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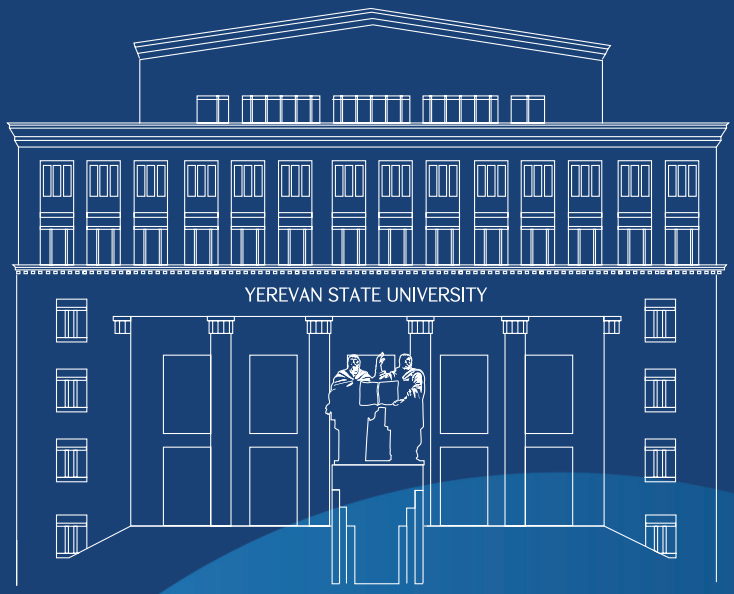

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The *YSU Journal of International Affairs* (YSUJIA) is a peer-reviewed academic journal fostering debate and dialogue on international affairs across humanities and social sciences, including international relations, international history, international law, international political economy, diplomacy, and foreign policies. It aims to link scholars and policymakers while encouraging innovative, interdisciplinary contributions that broaden the scope of current scholarship. While *YSUJIA* publishes high-quality interdisciplinary, quantitative, and qualitative research, it prioritizes providing a platform for work that emphasizes new approaches, as well as AI in IR, theoretical, and policy advancements. The journal is also interested in articles that situate contemporary international affairs debates within a broader historical context. The *YSUJIA* welcomes submissions of unpublished original manuscripts and articles from panels, workshops, and conferences, theoretically informed, empirically rich, and methodologically rigorous articles. The *YSUJIA* is edited at the Faculty of International Relations of Yerevan State University and is published twice a year by the YSU Press.

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DIVERGING PATTERNS OF EURASIAN GEOPOLITICS: SOVEREIGNTY, IDENTITY, AND CONNECTIVITY IN A FRAGMENTED ORDER

Editorial Foreword

The comforting illusion of a linear and converging world order, which defined the immediate post-Cold War era, has effectively dissolved. We have entered a volatile interregnum characterized not merely by multipolar disorder, but by diverging paradigms of post-modernity or, perhaps, neo-medievalism. The term multipolarity has become so ubiquitous that it risks losing its analytical edge due to a profound fragmentation of the very mechanisms that once governed international life. In this new kinetic reality, the traditional binary of East versus West is increasingly insufficient to explain the complex behaviors of states. Instead, we are witnessing the rise of a quantum ecosystem, where middle and small powers are no longer content to act as passive recipients of great power politics. They have become active architects of their own survival.

This issue of the *YSU Journal of International Affairs* is dedicated to mapping this uncharted terrain. The contributions gathered here, spanning the Balkans, the South Caucasus, Central Asia, and the broader Eurasian rimland, suggest that the modern state is currently fighting a war on three distinct fronts: the normative, the ontological, and the geoeconomic. The articles in this volume collectively argue that sovereignty is no longer a static legal status guaranteed by the UN Charter. Rather, it is a continuous and high-stakes performance enacted through the modernization of national identity, the careful calibration of active hedging strategies, and the physical pouring of concrete to reroute global trade arteries.

We begin our inquiry by interrogating the fraying edges of the European project and the evident crisis of normative integration. For decades, the normative power of the European Union, its ability to shape the world through attraction rather than coercion, was the gravitational force of the Eurasian periphery. However, as Adrian Brisku and Klodiana Beshku demonstrate in their comparative study "A Tale of Two States," this gravitational pull is neither uniform nor inevitable. By juxtaposing the trajectory of Albania against that of Georgia, Brisku and Beshku offer a sophisticated critique of the *Brussels Effect*. They argue that the success of

Europeanization is not dependent solely on the technocratic conditionality of the EU, but relies heavily on the alignment of domestic elite interests. In Albania, the normative framework of the EU anchored a successful, albeit difficult, transition because local elites viewed compliance as a mechanism for their own legitimacy. In contrast, the Georgian case reveals the fragility of this influence when confronted with a domestic elite that views European oversight as an existential threat to its power retention. This dynamic is further complicated by the looming coercive shadow of the Russian Federation, which offers an alternative model of governance. This article serves as a crucial corrective to the literature on European integration, suggesting that without deep local buy-in, normative power evaporates, leaving states drifting in a geopolitical grey zone where neither Western promises nor Eastern threats are fully decisive.

If the external anchor of Western integration is loosening, states are forced to look inward to secure their foundations. The subsequent two articles form a powerful dialectic on how national identity is constructed and utilized in the post-Soviet space. Violetta Manukyan provides the optimistic thesis in "Reconstruction and Modernization of National Identity as Catalysts for Stateness." Moving beyond the primordialist view of nationalism as ancient folklore, Manukyan treats identity as a functional infrastructure of the modern state. She posits that in the post-Soviet vacuum, the state is often an empty shell unless filled by a modernized and cohesive national narrative. Her analysis suggests that stateness, or the institutional capacity to govern, coordinate, and command loyalty, is downstream from identity. When identity is successfully modernized and linked to civic values, it strengthens the immune system of the state against external subversion and internal decay. It transforms the population from passive subjects into active citizens who are invested in the survival of the political unit.

However, the construction of identity has a darker and more volatile mirror image, which Anzhela Mnatsakanyan dissects in her harrowing analysis, "Manufacturing the Enemy." Focusing on the case of post-Soviet Azerbaijan, Mnatsakanyan explores the phenomenon of negative nationalism. She argues that the regime in Baku has consolidated its authority not through the positive civic modernization described by Manukyan but through the institutionalization of Armenophobia. This is not merely a study of prejudice. It is an analysis of authoritarian statecraft. Mnatsakanyan demonstrates how the regime utilizes ontological insecurity, the fear of the dissolution of the self, to manufacture an existential external enemy. By embedding hatred into the educational and media apparatus, the state generates a rallying effect that compensates for democratic deficits. This creates a dangerous paradox for the region, where the domestic stability of the regime has become dependent on the perpetual maintenance of external conflict. The result is a security

dilemma where peace becomes politically costly for the ruling elite, locking the South Caucasus into a cycle of violence that traditional diplomacy struggles to break. Whether the security dilemma in the South Caucasus could be transformed into a security community, as in the case of Europe, is still a matter of diplomatic pursuit of peace.

As states stabilize or manipulate their internal identities, they must simultaneously navigate a hostile external environment. The issue moves geographically eastward to Central Asia, where the passive strategy of balancing is being replaced by something far more dynamic. Fatima Kukeyeva offers a groundbreaking assessment of this shift in "From Balancing to Active Hedging." For decades, Kazakhstan was the exemplar of multi-vector diplomacy as it passively balanced Russian, Chinese, and Western interests. Kukeyeva argues that the 2022 invasion of Ukraine shattered this equilibrium and forced Astana to adopt active hedging. This is a strategy of calculated risk management. It involves diversifying security portfolios and deepening engagement with middle players, such as Turkey and the Gulf states, to offset the unpredictability of the Great Powers. The analysis provided by Kukeyeva is vital for understanding the agency of the Global South. She shows that Kazakhstan is not merely trying to hide from the storm of great power competition but is actively building new shelters to effectively decouple its economic survival from its traditional security guarantor. The shift from balancing to hedging represents a maturation of statecraft where the goal is no longer just neutrality but strategic diversification.

Strategic autonomy, however, requires more than diplomatic agility. It requires physical exit routes. In the 21st century, the map of the world is being redrawn not by borders but by supply chains. The subsequent articles turn to the hardware of this new world order: transport corridors and connectivity. Seyedhassan Mirfakhraei zooms in on the critical bilateral axis in the South Caucasus in "Geoeconomics, Connectivity, and Strategic Partnership: Iran and Armenia in Eurasia's New Order." Mirfakhraei posits that for both Tehran and Yerevan, connectivity is not a commercial luxury but a geopolitical imperative. For a sanctioned Iran and a blockaded Armenia, their shared border is a vital lifeline. Mirfakhraei analyzes their cooperation not just as trade but as resistance to isolation. He argues that the North-South connectivity between these two ancient nations acts as a stabilizer in a region increasingly dominated by East-West energy corridors. This proves that infrastructure projects are arguably the most effective form of security policy available to small states. By physically linking their economies, these nations create a mutual dependency that serves as a buffer against regional instability.

Expanding the lens to the continental level, Sandeep Tripathi and Urvashi Singh investigate the macro-strategic shifts in "International North–South

Transport Corridor: A Renewed Horizon of Trade Connectivity." The INSTC has long been a theoretical project, but Tripathi and Singh argue that the geopolitical rupture between Russia and the West has catalyzed it into reality. Their analysis details how New Delhi and Moscow are operationalizing this corridor to bypass the chokeholds of the traditional and Western-dominated maritime routes. The authors present the INSTC as a material manifestation of multipolarity. It is a concrete attempt to rewire the global economy. This is not just about moving goods faster; it is about creating a trade architecture that is immune to the sanctions and leverage of the Euro-Atlantic powers. The authors suggest that the successful operationalization of this corridor would represent a significant blow to the ability of Western powers to use trade choke points as levers of political coercion.

The issue concludes by looking toward the future of hegemony and returning to the timeless nature of diplomatic practice. In his Discussion Article, José Miguel Alonso Trabanco offers a provocative theoretical intervention titled "Bitcoin as a Potential Hegemonic Watershed." Moving the debate from physical trade routes to the digital ether, Trabanco challenges the bedrock of the current international economic order: the US dollar. He asks whether a stateless and decentralized currency could act as the catalyst for the next great hegemonic transition in the Global Political Economy. The argument presented by Trabanco is distinct from typical financial analysis because he treats Bitcoin as a geopolitical variable. He challenges the reader to consider whether the revisionist powers of the future will not be states seeking territory, but digital protocols seeking to decapitate the financial power of the existing hegemon. It is a bold and forward-looking piece that forces us to question the very nature of power in the 21st century. If money becomes decoupled from the state, the traditional levers of international relations may become obsolete.

Finally, we ground these high-level theories in the practical realities of the negotiation table. Ruben Melkonyan provides a lucid review of *The Power of Negotiation* by Seyyed Abbas Araghchi. Reviewing this work by the Iranian veteran diplomat and current Minister of Foreign Affairs, Melkonyan illuminates the distinct nuances of the Eastern school of diplomacy. In an era increasingly dominated by algorithmic trading, drone warfare, and digital sovereignty, the review reminds us that international relations remain a deeply human endeavor. The ability to read a counterpart, to manage silence, and to navigate the bazaar of high politics remains the ultimate safeguard against conflict. Melkonyan emphasizes that despite the technological acceleration of our age, the patience and cultural intuition required for successful negotiation cannot be automated.

The *YSU Journal of International Affairs* is glad to present this collection. These articles, individually and collectively, refuse to accept the current global

fragmentation as a tragedy. Instead, they analyze it as a complex puzzle that requires new theories, new strategies, and new connections to solve. We invite you to engage with this scholarship, which charts the path from the crisis of the old order to the uncertain yet dynamic possibilities of the new.

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A TALE OF TWO STATES: EXPLAINING THE DIVERGENT OUTCOMES OF THE EU SOFT-TRANSFORMATIVE POWER IN ALBANIA AND GEORGIA

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Abstract

Although the EU has recently shifted toward a more "geopolitical" approach, it has long relied on its normative and transformative soft power to drive political and economic reforms in aspiring member states. However, the success of this approach has varied considerably, particularly between the Western Balkan candidates and the states recently granted candidate status—Ukraine, Georgia, and Moldova. This article compares the EU's success in exercising soft power in Albania with its struggles in Georgia. The Albanian government has embraced both democratic and acquis-related conditionalities and has agreed with the European Commission on a roadmap to conclude negotiations by 2027, while Georgia's government has frozen its own path toward opening negotiations less than two years after receiving EU candidate status. Employing a comparative approach, the analysis examines factors such as government compliance, geopolitical contexts, and external influences, with a special focus on Russia's role in shaping anti-EU narratives in Georgia. The article argues that strong public support, compliance with EU conditionalities, and the lack of a compelling geopolitical alternative explain the EU's success in Albania. In Georgia, by contrast, strong public backing has not translated into progress: selective or outright non-compliance, the influence of Russian hard and sharp power, and elite-driven Euroscepticism have weakened the EU's leverage.

Keywords: *EU Soft Power, EU Transformative Power, EU Geopolitical Power, Enlargement, Albania, Georgia.*

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Introduction

Despite a recent shift toward a more "geopolitical Europe," the EU has long relied on its normative and transformative power—namely, Europeanization through conditionality—to drive political and economic reforms in long-aspiring member states, including Albania and Georgia. This shift toward a "geopolitical Europe" was announced in late 2019 by the European Commission president Ursula von der Leyen, who, in outlining a "geopolitical Commission," emphasized the EU's need to engage in the language and logic of power politics—military, economic, and geostrategic. Such a shift runs counter to the long-held views of the "EU's place in the world," as a normative, soft power that "overcame the legacy of power politics that had brought war and conflict to Europe."[1] This transformation has been present in EU debates at least since 2013, when the notion of "European strategic autonomy" began to take shape. It gained greater visibility amid the "polycrisis"[2] of the 2020s: the crisis of economic globalization, the Covid-19 pandemic, Russia's invasion of Ukraine, and the uncertainties surrounding the US presence in Europe. In this articulation, the claim has been made that "Europeans cannot afford to avoid the pressing question of their capacity to act, not just in their immediate neighborhood, but also on a global stage, increasingly pressurized by US-China tensions."[3] Yet this shift has already revealed important limitations, particularly in the context of Russia's illegal and brutal war in Ukraine, where "divided geographies of Europeans' support for continued military assistance to Ukraine" have emerged. As this geopolitical turn is increasingly presented as the "only alternative," it has simultaneously created space for illiberal political forces within the EU to expand their discursive influence.[4]

Thus, while the effects of such a shift are yet to be manifested, the epistemic community studying the EU, as well as the EU's actors and institutions, continues to see the EU as a civilian, normative power that exercises its soft power through attraction[5] and persuasion[6] in international affairs, and its transformative power

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[1] Stephan Lehne, "How the EU Can Survive in a Geopolitical Age," *Carnegie Europe* (February 2020): 1–2.

[2] Eric Helleiner, "Economic Globalization's Polycrisis," *International Studies Quarterly* 68, no. 2 (June 2024): 1–9.

[3] Tara Varma, "European Strategic Autonomy: The Path to a Geopolitical Europe," *The Washington Quarterly* 47, no. 1 (2024): 65, https://doi.org/10.1080/0163660X.2024.2327820.

[4] Luiza Bialasiewicz, "What's 'Left' for a 'Geopolitical Europe'," *Transactions of the Institute of British Geographers* 48 (2023): 826, https://doi.org/10.1111/tran.12636.

[5] Kristian L. Nielsen, "EU Soft Power and the Capability-Expectation Gap," *Journal of Contemporary European Research* 9, no. 5 (2013): 723, https://doi.org/10.30950/jcer.v9i5.479.

[6] Anna Michalski, "The EU as a Soft Power: The Force of Persuasion," in *The New Public Diplomacy: Studies in Diplomacy and International Relations*, ed. Jan Melissen (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2005), 124.

primarily through the enlargement policy. Indeed, the EU has come to exert its attraction (stability, prosperity, security, personal freedoms, open market and society) as well as transformative power, "Europeanisation through conditionality,"[7] by requiring political, legal, and economic reforms from aspiring polities and societies seeking to "join [its] powerful and rich regional club."[8]

The EU's normative and transformative soft power was at play in one of its largest eastward expansions, when ten new member states—primarily from Central and Eastern Europe, plus Cyprus and Malta—joined in 2004, followed by Romania and Bulgaria in 2007 and Croatia in 2013. The outcomes of this expansion revealed both the strengths and limitations of the EU's approach. While accession anchored democratic transitions and ensured continued alignment with EU laws and policies, the Union's appeal began to fade once accession dates were secured. Questions persisted about the long-term sustainability of political and economic reforms, and the EU often struggled to maintain consistency and credibility in applying conditionality. The Union also proved ill-equipped to resolve bilateral disputes among new member states. Moreover, enlargement tended to function as an elite-driven foreign policy process rather than a societal one.[9] These dynamics, although largely successful in integrating new members, ultimately diminished the EU's attractiveness in the eyes of many of these states.

The EU's appeal as a normative and transformative power continued for other long-aspiring countries such as Albania and Georgia. This persistence is notable given the events of 2013, when Russia employed both sharp and hard power to obstruct Armenia and Ukraine from signing Association Agreements with the EU—pressure that redirected Armenia toward the Russia-led Eurasian Economic Union, and in Ukraine triggered the Maidan Revolution, followed by the annexation of Crimea in 2014 and the outbreak of a proxy war in the country's east. Nevertheless, the 2013–2014 events marked the end of "the EU's monopoly on transformative power,"[10] while, as noted earlier, the polycrisis of the 2020s, including Russia's war in Ukraine, gave rise to the notion of "geopolitical Europe." Indeed, the EU has continued to exercise its soft and transformative power in Albania, particularly after the two sides signed the Stabilisation and Association Agreement (SAA) in 2006, after which Albania was granted EU candidate status in 2014, with accession negotiations launched in July 2022. A similar dynamic is visible in Georgia, which

[7] Heather Grabbe, *The EU's Transformative Power: Europeanisation through Conditionality in Central and Eastern Europe* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2006).
[8] Heather Grabbe, "Six Lessons of Enlargement Ten Years On: The EU's Transformative Power in Retrospect and Prospect," *Journal of Common Market Studies* 52 (2014): 40.
[9] Grabbe, "Six Lessons," 43–44.
[10] Grabbe, "Six Lessons," 44.

signed the Association Agreement (AA) in 2014 and received EU candidate status in December 2023.

This article compares the EU's achievements in its exercise of soft (normative and transformative) power in Albania with its struggles in Georgia. The vast scholarship on the EU's exercise and effectiveness of its soft (normative and transformative) power has not compared these cases, nor has it examined them from the perspective of how domestic and external factors shape the membership trajectories of aspiring states. It explores why Albania continues to embrace the EU's soft power, exercised through its "democratic" and "acquis" conditionalities, and why it has agreed with the European Commission to conclude negotiations by 2027. Meanwhile, Georgia's path toward opening accession talks has been halted by its government's actions less than two years after receiving EU candidate status. Employing a comparison of contrasts approach,[11] the analysis examines factors such as government compliance, geopolitical contexts, and broader external influences, placing special emphasis on Russia's role in constructing anti-EU discourse in Georgia.

Evidence from the two cases indicates that the EU retains substantial leverage in Albania, where public endorsement and consistent governmental alignment with conditionality create favorable conditions for progress. In Georgia, the combination of policy backsliding, elite skepticism, and Russia's geopolitical pressure undermines the EU's transformative capacity despite strong societal support. The article concludes by situating these outcomes within the wider landscape of enlargement challenges.

Europe and the EU's Historical Appeal in Albania and Georgia

The rationale for comparing the effectiveness of the EU's soft power in Albania and Georgia rests not only on the fact that both states and societies entered the process of EU integration, even if the Georgian Dream (GD) government's decision in November 2024 to suspend Georgia's EU accession process until the end of 2028 that, together with the fraudulent parliamentary elections of October 2024,[12] now marks a sharp divergence between the two cases. It also rests on the historical yet cautious appeal and attraction that the historical concept of Europe has exercised over Albanian and Georgian political and intellectual elites since the late nineteenth century. A similar understanding of Europe as "a triadic entity" held sway

[11] Charles C. Ragin, *The Comparative Method: Moving Beyond Qualitative and Quantitative Strategies* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1987).
[12] Irakli Sirbiladze, "How to Help Georgia out of Its Growing Democracy Crisis," *GMF Transatlantic Foundation*, Policy Brief (June 2025): 3, https://www.gmfus.org/sites/default/files/2025-06/Sirbiladze%20-%20Georgia%20-%20brief.pdf.

for most of these societies' modern era. This included a geopolitical Europe "associated with continental, big power politics and their occasional arbitrariness over the fate of these nation-states," Europe as "the embodiment of progress—a reservoir of knowledge for present and future political and socio-economic alternatives, which Georgians and Albanians could draw on for building their future and yet finding them continuously elusive," and a "civilizational and cultural veil—the epitome of the most cherished ancient and modern civilization, culture and identity with its Christian roots and liberal values constantly in opposition to the East's 'Oriental traits.'"[13]

At the same time, historically and comparatively, Europe's appeal, in its triadic dimensions, was contingent upon the political dynamics affecting an ever-changing (geo)political Europe, as well as the shifting political and socio-economic circumstances in the two societies.

During the late nineteenth century and the years leading up to the First World War, Albanian and Georgian national movements entered a formative phase, shifting from their positions within the Ottoman and Russian empires toward the pursuit of independent statehood. In this context, Europe held a particular allure as the embodiment of "the future" in political, ideological, and cultural terms—an orientation these emerging societies actively sought to emulate. The (geo)political Europe of the era was defined by six rival Great Powers stretching across the Eurasian landmass: Great Britain, France, and Germany—highly industrialized states with extensive colonial domains, especially the first two[14] —alongside Italy, Austria-Hungary, and the Russian and Ottoman empires.

For both Albanian and Georgian intellectuals, this geopolitical Europe determined the political future of their small nations, meaning that "tying together of the respective national projects [of independence] with European imperial geopolitical structures, would be from the outset fragile enterprises."[15] As such, in the period leading to the establishment of respective nation-states—Albania in 1912 and Georgia in 1918—discourses of hope and distrust toward the Great Powers of Europe prevailed in both contexts.[16] In this same timeframe, the appeal of "Europe as the embodiment of progress," along with the desire to emulate European modernities and ideologies (liberalism, socialism, Marxism),[17] as well as "different political

[13] Adrian Brisku, *Bittersweet Europe: Albanian and Georgian Discourses on Europe, 1878-2008* (New York, Oxford: Berghahn Books, 2013), ix–x.
[14] Eric Hobsbawm, *The Age of Empire: 1875-1914* (London: Abacus, 1987), 10.
[15] Brisku, *Bittersweet Europe*, 28.
[16] Brisku, *Bittersweet Europe*, 37.
[17] Stephen F. Jones, *Socialism in Georgian Colours: The European Road to Social Democracy, 1883-1917* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2005), 4–49; Sommerville Story, ed. *The Memoirs of Ismail Kemal Bey* (London: Constable and Company, 1920), 172–73.

and economic ideas and projects that had already made a mark on the societies of advanced European states such as Britain, France, and later imperial Germany and Italy," remained strong and were actively contested within Georgian and Albanian settings.[18]

Meanwhile, the appeal of Europe in its civilizational dimension, past and present, stimulated the reconstruction of Europe in its "civilizational and cultural veil" as an "entanglement of the finest and layers of the past—Greco-Roman antiquity, the Byzantine and Christian heritages… the Enlightenment… [and] its modern mentalities and development in literature and fine arts," and prompted intense reflections on whether Georgianness and Albanianness, and thus their respective national identities, were firmly part of such a European civilizational space. Indeed, Europe's cultural magnetism became so pronounced among intellectual elites that, while many located their national identities and cultural developments firmly within a "Western," European framework, others insisted on preserving historical "Eastern" influences, with some even proposing an "'in-between' civilizational positioning" for their respective national cultures.[19]

In the interwar period, when the fragilely (re)established nation-states of Georgia and Albania succumbed to occupations, respectively, by Bolshevik Russia and Fascist Italy, the perception of geopolitical Europe was that of an entity comprised of imperial states, which, despite participating in a new supranational body, the League of Nations, did little to alleviate anxieties about national territorial integrity and survival of small states.[20] The appeal of Europe's multiple political and socio-economic projects and modernities—Europe as a torchbearer of progress—took divergent domestic forms: in Georgia, it was reflected in the social-democratic project, and in Albania in a liberal-democratic endeavor, both ultimately constrained by the imposition of Bolshevik-Leninist and Fascist modernities by their respective occupying powers. At the same time, Europe's soft power—its civilizational and cultural heritage, values, and artistic canon—was refracted differently across the two contexts. In Sovietized Georgia, it was interpreted through the narrative of the "Decline of the West," giving way to a new cultural horizon grounded in "*ex oriente lux*,"[21] that is, a Soviet cultural space.[22] In interwar Albania, it came to

[18] Brisku, *Bittersweet Europe*, 46.
[19] Brisku, *Bittersweet Europe*, 56.
[20] Brisku, *Bittersweet Europe*, 73.
[21] Brisku, *Bittersweet Europe*, 95–100.
[22] I. Mitsishvili, ed., *Pikrebi Sakartveloze* (Tbilisi: Gamomtsemloba "Intelekti," 2006), 70–71.

symbolize a quest to anchor national identity firmly in the "Occident" while purging what was perceived as the "Oriental within."[23]

Although Europe's multidimensional appeal fluctuated throughout the interwar period, the destruction wrought by the Second World War, together with the emergence of the Cold War order, fostered a similar attitude in socialist Albania and Soviet Georgia, where political Europe came to be viewed as weakened and unappealing. This was a divided Europe, held under the influence of two superpowers: the United States and the Soviet Union. Yet it sought to distinguish itself from the two through the European Community, composed of former imperial powers. Europe's loss of luster as a geopolitical entity was also reflected in the contestation of its role as a torchbearer of progress and as a source of politico-ideological alternatives. In this context, Soviet Marxist–Leninist ideology—already fully entrenched in Soviet Georgia—was embraced by socialist Albania and promoted as a superior alternative to Western European liberal, social-democratic, and capitalist modernities.

Although Western Europe's institutional frameworks and its liberal and social democratic ideologies were dismissed in both contexts until the mid-1980s, the Soviet Marxist model was nevertheless interpreted by political authorities and intellectuals in Soviet Georgia and socialist Albania as an expression of Europe's wider modernity.[24] At the same time, the quest to embed national identities within Western and European civilizational and cultural space and "roots," particularly underscoring commonalities and contributions in the Greco-Roman and Renaissance periods, shaped historical and literary knowledge production in late Soviet Georgia and socialist Albania.[25]

Albanian and Georgian historical and often timid attractions to Europe in its triadic dimensions were heightened and compounded by challenging political and socio-economic realities in post-socialist Albania and post-Soviet independent Georgia, together with a transformed Europe and the West increasingly associated with the EU and Euro-Atlantic institutions. The Europe of the EU, with its institutions, transformative power, and processes of Europeanization, came to attract Al-

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[23] Brisku, *Bittersweet Europe*, 100; Gjergj Fishta, *Illumination: Analysis, Polemics, Chronicles* (Tirana: GEER, 2000), 61, in Albanian: [Gjergj Fishta, *Përndritje: Analiza, Polemika, Kronika* (Tiranë: GEER, 2000)], 61.

[24] I. Gamrekeli and I. Tsintsadze, "Herbert Markuze – Kapitalizmis Meabdjre," *Sakartvelos Komunisti*, no. 1 (1972): 49–53; Zurab Kakabadze, *Philosophiuri Saubrebi* (Tbilisi: Sabchota Sakartvelo, 1998), 82; Mehmet Shehu, "On the Implementation of Tasks Regarding the Further Revolutionization of Our School," *The Voice of the People*, April 12, 1968, 2, in Albanian: [Mehmet Shehu, "Për Zbatimin e Detyrave në Lidhje me Revolucionarizimin e Mëtejshm të Shkollës Sonë," *Zëri i Popullit*, 12 Prill 1968, 2].

[25] Brisku, *Bittersweet Europe*, 108–52.

banian and Georgian political and intellectual elites as well as their societies at large. This attraction was often articulated as a "return to Europe" and moving "closer to Europe." [26] To a large extent, such an appeal toward "new Europe," distinct from the old one, reflected a shift from a geopolitical Europe dominated by Great Powers driven by the "spirit of conquest" to a "peaceful community of nations." The member states of the EU were prosperous within this reconfigured geopolitical space, and thus, slogans such as "we want Albania to be like Europe" and "I am Georgian, therefore I am European" emerged and resonated widely.[27]

Europe's earlier appeal as a reservoir and torchbearer of multiple modernities and visions of progress also gained renewed strength after the collapse of the Marxist-Leninist and Stalinist alternative in both societies. It was now expressed as an attraction to the EU's liberal democratic and social or market-oriented economic models, institutions, and transformative power, embodied in its integration and enlargement processes. In both societies, broad popular support began to emerge for joining the EU as the "only alternative" for progress by agreeing to undergo the EU's transformative processes of integration, provided that this new Europe greenlighted their aspirations in its enlargement policy and seriously committed to it, and that their respective political elites also committed to such processes.[28]

In the sections that follow, the analysis explains why, despite similarly strong public support in both societies, the EU's soft and transformative power has lost its appeal among the governing elite in Georgia but not in Albania. Europe's third dimension, understood as the realm of "the West" and of European civilization with its layered Greco-Roman, Judeo-Christian, Enlightenment, and modern legacies, also became embedded in the construction of a European identity required for EU integration. Although this resonated with Albanian and Georgian intellectual circles, it also prompted intense post-socialist debates about the "European" nature of Albanianness and Georgianness.[29]

The Ineffectiveness of the EU's Soft/Transformative Power in Georgia

Despite this enduring historical appeal of Europe and a growing, strong public support for Georgia's EU integration—especially since the mid-2000s,[30] to the extent

[26] Brisku, *Bittersweet Europe*, 153.
[27] Brisku, *Bittersweet Europe*, 154–61.
[28] Brisku, *Bittersweet Europe*, 168–79.
[29] Brisku, *Bittersweet Europe*, 179–184.
[30] One of the earliest polls conducted in 2009 found that 79% of Georgians would vote for Georgia's EU integration, whereas about 85% of them declared that getting closer with the EU was either "a very important" or "quite important" priority. See Ketevan Bolkvadze, "Cherry Picking EU Conditionality: Selective Compliance in Georgia's Hybrid Regimes," *Europe-Asia Studies* 68, no. 3 (2016): 421, https://doi.org/10.1080/09668136.2016.1154138.

that the GD government in its second term codified the country's aspiration to integrate into European and Euro-Atlantic structures in the Constitution in 2017[31]—the EU has struggled and has yet to succeed in exerting its soft (transformative) power in post-socialist Georgia. This has been evident both during the period when Georgia engaged with the EU through the European Neighbourhood Policy (ENP) and Eastern Partnership (EaP) frameworks, where Europeanization without the "carrot" of membership functioned as a form of "conditionality-lite,"[32] and after Georgia obtained EU candidate status in December 2023, which was then followed by the GD government's unprecedented decision to suspend the accession process until the end of 2028.[33]

Such apparent ineffectiveness of the EU's value-based transformative power in Georgia stems from two main factors. First is the role of domestic actors—primarily governing elites seeking to retain power, whose political incentives have led to selective or outright non-compliance with parts of the EU's conditionality. Second is the role and influence of geopolitical and ideological alternatives: the absence of a security umbrella, combined with Russia's continued military presence in the "occupied territories" of Abkhazia and South Ossetia, has pushed Georgia's foreign policy from EU alignment toward a balancing strategy. Additionally, segments of society became more susceptible to anti-Western and anti-EU discourses, mainly generated in Russia and amplified by influential domestic actors such as the Georgian Orthodox Church and small right-wing parliamentary and non-parliamentary groupings.

Domestic Factor(s) – from Selective Compliance to Non-Compliance

The EU's transformative power has proven to be ineffective, especially in the implementation of its fundamental principles (political criteria), that is, "democratic" conditionality: ensuring stable institutions that guarantee democracy, upholding the rule of law, protecting human rights, and safeguarding the rights of minorities. This is because these principles have clashed with the interests of governing parties in Georgia. This has been the case primarily because both the United National Movement (UNM) and Georgian Dream (GD) governments, each characterized as hybrid[34] and illiberal[35] in nature, have sought to retain power by distorting the play-

[31] Sandro Tabatadze and Nika Gigauri, "Eurosceptic Games in the EU Candidate States: The Case of Georgia," *Southeast and Black Sea Studies*, (2025): 5, https://doi.org/10.1080/14683857.2025.2473171.
[32] Bolkvadze, "Cherry Picking EU Conditionality," 411.
[33] Sirbiladze, "How to Help Georgia out of Its Growing Democracy Crisis," 3.
[34] Bolkvadze, "Cherry Picking EU Conditionality," 409.

ing field through the use of state resources, the media, and the legal system to their advantage.

Such ineffectiveness is captured in the growing Europeanization scholarship with a focus on the EU's conditionality compliance of candidate and non-candidate countries. In this scholarship, which assesses whether and how states adopt EU political, economic and legal criteria, rules, directives and norms into their domestic spheres, a distinction is made between the adoption of "democratic" conditionality, i.e., meaning the fundamental principles of the EU, and "acquis" conditionality, as in coming into regulatory alignment with the EU's internal market[36] or a "political approach" versus "management approach" to compliance. [37]

The ineffectiveness of the EU's conditionality in Georgia, and the country's shift from selective compliance to non-compliance, can be traced back to the period of Mikheil Saakashvili's UNM governments. Although Saakashvili placed EU integration at the centre of his foreign policy, Georgia's cooperation with the EU took place within the ENP, which offered no membership perspective. What the UNM administration valued most was the Association Agreement, which promised visa liberalization and a deep and comprehensive free trade arrangement.

During his two administrations, a pattern of "cherry-picking… selective compliance" emerged, whereby the government was able to "dodge" adopting reforms falling under "democratic" conditionality to preserve an uneven political playing field, while agreeing to implement measures within the "acquis" conditionality, such as visa liberalization, which were popular domestically and therefore electorally advantageous.[38]

In the context of the ENP and EaP frameworks, where financial assistance programs and the prospect of signing the AA served as the EU's "carrots," the corresponding "sticks," namely the EU's conditionality, required the Georgian government to implement democratic reforms. Thus, Saakashvili's administration was expected to comply with the obligation to conduct free and fair elections. Within the ENP, and specifically through the European Neighbourhood and Partnership Instrument, the EU assessed between 2007 and 2013 the extent to which Saakash-

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[35] Malkhaz Toria, "Georgia's Turn toward Illiberalism and the 'Uses and Abuses' of History," *Democracy Seminar*, October 22, 2024, https://democracyseminar.newschool.org/essays/georgias-turn-toward-illiberalism-and-the-uses-and-abuses-of-history/.

[36] Bolkvadze, "Cherry Picking EU Conditionality," 411–412.

[37] Michel V. Anderlini, "Implementation is the Hardest Word: Explaining Georgia's (Non)-Compliance with the European Union Acquis," *Problems of Post*-Communism, 71, no. 5 (2024): 446–447, https://doi.org/10.1080/10758216.2023.2245546; see also Tanja Börzel, *Why Non-Compliance: The Politics of Law in the European Union* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2021).

[38] Bolkvadze, "Cherry Picking EU Conditionality."

vili's government advanced democratic power sharing, undertook media reforms, and strengthened the rule of law.

Under the EaP framework, the stakes for democratic progress increased[39], reinforcing the need to comply with "democratic" conditionality. And yet in the ensuing ENP progress reports, between 2007 and 2013, assessing Saakashvili administrations' compliance in terms of the use of state administrative resources, access to media, and access to law, it became clear that they repeatedly sought to "manipulate control over state agencies, and resources to skew the political playing field… [demonstrating] their power seeking strategies and their ultimate reluctance to genuinely comply with EU democratic norms."[40] Some formal compliance with "democratic" conditionality nonetheless occurred, partly because the country depended on foreign assistance and because the EU would "occasionally" apply "strict conditionality." This occasional compliance was also facilitated by the UNM's concern for its international image. However, even in this context, compliance was "subverted" and would "rarely translate into sustained patterns of compliance." Thus, while Saakashvili's administrations agreed to adopt certain regulations, they attempted to insert provisions that would prevent these reforms from functioning as intended.[41]

Where Saakashvili administrations "genuinely" complied was with regard "acquis" conditionality, as about the process of visa facilitation and liberalization, cooperation in border security with the EU's agency for external border security (FRONTEX) and illegal immigration, Anti-Money Laundering/Combating the Financing of terrorism framework in terms of adopting and harmonizing Georgian legislative framework as well as in cooperating with EU agencies and implementing norms and measures. The reason Saakashvili's administrations complied with the EU's "acquis" conditionality was twofold: they expected it to generate strong popular backing, amid widespread "EU-phoric" sentiment, and the reforms themselves "did not encroach on the political playing field." Indeed, facilitating visa liberalization for Georgian citizens would make them even more popular, thereby incentivizing them to implement such EU norms and rules.[42]

This pattern of selective compliance, verging on non-compliance, continued with the GD administrations, culminating in that latter's full non-compliance by 2023. The Georgian Dream (GD) Party, led by billionaire and Prime Minister Bidzina Ivanishvili, came to power in 2012 after the Saakashvili administration's defeat, which was due to "systematically violating human rights, the rule of law, and

[39] Bolkvadze, "Cherry Picking EU Conditionality," 422–423.
[40] Bolkvadze, "Cherry Picking EU Conditionality," 430.
[41] Bolkvadze, "Cherry Picking EU Conditionality," 430.
[42] Bolkvadze, "Cherry Picking EU Conditionality," 431–34.

property-related issues."[43] It pledged to continue Georgia's Europeanization process.

The GD governments enjoyed the carrots of compliance with the EU's "acquis" conditionality, namely the materialization of the AA that also included the Deep and Comprehensive Free Trade Area (DCFTA), signed in 2014. The AA came into effect in 2017, along with 90-day visa-free travel for Georgian citizens to the EU. Moreover, it vowed to commit to Georgia's EU path, despite the absence of a clear EU-approved roadmap to membership, by amending the country's constitution to add an article that rendered European and Euro-Atlantic integration a constitutional obligation for the government and society.[44] And yet, the pattern of selective compliance and non-compliance continued concerning both "democratic" and "acquis" conditionalities. Regarding the latter, particularly the EU's "twinning projects"—pairing EU institutions (ministries and agencies) with Georgian counterparts to exchange best practices, impart administrative knowledge, and enhance capacities in accordance with the EU acquis—implementation encountered reluctance and opposition from the government and other political actors.[45]

Indeed, while some compliance concerning the "acquis" conditionality was still manifested, complete non-compliance on "democratic" conditionality, specifically, implementing electoral and judicial reforms, became apparent soon after Georgia was granted visa liberalization in 2017. An incident in 2019 in which a Russian Duma MP took the seat of the Speaker of the Georgian Parliament, as an inter-parliamentary Assembly of Orthodoxy was taking place in Tbilisi, triggered mass protests in the capital. It put directly into question the GD's European path.[46] In fact, the GD had a program to normalize relations with Russia. However, the context of the outcomes and societal reactions to the Russia-Georgia war of 2008, the continued "borderization," in which Russia constructs barbed wire and other barriers along the administrative borderline of South Ossetia, and the majority of Georgians' viewing Russia as an occupier, hampered such a plan.[47] Most notably,

[43] Tabatadze and Gigauri, "Eurosceptic Games," 5.
[44] Tabatadze and Gigauri, "Eurosceptic Games," 5.
[45] Projects which in Georgia consisted of ascertaining compliance of civil aviation, customs, gender equality, judicial training, meteorology and standards, research and innovation, auditing, energy regulation and spatial planning, aside from most of them are being affected from the instability caused by high level staff turnover in public administration because many top-level bureaucrats are affiliated with the ruling elite, compliance in areas pertaining respectively, to "acquis" conditionality, energy regulation, and "democratic" conditionality, advancing gender equality. See Anderlini, "Implementation Is the Hardest Word," 456.
[46] Lia Tsuladze et al., "De-Europeanisation as Discursive Disengagement: Has Georgia 'Got Lost' on its Way to European Integration?" *Journal of European Integration*, 46, no. 3 (2024): 398, https://doi.org/10.1080/07036337.2023.2278072.
[47] Tabatadze and Gigauri, "Eurosceptic Games in the EU Candidate States: The Case of Georgia," 6.

the GD government did not heed public and opposition demands to implement electoral and judicial reforms required under the EU's democratic conditionality.[48] This led opposition parties to reject the results of the 2020 parliamentary elections due to the GD's heavy use of administrative resources. The political deadlock was resolved in 2021 when the President of the European Council, Charles Michel, mediated an agreement between the GD and the opposition, allowing parliamentary activity to resume.[49]

But the GD governments' non-compliance with the EU "democratic" conditionality became especially visible in the context of Russia's war in Ukraine. The GD government refused to align with the EU on imposing sanctions on Russia, and decided "to pursue 'non-irritation politics' toward its northern neighbor."[50] Although the war accelerated the EU's shift toward a "geopolitical Europe" and opened a genuine path to membership for Ukraine, Moldova, and Georgia in 2022, Georgia, unlike the other two, was granted candidate status only in 2023. This status was granted, even though the consecutive GD governments did not comply with most of the twelve "democracy" conditionality recommendations that the EU demanded before granting it.[51] These developments, coupled with the passing of the Law on Transparency on Foreign Influence and the Law on Family Values and the Protection of Minors, sparked massive nationwide protests, which the EU deemed as "going against EU core principles and values"[52] and "undermining the fundamental rights of Georgian people."[53] After the October 2024 parliamentary elections — rejected by opposition parties, civil society groups, and the EU — the GD suspended the country's progress toward EU membership.

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[48] Tsuladze et al., "De-Europeanisation as Discursive Disengagement," 398.
[49] Tabatadze and Gigauri, "Eurosceptic Games in the EU Candidate States: The Case of Georgia," 6.
[50] Tsuladze et al., "De-Europeanisation as Discursive Disengagement".
[51] Such recommendations for compliance included: fighting disinformation and foreign information manipulation, improving Georgia's alignment with the EU CFSP, ensuring a free and fair competitive electoral process, completing and implementing a holistic and effective judicial reform, and improving the current action plan to implement a multi-sectoral, systemic approach to de-oligarchization. See Malkhaz Nakashidze, "Georgia's Progress in Implementation of Fundamentals of the EU Accession Process," *EUI, RSC, Working Paper* 48 (2024), 8, https://hdl.handle.net/1814/77383.
[52] European Commission, "Statement on the Law on Transparency of Foreign Influence," *European Commission*, May 28, 2024, https://ec.europa.eu/commission/presscorner/detail/en/statement_24_2945.
[53] European Union External Action, "Georgia: Statement by the Spokesperson on the Legislative Package on 'Family Values and Protection of Minors,'" *EEAS*, September 4, 2024, https://www.eeas.europa.eu/eeas/georgia-statement-spokesperson-legislative-package-family-values-and-protection-minors_en.

