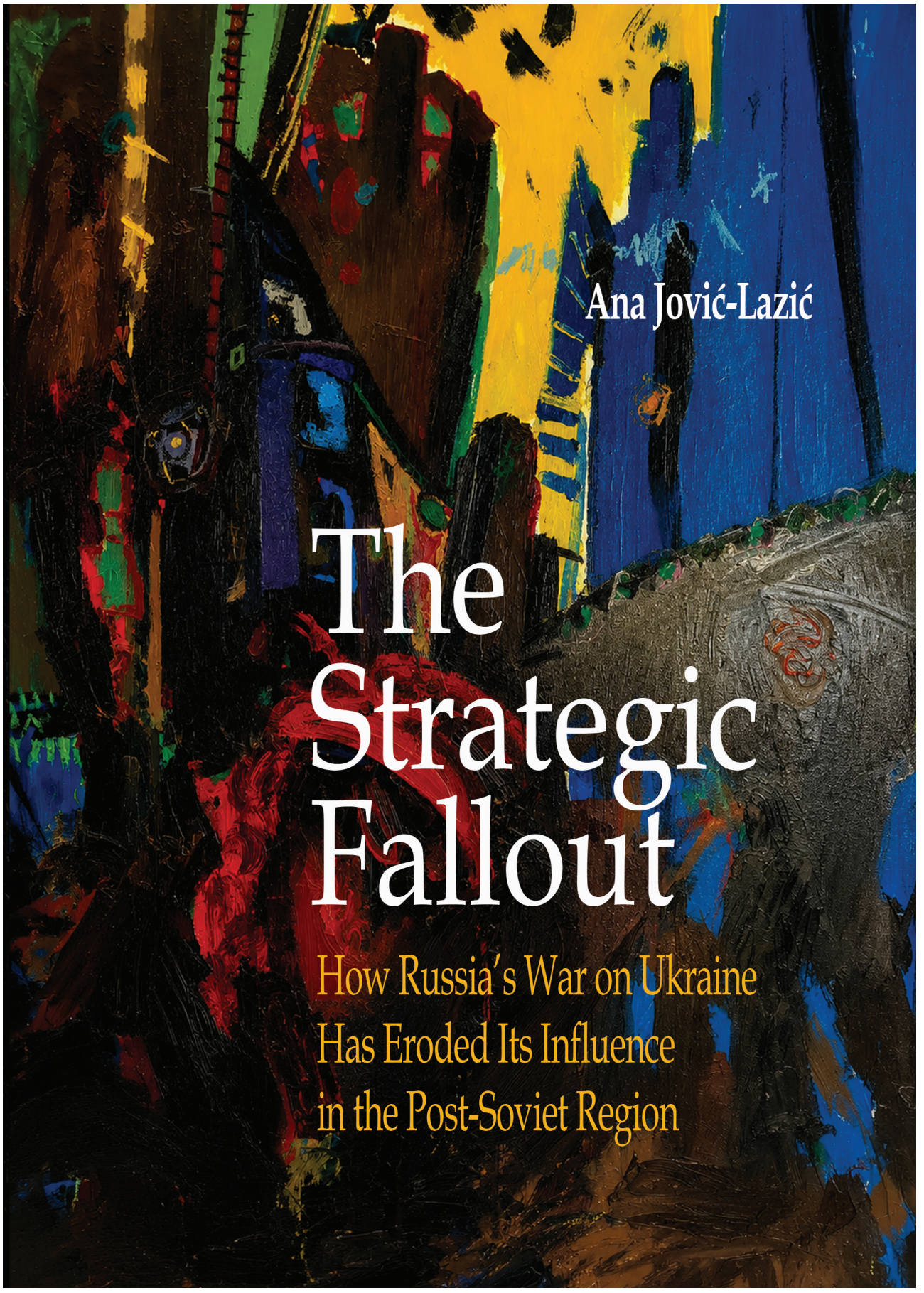

Ana Jović-Lazić
The Strategic Fallout
How Russia's War on Ukraine Has Eroded Its Influence in the Post-Soviet Region


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Dr. Ana Jović-Lazić

THE STRATEGIC FALLOUT:

How Russia's War on Ukraine Has Eroded Its Influence in the Post-Soviet Region

Belgrade, June 2026

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To my greatest happiness
and the source of my strength and inspiration

