planned for June 2026, and the forecasts are not optimistic, as there is a lot of frustration in society. Armenians do not trust politicians (Pashinyan who leads

the ranking from autumn 2024 scored just 16% while 61% respondents indicated that they do not trust any politician¹⁵) and they are not interested in politics, as evidenced by the 49.37% turnout during the most recent elections.

Unlike recent elections in Georgia or Moldova, the main narrative during the upcoming election campaign in Armenia will not be whether the country is pro-Russian or pro-European; its pro-Western choice is already established. In April, Armenian parliament adopted a law on launching the country's accession process to the EU. The key issue will be thus a peace treaty with Azerbaijan (should Pashinyan succeeds with his peace agenda). First of all, it is about the security of the country. Secondly, it is treated as a precondition for the Western integration of Armenia (so far, Türkiye – Armenia's geographic link to the EU – has used the ongoing peace talks as an excuse not to open borders with Armenia or implement some normalization arrangements until the peace treaty is signed). Nevertheless, the 2026 elections will also be a test of Russian influence on the country as it seeks to overthrow Pashinyan. Instead of threatening him personally, which was the case in 2020, it may use economic leverage against Armenia and portray Pashinyan's government as failing to deliver not only on security but also economy issues; there is already some information that Russian investments in Armenia are beginning to decrease. Moreover, Russia is spreading a narrative that it will become the best ally of Armenia once his government is gone.

„The main narrative during the upcoming election campaign in Armenia will not be whether the country is pro-Russian or pro-European; its pro-Western choice is already established.“



Statue of a brave little girl in front of the Armenian Parliament



With this in mind, as early as September 2023, some Armenian NGOs issued a statement on limiting Russian influences in the country. The text warns of harmful Russian interference that could lead to a coup and the establishment of a pro-Russian dictatorship. The NGOs call on the Armenian government to resolutely thwart all attempts at foreign interference in domestic political processes, to suspend the operation of Armenian-Russian agreements ensuring the rebroadcasting of Russian TV channels, and to oblige cable operators to disconnect all Russian TV channels spreading anti-Armenian narratives and propaganda from their networks, to begin the official process of terminating Armenia's membership in the CSTO, as well as all agreements related to the location of the Russian (102nd) military base in Armenia and the complete withdrawal of Russian armed forces from our country. The outcome, however, is yet to be seen.



Street vendor, Yerevan

Georgian uncertainty



As early as 2017, Georgia's Strategic Defense Review recognized Russian soft power as a significant threat to the country's security¹⁶. In a public opinion poll in early 2023, 87% of respondents said that Russia was the biggest political threat to Georgia¹⁷. More recently, Georgia's fifth President Salome Zourabichvili warned against Russian interference in the elections, pointing to cyber-attacks and propaganda¹⁸. The Russian Foreign Intelligence Service (SVR) was indeed an active „participant” in the Georgian electoral campaign before the 2024 voting. It spread disinformation (e.g., via Telegram) accusing the West of orchestrating a coup to overthrow the Georgian Dream. While Meta was successful in removing the Russian-originated network that spread propaganda, Russia disseminated its disinformation through many more channels aimed at confusing Georgians by blurring the line between real and manipulated political narratives in the country¹⁹. Moreover, for years, Western support for the Georgian StratCom unit has been misused by ruling politicians to attack the opposition and even spread anti-Western propaganda; Georgian Dream used fake social media accounts to spread support for its policies²⁰.

The country's biggest challenge now is to find a way out of the political-constitutional crisis it has been unable to resolve since last fall. The October 2024 parliamentary elections provided alarming evidence of Russia's growing political presence and visibility in Georgia. Although there is no evidence of concerted cooperation between Georgian and Russian authorities in the form of adopted strategies, statements, or meetings between politicians, it is intuitive. For example, Russian propagandists were in Georgia. On election day Alexander Malkevich – a Russian propagandist sanctioned by the US and Ukraine – was in Tbilisi²¹, what is pretty telling about the level of Russian involvement in the electoral process. Also, the synchronized narrative of Russia and the ruling Georgian Dream was more visible than in previous years. During the recent election campaign, their discourse was almost the same in terms of warning of a coup allegedly being prepared by the opposition parties and presenting Georgian Dream as a guarantor of peace and stability, as opposed to the West-influenced opposition parties dragging Georgia into another conflict with Russia and allowing the West to look down on Georgia.



The Georgian capital and several major cities have been rocked by demonstrations for weeks. Georgians continue to protest the results of the recent elections, which Georgian Dream appears to have won with 53.93% of the votes (and then elected its President, Mikheil Kavelashvili), but in many cases it is not clear what the likely outcome will be. Opponents of the Georgian Dream are cautious in discussing future scenarios and talk about the need for consensus and dialogue. This is because people are afraid of what they call a „second Maidan,” that there is a revolt in the country that could come through the conflict zones because of the Russian presence there. Moreover, Georgians understand that if the country was able to come out of this crisis peacefully, its chances of EU integration talks will skyrocket. This, in turn, incentivizes the opposition to prioritize peaceful means.

In deciding to vote for the opposition, many Georgians had actually voted against the Georgian Dream party rather than in favor of a particular political party. And that „against” vote was divided between four political parties of the opposition, who are now blamed for not defending the votes during the elections. In addition, these parties are not united enough, their postulates vary, they are scattered, infeasible, and personalized. While they are aware of these problems and are beginning to unite, this may be too little too late. On the one hand, they want

„Georgians understand that if the country was able to come out of this crisis peacefully, its chances of EU integration talks will skyrocket.”

a complete victory in the sense of a revolution and a change of leadership. On the other hand, they are also ready to recognize that Georgian Dream still has some voters – more traditional or conservative people (the actual support for Georgian Dream was less than 40%, which means it would have to form a coalition government). Ultimately, they rejected this scenario and continue to fight not to share power, hoping that the opposition and protests will burn out. Nevertheless, Georgian Dream’s position is weakening due to the sanctions imposed mainly by the USA, the criticism of the ODIHR and a number of foreign governments that do not recognize the results of the elections. In this sense, it should have an incentive to enter into dialogue, but it is still uncertain how to shape the agenda.



Saint George Icon in Bagrati Cathedral, Kutaisi

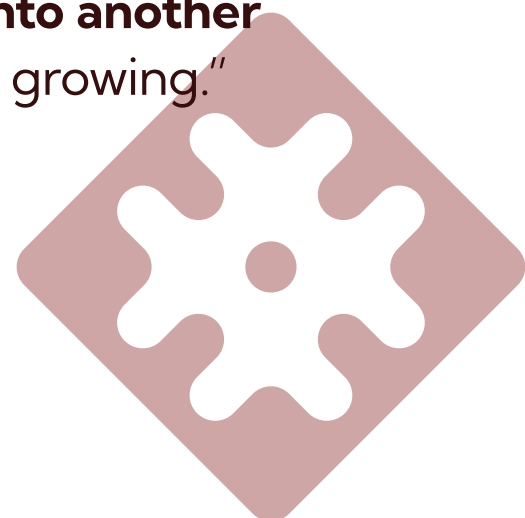


Map of Georgia and autonomous regions of Abkhazia and South Osetia

Nevertheless, peaceful development may also be a risky scenario. Before the Georgian parliamentary elections in 2024, Russian officials argued that the normalization between Georgia and Russia, which started when Georgian Dream came to power, is a kind of done deal, it has already happened (e.g. restoration of direct flights, Russian investments in Georgia). While normalization is no longer an issue, the main challenge – for the moment – is whether this would be formalized by restoring diplomatic relations. This is a plausible scenario in case GD remains the only and main party in power in the country. The last impediment would be thus the status of Russia-backed Abkhazia and South Ossetia. One thing that definitely unites Georgians is that the two separatist regions belong to Georgia. But if one adds some variables such as „their non-recognition will provoke a war”, or rebrands them (to accommodate the postulates of creating a confederation), this change of status can actually be sold to the general public without making it realize that a line has been crossed. In this context, various groups associated with Kremlin’s soft power are beginning to discuss all sorts of formulas and models. Some call them confederations or autonomies, but they all boil down to Georgia recognizing the de facto and de jure independence of Abkhazia and South Ossetia. This, in turn, would increase Russia’s presence in Georgia and its involvement, for example, in transportation and logistics, making it more dependent on its stronger and more powerful neighbor. Such a scenario incentivizes people to revolt against the Georgian Dream.

The space for such decisive action is shrinking as the ruling party has turned the police and other power-based services (all except the defense forces) from the people’s friends into their enemies. This has confused Georgian society and made it less resilient. While this shift may motivate society to oppose the anti-Western government even more, it is not yet certain. What is sure, however, is that the risk of Georgia turning into another Belarus is growing. The question remains whether Georgia can afford (or how far GD dares to go) to crack down harder on protesters or see people leaving the country.

„What is sure, however, is that the risk of Georgia turning into another Belarus is growing.”





Moldovan (im)possibilism



After the majority of voters (50.4%) in the first round opted for the inclusion of European integration in the Moldovan constitution, on November 3, 2024, the pro-European Maia Sandu won the second round of the presidential elections against Alexandr Stoianoglo, who was supported by the pro-Russian Party of Socialists (PSRM). The 2024 presidential elections and referendum were nevertheless a showcase of Russian influence. 130,000 people (about 10% of voters²²) were bribed (out of approximately 300,000 approached), including through pro-Russian political parties. Sandu herself was the subject of deepfake attacks that portrayed her as a pro-Russian supporter or insulted the electorate. Cyber-attacks hit the Central Election Commission, government agencies, the media, and even private companies. In addition, the tactic of sending young people to Russia and the Balkan countries for country destabilization trainings (to learn the techniques to be used during demonstrations, etc.) was used, together with fake bomb alarms in several polling stations abroad and threatening voters by phone²³. These actions were met with a response from the authorities, who dismantled the voter payment network, confiscated the funds earmarked for this purpose, and conducted media campaigns²⁴. Before the elections, a new electoral code was adopted to strengthen the fight against illegal campaign financing, and a renewed national security strategy was adopted to strengthen the resilience of state institutions (it also recognized Russia as an existential threat to national security)²⁵. In addition, the Center for Strategic Communications and Countering Disinformation and the National Cybersecurity Agency were established.



Liberation Memorial, Chisinau

„The 2024 presidential elections and referendum were a **showcase of Russian influence**. 130,000 people (about 10% of voters) were **bribed** (out of approximately 300,000 approached).”



Yet the old networks and corruption schemes are still functioning and playing a crucial role, as election interference is not exclusively organized by Russia. It is made possible by local actors who are experienced in Moldovan politics and have better access to buying votes (not only as Russia's proxies, but also for their own needs). The Moldovan state apparatus is not sufficiently „cleansed” of them, and Russia takes advantage of this. Furthermore, while not all of Moldova's problems come from Russia, the latter is often used as an excuse by those in power (both the Party of Action and Solidarity, PAS, and its predecessors) to cover up incompetence or lack of political will. Russia may be the most important factor in this mix, but it is certainly not the only one.

