

FRAGILE INDEPENDENCE IN A WORLD OF EMPIRES: ARMENIA AND THE UNFULFILLED PROMISE OF SOVEREIGNTY

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Abstract

This article examines how formal independence translates into effective sovereignty in post-Soviet Armenia, where internal institutional weaknesses and external structural constraints interact. It argues that independence is continuously reshaped and reproduced through patterns

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of structural dependence. To assess the gap between formal independence and effective sovereignty, the study constructs a composite Structural Dependence Index (SIDI) that combines trade, energy, and military-security dependence on Russia, and applies it to all post-Soviet states over the period 1994–2024. Cluster analysis, combining SIDI values with V-Dem Liberal Democracy Index scores, groups the states by dependence and regime type, and a Markov transition model traces movement between dependence regimes, with Armenia as the focused case study. The results show growing polarization among post-Soviet states and a nonlinear, reversible trajectory for Armenia, whose dependence rises again after a period of partial diversification. Security reliance on an external patron, together with inherited institutional constraints, produces a mirage of sovereignty in which legal independence coexists with systematically limited autonomy. Armenia's sovereignty is thus neither fully consolidated nor permanently lost, reflecting a structural inertia that limits sustained *de facto* autonomy. By demonstrating how post-imperial dependencies are actively reproduced over time, the article contributes to broader debates on sovereignty, small states, and the enduring hierarchies of the post-Soviet international order.

Keywords: *Armenia, dependence index, Markov transition matrix, sovereignty, structural dependence.*

Introduction

One of the defining political developments of global history over the past five centuries has been the gradual transformation of a world of empires into a world of states. Declarations of independence functioned as key markers of this transformation, signaling claims to sovereignty and the emergence or re-emergence of political communities as states. Among these, the American Declaration of 1776 was the first in world history to identify sovereignty with independence (Armitage 2005). It articulated a universal philosophy of human rights applicable not only to Americans but to people everywhere, thereby giving the American Revolution its broader appeal (Armitage 2007). In this way, the Declaration became not only a historical document but also a global ideological repertoire and a normative source of sovereignty, freedom, and self-determination that would sweep the world in the centuries after 1776 (Armitage 2005, 3; The U.S. National Archives and Records Administration 2024). However, over time, deep contradictions emerged between the normative ideas of independence and its political implementation. In the modern international system, characterized by asymmetric power relations (Lees 2012, 210), informal hierarchies (Clark 1989) and external constraints on state power (Vadai and Press-Barnathan 2024), independence often coexists with profound constraints on effective sovereignty (Drobush, Kornuta, and Ukrainets 2025). Independence, therefore, should be understood not as a guarantee of effective sovereignty, but as a contingent and relational condition that may coexist with substantial external constraints.

These constraints are especially pronounced in the case of small states. Building on this insight, a growing body of scholarship emphasizes economic dependence as a key mechanism shaping the foreign policy behavior of post-Soviet states vis-à-vis Russia. Where economic dependence on a hegemonic power is high, strategies of balancing become not only difficult but also costly (Gvalia et al. 2013, 104).

This article examines Armenia's post-Soviet trajectory to explore how formal independence translates into effective sovereignty, shaped by both internal institutional weaknesses and external structural constraints. It shows how independence is continuously reshaped and reproduced through patterns of structural dependence.

To understand this complex situation, the study addresses:

First, how do post-Soviet states differ in their dependence on Russia? This study measures dependence using the Structural Dependence Index (SIDI) constructed for this study.

Second, how have patterns of dependence changed over time? By tracking the dynamics of dependence, cases of persistence, decline, or reversal of dependence are identified.

Together, these questions allow for a dynamic comparative assessment of dependence among post-Soviet states. Such an approach makes it possible to identify transitional phases of dependence, which can serve as an empirical basis for theoretical conclusions about post-imperial dependence.

Additionally, this study addresses two interrelated case-focused questions. First, how has Armenia's independence transformed—or failed to transform—into effective sovereignty?

Second, which dependency trajectory best characterizes Armenia's post-Soviet experience: persistent dependence, gradual decline, or partial transformation? Together, these questions enable a dynamic assessment of Armenia's post-Soviet condition, highlighting both the structural inertia of inherited dependencies and the conditions under which sovereignty may be partially exercised or constrained.

