

Schmitz, Andrea; Smolnik, Franziska

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SWP Comment

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Reconfigurations in the Post-Soviet South

Dynamics and Change in Eurasia

Andrea Schmitz and Franziska Smolnik

Russia's invasion of Ukraine has accelerated global dynamics that profoundly impact the post-Soviet South. Relations with Russia are still strong, but the former subalterns are raising their voices. The empowerment is most visible in their foreign relations, but also tends to strengthen incumbent regimes and the political structures on which their power is built. A widening radius of interaction reinforces perceptions of collective agency and reduces the incentives for political reform. The persistence of authoritarianism parallels the diminishing soft power of the EU and the West in general. In dealing with more assertive Eurasian partners the EU will have to come up with credible offers to strengthen existing relations and harmonise its policies for impact.

Russia's war on Ukraine has aggravated the competition over regional and international order, heightening tensions between the great powers and enhancing the weight of ambitious middle and aspiring regional powers in international politics. Unsurprisingly, these developments also affect the former Soviet South (here: the South Caucasus and the Central Asian states), where Russian influence has been significant. But they have done so in ways different from what could have been expected.

While relations with Russia remain strong across most of Eurasia, Western economic sanctions have dramatically altered trade logistics and energy markets and expanded the international influence of a number of countries in the region. The Kremlin's decision to assert an imperial worldview by applying brute force in Ukraine has spurred existing decolonisation

debates throughout the former Soviet periphery, lending weight to emancipatory and multi-vector foreign policies.

The Eurasian countries' widening horizons have not led to any weakening of the neo-patrimonial and authoritarian forms of rule that were inherited from the Soviet era and refined in the post-Soviet years. Instead, the consolidation of authoritarian regimes in most of Eurasia seems to extend into authoritarian regionalisms that exclude Western actors. This development echoes the deteriorating image of Western powers and reflects an antagonism towards liberal values in many parts of the world.

Relations with Russia

Despite being preoccupied by its war on Ukraine, Russia is working hard to keep a



grip on the rest of its “Near Abroad”. Here it employs a broad range of policies and instruments, in particular leveraging economic connections and dependencies in energy, transport and trade. It supplies oil and gas to countries that lack their own reserves, such as Georgia and especially Armenia, whose conflict with Azerbaijan has left it comparatively isolated in the region. It also exports oil and gas to states in the region that have significant hydrocarbon production of their own, either for their domestic needs or for re-export. Russia also plays a role in supplying investment to modernise national industries, for example in Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan and Uzbekistan.

Russia is among the top trade partners for all these countries, according to IMF data for 2023. Even in Georgia, where anti-Russian sentiments among the population are probably most pronounced, 56 percent approve of doing business with Russians according to the 2024 Caucasus Barometer. In many cases trade actually increased after the invasion of Ukraine, as Western sanctions led Moscow to seek new supply chains and alternative transport routes.

The Eurasian Economic Union (EEU), which brings together Armenia, Belarus, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan and Russia, also serves as a political vehicle for Moscow. Preferential treatment within the bloc – including labour migration, which is essentially mono-directional into Russia – keeps the member states in Russia’s orbit. Russia has repeatedly demonstrated its willingness to employ economic means for political ends towards countries inside and outside the EEU, whether by threatening to disrupt existing ties or promising to expand them. For example, when Russian health, food safety or consumer protection agencies identify deficiencies in specific imported products this often signals an imminent deterioration of bilateral relations. Positive incentives are also employed, as in Moscow’s decision to reinstate extended visa-free access for Georgian labour migrants just weeks before the 2024 Georgian parliamentary elections.

As well as leveraging economic relations, Russia works to sustain existing cultural ties. Russian minorities play an important role in certain countries. In northern Kazakhstan, for example, they make up a significant part of the population and are potentially susceptible to Russian propaganda. There, the shared Orthodox faith offers potential to project Russian soft power, which also applies to predominantly orthodox Georgia. Pro-Russian sympathies are often still strong among the older generation. These sympathies are rooted in a persistent image – dating from the Soviet-era – which ascribes a privileged status to the erstwhile metropolitan core, and in a collective but ultimately Russified Soviet culture. Shared memory and rituals evoke deep ties, in particular in connection with the Soviet victory over Nazi Germany in the “Great Patriotic War”. This is bolstered by the Russian language, which still serves as lingua franca in many post-Soviet countries, notably among ethnic minorities; in some of them it is still an official language (Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan). Russia is keen to maintain this status, for example by providing Russian textbooks and teachers. A common language also eases the transmission of Russian interpretations of regional and global developments to audiences in the post-Soviet South by Russian media channels and internet outlets. Naturally, these may also be used to disseminate targeted disinformation. The prevalence of the Russian language also facilitates educational exchanges and study at Russian universities.