In addition to a considerable number of purely internal problems, there is the inability and incompetence of the Moldovan administration. The public sector, especially the state administration, remains relatively small. With an insufficient number of underpaid staff, the prospects for effective administration of the country remain low. While this problem could be solved quickly, there is a certain level of resistance of authorities in Moldova to increase salaries, in order not to send a signal that the administration earns more than the general public.



Kamil Calus

Moldova's ability to implement reforms is hampered by a lack of qualified personnel and the constant need to respond to overlapping crises, such as the war in Ukraine, energy shortages, and inflation. The PAS-led administration is composed largely of newcomers to public service, and state institutions struggle to attract skilled staff due to uncompetitive salaries. Moreover, the management of successive crises (the energy and refugee crises, high inflation, and other effects of the war in Ukraine) further reduces the already-limited capacity of the Moldovan administrative apparatus. These structural weaknesses are compounded by internal resistance: a certain number of lower- and mid-level officials still serve oligarchic interests and quietly undermine reform efforts. Additionally, while political loyalty is no longer the main hiring criterion, the ruling PAS party remains wary of former officials linked to the previous oligarchic regime, which further limits the talent pool. Local administrations, especially in rural areas, often struggle with corruption, political dependencies, underfunding, and staffing issues. Structural problems—such as the fragmentation and small size of local government units—also weaken their autonomy.

Another factor limiting the effectiveness of Moldova's administration is the still highly centralized and personalized nature of policy coordination. President Maia Sandu and a close circle of trusted politicians and officials remain the main drivers of the ruling majority's agenda. Coordination between ministries and institutions exists but relies heavily on personal relationships, for instance, between individual ministers. This centralization can sometimes create friction, particularly when institutions are led by ambitious figures seeking to climb the political ladder.



Casino, Chisinau

The main concern ahead of the parliamentary elections on September 23, 2025 was that pro-Russian candidates could come to power, as support for pro-European parties has been declining. This could have made it difficult to form a pro-European government and conclude EU accession negotiations (which have yet to begin) by 2029 – the end of the next parliamentary term, to protect the country against making a U-turn. The Moldovan opposition consisted of groups centered around the openly Russian-backed Ilan Șor, the pro-Russian PSRM, and parties trying to position themselves between European integration and Russia. All those kinds of pro-Russian parties were neither unified nor determined enough in their pro-Russian sentiments (some of them may even be eager to take a more pro-European course). On the other hand, the idea behind Sandu's creation of PAS in 2016 was to bring together all pro-Europeans. In the short term, this was successful, but in the long term it is becoming an increasing burden, as voters are tired of the same faces and ideas and are looking for change.

In its current form, the Moldovan political scene does not offer a pro-European alternative or coalition partner to the PAS.

Interestingly, although parliamentary elections are more important from a constitutional point of view, voter turnout is usually lower than for presidential elections. While the political scene is split into pro-European and pro-Russian camps, the electorate divides into those who are satisfied with their standard of living (and thus vote for the pro-European Sandu) and those who are not. The latter cast their votes for the opposition, but this does not mean that they are pro-Russian as such, but rather that they want the authorities to deal with their daily problems. This is related to another problem of the current government, which is to maintain good communication with the general public, especially outside the capital and larger cities. People expect politicians to come and explain problematic issues, but the leadership seems reluctant to have such interactions, arguing that these people would not vote for them anyway.

„Moldova's ability to implement reforms is **hampered** by a lack of qualified personnel.”



Separatist Transnistria is a very particular example of this trend. In the 2024 referendum, about 50% of voters coming from the region favored EU integration. This can be explained by the general weariness of being distracted from everyday life by major geopolitical dilemmas that do not improve their living standards, which are particularly visible among the younger generations. Moreover, some Transnistrian residents manage to break the pro-Russian information bubble, especially those who travel with Moldovan or Romanian passports. While they may be responsible for relatively positive results in the most recent Moldovan elections, this does not necessarily mean that Transnistria as a whole is changing; there is still not enough space for political protests, dialogue with Moldova or the EU. On the other hand, Transnistrians would not be ready to sacrifice their lives for Russia. Their pro-Russianism stems from the fear that reorientation towards the West will worsen their situation. With a vision of a better life and proof to the contrary, their pro-Russianism could disappear instantly. The same is true in case of Gagauzia.

On top of that, another variable should be added: Moldovan diaspora. During the 2024 elections and referendum, it accounted for 19% (about 330,000) of the votes in the first round²⁶ and even more in the second round. In September voting it cast over 17% of votes (78.5% in support for PAS) making a record score in parliamentary elections. As the traditional savior of Moldovan politics, it basically neutralized Russian active measures in Moldova. However, it is often ignored by Moldovan politicians, who in a sense do not address the diaspora with their political offer. Positioning

the elections as a choice between a pro-European and a pro-Russian course of the state, in turn, is intended to encourage their – usually pro-Western – involvement²⁷.

Although the ruling PAS won the September parliamentary elections with an outright majority, the campaign and voting were once again marked by intense Russian activity, which attempted to influence their outcome. Kremlin doubled its efforts to deploy wide array of measures, from financing pro-Russian parties and buying votes, through disinformation campaigns against PAS and Sandu (not only as a head of state but also the face of the party), spoofing, to cyberattacks, to mention but a few. And yet again the Moldovan authorities were to respond, i.a. by excluding from the elections two parties (the Heart of Moldova Republican Party, and the Greater Moldova Party).

„Transnistrians would not be ready to **sacrifice** their lives for Russia. Their **pro-Russianism stems from the fear** that reorientation towards the West **will worsen** their situation.”



Statue of Alexander Suvorov, Tiraspol



Economic Factor



Fruit market, Kutaisi

Trade has traditionally been a tool used by Russia to exert pressure on former Soviet states. Once an effective mean of influencing those countries is becoming less threatening, although it remains a lucrative option in some cases. All three countries under discussion differ in terms of Russian economic influence. Despite cautious attempts at economic rapprochement with the EU, the Armenian economy is based on close cooperation with Russia. Moldova is in a completely different situation, as it has effectively changed partners in this regard - thanks to the conclusion of the DCFTA with the EU, Russian economic influence has been reduced to a minimum. In the case of Georgia, the cooperation is more sectoral and seems to be based on a several low hanging fruits, such as more liberal requirements for wine exports to Russia than to the EU, or the use of convenient transport routes. These seem to be well-established patterns which are unlikely to change anytime soon.

„Trade – once an **effective mean** of influencing is becoming **less threatening**, although it remains a **lucrative option in some cases.**”



Armenia doing business



An important variable in Armenia's relations with Russia is the economy. Armenia depends on Russian exports of grain and oil products, but in terms of trade it is not only its client. As a result of the sanctions imposed on Russia by the West in response to its aggression

in Ukraine, Armenia has become an important partner, as the membership of both countries in the Eurasian Economic Union facilitates the re-export of Western goods²⁸. Therefore, it is difficult to assume that Russia will use bilateral trade as a tool to influence Armenia.

Armenia–Russia trade in thousand US dollars ³²	export	import (countries of origin)	import (country of consignment)
2021	840,689.6	1,785,414.1	1,997,869.1
2022	2,462,777.2	2,637,121.8	2,891,258.7
2023	3,540,192.1	4,383,754.4	4,543,352.9
2024	3,163,991.8	9,239,648.6	9,434,107.0

Trade volume between Armenia and Russia

Armenia's trade with Russia is growing at an unprecedented rate. In the first 11 months of 2024, trade turnover with the EAEU increased by 68.3% and reached \$11.9 billion, which is more than 42% of the country's total foreign trade turnover. At the same time, trade with the EU decreased by 14.1% (\$2.1 billion or 7.5% of the total volume)²⁹. In mid-January this year, Minister of Economy Gevorg Papoyan denied any attempts to replace Armenia's membership in the EAEU with European integration and presented it rather as exploring ways to increase the resilience and competitiveness of the Armenian economy through diversification (he advocates increasing the volume of trade with everyone, including the EAEU³⁰). As for now, limiting cooperation within the EAEU would provoke a rise in energy prices and the decline of Armenian exports, to name but a few³¹. On the other hand, the EAEU

model is incompatible with the DCFTA of the EU, which makes simultaneous membership to both impossible. While Armenian politicians expect the EU to provide the country with a viable and lucrative solutions that would enable it to smoothly and painlessly decouple from Russia, the Union does not present any.

„Limiting cooperation within the EAEU would provoke a rise in energy prices and the decline of Armenian exports.”



However, in terms of capability of affecting Armenian economy, Russia has ace up its sleeve – diaspora remittances (in 2022, \$3.6 billion out of the total \$5.1 billion came from Russia³³). While the Armenian diaspora is leaving Russia, the card was already used against Armenia in October 2023, when the Russian Duma postponed for an indefinite period of time the debate on a bill on recognition of Armenian driver's licenses for business and labor purposes, allegedly in response to the Armenian government's failure to take steps to grant official status to the Russian language³⁴. In addition, Russia controls Armenia's telecommunications, mining, infrastructure, and financial sectors, giving it a more direct method to influence the state of Armenia's economy.



Local products at the Yerevan Market

Georgia thinking business



The conflict over Abkhazia and South Ossetia ranked only fifth in the 2023 IRI's Georgian opinion poll with 5%, compared to 36% of respondents who cited unemployment, 19% – high prices, 9% – poverty, 9% – other economic problems³⁵. Although Georgia is not a member of the EAEU and has concluded the association agreement with DCFTA with the EU (which is not applicable to Abkhazia and South Ossetia), Russia remains its most important trade partner. In the first half of 2024, it was second (after Türkiye) in terms of trade turnover (\$1.198 billion) and imports (\$8.575 billion), and third in terms of exports (\$3.401 billion) after Kyrgyzstan and Kazakhstan. At the same time, both exports and imports decreased slightly compared to the same period in 2023³⁶, and this is a reversal of the upward trend that was in place until 2022, when economic dependence was described as a threat to the state. An important aspect of bilateral trade cooperation is the sale of Georgian wines. Their export to Russia is more advantageous for Georgians, as it involves fewer restrictions and lower costs of adapting to target market. This makes even anti-Russian residents of the Georgian provinces – especially in the eastern regions of the country, which are more dependent on wine production – adopt a more pragmatic attitude.

Also, the fact that since the beginning of the full-scale invasion of Ukraine the number of Russian companies moving to Georgia should not go unnoticed. As of February 2023, there were 22.4 thousand Russian companies registered in Georgia, 66% of which after February 24, 2022³⁷.

In addition, Georgia benefits from Armenian trade with Russia passing through its territory. TEN-T (Middle Corridor) project, which connects China with Europe through Central Asia, Caspian Sea, Azerbaijan, Georgia, and Türkiye, is a headache for the EU in the context of Georgian domestic problems, as it was supposed to be an alternative to the Northern Corridor through Russia. From the EU's point of view, the issue of the transport corridor through Georgia is over, at least for now.

Similar to Armenia, Russia is an important market for Georgia in terms of remittances, although according to the National Bank of Georgia, those from Russia decreased by 65% to \$541 million in 2024³⁸.



