

POST-SOVIET DESTABILIZATION AS A STRUGGLE BETWEEN AUTOCRATIC AND DEMOCRATIC TRENDS*

*Emil Ordukhanyan, PhD in Political Science, Associate Professor,
Leading Researcher at the Institute of Philosophy,
Sociology and Law of NAS RA
(email: emil.ordukhanyan@gmail.com)*

*Gohar Ananyan, MA in Political Science,
Assistant at the Institute of Philosophy,
Sociology and Law of NAS RA
(email: ananyangohar5@gmail.com)*

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Abstract

The research paper explores the struggle between democratic and autocratic diffusions in post-Soviet space, reveals their peculiarities and emphasizes the upcoming trends, especially by taking into consideration the situations emerged after successful democratic improvements and progress in some former soviet republics. The comparative analysis of social and political processes in post-Soviet space showcases that some authoritarian states such as Russia and Azerbaijan, consistently play a destabilizing role and engender new challenges not only for democratization but also for stability and peace-building in conflicting zones.

The research is focused on the study of Ukrainian, Georgian, and Armenian post-Soviet experiences as states with democratic vision challenged by their autocratic neighbors that persistently threaten democratic ones by violating their territorial integrity and sovereignty.

To overcome these challenges, post-Soviet democratization needs to be protected from both inside and outside. Only in this case the foreign policies' diversification in post-Soviet democratic states will succeed and the dependence of democratic rulers on autocratic ones will considerably decrease.

In this regard, mainly Russia is very sensitive to this circumstance because such developments will lead to the fall of its geopolitical hegemony in post-Soviet space. If Russia succeeds in destroying democratic trends in post-Soviet

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space, it will not only keep its influence over other countries but also push them back to the authoritarian rule.

Keywords: democratization, autocracy, destabilization, post-Soviet space, Russia, South Caucasus.

Post-Soviet Autocrats' Fear of Democracy

After the “waves of democratization”^{*} in the 20th century, there was a hope that the trend of democratization would spread to regions previously under authoritarian rule and communist dictatorship. The dissolution of the Soviets, somehow, was considered as a new wave of democratization and market economy building but the social and political developments showcased that even after 33 years there are still many obstacles that democracy has to overcome for an effective transition.

In this regard, T. Carothers rightly points out that the temporary weakening of an authoritarian regime may sometimes be conflated with a democratic transition (Carothers, 2002, pp. 5-21). A transition, however, requires fundamental, systemic changes in a given polity (Snegovaya, 2023, pp. 105-118). Most authoritarian breakdowns do not bring about democratization but instead lead to the emergence of new authoritarian regime or state collapse and anarchy (Levitsky & Way, 2002, pp. 51-65). Moreover, the failed regional democratization leads to new conflicts or to defrosting of frozen ones. We can confirm that a similar situation is now emerged in post-Soviet space. Some post-Soviet authoritarian rulers serve as a source of conflict generation against their democratic neighbors because democracy was, is, and will be considered by authoritarian rulers as a primary threat to their regimes and political power.

It is a fact that in recent years some countries in every region of the world have been captured by authoritarian rulers. For much of the 21st century, however, democracy’s opponents have labored persistently to dismantle this international order. The fruits of their exertions are now apparent. Russia and other dictatorships have succeeded in shifting global incentives, jeopardizing the consensus that democracy is the only viable path to prosperity and security while encouraging more authoritarian approaches to governance. The present threat to democracy is the product of 16 consecutive years of decline in global freedom. Over the past year, a total of 60 countries suffered declines, while only 25 improved. As of today, some 38 percent of the global population lives in Not Free countries, the highest proportion since 1997. Only about 20 percent now live in free countries (Repucci & Slipowitz, 2022, p. 1).

^{*}See more in detail in Huntington, S. (1984).

From the viewpoint of democracy, a truly democratic Russia was never “gained”. While the Soviet Union broke up in 1991, no real democratic transition took place. Instead, the former communist system remained in place, with only a few outward appearances shifting: the old Soviet wolf in new clothing. The Soviet-era ruling groups and institutions largely survived at the top of Russian politics. One exception was or should have been the market economy, but even there, old elites seized for themselves the most lucrative assets and positions. The eventual re-autocratization of Russia was just a matter of time (Snegovaya, 2023, pp. 105-118).