Small States, Sovereignty, and Fragile Independence

The literature on small states in international relations and comparative politics is anchored in the distinction between *de jure* and *de facto* sovereignty. *De jure* sovereignty refers to formal legal independence and international recognition, whereas *de facto* sovereignty captures the effective capacity of states to exercise autonomous authority over core policy domains (Krasner 1999). For small states, scholars consistently note a persistent divergence between these dimensions, resulting in sovereignty that is formally established but operationally constrained.

This discrepancy is particularly salient in analyses of small states situated within imperial and post-imperial orders. Research on empire emphasizes that imperial rule produces durable asymmetries that outlast formal political rupture (Lake 2009). Post-imperial small states often inherit dense networks of dependence—economic, security-related, and institutional—that continue to structure their strategic choices after independence. Comparative studies of post-Soviet and post-imperial transitions demonstrate that independence rarely constitutes a complete break from hierarchical relationships; instead, it involves the reconfiguration of dependence through informal mechanisms and structural leverage exercised by former imperial centers (Beissinger 2002; Bunce 1999).

Contemporary scholarship increasingly conceptualizes sovereignty and autonomy as structurally constrained rather than binary attributes. Small states face inherent limitations stemming from geography, demographic scale, market size, and

vulnerability to external threats, which restrict their room for maneuver irrespective of domestic political preferences (Katzenstein 1985; Keohane 1969). These internal constraints are reinforced by external structures such as alliance systems, regional hegemonies, and global economic hierarchies, which systematically privilege larger states.

Taken together, the literature converges on the view that independence for small states is best understood as *fragile*: a dynamic condition shaped by asymmetric power relations, inherited dependencies, and enduring structural constraints embedded in the international system.

Armenia's Post-Independence Trajectory in Historical Perspective

Armenia's post-independence trajectory reflects broader post-Soviet patterns in which formal statehood emerged under conditions of severe institutional, economic, and security disruption. The Declaration of Independence in 1990 established Armenia's *de jure* sovereignty and marked the collapse of Soviet political authority. Independence, however, coincided with armed conflict, economic contraction, and the erosion of centralized governance, shaping a state-building process driven primarily by short-term stabilization rather than long-term institutional consolidation (Suny 1993; Cornell 2001).

Constitution-building constituted a critical step in formalizing Armenia's new political order. The adoption of the 1995 Constitution established a republican system with codified separation of powers, fundamental rights, and institutional structures. Yet comparative scholarship on post-Soviet constitutionalism emphasizes that formal constitutional design often exceeded effective institutional implementation, particularly in contexts marked by weak checks and balances (Elgie 2011; Hale 2015). Subsequent constitutional amendments reflected recurring attempts to recalibrate executive-legislative relations without fully resolving underlying governance dynamics.

Although the separation of powers was constitutionally embedded, executive dominance emerged as a persistent feature of Armenia's political system. This pattern aligns with broader analyses of semi-presidential regimes in the post-Soviet space, where strong executives frequently constrained legislative autonomy and judicial independence and limited accountability (Fish 2005; Levitsky and Way 2010).

Electoral institutions were established early, including regular elections and a multiparty system. While these institutions formally conformed to democratic norms, empirical studies classify Armenia's political regime as hybrid for much of the post-independence period, characterized by restricted competition, elite entrenchment, and contested electoral integrity (Levitsky and Way 2010; Way 2015). Elections thus were often perceived as functioning more as instruments of regime stabilization than as mechanisms of substantive political activity.

State-building progressed unevenly under conditions of constrained resources, inherited Soviet administrative legacies, and external dependency. Institutional capacity developed selectively across policy domains, reinforcing the gap between formal independence and effective governance. In the Armenian case, scholars argue that decades of statelessness and post-imperial legacies have produced a weak state-

centred political culture, limiting the effective exercise of sovereignty even after formal independence (Atoyan et al. 2022).

Overall, Armenia's post-independence experience illustrates how legal sovereignty and institutional construction can coexist with persistent limitations on *de facto* autonomy.