Alongside temporary and seasonal labour migration, quite substantial diasporas from Russia’s southern neighbours create an important layer of people-to-people contacts. The number of Tajik migrants alone was 1.2 million in 2023. Many households in Central Asia and the South Caucasus depend on remittances from family members working temporarily or permanently in Russia. Migration-related dependencies may act to restrain or discipline governments fearful of repercussions for their emigrant communities in Russia. For example, after

the Islamist attack on Crocus City Hall in March 2024, which involved Tajik nationals, Russia expelled large numbers of Tajik migrants and tightened its migration rules. Tajikistan was left with no choice but to accept the situation.

The protracted conflicts in the South Caucasus shape relations and create a particular dimension of leverage. In the context of the Armenian-Azerbaijani conflict, Russian influence has declined since Azerbaijan's victory in the Second Karabakh War of 2020, its re-establishment of full control over the region in 2023, and the subsequent early withdrawal of the Russian "peacekeepers". But Russia still has boots on the ground in Abkhazia and South Ossetia, the two breakaway entities that slipped from Georgia's control, and continues to seek to expand its influence there. Against the backdrop of its conflict with Azerbaijan, Armenia long relied on Russia for security. Significant emancipatory steps by Yerevan notwithstanding, Russia continues to operate two military bases in the country and Russian troops patrol Armenia's borders with Iran and Türkiye. In Central Asia, too, military cooperation serves to affirm Russia's alliances. As well as defence cooperation in the Collective Security Treaty Organisation (CSTO), Russia maintains bases in Tajikistan and Kyrgyzstan and possesses significant military infrastructure in Kazakhstan. Cooperation among the security organs of various Eurasian countries — including intelligence and border management — generates a shared esprit de corps.

These multifaceted ties ensure that Russia remains a major player in the region. Yet, while Russia's claims on its "Near Abroad" are still strong, its hegemonic aspirations are becoming more contested.

Eurasian empowerment

During more than three decades of independence, the erstwhile Soviet republics have pursued a variety of partners and trajectories, extending beyond the former metro-

politan centre. The United States and its Western allies were among the first to reach out to the newly independent states of the former Communist bloc. The adoption of liberal norms, democratic reforms and market instruments backed up by development aid and social benefits were seen as key to modernising Eurasia and integrating it into the realm of free trade and liberal values. It was Georgia that most decisively embraced the Euro-Atlantic vector. The goals of EU and NATO membership are enshrined in its constitution and in December 2023 it was accepted as a candidate for EU membership. Armenia's Comprehensive and Enhanced Partnership Agreement with the EU came fully into force in 2021, and Yerevan recently announced its intention to seek even closer relations with the EU.

China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI, introduced 2013) has boosted the modernisation of the Central Asian economies. While Beijing's sway in the South Caucasus remains more limited, it nevertheless offers an additional foreign policy vector. At the same time deepening relations with the Arab world and the Middle East, economic cooperation with South-East Asian countries, as well as Türkiye's integration efforts — bilaterally and within the Organisation of Turkic States (OTS) — have helped to improve Eurasian connectivity. In Central Asia, the Southern foreign policy vector was also strengthened after the American withdrawal from Afghanistan in 2021 and the establishment of relations with the Taliban, advocated mainly by the Uzbek government. Trade and transportation links to the West through the trans-Caspian corridor are being upgraded in response to shifts in European energy markets following Russia's invasion of Ukraine.

Europe's quest for partners, in particular in Central Asia, is embedded in an energy security discourse that also encompasses renewables. Countries in Central Asia and the South Caucasus demonstrate readiness to supply the necessary resources (wind and solar), with the South Caucasus also eager to provide crucial transport routes linking sources and consumers. This constellation

has spurred cooperation among the countries involved, namely Azerbaijan, Georgia, Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan. At the same time, the Western vector offers Eurasian countries the possibility to balance their longstanding dependencies on Russia. Even though Russia continues to play a key role in trade in crude oil and other commodities and can use its position to enforce compliance or punish neighbours of whose actions it disapproves, the Ukraine war and its implications for transit and supply routes have shifted the balance of power between the former centre and its periphery.