Under the first years of Yeltsin’s rule, Russia made some improvements by amending former soviet laws, tried to accelerate the economic growth, built a multi-party system but at the same time it kept its levers of influence over neighboring countries, and politically (in some cases militarily) got involved in regional and territorial conflicts in Chechnya, Abkhazia, South Ossetia, Nagorno-Karabakh, etc. The neo-imperial intentions of Russia, nourished by the ideology of “Russkiy Mir – Russian World”^{*} became more realistic after Yeltsin’s resignation in 1999 when the PM V. Putin was chosen as his successor.

Under Putin’s rule, Russian policy has considerably hardened both domestically and internationally. It has gone from a mixture of oligarchy and democracy to a regime of autocracy and from an effort to imitate and join the West to a verbal aggressiveness towards the United States and an effort to reassert Russia’s domination over its former empire, especially in post-Soviet space. An important link between the two evolutions is to be found in the post-imperial nostalgia of the Russian population, in the neo-imperial ambition of its leaders, and in their fear of the spread of “color revolutions” among their neighbors (Hassner, 2008, pp. 5-15). In this respect, a legitimate question arises “*Why Russia is so sensitive about “color revolutions”?*”. The answer to this question is related to the fear of authoritarian rulers about democracy. It is quite evident that such revolutions lead to democratic regime development which is the biggest threat to autocracies.

As a political and social process, the post-Soviet transformation has showcased the trend of crystallization for two groups of countries: *autocratic* and *democratic*. Obviously, autocratic countries in Russia’s near abroad are more or less safe and not threatened by Russia in comparison with democratic ones. In the last two decades, Russia has concentrated on its aggressive policies regarding its neighboring countries that have chosen the democratic path of state-building and social development. Since the 90s, Russia has been also aggressive to its internal democratic movements. If we take into account

^{*}See more in detail in Gilge, W. (2016).

the fact that the post-Soviet space is fractured between autocracies and democracies, we can clearly see and confirm that post-Soviet countries with democratic trends in Russia's near abroad such as Georgia, Moldova, Ukraine, and Armenia are really endangered and targeted by Russia. In these countries or around them Russia has created conflict zones to use political leverages of control by managing the conflicts.

On the contrary, Russia is now strengthening its ties with post-Soviet autocratic countries such as Belarus and Azerbaijan by forging with them common interests. Recently, Russia has improved its political, energetic, and military ties with Belarus and Azerbaijan. Furthermore, the Belarus regime continues to rely on Russia economically and has worked to increase trade cooperation with Azerbaijan (Ioffe, 2024). The Russian Federation is slowly forcing Belarus into a union state. This circumstance became more apparent during and after the Belarusian presidential election in 2020. Over the past two years, Russia has violated Belarus's sovereignty by stationing troops in the country. This occupying force has transferred weapons and equipment from Russia into Belarus to equip the invading force in Ukraine (Temnycky, 2024). As for Azerbaijan, during his visit to Baku, Russian PM M. Mishustin stated that Russia is among Azerbaijan's key trading partners. Trade and economic relations between the two countries are developing consistently. Bilateral trade is growing steadily. In 2023, their trade reached a record high of almost \$4.4 billion (Official Website of the Russian Government, 2024).

It has to be noticed the exceptional political longevity of all three countries' autocratic leaders who are in power for decades. The above-mentioned facts prove that these post-Soviet leaders forge much more common interests and are aggressively minded towards neighboring countries with democratic vision such as Ukraine, Armenia, Moldova, etc.

Even in the case of post-Soviet conflicts' settlement, Russia acts according to the interests of autocratic countries by neglecting the interests of democratic ones. For example, the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict "was settled" only with the respect of Azerbaijani interests when not only the bloody war against Armenians in 2020 was recognized by Russia as legitimate but also the whole territory of this region was recognized as inseparable part of the Azeri state without the rights of Armenians to autonomy. Being the only warrantor of the Armenian population's security, safety and rights in Nagorno-Karabakh, Russia did nothing to react or protect them during the ethnic cleansing in 2023.

In this regard, D. Scheffer rightly points out "The ethnic Armenian population ... is experiencing ethnic cleansing at warp speed. Over the last week, almost all of the estimated 120,000 ethnic Armenians in Nagorno-Karabakh have fled west to Armenia. This exodus follows clashes with the

Azerbaijan army that has reportedly killed upwards of four hundred people, including some civilians” (Scheffer, 2023).