From Systemic Collapse to Structural Dependence

The Soviet collapse marked the beginning of building a new system in the former republics (Shcherbina and Gorbenkova 2016, 1). During the Soviet period, these republics were embedded in a centralized, integrated economic system. Following independence, former Soviet states confronted severe economic and political crises as they were compelled to establish independent fiscal and monetary policies amid profound structural disruption. For Armenia, the task of economic restructuring was particularly urgent and complex (Abdieva, Baigonushova, and Ganiev 2017; Vasilyan 2006, 9). In this context, Armenia faced growing economic and political dependence on Russia, particularly for energy supplies, along with corresponding structural constraints (Terzyan 2017, 186). Additionally, unresolved regional conflicts and security shocks further constrained and exacerbated these vulnerabilities. This included the First and Second Nagorno-Karabakh Wars and closure of borders by Azerbaijan and Turkey, and eventual control and ethnic cleansing of the Nagorno-Karabakh region (Cheterian 2017, 82; Hedenskog 2023, 2; Mkrtchian 2025; Sahakyan 2023; Zakaryan 2021).

Together, these events and conditions entrenched a pattern of structural dependence that significantly constrained Armenia's post-Soviet sovereignty.

Data and Methods: Measuring Structural Dependence

The analysis covers the period from 1994 to 2024, and includes all post-Soviet states. Dependence on Russia is modeled through a composite index—the Structural Dependence Index. The index is constructed along three core dimensions: trade, energy, and military-security.

Constructing the Index

Trade dependence (United Nations 2024) is measured as the share of bilateral trade with Russia in each country's total external trade.

Energy dependence is measured by the share of energy imports that come from Russia, especially fossil fuels. The analysis uses trade data from UN Comtrade, focusing on HS Chapter 27, which covers mineral fuels, mineral oils, and related products.

Military-security dependence (SIPRI 2024) is measured by looking at arms imports from Russia and the presence of Russian military bases. Each part of the index is scaled from 0 to 1, with higher values indicating greater dependence.

The Structural Dependence Index is calculated by averaging the three normalized components, each weighted equally. Thus, all components are equally important.

Clustering and Transition Analysis

In addition, cluster analysis (Everitt et al. 2011) is applied to identify groups of post-Soviet states that share similar dependence profiles and trajectories. In this clustering exercise, structural dependence profiles are examined alongside regime characteristics to identify systematic associations between dependence levels and political governance. Regime type is captured using the Liberal Democracy Index from the Varieties of Democracy project (2024), which provides annual country-level data over the study period.

Finally, the study adopts a transition-based approach to examine how countries move between dependence regimes over time, drawing on a Markov framework (Kemeny and Snell 1960).

The Dynamics of Dependence on Russia in Post-Soviet States Trends in Structural Dependence

The dynamics of the Structural Dependence Index over the period 1994–2024 point to a process of polarization among post-Soviet states. Although the average SIDI level across countries remains relatively stable at approximately 0.35, the index values in the Baltic states since 2020, in Georgia since 2008, and in Ukraine after 2022 approach zero, while the maximum values exceed 0.85 (Belarus). This growing divergence indicates the emergence of fundamentally different post-Soviet models of sovereignty. These trends are not just the result of sudden political events. Instead, wars and crises accelerate changes that were already underway. In the Baltic states, there has been a sustained and deliberate effort to disengage from former Soviet ties, a process that is reflected in a gradual and consistent decline in SIDI values. This trajectory is consistent with a long-term strategy aimed at distancing these countries from legacy systems and integrating them into European economic and security institutions.

By comparison, Armenia follows a nonlinear trajectory. The SIDI value declines from 0.50 in the mid-1990s to approximately 0.23 to 0.25 by 2006 and 2007, indicating a phase of partial diversification. From 2008 onward, dependence intensifies again, with peaks above 0.60 and a maximum of 0.71 in 2022. The average SIDI value for Armenia during the observed period (0.48) is higher than the post-Soviet average. This dynamic reflects a condition of constrained and reversible sovereignty. Overall, the results show that post-Soviet independence is not a linear transition, but a complex and internally contradictory process.

Dependence and Regime Type

As a starting point for the analysis, countries are classified according to the median values of the Structural Dependence Index and the V-Dem Liberal Democracy Index. Low, medium, and high levels of SIDI correspond to values below 0.25, between 0.25 and 0.45, and above 0.45, respectively. Similarly, low, hybrid, and high levels of democracy correspond to values below 0.15, between 0.15 and 0.40, and above 0.40, respectively.