External Factor(s), Shifting Geopolitical Contexts: Impressing Geopolitical Alternative(s)

Another reason, aside from such domestic factor(s), as to why the EU's soft (transformative) power has stumbled in post-socialist Georgia are external factor(s) and shifting geopolitical contexts, more specifically the presence and influence of Russia in the South Caucasus and its war in Ukraine. Russia's influence in Georgia has been expressed not only through its direct use of hard power, most visibly in the 2008 Russia–Georgia war—which effectively obstructed Georgia's pursuit of Euro-Atlantic integration and resulted in the continued presence of Russian military bases in the breakaway regions of Abkhazia and South Ossetia—but also through more indirect methods. Moscow has also exercised its "sharp power," hence heightening societal polarization and eroding confidence in democratic institutions.[54] Additionally, Russia has employed hybrid warfare, exposing Georgia to a "mix of conventional, economic, cyber, psychological, and diplomatic means of conducting war," and thereby deepening the country's strategic vulnerabilities.[55]

Certainly, throughout most of the post-socialist era, the appeal of Russia's soft power in Georgia was not comparable to that of Europe and subsequently the EU. Historically, Georgian political and intellectual perspectives on Russia, in both its imperial form and its existence as the Soviet Union, have reflected a tense dichotomy. Russia has been viewed as a state that exercised both hard and soft power, "an empire of conquest and of civilization." Such a perception became especially skewed during Saakashvili's presidency, whereby the Russian state, lacking an overt soft power appeal, was experienced as exercising its hard power, as an "empire of conquest." This was especially evident during the ethnopolitical wars of the early 1990s and 2008. Nevertheless, while an undercurrent during the Saakashvili period, the emphasis of historical affinity with Orthodox Russia as the defender of Georgian civilization, not only from "its historical civilizational enemies [Ottoman and Persian empires]" but also from "heretical" modern European civilization, gained traction in Georgian public discourse.[56]

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[54] The "piercing, and penetration" of the political and information environment of targeted country, either through open interference in foreign elections or by exploiting existing conflicts in the society. See Christophor Walker, "What Is 'Sharp' Power," *Journal of Democracy*, 29, no. 3 (July 2018): 12, https://doi.org/10.1353/jod.2018.0041.

[55] Kornely Kakachia and Shota Kakabadze, "Beyond Cyber and Disinformation: Russian Hybrid Warfare Tactics in Georgia," in *Russian Warfare and Influence: States in the Intersection between East and West*, ed. Nicklas Nilsson and Mikael Weissmann (London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2024), 131.

[56] Adrian Brisku, "Empires of Conquest and Civilization in Georgian Political and Intellectual Discourses since Late Nineteenth Century," *Intersections.EEJSP*, 2, no. 2 (2016), 32.

Already in the early years of the GD administration, when the EU's integration perspective for Georgia was still unclear, anti-Europe, anti-West, and anti-EU narratives became more pronounced, offering an alternative to the EU's soft/transformative power. A 2014 poll showed a three-percentage-point decline in support for EU membership, falling from 68 percent in November 2013 to 65 percent in April 2014. During the same period, support for the Russian-led Eurasian Union rose by five percentage points, increasing from 11 percent in November 2013 to 16 percent in April 2014. Small, Eurosceptic groups in the country, through the narrative of "Civilization. Choice. Peace," began to appeal to all those "forces of pro-Russian apologias, anti-Western Conservatism, and religious conservatism" and began to "converge." Meanwhile, the Georgian Orthodox Church (GOC), which plays a defining role in the national (and nationalist) discourse, began to preach to its flock of a West and Europe that is "de-nationalized, sinful space that threatens Georgia's national uniqueness, and traditions with obliteration," views and narratives "largely determined by its ties with the Russian clerical space."[57] Russia has used these cultural affinities as components of both its sharp power and its hybrid warfare tactics. Within Russia, this strategic approach has been conceptualized as "paleoconservatism," which refers to the politicization of culture and its deployment as an instrument in an ongoing civilizational struggle.

In the Georgian context, this approach was designed to influence what Russia views as Georgia's "ideological and information domain." Such instrumentalization sought to counter the West by promoting narratives that Europe had abandoned its true values of Christianity and conservatism.[58] It also aimed to strengthen pro-Russian, non-parliamentary opposition groups in Georgia, including Alt-Info, Georgia March, and Georgian Idea, and to reinforce Eurosceptic sentiment within the Georgian Dream party and in successive Georgian governments.[59]

Russia's war in Ukraine, with the geopolitical shift it brought about, placing Georgia as a frontline state in the "EU's periphery, in a precarious position that threatens [its] security and stability,"[60] played "a pivotal role in reshaping Georgia's foreign policy stances, leading to a polarization of the political elite". With the war ongoing, the GD government became openly Eurosceptic in 2023. This was manifested with the implementation of the Foreign Agent Law, a law similar

[57] Brisku, "Empires of Conquest," 43.
[58] Kakachia and Shota Kakabadze, "Beyond Cyber and Disinformation," 134.
[59] Tabatadze and Gigauri, "Eurosceptic Games in the EU Candidate States: The Case of Georgia," 12.
[60] Kornely Kakachia, Bidzina Lebanidze, and Shota Kakabadze, "Transactional Hedging versus Value-Based Hedging: How Small Frontline States Balance between European Integration and Russian Influence," *European Security* 33, no. 4 (2024): 594–614, https://doi.org/10.1080/09662839.2024.2388638.

to a Russian law, counter to some of the EU fundamental rights, and by not aligning with the EU's CFSP in sanctioning Russia. On the latter, the GD government received praise from the Kremlin for "not joining the sanctions or for not opening a second front despite great pressure."[61] In fact, as some Georgian IR scholars have pointed out, as the EU shifted toward a more "geopolitical Europe," thus "tough-en[ing] its foreign policy stance and made its enlargement and neighbourhood policies more security-oriented," and with a Georgia as a "weak state," vulnerable to the Kremlin's pressure, lacking a security umbrella from NATO, maintaining economic ties with it and with its "ruling elite… focused on the preservation of power domestically," led to a GD foreign policy that sought to do away with a "value-based foreign policy as demanded by the EU… [and] diversifying relations externally as necessary, even away from the EU."[62]

The Effectiveness of the EU's Soft/Transformative Power in Albania

While the EU emerges as a "geopolitical actor," especially after the Russian war in Ukraine, Albania, in need of the EU to build its post-socialist society, has already regarded the EU as a "geopolitical ally" since the 1990s. This aligns with Albania's historical view of Europe as a geopolitical arena composed of great powers that shape the nation-state's present and future. As a result, the European Union was not only a club to join. It also represented the essential post-socialist ally that, together with the USA, constituted the Albanian governments' indisputable "Euro-Atlantic integration" axis in foreign policy. In fact, the "Euro-Atlantic process" has always represented a "basic consensus"[63] among all the political parties, which have always agreed on these "traditional cooperation shafts."[64] As noted above, and as other Albanian scholars confirm, after the 1990s, Europe in Albania became closely associated with the European Union, and the two terms have been used interchangeably ever since. Europe functioned as a "signifier that stood for democracy, freedom, equality, economic development, justice, enjoyment, and about every-

[61] Tabatadze and Gigauri, "Eurosceptic Games in the EU Candidate States: The Case of Georgia," 12–13.
[62] Kakachia et al., "Transactional Hedging versus Value-Based Hedging," 595.
[63] Harilla Goga, *Albania Amidst Today's International Developments* (Tiranë: Dituria, 1999), 30–31. In Albanian: [Harilla Goga, *Shqipëria mes Zhvillimeve të Sotme Ndërkombëtare* (Tiranë: Dituria, 1999), 30–31].
[64] Agim Nesho, *The Overlapping Axes of Albanian Foreign Policy: For an Active Policy of the 21st Century* (Tiranë: UET PRESS, 2013), 99. In Albanian: [Agim Nesho, *Boshtet e Mbivendosura të Politikës së Jashtme Shqiptare: Për Një Politikë Aktive të Shek. XXI* (Tiranë: UET PRESS, 2013), 99].

thing that socialism had failed to provide."[65] Unlike the Georgian case, Albania has not developed any anti-European movement, nor has any political party adopted a Eurosceptic or anti-European discourse. There are only a few isolated critiques of European integration made by individual intellectuals or journalists in public debates. The "Atlantic" part of this axis dropped after Albania joined NATO in 2009, making the "European Integration" a mantra in the country's political discourse.

Domestic Factor(s): Willing and Imposed Compliance

Albania saw itself as a committed state on the path toward the European Union, especially after 2003, with the Thessaloniki Agenda for the Western Balkans. An intensive relationship between Albania and the EU began in the framework of the Stabilisation and Association Process (SAP), which started in 1999. This relationship deepened with the official SAA negotiations between the EU and Albania in January 2003, a process completed on 12 June 2006. That step "effectively move[d] Albania on to an accession track,"[66] elevating it to the "third Western Balkan state to sign the SAA."[67]

After a two-year interval, the SAA entered into force on 1 April 2009, marking a new, more advanced stage of relations between Albania and the EU. After Albania entered NATO in April 2009, the European Commission announced in October 2012 the opening of the process leading to Albania's application for candidate-country status, coinciding with the centenary of Albania's independence as a state. In this atmosphere, the EU Progress Report of November 2012, which highlighted some of the aspects of the country's compliance with both "democratic and "acquis" conditionality criteria, was perceived in a celebrative mood by the Albanian government of the time. An Italian scholar described the phase after the Commission's progress report as the beginning of "the next hundred years of Albania."[68] Another milestone in Albania's progress toward European Union integration was the European Council's decision in June 2014 to grant the country candidate status.

In July 2016, with the initiative of the governing Socialist Party, keen to enhance the prospects of EU integration, hence, increase the country's compliance

[65] Bledi Kajsiu, "Albanian Democratization between Europeanisation and Neoliberalism," in *Albania in the Next Ten Years. Envisioning the Future,* ed. Albert Rakipi (Tiranë: AIIS. 2012), 29.
[66] John O'Brennan and Esmeralda Gassie, "From Stabilization to Consolidation: Albanian State Capacity and Adaptation to European Union Rules," *Journal of Balkans and Near East Studies*, 11, no. 1 (2009): 61–82, https://doi.org/10.1080/19448950902724448.
[67] Dorian Jano, *The Europeanization of the Western Balkans* (Saarbrucken: VDM, 2010).
[68] Emanuela C. Del Re, "The Future of Albania between Migrations and European Strategies," *Current Politics and Economics of Europe,* 24, no. 1/2 (2013): 23.

with the EU's conditionalities, the Albanian Parliament unanimously adopted a comprehensive justice reform, though also under the push of the EU and the US representatives in Albania. This reform, which baptized the EU as a "reformative power"[69] in the country, was to pave the way for the opening of Albania's accession negotiations in a shorter time. Seen as major efforts on the Albanian side, the steps taken to finalize SPAK (Special Prosecution Office) and BKH (National Bureau of Investigation), institutions designed to investigate high-level political corruption and organized crime and essential for implementing justice reform in line with the European Union's "democratic conditionality" criteria, were scheduled to be completed by late 2019 and early 2020.

Yet, despite these efforts and the European Commission's assessment that Albania had complied with the set criteria, the European Council twice, in 2018 and 2019, postponed its decision to open access negotiations with Tirana. Both such postponements were caused by France's veto in the European Council, which, among other aspects, used it to stop the illegal migration of Albanian citizens into the country. Nevertheless, in March 2020, the Council finally approved the opening of accession negotiations with Albania. Bulgaria's veto in 2021, directed to North Macedonia and indirectly involving Albania, however, also postponed the ensuing start of the Intergovernmental Conference between the Commission and the Albanian government. Such halts came to be perceived as "unjust." Nevertheless, after this "arresting phase" of European Integration (2018-2021), the Albanian society's view of the EU did not change substantially, suggesting that the EU's soft (transformative) power still enjoyed strong appeal in the country. In a BiEPAG opinion poll of November 2021,[70] 94% of Albanian respondents answered "yes" to the question, "Are you in favor of your country joining the EU?" By placing responsibility for delays on their own government rather than on the European Union, the public demonstrated that the EU still possessed high legitimacy and strong normative influence within Albania.[71]

Albania's negotiations with the EU finally started in July 2022, a development likely influenced by Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine and by the EU's "geopolitical turn," which framed enlargement policy as a geopolitical necessity. Since then, Albania has opened 24 chapters in 11 months, with the current government

[69] Klodiana Beshku and Orjana Mullisis, "The European Union as a Reforming Power in the Western Balkans: The Case of Albania," *Journal of Liberty and International Affairs* 4, no. 2, (2018), https://e-jlia.com/index.php/jlia/article/view/121/112.

[70] BiEPAG, "Public Opinion Poll in the Western Balkans on the EU Integration," BiEPAG, November 8, 2021, https://biepag.eu/news/public-opinion-poll-in-the-western-balkans-on-the-eu-integration/.

[71] Klodiana Beshku, "The EU as an Actor of Normative Power in the Western Balkans After 2018: The Case of Kosovo, Albania and North Macedonia," *Mediterranean Journal of Social Sciences*, 14, no. 2 (2023), https://doi.org/10.36941/mjss-2023-0013.

aiming to close all chapters by 2027 and to become part of the EU by 2030. The EU's foreign policy chief, Kaja Kallas, praised Albania's "ambitious" two-year target for completing membership negotiations and encouraged the country's political parties to support the difficult reforms required.[72]

As in the case of Georgia, where partial compliance was also evidenced in "acquis conditionality," experts have expressed concern about the sustainability of Albania's progress towards the EU,[73] while scholars have noted "sectoral contestation" toward the EU in Albania,[74] in line with the "fake, impartial and imposed compliance."[75] Nonetheless, the governing SP as well as the opposition parties, including the main DP, remain committed to the country's EU path, fully aligning its foreign policy with the EU's CFSP, as all the latest EU Reports on Albania state.[76] In parallel, one of the EU's "democratic conditionality" instruments, the Justice Reform, seen as partially imposed, began to yield results in the vetting of hundreds of judges and the prosecution of several high-level politicians between 2023 and 2025, who were alleged to have abused their office and committed corruption.

External Factor(s), Shifting Geopolitical Contexts: Unimpressive Geopolitical Alternatives

With an increasing influence over the last decades of other powers such as China, Russia, Türkiye, and Gulf countries in the Western Balkans,[77] Albanian govern-

[72] Gavin Blackburn, "Kallas Warns Albania of Complex Reforms but Says Its Future Is in the EU," *Euronews*, April 8, 2025. https://www.euronews.com/my-europe/2025/04/08/kallas-warns-albania-of-complex-reforms-but-says-its-future-is-in-the-eu.

[73] "Albania's Progress in Accession Talks Can't Mask the EU's 'Acrobatics' on the Rule of Law," *The New Union Post*, June 3, 2024. https://newunionpost.eu/2025/06/03/albania-eu-accession-negotiations-rama/.

[74] Lisian Roseni "Contesting EU Labour Norms in Albania: Between Compliance and Structural Constrains," in New Dynamics of Contestation in EU-Western Balkans Relations Adapting to Protracted Accession Processes under Conditions of Intensified Geopolitical Rivalry, ed. Doris Wydra, Klodiana Beshku, and Klaudia Koxha (Palgrave: forthcoming 2026).

[75] Gergana Noutcheva, "Fake, Partial and Imposed Compliance: The Limits of the EU's Normative Power in the Western Balkans," *Journal of European Public Policy*, 16, no. 7 (2009): 1065–1084, https://doi.org/10.1080/13501760903226872.

[76] European Commission, *Albania 2020 Report* (Brussels: European Commission, 2020); European Commission, *Albania 2021 Report* (Brussels: European Commission, 2021); European Commission, *Albania 2022 Report* (Brussels: European Commission, 2022); European Commission, *Albania 2023 Report* (Brussels: European Commission, 2023); European Commission, *Albania 2024 Report* (Brussels: European Commission, 2024); European Commission, *Albania 2025 Report* (Brussels: European Commission, 2025).

[77] Prague Security Studies Institute, Albania amidst the External Actors' Influence. The Open Balkan initiative: A Russian Trojan Horse or a Faster Approach to Regional Cooperation? (June 2023), https://www.pssi.cz/publications/104-albania-amidst-the-external-actors-influence-the-open-balkan-initiative-a-russian-trojan-horse-or-a-faster-approach-to-regional-cooperation.

ments have maintained a multivector foreign policy.[78] They continued to advance relations with neighboring powers—Türkiye, Italy,[79] and Greece, while always prioritizing those with the EU and the US.

Indeed, Albania has consistently maintained a clear geopolitical orientation grounded in Western foreign policy alignment at both regional and international levels. It has seen itself as a committed actor on its path toward the EU and NATO membership, a perception that has been well received within EU diplomatic channels. Albania is a longtime US ally that joined NATO in April 2009. Following a carefully coordinated diplomatic effort, the country obtained a non-permanent seat on the UN Security Council for 2021–2022, marking its transition from a traditional "security receiver" to a "security provider."[80]

Despite this straightforward configuration in the European and global arenas, external influences from third states in Albania have been present in various ways; however, these influences have not reached a level that could offer a meaningful alternative to EU membership. Indeed, unlike Georgia, Russia's influence has not taken root in Albania for most of its modern history, except for its alliance with the Soviet Union between 1949 and 1961. Türkiye has historically been Albania's partner, and both countries are EU candidate countries at differing levels of EU negotiations.

Moreover, China and the Gulf Arab states have recently viewed Albania as geo-economically attractive, largely because of its EU membership prospects.[81] The limited rise in influence from China, Russia, and the Gulf States did not occur because Albania was seeking an alternative to the EU; rather, it resulted from the vacuum created by the EU's poly-crisis period (2008–2016), the US withdrawal from the region during the first Trump presidency (2017–2021), and the EU's hesitancy to open accession negotiations with Albania and North Macedonia (2018–2020). It was during this EU's hesitancy period that Russia's Permanent Repre-

[78] Daniela Irrera, "Non-State Actors and Conflict Management in Proxy Wars," *Oxford Research Encyclopaedia of International Studies*, June 28, 2021. https://oxfordre.com/internationalstudies/view/10.1093/acrefore/9780190846626.001.0001/acrefore-9780190846626-e-641.

[79] *The (Geo)politics of Democracy in Albania (2025)*, Technical Report, EUI, RSC, Research Project Report, Global Governance Programme, Southeastern Europe, Country Report, no. 5 (2025), https://cadmus.eui.eu/handle/1814/78198.

[80] Dorian Jano, "Albania Moving from Security Receiver to Security Provider," in Peace and Security in the Western Balkans: A Local Perspective, ed. Nemanja Džuverović and Věra Stojarová (London: Routledge, 2023), 63.

[81] Nazif Mandacı and Elona Rusi Karacalarlı, "Gulf Region and Western Balkans: A Current History of Interregional Relations," *Dokuz Eylül Üniversitesi Sosyal Bilimler Enstitüsü Dergisi* 19, no. 3 (2018): 491–514, https://doi.org/10.16953/deusosbil.288136.

sentative to the EU,[82] aware of Albania's potential reaction, invited Albania and North Macedonia to join the Eurasian Economic Union (EAEU),[83] just one week after French President Emmanuel Macron vetoed the start of EU accession talks for both states. In response, Albania's long-serving Prime Minister Edi Rama reiterated his country's intention to "marry the EU," describing it as a difficult but desired marriage.[84]

Indeed, the establishment of diplomatic relations in 1924 and a brief alliance during the Cold War have not alleviated the strained and diplomatically cold nature of Albanian-Russian relations. Linkages to Russia are not encouraged as "politically, Tirana is strongly geared to the West."[85] Albania's firm support for Kosovo's independence forms the core of its strategic alliance with the US, while Russia's backing of Serbia places Moscow in direct opposition to Albania on a central national security issue. The Albanian attitude toward Russia has been shaped by its consistent alignment with the EU's CFSP, which led to a further deterioration in relations with Russia following the war in Ukraine.

Since 2015, Albania has followed the EU and the US sanctions policies against Russia after the annexation of Crimea and has continued to do so after the aggression against Ukraine in 2022. Relations reached one of their lowest points in 2018, when the Albanian government expelled two Russian diplomats. This was taken in response to NATO's collective action principle. And, following similar moves in some EU capitals, a street near the Russian Embassy in Tirana was named "Free Ukraine" in April 2022.[86] There have been indications of Russian sharp-power activity in Albania, most notably allegations that Moscow financed the former Democratic Party (PD) leader, Lulzim Basha, during the 2021 parliamentary elections. To date, however, this remains an isolated case.[87]

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[82] European Western Balkans, "Russian Representative to EU invites N. Macedonia and Albania to join EEU instead," *European Western Balkans*, October 30, 2019, https://europeanwesternbalkans.com/2019/10/30/russian-representative-to-eu-invites-n-macedonia-and-albania-to-join-eeu-instead/.

[83] European Western Balkans, "Russian Representative to EU Invites N. Macedonia and Albania to Join EEU instead."

[84] Edi Rama, "We Are in Love with Europe" / Rama Convinced: They Do not have Time, but They Are Forced to Marry Us!" March 15, 2022. https://www.imalbania.com/kosova/we-are-in-love-with-europe-rama-convinced-they-do-not-have-time-but-they-are-forced-to-marry-us/.

[85] Enika Abazi, "Albania. New Geopolitics and Shifting Linkages," in *The Western Balkans in the World. Linkages and Relations with Non-Western Countries*, ed. Florian Bieber and Nikolaos Tzifakis (Routledge: London and New York, 2020), 170.

[86] "Albania Renames Street in Capital Tirana as Free Ukraine," *Reuters*, March 6, 2022, https://www.reuters.com/world/europe/albania-renames-street-capital-tirana-free-ukraine-2022-03-06/.

[87] Alice Taylor, "Albanian Political Parties Spar over Russian Funding Allegations," *Euractiv*, September 12, 2022 https://www.euractiv.com/section/politics/short_news/albanian-political-parties-spar-over-russian-funding-allegations/

An official note of the Albanian Ministry for Europe and Foreign Affairs describes Albanian-Russian relations as ones in which "the progress of bilateral relations has not undergone special developments, as it has been conditioned by Russia's war of aggression against Ukraine. Albania has immediately condemned Russia's attacks, has applied the sanctions imposed by the European Union, and as a co-sponsor of Ukraine in the UN Security Council, has been in the foreground alongside partner countries, such as the USA, Great Britain, France, etc."[88]

While Türkiye's interests in Albania have always been driven, in part, by Türkiye's rivalry with Greece in the Western Balkans, Albania's interests in Türkiye are linked to its rivalry with Serbia and Russia's influence in Serbia. In this regard, Türkiye represents a crucial ally to Albania, as it helps preserve its security concerns through the balance of forces after the formation of two dominant axes of power in the region: the Russian-Greek-Serbian axis on one side and the American-Turkish-Albanian axis on the other.[89] Thus, Türkiye is considered the guarantor of external security,[90] which, on the other hand, does not hold back the country on its Euro-Atlantic path, for Türkiye is both a candidate country to the EU and a NATO member. Meanwhile, Albania maintains a partnership-oriented commerce collaboration with China, but the Chinese-Albanian relationship is not economically based on investments but on the exploitation of markets (petroleum and chromium) by China's side and wholesale and retail trade by Albania's side.[91] On the other hand, the relationship with China does not hinder the country's strong ties with the EU and the US, as China has no plans to replace the US alliance system with its own rival system in the region.[92]

Albania's effort to maintain geopolitical balance—while remaining anchored to the EU—was clearly illustrated by its vote on the United Nations General Assembly resolution of 12 September 2025. This resolution, initiated by France and Saudi Arabia, had the recognition of Palestine as a state at its very core, amid Israel's war in Gaza. It received 142 votes in favor, 10 against, and 12 abstentions,

[88] Ministry for Europe and Foreign Affairs of Albania, "Bilateral Relations between Albania and Russia," August 22, 2022, https://punetejashtme.gov.al/en/newsroom/marredheniet-shqiperi-rusi/.
[89] Klodiana Beshku, "The Albanian Relationship with Greece and Turkey. Perception and Reality in the Framework of the Foreign Policy Partnership," *Research Paper for the Centre of Excellence*, Albanian Ministry of Foreign Affairs, July 2015.
[90] Përparim Xhaferi, "The Post-Ottoman Era: A Fresh Start for Bilateral Relations between Albania and Turkey?" *Australia and New Zealand Journal of European Studies* 9, no. 1 (2017): 42–62, https://doi.org/10.30722/anzjes.vol9.iss1.15173.
[91] Alice Ekman, *China and the Battle of Coalitions: The 'Circle of Friends' Vs the Indo-Pacific Strategy* (Paris: EUISS, 2022).
[92] Ekman, *China and the Battle of Coalitions*.

with Albania among those abstaining.[93] Despite recognizing Palestine in 1988, the Albanian government has consistently supported a two-state solution, as also stated by Prime Minister Rama during his visit to Israel in April 2025.[94] The abstention vote apparently was the only way not to hurt Israel's feelings, backed up by the US, and not to go against an EU member state initiative (France). Neither domestic pressure, including protests by Albania's predominantly Muslim population against the suffering in Gaza, nor its alliance with Türkiye, a vocal critic of Israel's actions, was sufficient to lead Albania to dissociate from its Western allies. Instead, the government opted for an abstention to preserve balance among its key alliances.

EU's Conditionalities Affecting the Differences between Georgia and Albania

The EU conditionalities have affected the divergences between Georgia and Albania by means of the EU being much later involved and less imposing in the former than in the latter.

Concerning the latter, the EU has exerted its conditionality also through the transformation of the enlargement policy toward the whole Western Balkans. In this direction, Albania's government has made every effort to respond to the EU conditionalities and its persistence with several reforms. Following the EU's repeated and persistent emphasis on the need for regional cooperation in the region since 1999, Albania has championed regional cooperation, taking the lead in numerous initiatives within the Berlin Process framework, with the latter started in 2014 by German Chancellor Angela Merkel as an attempt to rejuvenate the stalled integration process in the Western Balkans by encouraging regional cooperation, reconciliation, and connectivity.

Following the EU's call for the Western Balkans to prioritize the rule of law, Albania has undergone a comprehensive judicial reform since 2016. In its June 2018 decision, the European Council set out five priorities for Albania to advance its European integration, focusing on judicial reform, human rights protection, public administration reform, and combating corruption and organized crime.[95] They were met with a great effort by the Socialist governments, at least formally, to establish offices and institutions that responded to these requirements. When the Eu-

[93] "UN Overwhelmingly Endorses Two-State Solution Declaration that Condemns Hamas," *Reuters*, September 13, 2025. https://www.reuters.com/world/middle-east/un-overwhelmingly-endorses-two-state-solution-declaration-that-condemns-hamas-2025-09-12/.
[94] "Rama in Israel: Albania Supports Two-State Solution, but not with Hamas," *Telegrafi*, April 7, 2025. https://telegrafi.com/en/Rama-in-Israel-Albania-supports-two-state-solution-but-not-Hamas/.
[95] Council of the European Union, *Enlargement and Stabilisation and Association Process: Council Conclusions*, June 26, 2018, https://www.consilium.europa.eu/media/35863/st10555-en18.pdf.

ropean Commission's New Methodology of February 2020 established that the first cluster—the Fundamentals, containing the Rule of Law and Human Rights chapters—would be opened first and closed last,[96] the Albanian government felt somewhat ready due to the judicial reform undertaken in 2016. When the access negotiation talks began in July 2022, the SPAK office was under construction, and the Judicial Reform had just begun to deliver its first results. The First Cluster was opened in July 2023, and between 2023 and November 2025, Albania opened all five Clusters, containing 33 negotiation chapters with the EU. SPAK and its prosecutors have managed to arrest some of the highest-level politicians in Albania over the last three years, which is the main reason why the November 2025 Commission Report[97] on Albania was concluded in more enthusiastic tones than previous ones.

Regarding the former, the EU appeared cautious and more distant. It offered Georgia a clear enlargement perspective only after Russia's 2022 war in Ukraine began, and it was also less assertive toward non-compliant Georgian governments in enforcing "democratic" conditionality. In its 2017-2020 and 2021-2027 association and enlargement agendas, the EU identified several direct key priorities for the country: strengthening democracy, the rule of law, judicial independence, human rights, and good governance, fighting corruption, as well as including connectivity and infrastructure, under the EU's Global Gateway Strategy.[98] Yet by 2023, the EU observed that Georgia had not met any of the key priorities related to its "democratic conditionality," raising serious concerns about political polarization and democratic backsliding.[99]

Amid the events of 2023 and 2024 and the ongoing popular protests in 2025, Enlargement Commissioner Marta Kos, in her address to the European Parliament on 4 November 2025, while presenting the Commission's 2025 Enlargement Package, described Georgia's political situation as "sharply deteriorated, with serious democratic backsliding never seen before in a candidate country. We saw a rapid erosion of the rule of law and severe restrictions on fundamental rights." Remarking on such severe non-compliances, the Commissioner proposed no other instru-

[96] European Commission, "Press Release, 'A More Credible, Dynamic, Predictable, and Political EU Accession Process - Commission Lays out its Proposals Brussels,'" *European Commission*, February 2020, https://ec.europa.eu/commission/presscorner/api/files/document/print/en/ip_20_181/IP_20_181_EN.pdf.

[97] European Commission, *Albania 2024 Report*, November 2025. https://enlargement.ec.europa.eu/document/download/a8eec3f9-b2ec-4cb1-8748-9058854dbc68_en?filename=Albania%20Report%202024.pdf.

[98] European Union External Action, *EU and Georgia Adopt Revised Association Agenda*, November 21, 2017, https://www.eeas.europa.eu/node/35934_en?utm; Delegation of the European Union to Georgia, "The European Union and Georgia," *Delegation of the European Union to Georgia*, September 7, 2023, https://www.eeas.europa.eu/georgia/european-union-and-georgia_en?utm.

[99] Delegation of the European Union to Georgia, "The European Union and Georgia."

ments for compliance than simply urging the GD government "to reverse their course to respond to the citizens' demand for a European future." In fact, the only geopolitical mechanism left for the Commission to react to Georgia's divergence from the EU's transformative power was to acknowledge how de facto Georgia was no longer a Candidate country. As she put in her concluding sentence on Georgia, "following the last year's European Council's conclusions that the Georgian government's actions have led to a de facto halt of the pre-accession process, and in light of Georgia's continued backsliding on the fundamentals since then, the Commission considers Georgia a Candidate country in name only."[100]

Conclusion(s)

Clearly, over the last decades, the EU has been able to exercise its soft (transformative) power in Georgia and Albania. But with diverging outcomes. This becomes understandable, even though both polities and societies have historically been drawn to the idea of Europe and the EU, considering their respective interactions with EU institutions and their geopolitical positions. More specifically, such divergence has been manifested in the Albanian government's willingness and imposed compliance with "democratic" and "acquis" conditionalities, as well as unimpressive geopolitical alternatives to European integration, and in the Georgian government's increased non-compliance and the impressive geopolitical alternatives surrounding the country. The EU's "geopolitical turn," also in its enlargement policy—though perhaps altering the EU's self-understanding as a soft (normative/transformative power)—appears to be rather belated for the two states. And it is such a belatedness that mostly explains Albania's recent acceleration and Georgia's recent stalling of their EU integration paths.

Conflict of Interests
The authors declare no ethical issues or conflicts of interest in this research.
Ethical Standards
The authors affirm this research did not involve human subjects.

[100] DMR News, "'Only a Unified Europe Can Stop Putin': EU Chief Marta Kos Issues Stark Warning to Russia," YouTube video, 1:15, November 4, 2025, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=27R6Ns7HRrE.

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europe/2025/04/08/kallas-warns-albania-of-complex-reforms-but-says-its-future-is-in-the-eu.

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RECONSTRUCTION AND MODERNIZATION OF NATIONAL IDENTITY AS CATALYSTS FOR STATENESS: A POST-SOVIET PERSPECTIVE

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Abstract

This article explores the processes of national identity reconstruction and modernization as pivotal drivers in the formation and consolidation of stateness in post-Soviet contexts. Drawing on comparative case studies from selected former Soviet republics, this study analyzes how national identity narratives have been rearticulated and institutionalized to strengthen state legitimacy, foster political cohesion, and enhance sovereign functionality. Methodologically, the article employs a qualitative, comparative political analysis grounded in interpretive institutionalism and constructivist approaches to identity, integrating discourse analysis of official state narratives, policy documents, and public rhetoric with process tracing of post-Soviet nation-building trajectories. The analysis highlights the interplay between historical memory, cultural policy, and state-building strategies. It argues that the modernization of national identity, when grounded in inclusive civic values and responsive governance, substantially enhances a state's capacity to assert authority and ensure internal stability. By positioning identity not merely as a derivative of statehood but as a strategic instrument in its construction, the article contributes to a deeper understanding of the mechanisms underpinning contemporary state-building processes.

Keywords: *Post-Soviet states, national identity, stateness, state-building, identity reconstruction, identity modernization.*

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Introduction

More than three decades after the dissolution of the Soviet Union, the fifteen successor states continue to grapple with the legacies of imperial collapse, contested sovereignty, and identity fragmentation. Central to the challenge of post-Soviet transformation is the task of reconstructing and modernizing national identity, a process not simply cultural in nature, but profoundly political. In weakly institutionalized environments, where the boundaries of the nation and the state do not always coincide, identity becomes a pivotal axis through which stateness is either consolidated or eroded. The extent to which post-Soviet states have succeeded in articulating coherent, inclusive, and forward-looking identity narratives correlates strongly with their degree of political stability, legitimacy, and international recognition.[1]

Qualitative studies across the region underscore the instrumental role of identity in state-building. For example, interpretive analyses of elite discourse in Estonia and Georgia demonstrate how historical memory and symbolic institutions are mobilized to reassert sovereignty and national continuity.[2] Process tracing in Armenia, Ukraine, and Kazakhstan reveals how national identity policies, ranging from language reform to curriculum development, have been deployed to legitimize political regimes and redefine citizen-state relations.[3] Moreover, empirical work on cultural policy and media control in Belarus and Russia indicates how identity can be constructed in ways that reinforce authoritarian consolidation, often by fusing ethnonationalist rhetoric with statist paternalism.[4]

Quantitatively, cross-national surveys and datasets further illuminate the role of national identity in shaping political outcomes. The World Values Survey (WVS) and European Social Survey (ESS) have demonstrated consistent correlations between strong national identification and trust in political institutions, espe-

[1] Rogers Brubaker, *Nationalism Reframed: Nationhood and the National Question in the New Europe* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996); Henry E. Hale, *Patronal Politics: Eurasian Regime Dynamics in Comparative Perspective* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2014).

[2] Eva-Clarita Pettai, *Memory and Pluralism in the Baltic States: National Identity, Culture and History after Independence* (London: Routledge, 2016); Stephen F. Jones, *Socialism in Georgian Colors: The European Road to Social Democracy, 1883–1917* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2005).

[3] Ronald Grigor Suny, "Constructing Primordialism: Old Histories for New Nations," *Journal of Modern History* 73, no. 4 (December 2001): 862–96; Edward Schatz, "Framing the State in Times of Transition: Case Studies in Constitution Making," *Comparative Politics* 32, no. 4 (2000): 459–79.

[4] Marlène Laruelle, *Russian Eurasianism: An Ideology of Empire* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2012); Andrew Wilson, *Belarus: The Last European Dictatorship* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2011).

cially when identity is framed in civic rather than ethnic terms.[5] For instance, a 2020 Pew Research Center report found that in Estonia and Lithuania, where identity models are more inclusive and Europeanized, over 65 percent of citizens expressed confidence in democratic institutions, compared with less than 30 percent in countries such as Moldova and Kyrgyzstan, where identity narratives remain fragmented. Likewise, the Varieties of Democracy (V-Dem) dataset reveals that post-Soviet countries scoring higher on "national identity clarity" also perform better on indicators of regime legitimacy, bureaucratic capacity, and civic engagement.[6]

These findings suggest that national identity is not merely an epiphenomenon of statehood, but a foundational variable in the construction of effective and legitimate governance. However, identity projects differ markedly across the post-Soviet space, ranging from the civic nationalism of the Baltic states to the instrumental multiethnic narratives of Central Asia, the civilizational discourse of Russia, and the trauma-inflected identity politics of the South Caucasus. This diversity underscores the need for a nuanced, comparative approach.

This article argues that the reconstruction and modernization of national identity constitute active and strategic mechanisms in the production of stateness across the post-Soviet region. Through a broad comparative analysis of all fifteen post-Soviet states, supplemented by process tracing in selected cases and a review of quantitative data, the study examines how identity narratives have been (re)articulated since 1991 and evaluates their impact on political cohesion, legitimacy, and state capacity. By situating identity as a core component of statecraft, rather than a byproduct of institutional evolution, the article contributes to the broader political science literature on state formation, legitimacy, and post-imperial transitions.

As already stated, his study employs a broad comparative scope across all post-Soviet states to identify typological variations in identity modernization and stateness. While depth per case is necessarily limited, the systematic inclusion of all fifteen states enables a more robust cross-regional typology, allowing generalizable conclusions about post-imperial state formation.

Conceptualizing Stateness and Identity Modernization: The concept of stateness has long preoccupied scholars of comparative politics and state–building. Scholars such as Charles Tilly, Theda Skocpol, and Joel Migdal have emphasized the centrality of coercion, extraction, and administrative competence in state for-

[5] Ronald Inglehart and Christian Welzel, M*odernization, Cultural Change, and Democracy: The Human Development Sequence* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005).
[6] Michael Coppedge et al., *Varieties of Democracy (V-Dem) Dataset v13* (Gothenburg: V-Dem Institute, 2023), https://datafinder.qog.gu.se/dataset/vdem.

mation.[7] More recent approaches disaggregate state capacity into coercive, extractive, and administrative dimensions, highlighting the institutional underpinnings of effective governance.[8] Yet in post-imperial contexts, capacity alone cannot secure durability. Legitimacy and societal cohesion are equally necessary. Following Linz and Stepan's seminal work, stateness can be defined as comprising three interlocking dimensions: authority and legitimacy (the recognized right to rule), cohesion (societal compliance and solidarity), and capacity (bureaucratic and administrative competence).[9]

Within this framework, identity modernization refers to the institutional transformation of symbolic repertoires and civic infrastructures that underpin legitimacy, cohesion, and capacity. The modernization of identity is not a superficial matter of rhetoric; it involves embedding new civic norms and competencies into state institutions. This process operates along at least four dimensions:

1. **Symbolic repertoires and memory politics**: updating monuments, toponymy, curricula, and historical canons to reflect pluralist narratives and distance the polity from imperial legacies.
2. **Linguistic and civic competencies**: standardizing language and education systems to enable equal citizenship and effective bureaucratic communication.
3. **Alignment with international norms**: incorporating principles of pluralism, the rule of law, and civic inclusion into identity narratives and policy frameworks.
4. **Depoliticization of indoctrination**: reducing the use of curricula and media for regime legitimation and expanding civic education to foster autonomous trust in institutions.

Datasets such as V-Dem's indicators of indoctrination in education and media (V-Indoc) provide comparative leverage in operationalizing these dimensions.[10] Language and citizenship laws, memory policies (e.g., legislation on monuments and museums), and education standards serve as observable proxies for identity modernization. These reforms are directly linked to the three dimensions of

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[7] Charles Tilly, *Coercion, Capital, and European States, AD 990-1992* (Cambridge, MA: Blackwell, 1992); Theda Skocpol, *States and Social Revolutions: A Comparative Analysis of France, Russia, and China* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1979); Joel S. Migdal, S*trong Societies and Weak States: State-Society Relations and State Capabilities in the Third World* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1988).

[8] Hillel Soifer, "State Infrastructural Power: Concept and Measurement Proposals," *Studies in Comparative International Development* 43, no. 3–4 (2008): 231–51.

[9] Juan J. Linz and Alfred Stepan, *Problems of Democratic Transition and Consolidation: Southern Europe, South America, and Post-Communist Europe* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1996), 16–37.

[10] Coppedge et al., *Varieties of Democracy (VDem) Dataset v13*.

stateness: civic-inclusive identity supports legitimacy; integrative curricula and memory regimes foster cohesion; standardized language and depoliticized education–media ecosystems enhance capacity by building human capital and compliance.

Thus, identity modernization is theorized not as an ancillary process but as a central mechanism of state consolidation. In post-Soviet Eurasia, where historical legacies of empire, ideology, and multinational governance persist, the stakes of identity modernization are heightened. Choices about language, memory, and curricula are simultaneously symbolic and functional, shaping the very architecture of stateness.

Research Design and Evidence Strategy: The study employs a mixed–methods comparative design, integrating discourse and policy analysis, process tracing of selected cases, and cross–national quantitative analysis. Rather than providing exhaustive case narratives, the analysis focuses on tracing the core mechanisms—language reform, memory politics, education and media transformation, and citizenship policy—through which identity modernization shapes stateness.

1. Discourse and policy analysis: Government documents, laws, curricula, and public statements are examined to trace the evolution of identity reforms after 1991. This includes reforms in language policy (e.g., Kazakhstan's Latinization, Ukraine's language laws), memory politics (e.g., Baltic de-Sovietization, Ukraine's de-communization and de-Russification), and education/media frameworks (e.g., curriculum standards, V-Indoc scores).
2. Comparative process tracing: Cases are selected to maximize variation in identity strategies. The Baltic states represent civic and inclusive models of modernization, closely linked to rapid European integration. Ukraine demonstrates a hybrid trajectory, marked by an accelerated civic turn during and after the wars of 2014 and 2022. Moldova exemplifies ongoing identity contestation, balancing Romanianization, civic integration, and accommodation of Russophone communities. Belarus pursues a dual project of Soviet nostalgia and pragmatic identity management under conditions of authoritarian consolidation. Russia advances a civilizational framing of identity as a key instrument of regime legitimation. In Central Asia, states such as Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan have adopted elite-managed models of identity modernization that retain strong patrimonial features. Finally, in the South Caucasus, the cases of Armenia, Georgia, and Azerbaijan reflect divergent orientations, ranging from pluralist to overtly geopolitical conceptions of national identity.