Taking into consideration the democratic trends in neighboring countries, Russia, when necessary, even does not recognize the fundamental documents that it has signed when these documents don't reflect its national interests: for example: the 1991 Alma-Ata Declaration (Alma-Ata Declaration, 1991) according to which all administrative borders of the Soviet Union member states have become as state borders for post-Soviet countries. Russia's attack on Ukraine in 2014 and the occupation of Crimea as well as the recent war launched in 2022 totally neglect and bypass that declaration's principles.

Russia does not support democratic trends not only in its near abroad but also in its own territory. For example, in the run-up to Russia's 2021 parliamentary elections, the regime of President V. Putin dispelled the illusion of competition by imprisoning the opposition leader A. Navalny and tarring his movement as “extremist” which prevented any candidates who were even loosely associated with it from running for office (Repucci & Slipowitz, 2022, p. 1).

The fact is that almost all democratic activists, journalists, and opposition leaders were arrested, repressed, killed, or passed away during the last 3 decades. The opposition's most promising leaders' deaths every time shocked the international community (Boris Nemtsov was killed in 2015, Alexey Navalny passed away in prison in 2024). Their deaths also demonstrate that Russia's ruling political elite is not intended to real political pluralism or to free and open political competition due to its fear of democracy.

Despite Russia's narratives and active propaganda, democracy in post-Soviet space is mostly supported and promoted by the West, especially by the US and EU that's why Russia considers this circumstance as a real threat and a serious geopolitical challenge to its national interests.

As counteractions to the spread of autocratic trends in post-Soviet space engendered by Russia, Belarus, and Azerbaijan, the US and EU revise their policies and diplomatically shift the democratic discourse to a concrete financial, political, in some cases (Ukraine, Armenia) militarily aid to “targeted” countries.

In this context, it has to be mentioned the US President J. Biden's speech (March 7, 2024) addressed to the Congress when he highlighted the importance of defending democracy around the world. He began by emphasizing what he said are threats facing democracy around the world and calling on Congress to approve additional aid to Ukraine in its war against autocratic Russia. More broadly, Biden said that freedom and democracy are under attack both at home and overseas at the very same time (Scott, 2024).

Nowadays, Russia consistently and continuously increases its efforts to challenge the stability in its near abroad for deterring the spread of democracy. The aftermath of Russia's actions in Eastern Europe, and additionally, the Azeri aggressive discourse and its obsession to become the leading power in the South Caucasus currently destabilize the post-Soviet space.

Another important backlash against Russia's foreign policy in Eastern Europe was the recent NATO enlargement, when Sweden and Finland joined the alliance for security reasons. This was done to prevent Russia's new invasion plans into other Eastern European democratic countries. In this regard, S. Tapia rightly pointed out: "Seen from the south of NATO territory; the entrance of the two countries shifts the Alliance's centre of gravity even further north than it already is" (Tapia, 2022). This showcases that Russia's aggression against Ukraine didn't deter but accelerated the integration of the above-mentioned countries to NATO. Not once Russia has announced and tried to reason up its Ukrainian invasion as a preventing step to strategically deter the NATO enlargement on its borders. But its aggression against Ukraine and provisions for other post-Soviet democratic states in Eastern Europe had a counter effect.

The internal political situation is quite similar in other post-Soviet autocratic states such as Belarus and Azerbaijan. In these countries, the opposition leaders are also pursued, arrested, exiled, or found dead in prison. For example, in 2020 a Talysh prominent leader F. Abbasov was found dead in prison after being extradited from Russia to Azerbaijan ("Talish.org", 2020). In this regard, post-Soviet autocratic countries imitate each other to maintain and last their authoritarian regimes.

The elections are another factor that unites post-Soviet autocracies. The fear of democracy forces autocratic leaders "to win" in elections with a huge advantage over their competitors who are mostly "puppets" to show "competitiveness" and "pluralism". Real opponents are neutralized before or during the electoral process. For example, in Belarus the main opposition candidate S. Tikhanovskaya was forced to leave the country for Lithuania in the wake of a disputed 2020 presidential election ("BBC", 2020).