Table 1. Cluster 1: Authoritarian structural dependents (High SIDI + Low democracy)

Country	SIDI	Democracy
Belarus	0.78	0.10
Kazakhstan	0.63	0.12
Kyrgyzstan	0.53	0.19

*Source: Authors' calculations***Table 2. Cluster 2: Hybrid trapped dependents (Medium–High SIDI + Hybrid democracy)**

Country	SIDI	Democracy
Armenia	0.50	0.21
Ukraine	0.45	0.26
Tajikistan	0.40	0.06

*Source: Authors' calculations***Table 3. Cluster 3: Peripheral autocracies with low dependence (Low SIDI + Low democracy)**

Country	SIDI	Democracy
Azerbaijan	0.16	0.07
Turkmenistan	0.24	0.03
Uzbekistan	0.21	0.04

*Source: Authors' calculations***Table 4. Cluster 4: Structural defectors (Low SIDI + High democracy)**

Country	SIDI	Democracy
Estonia	0.20	0.81
Latvia	0.14	0.71
Lithuania	0.36	0.76
Georgia	0.18	0.36
Moldova	0.30	0.43

Source: Authors' calculations

Using the median values of the Structural Dependence Index and the Liberal Democracy Index as reference points, post-Soviet states cluster into four distinct groups.

The first cluster (Table 1) comprises authoritarian structural dependents, characterized by high structural dependence and low democratic development. These cases reflect a condition of post-imperial structural lock-in, in which inherited economic and security ties are reinforced through authoritarian governance arrangements.

The second group (Table 2) comprises countries with mixed political regimes and relatively high levels of structural dependence. Although these states often pursue strategies to increase autonomy, such efforts are frequently reversed, resulting in renewed reliance on external actors. This pattern underscores how attempts to dismantle inherited dependencies can remain fragile and reversible.

The third group (Table 3) includes states with low structural dependence but limited democratic development. In these cases, autonomy is largely derived from robust

domestic resources and the preservation of political and economic separateness rather than from institutional transformation.

The fourth group (Table 4) combines low levels of structural dependence with high levels of democracy, indicating a more complete departure from inherited systems and a sustained integration into alternative political and economic arrangements.

Transition Dynamics in Armenia

To analyze the dynamics of structural dependence, the Structural Dependence Index is divided into four states based on country-specific quartiles. These states represent dependency regimes: S1 (Low dependence), S2 (Lower-middle dependence), S3 (Upper-middle dependence), and S4 (High dependence). This classification makes it possible to identify not only static levels of dependence but also the dynamics of movement across these categories.

Applied to Armenia, the quartile-based classification reveals a highly nonlinear and volatile trajectory. From 1994 to 2024, Armenia occupied all four dependency states, with a pronounced concentration in the upper dependency regimes. By contrast, transitions into S3 and S4 recur frequently, indicating that periods of partial disengagement are repeatedly followed by renewed structural reliance. This pattern indicates reversible rather than sustained independence.

For Armenia, the quartile thresholds are defined as follows: S1 (Low dependence): $SIDI < 0.38$; S2 (Lower-middle dependence): $0.38 \leq SIDI < 0.50$; S3 (Upper-middle dependence): $0.50 \leq SIDI < 0.54$; and S4 (High dependence): $SIDI \geq 0.54$.

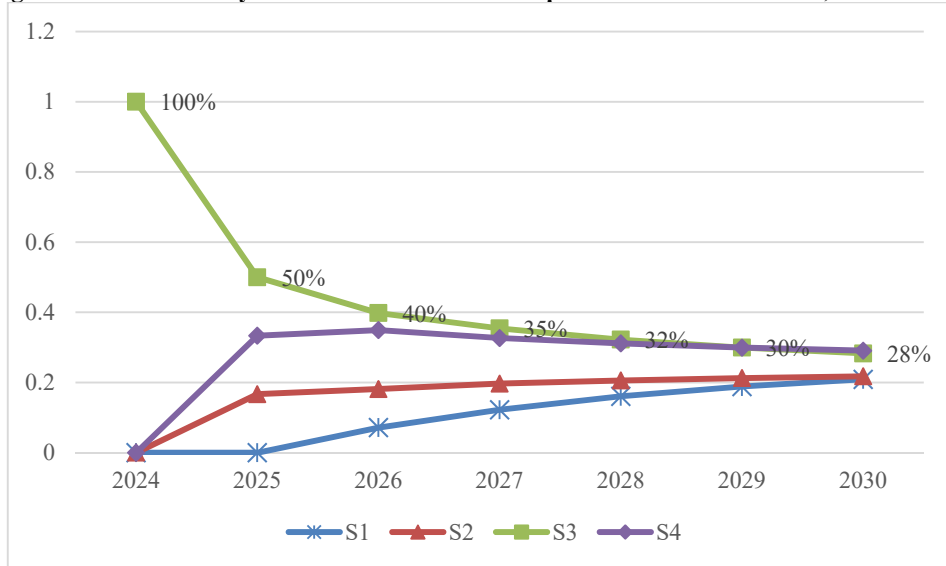
Table 5. Markov transition matrix (Armenia)