Moldovan business as usual



Compared to Armenia and Georgia, Russia's importance in the Moldovan economy is much lower, but according to experts, it is still too significant. The EU played a crucial role in the process of decoupling the Moldovan economy from Russia. The Union took over the role of Moldova's main economic partner from Russia and in 2023 it accounted for 53.7% of its trade, while Russia with 3.7% did not even make it into the top three³⁹. This is not only due to the DCFTA (its provisional application started in September 2014), but also to the logistical constraints caused by the war in Ukraine.

The DCFTA also applies to separatist Transnistria. While Russia did not want the region to fall into the EU's economic sphere of influence, it was very interested in keeping it economically viable. The EU secured the process with ready-made solutions that were helpful to the Moldovan administration. Another factor that contributed to its success was the EU's flexibility, concluding an unpublicized special agreement with Transnistria on joining the free trade zone in 2014–2016. Although Transnistria repeatedly fails to meet its obligations, e.g. to introduce VAT or to abolish all customs duties, it is still a success story because the trade

„EU took over the role of Moldova's main economic partner from Russia and in 2023 it accounted for 53.7% of its trade, while Russia with 3.7% did not even make it into the top three.”

agreements reached redirect approx. 80% of its trade to the EU, making it dependent on the West rather than its Eastern patron. However, if smuggling from Transnistria is almost non-existent now, corruption schemes remain a problem. The financing of many relevant businesses in Transnistria is managed by corruption schemes from the Right Bank of Moldova, an issue that needs to be properly addressed by decisions in Chisinau.



Billboard near the Sheriff Stadium, Tiraspol



Energy Factor

Energy plays an important role in Russia's toolbox for exerting influence abroad, although Armenia, Georgia, and Moldova face different kinds of problems in this regard. In the case of Armenia, its heavy dependence on Russian supplies of fossil fuels and uranium has not yet been implemented against it, but the threat is there.

On the other hand, Russia has already tried to use energy to interfere in Moldova's political decisions. Although Moldova has had considerable success in cutting itself off from Russian supplies, this has come at a financial cost. Georgia, in turn, is predisposed to either further cut itself off from Russian supplies or become more entangled

In its influence, depending on the direction its politicians take.

„Energy plays an important role in **Russia's toolbox** for exerting influence abroad, although Armenia, Georgia, and Moldova face **different kinds of problems** in this regard.”

Energy dependency on Russian supplies	Armenia	Georgia	Moldova
Crude oil	High	Manageable	Already decoupled
Natural gas	High	Manageable	Already decoupled
Uranium	High, but decreasing	Not applicable	Not applicable

Energy dependency on Russian energy supplies



Armenia – a potential threat



Heating system, Yerevan

Over 70% of Armenia's electricity comes from Russia⁴⁰. Armenia depends on Russia for three main sources of its energy – gas, oil, and uranium for nuclear power. Due to the lack of domestic sources, fossil fuels are almost entirely of Russian origin (they are imported through Georgia). In 2024, Armenia's gas imports from

„Armenia has **the least chance** of reducing its dependence on gas from Russia. Although Iran has offered to **triple or even quadruple** supplies to Armenia, this is **dependent on consent from Russia**, which controls the **infrastructure**.”

Russia exceeded 92% (the remaining 8% are imported from Iran), and the owner of gas distribution infrastructure is the Russian company Gazprom. Also, Armenia's thermal power plants are largely dependent on Russian natural gas⁴¹.

In addition, Russia is responsible for 100% of the supply of raw materials for nuclear energy production, while the Metsamor nuclear power plant – the only one in the South Caucasus – is owned equally by Rosatom and the Armenian state. In 2023 the Armenian government signed an agreement with Russia to invest in Metsamor 2 to extend the reactor's life to 2036 (the work is to be carried out by Rosatom, Russia's state nuclear energy company, at a cost of \$65 million⁴²), but the plant is of concern to the EU and neighboring Türkiye for security reasons⁴³. The risk factors – apart from its age and use of outdated technology – are its location in a highly seismically active region and

the re-escalating conflict with Azerbaijan, making it one of the most dangerously located nuclear power plants in the world⁴⁴. Armenia intends to build a new nuclear unit at Metsamor, but its construction has not yet begun, giving the country opportunity not to outsource it to Russia, which has already expressed interest in the project. Meanwhile, Armenia is taking steps to reduce its dependence on Russia for uranium supplies. Its operating reactor is a sister to the one in Ukraine, which currently uses American nuclear fuel, showing that this is possible. In addition, Armenia is looking into the possibility of purchasing small modular nuclear reactors from the US, France, and South Korea, but without much success so far.

Armenia has the least chance of reducing its dependence on gas from Russia; 85% of come from Russia under a 2022 contract that sets the price at less than half of the current market value. Although Iran has offered to triple or even quadruple supplies to Armenia, this is dependent on consent from Russia, which controls the infrastructure. In addition, Armenia plans to build a geothermal power plant in Karkar.



Georgia – unconvincing threat



Due to its location, Georgia is an arena where Western and Russian projects are competing, such as the EU- and US-backed Nabucco gas pipeline and Russia's South Stream. The main suppliers of electricity to Georgia are Azerbaijan and Türkiye. This puts Georgia in a much better position than neighboring Armenia, which cannot afford such support from their side. In 2020, domestic energy production covered about 21% of Georgia's needs, with the main sources being hydropower and bioenergy and, to a very limited extent, fossil fuels⁴⁵. In terms of gas and oil supplies, the country is almost entirely dependent on external supplies; in the case of gas, from Azerbaijan (78.5% in 2023) and Russia (21.5% in 2023, with the authorities announcing plans to double supplies in 2025)⁴⁶.

The Enguri hydroelectric dam, whose arch is located in Georgia while the reservoir extends into separatist Abkhazia, is another important variable in this puzzle. On the one hand, it pushes both actors to cooperate, but on the other – it makes Georgia more vulnerable to Russian threats (exercised directly or through its proxy in Skhumi).

„In terms of gas and oil supplies, the country is almost entirely dependent on external supplies; in the case of gas, from Azerbaijan (78.5% in 2023) and Russia (21.5% in 2023).“



Traditional Georgian sweet – churchkhela



Moldova – already (de)materialized threat



Moldovagaz headquarters, Chisinau

In the past, Russia has used gas supplies to pressure Moldova into making concessions. The latest development is the cutoff of Russian gas supplies to Transnistria as of January 1, 2025, under the pretext that Ukraine has not renewed the agreement. This situation illustrates Russian influence, but also the EU's support for Moldova and the role of national authorities in building or weakening the country's resilience.

In recent years, Moldova has sought to become independent of Russian energy supplies. As early as March 2022, its electricity grid was synchronized with the European system, allowing it to import electricity from the EU⁴⁷. At the end of 2022, Moldova proper became independent from Russian gas supplies by diversifying its sources and creating reserves (in Ukraine and Romania due to the lack of such infrastructure in the country). Since then, Russian gas contracted at the end of 2021 has been delivered exclusively to Transnistria. However, Moldova still consumed about 80% of the electricity produced in Transnistria as it was cheaper.

In early December 2024, the specter of Russian gas cutoff to Transnistria became real, but Moldovan decision-makers left it until the last minute to react. Moreover, in December it turned out that they failed to prepare adequate gas reserves in Ukraine and Romania in the summer – when gas is cheaper. As a result, Moldova was forced to pay much higher prices. To support Chisinau, the EU provided a total of one hundred million euros in aid⁴⁸.

While residents of Moldova proper felt only the price increase, the effects of the cutoff were more visible in separatist Transnistria. The local leadership was counting on the resumption of free gas supplies from Russia (via the Balkan route) and initially rejected proposals from Chisinau to sell the region the gas it purchased at market prices⁴⁹. Although Russia could do this, it refused to do so to weaken support for the PAS ahead of the parliamentary elections and to divert at least part of the electorate to pro-Russian parties⁵⁰. The Transnistrian leadership, however, blamed everyone but Russia for the situation (e.g., it criticized Ukraine for gas and electricity cuts, even though it had the national right to cut off gas supplies to Transnistria/Moldova and other markets).

EU assistance has allowed Transnistria to receive non-Russian gas for the first time in its history. Since the beginning of February, Moldova has been supplying Transnistria with gas in quantities that allowed it to restore heating and resume energy production, but not enough to resume normal operation of local industrial facilities. About 2,000 people – power plant workers – were unemployed with no job prospects for the next few months and no pensions, and the crisis may eventually have serious consequences for the economic stability of the region. In January, Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelenskyy and Maia Sandu reached an agreement to supply coal from the Donbas region to the Transnistrian power plant, which would reduce the cost of electricity.

„EU assistance has allowed Transnistria to receive non-Russian gas for the first time in its history.”

This solution would require some adjustments to the previous deal with Russia, but it would still be cheaper than buying electricity from other sources and would benefit Ukraine. However, the Transnistrian economy is unprofitable without free gas supplies⁵¹. While this could increase Moldova's leverage over the separatist region and encourage it to distance itself from Russia⁵², Moldovans must first overcome a mental barrier – a firm belief that the country cannot survive without Russian support. All while Russian experts meddle using all of the above factors, with the classic stick and carrot model. Threats made by Russian officials serve as the stick. The carrot, in turn, is that Russia plays the role of an enabler, offering some ready-made solutions (e.g., using the already known schemes and documentation templates), the application of which does not require any expertise or overthinking on the Moldovan side.

Moldova is taking further steps towards greater – and looking at things over several years even complete – independence from Russian energy supplies. In the next one or two years, it plans to develop new instruments for self-sufficiency in electricity, to conclude some long-term agreements, and to build or complete new electricity infrastructure.

„Transnistrian economy is unprofitable without free gas supplies.”



Map of Moldova, Transnistria and Gagauzia, with notable gas pipelines



Security Factor

Since the collapse of the USSR, Russia has been constantly influencing the security situation in Armenia, Georgia, and Moldova to determine their domestic and foreign policy choices (e.g., hindering their rapprochement with the EU or NATO). It uses separatist conflicts but operates with different instruments. In the case of Armenia, it has for years provided security guarantees in the conflict with Azerbaijan over Nagorno-Karabakh. In Georgia and Moldova, it acts even more directly, fueling the separatism of Abkhazia and South Ossetia, as well as Transnistria.

Paradoxically, however, the security factor seems to be most important for Armenia. On the other hand, the Russian focus on its aggression on Ukraine means there is a possibility that its harmful influence on the security situation of Armenia, Georgia, and Moldova will weaken. This can already be seen in Armenia, although in the case of Georgia and Moldova this window of opportunity does not seem to have been used.

Defense spending	Armenia	Georgia	Moldova
Amount in \$ in 2025 ⁵³	1.700.000.000	495.629.055	1.710.000.000
GDP % in 2023 ⁵⁴	5,45	1,68	0,55
Trend	increasing	fluctuating	increasing

Defence spending in Armenia, Georgia in Moldova



Zoravar Andranik statue, Yerevan



Armenian securitization



The main concern of Armenian society is hard security (over 70% of respondents raised this issue in the polls), which is also the country's biggest vulnerability. According to Armenian experts, in 2025, even up to 10% of its GDP may be spent on national security⁵⁵, which would make it the third most militarized country in the world and in these terms – a potential perfect NATO ally, but the road to this would be rather long and bumpy.

and in the meantime is taking steps to distance itself from the organization. In January 2023, Armenia refused to host the CSTO's annual flagship exercise, Unbreakable Brotherhood, indicating that it sees a Russian presence on its soil as a threat rather than protection (in an IRI opinion poll in early 2023, 24% of Armenians cited Russia as the biggest threat; it ranked third after Azerbaijan (93%) and Türkiye (89%)⁵⁶).