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PREFACE

The February 2022 full-scale invasion of Ukraine by Russia marked a historic rupture in the post-Soviet regional order. Europe had not witnessed a conventional interstate war involving a major power on this scale since 1945, and the post-Soviet region had not faced such a fundamental shock since the collapse of the Soviet Union. The war's outbreak generated a strong sense of urgency. It also pushed questions of empire, regional order, and national identity to the forefront. The analysis was developed in the shadow of that turning point and treats the war in Ukraine not only as a tragic conflict, but as a catalyst for re-examining Russia's role in its neighbourhood and a test case for theories of power and decline. This moment matters for two reasons. On one level, it has changed the balance of power in the region. On another, it has forced a return to older questions about empire, identity, and the legacy of the Soviet collapse. The war has made it difficult to separate questions of military power from questions of legitimacy and identity. Since 2022, more attention has been given to understanding why a war that was meant to restore Russia's influence appears to have weakened it. The implications are not limited to regional politics, but extend to broader debates in international relations.

The invasion of Ukraine did not occur in a vacuum. It was the culmination of long-brewing tensions and aspirations. Vladimir Putin's oft-cited description of the Soviet breakup as a major geopolitical catastrophe of the twentieth century captures the Kremlin's sense of loss and longing for great-power status. By 2022, Russia's leadership openly sought to upend the European security architecture, demanding a "sphere of influence" reminiscent of 19th-century politics. These ambitions are rooted in the historical narratives of empire and resistance to Western encroachment. Yet the ferocity of the Ukraine war and the unusually coordinated Western response signalled that something had fundamentally shifted. The conflict galvanised Western alliances, particularly NATO

and the EU, in ways that were unforeseen by Moscow. More surprisingly, it sent shockwaves through the post-Soviet region itself – the very region Russia sought to reassert its political and strategic primacy. As Russian tanks rolled toward Kyiv, neighbouring states recalibrated their own orientations, many seeking greater autonomy from Moscow's shadow. Observers soon noted an ironic pattern: actions intended to reassert Russian primacy accelerated the erosion of Russian influence in several key parts of the post-Soviet space. Recent analyses argue that the war has drained Russian resources and attention, while creating opportunities for neighbouring states to diversify their partnerships and reduce their dependence on Moscow (Mankoff, 2025).

How did a war intended to restore Russia's regional influence accelerate its erosion? This question is both empirically and theoretically perplexing. Russia has not disappeared from this region. It still has troops, markets, pipelines, institutions, and old habits of dependence to rely on. But something has changed. Its presence now carries less authority than before. More often, it looks like pressure rather than leadership. The war did not remove Russia's influence from the post-Soviet region. It made the limits of its influence harder to hide. Historically, great powers have often used military force to shore up fading empires or cow restive peripheries. Indeed, Putin's government clearly intended the Ukraine invasion as a show of strength – a shock-and-awe campaign to re-establish control over Ukraine and warn other neighbours against Western alignment. Yet the outcomes have starkly diverged from the intended goals. Instead of consolidating a renewed Russian-led regional order, the war destabilised old assumptions and emboldened Russia's neighbours to seek alternatives. NATO expanded after 2022, with Finland joining in April 2023 and Sweden in March 2024 after abandoning their long-standing military non-alignment. The European Union's appeal has grown among several eastern neighbours, especially Ukraine and Moldova, and even erstwhile Russian allies are hedging their bets. The discussion focuses on six post-Soviet states – Ukraine, Moldova, Georgia, Armenia, Belarus, and Azerbaijan – to trace how each responded to

the war and how its relationship with Moscow evolved. Broadly, the trend is one of selective distancing from Moscow, although the pattern varies sharply across cases. A war launched to halt Ukraine's westward drift and revive a "privileged sphere of influence" instead accelerated NATO's revival, deepened the alienation of the public and elites from Moscow's leadership, and exposed the limits of Russia's regional clout. Explaining why coercive power backfired remains central to understanding the dynamics of post-Soviet regional transformation.

Three broad lines of thought frame this argument: post-Soviet regionalism, debates about hegemonic decline, and approaches centred on identity and ontological security. They serve as broad reference points, rather than direct genealogies.

The first concerns the study of regional order and integration in the former Soviet Union. The USSR disappeared, and its republics had to redefine their place in a new regional order. Old habits lingered. The CIS, CSTO, and Eurasian Economic Union were each attempts to stitch together what had already come undone. Each promised stability, but each often fell short of producing it. Moscow saw them as tools to hold the region close, and to keep what could still be kept. For others, they were a compromise, a cautious way to avoid open rupture. In practice, these alliances never escaped the shadow of the hierarchy. Cooperation often means acquiescence, and trust rarely lasts long. The war in Ukraine has disrupted these arrangements. What seemed like enduring connections turned out to be fragile. Several states that had long looked to Moscow for balance began to step back, calculating that a greater distance might be safer than dependence. The regional map that once centred on Russia is shifting toward something looser and more uncertain—many directions instead of one.