3. Cross-national patterning: Quantitative data are employed to examine correlations between identity reforms and indicators of stateness:
   - V-Dem: Regime legitimation, indoctrination in education/media, administrative capacity indices.[11]
   - World Values Survey (WVS) and European Social Survey (ESS): Indicators of civic identity, institutional trust, and societal cohesion.[12]
   - Pew Research Center surveys: Attitudes toward democracy, identity, and institutions in Eastern Europe and Eurasia.[13]
   - Additionally, the assessment is informed by the author's own "Peace Index",[14] an integral model for assessing stateness across political, economic, social, and security domains.

Recent studies (2022–2025) on wartime identity shifts in Ukraine and Belarus provide additional empirical insights into how crisis contexts catalyze identity modernization and recalibrate legitimacy.[15]

The integration of these methods allows for tracing causal mechanisms within cases, identifying typological patterns across cases, and assessing cross-national correlations. This triangulated approach aims to overcome the limitations of purely qualitative or quantitative studies and to illuminate the complex ways in which identity modernization conditions stateness in post-Soviet Eurasia.

Mechanisms of Identity Policy and Stateness

Identity modernization operates through multiple institutional and symbolic mechanisms that directly influence the three dimensions of stateness: legitimacy, cohesion, and capacity. In post-Soviet contexts, these mechanisms are particularly consequential because the legacies of empire and Soviet institutional design have left states both territorially and socially fragmented. This section examines four interrelated mechanisms: language and orthography reforms, memory and toponymy, education and media, and citizenship and minority policies. Each mechanism illus-

[11] Coppedge et al., *Varieties of Democracy (VDem) Dataset v13*.
[12] World Values Survey, *Wave 7 (2017–2022)*, https://www.worldvaluessurvey.org/WVSDocumentationWV7.jsp; European Social Survey, *Round 10 (2020)*, https://ess.sikt.no/en/study/172ac431-2a06-41df-9dab-c1fd8f3877e7.
[13] Pew Research Center, "European Public Opinion Three Decades After the Fall of Communism," Pew Research Center, October 15, 2019, https://www.pewresearch.org/global/2019/10/15/european-public-opinion-three-decades-after-the-fall-of-communism/.
[14] Violetta Manukyan, "From Conflict to Peace? Stateness Assessment of the South Caucasus Countries at the Crossroads of Political Processes from 2017 to 2022," *Journal of Political Science: Bulletin of Yerevan University* 2, no. 5 (September 2023): 11–33.
[15] Volodymyr Kulyk, "War, Language, and Identity in Ukraine," *Post-Soviet Affairs* 39, no. 1–2 (2023): 1–23.

trates how state strategies to modernize identity translate into measurable effects on authority, societal cohesion, and institutional capacity.

Language and Orthography Reforms: Language standardization serves as a critical tool for enhancing bureaucratic capacity and establishing a shared civic culture. In multilingual polities, standardization must be coupled with accommodations for minority groups to maintain legitimacy and cohesion. In Kazakhstan, the Latinization of the Kazakh alphabet, first announced in 2017 and revised several times, exemplifies how language reform functions as both a nation-building strategy and a geopolitical reorientation toward the global sphere and away from Cyrillic-based post-Soviet legacies.[16]

The delays and repeated revisions in Kazakhstan's reform process reveal the tension between technocratic precision and social inclusiveness that accompanies large-scale orthographic change. Other Central Asian states, including Uzbekistan and Turkmenistan, pursued more gradual language modernization, balancing elite-driven symbolic initiatives with local acceptance. The Baltic states demonstrate a contrasting trajectory. Estonia and Latvia prioritized rapid linguistic integration of titular populations while offering structured minority language education to maintain civic legitimacy.[17]

Across cases, empirical evidence from V-Dem's administrative capacity indices indicates that language standardization correlates positively with bureaucratic effectiveness and compliance, provided minority rights are respected.[18]

Memory, Toponymy, and Decolonization: Memory politics anchors legitimacy and delineates the political community through monuments, museums, street names, and canonized histories. These symbolic tools serve not merely as markers of past events but as active instruments shaping contemporary civic cohesion. In Ukraine, the post-2022 acceleration from de-communization to de-Russification, including widespread hodonym changes and removal or re-inscription of imperial and Soviet symbols, demonstrates how external aggression can catalyze civic consolidation and national solidarity.[19]

The Baltic states similarly leveraged memory policy to reinforce post-Soviet sovereignty while aligning with European norms. In Estonia and Lithuania, memorials and public education highlight historical oppression and occupation, fostering a shared narrative that legitimizes contemporary political authority. Conversely, in Russia, memory politics often reinforces centralized civilizational narratives, em-

[16] Aidos Zholdasbekov, "Kazakhstan's Latinization Policy: National Identity and Global Alignment," *Central Asian Survey* 41, no. 2 (2022): 185–205.
[17] Pettai, *Memory and Pluralism in the Baltic States*,
[18] Coppedge et al., *Varieties of Democracy (VDem) Dataset v13*.
[19] Kulyk, "War, Language, and Identity in Ukraine."

bedding imperial continuity in civic consciousness and consolidating regime legitimacy at the expense of pluralist inclusion. Comparative research demonstrates that memory-based identity strategies are most effective in producing cohesive states when narratives are pluralist and forward-looking, emphasizing shared civic values rather than exclusively ethnic or exclusionary interpretations.[20]

Education and Media: Indoctrination vs. Civic Competence*:* Identity is co-produced in classrooms and media platforms. Post-Soviet regimes vary widely in the extent to which education and media are used for civic formation versus political indoctrination. Global datasets such as V-Indoc allow cross-national comparisons of these dynamics, quantifying the politicization of curricula and media content.[21]

Authoritarian consolidators, including Belarus and Russia, tend to embed selective heritage and civilizational frames into textbooks and state broadcasting, reinforcing regime legitimacy but limiting independent civic capacities. Reformist governments, such as in Georgia or Estonia, depoliticize curricula and expand civic values instruction, fostering social trust and resilience.[22]

Empirical correlations indicate that lower levels of indoctrination are associated with higher public trust in institutions and more stable legitimacy. For instance, V-Dem measures of education and media autonomy correlate with higher WVS and Pew measures of institutional trust, particularly in the Baltic states.[23]

Citizenship and Minority Policies: Policies governing citizenship, minority recognition, and language in education are central to the modernization of identity. Inclusive approaches, combining accessible citizenship pathways, minority language rights, and representation in public institutions, are associated with lower levels of identity contestation and higher institutional trust. In Estonia and Latvia, for example, gradual integration of Russian-speaking minorities through naturalization and education reforms has helped stabilize civic cohesion without undermining titular national identity.[24]

By contrast, exclusionary or instrumentalist approaches, such as selective recognition of minority groups or politicized naturalization procedures in Belarus and some Central Asian states, produce short-term regime legitimation but create long-term fragility in cohesion and capacity. Comparative studies indicate that these differences are measurable: V-Dem legitimacy indices and civic identity

[20] Kulyk, "War, Language, and Identity in Ukraine."
[21] Laruelle, *Russian Eurasianism*,45–67.
[22] Laruelle, *Russian Eurasianism*,45–67.
[23] World Values Survey, *Wave 7 (2017–2022)*.
[24] European Social Survey, *Round 10 (2020)*.

measures from WVS and ESS show consistent patterns linking inclusive identity policies to stronger societal compliance and institutional trust.[25]

Collectively, these mechanisms demonstrate that identity modernization is not symbolic alone; it is instrumental to state-building. Language reforms enhance administrative capacity; memory and toponymy anchor legitimacy; education and media shape civic skills; citizenship and minority policies govern inclusion and cohesion. The interaction of these mechanisms produces measurable effects on the three dimensions of stateness: legitimacy, cohesion, and capacity. Comparative analysis in the next section links these mechanisms to real-world trajectories across the post-Soviet space.

Comparative Trajectories, Cross-national Patterns, and Migration

The post-Soviet region presents a strikingly heterogeneous set of outcomes in terms of stateness and identity modernization. These divergent outcomes reflect not only initial conditions (e.g., pre-Soviet nationhood, ethno-linguistic composition) but also deliberate policy choices in identity reform, responses to external pressures, and internal regime strategies. While the Baltic states rapidly consolidated both civic identities and European-oriented institutional frameworks, other cases illustrate partial, stalled, or authoritarian trajectories. This comparative mapping highlights how different configurations of language reform, memory politics, and civic inclusion interact with state capacity and legitimacy. These configurations and their resulting trajectories are summarized in Table 1, which consolidates the dominant identity modernization strategies, key mechanisms, and stateness outcomes across all post-Soviet cases.

Baltic States: Rearticulating National Identity through Europe

The Baltic republics represent paradigmatic cases of rapid identity rearticulation. Emerging from the Soviet collapse with strong pre-Soviet national traditions, these states anchored identity reconstruction in narratives of occupation, resistance, and European belonging.[26] Unlike other post-Soviet republics, they possessed prior experiences of sovereign statehood (1918–1940) and retained historical narratives of forced incorporation into the USSR. These memories were rapidly mobilized in the early 1990s to craft legitimacy through discourses of resistance and continuity.[27]

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[25] Pew Research Center, "European Public Opinion."
[26] Graham Smith et al., *Nation-Building in the Post-Soviet Borderlands: The Politics of National Identities* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002).
[27] Pettai, *Memory and Pluralism in the Baltic States*.

Estonia's approach to its substantial Russian-speaking minority was emblematic of a hybrid model: stringent language and citizenship laws initially excluded many Soviet-era settlers from full participation, but subsequent reforms under EU accession pressure introduced pathways to integration. The result is a carefully balanced model of "civic exclusivity": rooted in ethno-linguistic core identity but softened by institutional pluralism. V-Dem and ESS data show that Estonia and Lithuania score consistently high in indicators of civic trust, institutional legitimacy, and media autonomy.[28]

European Union accession functioned as both a symbolic and institutional framework for modernization. By embedding identity in 'return to Europe' discourses, Baltic elites framed sovereignty not merely as independence from Moscow but as reintegration into Western institutions.[29] These choices had measurable outcomes: Eurobarometer surveys consistently show higher levels of trust in democratic institutions in the Baltics compared to other post-Soviet states, a reflection of successful civic identity consolidation.[30]

Ukraine: Nationalization of History and Civic Mobilization

Ukraine's identity trajectory is marked by oscillations between ethno-linguistic nationalism and civic inclusivity, often catalyzed by external shocks. The early independence period saw competing identity models: Western Ukrainian elites pushed for ethno-linguistic nationalism, while eastern and southern regions remained culturally and linguistically russified. This fragmentation initially produced weak symbolic cohesion and ambiguous citizenship regimes.[31] Since the early 1990s, state-sponsored memory projects, such as the promotion of the Holodomor as a central historical trauma, have served to consolidate sovereignty and distinguish Ukraine from Russia.[32]

The Orange Revolution (2004) marked the first mass civic mobilization around democratic and pro-European identity, but it was the 2014 Euromaidan uprising and subsequent Russian aggression that fundamentally recalibrated national

[28] Aadne Aasland, "Citizenship Status and Social Exclusion in Estonia and Latvia," *Journal of Baltic Studies* 33, no. 1 (2002); Pew Research Center, "European Public Opinion"; European Social Survey, *ESS Round 9 (2018/2019)*, https://www.europeansocialsurvey.org; Coppedge et al., *Varieties of Democracy (VDem) Dataset v13*.

[29] Piret Ehin, "Political Support in the Baltic States, 1993-2000," *Europe-Asia Studies* 59, no. 7 (2007): 977–1000.

[30] European Commission, *Public Opinion in the European Union: Standard Eurobarometer 98* (Brussels: European Commission, 2023), https://europa.eu/eurobarometer/surveys/detail/2872.

[31] Gwendolyn Sasse, *The Crimea Question: Identity, Transition, and Conflict* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2007).

[32] Georgiy Kasianov, "The Holodomor and the Politics of Memory in Ukraine after 1991," in *Mass Starvation: The History and Future of Famine*, ed. Alex de Waal (Cambridge: Polity, 2018), 220–243.

narratives. The state's active promotion of the Holodomor as genocide, along with de-communization and de-Russification legislation, recast identity through a dual lens of historical trauma and civic resilience.[33]

These narratives gained renewed salience after the 2014 annexation of Crimea and subsequent conflict in Donbas, where civic identity became mobilized through grassroots volunteer movements and national defense initiatives.[34] Empirical evidence from the Razumkov Centre, as well as ESS and Pew surveys, shows a significant post-2014 rise in national identification across traditionally Russophone regions, suggesting a redefinition of Ukrainian identity as inclusive and civic, rather than solely ethno-linguistic.[35] The 2022 full-scale invasion accelerated this process: wartime narratives emphasized sacrifice, dignity, and democratic resolve. This "conflict-forged civic nationalism" has contributed to a durable consolidation of stateness under existential threat, a pattern mirrored in comparative literature on war and nation-building.[36]

Belarus: Ontological Insecurity and Identity Ambiguity

Belarus exemplifies a case where identity modernization has been strategically constrained by authoritarian governance. Unlike its neighbors, lacking a strong nationalist movement at the moment of independence, Belarus was largely a passive inheritor of Soviet statehood. President Alexander Lukashenko's regime perpetuated a paternalist narrative of stability, continuity, and Slavic brotherhood with Russia, effectively freezing identity discourse in neo-Soviet terms. It deliberately suppressed independent identity projects, privileging Soviet nostalgia and Russian linguistic dominance.[37] As a result, identity remained fragmented, with limited resonance among younger generations seeking European connections.

However, the 2020 protests following contested elections revealed the latent power of identity rearticulation. Civil society mobilized around pre-Soviet symbols (white-red-white flag, historical anniversaries), articulating an emergent national identity that challenged regime legitimacy.[38] While the ruling regime violently repressed these movements, their symbolic resonance exposed the regime's ontologi-

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[33] Keith Darden, *Resisting Occupation: Mass Schooling and the Creation of Durable National Loyalties* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2021).
[34] Serhiy Kudelia, "The Donbas Rift," *Russian Politics and Law* 52, no. 5 (2014): 5–27.
[35] Razumkov Centre, "National Identity and Civil Cohesion in Ukraine: Trends 2014–2023," https://razumkov.org.ua/en/research-areas/surveys/identity-of-ukrainian-citizens-trends-of-change-may-2023.
[36] Darden, *Resisting Occupation.*
[37] Wilson, *Belarus*.
[38] David R. Marples, "Color Revolutions: The Belarus Case," *Communist and Post-Communist Studies* 54, no. 1 (2021): 1–14.

cal insecurity—an inability to generate a coherent, future-oriented identity. This fragmentation undermines all three pillars of stateness: legitimacy, cohesion, and capacity.

Belarus illustrates how ontological insecurity—uncertainty over collective self-definition—undermines state legitimacy and leaves stateness vulnerable to crises of representation.

Russia: Toward a New Civilizational Identity

Russia's identity reconstruction has been characterized by contestation between competing models: European integration, post-imperial nationhood, and Eurasian civilizational exceptionalism.[39] In the 1990s, attempts at liberal civic identity were largely eclipsed by institutional collapse and economic turmoil. By the 2000s, the Putin regime forged a new narrative around Eurasianism and civilizational uniqueness. Drawing on historical imperial myths and Orthodox cultural motifs, Russia's identity project positioned it as a global alternative to Western liberalism.

This shift was institutionalized through foreign policy (such as the "Russian World" doctrine), educational reforms (including the standardization of patriotic curricula), and memory politics (exemplified by the glorification of the Soviet victory).[40] The annexation of Crimea in 2014 and the 2022 invasion of Ukraine were not only geopolitical acts but symbolic assertions of a revisionist identity. State-controlled media, educational reforms, and religious institutions have been instrumentalized to embed a civilizational identity that legitimizes external expansion and domestic authoritarianism.[41]

While these strategies have consolidated regime control and cultivated mass loyalty domestically, they have also isolated Russia diplomatically and entrenched authoritarian governance. Russia illustrates how identity modernization can take an exclusionary, imperial form that reinforces stateness in the short term but jeopardizes long-term legitimacy and international standing.[42]

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[39] Laruelle, *Russian Eurasianism*.

[40] Laruelle, *Russian Eurasianism*; Ronald Grigor Suny, "Living in the Hood: Russia, Empire, and Old-New Nationalisms," in *Nationalism and Democracy in the Welfare State*, ed. Kjell Goldmann et al. (Norwegian University Press, 2021), 55–76.

[41] Andrey Makarychev and Alexandra Yatsyk, *Russia, Ukraine and the EU: Interactions, Policies and Practices* (London: Routledge, 2015).

[42] Freedom House, *Nations in Transit: Russia*, 2024, https://freedomhouse.org/country/russia/nations-transit/2024.

Central Asian Republics: Elite-Driven Modernization in Multiethnic States

Central Asia's identity projects reflect the legacies of Soviet national delimitation, which produced multi-ethnic republics with contested histories. Central Asia's post-Soviet identity trajectories reflect the complex legacies of Soviet ethno-territorial engineering. Most states inherited borders that did not align with clear ethnic majorities, creating inherent challenges for cohesion.[43]

Kazakhstan has emerged as a partial success story. Under Nazarbayev, the state pursued "Kazakhization" through language and cultural revival policies, but balanced this with explicit recognition of minority rights and a multiethnic narrative.[44] The Assembly of the Peoples of Kazakhstan, for instance, institutionalized interethnic dialogue and representation. Empirical studies suggest this pragmatic approach has underpinned relatively stable statehood and facilitated international partnerships, including with both the West and Russia.[45]

In contrast, Uzbekistan and Turkmenistan pursued strongly personalized approaches to identity construction. In Uzbekistan, Tamerlane was elevated to the status of a mythic national founder in school curricula, while in Turkmenistan, state identity became entirely subsumed under the cult of personality. Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan, marked by civil conflict and weak institutions, have struggled to sustain cohesive identity frameworks, often reverting to localism and patronal politics.[46]

Across the region, identity remains instrumental to regime survival rather than civic cohesion. V-Dem data on indoctrination and rule of law suggest a strong correlation between authoritarian uses of identity and weak bureaucratic performance.[47]

The South Caucasus: Memory, Integration, and Boundaries

The South Caucasus, comprising Armenia, Azerbaijan, and Georgia, embodies a closely interlinked nexus of identity formation, historical trauma, and geopolitical rivalry. Armenia's national identity is grounded in one of the oldest continuous civilizational traditions in the world. As the first state to adopt Christianity as a state religion (301 CE), Armenia developed a robust religious, linguistic, and literary culture that served as a symbolic anchor during centuries of statelessness. Insti-

[43] Hale, *Patronal Politics*.
[44] Bhavna Dave, *Kazakhstan: Ethnicity, Language and Power* (Routledge, 2007; Martha Brill Olcott, *Kazakhstan: Unfulfilled Promise* (Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, 2010).
[45] Dave, "Kazakhstan".
[46] Sally Cummings, *Understanding Central Asia: Politics and Contested Transformations* (London: Routledge, 2012); Edward Schatz, "The Soft Authoritarian Tool Kit: Agenda-Setting Power in Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan," *Comparative Politics* 41, no. 2 (2009): 203–222.
[47] Coppedge et al., *Varieties of Democracy (VDem) Dataset v13*.

tutions such as the Armenian Apostolic Church, the invention of the Armenian alphabet (405 CE), and medieval scholarship functioned as mechanisms of cultural continuity in the absence of political sovereignty in the form of a stateless nation.[48] This deep heritage, however, has also shaped identity modernization in complex ways. The collapse of the Armenian kingdom in the Middle Ages and subsequent domination under the Persian, Ottoman, and Russian empires[49] embedded a narrative of survival rather than statecraft. As a result, Armenian national consciousness historically revolved around cultural resilience and diasporic identity rather than institutional sovereignty.

Although the 1915 genocide continues to serve as a core historical trauma, particularly within the Armenian diaspora's identity formation, it represents only one facet of a broader narrative framework. In this post-Soviet republic, national identity has been reconstructed around themes of historical depth, religious continuity, cultural exceptionalism, and geopolitical vulnerability.[50] Educational curricula, monuments, and diplomatic discourse consistently emphasize Armenia's ancient statehood, spiritual legacy, and civilizational contributions.

This heritage-based identity has served as both a source of legitimacy and a constraint. On one hand, it unifies the global Armenian nation through shared memory, symbols, and cultural pride.[51] On the other hand, it sometimes inhibits the development of a forward-looking, civic model of nationhood that can accommodate diversity, dissent, and institutional modernization. Beyond the genocide, it is the recollection of statelessness that has fostered a defensive sovereignty paradigm, privileging existential security over pluralism. Since the 2000s, civic dimensions of identity have gained salience, particularly among younger urban populations. The reconfiguration of governance in terms of transparency, accountability, and participatory politics introduced new symbolic repertoires: the citizen as stakeholder, not merely survivor. However, the 2020 and 2023 Nagorno-Karabakh conflicts reactivated more traditional framings of identity as collective endurance and struggle.

Thus, Armenia's identity modernization reflects an ongoing tension between civilizational heritage and civic reinvention. While its rich historical repertoire

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[48] Robert W. Thomson, *The Armenian Church* (Routledge, 1996); Ronald Grigor Suny, *Looking Toward Ararat: Armenia in Modern History* (Indiana University Press, 1993).

[49] Razmik Panossian, *The Armenians: From Kings and Priests to Merchants and Commissars* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2006), 45–76.

[50] Panossian, *The Armenians*; Eduard Melkonian, "Memory, History and Identity in Armenian Educational Policy," *Caucasus Survey* 4, no. 2 (2016): 120–39; Harutyun Marutyan, *Iconography of Armenian Identity: The Memory of Genocide and the Karabakh Movement* (Yerevan: Gitutyun Publishing House, 2009).

[51] Suny, "Constructing Primordialism," 862–96.

provides symbolic capital and cultural cohesion, the long arc of statelessness complicates the consolidation of a pluralist, inclusive, and democratic national identity.

Georgia's national identity project is shaped by one of the most continuous state traditions in the post-Soviet space. With medieval monarchy, Christian statehood dating back to the 4th century, and a literary canon central to collective memory, Georgia has long imagined itself as a civilizational bridge between Europe and the East.[52] This historical depth has produced a strong sense of cultural distinctiveness, but also posed challenges for civic modernization in a multiethnic and territorially fragmented state.

Since regaining independence, Georgia's identity discourse has oscillated between ethno-cultural revivalism and European civic aspiration. The 2003 Rose Revolution marked a turning point, infusing national identity with democratic and reformist energy. The rule of law, accountability, and aspirations for Euro-Atlantic integration became central civic ideals within a renewed symbolic repertoire connecting identity to state governance.[53] Under leaders like Mikheil Saakashvili, the state promoted a vision of Georgia as a Western-oriented, high-capacity democracy, often in contrast to perceived Russian backwardness or authoritarianism.

At the same time, unresolved conflicts in Abkhazia and South Ossetia, combined with tensions involving other communities, revealed the limits of civic inclusion. The tension between a dominant ethnic-Georgian national identity and the reality of internal diversity remains a persistent friction point.[54] While public discourse emphasizes tolerance and multicultural heritage (e.g., Tbilisi's religious pluralism), minority regions often report marginalization, limited linguistic rights, and inadequate political representation.[55]

The 2008 Russo-Georgian War and ongoing Russian occupation of secessionist regions reinforced national narratives of victimhood, resilience, and geopolitical orientation. Educational reform, history curricula, and public monuments increasingly frame Georgia as a European nation under siege by imperial revanchism.

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[52] Jones, *Socialism in Georgian Colors*, 15–42; Natia Mestvirishvili, Maia Mestvirishvili, and Tamar Khoshtaria, "National Identity and Perceptions of Citizenship in Georgia Over the Last Decade," in *Identities and Representations in Georgia from the 19th Century to the Present* (De Gruyter Oldenbourg, 2021).

[53] Lincoln A. Mitchell, *Uncertain Democracy: U.S. Foreign Policy and Georgia's Rose Revolution* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2009); Lia Tsuladze, "On Europeanisation, National Sentiments and Confused Identities in Georgia", Communist and Post-Communist Studies 50, no. 2 (June 2017): 125–33.

[54] Jonathan Wheatley, "Obstacles Impeding the Regional Integration of the Kvemo Kartli Region of Georgia." ECMI Working Paper No. 19, 2009.

[55] Minority Rights Group International, *State of the World's Minorities and Indigenous Peoples 2023: Georgia* (London: MRGI, 2023).

This externalization of threat has been instrumental in consolidating national unity, but may also obscure internal divisions and governance deficits.[56]

Recent political polarization and a slowdown in democratic reforms have prompted questions about the sustainability of Georgia's civic identity trajectory. Although public sentiment remains broadly pro-European, shifts in policy direction and political discourse among governing elites have complicated the perception of Georgia as a straightforward case of identity modernization.

In sum, Georgia exemplifies a dual-track identity project: a deeply historical consciousness rooted in religious and cultural tradition, and a post-Soviet civic reimagination aligned with Western institutions. The tension between these forces, Orthodox national identity and democratic pluralism, constitutes the source of both Georgia's resilience and its vulnerability.

Azerbaijan represents a relatively rare case in the post-imperial world: a nation developing around the state, rather than a state emerging from an already cohesive national identity. Unlike many European or Middle Eastern contexts where nationhood preceded statehood, Azerbaijan's modern identity formation has been largely driven by the political apparatus of a young state, officially reestablished only in 1991, with earlier precedents lasting briefly (such as the Azerbaijan Democratic Republic, 1918-1920).[57] The state-building project has therefore served as the primary engine of identity production, rather than simply a container for a preexisting nation.

This statist model of nationhood has resulted in a highly centralized, top-down construction of identity. Post-Soviet Azerbaijan has emphasized pan-Turkic cultural lineage, Islamic heritage, and secular modernity, while simultaneously distancing itself from Persian, Russian, and Soviet narratives. The Azerbaijani leadership, first under Heydar Aliyev and later Ilham Aliyev, has constructed an identity centered around statehood, territorial integrity, and victorious sovereignty, increasingly reinforced after the 2020 and 2023 military operations in Nagorno-Karabakh.[58]

Azerbaijan's cultural policy reflects this statist orientation. Through school textbooks, museums, literature, and public ceremonies, the state constructs a cohesive historical narrative rooted in heroism, cultural greatness, and geopolitical self-assertion. However, this narrative is not pluralistic. The state-sponsored identity

[56] Coppedge et al., *Varieties of Democracy (VDem) Dataset v13*; Pew Research Center, "European Public Opinion"; Giorgi Gvalia, Salome Lebanidze, and David S. Siroky, "Neoclassical Realism and Small States: Systemic Constraints and Domestic Filters in Georgia's Foreign Policy," *East European Politics* 35, no. 1 (2019.

[57] Svante E. Cornell, *Azerbaijan Since Independence* (London: Routledge, 2017), 1–42.

[58] Audrey L. Altstadt, *Frustrated Democracy in Post-Soviet Azerbaijan* (Washington, DC: Woodrow Wilson Center Press, 2017), 121–144.

discourse includes systematic vilification of Armenians, with animosity permeating educational materials, televised media, and even folklore. Multiple human rights monitoring organizations and independent education watchdogs have documented anti-Armenian content in school curricula and children's literature, including fairy tales that portray Armenians as traitors or subhuman "others."[59] This process of symbolic dehumanization serves not only to mobilize public sentiment during conflict but also to cultivate a long-term exclusionary national identity.

In this framework, the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict is not merely a geopolitical issue but the symbolic heart of national belonging. The state has successfully framed the conflict as a struggle for historical justice and existential sovereignty. The victory in 2020 and the reclamation of territories in 2023 were celebrated as national rebirths, cementing the ruling regime's legitimacy while reinforcing narratives of trauma, grievance, and moral superiority.

At the same time, Azerbaijan projects a modern and cosmopolitan image externally. Urban modernization in Baku, energy diplomacy, and global cultural initiatives (e.g., hosting Eurovision 2012, Islamic Solidarity Games) seek to position Azerbaijan as a dynamic, forward-looking regional actor. Yet this external projection of inclusivity and modernity contrasts sharply with internal controls on pluralism, civic dissent, and minority representation.[60]

Thus, Azerbaijan exemplifies a case where the state manufactures the nation, drawing on cultural revivalism, territorial restoration, and exclusionary ethnonationalism. While effective in consolidating state authority and geopolitical posture, this strategy leaves little room for civic inclusivity or reconciliation, especially in the context of long-term Armenian-Azerbaijani relations.

Moldova: Between East and West

Moldova represents the archetype of identity ambivalence: it epitomizes the identity dilemmas of post-Soviet states caught between cultural affinities and geopolitical orientations. Its population is divided between Romanian-speaking Moldovans advocating unification with Romania and Russophone communities resisting Western integration. Political elites have oscillated between "Moldovanism" (a distinct identity) and "Romanianization", reflecting deeper geopolitical divides between East and West. The unresolved status of Transnistria further complicates national consolidation, fragmenting state legitimacy. The existence of a de facto breakaway

[59] Human Rights Watch, "Azerbaijan: Discrimination Against Armenians in Education and Media," *World Report 2021*; Felix Corley, "Education and Ethnic Hatred in Azerbaijan," *Forum 18 News Service*, 2021.
[60] Coppedge et al., *Varieties of Democracy (VDem) Dataset v13*; Freedom House, *Nations in Transit: Azerbaijan, 2024*.

region undermines the symbolic and territorial coherence of the Moldovan state, limiting its capacity to institutionalize a unified identity narrative.[61]

While Moldova's EU candidacy status (granted in 2022) represents a significant step toward Western alignment, surveys from the European Social Survey and Pew Research Center reveal persistent internal ambivalence toward identity orientation and low levels of public trust in democratic institutions.62 V-Dem indicators of legitimacy and civic cohesion also place Moldova among the weakest post-Soviet states in terms of stateness, underscoring how unresolved identity contestation impedes both governance and geopolitical orientation.[63]

Comparative Patterns and Theoretical Implications

The comparative analysis reveals three overarching patterns of post-Soviet identity reconstruction. First, memory-centered strategies anchor legitimacy by invoking historical trauma and resistance, yet risk entrenching exclusivity and limiting pluralism. Second, civic-inclusive narratives, as seen in the Baltics and increasingly in Ukraine, foster institutional trust and resilience, correlating with higher democratic consolidation. Third, identity's instrumental and authoritarian manipulation, evident in Belarus, Russia, and Central Asia, has contributed to regime endurance but undermined ontological security and institutional resilience over time. These patterns are summarized in Table 1, which consolidates the dominant identity modernization strategies, key mechanisms, and stateness outcomes across all post-Soviet cases.

These patterns underscore that national identity is not a residual cultural feature but an instrument of statecraft with tangible consequences for stateness. Quantitative data from the V-Dem dataset, the World Values Survey, and Pew Research Center demonstrate that states with higher levels of "identity clarity" consistently report stronger legitimacy and bureaucratic capacity. Conversely, identity ambiguity correlates with contested sovereignty and weak governance.

The implications are twofold. First, inclusive and flexible identity narratives are essential for reconciling pluralism with social cohesion in heterogeneous societies. Second, external disruptions—such as wars, revolutions, or integration initiatives—serve as catalysts for identity rearticulation, underscoring its dynamic and contingent role in state formation.

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[61] Charles King, *The Moldovans: Romania, Russia, and the Politics of Culture* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2000).

[62] Pew Research Center, "European Public Opinion"; European Social Survey, *ESS Round 9 (2018/2019)*.

[63] Coppedge et al., *Varieties of Democracy (VDem) Dataset v13.*

Cross-national Patterns of Identity Modernization: A comparative analysis across post-Soviet states demonstrates three distinct trajectories of identity modernization, each with profound implications for sovereignty, state capacity, and international alignment.

First, states that successfully embedded memory-centered identity projects—notably the Baltic republics and Armenia—show higher resilience in democratic consolidation. In these cases, historical trauma (occupation, genocide, war) functions as a mobilizing framework that anchors legitimacy. However, while effective in securing sovereignty, this strategy risks ossifying exclusionary narratives that may limit pluralism.[64]

Second, examples such as post-2014 Ukraine and Kazakhstan's equilibrium-seeking approach illustrate how civic-inclusive identity models can more effectively accommodate diversity. Quantitative data from the V-Dem dataset v13 shows that states scoring higher on "identity clarity" and "civic inclusivity" also report stronger bureaucratic capacity and public trust in democratic institutions.[65] The Baltic states, for instance, consistently outperform their post-Soviet peers in Eurobarometer surveys measuring institutional trust and perceptions of governance quality.[66]

Third, in cases such as Belarus, Russia, and Turkmenistan, identity is instrumentalized in authoritarian ways, serving the purpose of regime endurance while undermining pluralistic consolidation and deepening ontological insecurity.[67] In such contexts, memory politics are not oriented toward reconciliation or inclusion but toward perpetuating centralized control. Russia's civilizational turn exemplifies this trajectory, embedding national identity in a project of external expansion and internal authoritarian consolidation.[68]

Taken together, these patterns suggest that national identity is not a cultural residue but a central mechanism of modern statecraft. Its articulation determines the quality of governance, the resilience of democratic institutions, and the credibility of sovereignty in a globalized system.

Migration as a Driver and Consequence of Identity Modernization: Both emigration and immigration have emerged as key facets of post-Soviet identity politics. The disintegration of Soviet borders set in motion large-scale mobility, with

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[64] David J. Smith et al., The Baltic States and Their Region: New Europe or Old? (London: Routledge, 2002).
[65] Coppedge et al., *Varieties of Democracy (VDem) Dataset v13.*
[66] European Commission, *Eurobarometer 97.3: Public Opinion in the European Union* (Brussels: Directorate-General for Communication, 2023).
[67] Stephen White and Ian McAllister, "Belarus, Ukraine and Russia: East or West?" *The British Journal of Politics and International Relations* 10, no. 2 (2008): 257–71.
[68] Laruelle, *Russian Eurasianism.*

migratory trends since the 1990s playing a decisive role in reshaping identity modernization. Emigration from Armenia, Georgia, and Moldova has functioned as a double-edged phenomenon. On the one hand, diasporas serve as crucial identity anchors abroad, sustaining national narratives through remittances, lobbying, and cultural reproduction.[69] On the other hand, mass emigration exacerbates demographic decline and institutional fragility, creating what scholars describe as "hollow sovereignty."[70] Armenia's engagement with the European Union trajectory in 2025 is both supported and complicated by its diaspora: while remittances contribute nearly 12 percent of GDP, continued outmigration raises critical concerns about demographic sustainability.[71]

Labor migration to Russia remains a dominant feature of Central Asia, particularly in Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, and Uzbekistan, where remittances contribute between 20-30 percent of GDP.[72] This dynamic reinforces dependency on Russian economic structures while simultaneously reshaping local identities: younger generations in these republics increasingly view migration as part of the life cycle, embedding hybridized identities that combine local tradition with transnational practices.[73]

The experience of forced migration and displacement has significantly transformed national narratives across the region. In Ukraine, identity formation accelerated after 2014 and even more so following the 2022 invasion, as millions were uprooted and internally displaced.[74] Similarly, the 2020 and 2023 wars in Nagorno-Karabakh generated large-scale displacement, with Armenians from Artsakh reconstituting identity frameworks around victimhood, exile, and cultural survival.[75] In Azerbaijan, by contrast, the return of displaced persons is now institutionalized as a state project, framing repopulation of Karabakh as the culmination of national restoration.

Although less significant in scale, immigration continues to affect identity trajectories. In the Baltic republics, the presence of large Russian-speaking communi-

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[69] Panossian, *The Armenians.*

[70] Neil Melvin, "Post-Soviet Migration and the Re-Making of the Central Asian States," *Europe-Asia Studies* 48, no. 7 (1996): 1011–39.

[71] World Bank, *Migration and Development Brief 37: Remittances and Development in Armenia* (Washington, DC: World Bank, 2025).

[72] Asian Development Bank, *Labor Migration in Central Asia: Patterns and Prospects* (Manila: ADB, 2024).

[73] Madeleine Reeves, *Border Work: Spatial Lives of the State in Rural Central Asia* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2014).

[74] Serhiy Kudelia, "The Maidan and Beyond: Ukraine's Identity and Civic Mobilization," *Journal of Democracy* 25, no. 3 (2014): 19–34.

[75] Armine Tigranyan, "Erasing Identity: Azerbaijan's Attack on Artsakh's Spiritual Heritage," *Regional Post*, July 10, 2025.

ties has posed complex questions of integration and civic inclusion. Their hybrid model of ethno-linguistic anchoring combined with civic inclusivity illustrates how immigration (or retained Soviet-era settlers) necessitated institutional innovation.[76]

Migration thus functions both as a catalyst and as an outcome of identity modernization. States that harness migration as a civic asset, via diaspora engagement, pluralistic governance, and inclusive integration, enhance their long-term legitimacy and resilience. Conversely, where migration exacerbates demographic decline or entrenches dependency, identity modernization remains fragile, vulnerable to external shocks and internal fractures.

The comparative evidence underscores that sovereignty in the 21st-century post-Soviet space is not reducible to territorial control; it is equally a function of demographic sustainability, diaspora engagement, and the management of transnational flows of people and ideas.

Table 1. Comparative Overview of Identity Modernization and Stateness in Post-Soviet States

Country / Cluster	Dominant Identity Modernization Strategy	Key Mechanisms (Indicators)	Stateness Level (by Peace Index) / Resulting Stateness Trajectory	Illustrative Features / Notes
Baltic States (Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania)	Civic-inclusive modernization anchored in European integration	Language reform; memory de-Sovietization; pluralist civic education; minority naturalization	**Sustainable /High stateness** - strong legitimacy, cohesion, and administrative capacity	Rapid institutional Europeanization; balanced ethno-linguistic core with civic pluralism
Ukraine	Civic redefinition through conflict-driven consolidation	De-communization and de-Russification; inclusive citizenship; education reform	**Fragile/ Strengthening stateness** - legitimacy and cohesion increased after 2014 and 2022	Wartime civic nationalism and democratic resilience
Moldova	Identity ambivalence between Romanianization and Moldovanism	Bilingual policy; memory contestation; geopolitical oscillation	**Fragile/ Fragile stateness** - low legitimacy, divided cohesion	Persistent identity cleavage; limited consolidation of national narrative

[76] Hilary Pilkington, "Migration, Discourse, and Identity in the Baltic States," *Europe-Asia Studies* 51, no. 1 (1999): 77–100.

Belarus	Neo-Soviet paternalism and symbolic continuity	Soviet nostalgia; linguistic Russification; media indoctrination	**Fragile/ Weakening stateness** - legitimacy crisis, low cohesion	Regime control sustains surface stability but erodes institutional trust
Russia	Civilizational and imperial identity reconstruction	"Russian World" doctrine; patriotic education; memory glorification	**Middle level of sustainability/ Authoritarian stateness** - high coercive capacity, fragile legitimacy	Identity instrumentalized for regime legitimation and expansionism
Kazakhstan	Balanced civic-ethnic modernization within elite-managed framework	Language Latinization; Assembly of Peoples of Kazakhstan; symbolic revival	**Middle level of sustainability/ Partial stateness** - stable legitimacy, moderate cohesion	Hybrid civic-ethnic model; moderate pluralism and international balancing
Uzbekistan	Personalized modernization through cultural revival	Mythic national founder (Tamerlane); selective reforms; centralized control	**Fragile / Controlled stateness** - stable capacity, limited legitimacy	Identity personalization under strong leadership; restricted pluralism
Turkmenistan	Cultic personalization of identity	Leader cult; ideological schooling; isolationist heritage policy	**Under the threat of failure / Brittle stateness** - coercive stability, low legitimacy	Identity monopolized by regime symbolism
Kyrgyzstan	Fragmented modernization under patronal pluralism	Competing regional elites; oscillating curricula; weak state capacity	**Fragile / Fragile stateness** - low cohesion and legitimacy	Identity fragmented along regional and tribal lines
Tajikistan	Post-conflict ethno-religious consolidation	Civil war memory; Islamic heritage framing; security-based legitimacy	**Fragile / Resilient authoritarian stateness** - strong control, limited pluralism	Identity shaped by war memory and regime securitization
Armenia	Heritage-based identity with civic transition attempts	Religious continuity; education reform; diaspora engagement	**Middle level of sustainability / Mixed stateness** - strong cohesion, moderate capacity	Deep civilizational identity; civic reinvention constrained by security trauma

Georgia	European civic modernization within historical tradition	Democratic reform; education/media pluralism; European alignment	**Middle level of sustainability / Evolving stateness** - high legitimacy, contested cohesion	Dual identity: Orthodox heritage vs civic modernity
Azerbaijan	State-manufactured nationalism with exclusionary framing	War memory; cult of leadership; education nationalism	**Middle level of sustainability / Stable but illiberal stateness** - strong capacity, low pluralism	Identity tied to territorial victory and regime consolidation

Conclusion

The comparative trajectories of identity modernization across the post-Soviet space demonstrate that national identity is a central instrument of statecraft rather than a mere cultural residue. Its articulation - through memory politics, civic inclusion, or instrumental authoritarianism directly influences state capacity, legitimacy, and resilience in the face of internal and external challenges.

Three key insights emerge. First, identity rooted in historical memory provides resilience against external threats but can entrench exclusivist narratives that limit pluralism. Second, civic-inclusive approaches, which balance historical consciousness with inclusive citizenship and responsive governance, strengthen state legitimacy and social cohesion. Third, the instrumental use of identity by authoritarian regimes secures short-term stability but often undermines long-term institutional capacity and societal trust.

Migration, whether voluntary or forced, plays a crucial role in shaping the trajectories of identity. Diaspora communities, remittances, and population mobility influence national narratives and state legitimacy, while displacement and resettlement can catalyze the rearticulation of collective identity, highlighting the dynamic interplay between demographic change and political cohesion.

Ultimately, post-Soviet experiences reveal that state sovereignty in the twenty-first century depends not solely on military or economic power but on the ability of states to construct, adapt, and sustain inclusive and coherent national identities. The success of identity modernization hinges on balancing memory with pluralism, tradition with civic inclusivity, and national narratives with global integration. States that achieve this balance are better positioned to consolidate authority, cultivate social cohesion, and navigate the uncertainties of a complex geopolitical environment.

While this article provides a panoramic comparative framework, future research will extend this inquiry through in-depth case studies of selected states to further explore the causal mechanisms identified here.

Conflict of Interests

The author declares no ethical issues or conflicts of interest in this research.

Ethical Standards

The author affirms this research did not involve human subjects.