According to the statement of OSCE monitors, the anticipated 2024 presidential election in Azerbaijan was not competitive ("Al Jazeera", 2024) when I. Aliyev got more than 92 percent of the votes. His 5th term victory with such a percentage is proper to autocratic, more likely to the totalitarian leader.

As for Russia's presidential election in March 2024, the reappointment of V. Putin seemed inexorable (Caprile, 2024). It was one month before the election that the opposition leader A. Navalny died in prison. All these facts confirm that autocracies fear of democracy and push it back in all possible ways.

Russia's fear of democracy is also related to the EU's policies towards post-Soviet countries. Russian political leadership is very sensitive to the decision by EU leaders on December 14, 2023, to open accession talks with Ukraine and Moldova and to grant Georgia "candidate status". These actions are considered as a geopolitical threat to Russia; the whole EU enlargement process is now infused by it. Russian elites have been thinking in win-lose categories, in zones of influence and buffer zones, as well as about the weaponization of energy and strategic infrastructure for decades. Therefore, it should not have been a surprise that a major conflict about territory and borders, in this case Ukraine's, has emerged. For Moscow, threatening Ukraine in particular means a changing security situation for Georgia, Moldova, and the Baltic States (Meister, 2024).

It has to be noted that Georgia's "candidate status" is now suspended after adopting by the parliament the so-called law on "foreign agents" (European Commission for Democracy through Law, 2024). The Western countries and pro-western experts in Georgia were convinced that this law was backed by Russia because a similar law was adopted there earlier. Now Georgia's hopes of joining the European Union are put on ice just months after the South Caucasus country was granted "candidate status". Critics and legal experts say the legislation mirrors rules used by Russia to crush dissent and shutter civil society groups (Gavin, 2024).

The attempts of Russia to destabilize the post-Soviet space and intervene in the internal affairs of neighboring countries continue. At the same time it is very important to highlight that if post-Soviet countries with democratic vision stayed authoritarian, they would not be threatened by Russia or other post-Soviet autocratic countries because in that case, autocrats would not consider them as a geopolitical challenge and political risk for their regimes.

S. Meister rightly points out that Russia's policy is often not about dominating territories outright by way of military occupation but through close informal links with authoritarian and corrupt elites. Gray zones with a certain level of disorder, weak and non-democratic institutions, and competing groups of warlords are a perfect environment for Russia to gain influence via informal ties, corruption, and military forces. This approach comes under pressure if there is a political change such as Georgia's Rose Revolution in 2003, Ukraine's Euromaidan in 2013, Armenia's Velvet Revolution in 2018, and a growing public pressure for democratic transition, EU integration, the fight against corruption, and less Russian influence (Meister, 2024). No doubt that Russia's perception of the above-mentioned post-Soviet countries has changed in consequence of their option for democratic development. That was considered by Russia as a step away from its political interests and impetus to leave its zone of influence. Social and political changes in former Soviet

republics were called “color revolutions”^{*} to which Russia became very sensitive. In Russia, these processes gained some kind of aggressiveness towards those former Soviet republics that preferred to establish closer relations with the democratic world by neglecting Russia’s interests.

Russia’s decision to launch a large-scale invasion of Ukraine is, therefore, an exception to the successful Russian policy of creating and maintaining gray zones. With the attempt to take Kyiv by force, topple the Ukrainian government, and install a pro-Russian leadership, the Kremlin wanted to get a whole country under its control. It was not only a reaction to the assessment that with Ukraine Russia is losing the key country in the post-Soviet region. But it also was carried out based on the assessment by Putin that, after the limited reaction of the European countries and the US to the annexation of Crimea and the war in Donbas, the Kremlin would not incur any major costs. The comprehensive Western sanctions and the support for Ukraine came as a surprise to the Kremlin (Meister, 2024).

Another attempt to clash the legitimate government and to intervene politically is the case of Armenia when on September 19-30, 2023, in parallel with the ethnic cleansing of Armenians as an autochthon population of Nagorno-Karabakh, Russia’s former president D. Medvedev called on his Telegram channel for a coup in Yerevan (“Zarkerak”, 2023).

After its invasion of Ukraine, Russia considerably increased its political pressure on Georgia too. According to some expert assessments: “Russia is losing in Ukraine but winning in Georgia” (Kandelaki, 2023). This circumstance deeply affects the political situation and slows down the democratic development in this country.