The *second tradition* informing the analysis stems from the extensive International Relations literature on hegemonic rise and decline. Theories of power transition and hegemonic decline, associated with scholars such as Organski and Gilpin, highlight the recurrent risk that prolonged expansion and mounting commitments can generate overextension and relative decline. Great powers lose balance when

the costs of maintaining dominance outgrow their means, and smaller states begin to adjust to them. Although written mostly about global hegemons such as Britain or the United States, these ideas fit the regional scale as well. In Eurasia, Russia has played the role of a state that provides order through control, equating leadership with obedience. The invasion of Ukraine follows this logic. It was meant to prove strength and halt decay, but instead laid bare the limits of Moscow's influence. This pattern also recalls a broader historical tendency visible in earlier Russian imperial wars, in which coercive campaigns often produced long-term strategic over-extensions. Fighting one war drains the resources needed to sustain influence elsewhere. As Russia's attention narrowed, other countries moved in. China deepened its presence in Central Asia, and Turkey pressed its advantage in the Caucasus (Rumer, 2023). The familiar rhythm of hegemonic decline repeated itself: attempts to restore supremacy exposed how far it had eroded. Between 2022 and 2025, Russia increasingly illustrated the self-defeating dynamics of coercive regional restoration, as efforts to reclaim influence by force often accelerated strategic distancing among its neighbouring states.

The *third tradition* is more interpretive and rooted in constructivist IR theory, specifically in the concept of ontological security and post-imperial identity. Ontological security theory asks how states hold on to a coherent sense of self. It assumes that survival is not only physical but also psychological: nations need continuity in identity as much as they need borders and armies. Applied to Russia, this framework clarifies why power politics and questions of status often merge. Moscow's foreign policy has often revolved around the search for recognition and the fear of diminishment. The image of Russia as a great power—a civilisation rather than just a state—has become part of its self-definition and insecurity. The full-scale invasion of Ukraine in 2022 can be interpreted as an attempt to repair the shaken identity. It was meant to confirm that Russia still mattered, and that the story of imperial decline could be reversed. However, this move had the opposite effect. The war exposed the gap between Russia's self-image and its actual status. Viatcheslav Morozov's (2013, 2015) notion of the "subaltern empire" captures this tension: a power that imitates and resents the West

at the same time, both coloniser and, in its own eyes, culturally slighted. Pride and humiliation intertwined, driving choices that deepened the loss of standing that the Kremlin sought to avoid. Military setbacks in Ukraine have intensified this anxiety. Several neighbours have begun to turn away, the old narrative of Russia as a reliable centre has become much harder to sustain, and the need for validation has grown sharper. The same identity that demanded dominance now feeds on insecurities. Seen through this lens, the war's psychological and ideational costs may prove at least as consequential as its material ones, a case of ontological crisis accelerating hegemonic decline.

Each of these traditions opens a different path to the problem. The logic of power and hierarchy that runs through hegemonic decline literature connects directly to realist thought and debates on hegemonic stability. Attention to consent and legitimacy links the same tradition to ideas of soft power. The ontological and post-imperial perspectives grow out of the identity strand, tracing how loss, memory, and recognition shape Russia's behaviour. Finally, the regionalist tradition overlaps with the English School and discursive approaches, both of which are concerned with how rules, norms, and narratives hold or unravel regional order. Read together, they provide the ground from which the later theoretical chapters develop. The urgency of the 2022 invasion compels such a perspective. No single theoretical lens can fully capture the complexity of an event that is simultaneously about tanks and trade routes, but also about memories, myths, and the meaning of Russia's post-imperial role. Yet the different lenses point toward the same paradox. A war launched to restore Russia's authority has made that authority more contested. Russia used force to recover authority, but force made that authority harder to sustain. It weakened fear in some places, trust in others, and the old assumption that Moscow could still hold the region together.