Matrix	S1	S2	S3	S4
S1	63%	38%	0%	0%
S2	43%	14%	0%	43%
S3	0%	17%	50%	33%
S4	0%	22%	44%	33%

Source: Authors' calculations

The Markov transition matrix (Table 5) shows that Armenia's dependency dynamics are unbalanced. It is unlikely for the country to move down from higher levels of dependency, while the chances of staying at the same level or moving to an even higher dependency state are much higher. In particular, the likelihood of remaining in S3 or of moving from S3 to S4 is much greater than that of moving from S3 to S2. This suggests that once Armenia reaches a high level of dependency, long-term diversification becomes difficult due to structural inertia.

Projections (Figure 1) for the period from 2025 to 2030 further reinforce this conclusion. When Armenia begins in S3 in 2024, the simulation indicates that S3 and S4 emerge as the most frequent outcomes. By 2030, there is more than a 55 percent probability that Armenia remains in upper-middle- or high-dependence states, while the likelihood of transitioning to low dependence remains below 25 percent.

Figure 1. Scenario analysis based on Markov chain probabilities for Armenia, 2025–2030

Source: Authors' calculations

These findings support the concept of post-imperial structural lock-in, whereby formally sovereign states remain embedded in inherited economic and security structures that systematically limit autonomous exit. Armenia's repeated return to higher dependency regimes illustrates how post-imperial dependence is actively reproduced rather than gradually dissolved.

The Mirage of Sovereignty: Armenia's Security Dilemma

Armenia's post-independence security predicament cannot be adequately explained through the classical security dilemma as conceptualized in realist theory. In its traditional formulation, the security dilemma arises from arms accumulation in an anarchic environment, where states' efforts to enhance their security through military buildup generate mutual suspicion and escalation (Jervis 1978). Armenia's experience diverges fundamentally from this logic. Rather than being driven by reciprocal arms competition, Armenia's security dilemma is shaped by structural vulnerability, asymmetric power relations, and limited capacity for autonomous deterrence.

Unlike states engaged in balancing behavior, Armenia has faced persistent constraints on its ability to generate security internally. Limited economic resources, demographic scale, geographic exposure, and unresolved regional conflicts have restricted its participation in sustained arms races. Consequently, Armenia's security strategy has been oriented less toward military competition and more toward alignment with an external security provider (Atoyan, Brosius, and Hovyan 2023). In this sense, security has been pursued by relying on external guarantees rather than on the dynamics of mutual military escalation typically associated with the Jervisian model (Lake 2009; Walt 1987).

This fundamentally reshapes the meaning of sovereignty. While such guarantees may reduce immediate security risks, they introduce long-term trade-offs between protection and autonomy. When security provision is effectively outsourced, defense policy, alliance commitments, and foreign policy orientation become constrained by the security patron's interests. Sovereignty thus remains intact in *de jure* terms but is selectively limited in *de facto* practice (Krasner 1999).

Dependence on a single security patron further intensifies this condition. Unlike diversified security partnerships, reliance on one dominant guarantor reduces strategic flexibility and increases vulnerability to shifts in the patron's priorities. Over time, security dependence may spill over into political, economic, and institutional spheres, reinforcing broader patterns of asymmetric interdependence and hierarchical relations (Cornell 2001; Hale 2015).

In this context, Armenia's security dilemma is best understood as non-classical: not a dilemma driven by arms competition and mutual fear, but one rooted in guarantees and dependence. The pursuit of security through external protection produces a paradox in which formal sovereignty coexists with structurally constrained autonomy—constituting a “mirage of sovereignty” rather than its full realization.