„Armenia seems to be **waiting for a sign** from its Western partners and in the meantime is taking steps to **distance itself** from the CSTO.”

Not sharing a border with Russia does not make Armenia more resilient to Russian influence in terms of security. Not long ago, Armenia relied on Russia for its security, threatened by Azerbaijan because of the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict. However, Azerbaijan's attacks in 2021 and 2022 and its recapture of Nagorno-Karabakh in 2023 were a wake-up call and spark to revise this approach. At the time, Armenia called on Russia to fulfill its obligation arising from the two countries' membership in the CSTO and intervene, but its partner not only abstained from engagement (allegedly due to the lack of a demarcated border between Armenia and Azerbaijan), but did not even issue a statement criticizing Azerbaijan's actions. As a result, Armenia froze its membership in the Russian-dominated CSTO. It did not decide to leave the organization, as during consultations some Western partners advised it to remain in the organization (managing the risks associated with Armenia's withdrawal would be very difficult at the moment). Therefore, the country seems to be waiting for a sign from its Western partners



Mother Armenia statue and decommissioned soviet arms, Yerevan



Relief at the War Museum, Yerevan

At the request of the Armenian authorities, Russia started to withdraw its forces from Armenia. In 2024, Russian border guards left Zvartnots airport, where they had been stationed for over 30 years, at the request of Armenia, which did not have sufficient resources to secure it after the fall of the USSR. In addition, Armenia is gradually taking over from the Russians the responsibility for protecting its borders with Iran and Türkiye. Since March 1, the Margara crossing on the Armeno-Turkish border has been controlled by Armenians, and the withdrawal of Russian guards along the entire border is expected by 2027. The process is proceeding smoothly, thanks in part to a proper legal framework. The 1992 agreement between Armenia and Russia stipulates that Russian personnel will be withdrawn as soon as Armenia develops its national capabilities. Thus, Armenia does not have to terminate the agreement, it only has to inform the Russians that they are no longer needed. However, it is linked to the development of relations with the other partners, e.g., the preparation of programs aimed at strengthening the capabilities of Armenian border guards with the USA and Lithuania. While the number of personnel at the Russian military base in Gyumri has also decreased, it seems to be connected with

the transfer of some of them to Ukraine. The liquidation of the base is more problematic, as it requires the termination of the agreement between the two countries.

Another important issue was Armenia's dependence on Russian arms supplies; not only did Russia have a monopoly in this field, but it also limited the possibilities of importing weapons from other sources. A few years ago, it was 96%, now it is less than 10%. Due to the war in Ukraine, Russia was unable to fulfill its obligations to Armenia; in some cases, the orders were even paid, but Armenia still did not receive the supplies, and both states agreed to deduct these undue payments from the overall interstate debt. More importantly, this allowed Armenia to establish cooperation with other partners, such as India and France, and reduced Russia's influence on the country.

Moreover, unlike in Georgia, Russia is not directly threatening Armenia. It is instrumentalizing Azerbaijan. Although the Baku regime is more resilient to Russian influence than any other country in the region, it shares some interests and narratives with Russia that can be used against its neighbor. For example, just as neither wants to see an increased Western presence in the South Caucasus, both criticize the unarmed civilian EU Mission in Armenia (EUMA), which was launched in February 2023, and seek to reduce its engagement. The presence of EU observers is a stabilizing factor, as it verifies and counteracts disinformation about Armenian provocations spread by Azerbaijan to prepare the ground for escalation. Its importance for both sides of the conflict is demonstrated by the fact that it is one of the outstanding issues in the peace talks. Azerbaijan expects its withdrawal, while Armenia does not agree to it.

On March 6, the Armenian government decided to send a defense attaché to the EU and Belgium, notwithstanding the appointment of a defense attaché to NATO in February 2024. His task is to further strengthen and develop institutional relations and expand military and politico-military cooperation. This is another step in bringing Armenia closer to the European security framework, after the provision of financial assistance through the European Peace Facility (ten million euros in non-lethal military assistance) and the start of negotiations on the Framework Agreement on Armenia's participation in EU crisis management missions. In the long term, these initiatives should increase Armenia's resilience and defense capabilities.



Map of territorial changes after the 2020, and 2023 Karabakh wars

A less certain element of Western support for Armenia is, however, the United States. On January 14, Armenian Foreign Minister Ararat Mirzoyan signed a Strategic Partnership charter with the United States (now former U.S. Secretary of State Antony Blinken). The agreement provides for the continuation of the Eagle Partner joint military exercises and the visit of a team of U.S. border guards. The former did not take place, and other joint U.S.-Armenian projects were halted. Yet it was the Trump administration that contributed to Armenia-Azerbaijan peace negotiations. On August 8, Armenia and Azerbaijan agreed in Washington to the Trump Route for International Peace and Prosperity — an American proposal aimed at resolving the dispute over the Zangezur Corridor and thereby contributing to the conclusion of a peace agreement between the two countries. This demonstrates that, although the political priorities of the United States are fluctuating, the Americans may play a role in the South Caucasus and reduce Russian influence in the region.

Another important variable in this puzzle is Armenian neighborhood. Türkiye is aware of Russia's diminishing role in the South Caucasus due to the war in Ukraine and may be interested in filling this vacuum. So is

Iran, which plays a dual role. It is a stabilizing factor (to some extent preventing Azerbaijani escalation), but it is strongly against the idea of the Zangezur corridor as a trade route, as this would sideline it as a connecting road between Azerbaijan, Nakhchivan and Türkiye.

„On March 6, the Armenian government decided to send a **defense attaché to the EU and Belgium, this is another step in bringing Armenia closer to the European security framework.”**



Georgian insecurity



In a public opinion poll commissioned by IRI in early 2023, 76% of respondents pointed to Russia as the greatest threat faced by Georgia⁵⁷. Russian influence in Georgia is most visible in the occupation of Abkhazia and South Ossetia. It affects all spheres of functioning of the state and its society; existentially, in terms of security, economy, social perception, and mobilization or demobilization. In public perception, the war in Ukraine has distracted Russia from Georgia, but this is only temporary, as Georgia continues to pose a threat to the entire South Caucasus. According to estimates, Georgia would not be able to repel a Russian attack for even 2–3 days. Russian troops are stationed in Abkhazia and South Ossetia, violating Georgia's territorial integrity, including by borderization. In addition to creating a kinetic threat, the occupation of the two regions allows Russia to destabilize Georgia. Even a minor incident on the line of contact can trigger a major crisis and thus become a factor that would wipe out post-election demonstrations.

In addition, by maintaining its presence in Abkhazia and South Ossetia, Russia is effectively blocking Georgia's progress in cooperating with the EU and NATO.

An example of this is the EU Association Agreement and visa liberalization, the negotiation of which highlighted the significance of the separatist conflicts on the path to European integration. At the same time, this obstacle generates negative emotions towards the EU in public opinion, which sees the Union as ineffective and blocking progress in integration, and this narrative is in turn used by the Georgian Dream („if the EU doesn't want us, let's not go down this path”).

What the EU is doing, however, is maintaining an unarmed civilian monitoring mission (EUMM) in Georgia since September 2008, consisting of some 200 monitors from various EU member states, with de-escalation, confidence-building, and information tasks. External support for Georgian security comes also from the other partners. While Türkiye is a main provider of various military products, equipment and projects, the change of administration in the White House raises a lot of concern in terms of the dimension of Georgia-U.S. military and political cooperation.

„Georgia would not be able to repel a Russian attack for even 2–3 days.”



Georgian National Museum of Military Glory, Kutaisi



Olesya Vartanyan

The Ukraine war offered a chance to make progress on Georgia's long-standing conflicts, but that opportunity was missed. Since the invasion, Moscow not only withdrew some of its military assets from Abkhazia and South Ossetia, but also worked harder to maintain stability and avoid incidents. Yet Tbilisi failed to seize this window to take political steps toward reducing Russian influence – or even presence – in these regions. Instead, it strained relations with its Western partners, further weakening its negotiating position with Moscow.



Abandoned GAZ-53 truck, Zestaponi district, Georgia



Moldovan security



„The defense sector in Moldova is in very bad shape due to underfunding (it is probably the most underfunded sector in the whole country) and insufficient human resources.”

The defense sector in Moldova is in very bad shape due to underfunding (it is probably the most underfunded sector in the whole country) and insufficient human resources (theoretically 6,600 people, but in practice 4,400, not all of whom are capable of combat). The war in neighboring Ukraine should encourage its reform, but the problem is the belief in Moldova's neutrality, which is deeply rooted in the mentality of both officials and society.

Transnistrian conflict has also failed to act as a motivating factor. Russia maintains a military presence in the separatist region, but the combat readiness of these forces is completely different from those stationed in Armenia or Georgia. There are about 15,000 former Russian troops in Transnistria, but this is primarily a symbolic presence, as they seem unlikely to engage in combat and are capable of ignoring orders from Moscow. Moreover, Moldovan society does not care much about Transnistria, so it is impossible to make political capital out of it. In September 2023, only 1.9% of Moldovans (in Moldova proper) perceived separatism as the main problem to be solved by the country; 6.5% assigned it a secondary role, while 5.9% - a tertiary

role. They prioritized economic development, raising living standards and fighting corruption⁵⁸. Therefore, the authorities tend to underestimate its importance, and when a crisis occurs, everyone is caught by surprise. Politicians do not avoid the issue but oftentimes do not give it priority; they put it on the agenda like any other item. At the same time, they prefer to allocate the state's modest resources to solving other problems or - for electoral reasons - to make progress on the path to European integration.

Moldova has nevertheless hosted the European Border Assistance Mission (EUBAM) on its border with Ukraine since 2005. In addition, since April 2023, the European Partnership Mission (EUPM) is tasked with strengthening Moldova's crisis management structures and increasing its resilience to hybrid threats, including cybersecurity and countering foreign information manipulation and interference (FIMI). Moreover, in April the EU decided to grant Moldova the biggest-ever lethal military aid package (20 mln euro), to be spent on short-range air-defense systems with assistance from the Estonian Center for Defense Investments.



Statue of a soviet tank and St. George Chapel, Tiraspol



International Factor

Russia seeks to keep Armenia, Georgia, and Moldova within its sphere of influence to prevent their Western integration, which it perceives as a threat to its position in the former Soviet republics. Its actions have had only limited success, and its influence is waning. The areas in which Russia is making concessions are gradually being filled by Western partners, to the extent that geography, values, and other constraints allow. In this respect the main stronghold of Russia is the unresolved conflicts in Abkhazia, South Ossetia, Transnistria and even over Nagorno-Karabakh⁵⁹. Especially in the case of Georgia and Moldova they determine and limit the scope of choices, each time reducing the possibility of Western integration. In this context, one might ask whether Armenia, Georgia, and Moldova would be willing to sacrifice the disputed regions for the sake of rapprochement or even eventual accession to the EU. While the answer to Moldova's question is clearly yes, in the case of Armenia or Georgia the issue is much more complex. In addition, all three republics have taken steps toward Western integration, but the case of Georgia is a reminder that there is always the possibility to turn away from this path.