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MANUFACTURING THE ENEMY: ARMENOPHOBIA AND THE CONSTRUCTION OF NATIONAL IDENTITY IN POST-SOVIET AZERBAIJAN

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Abstract

This article examines the role of Armenophobia in the construction of national identity in Azerbaijan. It argues that the Azerbaijani national identity has been shaped not through affirmative civic or ethnic principles, but rather through a sustained campaign of "negative nationalism" — a nation-building project defined predominantly by hostility toward the Armenians. Drawing on political discourse analysis, state policy review, and examples from elite rhetoric, the study illustrates how Armenophobia functions as a tool of authoritarian consolidation, ideological substitution, and historical revisionism. The Azerbaijani regime has cultivated an image of Armenians as existential enemies to justify both domestic repression and external aggression, presenting itself as the sole protector of the Azerbaijani nation. The article situates this phenomenon within broader theoretical discussions of ontological insecurity, post-imperial identity crises, and authoritarian statecraft in the post-Soviet space. By framing Armenophobia as a strategic instrument for regime legitimacy and societal mobilization, the study contributes to a deeper understanding of the politics of memory, nationalism by negation, and conflict-driven identity formation in transitional political systems.

Keywords: *Turkism, Azerbaijanism, Azerbaijani Citizenship, Armenophobia, national identity.*

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Introduction

The dissolution of the Soviet Union in 1991 placed Azerbaijan at a critical juncture of state- and nation-building. Independence demanded the forging of new political institutions, but equally urgent was the creation of a coherent national identity capable of uniting a diverse society under a single political framework. From the outset, the search for identity in Azerbaijan was shaped not only by internal debates between civic Azerbaijanism and ethnically oriented Turkism, but also by the existential confrontation with Armenia over Nagorno-Karabakh. The combination of territorial conflict, fragile institutions, and competing ideological legacies created fertile ground for the emergence of a particular form of nationalism that was less defined by positive values than by hostility toward an external enemy.

This article argues that Armenophobia has been central to the consolidation of Azerbaijani national identity in the post-Soviet era. Rather than developing around inclusive civic principles or a clear ethnic project, Azerbaijani nationalism has relied on what may be termed negative nationalism: a framework of belonging constructed through systematic opposition to the Armenians. By portraying Armenians as existential enemies, Azerbaijani elites have mobilized society, suppressed dissent, and legitimized authoritarian governance. This strategy, far from being a temporary wartime expedient, has become institutionalized across education, media, and cultural production, embedding enmity at the level of everyday consciousness.

The trajectory of Azerbaijani nationalism cannot be understood without examining the interplay between Turkism, Azerbaijanism, and Azerbaijani citizenship identities. Ayaz Mutallibov's vision was less centered on cultivating a distinct Azerbaijani identity and more aligned with the Soviet framework, which emphasized the label "Turk" for Azerbaijanis while simultaneously suppressing broader Turkish cultural affiliations. Abulfaz Elchibey's short-lived reliance on Turkism in the early 1990s highlighted the appeal of pan-Turkic solidarity but failed to address the country's internal diversity. Heydar Aliyev's subsequent promotion of Azerbaijanism as state ideology introduced a civic vocabulary of tolerance and multiculturalism, yet in practice, it was interwoven with an exclusionary logic directed at Armenians. Under Ilham Aliyev, this synthesis hardened into a durable state project: a nationalism that speaks the language of Azerbaijani citizenship while cultivating Armenophobia domestically as a unifying and mobilizing force.

By situating Azerbaijan's trajectory within theoretical debates on nationalism by negation, ontological insecurity, and authoritarian statecraft, the article contributes to the comparative study of identity formation in transitional systems. It suggests that Armenophobia in Azerbaijan is not merely a cultural byproduct of con-

flict but a deliberate political instrument, one that sustains authoritarian rule, legitimizes external aggression, and forecloses opportunities for reconciliation.

Pre-Soviet and Soviet Background of Azerbaijani Identity Formation

Until the proclamation of the Azerbaijan Democratic Republic in 1918, the population now known as Azerbaijanis was commonly referred to in Russian imperial sources as Tatars or Caucasian Tatars.[1] A distinct conception of an "Azerbaijani nation" in the modern sense was absent. Azerbaijan first emerged as a political entity in 1918 with the proclamation of the Democratic Republic of Azerbaijan (1918–1920). However, this short-lived state failed to secure formal recognition from the League of Nations[2] The duality between Turkic nationalism and Islamic universalism was reflected in the famous dictum of Muhammad Amin Rasulzade, founder of the First Republic of Azerbaijan: "Turkify, Islamize, Europeanize."[3] This slogan epitomized the dialectical character of early Azerbaijani national consciousness: a modernist enterprise seeking reform and progress, yet ideologically moored in the transnational imaginaries of Turkism and Islam. Hence, the nationalism that developed in the pre-Soviet context was not an autonomous state-centered phenomenon, but a composite formation situated at the intersection of Pan-Turkist and Pan-Islamist discourses.[4]

With the Soviet takeover, these early nationalist currents were abruptly curtailed. In the early decades of Soviet rule, Azerbaijani identity virtually disappeared as an official category. Most people continued to identify themselves primarily as Muslims, while family, clan, and tribal ties remained crucial.[5] The absence of a clearly defined Azerbaijani identity was evident even at the institutional level. Between 1922 and 1956, the official language of the Azerbaijan Soviet Socialist Republic was still designated as Turkish.[6]

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[1] Harun Yilmaz, *National Identities in Soviet Historiography: The Rise of Nations Under Stalin* (Routledge, 2015), 17.
[2] Anzhela Mnatsakanyan, "The territorial integrity of Azerbaijan has nothing in common with Nagorno-Karabakh," *Greek city times*, November 20, 2020, https://greekcitytimes.com/2020/11/26/azerbaijan-nagorno-karabakh-common.
[3] Brenda Shaffer, *Borders and Brethren: Iran and the Challenge of Azerbaijani Identity*, (MIT Press, 2002), 38.
[4] Hrair Dekmejian and Hovann Simonian, *Troubled Waters: The Geopolitics of the Caspian Region* (I.B.Tauris, 2001) 63.
[5] Emil Souleimanov, *Understanding Ethnopolitical Conflict: Karabakh, South Ossetia, and Abkhazia Wars Reconsidered* (Palgrave Macmillan, 2013), 140.
[6] Altay Goyushov, "The Language of Azerbaijan: Turkish or Azerbaijani?" Baku Research Institute, September 26, 2018, https://bakuresearchinstitute.org/azerbaijani-turk-dili-yoxsa-az%C9%99rbaycan-dili/.

During the 1930s, however, Moscow sought to delimit Azerbaijani identity in more precise terms. Stalinist nationality policy aimed to foster a specifically Azerbaijani national identity, in part to reduce the cultural and political influence of Türkiye.[7] This process, often described by scholars as a fusion of European romantic-nationalist tropes with Soviet nation-building from above was far from straightforward.[8] Language reform, including successive changes in script, from Arabic to Latin, then to Cyrillic, and eventually back to Latin, produced a recurring "identity crisis" among speakers and fractured the continuity of cultural transmission.

During the final decades of the Soviet Union, Azerbaijani identity was officially codified within the ideological apparatus of the state, though its foundations remained tenuous. The sense of national continuity often depended on carefully curated cultural symbols such as music, poetry, and folklore, which Soviet authorities elevated to lend the republic historical depth. The city of Shushi in Nagorno-Karabakh, for example, was promoted in Soviet narratives as the "birthplace of Azerbaijani musicians and poets."[9] This symbolic framing was later to acquire explosive significance during the independence movement of the late 1980s.

The first large-scale demonstrations in Soviet Azerbaijan broke out in November 1988, triggered by rumors that authorities planned to cut down the Topkhana forest near Shushi to build an aluminum plant.[10] Although presented as an environmental concern, the dispute was inseparable from the ethnic tensions already mounting in Nagorno-Karabakh. In nationalist discourse, then as now, natural objects such as forests, rivers, and mountains are framed as integral to the wealth and dignity of the nation. Any harm inflicted upon them, especially when attributed to an "other" community, tends to be reinterpreted as a symbolic act of humiliation. In this sense, the alleged destruction of the Topkhana forest functioned as a catalyst for mass mobilization in Baku.[11]

From a theoretical perspective, these early protests can be situated within Ernesto Laclau's framework of populism. According to Laclau, unfulfilled social demands, when aggregated, create the possibility of a broader collective identity.[12] The Topkhana protests began as "democratic demands," expressed through specific and limited claims within the existing political framework, but soon evolved into

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[7] Goyushov, "The Language of Azerbaijan."
[8] Maxim Tabachnik, *Citizenship, Territoriality, and Post-Soviet Nationhood: The Politics of Birthright Citizenship in Azerbaijan, Georgia, and Moldova* (Palgrave Macmillan, 2019), 142–64.
[9] Thomas de Waal, *The Caucasus: An Introduction* (Oxford University Press, 2018) 99–133.
[10] de Waal, *The Caucasus*, 83.
[11] George Meneshian, "Exploring the Azerbaijani National Identity: a historical analysis," *Institute of Middle East, Central Asia and Caucasus Studies*, 4 February 2021, https://mecacs.wp.st-andrews.ac.uk/2021/exploring-the-azerbaijani-national-identity-a-historical-analysis/.
[12] Ernesto Laclau, *On Populist Reason* (Verso, 2005), 86.

"popular demands" that crystallized broader social and national grievances. This transformation gave rise to a discourse marked by antagonism and the affirmation of national identity. As in Armenia, where environmental and cultural issues initially animated the Karabakh movement, ecological concerns in Azerbaijan soon transformed into nationalist populism.

These conditions laid the ground for the first explicitly anti-Armenian violence: the Sumgait pogrom of February 1988. For three days, dozens of ethnic Armenians were killed, with hundreds injured or displaced. Soviet officials later linked the events directly to the escalating situation in Nagorno-Karabakh.[13] As Thomas de Waal has argued, Sumgait represented "the first violent fission of a 'Soviet' identity."[14] It marked both a shocking rupture in the late Soviet political order and a precedent for ethnically charged violence within the Union at a time when Gorbachev's perestroika reforms had encouraged greater openness. In Azerbaijan, the events fueled an anti-Armenian narrative that increasingly served as a unifying discourse. The mobilization that followed soon coalesced into the Meydan ("Square") Movement, named after Baku's Lenin (later Freedom) Square, where massive demonstrations took place. Initially, the Meydan Movement echoed socialist and internationalist rhetoric. Slogans such as "Long live Lenin's national policy" or "The USSR is one country; we will not allow its division" highlighted the movement's ambiguous position within the Soviet framework. Yet, as nationalist sentiments intensified, these slogans were gradually replaced by explicitly separatist and irredentist calls: "Long live independent Azerbaijan," "We have two eyes—one is Baku, the other is Tabriz," and, most enduringly, "We will die but never give up Karabakh." The shift illustrates the discursive rearticulation of Azerbaijani identity from Soviet internationalism toward an antagonistic nationalism defined largely in opposition to Armenians.[15] The trajectory of the late Soviet Azerbaijani identity was thus deeply shaped by this antagonistic discourse. Through slogans, poetry, and populist speeches, the national "Self," articulated as Azerbaijani Turkic identity, was constructed in direct relation to the notion of "lost lands" and the contested symbol of Karabakh. This antagonistic framework, later institutionalized through the Meydan Movement, created fertile ground for the consolidation of Armenophobia as a defining component of Azerbaijani nationalism.

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[13] Mark Beissinger, *Nationalist Mobilization and the Collapse of the Soviet State* (Cambridge University Press, 2009), 298.

[14] Thomas De Waal, *Black Garden: Armenia and Azerbaijan through Peace and War* (New York University Press, 2003) 37.

[15] Bahruz Samadov and Mane Grigoryan, "Formation of Discourses of National Identity in Armenia and Azerbaijan: from the Path to Independence to Nationalist Hegemony," *Journal of Conflict Transformation*, September 23, 2022, https://caucasusedition.net/formation-of-discourses-of-national-identity-in-armenia-and-azerbaijan-from-the-path-to-independence-to-nationalist-hegemony/

The subsequent escalation only deepened this antagonism. Between January 13–15, 1990, radical nationalists in Baku carried out another pogrom, killing approximately 90 Armenians. Within Azerbaijani memory, however, these events were quickly overshadowed by "Black January." For many Azerbaijanis, Black January became the founding moment of independence—at once a day of grief and a source of national pride.[16] Yet, significantly, the ethnic pogroms of the same period were downplayed or reframed, while the nationalist narrative focused on the violence of the Soviet state.

In this sense, the late Soviet period was not merely a moment of national awakening but also one of selective memory. The construction of Azerbaijani identity relied on a dual process: the glorification of victimhood at the hands of imperial powers and the demonization of Armenians as existential adversaries. This discursive foundation would later be amplified and institutionalized under the leadership of Heydar Aliyev and, subsequently, his son Ilham Aliyev, where Armenophobia became not just a byproduct of conflict but a central pillar of national identity and regime legitimacy.

Post-Soviet Azerbaijan: Armenophobia Between Turkism, Azerbaijanism, and Azerbaijani Citizenship Identities

The years following Azerbaijan's independence in 1991 were marked by competition between two ideological currents: Azerbaijanism and Turkism. This tension reflected deeper struggles over how to define the nation in the aftermath of the Soviet collapse.

Initially, Ayaz Mutallibov's conceptualization of Azerbaijani identity was deeply embedded within the Soviet ideological framework, emphasizing the primacy of a unified state over the articulation of a distinct national identity. His approach did not seek to construct an independent notion of "Azerbaijani" identity but rather sustained the Soviet paradigm, which classified Azerbaijanis under the generalized label of "Turks" while simultaneously restricting overt cultural and historical connections to Türkiye. Following the dissolution of the Soviet Union in 1991, however, this framework rapidly lost relevance. In its place emerged a more autonomous and distinctly formulated Azerbaijani identity, one that moved beyond both Soviet-era homogenization and a purely Turkic definition, thereby reflecting the broader political and cultural transformations of the post-Soviet period.[17]

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[16] Elisabeth Militz and Carolin Schurr, "Affective Nationalism: Banalities of Belonging in Azerbaijan," *Political Geography* 54 (2016): 58, https://doi.org/10.1016/j.polgeo.2015.11.002.

[17] Narmin Guliyeva, "The Evolution of National Identity and Nationalism in Azerbaijan (1900–2018)" (MA thesis, Middle East Technical University, September 9, 2022), https://open.metu.edu.tr/handle/11511/99415.

The short-lived presidency of Abulfaz Elchibey (1992–1993) sought to anchor Azerbaijani identity within the framework of Turkism.[18] His government emphasized ethnic kinship with Anatolian Turks and even renamed the official state language as "Turkish." Such steps highlighted a vision of nationhood rooted in pan-Turkic solidarity rather than civic inclusivity. However, Elchibey's defeat in the First Karabakh War, combined with the fragility of state institutions, diminished the appeal of this ethnic nationalism.

Upon assuming power in 1993, Heydar Aliyev initiated a deliberate reorientation of national discourse. Seeking stability and national cohesion, Aliyev reinstated the term "Azerbaijani language" and elevated Azerbaijanism to the level of official state ideology.[19] Unlike Turkism, Azerbaijanism was a civic and territorial doctrine, emphasizing unity across ethnic and religious lines within the boundaries of the republic.[20] The choice was strategic. Azerbaijan in the early 1990s faced immense pressures of state-building, regional insecurity, and social fragmentation.[21] A narrowly ethnic definition of the nation risked deepening internal divisions, especially given Azerbaijan's multi-ethnic composition. Azerbaijanism, by contrast, provided a more inclusive framework that could be institutionalized through state policy and official discourse.[22] Still, Turkism did not disappear. Türkiye had been the first state to recognize Azerbaijan's independence, and cultural-linguistic ties between the two nations remained strong. The slogan "One Nation, Two States," coined by Heydar Aliyev, epitomized this dual structure. Azerbaijanism operated as the formal state doctrine, whereas Turkism persisted as a powerful undercurrent shaping public sentiment and guiding foreign policy.[23] In this sense, Azerbaijan's national identity since independence has remained hybrid.

Civic Azerbaijanism became the official doctrine, but Turkist references persisted in public rhetoric, cultural life, and regional diplomacy.[24] The interplay be-

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[18] Tabachnik, *Citizenship, Territoriality, and Post-Soviet Nationhood*, 142–64.

[19] Levon Hovsepyan and Artyom Tonoyan, "Sustaining Conflict: Identity, Ontological (In)Security, and Azerbaijan's Policy Toward Armenia after the 2020 Nagorno-Karabakh War," *Small Wars & Insurgencies*, March 25, 2025, https://doi.org/10.1080/09592318.2025.2480690.

[20] Nina Krickel-Choi, "State Personhood and Ontological Security as a Framework of Existence: Moving beyond Identity, Discovering Sovereignty," *Cambridge Review of International Affairs*, August 9, 2022, https://doi.org/10.1080/09557571.2022.2108761.

[21] Jennifer Mitzen, "Ontological security in world politics," *European Journal of International Relations*, September 1, 2006, https://doi.org/10.1177/1354066106067346.

[22] Lamiya Panahova, "One Nation – Two States Indeed? Turkish Soft Power and the National Identity Dynamics in Azerbaijan after the Karabakh War," The Hague Research Institute, April 2025, https://hagueresearch.org/one-nation-two-states-indeed-turkish-soft-power-and-the-national-identity-dynamics-in-azerbaijan-after-the-karabakh-war/.

[23] Panahova, "One Nation – Two States Indeed?"

[24] Ceylan Tokluoğlu, "Definitions of National Identity, Nationalism and Ethnicity in Post-Soviet Azerbaijan in the 1990s," *Ethnic and Racial Studies*, August 15, 2006,

tween these two ideologies reveals both the fluidity and the contested nature of nation-building in post-Soviet Azerbaijan.[25] Since the 1990s, Pan-Turkism has made a return to Azerbaijan, once again challenging the framework of territorial nationalism. The high point of this revival was the rise to power of Abulfaz Elchibey in 1992, a nationalist and pan-Turkist leader who had long argued that Azerbaijanis were part of the broader Turkic nation.[26] Yet his government proved short-lived. Following Azerbaijan's defeat in the First Karabakh War and the deepening of internal instability, Elchibey was overthrown in 1993 and replaced by Heydar Aliyev, who redefined the ideological orientation of the state. The Popular Front of Azerbaijan (PFA), led by Elchibey, had been central to propagating Turkism in the late Soviet and early independence years. Formed in 1988, just before the dissolution of the USSR, the movement evolved from a discussion circle of nationalist intellectuals into a mass political force demanding independence.[27] Importantly, it was not a top-down nationalist ideology that brought the people into the streets. Rather, collective action itself created a new sense of belonging. Through protests, rallies, and demonstrations, ordinary citizens redefined their identity, transcending the traditional boundaries of clan, family, and region.[28]

The consolidation of Azerbaijanism during Aliyev's rule made it possible to stabilize the fragile state and gave the regime a unifying ideological framework.[29] At the same time, Turkism remained present in everyday life and popular imagination. By the late 1990s, Turkish television channels had become widely accessible across Azerbaijan. With few domestic alternatives, particularly in rural areas, Turkish programming quickly dominated. Compared to the heavily censored state media, Turkish channels offered colorful series, films, music videos, and news programs that were far more appealing to viewers. Many adults came to understand Turkish fluently, while younger generations acquired near-native speaking skills. This exposure reshaped cultural horizons and produced a stronger sense of close-

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https://doi.org/10.1080/01419870500092951; Elyse Semerdjian, "Gazafication and Genocide by Attrition in Artsakh/Nagorno-Karabakh," *Journal of Genocide Research*, July 17, 2024, https://doi.org/10.1080/14623528.2024.2377871.

[25] Ilgam Abbasov et al., "Ethnic Groups and Conflicts in the South Caucasus and Turkey," *Caucasus Edition – Journal of Conflict Transformation*, February 1, 2016, https://caucasusedition.net/ethnic-groups-and-conflicts-in-the-south-caucasus-and-turkey/.

[26] Tabachnik, *Citizenship, Territoriality, and Post-Soviet Nationhood*, 142–64.

[27] Tokluoğlu, "Definitions of National Identity…," 2006.

[28] Umut Uzer, "Nagorno-Karabakh in Regional and World Politics: A Case Study for Nationalism, Realism and Ethnic Conflict," *Journal of Muslim Minority Affairs*, June 2012, https://doi.org/10.1080/13602004.2012.694668.

[29] Ayça Ergun, "Citizenship, National Identity, and Nation-Building in Azerbaijan: Between the Legacy of the Past and the Spirit of Independence," *Nationalities Papers*, July 2022, https://doi.org/10.1017/nps.2020.81.

ness with Türkiye.[30] Here, Michael Billig's concept of banal nationalism is particularly relevant. Everyday references to "we," "our," and "motherland" in Turkish broadcasts, the omnipresence of Turkish flags, and the circulation of patriotic songs and imagery acted as constant reminders of a wider Turkish belonging.[31] This was reinforced in popular culture: nearly every football fan in Azerbaijan supported one of Istanbul's major teams, and during international tournaments, Turkish flags were waved in the streets as though representing a second home. Turkish media discussions about the shared origins of Azerbaijanis and Anatolian Turks further encouraged this identification. Bookstores also began filling their shelves with Turkish-language publications, deepening the cultural overlap. In this way, Turkism, even when not an official state ideology, permeated everyday practices and identities.

Religion provided another layer of complexity. Despite the secularism inherited from the Soviet system, Azerbaijan remained a predominantly Muslim country with a Shia majority and an expanding Sunni minority.[32] However, that sectarian divisions are often overstated; for most Azerbaijanis, religious identity is expressed simply as "Muslim," without reference to denominational differences.[33] While the process of Islamization has been gradual, it nonetheless represents an undercurrent that may increasingly influence Azerbaijani identity in the long term.[34] For now, secularism and Islam continue to coexist in a pragmatic balance, shaping identity in subtle ways.[35]

Popular discourse of the 1990s also revealed how Turkism and nationalism were woven into cultural production. A striking example is the rap song "Either Karabakh or Death" (1999) by the group Dayirman, which invoked jihad and portrayed Karabakh as a sacred cause.[36] Similarly, the 2001 poem by conservative Shia poet Baba Punhan sacralized the loss of Karabakh and infused it with a sense of religious duty. These cultural texts reinforced the representation of Karabakh as a sacred land and depicted Armenians as a cruel and unrelenting enemy. During

[30] Meneshian, "Exploring the Azerbaijani National Identity."
[31] Michael Billig, *Banal Nationalism* (Sage, 1995), 175.
[32] Svante E. Cornell, Halil Karaveli, and Boris Ajeganov, *Azerbaijan's Formula: Secular Governance and Civic Nationhood* (Silk Road Paper, 2016), 74.
[33] Dobrosława Wiktor-Mach, *Religious Revival and Secularism in Post-Soviet Azerbaijan* (De Gruyter, 2017), 71.
[34] Irina Ghaplanyan, "Empowering and Engaging Civil Society in Conflict Resolution: The Case of Nagorno-Karabakh," *International Negotiation*, January 1, 2010, https://doi.org/10.1163/157180610X488191.
[35] Cornell, Karaveli, and Ajeganov, *Azerbaijan's Formula*, 76.
[36] Cameron S. Brown, "Wanting to Have Their Cake and Their Neighbor's Too: Azerbaijani Attitudes toward Karabakh and Iranian Azerbaijan," *The Middle East Journal* 58, no. 4 (Autumn 2004): 576–96, https://www.jstor.org/stable/4330064.

Aliyev's presidency, official discourse reproduced these motifs: Karabakh was presented as holy, atrocities attributed to Armenians were emphasized, while Azerbaijani pogroms were either denied or rationalized through conspiracy narratives. Within this framework, diplomacy was increasingly portrayed as futile, given the enemy's allegedly deceitful and inhuman character.[37]

Foreign policy developments reinforced these ideological dynamics. While Bülent Ecevit's government in Türkiye during the 1990s had sought close relations with the Turkic world and Azerbaijan in particular, the rise of the Justice and Development Party (JDP) in 2002 brought initial distance.[38] The JDP prioritized former Ottoman lands and Islamic solidarity, and while cooperation with Azerbaijan continued in energy and neighborhood policy, the emphasis was less on pan-Turkism than under Elchibey. Still, the foundations of "One Nation – Two States" were never abandoned, and cultural identification with Türkiye remained strong.[39]

Finally, the redefinition of the "Other" also evolved in this period. In Soviet times, Azerbaijani expansionist narratives focused largely on Iran, framed through the fabricated idea of "Southern Azerbaijan" as a divided homeland. In the post-Soviet years, however, Armenia came to occupy this role as so-called "Western Azerbaijan."[40] Heydar Aliyev's doctrine muted overt irredentism toward Iran, understanding its destabilizing potential, but his government nevertheless cultivated pseudo-historical narratives delegitimizing Armenia's existence. A revealing episode occurred in 1999, when state institutions encouraged the production of historical works aimed at the falsification of history and 'proving' that Armenian lands had historically belonged to Azerbaijan, thereby providing ideological resources for future generations. This directive embedded irredentist thinking into academic and cultural production, ensuring its reproduction beyond immediate politics.[41] A major milestone was reached in 2001, when Azerbaijanism was officially declared the state ideology at the first Congress of World Azerbaijanis.[42]

Aliyev's model of Azerbaijani citizenship strengthened internal unity and extended its reach beyond the republic, focusing particularly on Azerbaijani communities in Iran. At the same time, Armenians continued to be defined as the nation's

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[37] Samadov and Grigoryan, "Formation of Discourses of National Identity…," 2022.
[38] Thomas Goltz, *Azerbaijan Diary: A Rogue Reporter's Adventures in an Oil-Rich, War-Torn, Post-Soviet Republic* (1998), 34.
[39] Panahova, "One Nation – Two States Indeed?"
[40] Hovsepyan and Tonoyan, "Sustaining Conflict…," 2025.
[41] Laurence Broers, "Perspectives | Augmented Azerbaijan? The Return of Azerbaijani Irredentism," *Eurasianet*, August 5, 2021, https://eurasianet.org/perspectives-augmented-azerbaijan-the-return-of-azerbaijani-irredentism.
[42] Hamid Ahmadi, *The Clash of Nationalisms: Iranian Response to Baku's Irredentism* (Oxford University Press, 2017), 112.

primary 'Other'. This image of a common adversary allowed the regime to integrate Azerbaijan's diverse ethnic and regional groups under a single narrative. From an identity-theoretical perspective, this oppositional framing provided the cohesion, legitimacy, and mobilizing energy that sustained the national project. The interplay between civic Azerbaijanism, cultural Turkism, and anti-Armenian sentiment ultimately shaped the consolidated form of Azerbaijani identity in the early 2000s.

Since 2003, the consolidated notion of Azerbaijanism has served as the basis for a civic understanding of national identity and an inclusive model of citizenship. This framework has been officially promoted as multicultural, tolerant, and secular, drawing upon elements that have been historically present in both pre-Soviet and Soviet Azerbaijani society. Within this state-sponsored interpretation, independence itself is framed as a supreme value: building a new state became a source of collective pride, while territorial belonging rather than ethnicity was emphasized as the foundation of identity. Although the ethnic roots of Azerbaijanis were not openly promoted, they remained embedded at the core of the citizenship concept. Turkish origins were acknowledged as complementary to Azerbaijani Citizenship rather than contradictory, and references to Turkic kinship were presented as peacefully coexisting with the civic-territorial model. Nevertheless, this balance remained fragile. As one Azerbaijani filmmaker, Teymur Hajiyev, remarked: "We speak Russian, our names are Islamic or Persian, we try to be Turkish. We have a Frankenstein culture. We haven't figured out what it means to be Azerbaijani."[43] His comment captures the hybridity and contradictions at the heart of Azerbaijan's post-Soviet identity discourse.

Ilham Aliyev, who succeeded his father Heydar in 2003, inherited this ideological framework but adapted it to the realities of his own rule. Like his father, he relied heavily on state-directed nation-building, but under his leadership, Azerbaijan combined Azerbaijanism with increasing elements of cultural spectacle, prestige politics, and authoritarian consolidation. Flush with oil revenues, Aliyev sought to project Azerbaijan onto the global stage. Baku became the host of major international events such as the World Chess Olympiad, the European Games, the United Nations Climate Change Conference, and the Eurovision Song Contest; Formula 1 races were staged annually; and bids were made, though unsuccessful, for the Olympic Games. Global luxury hotel chains established branches in the capital, and lavish architectural projects, from an ultramodern airport to war memorials and futuristic shopping centers, were presented as symbols of national moder-

[43] Bruce Schoenfeld, "This Ancient Silk Road City Is Now a Modern Marvel," *National Geographic*, April 10, 2018, https://www.nationalgeographic.com/travel/article/photos-pictures-baku.

nity.[44] These efforts were part of a deliberate strategy to craft an image of Azerbaijan as both historically rooted and globally relevant.

Yet beneath this civic facade, Armenophobia remained a defining element of identity. Far from diminishing, it was further reinforced under Ilham Aliyev's rule. For over thirty years, Azerbaijani policy toward Armenia has been characterized by coercion, aggression, and hostility. Persistent hate speech, state propaganda, and the glorification of violence against Armenians eroded the social foundations necessary for reconciliation. The 2020 war further entrenched this trajectory: although framed as a "victory," it was accompanied by intensified propaganda portraying Armenians as existential enemies, thus undermining the possibility of trust and dialogue.[45]

Scholars often describe Heydar Aliyev's conceptualization of Azerbaijanism as a revival of Soviet-era Azerbaijanism, yet with notable adaptations. His project distanced Azerbaijan from both Türkiye and Iran, seeking instead to consolidate a distinct state-centric ideology. Aliyev redefined Azerbaijanism as a unifying formula suited to the geopolitical realities of independence. Retaining its emphasis on fabricated "territorial unity", Azerbaijanism positioned the term "Azerbaijani" as a marker of shared belonging for all citizens, regardless of ethnicity. At the same time, this inclusivity was secured by redefining the Armenian 'Other' as the central adversary, around which solidarity could be mobilized. The regime disseminated postulates such as "we are all martyrs in Karabakh" and "we gave, we shed blood", embedding a collective memory of sacrifice into public discourse and ensuring that Armenophobia served as a glue binding Azerbaijan's heterogeneous population.[46]

Ilham Aliyev further developed this framework. In his inauguration speech, he underscored the role of Azerbaijanism as the guiding ideology of the state, while simultaneously highlighting external threats as existential challenges.[47] Such framing not only legitimized the regime's policies but also perpetuated ontological insecurity within Azerbaijani society.[48] The enemy image of Armenians provided a convenient mechanism for containing internal diversity, especially the potential separatism of non-Turkic Muslim groups such as Talysh, Tats, Kurds, and Lezgins. By positioning Armenians as the universal adversary, the regime reinforced unity

[44] Schoenfeld, "This Ancient Silk Road City Is Now a Modern Marvel."
[45] Roza Melkumyan, "Baku's Hostility Has Not Abated since the Fall of Nagorno-Karabakh," *Freedom House*, November 30, 2023, https://freedomhouse.org/article/bakus-hostility-has-not-abated-fall-nagorno-karabakh.
[46] Hovsepyan and Tonoyan, "Sustaining Conflict…," 2025.
[47] "Inauguration Ceremony of Ilham Aliyev Was Held," Office of the President of the Republic of Azerbaijan, February 14, 2024, https://president.az/en/articles/view/63979.
[48] Broers, "Augmented Azerbaijan?"

among these groups and simultaneously advanced discriminatory policies of assimilation.[49]

In this period, Armenophobia transcended the domain of propaganda and assumed an institutionalized form within state policy. Across educational, media, and cultural spheres, Armenians were consistently represented as deceitful, violent, and fundamentally incompatible with peaceful coexistence. From textbooks and children's stories to official speeches and televised news, these depictions sustained a pervasive culture of enmity.[50] The political elite used this constructed threat to mobilize society and suppress dissent, casting Ilham Aliyev as the "protector" and "father" of the nation.[51] Documentation by the Office of the Nagorno-Karabakh Ombudsman since 2016 has highlighted the unprecedented normalization of such extremist rhetoric, noting its pervasiveness across all segments of Azerbaijani society.[52]

The escalation of Armenophobia was starkly evident during and after the 2020 war. A joint report by the Ombudsmen of Nagorno-Karabakh and Armenia documented organized hate speech by Azerbaijani officials and public figures, including targeting Armenian children. The public record contains numerous instances of explicit dehumanization and calls for violence against Armenians emanating from Azerbaijani state officials, political actors, and prominent cultural and sporting figures, phenomena that this study situates within a broader, state-aligned discourse of Armenophobia. These statements and actions fall into several interrelated categories: (1) delegitimization of Armenia as a political and territorial entity; (2) exhortations to, and public praise of, violence against Armenians; (3) vilification of Armenian civilians, including children and women on social media and other public fora; and (4) official impunity and state-level endorsement of perpetrators of extreme violence.

First, explicit delegitimization of the Armenian state and people has been voiced at the highest levels of power. For example, the President of Azerbaijan declared that "Armenia as a country is of no value. It is actually a colony, an outpost

[49] Hovsepyan and Tonoyan, "Sustaining Conflict…," 2025.
[50] Anzhela Mnatsakanyan, "Armenophobia in Azerbaijani schools" (@Anzhela_Yan, Mar 26), https://x.com/ANZHELA_YAN/status/1640037860647616512.
[51] Anzhela Elibegova, "Armenophobia in Azerbaijan: Causes and Effects," *EVN Report*, May 9, 2017, https://evnreport.com/politics/armenophobia-in-azerbaijan-causes-and-effects/.
[52] Human Rights Defender (Ombudsman), *Interim Public Report: Atrocities Committed by Azerbaijani Military Forces against the Civilian Population of the Nagorno-Karabakh Republic and Servicemen of the Nagorno-Karabakh Defence Army on 2–5 April 2016* (April 2016), https://anca.org/assets/graphics/2016/Public-Report-Ombudsman-of-NKR.pdf.

run from abroad, a territory artificially created on ancient Azerbaijani lands."[53] This rhetorical frame serves to negate Armenian sovereignty and to justify political and territorial claims in quasi-existential terms.

Second, violent exhortations and direct calls to kill Armenians have appeared in public statements by political actors and influential public personalities. A member of the Azerbaijani parliament affiliated with the ruling party has been quoted as rejecting negotiation and calling instead for continued operations "to destroy them,"[54] language that frames armed extermination as a legitimate policy objective. Similarly, a media-linked representative of Qarabag football club asserted, "We must kill Armenians. No matter whether a woman, a child, an old man. We must kill everyone we can…"[55]—a statement that normalizes mass violence and was widely circulated and condemned.

Third, the vilification of civilian populations extends to targeted threats against Armenian children and women on social media platforms, where users have openly advocated killing mothers and children and promoted other forms of cruelty. Across social media, posts, polls, and other interactive formats form not isolated acts of hostility but a broader ecosystem that fuels and legitimizes calls for violence against a different group.[56]

Fourth, the state's response to atrocity has at times signaled implicit or explicit approval of perpetrators, thereby entrenching a culture of impunity. Ramil Safarov's 2004 murder of Lieutenant Gurgen Margaryan in Budapest, followed by his extradition to Azerbaijan and subsequent pardon and promotion, serves as a striking example of how violence was publicly reframed and rewarded.[57] Azerbaijani officials and other public figures publicly praised Safarov following his return, and the subsequent European Court of Human Rights judgment in Makuchyan and Mi-

[53] Ilham Aliyev (@presidentaz), X (formerly Twitter), November 19, 2012, https://x.com/presidentaz/status/270827003521929216.

[54] Suren Tadevosyan, "Balancing Powers: Azerbaijan's National Role Conceptions Amidst Regional and Global Challenges," *Contemporary Eurasia*, November 5, 2024, 6–21, https://doi.org/10.52837/2579-2970-2024.13.1-6.

[55] "FFA Demands to Exclude FK Qarabag from European Club Competitions," Football Federation of Armenia (FFA), October 31, 2020, https://www.ffa.am/en/1604159474/page/3.

[56] The Human Rights Defender of Armenia and the Human Rights Ombudsman of Artsakh, *Ad Hoc Public Report: Organized Hate Speech and Animosity towards Ethnic Armenians in Azerbaijan as Root Causes of Ethnically-Based Torture and Inhuman Treatment by Azerbaijani Armed Forces* (September–November 2020) (Yerevan: Office of the Human Rights Defender of Armenia, 2020), 11, https://www.ombuds.am/images/files/2032f021fe81176414a649d588ad0e86.pdf.

[57] Artsakh Human Rights Ombudsman, *Interim Public Report on Atrocities Committed by Azerbaijani Military Forces against the Civilian Population of the Republic of Artsakh (Nagorno-Karabakh)* (Stepanakert: Office of the Human Rights Ombudsman of Artsakh, 2020).

nasyan v. Azerbaijan and Hungary recorded that the pardoning and glorification contributed to an ethically motivated endorsement of the act at the state level.[58]

Taken together, these elements demonstrate how hate speech, calls for violence, and official measures of reward or impunity can operate synergistically to produce a socio-political environment in which Armenophobia is not merely a set of private attitudes but a public, routinized, and politically consequential phenomenon. The prominence of such rhetoric among political elites, public personalities, and state institutions indicates that violent dehumanization is embedded in both discourse and policy practices.

This institutionalized animosity was not incidental but part of a closed cycle generated by state policy, reinforced by cultural production, and embraced by society. Evidence from this period points to systematic hate speech, incitement, and propaganda as root causes of ethnically motivated violence, torture, and killings during the September–November 2020 war. Analysts argue that these practices reflect not only hostility but also elements of ethnic cleansing and genocidal intent.[59] Evidence collected through the monitoring and fact-finding missions of Armenia's Human Rights Defender, along with reports from international bodies such as the European Commission against Racism and Intolerance (ECRI) and rulings of the International Court of Justice, demonstrates that Armenophobia in Azerbaijan is not an incidental social phenomenon but a systemic, state-supported policy. This policy has translated directly into gross human rights violations, ethnically motivated crimes, and atrocities committed by Azerbaijani servicemen during episodes of armed conflict, most notably the April 2016 clashes and the September–November 2020 war. Documentation shows patterns of torture, mutilation, and indiscriminate targeting of civilians, often carried out in the same rhetoric used by the Azerbaijani political leadership.[60]

The consolidation of Azerbaijani citizenship identity under Ilham Aliyev thus rests on a paradox. On the one hand, Azerbaijanism is presented as civic, inclusive, and secular; on the other, its unity is maintained through the exclusion and demonization of Armenians. Turkish cultural ties, encapsulated in the enduring slogan "One Nation – Two States", remain a powerful complementary narrative, further strengthened during the 44-day war with Türkiye's unequivocal support. Symboli-

[58] Artsakh Human Rights Ombudsman, *Interim Public Report on Atrocities…* (2020).
[59] Human Rights Defender of Armenia; Human Rights Ombudsman of Artsakh, *Organized Hate Speech* (2020).
[60] The Human Rights Defender of the Republic of Armenia, *Ad Hoc Public Report, the Azerbaijani Policy Ofhatred and Animosity Towards Armenians as Root Causes of Ethnically Motivated Violations of Human Rights: Evidence-Based Analysis of the Post-War Developments*, February 2022, https://www.ombuds.am/images/files/ea202a21c5fa032687be862bc5ba7689.pdf.

cally, Victory Day was moved from November 10 to November 8, to avoid coinciding with Atatürk Remembrance Day, signaling the centrality of the Turkish connection in Azerbaijan's post-war identity discourse.

In this framework, the notion of expansionism also shifted. During the Soviet era, the so-called 'Southern Azerbaijan' (northwest Iran) was invoked as a divided homeland; in the post-Soviet period, the so-called 'Western Azerbaijan' (the Republic of Armenia) was added as an imaginary historical territory to create a myth of a new 'lost cause.' While Heydar Aliyev had attempted to mask irredentist claims for pragmatic reasons, his instructions to historians in 1999 to consistently 'prove' that Armenia belonged to Azerbaijan laid the foundation for the institutionalization of the falsification of history. Ilham Aliyev has since carried this irredentist discourse into the diplomatic and military arenas, using it as a strategic tool of coercion against Armenia.

The evidence demonstrates that Armenophobia in Azerbaijan is not merely a spontaneous social sentiment or the byproduct of unresolved conflict but rather a deliberate, state-sponsored policy that has become a core element of Azerbaijani national identity. Over the past three decades, the Aliyev regimes have institutionalized hostility toward Armenians as a unifying framework for society. This has transformed education, culture, and daily life into a system organized around enmity: from academic publications and "historical" narratives to media propaganda, to children's fairy tales portraying Armenians as villains. By saturating both elite discourse and everyday practices, the state has ensured that Armenophobia functions as an intergenerational ideology rather than a transient political tool.

This policy has served clear political purposes. By manufacturing the Armenian "enemy," Azerbaijani authorities have diverted public attention away from pressing domestic grievances: the monopolization of power by the Aliyev family, the entrenchment of authoritarian rule, systemic human rights violations, pervasive corruption, and the deterioration of social and economic standards. In this way, Armenophobia operates as a substitute ideology, filling the vacuum left by the absence of democratic legitimacy or an affirmative vision of nationhood. The regime sustains itself not through civic participation or economic justice, but through the constant reproduction of an external threat that demands unity, loyalty, and obedience. After thirty-three years of independence, the results of this policy are visible: a society deeply conditioned to view Armenians as existential adversaries, and a political system that draws strength and legitimacy from perpetuating this hostility. Moreover, this externalized hostility conveniently deflects public attention from domestic challenges. Issues such as the snap presidential and parliamentary elections held in February and September 2024, which failed to meet international

standards for free and fair voting,[61] Azerbaijan's persistent human rights violations,[62] widespread poverty,[63] and the European Parliament's Members' 2025 condemnation of the imprisonment of Azerbaijani journalists,[64] are all overshadowed by the regime's manufactured sense of external threat. Through this diversionary strategy, Armenophobia becomes not only a tool of ideological cohesion but also a means of political distraction.

Conclusion

The Soviet collapse thrust Azerbaijan into the twin tasks of state- and nation-building amid insecurity, porous borders, and brittle institutions. In that unsettled space, identity coalesced not along a clean civic or ethnic line but as a hybrid project: outwardly speaking the language of tolerance and multiculturalism, while inwardly binding itself through an exclusionary 'Other'. As this study shows, Armenophobia has not only been a residue of conflict; it has been a shaped instrument of statecraft, a deliberate political instrument embedded in statecraft.

After the First Karabakh War, Heydar Aliyev promoted Azerbaijanism as a unifying civic frame. Its promise of inclusion, however, rested on an exclusion that cast Armenians as a standing danger to sovereignty and territory. Under Ilham Aliyev, this logic deepened. Where a positive national idea remained thin, a manufactured nationalism grew in its place, organized from above, spread through schools, media, and culture, and sustained by an everyday sense of siege.