Governance under Constrained Autonomy: Institutional Foundations of Sovereignty

Beyond the security domain, Armenia's sovereignty constraints are embedded in governance patterns shaped by institutional dependence. Contemporary political economy and comparative politics literature increasingly emphasizes that the erosion of sovereignty rarely occurs through the formal dismantling of institutions. Instead, constrained autonomy emerges when formal state institutions coexist with limited effective policy discretion. In such settings, parliaments, courts, ministries, and regulatory bodies function according to constitutional design, yet their capacity to make autonomous choices is circumscribed by external dependencies and structural constraints (Krasner 1999; Lake 2009).

In post-Soviet states, institutional arrangements often serve as channels through which dependence is reproduced rather than eliminated. Armenia's experience reflects this pattern: key institutions operate within a legal framework consistent with sovereign statehood, but strategic policy choices—particularly in security, energy, and macroeconomic coordination—are shaped by commitments and constraints originating beyond the domestic political arena (Hale 2015). As a result, governance is exercised within predefined boundaries rather than through unconstrained sovereign choice.

Institutional dependence also manifests through the alignment of domestic rules with the preferences or standards of dominant external actors, resulting in a cumulative effect on autonomy. Over time, these arrangements, obligations, and commitments can limit the range of feasible policy alternatives without formally transferring authority. Comparative analyses of small and post-imperial states highlight that these mechanisms often operate subtly, embedding constraints within routine governance practices rather than overt political control (Adler-Nissen 2014; Bunce 1999).

This condition should not be interpreted as a loss of sovereignty in legal or constitutional terms. Instead, sovereignty is structurally conditioned: formally

preserved while selectively constrained in practice. States retain the symbols and institutions of independence but exercise autonomy unevenly across policy domains. Governance under constrained autonomy thus reflects a transformation in how sovereignty is practiced rather than whether it exists.

In this perspective, Armenia's governance challenges are best understood not as institutional failure but as institutional adaptation within an asymmetric environment. Sovereignty persists as a legal status, yet its effective exercise is shaped in ways that do not formally negate independence.

Conclusion and Discussion

Based on this study, Armenia's post-Soviet experience illustrates the complex nature of independence for small states embedded in post-imperial and post-Soviet institutional structures. While the 1990 Declaration of Independence granted Armenia formal, *de jure* sovereignty, the exercise of effective *de facto* sovereignty has been constrained by internal institutional weaknesses and external dependencies. Institutionally, Armenia's governance structures persist and conform to formal sovereign norms, yet their capacity to implement autonomous policy is circumscribed by external and structural constraints. This highlights the distinction between institutional presence and effective policy discretion, revealing how small states adapt to asymmetric environments rather than losing sovereignty outright. Comparative analysis underscores that Armenia is not entirely subordinate but is characterized by reversible dependence, positioning it as a representative case of fragile independence within post-Soviet systems.

Armenia's post-Soviet trajectory reveals a transitional and non-linear form of independence. The quartile-based SIDI classification and Markov transition analysis show that the country repeatedly moves between dependency levels (S3 and S4). While periods of partial disengagement and relative autonomy occasionally occur, they are often followed by renewed reliance on Russia in trade, energy, and security. This pattern indicates that Armenia's sovereignty is neither fully consolidated nor permanently lost, reflecting a structural inertia that limits sustained *de facto* autonomy. Security constraints further compound this condition. Armenia's reliance on external guarantees, rather than autonomous deterrence, reshapes sovereignty in practice, producing a mirage of sovereignty. This structural dependence reflects a form of post-Soviet lock-in that limits the scope of effective sovereignty.

Thus, Armenia exemplifies how independence for small post-Soviet states is a dynamic and conditional status, continually shaped by structural dependencies and security constraints. This gap between formal sovereignty and effective autonomy clearly illustrates that legal sovereignty does not automatically translate into full control over state affairs. The study provides a valuable lens for understanding how small states navigate the tension between formal sovereignty and practical limitations, offering broader insights into the persistence of hierarchical relationships in international politics. Additionally, this study contributes to research on the political development of post-Soviet states and emerging democracies, as well as on the nature of freedom and democracy in established countries.

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Ethics Statement

The authors affirm that this research was conducted in accordance with the Journal's Research Ethics and Integrity Statement and that all ethical requirements applicable to the study have been fulfilled.

Conflict of Interest Statement

The authors declare no conflict of interest.

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