„The areas in which Russia is making concessions are **gradually** being **filled** by **Western partners**, to the extent that **geography, values, and other constraints allow.**”



Flags at Kutaisi International Airport



Armenia – extending comfort zone



„The Western perception of Armenia being Russia's number one ally in the South Caucasus is **somewhat outdated.**”



When the Soviet Union collapsed in the early 1990s, Armenia was the most pro-European state in the South Caucasus. Within a few years, however, its geographical situation – also known as its problematic neighborhood – made it dependent on Russia. Unlike Georgia and Moldova, Armenia's path to European integration is blocked not only by Russia, but also by three neighbors: Azerbaijan, Türkiye, and Iran. On top of this puzzle, the current situation in Georgia leaves Armenia as an isolated country.

The Western perception of Armenia being Russia's number one ally in the South Caucasus is somewhat outdated. This is not only because Armenia is distancing itself from Russia, which was passive during Azerbaijan's recapture of Nagorno-Karabakh, but also because the former protector is strengthening its relations with Azerbaijan. Moscow and Baku signed a strategic alliance two days before the Russian invasion of Ukraine

in 2022, and they also share interests in the energy and transport sectors. This, in turn, fits Russian interest in maintaining its presence in South Caucasus and all together goes against Armenian interests.

The general understanding of the Armenian population about the future is that Nagorno-Karabakh is lost and now they should try to save the state they have; the best way to do this is integration into Euro-Atlantic structures, as well as normalization with Turks and Azerbaijanis. Keeping this in mind, Armenia has taken some significant steps to ensure its pro-Western integration. In late February, Armenian Deputy Foreign Minister Paruyr Hovhannisyan announced the approaching completion of a new Armenia-EU agenda document aimed at bringing Armenia closer to the EU and expanding the scope of bilateral cooperation. At the same time, a bill supporting Armenia's future EU membership passed in the Armenian parliament.



Bas-relief on the Government Building, Yerevan



President Ilham Aliyev with President of European Council Charles Michel and Prime Minister of Armenia Nikol Pashinyan

Moreover, Pashinyan is a political animal who listens to public opinion, which is now very pro-American and pro-French. So, he is sincere in decoupling from Russia, but this may change in function of the attitude of general public. For example, the majority of Armenians do not see the EU as a power or a significant player in the South Caucasus; the Europeans themselves have so far been under the American security umbrella, assuming the role of recipients of security rather than providers. Armenians are aware that the process of EU integration, if any, would take years and depend on the mood in European capitals (e.g., current rise of conservatism that does not favor EU enlargement). Armenia would choose European integration if it would actually mean European integration with normalization with Türkiye (as a communication channel), customs union, DCFTA and a clear chance to become a member of the organization, but this does not seem to be the case, at least in the nearest future as on top of the aforementioned the country needs huge reforms and changes in its policies.

Another variable affecting the window of opportunity – and what also distinguishes the Armeno-Azerbaijani conflict from the cases of Abkhazia, South Ossetia, and Transnistria – is deep-rooted hatred, which can easily be instrumentalized by Russia. The czar can play this card in two complementary ways. Firstly, to encourage Armenians to fight by supplying them with weapons and financial resources. Armenia is a fertile ground for such war propaganda, as every single person who has been exiled from Karabakh is a carrier of painful memories and thus a potential ambassador of the Karabakh cause. The second card that Russia might play is to convince the Armenians that they lack the support of the West, but it can come and save them. Karabakh is over only as long as Russia is unable

to shift its focus to the South Caucasus. This limits the timeframe for the normalization of relations between Armenia and Türkiye and Azerbaijan, but their potential partners – comfortable with the recent Armenian defeat – seem to underestimate the Russian potential to reignite the hot conflict.

Zooming out, Armenian integration into Western structures seems physically impossible. It has closed its borders with Türkiye and has an unresolved conflict with Azerbaijan. Georgia is under sanctions, and Iran is in conflict with just about everyone Armenia wants to integrate with, not to mention the hardship related to its ongoing fight with Israel. So, the interim solution seems to be a non-bloc status for Armenia because it would satisfy all the major players in the South Caucasus as something manageable.

„Pashinyan is a political animal who listens to public opinion, which is now very pro-American and pro-French. He is sincere in decoupling from Russia, but this may change in function of the attitude of general public.“



Areg Kochinyan

Armenia's sovereign approaches in the field of foreign policy began to manifest primarily after the events of 2018–2020. Prior to that, especially following the palace coup of 1998, the key foreign policy decisions of the Republic of Armenia were made in Moscow. It is no coincidence that during this period Armenia became a member of all of Russia's integration structures.

The 2018 „Velvet Revolution” introduced certain changes; however, during that period, Armenia's foreign policy could be characterized as an “inertial drift.” Moscow's influence began to wane notably after the 44-day war of 2020 and the subsequent Azerbaijani aggression against Armenia's sovereign territory in 2021–2022, when Russia refused to fulfill its allied obligations to guarantee Armenia's security, as stipulated in various treaties and agreements.

Since 2022, Armenia's foreign policy has exhibited certain inconsistencies. On the one hand, Moscow no longer exercises

decisive influence over Armenia's decision-making. On the other hand, decisions made in Yerevan attempt to account for the reactions of all parties involved. This is one of the main reasons why, for example, Armenia has refrained from participating in CSTO activities for an extended period, has recalled its representative, and has refused to fulfill its financial obligations to the CSTO, yet, simultaneously, has not initiated the process of formally withdrawing from the organization (under the CSTO Charter, the withdrawal process would last six months). As of now, such an approach enables the government to better manage the associated challenges.

On the other hand, Armenia is striving to establish closer relations with alternative partners. Chief among these efforts is a focus on the EU, USA, and India. Over the past two to three years, certain achievements have been registered in these directions. Strategic partnership agreements have been signed between Armenia and the United States, as well as between Armenia and the Netherlands. A similar document is currently being prepared and is expected to be signed soon between Armenia and the European Union. France, notably, became the first EU member state to sell advanced military equipment to Armenia, a “member” of the CSTO.

In addition, in September 2023, Armenia ratified the Rome Statute and officially joined the International Criminal Court. Efforts are also underway to implement joint programs with the United Kingdom, Germany, and other European countries.

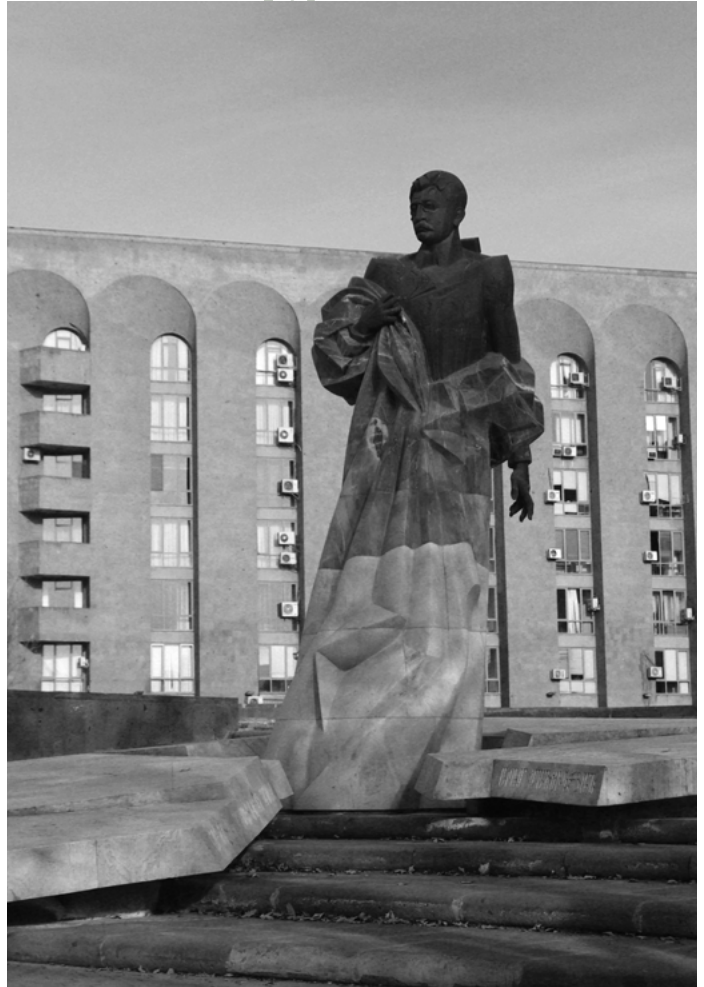
As of 2022, India became an important partner for Armenia and currently it is the biggest provider of armament to the Armenia while Armenia in 2023–2024 become the biggest purchaser of Indian weaponry in the world.

Türkiye has also become a highly significant direction in Armenia's foreign policy. Following the 44-day war, initially cautiously and subsequently with greater assertiveness, Armenia and Türkiye have been attempting to normalize relations. Although Azerbaijan's negative influence has thus far prevented major breakthroughs, work in this area continues on both sides.

Armenia's contemporary foreign policy trajectory increasingly aligns with the pursuit of a „non-bloc” status. This approach emphasizes the nation's intent to mitigate unilateral dependency on Russia while navigating the absence of formal or informal alliance proposals from any other major global power.



For Russia, Armenian diversification of partners is acceptable as long as Yerevan does not align with the West. For Türkiye, a neutral Armenia would be much more digestible than a pro-Western Armenia (as not too strong). Normalization of their bilateral relations would serve connectivity and increase the value of both for the West, reducing Armenian dependence on the domestic situation with Georgia and Russian presence on the ground. Türkiye would also like to see them withdraw from the region, and Iran would favor this development too, seeing the region as a part of the Iranian world that was taken by Russia away two hundred years ago. At the same time – from an Armenian perspective – the withdrawal of Russian forces from the South Caucasus is problematic because it would create a vacuum that Türkiye, Azerbaijan, and Iran would be ready to fill, and the EU is not ready to compete with them. At best, the EU would be able to make a statement when they are actually moving their troops. While no one expects the EU to become a military power and secure the region overnight, it is not a sufficient ally. The situation is further aggravated by the policies of the new Trump administration, which creates a rather gray scenario for the region. Therefore, Armenia cannot afford to exchange one fairytale (Russian security guarantees) for another (Western security guarantees).



Statue of Aram Manukyan, Yerevan

Georgia – solidifying comfort zone



Georgia is increasingly distancing itself from the West. In the narrative of its political elites, however, this does not mean joining Russia. Nevertheless, in society's perception it is a zero-sum game: moving away from the West means moving closer to Russia. For 63% of respondents, the EU is Georgia's most important political partner, followed by the U.S. (47%), Ukraine (27%), Türkiye (18%) and Azerbaijan (16%). While 89% and 80% of respondents strongly or somewhat support Georgia joining the EU and NATO; 8% strongly or somewhat oppose joining the EU, while 14% strongly or somewhat oppose joining NATO⁶⁰. However, even when it is ruled by pro-Western parties, the biggest elephant in the room has been how to proceed with accession negotiations while the issue of Abkhazia and South Ossetia remains unresolved.