This instrument serves immediate political ends. By fixing Armenians as a permanent adversary, the regime gathers varied groups into a single audience and converts disagreement into a test of loyalty. The slogan "We are all martyrs in Karabakh" illustrates this mobilizing strategy, transforming diversity into an illusion of unity through appeals to collective sacrifice and historical grievance. In this sense, Armenophobia functions not only as a unifying ideology but also as a mech-

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[61] Amnesty International. 2025. *Azerbaijan: No Sign of Hope for the Human Rights Situation in Azerbaijan: Systemic and Serious Breaches of Human Rights Must Be Strongly Condemned.* January 23, 2025. https://www.amnesty.org/en/documents/eur55/8963/2025/en/. Accessed October 13, 2025.

[62] European External Action Service (EEAS). 2025. *Azerbaijan: Statement by the Spokesperson on the Sentencing of Journalists and Political Activists.* June 23, 2025. https://www.eeas.europa.eu/eeas/azerbaijan-statement-spokesperson-sentencing-journalists-and-political-activists_en?s=09&%3Bref=oc-media.org&ref=oc-media.org. Accessed October 13, 2025.

[63] European Parliament. 2024. *MEPs Denounce Violations of Human Rights and International Law by Azerbaijan.* October 24, 2024. https://www.europarl.europa.eu/news/en/press-room/20241017IPR24740/meps-denounce-violations-of-human-rights-and-international-law-by-azerbaijan.

[64] World Bank Group. n.d. *Poverty Headcount Ratio at National Poverty Lines (% of Population) – Azerbaijan.* https://data.worldbank.org/indicator/SI.POV.NAHC?locations=AZ. Accessed October 13, 2025.

anism of political control—securing loyalty to the ruling elite while discouraging the emergence of alternative conceptions of national identity.

Institutionalization completes the loop. When hostility is taught, aestheticized, normalized, and then fed back into policy, it creates a closed cycle of enmity. What begins as strategy becomes common sense. Such routinization corrodes the social foundations of reconciliation: peace initiatives falter not only on terms but on the habits of mind and feeling that make trust imaginable.

The deeper engine is ontological insecurity. Like many post-imperial states, Azerbaijan faced the question of who it is without the Soviet frame. Rather than build an identity on democratic institutions or shared civic purpose, power brokers resolved anxiety by fixing the nation against an enemy. The 2020 victory did not end this insecurity; it intensified the need to reproduce enmity as a stabilizer. The interplay of Turkism and Azerbaijanism sharpens the paradox. Abroad, pan-Turkic affinity and a polished cosmopolitan brand promise openness through concerts, races, and global sport. At home, the pedagogy of siege teaches children who to fear.

In conclusion, this study has demonstrated that Armenophobia is not an incidental byproduct of conflict but a central pillar of Azerbaijani nation-building in the post-Soviet period. By manufacturing an enemy, the Azerbaijani state has sought to resolve its ontological insecurities, consolidate authoritarian power, and unify a diverse population under a shared sense of threat. Yet this strategy has come at a profound cost: the erosion of possibilities for peace, the entrenchment of hostility, and the impoverishment of national identity. Understanding this dynamic is essential not only for interpreting Azerbaijan's trajectory but also for grasping the broader patterns of negative nationalism and authoritarian statecraft in transitional societies. The case of Azerbaijan illustrates how nations can be constructed as much by enmity as by affirmation, and how the politics of memory, fear, and hostility can become the foundation of an entire state project. In the end, manufacturing the enemy may offer short-term cohesion. Still, it leaves behind a legacy of division, insecurity, and unresolved conflict that threatens to shape the South Caucasus for decades to come.

Conflict of Interests

The author declares no ethical issues or conflicts of interest in this research.

Ethical Standards

The author affirms this research did not involve human subjects.

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FROM BALANCING TO ACTIVE HEDGING: THE TRANSFORMATION OF KAZAKHSTAN'S MULTI-VECTOR FOREIGN POLICY AFTER 2022

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Abstract

The outbreak of the 2022 military crisis in Ukraine significantly redefined Kazakhstan's geopolitical setting, highlighting the limits of its established foreign policy model and steering it toward a proactive hedging approach emblematic of middle powers. Based on the concepts of equidistant diplomacy and hedging, the article illustrates how Astana simultaneously reduces exposure to any single power center and converts participation in the multilateral forums into economic and political gains. Six hedging tracks are examined: Russian, Chinese, European, American (the United States), Turkic, and Southern (Gulf states), as well as an autonomous transit track represented by the Middle or Trans-Caspian Corridor. Drawing on legislative texts, policy declarations, and development frameworks from 2022–2025, the analysis traces Kazakhstan's evolution from geographic balancing to rules-based portfolio management of interdependence in trade corridors, capital flows, and regulatory standards, highlighting the ongoing institutional entrenchment of Eurasian regionalism. Although Kazakhstan's bargaining leverage has expanded, its hedging behavior remains limited by the need to coordinate with the C5 group (the five Central Asian states), manage asymmetries with larger economies, and ensure conformity with the institutional norms of the Eurasian Economic Union (EAEU).

Keywords: *Kazakhstan, new geopolitics, multi-vector foreign policy, hedging, middle power, Eurasian regionalism.*

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Introduction

Changing geopolitical realities have exposed several structural vulnerabilities in Kazakhstan. Sanctions have disrupted trade and finance, while dependence on critical infrastructure, such as the Caspian Pipeline Consortium (CPC), has increased exposure to external pressures. At the same time, overlapping integration frameworks have produced new regulatory frictions.

In this context, Kazakhstan's foreign policy orientation was recalibrated toward strict adherence to international law, multilateralism, and the principle of sovereign equality. Astana also clarified its non-recognition of the breakaway entities in Donetsk and Luhansk, reaffirming its commitment to the UN Charter. In practice, this shift was reflected in an adjustment in the operational design of Kazakhstan's multi-vector policy, moving from equidistance to active hedging. Sanctions-induced volatility further heightened the demand for economic and legal compliance, compelling Astana to mitigate transit and compliance risks, restrict the re-export of sensitive goods, and preserve legitimate trade relations with major partners. This process required strengthening export-control mechanisms, digitalizing supply-chain traceability, and aligning domestic procedures with European and American practices while safeguarding obligations under the EAEU framework.

Second, infrastructure vulnerability became more pronounced, reflected in the concentration of flows along southern routes and dependence on bottlenecks in pipeline and port infrastructure. Disruptions at the CPC demonstrated how Kazakhstan's landlocked position can transform from a structural constraint into a strategic vulnerability during external shocks. In response, Astana pursued a rapid diversification of transport routes via the Middle or Trans-Caspian Corridor and the southern direction through the Gulf, transforming a set of individual projects into a unified transport system governed by standardized rules, digital mechanisms, and coordinated operations.

A third trend involved the growing competition among Eurasian institutional and normative regimes. The parallel expansion of the C5+China and C5+EU/US formats, the activation of the Turkic dimension through the OTS, and the maintenance of obligations within the EAEU and SCO have made regulatory compatibility and the avoidance of institutional conflict pressing priorities. In this context, traditional equidistance—based on maintaining equal relations with major powers—no longer provides sufficient protection from systemic risks or logistical disruptions. Consequently, Kazakhstan has shifted toward a practical, though undeclared, form of hedging that blends neutral discourse with diversification policies, spreading economic and logistical exposure across multiple centers and enhancing domestic regulatory resilience.

Conceptual Framework and Methodology: The article is based on the argument that hedging refines multi-vectorism into a more coherent strategic framework, shifting from situational balancing to the institutional and legal management of interdependence across multiple arenas. Its empirical base incorporates normative acts, official statements, multilateral roadmaps, and initiatives (C5+1, Global Gateway, OTS), complemented by sectoral cases in logistics, critical minerals, energy, and export control.

Central to this study is the operationalization of hedging as a form of procedural multi-vectorism. It includes three dimensions: first, institutionalism, reflected in the establishment of secretariats, business councils, and control regimes; second, proceduralization, encompassing digital documentation, tariff coordination, and interoperable standards; and third, network diversification, manifested in the development of combined routes and transport corridors. The practical relevance of this model lies in its capacity to show how Kazakhstan manages external shocks, increases bargaining power, and converts participation in regional formats into durable development gains.

The article is structured as follows. The first section offers a theoretical comparison of balancing, equidistance, and hedging in the context of middle-power behavior. The subsequent section provides a comparative examination of Kazakhstan's hedging strategies across several vectors: Russian, Chinese, Western (EU/US), Turkic, C5+1, Southern/Gulf, and transit. The conclusion discusses the strategic constraints (C5 coordination, asymmetries with larger economies, regime compatibility between the EAEU and C5+China) and argues that multi-vectorism is evolving into an institutionalized practice of interdependence management.

The theoretical basis of the study derives from the classical problem confronting small and middle powers: choosing between balancing and bandwagoning, concepts rooted in the distribution of power and perceived threats.[1] Under conditions of complex interdependence, ramified legal regimes, and dense economic connectedness, this binary model loses explanatory power.[2] A range of intermediary strategies therefore emerges, encompassing equidistance, non-alignment, strategic ambiguity, and most prominently, hedging.[3]

The contrast between equidistance and hedging is evident in their aims, instruments, and expected outcomes. Whereas equidistance seeks to minimize politi-

[1] Stephen M. Walt, *The Origins of Alliances* (Cornell University Press, 1987); Kenneth N. Waltz, *Theory of International Politics* (Addison-Wesley, 1979); Randall L. Schweller, "Bandwagoning for Profit: Bringing the Revisionist State Back In," *International Security* 19, no. 1 (1994): 72–107.
[2] Robert O. Keohane and Joseph S. Nye Jr., *Power and Interdependence* (Little, Brown, 1977).
[3] Evelyn Goh, *Meeting the China Challenge: The U.S. in Southeast Asian Regional Security Strategies*, Policy Studies No. 16 (East-West Center, 2005).

cal involvement and preserve flexibility by maintaining equal proximity to competing centers of power,[4] hedging focuses on actively managing risk while also deriving benefits from multiple, often rival, ecosystems.[5]

In this context, the instruments of policy evolve from the rhetoric of neutrality and balanced diplomacy to more structured mechanisms: institutional participation in multilateral platforms, procedural institutionalization, regulatory controls over exports and compliance, financial diversification, and infrastructural redundancy through parallel routes and substitute nodes. The functional outcomes also diverge. Equidistance reduces reputational costs from openly choosing sides, but leaves the state exposed to shared risks (sanctions, constraints, logistical disruptions). Hedging, however, reduces the variance of adverse outcomes through a portfolio of options and pre-established insurance mechanisms.

As Kuik suggests, hedging constitutes a policy pursued without formal proclamation, in which outward neutrality coexists with the construction of an implicit framework of safeguards.[6] In Asian contexts, at least two main types can be distinguished. Insurance hedging focuses on building buffers against shocks through legal controls, alternative transport routes, infrastructure redundancy, and credit lines secured from diverse sources. Influencing hedging, by contrast, entails embedding a state within institutional and normative networks that amplify its weight through procedural leadership and norm-setting activities such as business councils, secretariats, joint roadmaps, and harmonized standards.

Middle powers are particularly predisposed to such practices. The literature on middle-power diplomacy highlights their niche strengths in mediation, coalition formation, norm entrepreneurship, and network-based influence.[7] With limited hard capabilities and high external exposure, institutions, rules, and infrastructure become multipliers of influence. In this context, hedging organically converts a declarative principle into an operational instrument of interdependence management.

Hedging tends to prevail over equidistance in contexts of pronounced systemic uncertainty characterized by volatility, sanctions, and fragmented regulatory environments. Its effectiveness further depends on asymmetric dependencies with key partners, economic openness that amplifies external vulnerabilities, and robust domestic institutions capable of sustaining sophisticated frameworks such as export-control and tariff coordination. Geography also plays a decisive role. Landlocked

[4] Kei Koga, "Conceptualizing Equidistant Diplomacy in International Relations: The Case of Singapore," *International Relations of the Asia-Pacific* 22, no. 3 (2022): 449–476.
[5] Cheng-Chwee Kuik, "Hedging in Post-Pandemic Asia: What, How, and Why?," *The Asan Forum*, 2020, https://theasanforum.org/hedging-in-post-pandemic-asia-what-how-and-why/.
[6] Kuik, "Hedging in Post-Pandemic Asia."
[7] Carsten Holbraad, *Middle Powers in International Politics* (Macmillan, 1984).

geographical position, in particular, amplifies the need for redundant and diversified infrastructure.

Building on this foundation, the typology of procedural multi-vectorism comprises five complementary mechanisms. The first involves institutionalization, achieved by expanding engagement in multilateral frameworks, establishing secretariats and business councils, and launching structured roadmaps for cooperation.[8] Second, proceduralization focuses on developing interoperable customs and tariff standards, digital trade documentation, and coordinated export-control mechanisms. Third, network diversification expands logistical and infrastructural linkages. Fourth, financial and technological diversification involves alternative capital channels, participation in regional funding mechanisms, Islamic finance tools, and collaboration within rival technological ecosystems, particularly in decarbonization and digital transformation. Finally, normative leadership emerges through the projection of regulatory models, encompassing nuclear safety, energy regulation, and environmental sustainability standards.

The empirical operationalization of hedging rests on a series of observable indicators signaling movement beyond equidistance. These include the diversification of interdependencies (changes in the trade, finance, and route indices; a higher share of alternative corridors in transit), institutional intensity (the number and depth of formats involving the country, the presence of secretariats and roadmaps); regulatory adjustment (timeliness and completeness of implementing export controls, digital tracking, and compliance frameworks); infrastructure redundancy (added capacity of alternatives and the emergence of substitute nodes), and normative outcomes, observable in the diffusion or external adoption of national standards.

Under conditions of complex interdependence and fragmented global rules, hedging offers a more effective strategy than equidistance. It substitutes declarative neutrality with institutional, regulatory, financial, and infrastructural safeguards that reduce risk exposure, diversify trade routes and capital sources, and expand influence through participation in normative and multilateral platforms. Its core is procedural multi-vectorism supplemented by institutionalization, network diversification, financial and technological diversification, and normative leadership. Hedging tends to emerge under conditions of systemic uncertainty, asymmetric dependencies, economic openness, adequate regulatory capacity, and the structural constraints of landlocked geography. Empirically, it manifests through dispersed patterns of interdependence, enhanced engagement in multilateral institutions, ac-

[8] Amitav Acharya, *Constructing a Security Community in Southeast Asia*, 3rd ed. (Routledge, 2014).

celerated regulatory and compliance adaptation, expanded infrastructural redundancy, and the outward transmission of domestic norms and standards.

Kazakhstan's Hedging Policy

Between 2022 and 2025, Kazakhstan's external environment became a stress test of resilience: sanctions and regulatory risks intensified, dependence on specific infrastructure nodes grew more apparent, and competition among normative regimes in Eurasia deepened. The response was not only to preserve multi-vectorism, but also to reconceptualize it in the logic of a middle power's hedging strategy—diversifying both vulnerabilities and sources of gain, and shifting emphasis from neutrality rhetoric to rules, institutions, and infrastructure that embed insurance mechanisms for managing interdependence.

Kazakhstan's foreign policy can be understood as a set of distinct tracks, each shaped by its own decision-making logic and institutional framework. To compare these tracks, three analytical elements are identified. Policy tools refer to concrete and observable actions such as passing legislation, establishing secretariats, launching digital cargo-tracking systems, or creating financial instruments. Payoffs capture the resulting benefits, including expanded markets, investment inflows, technological advancement, and more reliable supply chains with lower transaction costs. Anchor points denote the milestones that formalize progress, such as the adoption of legal acts, intergovernmental agreements, summit-endorsed roadmaps, or the commissioning of infrastructure projects. This approach helps maintain analytical clarity by focusing on three questions for each track: what was implemented, what outcomes it produced, and which concrete events confirm these results.

Viewed through the analytical lens of international relations, this study moves beyond descriptive narration by introducing a set of comparative indicators that help systematically evaluate Kazakhstan's foreign policy tracks. The first, initialization, refers to the establishment and continuity of institutional platforms—such as secretariats, business councils, and formalized monitoring procedures—that ensure regular assessment of agreements. The second, procedural compatibility, captures the extent to which national regulations, including digital documentation, customs and tariff coordination, and export-control mechanisms, are aligned with external standards. The third, infrastructural redundancy, examines whether transport routes possess sufficient flexibility and resilience through the development of alternative capacities and parallel nodes. Finally, the interdependence–diversification indicator traces the distribution of trade, capital, and logistical flows: a lower level of concentration across these domains signifies greater systemic resilience and a stronger bargaining position for the state.

EAEU "Toxic Asset" vs. Platform for Hedging

Since 2022, Kazakhstan's participation in the EAEU has drawn polarized assessments. One camp of authors sees the Union as a source of toxicity, a channel for sanctions-related and reputational 'spillovers', asymmetries, and regulatory conflicts. The other treats the EAEU as a tool for procedural hedging, a venue where the 'rule repair' (digital traceability, export control, barrier removal, adjustment of tariff formulas) can reduce vulnerability while preserving access to markets and cooperation. Viewed through this lens, Kazakhstan treats the EAEU less as a binary decision to remain or withdraw and more as an adjustable framework, in which outcomes hinge on the extent to which legal and digital safeguards are institutionalized and procedural compatibility with external regimes is maintained alongside diversified trade and capital flows.

Several experts argue that participation in the EAEU amplifies sanctions–related and reputational risks, while market asymmetry weakens Astana's bargaining power. Independent political scientist Dosym Satpayev explicitly labels EAEU (and CSTO) as toxic institutions for Kazakhstan in the current environment and predicts a negative reaction from Moscow to any talk of withdrawal, making the situation, in his view, a dilemma.[9] Economist Almas Chukin argues that Kazakhstan should leave the EAEU due to the loss of trade sovereignty, non-tariff barriers, and higher consumer prices, using a "more independent foreign-trade policy."[10]

Several Kazakhstani experts advocate not abandoning integration within the EAEU but recalibrating its parameters. Political scientist Andrey Chebotarev argues it is more rational to focus on removing non-tariff barriers, harmonizing procedures, and fine-tuning tariff and customs mechanisms than debating an exit. The emphasis, in his view, should fall on gradual regulatory adjustment achieved through negotiation and institutional dialogue. Similarly, economist Rasul Rysmambetov calls for revising the terms of cooperation and using the EAEU's institu-

[9] Dosym Satpayev, "Kazakhstan's withdrawal from the EAEU and the CSTO is a hostile step for Russia," *Azattyq Rýhy*, 2022, https://rus.azattyq-ruhy.kz/society/37529-dosym-satpaev-vykhod-kazakhstana-%D0%B8z-eaes-i-odkb-dlia-rossii-vrazhdebnyi-shag, in Russian: [Досым Сатпаев, "Выход Казахстана из ЕАЭС и ОДКБ для России — враждебный шаг," *Azattyq Rýhy*, 2022, https://rus.azattyq-ruhy.kz/society/37529-dosym-satpaev-vykhod-kazakhstana-%D0%B8z-eaes-i-odkb-dlia-rossii-vrazhdebnyi-shag].

[10] ZONAkz, "Why Kazakhstan must leave the EAEU — Why Kazakhstan should not leave the EAEU," April 11, 2022, https://zonakz.net/2022/04/11/pochemu-kazaxstanu-neobxodimo-vyjti-iz-eaes-pochemu-kazaxstanu-ne-vyjti-iz-eaes/, in Russian: [ZONAkz, «Почему Казахстану необходимо выйти из ЕАЭС» — «Почему Казахстану не выйти из ЕАЭС», 11 апреля 2022, https://zonakz.net/2022/04/11/pochemu-kazaxstanu-neobxodimo-vyjti-iz-eaes-pochemu-kazaxstanu-ne-vyjti-iz-eaes/].

tional framework to advance Kazakhstan's national interests, underscoring the enduring importance of regional trade and investment.[11]

The official stance mirrors this cautious pragmatism. President Kassym-Jomart Tokayev has repeatedly rejected speculation about Kazakhstan's departure from the EAEU, reaffirming his government's commitment to existing integration frameworks and treaty obligations. In June 2022, he publicly clarified that rumors of an intended withdrawal were unfounded.[12]

A calibrated approach to expanding the supranational powers of the Eurasian Economic Commission (EEC) is emphasized separately. President Tokayev had earlier urged a careful stance toward delegating such functions. This line, favoring evolutionary integration and a measured institutional architecture, has been further developed in official discourse.[13] In essence, Kazakhstan's position seeks balance: staying within the Union while improving its mechanisms and ensuring that integration delivers measurable economic benefits. This orientation forms part of a broader strategy of procedural hedging, designed to strengthen flexibility without undermining commitments.

The CSTO military mission in Kazakhstan in January 2022 marked a significant precedent in the post-Soviet space. Acting at the request of President Tokayev, the organization deployed "collective peacekeeping forces" for the first time under Article 4 of the Treaty. The contingent arrived on January 6–7 and was fully withdrawn by January 19, establishing the practice of a time-limited operation.[14] In the immediate sense, the mission played a stabilizing role. Rapid restoration of control over key infrastructure and the reduction of violence helped prevent further escalation. However, as noted by Armenian expert of post-Soviet space Zhak Manukyan, "On February 16, 2022, the CSTO peacekeeping operation in Kazakhstan became a subject of discussion at a UN Security Council meeting on the topic of cooperation

[11] Qmonitor.kz, "Divorce and Maiden Name: What Will Happen if Kazakhstan Leaves the EAEU and the CSTO," 2022, https://qmonitor.kz/politics/4023, in Russian: [Qmonitor.kz, "Развод и девичья фамилия: что будет, если Казахстан выйдет из ЕАЭС и ОДКБ," 2022, https://qmonitor.kz/politics/4023].

[12] Inbusiness.kz, "Tokayev: Claims that Kazakhstan has cooled and wants to leave the EAEU and the CSTO are not true," 2022, https://inbusiness.kz/ru/last/tokaev-razgovory-o-tom-chto-kazahstan-ohladel-i-hochet-vyjti-iz-eaes-i-odkb-ne-sootvetstvuyut-dejstvitelnosti, in Russian: [Inbusiness.kz, "Токаев: Разговоры о том, что Казахстан охладел и хочет выйти из ЕАЭС и ОДКБ, не соответствуют действительности," 2022, https://inbusiness.kz/ru/last/tokaev-razgovory-o-tom-chto-kazahstan-ohladel-i-hochet-vyjti-iz-eaes-i-odkb-ne-sootvetstvuyut-dejstvitelnosti].

[13] RIA Novosti, "Tokayev urged a very cautious approach to expanding the powers of the EEC (Eurasian Economic Commission)," 2020, https://ria.ru/amp/20200519/1571668636.html, in Russian: [РИА Новости, "Токаев призвал очень осторожно подходить к расширению полномочий ЕЭК," 2020, https://ria.ru/amp/20200519/1571668636.html].

[14] Catherine Putz, "CSTO Deploys to Kazakhstan at Tokayev's Request," *The Diplomat*, January 6, 2022, https://thediplomat.com/2022/01/csto-deploys-to-kazakhstan-at-tokayevs-request.

between the UN and the CSTO".[15] At the regional level, the mission demonstrated the CSTO's ability to respond quickly to crises, enhancing its political relevance after earlier inaction in 2010 and 2021.

For Kazakhstan, participation in the CSTO remains pragmatic and limited in scope. The organization is seen primarily as a tool for crisis response and military coordination rather than as an instrument for involvement in external conflicts. The invocation of Article 4 to address internal unrest provoked legal debate and criticism from international organizations and the European Parliament, which pointed to a deterioration in the human rights situation.[16] At the same time, concerns about growing dependence on Russia surfaced in statements from Western officials, including US Secretary of State Antony Blinken.[17]

The international reaction was mixed. The EU focused on human rights and de-escalation, adopting a resolution on January 20, 2022.[18] The US emphasized Kazakhstan's sovereignty and strengthened cooperation within the C5+1 format.[19] China expressed full support for the Kazakh leadership and deepened cooperation in security and infrastructure.[20]

The CSTO mission pushed Kazakhstan toward greater flexibility in its foreign policy. In the short term, this was reflected in the diversification of partners and routes (C5+1, OTS, Trans-Caspian Corridor). In the longer term, the country began to rely more on rules and institutions to manage external relations. The mission helped stabilize the situation and ended quickly, but it raised legal and reputational questions, accelerating Kazakhstan's shift toward a hedging strategy and strengthening its independent foreign policy toolkit.

Comparative Review of Policy Tracks from 2022 to 2025

The Russian Track: Since 2022, Kazakhstan has adjusted its approach to the northern track as shared vulnerabilities became increasingly evident. Sanctions im-

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[15] Zhak Manukyan, "The Strategic Role of Central Asia in a Changing World Order: Resources, Logistics, and Competition," *YSU Journal of International Affairs* 1, no. 1 (2025): 66–99, https://doi.org/10.46991/jia.2025.1.1.066.

[16] European Parliament, "European Parliament Resolution of 20 January 2022 on the Situation in Kazakhstan (2022/2513(RSP))," https://www.europarl.europa.eu/doceo/document/TA-9-2022-0013_EN.html.

[17] Doina Chiacu and Katharine Jackson, "U.S. Seeks Answers from Kazakhstan on Need for Russian-Led Troops," *Reuters,* January 9, 2022, https://www.reuters.com/world/us-seeks-answers-kazakhstan-need-russian-led-troops-2022-01-09.

[18] European Parliament, "European Parliament Resolution."

[19] Chiacu and Jackson, "U.S. Seeks Answers."

[20] Embassy of the People's Republic of China in the U.S., "Foreign Ministry Spokesperson's Remarks on Kazakhstan," January 7, 2022, http://us.china-embassy.gov.cn/eng/fyrth/202201/t20220107_10601933.htm.

posed on neighboring states and related disruptions quickly affected the country's supply chains, financial transactions, and international reputation, while interruptions at critical bottlenecks such as the Caspian Pipeline Consortium severely impacted revenue flows.[21] Astana's response was pragmatic: rather than curtailing trade, it focused on regulating sensitive sectors and increasing transparency within the system.

The adoption of the "Law on the Control of Specific Goods" marked a turning point in Kazakhstan's trade and export regulation. Under this law, any product with potential military or dual-use applications cannot be resold or exported without a license. End users and intended purposes must be verified in advance, and explicit rules are established to prevent unauthorized re-exports.[22] Implementing laws with procedures and control lists followed.

Through the Qoldau 360 digital module, authorities can now track shipments from import to re-export, allowing them to identify irregular routes or opaque recipients and, if necessary, halt transactions in real time. In parallel, line ministries introduced targeted restrictions on the export of military and dual-use goods to curb illicit or gray-market schemes.

A related concern arises within the framework of the Eurasian Economic Union (EAEU). Kazakhstan has raised the issue of revising the distribution formula for the common import duty to ensure a fairer arrangement that reflects the country's growing transit and trade burden.[23] At the same time, businesses and banks have been encouraged to strengthen compliance systems, incorporate end-use and end-user clauses in contracts, and enhance transparency in financial settlements.

As a result, sensitive goods are now subject to strict regulatory oversight and digital tracking, while ordinary trade continues to operate without interruption. This framework reduces the risk of secondary sanctions and reputational damage without undermining cooperation within the EAEU or restricting trade to a narrow set of routes.

Consequently, Kazakhstan's approach along the Russian track has evolved from a position of neutral non-interference to one of cautious hedging. Legal in-

[21] Olzhas Auyezov, "Shocked by Ukraine War, Russian Neighbor Kazakhstan Looks West," *Reuters*, November 17, 2022, https://www.reuters.com/world/asia-pacific/shocked-by-ukraine-war-russian-neighbour-kazakhstan-looks-west-2022-11-17/.

[22] Law of the Republic of Kazakhstan, *On Control of Specific Goods*, No. 172-VII ZRK (December 28, 2022), Adilet (Legal Information System), unofficial translation, https://adilet.zan.kz/eng/docs/Z2200000172/history.

[23] Bekzada Ishekenova, "Kazakhstan is working on revising EAEU customs duties," *LS (LSM.kz)*, January 16, 2025, https://lsm.kz/kazahstan-poshliny-eaes-podrobnosti, in Russian: [Бекзада Ишекенова, "Казахстан работает над пересмотром таможенных пошлин ЕАЭС," *LS (LSM.kz)*, 16 января 2025, https://lsm.kz/kazahstan-poshliny-eaes-podrobnosti].

struments, including the statute, its implementing by-laws, and Kazakhstan's position within the EAEU, together with digital monitoring tools such as Qoldau 360, have enabled the country to mitigate exposure to secondary sanctions and reputational losses while preserving legitimate trade and cooperative relations within the union and avoiding vulnerability to external disruptions.

The China Track: Kazakhstan's China track is an illustrative example of insuring risks through institutions, procedures, and infrastructure, without declared "camp-switching". First, shifting from a bilateral plane to the C5+China format reduces asymmetry. China engages with the region not through bilateral channels but in coordination with its neighbors, working through a secretariat, a business council, and a regular schedule of summits. This strengthens bargaining power and establishes de-escalation channels in moments of friction—an essential feature of influence hedging.

Second, proceduralization through measures such as visa-free travel, synchronized border crossings, aligned timetables, and coordinated cargo priorities reduces transaction costs and makes supply chains more predictable. Such integrated rules function as an insurance mechanism against bureaucratic delays and bottlenecks, representing a form of process-level hedging.

Third, infrastructural redundancy is being built: freight flows are split across multiple crossings and lines, capacity is reserved in advance, and throughput is expanded on a planned basis. The effects are already visible along the China-oriented transport corridor. In 2024, total rail freight between Kazakhstan and China amounted to 32.05 million tonnes: 18.27 million moved via Dostyk–Alashankou and 13.79 million via Altynkol–Khorgos. Container traffic rose by 19.7 percent, easing congestion and ensuring a more balanced distribution of freight flows.[24] In parallel, Kazakhstan Temir Zholy and China Railway Urumqi Group aligned capacity plans and cargo-priority schedules for 2025, formalizing the practice of rapidly rebalancing timetables between crossings when one node is overloaded. An additional "insurance layer" comes from the construction of the third interconnection line, Ayagoz–Bakhty–Chuguchak (Tacheng), about 272 km long and slated for commissioning by 2027, a new border crossing, and another channel to offload existing routes.[25] Such redundancy reduces asymmetric interdependence and the risk of hold-up by any single node or partner, lowers switching between corridors,

[24] TransportCorridors.com, "Kazakhstan and China Have Agreed on Plans for Rail Transport for 2025," February 5, 2025, https://www.transportcorridors.com/10599.

[25] Railjournal.com, "Kazakhstan Starts Building Third China Link: New Line Will Help Boost Freight Capacity by Two-Thirds by 2027," accessed November 12, 2025, https://www.railjournal.com/freight/kazakhstan-starts-building-third-china-link.

and thereby strengthens bargaining positions on tariffs, cargo priorities, and regulatory regimes.

In geo-economic terms, this functions as deterrence by denial: a local disruption does not cascade into systematic shock because cargo can be swiftly rerouted along alternative legs, and threats to "close a route" become less credible. In short, spatial networking of infrastructure operates as an insurance mechanism with the hedging strategy: it narrows the variance of adverse outcomes without any political need to change camps.[26]

Additional examples of procedural insurance include: Kazakhstan-China visa-free regime (30/90 days), which enables rapid team travel, critical for clearing bottlenecks and border crossing, and for servicing logistics operations.[27] During the second session of the Central Asia–China Business Council (Astana, June 2025), over thirty-five agreements valued at $17 billion were concluded in logistics, renewable energy, and industrial cooperation, reflecting a portfolio strategy that balances risks across multiple sectors and time horizons.[28]

Consequently, Kazakhstan's reserve infrastructure capacity, coupled with its increasingly coherent procedural and institutional framework, enables a form of managed interdependence with China. Rising freight volumes are accompanied by greater operational flexibility, reduced reliance on individual transit nodes, and a diminished likelihood of bottlenecks being leveraged as tools of political or economic pressure.

Kazakhstan's soft-power strategy toward China is marked by a practical, businesslike orientation. Through visa-free travel, student and professional exchanges, joint festivals, and co-produced films and media projects, Astana promotes its national stories on Asian platforms and highlights its infrastructure corridors through cultural programming. The concrete outcome is a smoother process of partnership

[26] Rail-News.kz, "Prospects for infrastructure development and freight transport discussed by the heads of KTZ and the Urumqi Railway," 2024, https://rail-news.kz/ru/news/18872-perspektivy-razvitiia-infrastruktury-i-gruzoperevozok-obsudili-rukovoditeli-ktz-i-urumciiskoi-zeleznoi-dorogi, in Russian: [*Rail-News.kz*, "Перспективы развития инфраструктуры и грузоперевозок обсудили руководители КТЖ и Урумчийской железной дороги," 2024, https://rail-news.kz/ru/news/18872-perspektivy-razvitiia-infrastruktury-i-gruzoperevozok-obsudili-rukovoditeli-ktz-i-urumciiskoi-zeleznoi-dorogi].

[27] RFE/RL, "China's Xi Arrives in Kazakhstan for State Visit, SCO Summit," July 2, 2024, https://www.rferl.org/a/china-xi-visit-kazakhstan-tajikistan-shanghai-coooperation-sco-summit/33018280.html.

[28] The Astana Times, "Central Asia, China to Sign $17 Billion in Deals at Astana Business Council," 2025, https://astanatimes.com/2025/06/central-asia-china-to-sign-17-billion-in-deals-at-astana-business-council/.

formation, the growth of service chains linked to transit routes, and greater visibility of Kazakhstan as both a destination and an investment hub.[29]

At the same time, this approach has vulnerabilities. As access to media and funding remains asymmetrical, the risk increases that Chinese narratives will dominate and erode Kazakhstan's own agenda. Cultural centers and academic programs are easily politicized. This can lead to self-censorship regarding sensitive issues. At home, this may trigger negative reactions and heighten public anxieties about migration. A structural imbalance may arise when the inflow of Chinese content exceeds the visibility of Kazakhstani initiatives on Chinese media platforms. This situation is compounded by reliance on external funding sources with their own policy priorities, reputational vulnerabilities linked to global discussions of human rights and technology, gaps in regulation concerning intellectual property and data, and the overlapping influence of Turkic, European, and Western identity models.[30]

To ensure that hedging on the Chinese track yields more benefits than risks, soft power cooperation should be grounded in simple, verifiable rules that spread risks and preserve agenda autonomy.

We contend that such projects should be co-financed on a parity basis (Kazakhstan + Chinese side) and selection should be open and competitive. This reduces dependence on a single funding source and limits the leverage of either party. It is classic hedging logic. In practice, it means that open calls with the prepublished criteria and timelines, equal access to funding for both inbound initiatives (visiting groups, content from China) and outbound initiatives (Kazakh tours, co-production, exhibitions in China), public reporting on each project's budget, objectives, and outcomes, and joint oversight through a bilateral or multilateral supervisory board.[31]

As a normative reference point, it is useful to cite the 2005 UNESCO Convention on the Protection and Promotion of the Diversity of Cultural Expressions, which encourages balanced exchanges and transparent public policies. Incorporating these principles into cultural and educational agreements makes the China track manageable: it diversifies funding sources, codifies reciprocity, and lowers regula-

[29] RFE/RL, "China's Xi Arrives."
[30] National Endowment for Democracy (NED), *The Big Question: Understanding China's Sharp Power* (2017), https://www.ned.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/06/Understanding-Chinas-Sharp-Power.pdf.
[31] Yusuf Çelik and Janaka Jayawickrama, "A Win-Win Relationship between China and Kazakhstan: Thinking Beyond Dependency," *Uluslararası Ekonomi, İşletme ve Politika Dergisi* 8, no. 2 (2024): 421–441, https://doi.org/10.29216/ueip.1518040.

tory and reputational risks-serving as an insurance mechanism with the hedging strategy. [32]

The European Track: The EU track is likewise being reconfigured in the hedging logic of Kazakhstan's foreign policy. This shift represents a move away from the traditional export-based raw materials model toward deeper integration into European industrial and green transition chains. Critical minerals are increasingly seen not as a static extractive resource but as a foundation for beneficiation, processing, and battery-material production, linked to access to decarbonization technologies and standardized regulatory frameworks. The EU–Kazakhstan Memorandum on Critical Raw Materials, Batteries, and Renewable Hydrogen (7 November 2022), together with the 2023–2024 Roadmap, outlines specific steps—from resource mapping and ESG compliance to financial coordination and industrial cooperation. By 2025, the partnership had evolved from general commitments to the implementation of tangible projects.[33]

The reasons for this shift are typical of the hedging strategy. First, diversification of routes through the Trans-Caspian Corridor mitigates risks and lessens reliance on a single direction, reducing vulnerability to supply-chain interruptions and the reputational fallout of sanctions.[34] Second, it escapes the "raw-material corner": moving from ore exports to long-cycle intermediates and components dampens price volatility, anchors relations in long-term contracts, and increases added value. Third, standards function as insurance: joint alignment on ESG, traceability, and EU technical regulations reduces regulatory uncertainty (including carbon requirements) and eases market access. Fourth, technology and capital provide a safeguard against technological lag: EU instruments, ranging from Global Gateway to EBRD/EIB financing and industry consortia, lower the cost of modernization and bring in green solutions.

These processes are unfolding within a broader geo-economic context, where European initiatives coexist and interact with other major infrastructure projects, most notably China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI).

An important element of Kazakhstan's European track is the competitive yet complementary dynamic between the BRI and the European Union's Global Gate-

[32] UNESCO, *Convention on the Protection and Promotion of the Diversity of Cultural Expressions*, Legal Affairs, accessed November 12, 2025, https://www.unesco.org/en/legal-affairs/convention-protection-and-promotion-diversity-cultural-expressions.

[33] European Commission, "COP27: European Union Concludes a Strategic Partnership with Kazakhstan on Raw Materials, Batteries and Renewable Hydrogen," press release, November 6, 2022, https://ec.europa.eu/commission/presscorner/detail/en/ip_22_6585.

[34] European Commission, "Global Gateway: €10 Billion Commitment to Invest in Trans-Caspian Transport Corridor Connecting Europe and Central Asia Announced at Investors Forum," press release, January 29, 2024, https://ec.europa.eu/commission/presscorner/detail/en/ip_24_501.

way initiative. Both programs cover similar areas, infrastructure development, transport corridors, digitalization, energy, and green technologies, but they are based on different political-institutional principles, standards, and financing mechanisms. Kazakhstan does not position these initiatives in opposition to one another but instead pursues a strategy of parallel participation, which is a typical manifestation of hedging logic.[35]

By using the tools of both BRI and Global Gateway, Astana diversifies sources of investment and technology, reduces dependence on any single external center, and strengthens its bargaining position. European standards and regulatory mechanisms serve as a "safety layer", offsetting potential risks of excessive dependence on China's infrastructure and financial model. At the same time, participation in the BRI remains economically significant and is complemented by Kazakhstan's integration into European value chains and regulatory frameworks.

This configuration allows Kazakhstan to compare cooperation terms, manage regulatory risks, and ensure sustainable infrastructure development, reflecting a strategy of procedural hedging rather than a binary choice between competing geopolitical blocs.

Finally, within the C5+EU framework and through the Samarkand Summit, a political-institutional layer has emerged that enables agreement on shared corridor standards, digital documentation, harmonized customs systems, and coordinated timetables—effectively converting the route from fragmented initiatives into an integrated, managed chain.[36]

Kazakhstan's hedging strategy in the sphere of soft power is reflected in how Astana diversifies risks and builds autonomy by engaging with European Union cultural and educational platforms without binding itself to any single partner. Regular EU public events in the country, such as the European Film Festival and Europe Days, create alternative venues for broad audience engagement, thereby reducing dependence on individual media markets and cultural centers.[37] Serving as institutional anchors, the EU's cultural platforms facilitate co-productions and co-financed initiatives built upon shared standards—a clear instance of rule-based

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[35] Aida Yerimpasheva and Hans-Christian Brauweiler, *Global Gateway as a Tool for Sustainable Growth of Kazakhstan*, Ordnungspolitische Diskurse, no. 2025-2 (2025), https://www.econstor.eu/bitstream/10419/320422/1/1929669313.pdf.

[36] European Commission — Directorate-General for International Partnerships (DG INTPA), "Global Gateway: EU and Central Asian Countries Agree on Building Blocks to Develop the Trans-Caspian Transport Corridor," January 30, 2024, https://international-partnerships.ec.europa.eu/news-and-events/news/global-gateway-eu-and-central-asian-countries-agree-building-blocks-develop-trans-caspian-transport-2024-01-30_en.

[37] EEAS — Delegation of the European Union to Kazakhstan, "We Celebrated Europe Day Right in the Heart of Astana!" 2025, https://www.eeas.europa.eu/delegations/kazakhstan/we-celebrated-europe-day-right-heart-astana.

hedging. At the normative and educational level, Kazakhstan's involvement in Erasmus+ programs and the European Higher Education Area (via the Bologna Process) has fostered convergence of curricula, quality control systems, and academic frameworks with European models. This helps lower regulatory and reputational risks and widen access to grants and partners.[38] The C5+EU multilateral platform, consolidated at the Samarkand Summit in April 2025, established a political-institutional layer that integrates cultural, educational, and connectivity initiatives through unified rules, digitalized processes, and coordinated governance. In this way, soft power becomes institutionalized and strategically managed. Viewed comprehensively, this configuration embodies hedging: Kazakhstan broadens its engagement with European cultural and academic networks, formalizes collaboration through co-financing and open selection procedures, and spreads exposure across diverse platforms, including public diplomacy and higher education.[39]

The American Track: Kazakhstan's this hedging track is structured around the C5+US framework, a platform that brings together the five Central Asian states and the United States. Following the leaders' summit in New York in September 2023, the parties affirmed a common course on security, economy, energy, and connectivity. The New York Declaration specifically underscores the importance of clean energy and the integration of power systems. To translate framework arrangements into projects, the US launched several bridging instruments. First, the B5+1 (Business Five Plus One) platform functions as the business counterpart to the C5+1 framework. Its inaugural forum, held on 13–15 March 2024 in Almaty, identified five priority sectors for investment and cooperation: transport and logistics, e-commerce, tourism, agribusiness, and renewable energy. The platform thus serves as a practical entry point for access to U.S. capital, compliance standards, and expert networks.

Second, the Trade and Investment Framework Agreement (TIFA) establishes the U.S.–Central Asia Council on Trade and Investment. Its fifteenth meeting, convened in Astana on 14 June 2024, focused on eliminating barriers, streamlining procedures, and advancing digital trade and services for small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs). For Kazakhstan, this represents a roadmap for the gradual refinement of trade rules (CIPE, "B5+1 Takes New Steps to Accelerate Central Asia's Economic Integration," 2023).