While European and Eurasian interests coincide in the realm of economic diversification, attempts to achieve compliance with the anti-Russian sanctions have been less successful. Governments in Eurasia regard compliance with sanctions as a cost-benefit question, not a matter of principle. The regional economies are interwoven with Russia's to an extent that makes forgoing established relations unattractive for big companies and small entrepreneurs alike. In fact, Eurasian businesses have been involved in re-exporting sanctioned goods and parallel imports to Russia. Overall, trade and business in Eurasia have profited from the Russian and European efforts to support their respective policies.

The strategic value attached to Eurasia by major outside powers and the expansion of trans-regional connectivity have resulted in a growing assertiveness vis-à-vis Russia, while Russia's own interest in unimpeded transit constrains its leverage. Moscow retains influence, but its expectations are no longer imperative. This was apparent in the votes on the 2022 UN resolutions on Russia's aggression, where none of the Eurasian governments supported Russia. Open non-compliance by formal allies is now an option, as seen when Armenia refused to sign CIS agreements in October 2024 or when it effectively froze its membership of the CSTO. And compliance is less likely than ever to preclude the simultaneous pursuit of other options.

Attempts to enhance regional organisation and cooperation between Central Asia

and the South Caucasus are gaining momentum. High-level exchanges have increased, in particular between the Central Asian countries and Azerbaijan. Azerbaijan's President Ilham Aliyev participated in the recent Consultative Meetings of the Central Asian heads of states, which have been held regularly since 2018. Cooperation in the military sphere has also expanded. In July 2024 armed forces from Azerbaijan, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan and Uzbekistan held the Birlestik-2024 exercise in Kazakhstan. This was the first time that joint military exercises took place in Central Asia without Russian participation. It was no coincidence that it was conducted in the Caspian Sea region, which connects Central Asia and the Caucasus and is crucial for trans-continental transport bypassing Russia. The joint exercise illustrates that large parts of the post-Soviet space are no longer inclined to rely on Russia for their security, but rather seek to address regional issues on their own.

Empowerment from the hegemon is also driven by the decolonisation discourses that have become increasingly pronounced since Russia invaded Ukraine. Throughout Eurasia, the era of political independence and state-building that followed the breakup of the Soviet Union involved a re-writing of national histories, but, with the exception of Georgia, Russia's role as an essentially "progressive" colonial power was hardly questioned. This is now changing, most notably in academia. Scholars from the region have begun to reassess the dominant narratives and the Soviet legacies embedded therein, while simultaneously questioning Western orders of discourse.

Authoritarian regionalism

The realignment processes in Eurasia are playing out in a context of largely authoritarian governance. In most of the region, especially in the resource-rich economic powerhouses, modernisation has taken the shape of rentier capitalism. Foreign investment incentivised the appropriation of

natural resources, financial assets and mass media by local elites who used the revenues mainly for consumption and representational purposes rather than reinvesting them in the national economy. At the same time, the sudden access to investments and lucrative deals offered by international financial institutions and other transnational actors enabled local powerholders to integrate into global business networks that allowed assets to be moved abroad.

The elite networks of post-Soviet Eurasia tend to be closed entities. Kazakhstan's elite is essentially a cluster of financial and business actors with close connections to the state bureaucracy, while the elites in Turkmenistan, Tajikistan, Uzbekistan and Azerbaijan are built around the ruler's extended family and their close allies. Only in Georgia and Kyrgyzstan were the early post-Soviet rulers forced out by mass protests, preventing the emergence of a consolidated elite. In Armenia the comparatively recent "Velvet Revolution" brought a reform-minded government to power.

Although all governments in the post-Soviet states of Eurasia are formally committed to democratic principles, the democratic transformation often remained a marginal issue, the preserve of Western actors and local NGOs dependent on external funding. While the elites welcomed the free market, political liberalism has largely been perceived as an alien ideology. Over time, the region's authoritarian leaders have learned how to effectively ward off such unwanted influence. Even Kyrgyzstan and Georgia, as erstwhile "islands of democracy", have seen illiberal drift. In Kyrgyzstan the return of autocracy was facilitated by targeted social media mobilisation, while the Georgian Dream party has leveraged anti-liberal postures to build its electoral constituency and turned to authoritarian practices to secure its hold on power.