It is doubtful whether Georgia would be willing to sacrifice its separatist regions in exchange for accession to the EU and NATO, especially given the fact that this was a vivid topic in the conspiracy context. According to this narrative, the West is demanding that Georgia give up Abkhazia and South Ossetia because it will never accept the country with these frozen conflicts, or – paradoxically – the West is pushing Georgia into a new war over Abkhazia and South Ossetia. These conspiracy theories circulate and resonate well in society because Georgians are traumatized by constant wars and conflicts, the nation has fresh memories of actual war, and seeing Russian tanks approaching the separatist regions is not that unusual.

„On the other hand, there is also a bit of wishful thinking: some Georgians expect that Abkhazia and South Ossetia will voluntarily return to Georgia, attracted by EU integration, which is not the case.”

In the political debate, the approach is somewhat different. Abkhazia and South Ossetia are virtually absent from the agendas of political parties, political discussions, and pre-election campaigns. This is due to the comfortable ignorance of the issue. In everyday life, people begin to forget about separatism. In public opinion polls about the main political challenges facing the country, the occupied territories, were far behind e.g., the economy, unemployment, and inflation were given priority. However, if someone proactively mentions the issue, the population becomes more engaged and is not ready to give up Abkhazia and South Ossetia. Therefore, politicians tend to be on the sidelines and prefer not to mention such issues. From another point of view, one can be sure that support for the West would decrease if territorial integrity had to be sacrificed, even though Euro-Atlantic integration is perceived as a civilizational choice.

Georgia proposed applying the Cyprus model (the country would join the EU within its internationally recognized borders, but the application of EU law would be suspended in the regions where the authorities do not exercise effective control), which was rejected by the EU. The EU, on the other hand, was more interested in the Kosovo model (sectoral cooperation), which was strongly rejected by Georgians, who feared an implicit recognition of the separatist regions. At the end of the day, some non-papers were produced on how the EU should not proceed with this, and the Georgians took the opportunity not to advance the issue. It is also a story of mutual misunderstanding; in the Georgian interpretation, the EU - even with good

intentions - is handling this issue like a bull in a china shop, forcing them to leave their comfort zone.

On the other hand, there is also a bit of wishful thinking: some Georgians expect that Abkhazia and South Ossetia will voluntarily return to Georgia, attracted by EU integration, which is not the case. The longer the actual separation lasts, the deeper the division. The DCFTA does not apply to Abkhazia and South Ossetia, and the authorities are not even trying to extend the application of its provisions to those regions. It is a very different case from Transnistria, where there was a very clear demand to do so. In Georgia, quite the opposite reaction is underpinned by the political fear that such a move would lead to their independence, so politicians opt for an easier solution - not to have any kind of trade relations with the separatist region. This, in turn, leads to further restrictions on trade between Georgia proper and Abkhazia and South Ossetia.

There are also voices warning that Russia will swallow up Abkhazia and South Ossetia. This creates pressure on Georgia to prevent this from happening and not to allow further violations of its territorial integrity, but also - in the worst case - not to join them. From



Gergeti Trinity Church



the Georgian perspective, negotiations between Azerbaijan and Armenia prevent Russia from reasserting its power in the South Caucasus, yet its authorities do not follow their example.

What is more, by pursuing undemocratic policies, the Georgian authorities cut themselves off from Western support. In response to the introduction of the Russian-inspired foreign agents' law by the Georgian

authorities in 2024, the West reduced the aid program for the country and imposed sanctions on some representatives of the ruling camp. The US canceled its participation in the annual Noble Partner military exercises with Georgia, and the EU decided to halt Georgia's accession process and freeze financial assistance under the European Peace Facility⁶¹.

Moldova – stretching comfort zone



Lenin Statue and Supreme Council of Transnistria, Tiraspol

As far as the Transnistrian conflict is concerned, the Moldovan case is quite different from the Georgian one, because it is actually Moldova that does not want Transnistria back, but also Russia does not really want to integrate it. So, there is no separatism-EU nexus in Moldova because the authorities in Chisinau, as well as society, would eagerly sacrifice Transnistria for the sake of European integration. Paradoxically, it is the EU that is more persistent in not abandoning hopes for Transnistria, while not allowing any partial solution analogous to the Cyprus case. While the Moldovans share with the Georgians a certain tendency to procrastinate on this issue, the EU is more proactive because it would prefer not to have another humanitarian or economic crisis in its closer neighborhood.

The Moldovan case, however, differs significantly from the Georgian one in that the authorities in Chisinau are open to cooperation with the separatist region. In contrast to Abkhazia and South Ossetia – this is reciprocated by the Transnistrians. Interestingly, while the West tends to think of Transnistria as a post-Soviet

open-air museum and a Russian puppet state, this only partially reflects reality. Russia's perspective of taking Transnistria for granted is to some extent outdated; the 2003 Kozak Memorandum, which would in fact increase Russian influence over Moldova, has not been fully implemented. The installation of pro-Russian media and politicians in Transnistria is not actually working either, as many residents of the region participated in the 2024 referendum in Moldova and voted for EU integration, although Moldovan politicians were not allowed to campaign there. This is because this conflict is not saturated with mutual hatred of the neighboring communities. It is rooted in more or less pro-Soviet nostalgia due to history and economy. In addition, people tend to think in terms of business and not history; it is not politicized as in the case of Georgia and Armenia.

What may be a turning point in this sometimes surprising, yet enduring homeostasis is the end of the war in Ukraine, as a lasting peace seems inconceivable without addressing the issue of Russian-fueled Transnistrian separatism.



The Way Forward

There is a general – and justified – perception that more European involvement means, less Russian influence. The Eastern Partnership for some countries has already served its purpose and needs to be reinvented, as it cannot replace EU enlargement. Nevertheless, it can remain an option for those not at the forefront of EU integration. The need to reform the Eastern Partnership instead of launching a new project stems from political obstacles. On the one hand, the reform would avoid the need to obtain Hungarian (or Slovak) approval. On the other hand, it would also avoid the risk of Belarus and Azerbaijan dropping out for good.

The Eastern Partnership or European integration could be used to raise the costs of potential conflict escalation.

However, if it has a direct impact on Armenian position regarding its conflict with Azerbaijan or the actions of Georgian Dream, it will be completely useless in the case of Moldova. The unresolved issue is the impossibility of using this instrument directly to adequately balance the greatest threat to these countries – Russia. On a positive note, the framework of the Eastern Partnership could be used to increase the partners' resilience against harmful Russian influences, as much remains to be done in the areas of economics, media literacy, and countering propaganda and disinformation. Moreover – and this could refresh the old framework – it could be used more horizontally, looking beyond the EU's bilateral relations with its Eastern partners but also among them.



Bus timetable, Tiraspol



Armenia at a crossroads



„The EU cannot turn a blind eye to the fact that Armenia's trade with Russia is growing at unprecedented rate.“

In the context of EU integration, Armenians are asking not so much if, but how they can realize their European aspirations. Armenia therefore needs even more EU involvement, but it should be realistic about what can be achieved. In this regard, both sides could improve communication and shall not have exaggerated expectations of each other. Given the war in Ukraine, Armenia is not a priority in the EU's foreign policy, and the EU is not a power that will be able to protect Armenia from threats in the region in the nearest future. At the same time, Armenia is supposed to contain the pro-European and pro-Western political parties that create gigantic expectations towards these partners in society (like the Saakashvili camp in Georgia years ago) that create also a risk of abusing potential disappointment by Russia. For its standards, the EU as well as Armenia have already done a lot and that is something that could be built on.

The possible granting of candidate status to Armenia and the opening of accession negotiations would take years. What seems achievable in the short term is to increase the credibility of the EU's commitment to cooperation with Armenia. The process of Armenia's rapprochement with the EU should be based on clear guidelines taking into account Armenia's capabilities. Improving the competencies of Armenian officials should be an integral part of this process, as it is a guarantee of proper implementation of reforms (cf. the case of Moldova). At the societal level, the partners will

also focus on advancing the visa facilitation dialogue to achieve a visa-free regime for short stays of Armenians in the EU, as well as media literacy.

One of the first steps would be a new – more advanced and including DCFTA – partnership agreement. However, this would depend on Armenia distancing itself from the Russian-led Eurasian Economic Union, as staying in both regimes is not feasible. The EU cannot turn a blind eye to the fact that Armenia's trade with Russia is growing at an unprecedented rate and should take into account both in the design of its sanctions and in its cooperation with Armenia. Should the EU seriously consider it, this process should be smooth and efficient, as retaliatory measures from Russia are to be expected. Therefore, the EU must prepare a serious aid package for Armenia to compensate for the future losses (in case of Russian retaliation) expected from this withdrawal. To date, European Commission President Ursula von der Leyen announced in April 2024 that the EU would provide €270 million over the next four years to support business and industry in Armenia. She also backed Pashynian's „Crossroads of Peace” proposals, which would see the country become a transportation and trade hub connecting Türkiye, Azerbaijan, Iran, and Georgia. Armenia is also encouraging the EU to develop production in Armenia with European technologies. Some projects with France, Germany, and even Great Britain are already underway, including those of military use, such as the production of artillery shields.



Road signs, Yerevan



Armenia is also closely watching the developments on the Georgian political scene. If Georgian Dream remains in power, it will mean a rapprochement with Russia at the expense of Georgia's relations with the West (such a narrative was used in the pre-election campaign by Georgian opposition, which was trying to win the votes of the Armenian minority). Although Georgia does not share a border with the EU either, for Armenia it means a deepening of the geographical cut-off from the EU and the need to intensify efforts to normalize relations with Türkiye and Azerbaijan. The claim that the post-election situation in Georgia would create momentum for Armenia to act as a pro-Western island in the South Caucasus is rather wishful thinking, as it will only

Russia, is maneuvering between Armenia and Azerbaijan. It is financing the Black Sea submarine cable project, which would connect the South Caucasus – Azerbaijan and Georgia – to the EU. Armenia is excluded due to pressure from Azerbaijan, even though the latter currently has a lower share of clean energy sources in its mix. The EU has also been unwilling to impose sanctions on Azerbaijan for its actions against Armenians. While Azerbaijan has faced no consequences from the EU for these violations, the Union has demonstrated its support for Armenia by providing it with financial assistance to help Nagorno-Karabakh refugees, which in turn has led to accusations of double standards on the part of Azerbaijan, on whose internationally recognized territory the fighting

„EU should persuade Türkiye to open its border with Armenia, possibly within the framework of the EU-Türkiye customs union negotiations.”

consolidate its status as a country at odds with all regional powers. Although the European Commission treats relations with Georgia and Armenia separately, Armenia cannot detach its relations with the EU from developments in Georgia. First, deepening Georgian ties with Russia would increase economic dependence (e.g., in the event of sanctions against Georgia that affect its economy, Russian investments can be redirected to Armenia, and Georgian investments will be severely limited). Second, some local analysts point to a risk that the Armenian leadership will use Georgia as an excuse not to introduce politically uncomfortable but expected EU reforms⁶³.