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[38] ENIC-Kazakhstan, "Key Documents — Bologna Process," accessed November 12, 2025, https://enic-kazakhstan.edu.kz/ru/bologna_process/documents, in Russian: [ENIC-Kazakhstan, "Основные документы — Болонский процесс," accessed November 12, 2025, https://enic-kazakhstan.edu.kz/ru/bologna_process/documents].

[39] Council of the European Union, "First EU–Central Asia Summit, 4 April 2025," Meeting page, https://www.consilium.europa.eu/en/meetings/international-summit/2025/04/04/.

Third, in the energy domain, the United States Agency for International Development (USAID) has since 2018 implemented the Central Asian Regional Electricity Market (CAREM) initiative, aimed at developing a regional electricity market. The program assists regulators and companies in preparing for renewable energy transactions, green power trading, and the harmonization of energy rules at the regional level. For Kazakhstan, this simultaneously reduces the costs of integrating renewables and improves the projects' ability to secure financing.[40]

Fourth, the Economic Resilience Initiative in Central Asia (ERICEN), launched in 2022, has reached a funding level of approximately $50 million during 2022–2023. The program focuses on soft infrastructure, including alternative transport routes such as the Trans-Caspian corridor, electronic payments, trade facilitation, skill development, and English-language training for civil servants and entrepreneurs. These constitute the practical foundations upon which diversification is built.[41]

Fifth, the C5+1 Critical Minerals Dialogue (CMD), which convened its first meeting on 8 February 2024 at the U.S. Department of State, is designed to link Kazakhstan and other Central Asian states to global value chains in uranium, rare earth, and non-ferrous metals. Its agenda emphasizes attracting investment and fostering shared standards for sustainable and transparent extraction and processing.[42]

Finally, under the domain of logistics, both physical and procedural, the U.S. Department of Commerce's Commercial Law Development Program (CLDP) oversees the Trans-Caspian Trade Route (TCTR/Middle Corridor) project. The initiative prioritizes soft infrastructure, emphasizing harmonized port and border procedures, digitalized documentation, and coordination mechanisms that facilitate cargo movement without multi-billion-dollar construction investments (CLDP, "Trans-Caspian Trade Route (TCTR)").

The American track provides Kazakhstan with structured access to U.S. investment, markets, and regulatory expertise through platforms such as B5+1 and TIFA. The Almaty Forum of 2024 identified five priority sectors—transport and logistics, e-commerce, tourism, agribusiness, and renewable energy—while the TIFA meeting in Astana the same year emphasized the removal of trade barriers

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[40] USAID Power Central Asia Activity, *Public Annual Report 2023* (January 2024), https://powercentralasia.org/wp-content/uploads/2024/01/PCA-Public-Annual-Report-2023_v2_comp.pdf.

[41] U.S. Department of State, "Economic Resilience in Central Asia Initiative," accessed November 12, 2025, https://2021-2025.state.gov/economic-resilience-in-central-asia-initiative.

[42] U.S. Department of State, "Inaugural C5+1 Critical Minerals Dialogue among the United States and Kazakhstan, the Kyrgyz Republic, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan, and Uzbekistan," 2024, https://2021-2025.state.gov/inaugural-c51-critical-minerals-dialogue-among-the-united-states-and-kazakhstan-the-kyrgyz-republic-tajikistan-turkmenistan-and-uzbekistan/.

and the development of digital commerce for small and medium-sized enterprises. In the energy field, CAREM and USAID's Power Central Asia initiatives are helping to shape a regional electricity market and shared rules for renewable integration, improving returns and system stability. ERICEN develops soft infrastructure by promoting alternative routes, electronic payments, and trade facilitation, while the Critical Minerals Dialogue (CMD) connects Kazakhstan to global value chains in uranium and non-ferrous metals. Through the Commercial Law Development Program (CLDP) under the Trans-Caspian Trade Route (TCTR) initiative, procedural reforms are being introduced in logistics; with sustained policy backing, the Middle Corridor could triple freight volumes and shorten transit times by 2030.

Visible progress underlines these trends. In Almaty, a roadmap across five sectors and a permanent business–government dialogue format has been established. In Astana, steps have been taken to remove trade barriers and advance digital trade. In the energy sector, regulators now cooperate through dedicated working groups, while pilot projects in renewables are underway. In logistics, a "soft connectivity" plan is being rolled out along the Trans-Caspian route. The broader logic is clear: the American track does not replace Kazakhstan's other directions but complements them, adding a layer of clear rules, market access, expertise, and institutionalized soft infrastructure.

The Turkic Track: As a practical form of hedging Kazakhstan's Turkic track reduces its reliance on a single route or source of financing, builds a buffer of resilience through connectivity across the South Caucasus and Türkiye, and integrates into the broader Turkish engineering and financial ecosystem. Within the agenda of the Organization of Turkic States (OTS), transport remains a central priority, with the Middle, or Trans-Caspian, Corridor forming its backbone. The Samarkand Declaration of 2022 outlined a course for deeper regional connectivity, while at the 2024 ministerial meeting in Shusha, transport ministers agreed on the legal framework for permits, a unified system of electronic permits for international road haulage. The reform significantly cuts paperwork, accelerates border crossings, and reduces transport costs for carriers, providing a tangible example of how procedural harmonization can translate into economic efficiency.[43]

The second element is the quick-disbursing financing and co-investment. The Turkic Investment Fund (TIF) was established with an initial capital of $500 million; the founding treaty entered into force in 2024. By 2025, the fund had started introducing a set of operational mechanisms designed to support SMEs, infrastruc-

[43] Turkic States Organization, "Samarkand Declaration of the Ninth Summit of the Organization of Turkic States," accessed November 13, 2025, https://www.turkicstates.org/u/d/basic-documents/ninth-summit-declarataion-16-en.

ture development, and industrial ventures along the corridor. For Kazakhstan, it provides both diversification from conventional lenders and a complementary avenue for shared project financing.[44]

The third pillar is the corridor's infrastructure backbone. In May 2024, the freight section of the Baku-Tbilisi-Kars line completed modernization: its stated capacity rose to 5 million tons per year, and the line reopened for freight traffic. For Kazakhstan, the route forms a vital component of the Caspian–South Caucasus–Türkiye transport chain. It mitigates reliance on the northern corridor, diversifies transit exposure, and broadens export opportunities. This diversification, in turn, reinforces the hedging effect by ensuring access to a high-capacity route governed by more transparent and reliable procedures.[45]

In the soft-power dimension, the Turkic track functions as a pragmatic expression of Kazakhstan's hedging strategy. By expanding cultural cooperation with Türkiye, Azerbaijan, Uzbekistan, Kyrgyzstan, and other partners, Astana diversifies its symbolic resources and reduces reliance on a single cultural hub. This is not a substitute for the European or American directions but a complementary layer grounded in festivals, academic exchanges, media collaboration, and tourism. The result is greater international visibility and additional channels of influence. The OTS acts as the coordinating mechanism, harmonizing cultural programs, initiating educational projects, and advancing shared standards for accreditation and mobility, while TURKSOY, the International Turkic Academy, and TURKPA implement these through joint cultural and academic activities.[46]

Kazakhstan's Turkic track serves as a practical hedge, broadening routes and financing sources through partnerships with the South Caucasus and Türkiye while tapping Turkish expertise in engineering and finance. Under the OTS, transport integration has been prioritized, with the Middle (Trans-Caspian) Corridor as its core. The Samarkand Declaration (2022) and the ePermit accord (2024) simplified procedures and expedited transit. The Turkic Investment Fund offers rapid co-financing for SMEs and infrastructure, while the renewed Baku–Tbilisi–Kars line enhances capacity and disperses risks. Through TURKSOY, the International Turkic Academy, and TURKPA, Kazakhstan's soft power expands across culture, academia, and media. The Turkic direction thus reinforces, rather than replaces, Western partnerships by embedding a resilient framework of connectivity and shared norms.

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[44] Turkic Investment Fund, "At a Glance," 2025, https://turkicfund.org/about-us/.
[45] Nikos Papatolios, "Baku–Tbilisi–Kars Railway Is Officially Open Again after Year-Long Closure," *RailFreight.com*, May 23, 2024, https://www.railfreight.com/infrastructure/2024/05/23/baku-tbilisi-kars-railway-is-officially-open-again-after-year-long-closure/.
[46] Turkic Academy, accessed November 13, 2025, https://turkicacademy.org/en.

The transit track warrants particular attention as an end-to-end transport corridor connecting Kazakhstan with the Caspian, Baku, the Baku–Tbilisi–Kars line, Turkish ports, and the EU. This strategy emphasizes an integrated routing approach designed to hedge against the vulnerabilities of the northern corridor and bureaucratic delays. The implementation of digital documentation, harmonized procedural standards consistent with the European framework, capacity expansion at the Port of Baku, and the modernization of the BTK railway have made the corridor functionally coherent in terms of regulation and scheduling. As a result, Kazakhstan gains enhanced bargaining leverage, lower transaction costs, and greater predictability in its logistics chain.[47]

Conclusion

Across all of Kazakhstan's foreign policy vectors runs a consistent logic: rules and procedures can stabilize interdependence as effectively as physical connectivity. When electronic documentation is standardized, tariffs and schedules coordinated, and digital booking and export-control systems made transparent, the institutional architectures of different integration spaces become easier to reconcile. This creates a structure of dual compatibility—linking Kazakhstan both to the EAEU and C5+China initiatives, and to the C5+EU, C5+US, and OTS frameworks.

From a portfolio logic perspective, this approach produces three outcomes. First, it creates redundancy across routes and sources of capital. Second, it helps prevent ripple effects of disruption between distinct strategic directions. Third, it strengthens Astana's role as a process organizer and rule architect.

Importantly, this strategy also serves as a tool for managing the regional balance of power. Through hedging, Kazakhstan seeks to maintain equilibrium among major external actors, balancing between cooperative frameworks and competing strategic agendas. While some partners — notably the EU and the United States — emphasize rules-based cooperation and connectivity, others, such as Russia and China, often pursue more dominant or hierarchical roles in the region. In this context, hedging allows Kazakhstan to avoid structural dependence on any single power center, mitigate the effects of hegemonic ambitions, and preserve room for foreign policy maneuver.

Ultimately, hedging transforms Kazakhstan's multi-vector foreign policy from a set of parallel ties into a coherent, networked system for managing interdependencies, in which each new institutional interface enhances resilience and expands the space for development.

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[47] World Bank, *The Middle Trade and Transport Corridor: Policies and Investments to Triple Freight Volumes and Halve Travel Time by 2030* (2023), https://www.worldbank.org/en/region/eca/publication/middle-trade-and-transport-corridor.

Conflict of Interests

The author declares no ethical issues or conflicts of interest in this research.

Ethical Standards

The author affirms this research did not involve human subjects.

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GEOECONOMICS, CONNECTIVITY, AND STRATEGIC PARTNERSHIP: IRAN AND ARMENIA IN EURASIA'S NEW ORDER

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Abstract

The geoeconomics of Eurasia has been constantly evolving over the past decade. Various events have contributed to these changes, including the outbreak of war in Ukraine, sanctions on Russia's geoeconomic infrastructure, shifts in the status of the Caspian Sea, and geopolitical developments in the South Caucasus. These transformations have created new conditions in Eurasian geoeconomic dynamics, prompting many stakeholders in the South Caucasus to redefine their geoeconomic roles. Iran's new engagements in this field are defined within the framework of the Eurasian Economic Union (EAEU) and the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO). Armenia, as a neighboring country with extensive historical ties to Iran, is considered a key player in the South Caucasus and a strategic partner for Iran. Under the new regional conditions, and in response to emerging uncertainties, Armenia serves as an important and reliable access route, especially for Iran–Russia geoeconomic interactions. Trade opportunities and energy cooperation can further deepen these interactions. A strategic partnership offers a low-cost, long-term framework for advancing mutual interests. It must include specific conditions, focus on priority sectors, and align with the interests of Iran and Armenia, as well as broader regional trends.

Keywords: *Iran, Armenia, Eurasia, Geoeconomics, strategic partnership*.

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Introduction

Iran and Armenia are two neighboring countries with deep historical ties. Armenia is positioned in the geoeconomy of the South Caucasus as part of the Eurasian subsystem, while Iran, as a regional power in the Middle East, is situated in the geoeconomic subsystem of Southwest and West Asia. Therefore, the relations and interactions between Iran and Armenia can be assessed not only within the framework of neighborly relations but also in the context of broader interregional dynamics. However, it is essential to consider an inevitable reality: alongside changes and transformations in regional systems—particularly the gradual transitional period emerging in the structure of the international system—regional geoeconomic trends are also evolving. In the South Caucasus, these trends have undergone significant shifts over the past decade due to developments in the Caspian Sea, the definition of new corridors, changes in energy relations, the outbreak of the war in Ukraine, Western sanctions on Russia, and, especially, the change in the status of Nagorno-Karabakh after 2020. These geoeconomic changes, occurring alongside and in parallel with geopolitical transformations, directly influence the interests of various actors.

In this regard, the current period is best understood as a transitional era. Accordingly, countries possess considerable potential to redefine their geoeconomic position and interests, and can modify or replace previous behavioral patterns by reinforcing or redefining them. Iran and Armenia are no exception to this rule and will logically determine their new geoeconomic standing by outlining updated and adaptive objectives suited to the new circumstances. Historical patterns of cooperation over the past three decades, together with centuries of bilateral interaction, indicate that the relationship between Iran and Armenia has been shaped by enduring common interests, with the potential for convergence regularly outweighing moments of divergence. Recent geopolitical developments in the South Caucasus, along with the positions taken by Tehran and Yerevan in response, have further highlighted this ongoing and relative convergence. Accordingly, the two countries are poised to encounter new opportunities for cooperation, especially in the geoeconomic domain.

However, the new model of cooperation and partnership between the two countries, along with its prospects within the framework of strategic priorities, raises a key question under current conditions. A central question concerns how ongoing geopolitical changes and the ambitions of other regional actors will shape the interests of Iran and Armenia, influence the main directions of their economic cooperation, determine their priorities in important geoeconomic sectors such as energy and transit, and guide the way the two countries respond together to shared

geoeconomic challenges. In such circumstances, and despite the long-term developments in the South Caucasus, Iran and Armenia have the potential to define a specific level of strategic partnership in response to the emergence of a new geoeconomic configuration in the region. This paper aims to examine the most important axes of this prospective strategic partnership by employing the Interpretive Structural Modeling (ISM) method and drawing on the conceptual frameworks of geoeconomics, energy geopolitics, and connectivity hubs.

Methodology: This paper, using a qualitative approach and a deductive strategy grounded in the theoretical perspectives of connectivity hubs and the geopolitics of energy, seeks to explain how Iran's position and interests in the South Caucasus are being redefined. In this regard, data are collected through various qualitative methods, such as qualitative trend analysis, content analysis, and coding. For analyzing these data, the Interpretive Structural Modeling (ISM) method is employed. The purpose of this method is to transform complex and unstructured issues into a coherent, multi-layered structural model that illustrates the causal and hierarchical relationships among factors. ISM serves as an effective technique for analyzing the impact of one element on others. This methodology traces the sequence and direction of complex relationships among the components of a system; in other words, through this tool, a group can overcome the complexity and make the underlying relationships among elements more intelligible. ISM was introduced by Sage in 1977.[1] Using this method, the paper maps the geoeconomic model of the South Caucasus as a system and identifies Iran's evolving position and interests within it.

Conceptual Framework: Geoeconomics, Geopolitics of Energy and Chokepoints

Geoeconomics is one of the more recent concepts in international relations. The term was first used in the 1990s by Edward Luttwak to describe how, in the post–Cold War environment, the main arenas of competition between states were shifting from the military sphere to the economic sphere. Around the same time, Samuel Huntington advanced similar views. In his theory, he emphasized that in a world where military conflict between great powers is unlikely, economic power will play an increasingly important role in determining whether states hold a dominant position or are subordinate.[2] Accordingly, geoeconomics can be defined as the use of

[1] Adel Azar and Karim Bayat, "Designing a Business Process-Centric Model with an Interpretive Structural Modeling (ISM) Approach," *Information Technology Management* 1, no. 1 (2008): 7.
[2] Sören Scholvin and Mikael Wigell, "Geo-Economics as Concept and Practice in International Relations," *FIIA* 102 (2018): 5.

economic instruments to defend national interests and produce beneficial geopolitical outcomes, as well as the impact of other nations' economic actions on a country's geopolitical objectives. The first dimension of this definition refers to maximizing national interests through economic tools; the second highlights how economic power may enhance a country's standing in the structure of the international system; and the third focuses on the influence of external economic actions on states' geopolitical goals.[3] Together, these components form a comprehensive definition of geoeconomics that captures its multidimensional nature and strategic consequences.

The second part of the conceptual framework, focused on the energy sector, is energy geopolitics. Energy and geopolitics have always been closely interconnected. The twentieth century demonstrated that access to energy resources could be a decisive factor in determining the outcome of wars. Oil production, the formation of new global alliances, price fluctuations, and related phenomena either propelled or constrained the strategic ambitions of great powers. The sweeping and rapid changes in the energy sector in the twenty-first century have transformed the relationship between energy and geopolitics, elevating it to a new level.

As new energy resources become available and new geopolitical tools and opportunities emerge, the overall landscape of the energy sector is changing rapidly. At the same time, climate issues are rising to the top of the global agenda. Together, these developments make it increasingly difficult to create a clear and stable roadmap for energy investors, policymakers, industry, and even the wider public.[4] This situation has strengthened the link between energy and geopolitics, giving rise to the concept of energy geopolitics. In this sense, energy geopolitics investigates the impact of energy and its broader dimensions on power politics and inter-state relations, with a traditional focus on fossil fuels such as oil and gas. However, the use of new forms of energy has broadened this definition. Thus, access to all types of energy resources, their transportation processes, control over production and transit routes, technologies and tools related to energy, and even policies governing energy consumption—which may influence international competition—are all considered part of energy geopolitics.[5] Broader definitions of energy geopolitics integrate more dimensions by combining specialized energy concepts with geopolitical terminology.

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[3] Seyed Mohsen Hosseini, Arash Raesinezhad, and Mohsen Abbaszadeh Marzbani, "The Impact of Populism and Rentierism on the Geoeconomy of the Bolivarian Republic of Venezuela," *International Quarterly of Geopolitics* 21, no. 1 (2025): 275.

[4] Carlos Pascual, *The New Geopolitics of Energy* (New York: University of Columbia, 2015), 5.

[5] Hossein Mahdian and Sirus Fakhri, "Iran's Energy Geopolitics and West Energy Security," *Human Geography Research* 44, no. 4 (2012): 48.

Alongside these two concepts, another theory that can significantly support the geoeconomic assessment of developments is the chokepoints theory. It helps analyze the geoeconomic position of regions and countries and their interests with a particular focus on transit and connectivity. In geoeconomics, this theory emphasizes the strategic value of transit chokepoints or critical nodes along global trade routes, including straits, canals, and pipelines, all of which carry major geoeconomic and geopolitical implications. These chokepoints are particularly crucial in maritime transport, which accounts for a considerable share of global trade.

Maritime chokepoints, known as "critical nodes in the maritime supply chain," represent a central domain in the development of sustainable commercial and maritime economies. They serve as indispensable passages for global shipping, and any disruption or congestion in these waterways can have profound consequences for the global economy. Ship congestion and forced rerouting of maritime routes result in higher operational costs and increased greenhouse gas emissions, placing additional pressure on the shipping industry. A tangible example of such an impact is the Suez Canal crisis.[6] Another related issue is the dependence of specific industries, including food production, on these chokepoints. Their vulnerability is significant enough that it even influences global food security. Examples include the role and position of the Strait of Malacca, whose importance in China's maritime trade is unmatched and carries significant geopolitical implications for the country. Approximately 70 percent of China's oil imports pass through this strait. Another case is the Strait of Hormuz and the experience of the Tanker War, which clearly illustrates the importance of such hubs.[7] The distribution of these hubs across global grain transit corridors is illustrated in the following figure.

[6] Xue Wang, Debin Du, and Yan Peng, "Assessing the Importance of the Marine Chokepoint: Evidence from Tracking the Global Marine Traffic," *Sustainability* 16, no. 1 (2024): 385–86.
[7] Laura Wellesley et al., "Chokepoints in Global Food Trade: Assessing the Risk," *Research in Transportation Business & Management* 25 (2017): 17.

Figure 1: Global grain trade routes and key hubs in global transport[8]

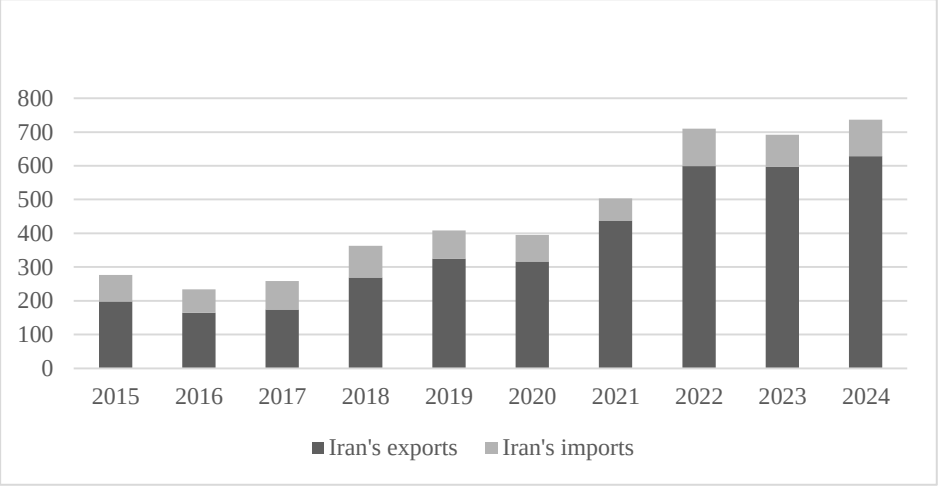
General Structure and Frameworks of Iran–Armenia Relations

Iran and Armenia are two neighboring countries with ancient historical ties going back several millennia. For this reason, Iran was one of the first countries to recognize Armenia's independence after the collapse of the Soviet Union. The Islamic Republic of Iran officially recognized Armenia on December 25, 1991—three months after its independence—and, given their shared border and regional political and security interests, established diplomatic relations with Yerevan in 1992. Armenia's geographic position was significant for Iran in terms of access to Russia and Europe, playing an active role in the South Caucasus, and addressing the circumstances arising from the Nagorno-Karabakh crisis in the 1990s, all of which contributed to the development of bilateral relations.[9] It is also worth noting that Armenia is the only Christian neighbor of Iran. Moreover, among Iran's 15 neighbors, relations with Armenia have experienced the least fluctuation and tension. The presence of Armenians in Iran, particularly in Tehran, Isfahan, and Tabriz, has served as a cultural and social bridge between the two countries. Thanks to the long-standing coexistence of Christian Armenian and Muslim compatriots, the Islamic Republic of Iran enjoys unique advantages in its interactions with Yerevan.[10] These features have fostered a steadily growing trend in Tehran–Yerevan relations.

[8] Wellesley et al., "Chokepoints in Global Food Trade," 18.
[9] Elaheh Koolaee and Mahnaz Goodarzi, "The Effect of Normalization of Armenia-Turkey Relations on Armenia-Iran Relations," *International Quarterly of Geopolitics* 11, no. 37 (2015): 44.
[10] Mehdi Hedayati Shahidani and Masoud Jabari Maleki, "Economic Relations between Iran and Armenia within the Framework of the Eurasian Economic Union," *Quarterly Journal of Political Commentary Knowledge* 5, no. 17 (2023): 68.

One of the most important areas of cooperation between Iran and Armenia has been in the economy and geoeconomics. Over the past three decades, growing links in electricity transmission, gas pipeline development, and transit cooperation, combined with Iran's observer status in the EAEU, have formed a solid basis for geoeconomic relations between the two countries. However, obstacles such as sanctions on Iran and FATF-related restrictions have affected certain aspects of bilateral banking relations.[11] Nevertheless, statistics indicate that trade exchanges between Iran and Armenia have expanded in recent years. The chart below illustrates the trade volume between Iran and Armenia from 2015 through 2022. As can be seen, bilateral trade has followed a gradual upward trend, rising from $276 million in 2015 to over $736 million in 2024, a growth of 166 percent.

Chart 1: Trade between Iran and Armenia from 2015 to 2024[12]



Although Tehran–Yerevan relations have generally followed an upward trajectory over the past three decades, they have also experienced periods of fluctuation. Between 1997 and 2000, for example, the level of relations saw a relative decline due to Armenia's closer ties with Israel and its enhanced cooperation with NATO. However, these relations were rebuilt within a short period. In 2006, the Iran–Armenia gas pipeline was inaugurated in the presence of both countries' presidents, and other forms of economic cooperation in the energy sector were strengthened. One outcome of this trend was the formulation of a trilateral plan to establish an oil refinery in Armenia with the participation of Iran and Russia. This

[11] Zahra Moshfegh, "Strategies for Developing Economic Relations with Armenia," *Economic Security* 10 (2022): 24.
[12] "Bilateral Trade between Armenia and Iran, Islamic Republic of," Trade Map, 2024, https://www.trademap.org/Bilateral_TS.aspx.

process of developing relations reached a higher level with the visit of Armenia's then-president to Tehran in 2009.[13] This pattern illustrates the emergence of a stabilizing mechanism that has accompanied both the expansion and the occasional tension in bilateral ties.

For instance, Armenian Prime Minister Nikol Pashinyan, speaking at the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe in France, despite Trump's "maximum pressure" policy against Iran, emphasized the importance of relations with Iran. He stated: "In all my conversations with European representatives and senior officials, I have emphasized that European allies understand the importance of good relations between Iran and Armenia and agree with the approach of maintaining normal relations and developing our good ties with Iran".[14] This continuity, despite major political changes in Armenia, reflects the presence of a transgovernmental relationship rooted in consistent neighborly policy.

Nonetheless, one of the most important strategic and structural factors shaping Iran–Armenia relations has been the presence of shared threats. Due to security threats from Azerbaijan, Armenia has sought to strengthen its relations with Iran, while Iran has aimed to use its regional influence to shape a balance with the Republic of Azerbaijan and, from this perspective, deepen its ties with Armenia. According to the theory of defensive realism, the root cause of this lies in the two countries' shared perception of threat from Azerbaijan and its relations with Israel and Turkey.[15] This balancing logic has been the most significant structural factor reinforcing Tehran–Yerevan relations. Furthermore, due to the geoeconomic positions of both countries and their mutual role as connectivity hubs for one another, this can serve as a basis for deepening their geoeconomic interdependence. Such geoeconomic interactions are crucial within the context of the new geoeconomic developments in the South Caucasus.

New Geoeconomic Developments in the South Caucasus

Over the past decade, three major geoeconomic developments have emerged in the South Caucasus, each progressing along a distinct path with different implications. These shifts concern the Caspian Sea, Nagorno-Karabakh, and the war in Ukraine.

Geoeconomic developments in the Caspian Sea: In the past decade, numerous geoeconomic changes have occurred in the South Caucasus, giving rise to new

[13] Nurollah Gheysari and Mahnaz Goodarzi, "Iran–Armenia Relations: Opportunities and Obstacles," Central Eurasian Studies 2, no. 3 (2009): 130–31.
[14] Elaheh Kolaee and Seyed Mehdi Hosseini Taghiabad, "Iran's Science Diplomacy in Its Relations with Armenia," *Central Asia and Caucasus Journal* 25, no. 108 (2020): 175.
[15] Bahram Amir Ahmadian, Habib Rezazadeh, and Ahmad Jorfi, "Analysis of Relations between Iran and Armenia in the Framework of Defensive Realism," *Central Eurasian Studies* 9, no. 1 (2016): 31.

trends in this Eurasian sub-system. These shifts have generated new competitive dynamics in the Caspian region, which has acquired significant geoeconomic importance following its demilitarization. The rise of China and the launch of the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) with a focus on Central Asia, the United States' new strategy during the Obama administration, and even the involvement of India and countries such as the UAE, Turkey, and South Korea have all contributed to what many describe as a new "Great Game" in Caspian geoeconomics. Some scholars even identify China and the Caspian littoral states as the main winners of this new "Great Game".[16]

Several key strategic developments have reinforced this new competition. The first and most important was the signing of the Convention on the Legal Status of the Caspian Sea in 2018. During the Fifth Summit of the Caspian Littoral States in Aktau, Kazakhstan, the convention was signed, replacing the 1921 and 1940 Iran–Soviet treaties. Although the convention advanced legal clarity in key spheres, including the Caspian Sea status, political and military coordination, environmental standards, navigation regimes, and pipeline matters, it left significant ambiguity regarding subsoil resource ownership and seabed pipeline construction. Nevertheless, it enabled countries such as Azerbaijan to expand the volume of international trade through Caspian-based corridors,[17] a factor that gained even greater importance after 2022. Another influential development was the agreement between Turkmenistan and Azerbaijan in the Caspian Sea, brokered by Turkey. The two countries reached a historic deal over a shared oil and gas field, called *Kepez* by Azerbaijan and *Sardar* by Turkmenistan, which they renamed *Dostluk* ("Friendship"). With proven oil reserves of up to 1.4 billion barrels and substantial gas resources, this field opened new prospects for the development of the Trans-Caspian Pipeline.[18] These developments have created new geoeconomic conditions in the Caspian Sea.

Fundamental change in Nagorno-Karabakh: The second significant and impactful development concerns the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict. This dispute has been one of the "frozen conflicts" in the South Caucasus, exerting deep geopolitical influence over the region for roughly three decades. The outbreak of a new round of conflict—apparently with the tacit approval of some major powers—led to a 44-day war starting on September 27, 2020. As a result of this war, Azerbaijan regained control over significant parts of Nagorno-Karabakh and its surrounding

[16] Omid Shokri Kalehsar, *US Energy Diplomacy in the Caspian Sea Basin: Changing Trends since 2001* (Cham: Springer Nature Switzerland, 2021), 93.
[17] Michał Pietkiewicz, "Legal Status of Caspian Sea – Problem Solved?" *Marine Policy* 123 (2021): 6.
[18] Kamer Kasım, "The Impact of Azerbaijan-Turkmenistan Energy Cooperation on the Caspian Energy Security," *Abant Sosyal Bilimler Dergisi* 21, no. 3 (2021): 951–52.

territories, creating new geopolitical—and especially geoeconomic—conditions in the South Caucasus. This shift is particularly important because the recaptured areas contain 160 deposits of precious metals, including gold, mercury, copper, lead, zinc, and others.[19] These deposits, shown in Table 1, highlight the considerable mineral significance of these territories. Before this period, the lack of international recognition and ongoing security concerns in Nagorno-Karabakh discouraged foreign investment and the development of local mining projects.

Table 1: Mineral reserves of the territories liberated from Nagorno-Karabakh by Azerbaijan[20]

Mineral	**Gold**	**Mercury**	**Copper**	**Lead**	**Zinc**	**Coal**
deposits	5	7	2	1	1	**1**
Mineral	Alabaster	Vermiculite	decorative stone	facade stone	**raw materials for soda production**	
deposits	6	4	12	21	**1**	

However, at another and more important level, the geoeconomic position of Nagorno-Karabakh is significant in the transit domain, which can also be important for various actors within the framework of land and rail linkages. Since the end of the war, Azerbaijan, with its illegal claim of 'corridor' through Armenia's sovereign territory, has sought to create direct transit access for Azerbaijan to Nakhchivan through Armenia's Syunik Province without Armenian border checkpoints. Furthermore, Azerbaijan's closest ally, Turkey, aims to strengthen its position in the Middle Corridor and deepen geoeconomic connectivity among Turkic countries through this corridor. At the same time, the Armenian government has proposed the "Crossroads of Peace" initiative, whose key concept is to develop connections between Armenia, Turkey, Azerbaijan, Iran, Georgia, and Russia.[21] In parallel, several roads and railway routes in areas previously affected by the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict have become operational following new investments and reconstruction efforts.

The war in Ukraine and the geoeconomic sanctions on Russia: The third and most important factor influencing the geoeconomic landscape of the South

[19] Aynur Nesirova, "Economic Results of the Karabakh War: Plundering in the Territories of Azerbaijan During the Occupation Period," *International Journal of Management Academy* 5, no. 2 (2022): 263–64.
[20] Nesirova, "Economic Results of the Karabakh War," 263.
[21] Masoumeh Falahati et al., "The Impact of the Karabakh Conflict on the Economic Security of the South Caucasus," *International Political Economy Studies* 7, no. 2 (2025): 89–90.

Caucasus is the war in Ukraine and the sanctions imposed on Russia. This crisis, which began in 2014, has profoundly affected the region's geoeconomic landscape over the past decade. A limited escalation occurred in Nagorno-Karabakh in 2014, although the extent to which it was connected to developments in Ukraine remains a matter of debate. What is clearer is that Russia has long regarded the Karabakh conflict as a source of geostrategic leverage in the South Caucasus, and the broader Ukraine crisis heightened Western attention to the region.

In response to the new conditions, the EAEU was formed in 2015. Armenia's membership has affected the South Caucasus by creating a Russia-oriented bloc in opposition to the West and to the growing alliance among Turkey, Azerbaijan, and Georgia. Meanwhile, the EU's strong condemnation of Crimea's annexation and its lack of a similar position toward Nagorno-Karabakh had political effects on Azerbaijan-EU relations.[22]

After February 2022, the consequences for the South Caucasus became more immediate and structurally significant. The most important effect was the blockage of Russia's geoeconomic access to Europe due to EU sanctions, especially for China and Central Asia. As a result, EU interest in the Middle Corridor increased, enhancing the geoeconomic importance of the South Caucasus.[23] The capacity of this corridor—from the port of Baku to Georgian ports on the Black Sea—rose from about 500,000 tons in 2021 to around 4 million tons by 2024. Based on initial estimates and planned projects, the capacity may exceed 11 million tons by 2030. However, this will only be achieved if all infrastructure development investments are implemented; otherwise, this projected capacity could fall by as much as 35 percent.[24]

This situation has had a profound effect on landlocked Central Asian countries, as well as on Europe's trade with these states and China, while also casting uncertainty over Europe's investment prospects. In some sectors, such as uranium, the crisis became even more acute, since the transit of such products could only take place under special and highly restrictive conditions.

In the energy sector, significant changes also followed the Ukraine war. With restrictions on the westward supply of Russian gas due to the war and resulting sanctions, Europe faced an energy supply crisis. The absence of any clear prospect

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[22] Amanda Paul, "The EU in the South Caucasus and the Impact of the Russia-Ukraine War," *The International Spectator* 50, no. 3 (2015): 40.

[23] Roman Karapetyan, "South Caucasus in the Phase of Russian-Ukrainian War: New Security Challenges and Possible Scenarios for Development," *Journal of Political Science: Bulletin of Yerevan University* 2, no. 3 (2023): 41.

[24] Salome Danelia, "The Middle Corridor in Current Geopolitical Turbulence," *Canadian Journal of Research, Society and Development* 1, no. 2 (2024): 6.

for the war's end pushed European states to diversify their energy sources and replace Russian gas. One of the alternatives was the South Caucasus. The Southern Gas Corridor, which transports Azerbaijan's gas to Europe through a pipeline system, became the primary substitute for Russian supplies. During this period, Europe reached an agreement with Azerbaijan to increase gas exports through this route.[25] This development raised the strategic importance of both Azerbaijan and the South Caucasus in the EU's energy policy.[26]

At the same time, Azerbaijan's limitations in gas supply revived the idea of the Trans-Caspian Pipeline. In this framework, two pipeline projects—one for gas and one for oil—were proposed for investment. The first project involves expanding a gas pipeline from Turkmenistan to Azerbaijan and then directing it toward European markets. The second envisions transporting oil from Kazakhstan to Baku and then either integrating it into the Baku–Tbilisi–Ceyhan pipeline or constructing a new parallel pipeline in the South Caucasus.[27] The introduction of these new energy projects has further strengthened the South Caucasus's position in global energy geopolitics, particularly for Europe.

Geoeconomic Implications of the New Strategic Environment

The outcome of the aforementioned geoeconomic developments has had profound effects on the geoeconomic position of the South Caucasus, particularly in the fields of energy and transit, across three key areas: the Caspian Sea, Nagorno-Karabakh, and the Ukraine war. These transformations have generated new trends and shaped a new geoeconomic landscape in the South Caucasus, one characterized by dynamics that differ markedly from those of the past.

One of the most significant outcomes is the intensified interconnection between geoeconomic and geopolitical variables in the South Caucasus. This linkage has been addressed in certain theoretical approaches to geoeconomics, such as resource conflict frameworks. According to these perspectives, resources—whether scarce or abundant—have been shown to increase the likelihood of conflicts or

[25] Gulnara Aslanbayli, "Connectivity Risks and Opportunities in the South Caucasus," in *Connectivity Risks and Opportunities in the South Caucasus*, ed. Christoph Bilban, Elena Mandalenakis, and George Ni (Vienna: National Defence Academy, 2025), 22–23.
[26] Suren Tadevosyan, "A Small State with Growing Influence: Balancing Azerbaijan in Global Energy Policy," *Journal of Political Science: Bulletin of Yerevan University* 3, no. 3(9) (2024): 38–40, https://doi.org/10.46991/JOPS/2024.3.9.034.
[27] Julian Lee and Yelena Kalyuzhnova, "Trans-Caspian Transport Corridor Infrastructure: Oil and Gas Pipelines," in *Unlocking Transport Connectivity in the Trans-Caspian Corridor*, ed. Dina Azhgaliyeva and Yelena Kalyuzhnova (Chiyoda: Asian Development Bank Institute, 2021), 55–56.

wars, a trend influenced by today's geopolitical economy.[28] Such arguments underline the close interdependence between geoeconomic and geopolitical developments, which, when viewed broadly, can be extended to mutual geoeconomic and geopolitical conflicts. This means that intertwined geoeconomic and geopolitical interests reinforce one another, prompting states to undertake mutually reinforcing geoeconomic and geopolitical actions.

As noted above, recent developments in Nagorno-Karabakh have sparked new geoeconomic competition in the South Caucasus. At the same time, the geoeconomic repercussions of the Ukraine war have set the stage for geopolitical shifts. Claims by Armenian sources that Azerbaijan is framing certain southern Armenian territories through historical narratives serve as an example of how geopolitical interpretations can emerge from geoeconomic strategies.[29] In fact, it appears that Azerbaijan and Turkey view Armenia's conditional reluctance to fully cooperate with the so-called 'corridor' as grounds for proposing the occupation of southern Armenia, particularly parts of the Syunik Province, which could lead to significant geopolitical implications.

Another notable outcome is the strengthening of the East-West axis over the North-South trajectory in geoeconomic trends, which could have major implications. Russia's sanctions and geoeconomic tensions with Iran over the past decade have driven geoeconomic trends—including trade, transit, energy, and even investment—to develop more along the east-west route rather than the north-south corridor. Transit volume along the Middle Corridor, the primary east-west route, has surged from around 500,000 tons in 2020 to 4.07 million tons in 2024, with projections reaching 10 million tons and a capacity of up to 300,000 containers by 2030. Meanwhile, trade between China and Europe is expected to grow by 30 percent by 2030. Estimates suggest that approximately 62 percent of this trade will pass through the Middle Corridor. Additionally, trade between key regional countries, including Azerbaijan, Georgia, and Kazakhstan, and the European Union via the Middle Corridor is expected to grow by over 37 percent by 2030.[30] In contrast, due to sanctions on Russia, the traditional International North-South Transport Corridor (INSTC), the primary north-south route, now faces an uncertain future.

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[28] Petar Kurecic, "Geoeconomic and Geopolitical Conflicts: Outcomes of the Geopolitical Economy in a Contemporary World," *World Review of Political Economy* 6, no. 4 (2015): 523.

[29] Elguja Kavtaradze, "Armenia and Azerbaijan in a Geopolitical Battle: Zangezur Corridor," *International Scientific Journal "The Caucasus and the World"* 29 (2024): 127.

[30] Dávid Biró and László Vasa, "Unveiling the Strategic Significance of the Middle Corridor in Global Trade and Geopolitical Dynamics," *Economics: The Strategy and Practice* 19, no. 2 (2024): 78.

This corridor ultimately connects to Russia via St. Petersburg, but after the sanctions introduced in February 2022, this link has become effectively obstructed.

Table 2: Estimated capacity of the Middle Corridor (2022-2030)[31]

Year	Volume (Ton)	Container capacity (TEU)
2022	1.9 million	**40,000**
2023	2.8 million	**80,000**
2024	4.08 million	**100,000 (Est)**
2025	More growth	**215,000 (Est)**
2030	10 million (Est)	**300,000 (Est)**

At the same time, another outcome of this situation is the strengthening of the South Caucasus' position as a key junction in international corridors. In addition to the Middle Corridor, the region has gained an elevated status in China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) following the Ukraine war. Before the war, 80-90 percent of cargo traffic between China and Europe passed through Russia via the so-called Northern Route, but after February 2022, this traffic dropped sharply by 50 percent. This shift redirected China and the BRI toward utilizing the South Caucasus, significantly increasing Chinese investment in the region and fostering a form of China-Europe cooperation there.[32] Meanwhile, Armenian Prime Minister Nikol Pashinyan's "Crossroads of Peace" initiative—unlike the approaches of Azerbaijan and Turkey—included all regional actors, such as Iran and Russia, and was well-received.[33] These initiatives particularly reinforced the South Caucasus' role as a transit hub, correspondingly giving rise to new geopolitical dynamics.

The political and behavioral consequence of this trend is the intensification of competitive dynamics in the South Caucasus, emerging alongside other elements of the region's emerging geoeconomic landscape. One of the most significant outcomes of the Ukraine war for Russia has been the weakening of its position as the regional hegemon in the South Caucasus. This shift has also altered Moscow's interests in the region. Under the new conditions, Russia needs to develop alternative trade routes—especially to Iran, Turkey, and India—via Azerbaijan and Georgia,

[31] Biró and Vasa, "Unveiling the Strategic Significance," 79.
[32] Katja Kalkschmied, "China's Infrastructure Investment in the South Caucasus before and after Russia's Invasion of Ukraine," *Caucasus Analytical Digest* 132 (2023): 7–8.
[33] Piotr Gawliczek and Khayal Iskandarov, "The Zangezur Corridor as Part of the Global Transport Route (Against the Backdrop of Power Games in the South Caucasus Region)," *Security and Defence Quarterly* 41, no. 1 (2023): 43.

while seeking partners to circumvent Western sanctions.[34] These developments have increased competition and expanded the influence of emerging powers in the geoeconomic arena of the South Caucasus.

Meanwhile, the region's smaller states, all of which rely on partnerships with regional and international powers, are seeking to redefine their engagement patterns. Georgia's gradual shift in orientation, Armenia's more pronounced repositioning, and Azerbaijan's increasingly proactive and multilateral approach after the 2020 Karabakh war reflect this changing strategic environment. Together, these developments signify an ongoing transformation in the nature of competition and in the positioning of various actors in the region. Indicators such as the region's growing importance in mineral resources and the emergence of new energy opportunities have further reinforced this trend.