All these facts showcase that Russia does not support post-Soviet democracies and consider them as rivals. Post-Soviet democracies are now more threatened in an authoritarian neighborhood than before. To face this challenge, the displacement of global democratic norms by authoritarian powers and other antidemocratic actors must be reversed. But success will require a bold, sustained response that establishes support for democracy and countering authoritarianism at the heart of each democracy’s foreign policy, national security strategy, and domestic reform agenda (Repucci & Slipowitz, 2022, p. 14). Only in this case, post-Soviet democracies will be able to resist and overcome Russia’s threats to their sovereignty and territorial integrity.

Russia’s Geopolitical Upheaval in Post-Soviet Space

After the dissolution of the Soviet Union, Russia was and is keeping its influence on post-Soviet space due to national or inter-ethnic conflicts

^{*}See more in detail in Ó Beacháin, D. & Polese, A. (2012).

necessarily by igniting and freezing them. The conflicts serve as an effective tool to control regional political processes and keep its own regime running. It means that conflicts resolution in post-Soviet space will definitively alter Russia's leading position and more likely lead to the weakening of its regional influence.

From the Kremlin's viewpoint, frozen conflicts keep its neighbors preoccupied and dependent on Russian mediation and peacekeeping missions.

According to the Kremlin, Russia is on a roll. It might seem odd at this moment to discuss Russia's declining geopolitical power. But in the larger context, regardless of political vicissitudes and something approximating stalemate on the ground in Ukraine, Russia is losing influence and position. Even if it ultimately prevails in Ukraine – in the sense of holding on to the territory it currently occupies – it will have done so at the expense of its global power. To use a chess analogy, Russia is attempting to protect a few pawns while putting its queen at risk (Feffer, 2023). Russia's efforts to keep the regional hegemony in post-Soviet space weaken its posture in its far abroad. Therefore, willing to win regionally Russia loses globally.

It is very important to state that day after day Russia becomes unable to provide “authoritarian peace”^{*} with its mediation or peacekeeping missions in case of frozen conflicts.

For example, after the 2020 war in Nagorno-Karabakh and 2021-2023 Azerbaijani invasions into Armenia's sovereign territory (Ordukhanyan, 2022, p. 318), disillusioned about Russia's non-actions, Armenia *de facto* withdrew from the Russian-led CSTO military alliance and invited US troops to participate in joint drills in the country.

Armenia's geopolitical balancing to the West is due because of Russia's refusal to recognize the Azeri invasions and to assume its responsibility to protect the territorial integrity of Armenia. After the Azeri invasions Russia and other CSTO member-states did not react and even did not make a political statement regarding the violation of their ally's territorial integrity. After 2020 war in Nagorno-Karabakh, Russia still did not deliver the defensive military equipment bought by Armenia which also demonstrates that Russia is not interested in stabilization and peace in the South Caucasus region. Otherwise, defensive military equipment would help to restore the balance of forces between Armenia and Azerbaijan which, in turn, would neutralize Azeri intentions to invade furthermore into Armenia's sovereign territory. Russia wants the conflict to persist because only in that case it can keep the chance to prolong its military presence as a fake “peacekeeping” mission.

^{*}See more in detail in Ordukhanyan, E. (2023).

But even before the latest turn of events, Armenia was distancing itself from Russia. Armenian PM N. Pashinyan declared last summer that Armenia is not Russia's ally in the war with Ukraine. The Armenian leader could see the writing on the wall in terms of Russia's waning commitment to its allies in the region. The Kremlin, meanwhile, saw less value in assisting a wavering ally (Feffer, 2023).

Change is noticeable in the South Caucasus. The takeover of Nagorno-Karabakh in September 2023 by the Azerbaijani military offensive and the exodus of Karabakh Armenians from the region were coordinated with and accepted by Moscow. After these events, Russia withdrew its "peace forces" from the region and lost influence over Azerbaijan. For Russia, Azerbaijan and its ally Turkey have become more important as part of the North-South transit route, and Turkey in particular for circumventing Western sanctions (Meister, 2024). Now, it becomes more obvious that the last war in Nagorno-Karabakh more likely was a deal between Russia-Azerbaijan, and Turkey to separate the zones of influence in the South Caucasus.