The EU has the tools to improve Armenia's international situation. It may convince Türkiye that it would also benefit from Armenia's European integration because it means stability in its neighborhood. Türkiye may also be geographically in the best position to play the role of a bridge between the EU and Armenia, so the Union should persuade it to open its border with Armenia, possibly within the framework of the EU-Türkiye customs union negotiations. Although Türkiye is not always a reliable partner and has its own agenda, it is still better than the worse prospects Armenia could get (Russian-led integration). Moreover, there is always some hope that it could push Azerbaijan to adopt a more favorable attitude towards Armenia.

Armenia also expects the EU to base its relations on clear principles: energy cooperation. The EU, striving to become independent of energy supplies from

took place. By acting in this way, the EU does not gain the trust of the parties to the Armeno-Azerbaijani conflict and excludes itself from the circle of the most trusted partners.

Armenia's withdrawal from the CSTO can be ruled out in the near future, as this would require coordination with the West. However, given the policies of the Trump administration, it is difficult to expect it to be a reliable partner or for NATO to take such actions. The EU, for its part, does not have sufficient competence in this area. However, Armenians expect the EU to balance the forces between Armenia and Azerbaijan. In this regard, they appreciate the activities of France, which provides Armenia with weapons and trains its armed forces free of charge. Armenia encourages other countries to follow its example, as this is a crucial element of deterring Azerbaijan from possible escalation. For many countries, however, Armenia's membership in the CSTO – even if frozen – remains an argument for refusing military-technical cooperation (e.g., in the form of knowledge transfer). The EU could thus help by increasing the EUMA staff, but first – by filling all vacancies in the mission (40 out of 220). The expanded mission could also cooperate with Armenia on its remaining borders in the context of training Armenian personnel. In addition, the EU could help increase Armenia's resilience in the area of cybersecurity and fighting disinformation.



Narek Minasyan

After the Second Karabakh War of 2020 and the ethnic cleansing of Armenians from Nagorno-Karabakh in 2023, a new status quo has emerged in the South Caucasus, characterized by a significant shift in the regional balance of power. In this altered environment, Azerbaijan seeks to consolidate its position as the dominant regional actor.

Throughout the negotiation process on the Armenia-Azerbaijan Peace Agreement, the Armenian side exhibited notable constructiveness, culminating in the announcement that the text had been finalized. Yerevan expressed its readiness to initiate discussions regarding the venue and timing of the signing. However, Azerbaijan has not demonstrated commensurate political will, instead resorting to various pretexts to delay the formalization of the agreement. The prevailing policies and rhetoric of the Azerbaijani leadership suggest an intention to maintain a „no war, no peace” situation, with the expectation that evolving

international dynamics might enable it to exploit its power advantage to impose unilateral concessions on Armenia.

At present, several key obstacles undermine prospects for sustainable peace:

1. Azerbaijani Preconditions

Despite the finalization of the peace agreement text, Azerbaijan continues to introduce new preconditions, notably the dissolution of the OSCE Minsk Group and amendments to Armenia's Constitution — the latter under the claim that it contains territorial claims against Azerbaijan.

On the matter of the Minsk Group, the Armenian side has expressed no fundamental objection, signaling its willingness to endorse its dissolution and sign the peace agreement simultaneously⁶⁴. Regarding constitutional issues, Armenia's Constitutional Court — the highest authority on constitutional interpretation — ruled on September 26, 2024, that Armenia's Constitution contains no provisions implying territorial claims against any third state.

Moreover, the peace agreement itself includes provisions explicitly prohibiting either side from citing domestic legislation as grounds for non-compliance and affirming mutual recognition of territorial integrity within the borders of the former Soviet republics.

This indicates that Azerbaijan's current stance is not rooted in substantive legal concerns, but rather in a strategic approach aimed at delaying the peace process. By creating artificial obstacles, Baku seeks to buy time, hoping that international instability and the erosion of international legal norms may present new opportunities to extract further concessions or achieve gains through the use of force.

Crucially, even full Armenian compliance with the two current demands would not guarantee the absence of new Azerbaijani preconditions, given the pattern of evolving and expanding demands from Baku at various levels.



2. Azerbaijan's Militarization

Since 2020, Azerbaijan has significantly increased its defense expenditures, with its military budget reaching a record \$5 billion in 2025, compared to Armenia's \$1.7 billion. This aggressive militarization stands in stark contrast to its professed commitment to peace. Simultaneously, Azerbaijan actively seeks to impede Armenia's efforts to rebuild its defense capabilities by blaming Yerevan for militarization and creating political and logistical obstacles for Armenia.

3. Absence of Confidence-Building Measures

Despite the completion of negotiations on the peace agreement text, no tangible steps have been taken to foster mutual trust. Particularly problematic is the inflammatory rhetoric of Azerbaijan's political leadership, which frequently refers to Armenian territory as „Western Azerbaijan” and describes Yerevan as an „Azerbaijani city.” Such narratives are not only expressions of irredentism but also hinder the preparation of Azerbaijani society for peaceful coexistence with Armenia.

Furthermore, Azerbaijan has failed to respond to numerous Armenian initiatives aimed at fostering trust, including proposals for mirrored troop withdrawals along the border, reciprocal arms control measures, mechanisms for joint investigations of border incidents, and the restoration of rail freight.

4. The Issue of the Rights of Nagorno-Karabakh Armenians

A critical outstanding issue in the normalization process concerns the rights of Armenians forcibly displaced from Nagorno-Karabakh. International legal standards, as well as the interim decision of the International Court of Justice in the case of Armenia v. Azerbaijan, affirm the right of displaced persons to return to their homes.

Nevertheless, this matter has been excluded from the Armenia-Azerbaijan Peace Agreement, and Azerbaijani authorities categorically refuse to address it in any format, reflecting a broader unwillingness to engage with key humanitarian dimensions of the conflict.

5. The Risk of Russian Involvement

Russia's role in the South Caucasus has significantly diminished in recent years due to the ongoing Russo-Ukrainian war. This has also weakened Moscow's involvement in the Armenia-Azerbaijan peace process. However, once the conflict in Ukraine is either frozen or a settlement is reached, Russia will inevitably seek to restore its influence in the South Caucasus. As long as the Armenia-Azerbaijan peace agreement remains unsigned, the persistence of conflict will provide Moscow with an opportunity to reassert its presence in the region.

While the Armenia-Azerbaijan Peace Agreement holds the potential to serve as a foundational framework for the normalization of relations, it cannot, by itself, resolve all critical issues. Its success will depend largely on the willingness of the parties to demonstrate—through actions rather than mere declarations—a genuine commitment to building a stable and lasting peace in the South Caucasus.

Georgia over the abyss



Powerline, Sno Valley, Georgia.

Looking at Georgia through the lens of the events of the past months, one might wonder how the EU could ever grant it candidate status. It seems that the EU's action in this regard was not so much based on a sober analysis of the facts, but rather wishful thinking and an overestimation of the possibilities of the EU carrot. On the other hand, the West as a partner is not completely off the table. While some members of the Georgian Dream advocate the 3+3 format (linking Russia, Türkiye, Iran, Georgia, Armenia, and Azerbaijan), Georgia is generally afraid of being in a format with Russia alone – without any Western partners.

Any offer of EU mediation is unlikely to be welcomed by those in power. This is an experience Georgia has already had in the recent past; the EU Council President's Charles Michel mediation between the opposition and the ruling party was not very appreciated by Georgian authorities. While this was more digestible when EU integration was at stake, it does not seem to be an argument in the short term given the current situation. Sanctions are also off the table, as the unanimity required by EU law would probably not be achieved because of Hungary and Slovakia.

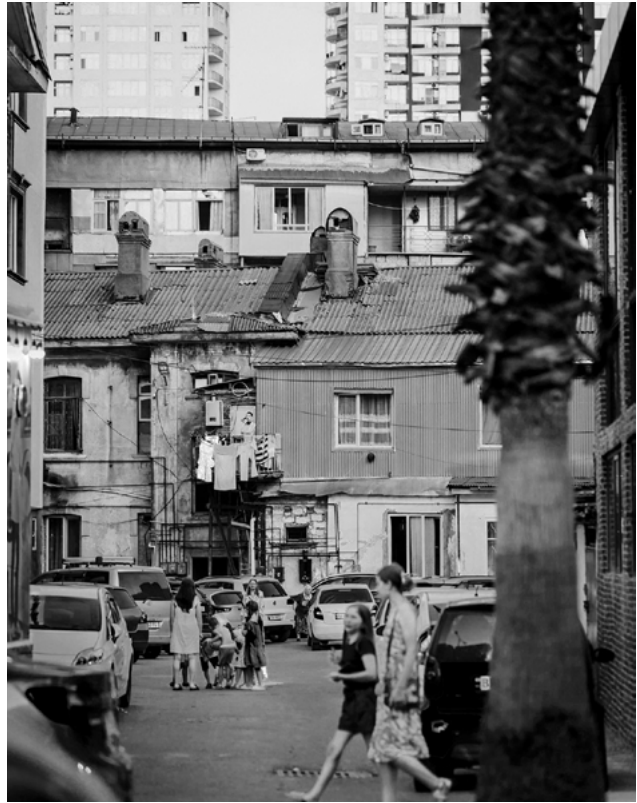
What the EU can do for Georgia is – as in the case of Belarus – to separate disapproval of the regime from support for society. It may use many tools at the same time: coordinate imposing sanctions by individual Member States, support for civil society organizations, etc. The EU could put more pressure on non-democratic parties, both in and out of power.

CSOs shape the political mindset in the country, despite being under serious attack. Although they are quite influential in the country, this may change with the Georgian version of FARA. The EU should therefore be more present in Georgia for people who are not actively involved in hot processes (outside the capital and larger cities), e.g., by participating in debates, guest lectures, speakers.

„What the EU can do for Georgia is – as in the case of Belarus – to **separate disapproval of the regime** from **support for society**.“



As far as Abkhazia and South Ossetia are concerned, dealing with non-recognition should be taken into account. The first step is to bring the issue to the attention of Georgian citizens, to legitimize exchanges with the separatist regions, and to prepare them to deal with the problem rather than ignore it. The area where the EU could intervene is in social programs that connect the conflicting communities. It is also important to involve them in some economic projects and business cooperation. But for this to happen, all of the required infrastructure has to be created, and the EU could play the role of a mediator. However, these scenarios are much more conceivable with respect to Abkhazia than in the case of South Ossetia. In the latter case, it would be useful to take even smaller steps and at least facilitate free movement through the ABL, because this is the area where Russia definitely failed when it started the policy of borderization (the border is different from the one between Armenia and Azerbaijan because so many people want to cross the ABL) and such an opportunity to step up the efforts for reintegration should not be wasted.