The most significant outcome of these developments is the recognition of geoeconomic expansion as an inevitable reality in the South Caucasus. The expansion of connectivity and the strengthening of the region's transit role have been the main drivers of this shift. Two parallel expansion processes have taken shape in the South Caucasus, each broadly consistent with the other.

The first is the emergence of the South Caucasus as an independent region, moving away from its historical characteristics as a Eurasian subsystem. This new form of regionalism reflects the South Caucasus' growing influence in global political and economic processes,[35] and is supported by strong geoeconomic incentives. One of its key roles is ensuring energy security for the EU.[36]

The second process involves the deepening of interregional ties with Central Asia in energy, transit, and participation in shaping a "Greater Central Asia."[37] This could significantly impact the geoeconomic prospects of both the South Caucasus and Central Asia, marking a major transformation in Eurasian geoeconomics. The South Caucasus is transitioning from a contested periphery to an increasingly interconnected geoeconomic hub, shaped by shifting power dynamics, infrastructure development, and strategic rivalries. The region's future will likely be defined by how it balances competing influences while capitalizing on its transit and energy potential.

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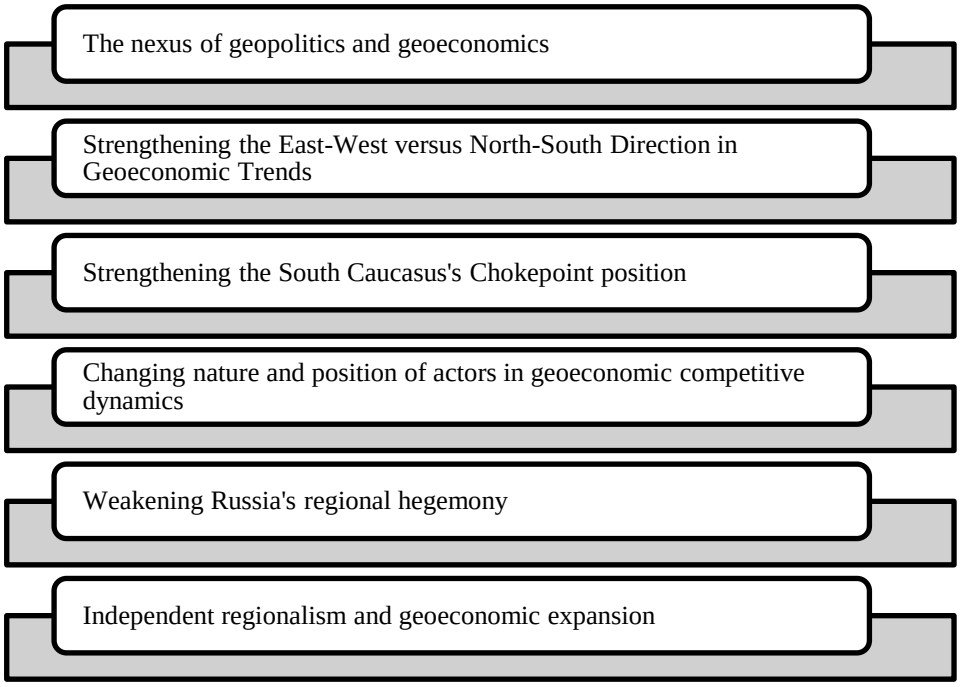
[34] Stefan Meister, "The End of Russian Hegemony: A New Transactional Order Arises in the South Caucasus," *DGAP Analysis* 10 (2024): 5.

[35] Revaz Gachechiladze, "The Making of the South Caucasus Region: A Geographical Approach," *Environment and Society* 14, no. 14 (2024): 175.

[36] Melih Dinçer, "The Role of Azerbaijan as the EU's Energy Supplier: A Secondary Alternative Partner in Natural Gas," *European Politics and Society* 25, no. 4 (2024): 624.

[37] John DiPirro, "A Greater Central Asia Strategy Without Russian Containment is Incomplete," *The Central Asia-Caucasus Analyst,* May 14, 2025, https://www.cacianalyst.org/publications/analytical-articles/item/13867-a-greater-central-asia-strategy-without-russian-containment-is-incomplete.html.

Figure 2: Outputs of transformation in the new geoeconomy of the South Caucasus



Strategic Partnership Between Iran and Armenia: Emerging Prospects

Strategic partnership is one of the emerging and modern patterns in relations between countries. Conceptually, seven preconditions are proposed for the formation of a strategic partnership between two states: (1) the presence of established partnership traits in bilateral relations; (2) the convergence of the parties' strategic objectives; (3) a shared belief that combining efforts increases the likelihood of achieving common strategic goals; (4) a credible and long-term partnership aimed at achieving shared objectives; (5) the prioritization and frequency of contacts, which distinguishes the level of closeness in the relationship from that of other ordinary partners; (6) a well-developed infrastructure for relations; and (7) a positive atmosphere in bilateral relations. This model of relations is also attractive to countries due to its lower commitment costs alongside its strategic and long-term nature.[38] In this context, Iran and Armenia, having nearly all of these conditions and based on the new geoeconomic circumstances in the South Caucasus, have considerable potential to develop a strategic partnership in the current situation. Economics and geoeconomics, in connection with geopolitics, form the essential nature of

[38] Seyed Hassan Mirfakhraei and Omid Rahimi, "Strategic Partnership; A New Pattern for Iran-Russia Relations," *International Relations Research Quarterly* 7, no. 25 (2018): 69–70.

this strategic partnership. Several key axes and drivers influence the vision for this strategic partnership.

The first and most important factor is the ceasefire agreement between Azerbaijan and Armenia. The reality is that ambiguity in Clause 9 of this agreement is one of the key contexts for the Tehran–Yerevan partnership. While Armenia interprets this clause minimally, Azerbaijan and Turkey have a maximalist and expansionist approach to it.[39] This divergence has created certain geopolitical concerns for Iran and has led it to pay greater attention to the prospect of a strategic partnership with Armenia. The development of the 'corridor' could reduce Iran's role as a transit link between Nakhchivan and mainland Azerbaijan, as well as relatively weaken Iran's position in connecting Central Asia with Turkey. Furthermore, if this corridor is developed based on the expansionist approach of Azerbaijan and Turkey, Iran may lose its direct access to the EAEU.[40] For these reasons, strategic cooperation between Tehran and Yerevan on this issue will carry significant strategic weight.[41]

Alongside these relations, a complementary dimension of this strategic partnership lies in geocultural interactions. Many cultural commonalities between Iran and Armenia can indirectly strengthen this geoeconomic strategic partnership. The presence of more than 1,400 Persian and Pahlavi words in the Armenian language, famous musicians such as Sayat Nova, who was active in Iran during the Zand dynasty, shared intangible heritage, including the Iranian Sadeh festival and the Armenian *Diarnandaraj*, or the Iranian *Nowruz* and the Armenian *Navasard* festivals, are all part of these commonalities.[42] Strengthening such cultural linkages can enhance cooperation in other areas. The infusion of these cultural commonalities into political and especially economic interactions can help ensure the long-term resilience of this strategic partnership.

The new geoeconomic transformations in the South Caucasus have created numerous opportunities to advance geoeconomic strategic projects and to establish a basis for strategic partnership. Among these opportunities are the development of the Iran and Armenia railway project, which involves Russian participation and a previously agreed budget of 1.8 billion dollars, and the agreement with Gazprom

[39] Iran's Parliament Research Center, *The Conflict between Armenia and Azerbaijan and the Interests of the Islamic Republic of Iran (1)* (Tehran: Iran's Parliament Research Center, 2021), 2.
[40] Ali Naseri and Abolfazl Shakoori, "Iran and the Geopolitics of Zangezzor Corridor," *Central Asia and Caucasus* 30, no. 125 (2024): 83.
[41] Tigran Yepremyan, "United States-Iran Relations: Security Implications for Armenia and Beyond," *Bulletin of Yerevan University D: International Relations and Political Sciences* 1 (December 2022): 53, https://doi.org/10.46991/BYSU:D/2022.sp1.050.
[42] Mohsen Nezamabadi, "Cultural Relations between Iran and Armenia, Capacities and Potentials," *Cultural Studies and Communication* 12, no. 43 (2016): 80–82.

for the construction of an Iran and Armenia petroleum products pipeline and a liquid fuel terminal with an annual capacity of 1.5 million tons.[43] Given Russia's current sanctions environment, these opportunities have an even greater chance of materializing with Moscow's effective participation. If Iran and Armenia consolidate their mutual hub position within the framework of international corridors, especially as a counterbalance to the instrumental use of these routes, they substantially enhance this strategic partnership.

One of the most important areas that underpins the Iran–Armenia strategic partnership in the geoeconomic sphere is energy. Iran, by expanding its gas exports, implementing energy swap schemes, developing the electricity transmission network through the launch of the third transmission line, and participating in refining and petroleum-processing infrastructure in Armenia,[44] has considerable potential to strengthen a strategic partnership in this area. Turning Armenia into a shared energy hub for gas exports could serve as a vital starting point in these relations. Recently, Iran and Russia have reached agreements for gas imports. Russia has significant potential for gas exports to destinations other than Europe. If a pipeline is completed from Russia and Georgia to Armenia and then to Iran, it would meet both Iran's and Armenia's gas needs while also creating opportunities for gas swaps from Russia to Pakistan via Iran. These ideas could guarantee the energy security of several countries and create a mechanism for multilateral convergence.

However, it is noteworthy that another prerequisite for developing the Iran–Armenia strategic partnership is the strengthening of bilateral trade. Although trade relations have expanded, the turnover between the two countries still has considerable room for growth. Moreover, Iran's upgraded partnership with the EAEU is a major factor influencing these relations. In response to this opportunity, Armenia established the Meghri Free Trade Zone in 2017 near its border with Iran.[45] Strengthening links in complementary and especially strategic sectors, particularly in essential goods, alongside geoeconomic linkages in regional and even interregional trade models, could deepen this partnership. If developed effectively, these measures can transform mutual trade dependence into a factor that sustains the two countries' strategic partnership.

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[43] Raymond Torosian, Ali Asghar Esmaeil Pourroshan, and Mahnaz Parvzai, "Geopolitical Developments in the Caucasus on the Relations between Iran and Armenia," *Quarterly of Geography and Regional Planning* 13, no. 51 (2023): 10.

[44] Matin Mahdokht and Ali Saberi, *Energy Situation in Armenia and Its Exchanges with Iran* (Tehran: Iran's Parliament Research Center, 2023), 17.

[45] Mahdi Amiri and Ehsan Fallahi, "Geopolynomics of Iran's Bilateral Relations with Armenia and the Republic of Azerbaijan from 2013 to 2021," *Central Eurasian Studies* 15, no. 2 (2023): 82.

Conclusion

Recent geoeconomic developments in the South Caucasus over the past few years have produced fundamental changes in the geoeconomic linkages among various actors. These developments include changes in the status of the Caspian Sea, the fundamental transformation in the situation of Nagorno-Karabakh, as well as sanctions on Russia and the blocking of Russia's geoeconomic access to the West. Although these transformations—within the framework of redefining the regional geoeconomic order in the South Caucasus—have created some new threats for actors by weakening their geoeconomic positions, they have also brought new opportunities. A significant opportunity concerns the prospect of reconfiguring and advancing the geoeconomic partnership between Iran and Armenia so that it attains the status of a strategic partnership. Tehran and Yerevan have the opportunity, within the framework of the new conditions, to establish a new economic order in the South Caucasus in a way that would reproduce their shared bilateral interests over the coming years.

This makes it essential to adopt harmonized policies and to design a roadmap that will organize the strategic geoeconomic interactions of the two countries within the structure of a strategic partnership. To this end, the two countries must consider several key stages: Defining and outlining their new position in the emerging geoeconomy of the South Caucasus to determine the orientations of their foreign policy; Aligning their geoeconomic interests with existing trends, identifying competing or even conflicting trends, and attaching political appendices to these trends and goals; Examining geopolitical options and scenarios related to recent geoeconomic developments and formulating political and security strategies in line with the outlined geoeconomic interests, goals, and positions under the new conditions; Sharing perspectives between the two countries at various levels, from expert meetings to high-level governmental sessions, to identify common ground in these orientations; Holding intergovernmental commissions to draft a roadmap for developing geoeconomic relations at the strategic partnership level and preparing a preliminary draft of the bilateral strategic partnership document; Integrating political and geopolitical discourses and mapping international events relevant to this geoeconomic strategic outlook, while gradually implementing the agreed provisions of the strategic partnership; and, Redefining domestic economic policymaking, particularly in terms of infrastructure investment, in line with the new geoeconomic objectives.

Following such a process would not only ensure the stability of relations under the new regional geoeconomic conditions but could also prevent certain other geopolitical changes and developments. At the same time, having a shared vision and

perspective for the Iran–Armenia strategic partnership can make the two countries' assessments in bilateral interactions more precise, and can give bilateral meetings, such as joint economic commissions, a more structured agenda. Logically, achieving such goals would only be possible through the focus of political elites and the creation of discursive consensus at the domestic level.

Conflict of Interests

The author declares no ethical issues or conflicts of interest in this research.

Ethical Standards

The author affirms this research did not involve human subjects.

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INTERNATIONAL NORTH–SOUTH TRANSPORT CORRIDOR: A RENEWED HORIZON OF TRADE CONNECTIVITY BETWEEN INDIA AND RUSSIA

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Abstract

In the context of shifting geopolitical alignments and evolving regional strategies, Indo-Russian trade relations are entering a new phase of strategic relevance. This paper examines the potential of the International North–South Transport Corridor (INSTC) as both an instrument for enhancing bilateral trade and a broader geopolitical lever. Two central questions guide the analysis: first, how the INSTC can redefine the scale, efficiency, and scope of economic exchange between India and Russia; and second, how it may influence regional power dynamics amid growing global fragmentation. As Western powers increasingly employ trade as a tool of political coercion, and Russia seeks to recalibrate its international partnerships, the INSTC emerges as a critical avenue for fostering strategic autonomy and connectivity. Beyond its economic utility, the corridor reflects a shared ambition to challenge existing power asymmetries and reinforce multipolarity. This study situates the INSTC within a wider set of developments, including China's expanding footprint, India's commitment to a rules-based international order, ongoing geopolitical tensions, and Russia's pursuit of a rebalanced global security architecture. Against this backdrop, a careful reassessment of the INSTC's strategic value is necessary to understand its implications for the future of Eurasian connectivity and order.

Keywords: *Russia, India, trade, transit corridor, geopolitics.*

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Introduction

India and Russia share a long-standing history of trade cooperation. However, since the collapse of the Soviet Union, their economic relationship has experienced limited momentum and has largely remained underdeveloped. In the context of shifting global power dynamics, both countries have recently begun efforts to broaden the scope of their bilateral engagement, moving beyond their traditional focus on defense and energy. These evolving initiatives reflect a strategic intent to diversify ties and enhance resilience through deeper economic integration.

India continues to face a significant trade deficit with Russia, highlighting a persistent imbalance in their economic exchange. One of the key challenges lies in the mutual lack of familiarity between business communities; Russian investors often have a limited understanding of the Indian market, and Indian stakeholders face similar informational gaps regarding Russia. Despite longstanding diplomatic ties and formal agreements, existing trade connectivity between the two countries has yet to tap into its full potential. In this context, both sides have emphasized the strategic importance of the INSTC as a means to strengthen bilateral trade and unlock greater commercial opportunities.

According to the facts and figures, a bilateral trade of US$8.1 billion was registered from April 2020 to March 2021.[1] On September 4, 2019, NITI Aayog and the Ministry for Development of the Russian Far East and Arctic signed an MoU to enhance trade and investment in the region. Russia's Far East region has become the pillar of the "Act Far East" policy. During the plenary session of the Eastern Economic Forum, Indian Prime Minister Shri Narendra Modi asserted, "I believe that the talent and professionalism of India can bring about rapid development in the Russian Far East."[2] He also highlighted the strategic significance of emerging transit corridors in fostering deeper India–Russia connectivity. Emphasizing this point, he stated: "Whether we talk about the International North–South Corridor, the Chennai–Vladivostok Maritime Corridor, or the Northern Sea Route, connectivity will play an important role in the development of our relations in the future."[3] He further noted India's growing economic footprint in the Russian Far East, particularly in sectors such as pharmaceuticals and diamonds, asserting, "Along with energy, India has also made significant investments in the Russian Far East in the areas of pharma and diamonds. Russia can become an important partner

[1] Embassy of India, Moscow, "Brief on India–Russia Economic Relations," 2023, https://indianembassy-moscow.gov.in/overview.php.
[2] Press Information Bureau, "English Translation of Address by Prime Minister Shri Narendra Modi at the Plenary Session of the Eastern Economic Forum 2022," September 7, 2022, https://pib.gov.in/PressReleaseIframePage.aspx?PRID=1857404.
[3] Press Information Bureau, "English Translation of Address."

for the Indian steel industry through the supply of coking coal."[4] Modi also underscored the potential for human capital cooperation: "We can also have good cooperation in the mobility of talent. Indian talent has contributed to the development of many developed regions of the world. I believe that the talent and professionalism of Indians can bring about rapid development in the Russian Far East."[5] These remarks underscore India's strategic interest in broadening its engagement with Russia through multi-sectoral cooperation and enhanced regional connectivity.

The INSTC, established in 2000, is a multi-sectoral transportation network that bridges the Indian Ocean and the Persian Gulf to the Caucasus, Central Asia, and Europe via Iran. It facilitates the movement of goods via Iran, the Caspian Sea, and Astrakhan to Russia and the adjoining countries of the CIS region.[6] It incorporates multiple modes of transportation, including sea, rail, and road links, and connects the Iranian ports of Bandar Abbas and Chabahar to the Russian port of Astrakhan and the Finnish port of Helsinki. The corridor also subsumes a rail link from Azerbaijan to Iran, and a highway network that connects Russia, Azerbaijan, and Iran. The main purpose of the corridor is to provide a faster, more efficient, and cost-effective transportation route for goods and passengers in these regions. The INSTC not only reduces transportation costs and transit times, but also expands trade opportunities and stimulates economic development in the countries along its route. At the same time, it fosters regional cooperation, contributes to greater stability, and strengthens political ties.

The connectivity architecture of the INSTC can be divided into three principal routes, distinguished by their length, modes of transport, and the development of main and ancillary infrastructure. The 'Western' Route stretches along with the western coast of Caspian Sea through Russia and Azerbaijan approximately about 5,100 km, well connected through Railway and Roadways of South Caucasus, the 'Eastern' Route, a 6,100 km, long route stretches over the Eastern Coast of Caspian Sea through Kazakhstan and Turkmenistan, and 'Trans-Caspian' a 4,900 km long route which uses ferry and feeder containment through Caspian Sea. The IN-

[4] Press Information Bureau, "English Translation of Address."
[5] Press Information Bureau, "English Translation of Address."
[6] United Nations Economic Commission for Europe, *Declaration Adopted by the Second International Euro-Asian Conference on Transport*, September 12–13, 2000, https://unece.org/DAM/trans/doc/cd/peter2e.pdf.

STC is viewed as a variant of the Suez Canal route.[7] Along with the physical connectivity, it will also enhance knowledge and information-sharing mechanisms.[8]

The ongoing Western sanctions and Russia's quest for new market avenues have given a new impetus to the geoeconomic appraisal of the INSTC as a viable alternative multimodal transit corridor. The complexities at the western front of INSTC, incessantly unraveling the Ukraine War, and Russia's derailed relationship with the European Union have crucially influenced and avowedly increased the geostrategic significance of the transit corridor, where India and Iran are dominant actors of ceaseless global power dynamics. India's standing in this international transit model becomes geopolitically exigent as it tries to maintain a delicate balance between its close allies and traditional partners. However, its efforts to establish an inclusive and sustainable geostrategic environment have faced significant challenges. Nevertheless, the INSTC offers substantial practical benefits, reducing transportation costs between India and Russia by approximately 30 percent and shortening transit times from 40 days to just 25 days.

The INSTC can initiate transformative development in the region, facilitate trade, transit, and overall economic advancement. Strategically, it bypasses Pakistan and exhibits better ties with Russia, Central Asia, and Europe. It offers a geostrategic counter to the sprawling network of the 'New Silk Road'. Recently, the Container Corporation of India and Russian Railways' container transportation subsidiary signed a service agreement to transport cargo between the two countries. The Container Corporation of India Limited (CONCOR) is keen to avail the INSTC route to facilitate the export of goods, including pharmaceuticals, vegetables like onion, spices, and tea from India that are in huge demand in the Russian market. For Russia, the INSTC serves as a viable alternative for accessing markets in South Asia, particularly in response to Western economic sanctions. During the COVID-19 pandemic and subsequent supply chain disruptions, stakeholders increasingly viewed the INSTC as a practical alternative logistics route.

This paper critically examines the INSTC as a means of strengthening investment and strategic partnership between India and Russia. The primary objective is to assess how the corridor shapes each country's evolving strategic calculus. For Russia, the INSTC serves as an alternative to the EU's Europe-Caucasus-Asia

[7] Vaishali Basu Sharma, "The Political Economics of the International North–South Transport Corridor," *The Wire*, June 30, 2022, https://thewire.in/world/political-economics-international-north-south-transport-corridor-india-iran-russia.

[8] Naina Bhardwaj, "India's Opportunities along the International North–South Transport," India Briefing, 2022, https://www.indiabriefing.com/news/indias-export-opportunities-along-the-international-north-south-transport-corridor-22412.html.

Transport Corridor (TRACECA), creating an efficient link to India.[9] For New Delhi, it offers vital access to Central Asian markets, bypasses Pakistan, and counters China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI). In light of shifting geopolitics marked by Western sanctions, India–China rivalry, global instability, and disruptions from COVID-19 and the war in Ukraine, the INSTC has gained heightened importance as a framework for transregional integration and cooperation.

This study also highlights the underexplored role of interconnectivity in shaping Indo-Russian relations within the context of globalization. By examining the direct links between transit corridors and economic growth, it provides critical insights into the expansion of bilateral trade. The analysis draws on a range of primary sources, including official reports, speeches, government documents, and joint statements, as well as secondary materials such as academic journals, yearbooks, and online data, to offer a comprehensive assessment of evolving India–Russia economic ties.

The INSTC is a multi-modal transportation route linking the Indian Ocean and the Persian Gulf to the Caspian Sea via Iran and onward to northern Europe via St. Petersburg in Russia. The need for an alternate logistics route became apparent during the COVID-19 pandemic and subsequent supply chain disruptions. And as the conflict in Ukraine has escalated, the Black Sea blockade has hampered trade between India and Russia and vice versa. This, again, has provided opportunities to revive this trade route. INSTC is a convenient and economically enduring option for Russia to diversify its export extent beyond Europe. Countries geographically placed along the INSTC route present a lucrative market for Russian Exports. Since the 2014 Crimean crisis, Moscow has faced persistent economic sanctions from Western countries. With the ongoing conflict in Ukraine, the scope and severity of these sanctions have intensified further. Along with the facilitation of southward connectivity, Russia can minimize the impact of these weaponized trade equations. For India, the route is also strategically significant. It offers access to Central Asia and Afghanistan, bypassing the archenemy Pakistan.[10] India can also expand its export capabilities through this route to Russia in a shorter time and lower cost. The corridor will elevate India's economic engagements with Russia.

India can also attract investments by developing commercial and economic centers along the INSTC ports, such as the Nhava Sheva port and Kandla port in

[9] "EU support to the Europe-Caucasus-Asia Transport Corridor." *MEMO*/12/141, Brussels, 28 February 2012 https://ec.europa.eu/commission/presscorner/api/files/document/print/en/memo_12_141/MEMO_12_141_EN.pdf.

[10] Charu Sudan Kasturi, "Is the INSTC Russia's New Economic Escape Route?" *Al Jazeera*, July 27, 2022, https://www.aljazeera.com/economy/2022/7/27/russias-new-economic-escape-route.

Gujarat. India aspires to be a leading producer and exporter of pharmaceuticals, electronics, aircraft, and accessories, and these products can find lucrative markets along the INSTC corridor. In 2021, the blockage of the Suez Canal, which disrupted approximately 12 percent of global trade and reportedly halted goods valued at US$9 billion per day, further amplified optimism regarding the INSTC as a practical and reliable alternative multimodal transit corridor.

India has accorded priority to economic integration with the member nations and has accordingly concluded Double Taxation Avoidance Agreements (DTAA) and Bilateral Investment Protection Agreements (BIPA) with adjoining member states. According to a study conducted by the Federation of Freight Forwarders' Association of India (FFFAI) in 2014, INSTC was 30 percent cheaper and 40 percent shorter than the traditional Suez route, slashing the transit time to an average of 23 days for Europe-bound shipments from the 45-60 days taken by the Suez Canal route.

Russia and India thus drew up the foundation for a road-and-sea corridor linking their countries with each other through Iran, Central Asia, and the South Caucasus. the INSTC would directly link St Petersburg with Mumbai.[11] By proposing the INSTC, Russia alluded to coining an alternative to the Transport Corridor Europe-Caucasus-Asia (TRACECA) of the European Union (EU). In addition, given worsening Sino-Indian relations, New Delhi might be more interested in developing the INSTC as a counterweight to the BRI's China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC). India is trying to use the INSTC to create an economic corridor and expand trade with Russia. Russia has begun sending goods to India via the INSTC to overcome sanctions-related challenges in doing business with traditional trade partners. Stakeholders believe the INSTC routing also helps shorten the transit time between India and Russia to 25 days from about 40 days under other available communication routes. It remains to be seen how far INSTC would help India and Russia grow trade volumes across tense borders. Nevertheless, the two strategic partners saw bilateral trade soar nearly 46 percent from April 2021 to February 2022, amounting to $11.9 billion.

In his Presidential address to the Federal Assembly, President Putin highlighted that Russia will impart special attention to the INSTC, connecting India to Russia via Iran, and the de-dollarization of the global settlements system. For more than two decades, the INSTC has been little more than a pipe dream. However, it has gained top momentum under the backdrop of the Russia-Ukraine crisis. A rare

[11] Mher Sahakyan, "Rebuilding Interconnections: Russia, India and the International North–South Transport Corridor," *AsiaGlobal Online*, September 17, 2020, https://hal.science/hal-02980041v1/document.

confluence of geopolitical and economic incentives is turning the route into a potentially vital economic escape pathway for Moscow. The Western sanctions deny the Kremlin access to European markets.[12]

Recently, however, that landscape has changed. In June, Lithuania imposed a transit ban on sanctioned goods headed for Russia's Baltic enclave of Kaliningrad, only reversing its decision after the EU stepped in to clear the way for the cargo to travel.

This study is guided by three central research questions. First, whether the INSTC can emerge as a viable and sustainable alternative trade route between India and Russia. Second, it examines the extent to which this corridor contributes to the expansion of bilateral trade volume. Third, it considers whether the INSTC represents a mere aspirational project or, instead, functions as a strategic counterweight to the Western sanctions and China's BRI.

Research Methodology: This research employs a mixed-methods approach, integrating both quantitative and qualitative analyses to provide a comprehensive understanding of the INSTC's economic and geopolitical implications. The quantitative component examines trade volume data, logistics efficiency, and conducts cost–benefit comparisons between the INSTC and traditional routes, using statistical tools to assess growth trends and economic impact. Qualitative analysis, on the other hand, involves case studies, policy reviews, and expert interviews to assess the geopolitical dynamics, mainly in countering BRI, by evaluating strategic partnerships, diplomatic engagements, and regional security implications. The study is grounded in Complex Interdependence Theory, which helps analyze the multifaceted economic, political, and strategic interdependences between India, Russia, and other participating nations, emphasizing non-state actors, transitional networks, and the role of economic cooperation in reducing geopolitical tensions. Secondary data obtained from government reports, trade databases, and institutional publications are supplemented with primary insights from policymakers and logistics experts. By combining these methodologies, the research aims to provide a holistic assessment of the INSTC's potential to reshape trade connectivity, while also addressing key challenges such as infrastructure gaps, geopolitical rivalries, and China's counter-strategies in the region.

International North–South Transport Corridor, Trade, and India

The impact of INSTC on trade volume between India and Russia has been especially significant. The recent data of the Indian Ministry of Commerce and Industry

[12] Kasturi, "Is the INSTC Russia's New Economic Escape Route?"

reveals that bilateral trade between India and Russia in the fiscal year 2019-20 was about $9.4 billion. Where Indian exports amounting to $3.8 billion and imports amounting to $5.6 billion have been realized. India is a destination with huge economic diversification, though bilateral trade with Russia accounts for only 1.19% of total Indian trade. Before the announcement of the INSTC, the bilateral trade between Russia and India stood at $10.11 billion in the fiscal year 2013-14.[13] The trade volume between India and Russia has witnessed several fluctuations due to changing geopolitical factors, global economic instability, and changes in trade policies. These factors not only influenced the trade value rather it also impacted the other dimensions of Indo-Russian bilateral engagements.

India's gradual shift toward closer ties with Western countries, coupled with Russia's increasing proximity to China and Pakistan, has significantly influenced the dynamics of their bilateral relationship. The COVID-19 pandemic and the subsequent Russia–Ukraine crisis further contributed to a sharp decline in India–Russia trade. Nevertheless, in the post-pandemic period, both nations have expressed a clear commitment to revitalizing and strengthening their partnership. This renewed engagement is reflected in India's continued imports of Russian S-400 defense technology, oil, and other commodities, even in the face of strong Western criticism. Their ongoing willingness to cooperate is also evident in multilateral forums such as BRICS, the Shanghai Cooperation Organization, and the Eurasian Economic Union.[14] This has resulted in the revival of the INSTC, which has the potential to increase trade volume between India and Russia by providing a more efficient transportation route. Despite numerous Western sanctions, trade between India and Russia has increased, supported by operational improvements to the INSTC route via Iran. Both countries have called for the maximum use of this corridor to increase not only bilateral trade but trade in extra-regional areas as well. The eagerness to develop it as more feasible transport connectivity was reflected in Putin's addressing of the 6th Caspian Sea Summit in July 2022, where he referred to the INSTC as 'Transport Artery from St Petersburg to Iran and India'.

The economic integration and interests of India in the INSTC belt could well be understood in India's recent agreements with different states in the region. India has agreed and signed on DTAA (Double Taxation Avoidance Agreements) with the Russian Federation, Central Asian states, Belarus, and Ukraine. Though established on September 12, 2000, the critical importance of this connectivity has been lately

[13] "Trade Statistics." *Ministry of Commerce and Industry, Government of India* https://www.commerce.gov.in/trade-statistics/.

[14] Nandan Unnikrishnan and Nivedita Kapoor, "India–Russia Relations in a Post-Covid World," Raisina Debate, March 1, 2021, https://www.orfonline.org/expert-speak/india-russia-relations-in-a-post-covid-world.

realized by the signatories, and hence its operationalization has been delayed. The export of natural gas and oil through the INSTC via India not only enhances the corridor's geopolitical significance as a major transportation route but also supports the growth of India's exports to the EU.

As global isolation intensified, Russia increasingly prioritized economic integration with Asia, particularly with India. In pursuit of this goal, both countries accelerated the development of institutional mechanisms to strengthen their bilateral trade relationship. India and Russia have actively promoted new channels for engagement between their business communities. For instance, a multi-sectoral trade fair, The India Show, was organized in Moscow from September 24 to 26, 2014, attracting participation from numerous Indian companies. The establishment of reciprocal banking links further illustrates tangible progress, with Russian banks such as VTB, Sberbank, Vnesheconombank, Promsvyazbank, and Gazprombank opening branches in India, and Indian banks like SBI and Canara Bank establishing a presence in Russia. Additionally, both countries have initiated discussions toward a free trade agreement with the Eurasian Economic Union.[15]

The Eurasian Economic Union is an important emerging economic bloc, and India is keen to engage more closely with Russia and the CIS countries to further intensify its trade and economic cooperation with this region. Russian Deputy Prime Minister Denis Manturov stated that "We pay special attention to the issues of mutual access of production to the markets of our countries. Together with the Eurasian Economic Commission, we are looking forward to intensifying negotiations on a free trade agreement with India."[16] He further stated that this will create opportunities for Indian companies to increase their supplies to Russia. Laying out the challenges posed by the Western sanctions and the COVID-19-led logistics disruptions provoked Russia to strengthen trade alignment with the fast-growing economy of India. Addressing the India-Russia Business Dialogue, India's Minister for External Affairs Dr. Jaishankar pointed out that "We have crossed the bilateral trade target of $30 billion before the year 2025, which was the target year given to us by our leadership. In order to make India a global manufacturing hub, we need to motivate businesses on both sides."[17]

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[15] "Decision No. 14 of the Supreme Eurasian Economic Council dated December 26, 2016 "On the Beginning of Negotiations with the Republic of India on Concluding an Agreement on a Free Trade Area" (Russian language), *The Eurasian Economic Commission (EEC)* https://eec.eaeunion.org/en/comission/department/dotp/torgovye-soglasheniya/india.php.

[16] ANI, "Kyrgyzstan Conference Stresses on Importance of INSTC and Chabahar Port as Alternative to BRI," *The Print*, October 24, 2022, https://theprint.in/world/kyrgyzstan-conference-stresses-on-importance-of-instc-and-chabahar-port-as-alternative-to-bri/1180383.

[17] "Remarks by External Affairs Minister, Dr. S. Jaishankar at the India-Russia Business Dialogue."

Will the INSTC be a Counterweight to BRI?

The INSTC is strategically crucial for India because the corridor route circumvents Pakistan and provides New Delhi access to Central Asia and Afghanistan, providing a viable counter to the controversial China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) of China-led BRI. India is thus looking to expand the strategic value of the INSTC.[18] On the surface, the project represents an ambitious undertaking of reinventing the ancient Silk Road. However, despite China's presentation of the project as serving only economic purposes, its political undertones cannot be negated. China has largely sold the BRI project as a significant contributor to the growth of Asia as a whole.

In this continuation, India, being the other major power after China in Asia, its position on the project cannot be overlooked. With a major part of the BRI project passing through Pakistan and close to the contested territories, India has been critical of the project from the beginning. Simultaneously, the Indian strategic community is already on alert with China's "String of Pearls" that manifests as an undeclared encirclement of India's maritime boundaries. So, taken together, India remains worried about China's extensive expansion achievable through the said project. The following section examines India's concerns and objections regarding China's BRI, as well as the strategies New Delhi has adopted to address these challenges. The central question remains: what specific issues drive India's apprehension toward the BRI, and how does it plan to overcome them?

The trajectory of India-China relations is cast in the shadow of unresolved boundary demarcations. Though they both share a robust economic relationship, their unresolved boundary often gets reflected in local border skirmishes. These localized conflicts have a strong bearing on India's domestic electoral politics. India's opposition to the BRI is also rooted in its concerns about China's strategic interests in the region. India sees the BRI as a way for China to increase its influence in the region and project its power beyond its borders. India is equally concerned with China's hostile expansion in the South China Sea, besides its undeclared 'String of Pearls' policy aimed at countering New Delhi in blue waters.

India also has reservations about the transparency and sustainability of the BRI projects. Several of the projects are funded through loans from Chinese banks and executed by Chinese companies, raising questions about their economic

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April 17, 2023 Ministry of External Affairs, Government of India. https://www.mea.gov.in/Speeches-Statements.htm?dtl/36496.

[18] Jagannath Panda, "Revitalizing INSTC: Analyzing Geopolitical Realignments and the China Factor," Institute for Security & Development Policy, February 2023, https://www.isdp.eu/publication/revitalizing-instc-analyzing-geopolitical-realignments-and-the-china-factor.

viability and the debated debt-trap diplomacy. In addition to these concerns, India is also worried about the geopolitical implications of the BRI. India sees the BRI as part of China's broader strategic vision to establish a new world order with China. India fears being marginalized in this new order and seeks to maintain its strategic autonomy and independence. Simultaneously, India-Pakistan relations have a bitter historical undercurrent. Because a major section of China's BRI—specifically the China–Pakistan Economic Corridor—passes through Pakistan-occupied Kashmir, India views these developments with particular concern. India considers this region an integral part of its territory and regards the CPEC as a violation of its sovereignty.[19]

India's investment in the Chabahar Port project in Iran, which connects India to Central Asian markets via Afghanistan, will come under severe strain once the BRI gets operational. India will lose its strategic edge to Afghanistan and Central Asia. Imperatively, with an uncertain border, the presence of Pakistan in the BRI, the loss of strategic inroads, and an expansionist China add to Indian anxieties. Persistent border uncertainties, Pakistan's involvement in the BRI, the loss of strategic leverage, and China's expansionist ambitions all heighten India's anxieties. Additionally, China's unpredictable approach further complicates the situation. In this context, New Delhi has resisted Chinese pressure and maintained its opposition to the BRI, instead adopting a policy of passive deterrence.

India's Counterbalance to BRI

Given the preceding analysis, the next logical question is: beyond a strategy of passive deterrence, what approach does India adopt to counterbalance the BRI? In this context, the INSTC emerges as a key element of India's regional strategy. The corridor is a multimodal route spanning 7,200 kilometers, connecting India and Russia via Iran and several Central Asian countries, and offering a robust alternative for regional connectivity and trade. India, Iran, and Russia founded INSTC in 2000 and refined it to include other countries like Azerbaijan, Armenia, Belarus, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Oman, Tajikistan, Turkey, Ukraine, and Syria. Bulgaria

[19] Srikanth Kondapalli, "Perception and Strategic Reality in India-China Relations" in Thomas Fingar Ed. *The New Great Game- China and South and Central Asia in the era of Reform* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2016) pp. 93-115.

was made an observer state.[20] Since its inception, the INSTC has been regarded as a potential game-changer for freight and trade dynamics across Eurasia.[21]

In its composition, INSTC truly represents a multilateral integration initiative that aims to connect disparate regions and pursue intra-regional development. Although the INSTC experienced a slow start, recent years have witnessed its revitalization, largely driven by shifting geopolitical dynamics. The need for intraregional connectivity has only increased with Iran and Russia bearing intense Western sanctions. Russia views INSTC as "a potentially vital economic escape pathway route", given the restrictions on the entry of its goods into the European market.[22] As for India, INSTC is expected to reduce transport time and costs, besides fulfilling its energy needs. India is promoting INSTC "as a viable and fairer corridor which doesn't have a superstitious neo-colonialist agenda like that of BRI."[23] At the same time, the INSTC provides Central Asian countries with an alternative to China's debt-laden infrastructure projects. India's policy has also been re-energized by its outreach to the region, wherein INSTC will emerge as a vital link for India-Central Asia. Therefore, INSTC holds an effective model for lowering trade transaction costs and promoting greater growth of intra/inter-regional trade on a global scale, by reducing transport time and costs for participating countries.[24] The INSTC is a counterincentive to China's BRI, providing India with opportunities to bridge its energy demand-supply gap and access untapped markets.

This route also offers a chance for India's infrastructure to go global, with state-run corporations leading the charge. India is looking to expand the strategic value of the INSTC by investing in Iran's Chabahar port, creating industrial parks and SEZs.[25] Despite recent progress, the INSTC has faced considerable challenges. Early growth was hampered by sanctions on Iran, while the Russia–Ukraine crisis and intensified Western sanctions have further stalled development. The Taliban's return to power in Afghanistan and ongoing regional instability have also hindered cooperation, while China's deepening ties with both Iran and Russia have complicated the corridor's strategic landscape.

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[20] Neythiri Levina, "Checkmating Chinese BRI through INSTC," *Chanakya Forum*, July 5, 2022, https://chanakyaforum.com/checkmating-chinese-bri-through-instc.

[21] Radhika Lakshminarayanan and Tigran Yepremyan, "Armenia-India Partnership: Geopolitical and Geo-Economic Implications in the Eurasian Context," *Asia Europe Journal*, 21, Springer-Verlag, 2023, pp. 81–100, https://doi.org/10.1007/s10308-023-00665-x.

[22] Panda, "Revitalizing INSTC."

[23] Levina, "Checkmating Chinese BRI through INSTC."

[24] Panda, "Revitalizing INSTC."

[25] Panda, "Revitalizing INSTC."

Strategic Importance of the INSTC for India

Conceived before China's Belt and Road Initiative, the INSTC is designed to reduce both costs and transit times for shipping commodities from India to Russia and Europe via Iran, while also providing Eurasian countries with an alternative framework for regional connectivity.[26] The Ashgabat accord, a multimodal transport agreement reached by India, Oman, Iran, Turkmenistan, Uzbekistan, and Kazakhstan, will also be synchronized through the INSTC. A major boost to India's "Connect Central Asia" policy, besides securing geopolitical interests in the region, is by-passing its regional rival, Pakistan.[27] Given these strategic dynamics, Eurasia holds considerable significance for India's broader regional ambitions.

The corridor will be a 'game changer' for India to position itself as a prominent player in the strategically important Eurasian space, where India has historically been a marginal player.[28] Despite having relations with the Central Asian Republics in the post-Soviet period, India could not establish a vibrant economic engagement with them. However, India's "Connect Central Asia" and "Act North" policies have facilitated a renewed interest in Eurasia. Trade relations between India and Russia remain a cornerstone of their bilateral partnership, and the effective operationalization of the INSTC is poised to further strengthen these ties. President Putin has already pushed INSTC to connect India by calling it a "truly ambitious project".[29] A trial run of goods has already projected a shortening of delivery time between the two countries.[30] Simultaneously, India is trying to expand its trade relations with Iran by adding INSTC to its Chabahar port, creating a viable trade corridor for both countries. The operational control over the port is key to "India's ambition for the INSTC."[31] INSTC also offers India to project its soft power in the region. The multilateral and consensus-driven approach of the INSTC stands in sharp contrast to the BRI, which faces mounting challenges due to protests in partner countries, escalating costs, and a growing trust deficit toward China. India's reputation as a responsible and trusted leader of the Global South is further solidi-

[26] IANS, "India Quietly Counters China's BRI."
[27] ANI, "Kyrgyzstan Conference Stresses."
[28] Sharma, "The Political Economics of the International North–South Transport Corridor."
[29] Dipanjan Roy Chaudhury, "Putin Pushes INSTC to Connect India; Describes It as a 'Truly Ambitious Project'," *The Economic Times*, July 1, 2022, https://economictimes.indiatimes.com/news/economy/foreign-trade/putin-pushes-instc-to-connect-india-describes-it-as-a-truly-ambitious-project/articleshow/92582524.cms.
[30] Krishna, "Is INSTC the Answer of China's BRI, Which Halved the Time of India–Russia Trade Route, Despite Reservations from US."
[31] Syed Fazal-e-Haider, "INSTC vs. BRI: The India–China Competition over the Port of Chabahar and Infrastructure in Asia," *The Jamestown Foundation: Global Research & Analysis* 21, no. 19 (2022), https://jamestown.org/program/instc-vs-bri-the-india-china-competition-over-the-port-of-chabahar-and-infrastructure-in-asia.

fied, building on its historical role in advancing South–South cooperation, reminiscent of the Non-Aligned Movement.[32]

INSTC's Role in Addressing Russia's Strategic Needs

Infrastructure is often described as the "lifeline of a country," playing a pivotal role in national development. In the context of Russia, the development of the INSTC is particularly significant, as it offers strategic opportunities to bolster the country's economy and enhance its regional connectivity. Russian economist Evgeny Vinokurov pointed out that INSTC would contribute to the "formation of a macro-regional transport and logistics system". He defines it as "Eurasian Transport Framework." It will boost the trade and investment partnerships within Eurasia.