This downward spiral of waning Russian interest and wavering Russian allies is visible elsewhere in the former Soviet space. Back in January 2022, before it invaded Ukraine proper, Russia helped the Kazakh government to suppress an outbreak of protests. But six months later, Kazakhstan was also distancing itself from the Kremlin as it began to reach out to the West and welcome Russians fleeing forced mobilization. When clashes erupted between Tajikistan and Kyrgyzstan, two close allies of the Kremlin, Russia didn't step in to mediate the conflict (Feffer, 2023).

As for Georgia, Russia's ties with this country more likely have improved despite the war in 2008 which has ended with Moscow's actual control over Georgia's territories of Abkhazia and South Ossetia. But nowadays situation is related to the Georgia's fear of being invaded again by Russia. Despite Georgia's civil society's efforts not to return to the Russian path and the European Commission's official recommendation to grant candidate status to Georgia on November 8, 2023, the risk of democratic decline and turn back under Russia's influence remains.

Georgia was a key country in the South Caucasus and post-Soviet region, crucial in terms of transit and trade, and it was also an example of reforms and transatlantic integration in the past. Here again, Russia competes with the EU over geopolitical influence in this key region, but also as a norm setter in regional conflicts or the legal sphere. The attempt of the Georgian government to introduce a "foreign agent" law in spring 2023, copied from Russian legislation and aimed at cutting civil society off from external funding, was stopped by public protests at the last moment (Meister, 2024). However, one

year later, that law was adopted by Georgia's parliament despite new massive protests (Jégo, 2024).

Traditionally, the Russian leadership is willing to use force against neighboring countries if they choose to be democratic and furthermore, leave Moscow's "sphere of influence". In the understanding of the Russian elites, post-Soviet countries are not sovereign, and their attempts to integrate with other institutions, especially with western ones such as NATO and the EU, need to be sanctioned if Russia is not to lose its position as the regional hegemon in post-Soviet space. But recent developments in post-Soviet space due to Russo-Ukrainian war outcomes showcase that the invasion of Ukraine in 2022 undoubtedly weakened Russia's regional leadership (Roberts & Ziemer, 2024, p. 9) that's why not only Russia but also Belarus make efforts to establish cooperation with extra-regional autocratic leaders. The bond between Russia and Belarus remains tight, and the latter even proposes three-way collaboration with North Korea (Roth, 2023).

However, prior to the invasion of Ukraine, Russia had much greater influence in its "near abroad" from the Caucasus to Central Asia. Putin thought that he could "kill the chicken to scare the monkey" by invading Ukraine and putting the fear of intervention into all the other neighboring countries. Instead, with the exception of Belarus, other former Soviet republics can easily see that Russia not only has failed to kill the chicken but has sustained some significant scratches in return. Worse, from the Kremlin perspective, Russia might have lost even more influence further from home (Feffer, 2023).

In its war with democratic trends in post-Soviet space, Russia strengthens ties with other authoritarian leaders to get new weapons for its invasion. In this regard, J. Feffer rightly points out that the consolidation of this authoritarian axis comes as Russian influence has declined among more powerful countries. For example, Saudi Arabia pointedly didn't invite Russia to a meeting organized with Ukraine on finding solutions to the conflict. India's Prime Minister Modi openly rebuked Putin about the war, and Russian-Indian relations have eroded over the last year (Feffer, 2023). As a reliable partner, India is more intended to develop economic ties with Western countries as an alternative to China. Last mutual visits in Paris and New Delhi aimed at economic and even strategic partnership with France as well as military supplies to Russia's *de jure* ally Armenia, showcase that not only big players but also smaller ones, mainly in post-Soviet space are diversifying their policies which geopolitically will lead to the regional retreat of Russia.

Even African leaders have been similarly angry over rising food and energy prices as a result of the Russian invasion of Ukraine. The death of Yevgeny Prigozhin and the break-up of the Wagner Group are also endangering the

more informal ties that Russia has forged with several African countries (Feffer, 2023).

Economic sanctions, in their turn, paralyze Russia's projects and their role in the global economy and market. To avoid sanctions, Russia tries to import goods and technologies from third countries that are in the same customs or economic union. But these actions create real threats for those third countries that really intend to collaborate with Russia to bypass the international sanctions.