Streets of Batumi



Wojciech Wojtasiewicz

What can the European Union do about the political crisis in Georgia? As a first step, the EU should take a clear position on the non-recognition of the Georgian Dream government and one-party parliament and recognize Salome Zurbishvili as still acting president. Then put the Georgian issue on the agenda of the next European Council summits. Subsequently, individual member states should introduce sanctions (individual – entry ban and financial – freezing of assets) against the Georgian de facto authorities at national level, which is not possible at EU level due to the veto of Hungary and Slovakia, as well as urgently provide financial support to NGOs and independent media, which are in danger of being closed down, inter alia due to a lack of funding. If these instruments do not lead to an agreement by the de facto ruling Georgian Dream to hold new parliamentary elections and stop its anti-democratic actions, the EU should consider withdrawing Georgia's membership candidate status and temporarily suspend visa-free travel for Georgians. Finally, it should prepare an effective information campaign aimed at Georgians explaining the steps it is taking and emphasizing its continued support for the pro-European aspirations of Georgian society.



In addition, there is the question of resuming the use of the airport in Sukhumi (Abkhazia). Its opening was postponed, probably due to the change of Abkhazian leadership, as a result of social protests and delays in renovation works. Yet the flights resumed in the beginning of May 2025. The aim of reopening the airport is to bring in Russian tourists – wealthy people from Russia who do not want to spend hours

getting to Sochi and then to Sukhumi, standing in traffic jams, etc. Although this raises legitimate concerns about the growth of Russian influence in Georgia or the use of the airport for military purposes, Georgia could try to use it in negotiations with the Abkhazian side on other issues. So far, however, it has blocked any agreements because, from its point of view, it is increasing economic activity in the region.

Moldova on track



Road from Tiraspol to Chisinau

When thinking about the Eastern Partnership, Moldova differs from the other five cases in that it is much easier for the EU to deliver. The EU could continue to support its internal reforms and increase country security at all levels – information, internal, external, energy. Moreover, just like in the other cases, the EU would gain relevance in supporting the country as the Trump administration froze US aid – the largest government donor to Moldova – in January 2025. Without the money and assistance, some key reforms in Moldova would stop, but this is the area where the EU can step in with its Reform and Growth Facility for the Republic of Moldova – the largest financial aid package in Moldova's history – of €1.885 billion in aid between 2025 and 2027 (including €385 million in non-repayable grants and €1.5 billion in preferential loans)⁶⁵. The money will be disbursed to support the country's implementation of EU accession reforms.

„The EU would gain relevance in supporting the country as the Trump administration froze US aid – the largest government donor to Moldova – in January 2025.”



Maksim Samorukov

Despite numerous challenges created by Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine, Moldova has managed to take advantage of the new circumstances in the region to radically speed up its integration into the European Union. Still, the country's path to Europe is not yet free of obstacles, and the most formidable among them is the separatist conflict in Transnistria. Even though Brussels has repeatedly stated that Moldova's EU integration will not be held hostage to this conflict, it would be a glaring omission for Chişinău to let slip the chance to reintegrate the statelet. With Russia's leverage in Transnistria reduced to a minimum by the war and the EU eager to offer significant support, Moldova faces a unique opportunity to boost its odds to join the EU by bridging the separatist divide before the circumstances change again.

As for Poland, it could do more. It has institutional memory and a good understanding of what is happening in the East, be it the South Caucasus or Moldova. It has good press and trust in all three countries; as a mentor, it is also a trustworthy partner that does not look down on the Eastern Partners. Its agenda is ambitious enough while being sober enough. As a country that managed to join the EU despite its past in the Eastern bloc, it could share its success story with Eastern Partners, for example in terms of reforming Armenian and Moldovan the Soviet-style army into a NATO-style one.

However, further Polish engagement would require more sustainable institutionalization to prevent the partnership(s) from being affected by turbulence and changes in the domestic political scene. Poland could become more involved in the work of the office of the EU Special Representative, which is currently understaffed. The same is true for the EUMM. These are long-term investments that would benefit from better and more direct information about the situation on the ground.

„Poland, as a country that managed to join the EU despite its past in the Eastern bloc, it could share its success story with Eastern Partners.”



Conclusions



Broken car being towed on road from Tiraspol to Chisinau

One of the common denominators of the current situation in Armenia, Georgia, and Moldova is the still very present legacy of the USSR. Russian remains the lingua franca for all these countries, and thus a key to the effectiveness of Russian communication. It defines access to (dis)information and pushes individuals into an information bubble where Russian propaganda freely seeps in and where content generated by the Western world is not allowed, or at least severely hampered. Another crucial element, or rather a stigma of the shared Soviet past, is the entrenched pattern of corruption and the rather careless approach of domestic politicians to media freedom, which is instrumentalized by Russia and per se hinders European integration. This already complicated picture may be further complicated by a degree of infiltration by Russia that is difficult to estimate and that demonstrates flexibility and adaptability to circumstances. Last but not least, the situation of Armenia, Georgia, and Moldova is further perplexed by the remnants of administrative divisions artificially created by Tsarist Russia and/or developed

by Stalin, which led to the creation of self-proclaimed republics during the collapse of the USSR - Abkhazia, South Ossetia, Transnistria and, until recently, Armenian Nagorno-Karabakh within Azerbaijani borders.

These factors provide Russia with a wide range of instruments to influence Armenia, Georgia, and Moldova. While it adapts this toolbox to its current needs and local conditions, and its actions are not always direct, it deeply affects the social mood and all spheres of life in all three countries. The Kremlin uses economic, financial, energy, security, and informational tools that are implemented by its agents, local politicians, and sometimes, more or less consciously, by societies themselves. However, they occur with different intensity and visibility in each of the states discussed, and these countries themselves are to various degrees susceptible to them. For Armenia, the key problems are issues related to energy dependence on Russia, trade cooperation, and Russian soft power. Interestingly, however, Armenia has already tested Russia's patience (e.g., by joining the ICC Rome Statute in October 2023, which obliges



„In addition to increasing targeted aid and the EU's presence in these countries, it is also necessary to improve communication at all levels.”

it to arrest Vladimir Putin if he appears on its territory and was viewed by the Kremlin as a hostile act). In the case of Georgian society, much more afraid to irritate Russia, the key concern is the occupation of Abkhazia and South Ossetia, the synchronization of the ruling Georgian Dream with Russia's political agenda, and the resulting therefrom separation from the West. For Moldova, the crucial issue nowadays is Russian disinformation and propaganda fed by a kind of ignorance of Moldova's own potential. Each of these countries approaches the issue of countering Russia in a unique way and their societies, sometimes including CSOs and diasporas, play a key role.

Armenia, Georgia and Moldova, aware of the harmful Russian influence, are trying to limit it (in some cases society, in others the state authorities would play the key role in these endeavours), but the effectiveness of their actions is determined by the current internal situation, political interests of individual politicians, competencies of the local administration, geographical location and credibility of support from foreign partners, to name but a few.

Interestingly, in all three cases, the full-scale Russian aggression against Ukraine did not affect the local population's attitude toward Russia and Russians. Armenia reached a turning point back in 2020, when it didn't receive any support from its former partner during the Azerbaijani attack. The political orientation of Georgians is very much determined by economic

considerations, while Moldovans seem to think more in stereotypes than reality. This, in turn, illustrates that the European way of thinking is sometimes too focused on the pro-Russian or anti-Russian divide and does not give enough subjectivity to these countries and their populations. Therefore, more partnership in the Eastern Partnership would be advisable.

The remedy to limiting Russian influence in Armenia, Georgia, and Moldova is greater EU involvement in these countries, best exemplified by trade cooperation. In doing so, however, they become an arena for the clash of two mindsets and models of integration – the European one and the one dominated by Russia. There are several options for the EU to assist its partners in limiting Russian influence, e.g. guidance in internalizing European regulatory frameworks that contribute to the fight against disinformation, or support language courses through development aid to help people get out of Russian-speaking information bubbles. Moreover, this should be underpinned by enhancing people-to-people contacts.

Russia undoubtedly contributes to the difficult situation in all three countries, but it is not the only contributing factor. Similarly, Western support is not the solution to all their problems. Building resilience in Armenia, Georgia, and Moldova therefore requires building local capacity and genuine democratic practices, motivating their communities, and supporting their inclusion in international cooperation. In addition to increasing targeted aid and the EU's presence in these countries, it is also necessary to improve communication at all levels: about capabilities and mutual expectations between the Union and its partners, and between politicians and local communities.





Main Takeaways

- The Kremlin uses economic, financial, energy, security, and informational tools that are implemented not only by its agents but also local politicians, and sometimes, even unconsciously, by the societies themselves.
- Russia adapts its toolbox to its current needs and local conditions; its actions are of diverse intensity and not always direct, but always deeply affect social moods and all spheres of life in all three countries.
- Russian being the lingua franca in Armenia, Georgia and Moldova gives Russia competitive advantage over the West in spreading its narrative and is a key to the effectiveness of Russian disinformation and propaganda.
- The vulnerability of Armenia, Georgia and Moldova is due, among many others, to separatist conflicts.
- For Armenia, the key problems are issues related to energy dependence on Russia and their trade cooperation.
- The key concern in Georgia is the occupation of Abkhazia and South Ossetia, the synchronization of the ruling Georgian Dream with Russia's political agenda, and the resulting therefrom separation from the West.
- For Moldova, the crucial issue nowadays is Russian disinformation and propaganda fed by a kind of ignorance of Moldova's own potential.
- The effectiveness of countering Russian influence is determined by the current internal situation, political interests of individual politicians, competencies of the local administration, geographical location, and credibility of support of foreign partners, to name but a few.
- The European way of thinking is far too focused on the pro-Russian or anti-Russian divide and does not give enough subjectivity to these countries and their populations.
- Democracy has become a tactics of marking the presence, or at least influence; the remedy to limiting Russian influence in Armenia, Georgia, and Moldova is greater EU involvement in these countries, but this makes them an arena for the clash of the two mindsets.
- Russia undoubtedly contributes to the difficult situation in all three countries, but it is not the only contributing factor. Similarly, Western support is not the solution to all their problems.
- Building resilience in Armenia, Georgia, and Moldova requires building local capacity and genuine democratic practices, motivating their communities, and supporting their inclusion in international cooperation.



List Of Abbreviations

• ABL	Administrative boundary lane
• CSO	Civil society organization
• CSTO	Collective Security Treaty Organization
• DCFTA	Deep and Comprehensive Free Trade Agreement
• EAEU	Eurasian Economic Union
• EU	European Union
• EUBAM	European Border Assistance Mission
• EUMA	European Union Mission in Armenia
• EUMM	European Union Monitoring Mission (Georgia)
• EUPM	European Partnership Mission (Moldova)
• FARA	Foreign Agents Registration Act (Georgia)
• FIMI	Foreign information manipulation and interference
• GD	Georgian Dream
• GDP	Gross Domestic Product
• IRI	International Republican Institute
• LGBT	Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender
• MAGA	Make America Great Again
• MOC	Moldovan Orthodox Church
• NATO	North Atlantic Treaty Organization
• ODIHR	OSCE Office for Democratic Institutions and Human Rights
• OSCE	Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe
• PAS	Party of Action and Solidarity (Moldova)
• PSRM	Party of Socialists (Moldova)
• PTSD	Post-traumatic stress disorder
• ROC	Russian Orthodox Church
• SVR	Russian Foreign Intelligence Service
• TEN-T	Trans-European Transport Network
• USSR	Union of Soviet Socialist Republics



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Notes

Shared Neighbourhood in The Near Abroad

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