In many parts of Eurasia, the persistence of authoritarian constituencies is fostered by social norms that reward compromise and consensus while punishing deviation. Such norms are essentialised as "tradition"

by mainstream politicians and intellectuals and reinforced by the ever-closer alignment of Eurasian regimes with each other and with partners that share similar norms, such as Türkiye, China and the Gulf states. Amidst the growing assertiveness of the Global South, the proliferating interactions within Eurasia are reinforcing perceptions of collective agency. This has further reduced incentives for political reform and is favouring authoritarian regime consolidation.

The demonstration of agency is underpinned by attempts to shape collective identities — if only to serve particular interests. Local actors increasingly draw on values for the ongoing alignment processes in Eurasia. The sixth Consultative Meeting of the heads of state of Central Asia in August 2024 was something of a milestone in this regard, with an official proposal to develop a "pan-regional identity in Central Asia". Uzbekistan's President Shavkat Mirziyoyev suggested a catalogue of concrete steps to propagate the idea among stakeholders, targeting in particular the region's young generation. Central Asia has been the main point of reference. The contours of an "imagined community" of sorts, occupying a common historical, cultural and geopolitical space, are not confined to the five Central Asian countries, though, with Azerbaijan's President Aliyev, who joined the meeting as a guest of honour, pointing to shared history, culture, religion and values.

Cooperation within Central Asia is driven by Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan, which have increasingly synchronised their regional policies since the signing of a Treaty on Alliance Relations in December 2022. Judging by the growing number of high-level interactions it can be assumed that Kazakh President Kassym-Jomart Tokayev's call, at the 2024 Consultative Meeting, to create a regional defence and security architecture was coordinated with his Uzbek counterpart. This does not imply the creation of a new military alliance. But, as Uzbekistan's President Mirziyoyev laid out at the CIS summit in Moscow in October 2024, it does mean stepping up measures such as systematic cooperation between

security forces and other relevant agencies – which would also include Russia’s.

Regional cooperation is increasingly shaped by sovereigntist and non-interference discourses. This expedites authoritarian forms of regionalism, to the exclusion of Western actors and their transformational agendas. One example is the 3+3 platform initiated by Azerbaijan and Türkiye following the 2020 Armenian-Azerbaijani war. It brings the three states of the South Caucasus countries together with Russia, Iran and Türkiye as the three regional – and erstwhile imperial – powers. Only three meetings have been held to date and Georgia is abstaining, so the platform is work-in-progress. While there are significant differences, the lowest common denominator for the platform’s proponents appears to be to keep the European Union and the United States out.

Regional realignment – even if it involves setting up new formats and adapting existing ones – must not be confused with bottom-up processes of regional integration. Yet, although the new platforms and efforts to promote regional identities are largely performative in character, they do provide regional elites with options to further expand their room for manoeuvre, not least by providing additional venues to manage and advance bilateral ties.

Europe and its discontents

The renewed European outreach to Eurasia has increased the bargaining power of the countries along the trans-Caspian corridor. Although Moscow still tries to uphold Russian hegemony in the post-Soviet South, this is increasingly challenged from within the region. That does not mean that these countries are drawing closer to the European Union, however, let alone seeking integration. Nor does it even necessarily translate into the EU (or the West more broadly) being perceived more favourably.

In its attempt to overcome its reliance on Russia, the Armenian government has announced its intention to seek closer rela-

tions with the EU. A number of concrete steps have been taken, such as the launch of a visa liberalisation dialogue and Armenia’s inclusion in the European Peace Facility. Yet the EU’s attractiveness is questioned in many countries in the post-Soviet South, including Armenia, and its influence often constrained. On the one hand, the EU’s role in the region has been challenged by national elites and right-wing, nationalist and conservative parts of society. Echoing the deepening of authoritarianism and the political elites’ tightening grip on state and society, EU policies seeking to foster human rights or strengthen democratic practices and the rule of law are dismissed as interference in domestic affairs. The EU’s promotion of minority rights, including those of sexual minorities, is often singled out to demonstrate the irreconcilability of the EU’s norms with those of the nation. The EU’s policies are portrayed as inimical to national values, traditions and beliefs. Anti-liberal politics challenges the validity of “Normative Power Europe” outside the EU’s borders. This development is even observed in Georgia. Until recently it was the region’s likeliest candidate for EU integration, but of late its ruling elite has become outspokenly critical of the EU and effectively put EU integration on hold.