Russia's isolation continues also in international organizations. For example, in 2022 PACE voted unanimously to call for Russia's exclusion from the Council of Europe (Council of Europe, 2022). In 2024 PACE called for frozen Russian State assets to be used to support the reconstruction of Ukraine (Council of Europe, 2024). Russia and Belarus have been banned from the Olympics in Paris 2024 (Sheldon, 2024), etc...

The struggle against democratic trends in post-Soviet space and the war against Ukraine are not only changing Russia, however, but also its relations with post-Soviet neighbors. Russian interests have changed within the new context of comprehensive Western sanctions and an economic and political decoupling from the West. Russia has to concentrate its resources on Ukraine; it is becoming weaker as an "*authoritarian security provider*". Some post-Soviet neighbors are becoming even more important for Moscow, and the Russian state and businesses have become more active in Central Asian and the South Caucasian autocratic states. Since trade and transit routes to Europe are now disrupted, investments in infrastructure and new corridors as well as cooperation to circumvent sanctions are growing (Meister, 2024).

Notably, Russia strengthens partnerships with other former Soviet autocratic countries such as Azerbaijan which trades Russian oil and gaz. Russia also claims from Armenia the control over "Zangezur Corridor" by not deterring Azerbaijan to continue its aggression over Armenian sovereign territory.

Conclusion

The struggle between autocratic and democratic trends in former Soviet space showcases the major trend of upcoming years that will affect the new order in this wide region. In the current situation, former soviet republics with a democratic vision really suffer because of Russia's large-scale war in Ukraine. However, due to this war, Russia becomes much weaker to strengthen its hegemony in post-Soviet space. To keep its influence, it will have to compete with other global and regional actors such as the US, EU, China, India, Turkey, and Iran.

With its ‘war’ against democracy in post-Soviet space and with its invasion of Georgia and Ukraine as well as *de facto* non recognition of Armenia’s borders with Azerbaijan, the several threats over Moldova, actual rejection of the 1991 Alma-Ata Declaration, and because of its fear of democracy, Russia has opened the Pandora’s box by destabilizing the post-Soviet space. Besides Russia, other post-Soviet autocrats also threaten neighboring democratic republics. Azerbaijan’s 2022 invasion of Armenia’s sovereign territory in bordering regions undermined its territorial integrity. Backed by Russia (previously also by Turkey), after the 2020 war in Nagorno-Karabakh and despite the existing road via Iran, Azerbaijan claims an “extraterritorial corridor – Zangezur Corridor” under Russian control crossing Armenia’s sovereign territory to directly connect with Nakhichevan.

This plan fails because of Armenia’s and Iran’s positioning that any change of borders between these two countries is unacceptable for both. The territorial integrity and sovereignty of regional states are also supported by the US, India, and EU (especially: France). This fact showcases that post-Soviet democratic states gain support from eastern and western partners to face security challenges in the region. At the same time, Russia still has some political, economic and energetic leverages to maintain its decreasing influence in the post-Soviet space, especially within the framework of the Eurasian Economic Union which helps the Russian economy to function at war time.

Recent developments in post-Soviet space clearly showcase that authoritarian rules are consistently challenging democratic ones by violating their territorial integrity and sovereignty. In this regard, Russia challenges the Eastern Europe and Azerbaijan, in its turn, challenges the South Caucasus. By their aggressive intentions and active policies towards neighboring countries, the post-Soviet authoritarian leaders surely tend to create a vulnerable and disadvantageous image of democracy by promoting the fake idea that *democracy is incompatible with security* in this wide region. They realize that sustainable democratization in post-Soviet space will entirely destroy the political and economic impact of autocratic countries on their neighbors by engendering preconditions to foster their independence and sovereignty. Post-Soviet democratization will give an opportunity for diversification and will decrease the dependence of democratic rulers from autocratic ones.

Therefore, mainly Russia is very sensitive to this circumstance because it will lead to the fall of its geopolitical influence. Otherwise, by destroying democratic trends in the post-Soviet region Russia will keep and even increase its influence over other countries in this space.

Taking into consideration these circumstances as well as the current situation and expected trends, it has to be argued that Russia itself has

launched the irreversible process of its global geopolitical retreat despite its efforts to keep the local hegemony in post-Soviet space.

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