All three INSTC routes are crucial for unlocking Russia's transport and transit capacity. In addition, the INSTC facilitates the development of special economic zones and industrial parks along its route, further stimulating regional economic growth. On the Syrian coast of the Mediterranean Sea, the corridor would provide Russia with railway connectivity to its military port in Tartous. Economically, the INSTC is poised to strengthen trade with the Middle East while also consolidating Russia's political and military presence in the region. Thus, this transit corridor would minimize US influence in the Middle East.[33]

This transit corridor is particularly vital for Russia, as it serves as the country's primary strategic trade route for engaging with global markets. Stabilizing the Middle East is a top priority for Russia, as it can foster greater regional economic interconnectivity between the Caucasus and the Middle East. Ultimately, the INSTC presents a mutually beneficial solution for Iran, Russia, and the member states of the Gulf Cooperation Council.

The rise of Asia in the geopolitical landscape has reasserted the need for regional connectivity. The INSTC has assumed greater significance as a transregional integration vehicle in the Eurasian region. This corridor might facilitate the trade flows between the Eurasian Economic Union and Russia at large under the FTA framework. At present, the maritime route between India and Russia is challenged by both geographic and strategic factors. The journey, which passes through the Red Sea, the Suez Canal, the Mediterranean Sea, and the English Channel, is exceptionally long and strategically vulnerable, with the potential to be disrupted by the US or European countries. In the context of extensive sanctions, Russia has

[32] ANI, "Kyrgyzstan Conference Stresses."

[33] Evgeny Vinokurov, Arman Ahunbaev, and Alexander I. Zaboeva, "International North–South Transport Corridor: Boosting Russia's 'Pivot to the South' and Trans-Eurasian Connectivity," *Russian Journal of Economics* 8, no. 2 (2022): 59–173, https://doi.org/10.32609/j.ruje.8.86617.

increasingly aligned itself with Iran, one of the most economically isolated countries in the world. The completion of the Rasht-Astara railway is likely to play a key role between the two nations. Additionally, Iran can capitalize on its strategic geographic location as a hub for the transit of goods between the West and East. Thus, the development of the corridor plays a key role in building the integrated Eurasian transport that may serve as the basis for regional trade and investment cooperation.

Conclusion

The INSTC will serve as a transformative approach not only for India and Russia but also for Iran. This Corridor will help to enhance their trade connectivity, counterbalance geopolitical challenges, and foster regional economic integration. The paper demonstrates that the INSTC can lower transportation costs by 30 percent and reduce transit times by 40 percent compared to the Suez Canal, thereby significantly boosting bilateral trade. This route offers a crucial economic advantage by minimizing capital and operational costs through shorter distances and faster delivery. The development of INSTC will provide direct access to India in Central Asia and Russia.[34] Some estimates suggest that using the INSTC could halve transit times from Mumbai to Europe and Russia compared to traditional sea routes, resulting in savings of up to $2,500 for every 15 tonnes of cargo. While the standard sea route takes approximately 40 days, the North–South Corridor is projected to reduce this duration by more than half.[35]

Geopolitically, the INSTC emerges as a counterweight to BRI, giving a transparent, multilateral model that contrasts with the BRI's debt-trap diplomacy and sovereignty concerns.[36] From a Russian perspective, the corridor may serve as a vital lifeline for diversifying trade beyond Europe and strengthening ties with partners amid ongoing Western sanctions.[37] Iran's crucial role in INSTC further under-

[34] Intueri Consulting, *International North–South Transit Corridor (INSTC) Impact Analysis*, October 23, 2022, https://intueriglobal.com/international-north-south-transit-corridor-instc-impact-analysis.
[35] David Rogers, "Iran's Railway Revolution," *Global Construction Review*, December 14, 2015, http://www.globalconstructionreview.com/markets/howislamic-republic-set-become-land-br8i8d8ge.
[36] Laura-Anca Parepa, "The Belt and Road Initiative as Continuity in Chinese Foreign Policy," *Journal of Contemporary East Asia Studies* 9, no. 2 (2020): 175–201, https://doi.org/10.1080/24761028.2020.1848370.
[37] Vinokurov, Ahunbaev, and Zaboeva, "International North–South Transport Corridor: Boosting Russia's 'Pivot to the South' and Trans-Eurasian Connectivity."

scores its potential to reshape regional dynamics, providing India with energy security and Iran with economic resilience.[38]

However, challenges such as the ongoing Russia–Ukraine conflict, instability in Taliban-controlled Afghanistan, and fluctuating international relations pose significant risks to the full operationalization of the corridor. After all these hurdles, the INSTC's success hinges on diplomatic agility. As Modi has emphasized, connectivity through initiatives like the INSTC is crucial for future relations.[39]

In conclusion, the INSTC is more than a trade route; it is a geopolitical tool that can reshape Eurasia's economic landscape. By leveraging this corridor, India and Russia can achieve mutual growth, reduce dependency on contentious routes, and assert their roles in an emerging multipolar world order. As Russian President Vladimir Putin has described the proposed ISTC, connecting India and Russia via Iran, as a "truly ambitious project"[40] and its realization could mark a new chapter in transregional cooperation.

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The authors declare no ethical issues or conflicts of interest in this research.
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The authors affirm this research did not involve human subjects.

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[39] Press Information Bureau, "English Translation of Address by Prime Minister Shri Narendra Modi at the Plenary Session of the Eastern Economic Forum 2022."
[40] Swarajya Staff, "'Truly Ambitious Project': Putin Pitches 7,200 km Long INSTC as 'Transport Artery' Connecting Russia to India via Iran," *Swarajya*, July 1, 2022, https://swarajyamag.com/business/truly-ambitious-project-putin-pitches-7200-km-long-inst-corridor-as-transport-artery-connecting-russia-to-india-via-iran.

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BITCOIN AS A POTENTIAL HEGEMONIC WATERSHED: STRATEGIC FORESIGHT ON DECENTRALIZED MONEY AND THE FUTURE OF POLARITY

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Abstract

This paper examines how and why Bitcoin, an unofficial cryptocurrency characterized by decentralized, leaderless, and stateless governance, could transform the balance of power and the structural configuration of polarity in the international system. Using strategic foresight as an analytical framework for horizon scanning and the anticipation of systemic behavioral trends, this study considers five hypothetical pathways, both direct and indirect, through which Bitcoin might influence a prospective hegemonic transition or redefine the global balance of power over the coming decades. These possibilities include: 1) Bitcoin as a potential major reserve currency, 2) Bitcoin as a policy instrument of an anti-hegemonic revisionist grand strategy, 3) the proliferation of Bitcoin as a trend that reflects the twilight of US hegemony, 4) Bitcoin as a linchpin of Pax Americana, and 5) Bitcoin as an inspirational forerunner for the design of creative alternatives to the dollar. This discussion blends the explanatory views of hybrid disciplinary models such as geoeconomics, mercantile realism (economic realism), and economic statecraft.

Keywords: *Bitcoin, money, reserve currencies, cryptocurrency, FinTech, strategic foresight, hegemony, international political economy.*

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Introduction

In the contemporary information age, the emergence of digital money, generated by the transformative technological processes of the Fourth Industrial Revolution, has become an increasingly global phenomenon that warrants analysis within the framework of high politics. This assumption is supported by the disruptive nature of stateless cryptocurrencies, their unique governance mechanisms, and their influence on the post–Cold War security environment, where traditional rivalries and emerging threats increasingly converge. At the same time, the continuation of the dollar's hegemony in the international political economy of money faces increasing challenges such as structural macroeconomic distortions, shifting geopolitical alignments in pivotal regional theatres, the reactivation of great power rivalries, and the overuse of economic coercion as a tool of US foreign policy.[1] It is therefore essential to clarify the strategic implications of data-driven currencies such as Bitcoin for the global balance of power and the prospective restructuring of polarity, particularly in light of the ongoing transformation of the international monetary and financial system into a key arena of great power rivalry. Building on these considerations, this study explores the possible avenues through which Bitcoin could influence the evolving architecture of world order.

Methodology: This work relies on strategic foresight as a qualitative method intended to scan the horizon, envisage hypothetical situations, and study their prospective ramifications. Rather than simply assuming the simple extrapolation of familiar long-range trends, strategic foresight encourages the assessment of various plausible evolutionary trajectories that may take place and the development of multidisciplinary analytical perspectives. In the context of this research, the identification and examination of these projections are informed by academic scholarship, open-source materials, and grey literature within the fields of international political economy, geopolitics, and security.

Theoretical Framework: The explanations put forward by this paper have been formulated based on the theoretical reasoning and insights of international political economy (IPE),[2] geo-economics,[3] economic statecraft,[4] and mercantile realism.[5] The interpretative frameworks of these hybrid models are useful for un-

[1] Wasta Ahmed Medha, "Dollar Hegemony in the Realm of Multipolarity: An Analysis," in *Contemporary World Politics,* ed. Amit Mandal, Farheen Bhuian, Nazmul, Laskar, Deepanjana Majumder, and Ekata Gosh (Authorspress, 2024), 300-311.
[2] Robert Gilpin, *The Political Economy of International Relations* (Princeton University Press, 1987).
[3] Robert Blackwill and Jennifer Harris, *War by Other Means: Geoeconomics and Statecraft* (Harvard University Press, 2016).
[4] David Baldwin, *Economic Statecraft* (Princeton University Press, 2020).
[5] Eric Heginbotham and Richard Samuels, "Mercantile Realism and Japanese Foreign Policy," *International Security* 22, no. 4 (1998): 171–203.

derstanding why and how the logic of high politics, hegemonic cycles, and great power competition provides an appropriate lens for engaging with the multifaceted grammar of money and finance in an era of high-tech complex interdependence.

Assessing Bitcoin's Prospects as a Global Reserve Currency

The conception of a major global reserve currency emancipated from the political control of governmental authority and great power politics is not new. During the negotiations of the Bretton Woods Conference, John Maynard Keynes, leading the British delegation, proposed the establishment of "Bancor," a supranational currency designed to be anchored in the intrinsic value of gold and intended to stabilize the postwar international monetary system.[6] In the twenty-first century, the proliferation of Bitcoin has revitalized the expectation of a denationalized international currency not subject to unilateral control.[7] A number of observers suggest that the dollar's hegemonic predominance as the world's leading reserve currency may not yield to another sovereign monetary unit, but to an emergent, nontraditional monetary paradigm. Within this evolving landscape, Bitcoin, as the foundational prototype of cryptocurrencies, occupies a potentially advantageous position to ascend into the upper hierarchy of global reserve assets.[8] Since its debut more than fifteen years ago, Bitcoin's most enthusiastic advocates have embraced "the dream of a single world currency that is private, free for all to use, and under the control of the masses."[9]

The rise of nonstate cybercurrencies such as Bitcoin can serve as a game-changer that hastens the renewal and diversification of international monetary governance. Theoretically, a digital currency such as Bitcoin could evolve to assume the functions of money on an international scale: unit of account, medium of exchange, and store of value.[10] [11] Bitcoin offers substantive benefits over conventional fiat currencies and even precious metals: built-in transnational circuits, algorith-

[6] Benn Steil. *The Battle of Bretton Woods: John Maynard Keynes, Harry Dexter White and the Making of a New World Order* (Princeton University Press, 2014).
[7] Ashwath Komath. "Bancor Comes of Age: A Case for an Indian Bitcoin Reserve." *India Quarterly* 78, no. 1 (2021): 121-142.
[8] STRATFOR. "Not Much Stands in the Dollar's Way." *Strategic Forecasting Inc*. March 29, 2017. https://worldview.stratfor.com/article/not-much-stands-dollars-way.
[9] Morgen Peck. "Let's Destroy Bitcoin." *MIT Technology Review* 121, no. 3 (2018): 72-77.
[10] I. Efremenko, T. Panasenkova, D. Artemenko, and V. Larionov. "The Role of Crypto-Currencies in the Development of the Global Currency System." *European Research Studies Journal* 21, no. 1 (2018): 117-124.
[11] Bill O'Grady. "The Dollar Weapon." *Vettafi Advisor Perspectives*. July 15, 2014. https://www.advisorperspectives.com/commentaries/2014/07/15/the-dollar-weapon.

mic programming, and apolitical governance.[12] As its accompanying ecosystem has flourished organically, the gravitational pull of this cryptocurrency has attracted mainstream economic agents such as retail e-commerce platforms, traditional financial entities, exchanges, and start-up businesses. Eventually, Bitcoin's increasing traction may go much further in cross-border payments, even though it would have to overcome regulatory obstacles. Such a level of international reach would challenge both the greenback's monetary hegemony and the legitimacy of established economic paradigms, including fiat money and fractional-reserve banking.[13]

Nevertheless, it would be both unwise and premature to assume the inevitable materialization of these forecasts. Political, economic, and technical constraints justify a degree of skepticism. Most notably, the Bitcoin network does not enjoy the full-spectrum political backing of any great power. Achieving a much higher degree of international circulation would require the adoption of Bitcoin as the anchor of a national or regional hard currency.[14] Without this backing, its strength would be structurally constrained. Since the Athenian silver drachma in classical antiquity, no currency has risen to dominance without the full-fledged support of a hegemonic polity. In contrast, the superior status of the US dollar is undergirded by various assets of American national power, such as military preparedness, economic prosperity, institutional nodes, infrastructure, territory, and cultural soft power.[15] Furthermore, it is improbable that most nation-states would willingly forgo the strategic, political, and functional advantages linked to the sovereign Westphalian authority they exercise over monetary policy.[16]

By design, 21 million is the maximum number of units that can exist in the Bitcoin network. This artificial scarcity means that even the total volume of Bitcoin's money supply is insufficient to fuel international economic exchanges, commercial operations, and financial transactions.[17] To keep things in perspective, Bitcoin's total market capitalization, estimated at 2.4 trillion US dollars by early

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[12] Arumugam Seetharaman, A. Saravanan, Nitin Patwa and Jigar Mehta. "Impact of Bitcoin as a world currency." *Accounting and Finance Research* 6, no. 2 (2017): 230-246.
[13] Bill Maurer, Taylor Nelms and Lana Swartz. "When Perhaps the Real Problem is Money Itself? The Practical Materiality of Bitcoin." *Social Semiotics* 23, no. 2 (2013): 261-277.
[14] David Orrell, and Roman Chlupatý. *The Evolution of Money*. (Columbia University Press, 2016).
[15] STRATFOR, "Not Much Stands."
[16] Bill O'Grady. "The Dollar Weapon." *Advisor Perspectives*. July 15, 2014. https://www.advisorperspectives.com/commentaries/2014/07/15/the-dollar-weapon.
[17] Peter Hazlett and William Luther. "Is Bitcoin Money? And What That Means." *The Quarterly Review of Economics and Finance* 77 (2020): 144-149; See also James Rickards. *Cryptocurrency Wars: The Making of the Next Monetary System* (Baltimore: Agora Financial LLC, 2018); Alesja Serada. "The Continuous Materiality of Blockchain." The University of Vaasa. 2020. https://monami.hs-mittweida.de/frontdoor/deliver/index/docId/11868/file/Druckversion_Serada_paper.pdf.

October 2025, makes it the dominant nonstate cryptocurrency.[18] This value exceeds the nominal GDP of economies such as Brazil, Russia, Spain, South Korea, and Australia.[19] Yet, this figure remains modest compared to the estimated value of global gold reserves (11.5 trillion US dollars), the market capitalization of the S&P 500 index (36 trillion US dollars), and the total global money supply (82.6 trillion).[20]

Nonetheless, stateless cryptocurrencies are still in their early developmental stages.[21] The volatile fluctuations of Bitcoin's exchange rates are another problem. This endemic instability means that Bitcoin behaves more like a speculative asset that is bought and sold in speculative markets for quick profits, denominated in more conventional forms of wealth, rather than as sound international money.[22] Critics contend that, for this very reason, Bitcoin's eventual trajectory may mirror the collapse of the seventeenth-century "tulipmania" bubble in Amsterdam, at a time when the Dutch Republic stood as the leading financial hub of the world.[23]

In summary, the predictions about Bitcoin as a universal coin are misplaced.[24] *Ceteris paribus*, the potential of prominent nonstate cybercurrencies like Bitcoin to reach the commanding heights of the global monetary pyramid is minimal.[25] Under existing circumstances, Bitcoin is hardly a strong candidate that can outcompete the US dollar.[26] Still, the long-term incremental projection of Bitcoin and similar cryptocurrencies could reduce the strategic advantages that come with the dollar's condition as a hegemonic reserve currency and even be leveraged by states as a strategic asset to further the implementation of de-dollarization policies.[27] There-

[18] CoinMarketCap. "All Cryptocurrencies.". October 04, 2025. https://coinmarketcap.com/all/views/all/.
[19] World Bank. "GDP (current US$).". 2025. https://data.worldbank.org/indicator/NY.GDP.MKTP.CD?year_high_desc=true.
[20] Jeff Desjardins. "All of the World's Money and Markets in One Visualization." *Visual Capitalist*. November 28, 2022. https://www.visualcapitalist.com/all-of-the-worlds-money-and-markets-in-one-visualization-2022/.
[21] STRATFOR, "Examining the Future of Bitcoin," Strategic Forecasting Inc., September 21, 2015, https://worldview.stratfor.com/article/examining-future-bitcoin.
[22] David Blaazer, "Bitcoin in the Longue Durée: Money, the State and Cryptocurrency." *Australian Humanities Review* 66, (2020): 196-203; George Friedman. "What Is Bitcoin?" *Geopolitical Futures*. December 17, 2017. https://geopoliticalfutures.com/what-is-bitcoin/; Nellie Huang. "What You Need to Know About Bitcoin." *Kiplinger's Personal Finance* 72, no. 4 (2018): 60-62; Tom Hashemi. "The Bitcoin Solution to Terrorism Financing." *War on the Rocks*. May 08, 2014. https://warontherocks.com/2014/05/the-bitcoin-solution-to-terrorism-financing/.
[23] Graham Middleton. "Bulbs, Bitcoins and Bubbles." *Dental Practice* 29, no. 1 (2018): 86-89.
[24] Hashemi. "The Bitcoin Solution to Terrorism Financing."
[25] Gal Luft and Anne Korin. *De-dollarization: The Revolt against the Dollar and the Rise of a New Financial World Order* (USA: Independently published. 2009).
[26] STRATFOR, "Not Much Stands."
[27] Glenn Diesen. *Great Power Politics in the Fourth Industrial Revolution* (London: I.B. Tauris, 2021).

fore, their potential applications as second-tier, minor, or alternative reserve assets are worth considering.[28] In a nutshell, Bitcoin could only partially roll back or downsize the dollar's hegemony if it becomes a secondary reserve currency.

Bitcoin as a Policy Instrument of an Anti-Hegemonic Grand Strategy

The growing cross-border circulation of decentralized cryptocurrencies such as Bitcoin could lead to a more pluralistic and fragmented global monetary order.[29] Considering their disruptive properties, these FinTech innovations can weaken the hegemonic status of the dollar and the capacity of the so-called "collective West" to impose coercive financial sanctions. Moreover, Bitcoin's open and competitive architecture carries counter-hegemonic potential by limiting the unilateral control of financial privileges.[30] Together, such features make Bitcoin attractive to states that seek to upend the enduring American dominance of international financial and monetary circuits. Therefore, revisionist states may strategically employ nonstate cryptocurrencies to construct parallel financial networks, promote de-dollarization, and foster a global monetary order grounded in a more multipolar distribution of power.[31]

The Russian Federation —a revisionist great power that seeks to play a more assertive role in a polycentric world order— may be interested in unlocking the counter-hegemonic potential applications of Bitcoin. This cybercurrency could be wielded by Russian economic statecraft to further a transition toward a higher degree of multipolarity within the international system. In the financial and monetary domains, Moscow lacks the resources to directly challenge the United States. However, operating from a zero-sum perspective, Russia may incorporate nonstate cryptocurrencies into a broader grand strategy aimed at eroding the dollar's global supremacy. This course of action would diminish Washington's commanding position in global financial and monetary affairs, lessen the attractiveness of the greenback in international markets, and deepen American financial problems such as the accumulation of unsustainable debt levels. Under these circumstances, Moscow

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[28] Ashwath Komath. "Bancor Comes of Age: A Case for an Indian Bitcoin Reserve." *India Quarterly* 78, no. 1 (2021): 121-142.

[29] David Orrell and Roman Chlupatý. *The Evolution of Money* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2016).

[30] Jason Lowery. *Softwar: A Novel Theory on Power Projection and the National Strategic Significance of Bitcoin* (Las Vegas: Independently published, 2023).

[31] Laura Shin. "Why Cryptocurrencies Could Push the Dollar from World Reserve Currency Status." *Forbes*. November 07, 2017. https://www.forbes.com/sites/laurashin/2017/11/07/why-cryptocurrencies-could-push-the-dollar-from-world-reserve-currency-status/?sh=583c8976a9ed.; Eric Yakes. "Whither Bitcoin?". *Bitcoin Magazine*. April 13, 2022. https://bitcoinmagazine.com/markets/whither-bitcoin-monetary-restructuring.

could serve as a testing ground for innovative projects involving unofficial cryptocurrencies such as Bitcoin.[32]

Russia is already taking strategic steps within the global cryptocurrency sector. In fact, the Kremlin's transition from an initial rejection of cryptoassets toward a more flexible approach is likely driven by a pragmatic necessity to bypass and weaken the dollar.[33] Russia, owing to its existing comparative advantages and strategic interests, is encouraging the intensive proliferation of large-scale Bitcoin mining facilities in Eastern Siberia as an unconventional industrial policy.[34] By December 2024, the Russian Federation represented 16% of global Bitcoin mining operations, which makes it the world's second-largest hub for this activity, only after the United States.[35] The Russian government has officially authorized national private companies to use Bitcoin in cross-border economic exchanges.[36] President Vladimir Putin himself has noted that, as a reserve asset, wealth denominated in Bitcoin cannot be frozen for political or strategic motives.[37]

However, Russia and other revisionist powers must overcome significant constraints before they can expand Bitcoin's role in cross-border transactions and international payments. These challenges include the development of a comprehensive transnational network of financial infrastructure.[38] Bitcoin's high financial volatility represents another shortcoming worth considering.[39] Even though such a strategic option could be useful to circumvent US-led international financial and monetary circuits, it would lack the critical mass needed to undermine the dollar. In the best-case scenario for Russian national interests, such measures could partially weaken the dollar's dominant position. Moscow could employ Bitcoin and other nonstate cryptocurrencies as counter-hegemonic tools, yet establishing a truly mul-

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[32] Nicholas Ross Smith. "Could Russia Utilize Cryptocurrencies in Its Foreign Policy Grand Strategizing? *Russia in Global Affairs* 17, no. 3 (2019): 134-152.

[33] Sean Costigan and Greg Gleason. "What if Blockchain Cannot Be Blocked? Cryptocurrency and International Security". *Information & Security* 43, no. 1 (2019): 13-20.

[34] Hugo Estecahandy and Kevin Limonier. "Cryptocurrencies and processing power in Russia: a new strategic territory in eastern Siberia?" *Journal of Cyber Policy* 6, no. 1 (2021): 68-80.

[35] Kaan Farahani. "*Top 10 Bitcoin Mining Countries of 2025*." Hashrate Index. January 06, 2025. https://hashrateindex.com/blog/top-10-bitcoin-mining-countries-of-2025/.

[36] Reuters. "*Russia is using bitcoin in foreign trade, finance minister says*." December 25, 2024. https://www.reuters.com/markets/currencies/russia-is-using-bitcoin-foreign-trade-finance-minister-says-2024-12-25/.

[37] Filip De Mott. "Vladimir Putin says bitcoin could be a useful asset as Russia's reserves remain frozen*"*. *Business Insider*. December 14, 2024. https://markets.businessinsider.com/news/currencies/bitcoin-cryptocurrency-russia-economy-vladimir-putin-frozen-assets-payment-systems-2024-12?op=1.

[38] Eric Yakes. "Whither Bitcoin?*"*. *Bitcoin Magazine*. April 13, 2022. https://bitcoinmagazine.com/markets/whither-bitcoin-monetary-restructuring.

[39] Sarah Jones. "Can Cryptocurrency Be Weaponized?*"* *Diplomatic Courier*. February 07, 2018. https://www.diplomaticourier.com/posts/can-cryptocurrency-weaponized.

tipolar global monetary order would require far greater strategic and economic capacity to displace the United States from its central position.

Bitcoin Proliferation as an Indicator of the Decline of US Hegemony

Bitcoin's symbolic significance is noteworthy. The currency's creation in the aftermath of the 2008 crisis shook the international financial system and raised concerns about the political and economic credibility of the US dollar as the world's primary reserve currency.[40] Financial Times commentator Rana Foroohar argues that the rise of Bitcoin and other nonstate cybercurrencies reflects a systemic trend that cannot be dismissed as transient. She maintains that the growth of these unofficial currencies signals mounting skepticism toward the dollar—driven by rising debt levels and persistently loose monetary policies—and simultaneously reflects a broader structural shift toward multipolarity in the realm of high politics.[41] In this sense, Bitcoin may herald the emergence of a more polycentric world order. Zoltan Pozsar, a former Credit Suisse analyst, argues that a new Bretton Woods–type arrangement would be beneficial for Bitcoin. He contends that such an arrangement would entail a weaker US dollar, a stronger Chinese yuan, heightened financial uncertainty, and the expansion of "outside money," including gold and other commodities.[42] Consequently, these tendencies would characterize an interregnum in which a waning dollar-centric order coexists with the rise of cryptocurrencies.[43] These perspectives suggest that Bitcoin is part of a long-term progression that, over the coming decades, will lead to the redesign of global financial and monetary systems.

Bitcoin as a Linchpin of Pax Americana

Mikic proposes the intriguing hypothesis that the growing monetization of Bitcoin will increase —rather than decrease— the greenback's role as the dominant reserve currency.[44] In a landscape influenced by worsening internal financial imbalances and the external pressure of revisionist challengers determined to target the green-

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[40] Chris Zapone, Elise Thomas and Katherine Mansted. "The Geopolitics of Crypto-currencies." *National Security Podcast*, September 03, 2019. Podcast, website. https://www.policyforum.net/national-security-podcast-the-geopolitics-of-crypto-currencies/-index.html.

[41] Rana Foroohar. "*Bitcoin's Rise Reflects America's Decline*." Financial Times. February 14, 2021. https://www.ft.com/content/16a37710-cbff-41b1-af96-7dc8b2de0c43.

[42] Zoltan Pozsar. *Bretton Woods III* (Zurich: Credit Suisse, 2022).

[43] Blessing Mbalaka. "The Finance Money Crisis and Cryptocurrencies: Is the US Dollar Hegemony in an Interregnum?" *Digital Policy Studies* 2, no. 1 (2023): 09-22.

[44] Luke Mikic. "The US Will Weaponize the Dollar by Backing it with Bitcoin*." Bitcoin Magazine*. October 29, 2022.

back's supremacy, it would be convenient for US self-interests to lead the in-depth renovation of the global monetary order with a Bitcoin-backed dollar. He further argues that this counterintuitive monetary formula could offer viable solutions to these structural challenges. Likewise, a report by the Bitcoin Policy Institute contends that Bitcoin represents an untapped source of strategic advantage that could reinforce the United States' position as the world's predominant power.[45] The think tank recommends that, rather than suppressing it, US economic statecraft should adopt Bitcoin as a strategic tool to deepen capital markets, spur technological innovation, counter China's promotion of e-RMB internationalization and the global spread of its FinTech platforms, project American soft power, and finance opposition to hostile regimes. Such a plan could reorganize international monetary governance —with Bitcoin as a central architectural pillar broadly analogous to the role played by gold under the provisions of Bretton Woods— in a way fully consistent with Washington's strategic agenda. Although this policy prescription once seemed unlikely at first glance, the recent official establishment of the US Strategic Bitcoin Reserve[46] represents a turning point that may foreshadow an incremental trajectory in this direction. Notably, the US has accumulated 198,012 Bitcoin, roughly equivalent to 23.45 billion US dollars.[47]

Bitcoin as a Conceptual Forerunner of Alternatives to the US Dollar

From a Braudelian perspective, Bitcoin could become a precursor that inspires the development of more far-reaching digital currency projects. Bitcoin's potential to eclipse the US dollar is negligible. Nevertheless, the ripples of its eventual success could trigger a domino effect that leads to the design of new generations of digital currencies, *linked either to their own financial infrastructures or to hard assets of intrinsic value, designed* to contest the dollar's hegemonic status.[48] Notably, an analytical report prepared within the framework of the Valdai Discussion Club

[45] Matthew Pines, *Bitcoin and U.S. National Security: An Assessment of Bitcoin as a Strategic Opportunity for the United States* (Washington, D.C.: Bitcoin Policy Institute), https://cointhinktank.com/upload/crypto/Bitcoin%20and%20U.S.%20National%20Security.pdf.

[46] The White House. "Establishment of the Strategic Bitcoin Reserve and United States Digital Asset Stockpile." March 06, 2025. https://www.whitehouse.gov/presidential-actions/2025/03/-establishment-of-the-strategic-bitcoin-reserve-and-united-states-digital-asset-stockpile/.

[47] Sai Nikhil. "World governments now hold 517,296 Bitcoin worth 61 billion." *Crypto Coverage*. July 31, 2025. https://www.cryptocoverage.co/news/world-governments-now-hold-517296-bitcoin-worth-61-billion.

[48] Erik Townsend. *Beyond Blockchain: The Death of the Dollar and the Rise of Digital Currency* (Coppell: Independently published. 2018); see also Gal Luft and Anne Korin. *De-dollarization: The Revolt against the Dollar and the Rise of a New Financial World Order* (USA: Independently published. 2009); David Birch. *The Currency Cold War: Cash and Cryptography, Hash Rates and Hegemony* (London: London Publishing Partnership, 2020).

points out that, since cryptocurrencies have a promising potential as highways for large-scale international money transfers, the introduction of innovative solutions programmed to overcome their current shortcomings and limitations is probably a matter of time.[49]

The ongoing development of governmental digital currencies and their foreseeable use in cross-border payments, reserves, and settlements will further the structural diversification of the global monetary system.[50] Authors like Gomez and Pasin even put forward the hypothetical design of multilateral virtual currency projects for groups such as the BRICS forum, Russian-speaking areas of the former Soviet Union aligned with Moscow's foreign policy, Latin American countries that belong to the so-called "Bolivarian axis", and nations that share a Turkic heritage as a common denominator.[51] Hence, Bitcoin's digital legacy could generate innovative monetary mechanisms intended to challenge the dollar's hegemonic order.

Conclusion

Per se, Bitcoin lacks the weight to overturn the global correlation of forces, remake world order, or rise as a hegemonic reserve currency. However, the grammar of nonstate cryptocurrencies with a strong degree of international circulation is suitable to interact with the strategic logic of Machiavellian statecraft. The expanding presence of Bitcoin in the international (global) political economy of money and finance *is a sign* of a broader transitional moment. Specifically, strategic foresight suggests that Bitcoin can be wielded in attempts to alter the global structural correlation of forces that underpins world order. Revisionist great powers such as Russia are prime candidates to rely on Bitcoin as an asymmetric vector of an anti-hegemonic grand strategy. In turn, the US can also co-opt the Bitcoin grid in an attempt to preserve the existing status quo and prolong the lifespan of the dollar's hegemonic reign. In the age of FinTech, digital cash has the potential to behave as kingmaker. Moreover, Bitcoin's ideological and technological legacy may inspire the conception of new monetary architectures *intended to transcend* the dollar's hegemonic sphere.

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[49] Kristina Ivanova, Vladimir Sokolov and Polina Uvarova. *Blockchain and Cryptocurrencies: Trends and Prospects* (Moscow: Valdai Discussion Club, 2018), https://valdaiclub.com/a/reports/blokchain-and-cryptocurrencies-trends-and-prospects/.

[50] Ran Wei. "The Impact of Fiat Digital Currencies on the Hegemony of the US Dollar" *Finance & Economics* 1, no. 4 (2025): 1-7.

[51] Nancy Gomez and Patrick Pasin. *Géopolitique des Cryptomonnaies* (Paris: Talma. 2018).

Conflict of Interests

The author declares no ethical issues or conflicts of interest in this research.

Ethical Standards

The author affirms this research did not involve human subjects.

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SEYYED ABBAS ARAGHCHI, THE POWER OF NEGOTIATION: PRINCIPLES AND RULES OF POLITICAL AND DIPLOMATIC NEGOTIATIONS [Սեյեդ Աբբաս Արաղչի, Բանակցության ուժը. քաղաքական և դիվանագիտական բանակցությունների սկզբունքներն ու կանոնները]. YEREVAN, 2025, 193 P.

Review By:

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The book by Dr. Seyyed Abbas Araghchi, Iran's Minister of Foreign Affairs and an experienced diplomat, has been published in Armenian in Yerevan. Dedicated to the principles and techniques of the art of negotiation, the book draws on nearly three decades of the author's diplomatic experience. In this respect, it effectively combines theoretical knowledge with practical expertise, which significantly enhances its value. This book will be of interest not only to a wide readership but also, in my view, serve as a genuine textbook for students of diplomacy and can be regarded as a practical guide for novice diplomats, with particular attention to the specific features of the Eastern school of diplomacy. Another notable strength of the work lies in the author's ability to present highly complex issues of diplomacy and geopolitics in a remarkably accessible manner, at times drawing on parallels and examples from everyday life. This approach makes the subject matter more comprehensible, while the illustrative analogies further enhance clarity.

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As an orientalist familiar with the characteristics of Eastern diplomacy, I must note that, in my view, the Iranian style of negotiation is distinguished by its deliberate pace, and in that they do not rush. Iranian diplomats conduct negotiations calmly and without haste, guided by the consciousness of representing a state with millennia of history. Consequently, they tend to perceive criteria and time on a much broader scale—not in terms of the years granted to an individual by the Almighty, but in terms of centuries and millennia that define the continuity of the state.

Dr. Araghchi compares diplomacy to a market, specifically the Iranian market and its rules.[1] For us as orientalists, this analogy is particularly comprehensible, since by the very nature of our discipline, we often study "Eastern markets," a term-metaphor for the distinctive features and variations of Eastern diplomacy. One may argue that within the broader "Eastern market" of diplomacy, there exist a variety of sub-markets (e.g., Iranian, Arab, Turkish, etc.), where states trade with each other, engage in exchanges in which the "goods" are national interests, problem-solving, and related matters. As Abbas Araghchi aptly observes: "In this 'trading' process, the goal of each negotiator is to achieve maximum gain at the minimum cost. In other words, the negotiator's goal is to 'maximize what is received' and 'minimize what is given'."[2]

The most important rule and mandatory condition of the Eastern market is bargaining, which has essentially been elevated to an institutional level. Guided by this logic, the skilled Iranian diplomat Dr. Araghchi explains one of the characteristics of Iranian diplomacy and negotiation style:

> *"The Iranian negotiation style is generally known in the world as the 'market style,' which means continuous and tireless bargaining. This method is a process of interaction that requires great patience and time. It requires a lot of time and energy, and he who gets tired and bored quickly will lose. The market has its own unique culture, and only a person who has lived in that culture for years or, as a person connected to the market says, 'has breathed the air of the market', can participate and compete in it."*[3]

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[1] The book has also been published in English by *Success Publications SAR* in 2025, and in Persian by *Entesharat E'telaat* (transliterated from Persian), Tehran, 2025.

[2] Seyyed Abbas Araghchi, *The Power of Negotiation: Principles and Rules of Political and Diplomatic Negotiations* [Բանակցության ուժը. քաղաքական և դիվանագիտական բանակցությունների սկզբունքներն ու կանոնները]. Yerevan, 2025, 24.

[3] Araghchi, *The Power of Negotiation*, 183.

The author's figurative account of the principles of diplomatic bargaining is particularly noteworthy. He emphasizes, in addition, the importance of recognizing the appropriate moment and timing, as well as maintaining a proper sense of proportion:

> *"The main principle of bargaining is practice: repetition, repetition, and repetition—combined with steadfastness and persistence. Insisting on positions and repeating demands is a necessity that must be done each time with different rhetoric and reasoning. Experienced people connected to the market talk and provide arguments, telling examples and stories so much that the other side of the deal, as they say, "gets numb" and gives its consent. At the same time, correctly assessing the moment to reach an agreement is also an art. Sometimes, insisting too much leads to the loss of an achievable advantage. It is important to know how much to stretch the rope of negotiations so that it does not break and the essence of the deal is not lost. You have to know where it is possible to add smaller advantages to the main results and where you have to sacrifice them to achieve bigger results. Time management is also very important. Sometimes being patient is good and increases the results obtained, but when you are selling ice under the sun's rays, too much bargaining is itself a loss."*[4]

Diplomacy is often understood as an arena that precedes or follows armed conflict and war; in other words, the battlefield is frequently preceded or succeeded by the diplomatic struggle. Accordingly, Araghchi compares diplomats to warriors, drawing parallels between the roles of warriors and diplomats: "In the history of countries, both the brave warriors who fought heroic wars to defend their motherland and the people who, with their wise efforts, tried to eliminate the danger of war or, in the case of war and conflicts, found ways to end them, have been recorded."[5] The author presents the organic link between war and negotiations as follows: "However, it must be remembered that war and negotiation are two sides of the same coin, and that is why negotiation is sometimes described as 'war by peaceful means'."[6]

In the context of negotiations and diplomacy more broadly, Araghchi rightly underscores the special importance of the negotiator, emphasizing their personal qualities and skills: "The personal abilities, skills, and talent of a negotiator become

[4] Araghchi, *The Power of Negotiation*, 185.
[5] Araghchi, *The Power of Negotiation*, 17.
[6] Araghchi, *The Power of Negotiation*, 30.

influential when they can use the components of national power to achieve national goals... The power that cannot ensure the security or interests of the country, no matter how great, can no longer be considered power, or in other words, it exists but is ineffective."[7]

It is noteworthy that Araghchi essentially advances the idea that refraining from negotiation can itself constitute diplomacy, provided that circumstances warrant it and when, after weighing both options, it becomes clear that not negotiating will cause less harm to one's country than entering into negotiations. In the event of a negotiating stalemate, it is preferable to suspend the talks with the intention of resuming them later under conditions that are more favorable. The Iranian diplomat formulates it as follows:

> *"In the absence of a balance of power, the political unit that is weak should not enter into negotiations, and if it is forced to do so, it should take special measures to get rid of the other side's superiority. If the agreement is formed on the basis of an imbalance of power, that agreement cannot last long, and eventually, one of the parties, usually the country that suffered a defeat within the framework of that agreement, will take action to violate it or reach a more just agreement, which will endanger the future of peace and cooperation between the actors… Therefore, although the cessation of negotiations is not considered good news, it is still better than announcing defeat."*[8]

An important element in achieving a favorable outcome through the advantage of power is the concept formulated as the 'golden bridge.' The construction of this 'bridge' is crucial for both the stronger or victorious party and the weaker party alike. Drawing on his interactions, Araghchi highlights the Chinese equivalent of the 'golden bridge,' which further elaborates and enriches the discussion of the concept:

> *"Creating a golden bridge or an opportunity to return for the weak side is one of the most important points that must be paid attention to in the negotiation process, especially by the country that has gained a significant advantage. Any political unit that wins in a negotiation process must provide a way for the defeated side to withdraw and retreat from its positions. The meaning of a way out and a return is that the party making concessions must be able to find a justification for*

[7] Araghchi, *The Power of Negotiation*, 71, 89-90.
[8] Araghchi, *The Power of Negotiation*, 119, 170.

> *this step or not feel that this step will cause irreversible political damage or that its reputation will be tarnished. History is full of examples where a victorious country humiliated the defeated country or did not create the conditions for a golden bridge for its return, and this in itself caused more destructive wars and even greater damage to the victorious side… "I once heard from Chinese diplomats, who usually make proverbs or quotes from Confucius and other Chinese sages, that if you want someone to come down from the roof, provide him with a ladder; do not ask him to jump down and get hurt; he will not do that."*[9]

A separate and important area is the 'body language' of a diplomat: "During negotiations, speech also includes body language. Body language is very important, and sometimes it can convey concepts that oral speech cannot. The movements of a negotiator's body can easily reveal their fear and lack of self-confidence, regardless of their desire… The use of speech techniques and body language during negotiations is the most important tool for a diplomat, but the message is not conveyed only by words, but also by the tone of speech and voice."[10]

Dr. Araghchi also highlights and draws the readers' attention to another key concept in diplomacy and the art of negotiation: the 'poker face': "A diplomat's face should not convey any mood, and the other side should not be able to get any feeling from it. The face of a skilled diplomat is inscrutable, and it is impossible to catch any emotion from it. The ability to control the expression of emotions on the face is not easy and requires continuous work and practice." The special characteristics of a diplomat's self-control also include managing anger, or purposefully getting angry: "There is a well-known saying that 'a diplomat never gets angry unless they have decided to get angry'." [11]

To summarize, the book by Iran's Minister of Foreign Affairs, Seyyed Abbas Araghchi, *The Power of Negotiation: Principles and Rules of Political and Diplomatic Negotiations*, has the potential to become required reading in university programs that offer courses on diplomacy and international relations. The author of the foreword, Iran's former Minister of Foreign Affairs, Mohammad Javad Zarif, notes: "I hope his valuable work will be a worthy step for students and future figures in the field of foreign policy to get acquainted with the methods and precondi-

[9] Araghchi, *The Power of Negotiation,* 119, 146-147.
[10] Araghchi, *The Power of Negotiation,* 132-133.
[11] Araghchi, *The Power of Negotiation,* 134-35.

tions of diplomacy and a new deliberation for these important necessities of foreign policy.”

Conflict of Interests

The author declares no ethical issues or conflicts of interest in this research.

Ethical Standards

The author affirms this research did not involve human subjects.

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