On the other hand, the EU’s internal difficulties with individual member states contravening its own principles have led to allegations of hypocrisy and contributed to a credibility gap. The EU’s inconsistent application of its value-driven foreign policy only reinforces perceptions that realpolitik trumps normative principles when in the EU’s interests. This undermines acceptance of the EU’s projected self-image as an ethical and moral leader among regional partners. The EU’s demands for reform and conditionality are increasingly challenged, with complaints of bias and double standards circulating even among milieus that the EU would regard as its allies, such as liberal-minded NGOs and civil society. The rise of decolonial discourses has only strengthened criticisms of the EU and its conduct in the region. Interestingly, these

same discourses have been reinforced by rising critique of Russian colonialism and neo-imperialism following its invasion of Ukraine.

Even where the European Union is seen as the preferred development model, its demands for burdensome reforms and the slow pace (or indeed lack of) economic benefits and prosperity gains have raised questions over one of the EU's strongest pull-factors, the prospect of economic benefits. For example, the EU's free trade agreement with Georgia (DCFTA), has fallen short of expectations since it came into force in 2016.

The challenge of adapting

The ongoing reconfiguration in Eurasia has many vectors. It is not an entirely recent phenomenon, nor does it affect the region uniformly. The changing status of Russia is one common denominator, the future shape of which will depend on how Russia emerges from its war against Ukraine. Even if Russia continues to claim a hegemonic position and represents an important power to reckon with for all the Eurasian countries, the post-Soviet South is emancipating itself. While they themselves seek to intensify bilateral relations with third countries, external players, in particular China and Türkiye, have increasingly actively pursued their own interests in the region. Türkiye in particular seems to aspire to the role of an alternative regional hegemon on the basis of historical and linguistic ties.

This has changed the horizons of the Eurasian countries, with the post-Soviet aspect slowly fading and the region becoming part of multiple arrangements and imaginaries, such as the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation, the Belt and Road Initiative, the Organisation of Turkic States, even the Middle East. The EU has strengthened relations with Central Asia and in particular the South Caucasus through its connectivity policy, Partnership and Cooperation Agree-

ments, the Eastern Partnership and especially the association and (most recently) integration tracks. Yet it is not necessarily seen as the partner of choice. For most of the region's governments — and depending on developments in Georgia, perhaps ultimately all of them — Brussels is but one vector among others. It is thus an option for diversification rather than a gravitational force.

For one, the EU lacks a track-record as a security actor, notably when it comes to hard security. While the EU's military support for Ukraine constitutes a dramatic departure from earlier policies, it is highly unlikely to serve as a blueprint for broader engagement in the Eurasian space. Second, the EU's proclaimed hallmarks of democracy, liberal values and a market economy based on rule-of-law are not regarded as attractive in most of Eurasia, in particular on the part of political and economic elites who see comprehensive reforms as a threat to their power base. Rather than providing opportunities for the EU to expand its relations with the Eurasian states, the current reconfiguration processes tend towards authoritarian regionalism.

Brussels must take these shifting conditions and its partners' perceptions of the EU — both at the level of leadership and society — into account when crafting its own policies towards the region and individual countries. The current processes do not automatically signal shrinking scope for interaction. But productive engagement — let alone effective policy convergence — will become more challenging. It will require a more coherent approach towards individual countries and sub-regions within Eurasia. To this end, the EU's expectations vis-à-vis Eurasia will need to be revisited — and possibly readjusted. This must begin with a sober assessment of the EU's own position, its instruments and the resources it is willing and able to invest. Such a review should be guided by a holistic view and integrated assessment in a rapidly changing environment.



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SWP

Stiftung Wissenschaft und Politik
German Institute for International and Security Affairs

Ludwigkirchplatz 3–4
10719 Berlin
Telephone +49 30 880 07-0
Fax +49 30 880 07-100
www.swp-berlin.org
swp@swp-berlin.org

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