Russia's reach after the Soviet collapse stretches unevenly. In some places, it has faded, while in others, it still clings. Six cases are examined: Ukraine, Moldova, Georgia, Armenia, Belarus, and Azerbaijan — the belt from Eastern Europe down to the Caucasus, where Moscow's hold has been tested the hardest since 2022. Central

Asia is left aside because its trajectory increasingly requires a separate analysis, especially given China's expanding economic role and the region's distinct security dynamics. The area's history and geography make it part of the post-Soviet world, yet its trajectory has become distinct. The Baltic states are also out of the frame, their Western turn long complete. What remains is the part of the former empire where Moscow's grip has been tested and found to be uncertain. Operational developments are discussed only insofar as they affect political alignments, institutional choices, and regional power relations beyond Ukraine's borders. Since 2022, this balance has become more fragile and openly contested. Ukraine sits in the middle of it all, not as the whole story but as the sharpest example of how the old Russia-centred regional order is being challenged. At its core lies a single question: how a war intended to restore order stripped away what remained of Russia's dominance. The conceptual framework that follows defines key terms, outlines the logic of comparison, and traces how a once-integrated space has adapted to life without its centre.

This monograph is therefore not a military history of the war, nor a chronological account of battlefield developments. It examines the war as a regional and theoretical rupture: a moment in which Russia's material power remained formidable, but its authority, legitimacy, and capacity to organise the post-Soviet space around itself were visibly weakened. The central concern is not whether Russia still matters in Eurasia. It does. The question is why it now matters differently.

INTRODUCTION

Russia's war in Ukraine did not remove Russia from the post-Soviet region, but it changed the meaning of its presence there. This is why the analysis begins with the concept of regional influence. In the post-Soviet context, this influence has never rested on military power alone. Russia's position depended on something wider: dependence, habit, inherited hierarchy, and the expectation that Moscow would remain the centre even after the Soviet Union disappeared. Troops, pipelines, labour migration, energy networks, political ties, media space, and shared memories all kept parts of the region tied to Russia long after 1991.

Influence is not treated as a possession. It matters only when it shapes behaviour. A state may possess military superiority and still fail to secure compliance, loyalty, and alignment. Regional influence, therefore, means the capacity to affect the choices of neighbouring states in ways that favour the dominant actor. Sometimes, this works through pressure. Sometimes, this is achieved through incentives, institutions, or old political habits. Sometimes through attraction, legitimacy, and the ability to make leadership appear natural. Influence, in this sense, is not only about material superiority; it also depends on institutions, legitimacy, and the degree to which others accept a dominant actor's authority (Keohane, 1984; Ikenberry, 2001).

In the post-Soviet region, Russian influence historically operated through several connected layers. One was military. Russia inherited the Soviet military infrastructure and preserved its security presence through bases, peacekeepers, frozen conflicts, and alliance systems such as the CSTO. Another was economic. Trade routes, remittances, energy dependence, and transport corridors gave Moscow leverage over its neighbouring economies. Institutions have reinforced this position. The CIS and the Eurasian Economic Union were formally multilateral, yet often reproduced asymmetrical relationships centred

on Russia. Finally, there was the less visible layer: language, media, shared memory, and the lingering assumption that Russia still belonged at the centre of the region.

These layers of influence did not operate evenly. Russia's position in Belarus was never the same as its position in other neighbouring states. The influence also varied across sectors. Moscow could retain leverage in security while losing ground culturally or economically. Therefore, the question is not simply whether Russia possessed power, but whether that power translated into obedience, restraint, or deference.

Since 2022, signs of erosion have become harder to ignore. Ukraine and Moldova moved more decisively toward the European Union. Armenia began to question the value of Russian security guarantees. Kazakhstan refused to recognise Russia's annexation claims in Ukraine despite pressure from Moscow. Belarus remained the clearest exception, although even there, the relationship increasingly resembled asymmetric dependence rather than consensual leadership. Across the region, Russian influence has become more conditional, more defensive, and less able to present itself as legitimate leadership.

This shift matters because the monograph does not argue that Russia disappeared from the region after 2022. It did not. Russia retained military capabilities, economic links, institutional footholds, and the ability to coerce its neighbours. What changed was the relationship between power and influence. The war exposed how difficult it had become for Moscow to convert raw capability into stable authority. In this sense, the erosion of Russian influence reflects not merely a decline in capabilities but a weakening of hierarchical authority, as neighbouring states became less willing to accept Russian leadership as legitimate (Lake, 2009).

The distinction between power, influence, and control matters because the war showed how unevenly they can operate. Russia entered 2022 with substantial military capabilities, vast natural resources, nuclear weapons, institutional reach, and a long-established position in the region. None of these disappeared after the invasion. Russia remains too

large, too heavily armed, and too deeply entangled to become irrelevant in Eurasia. However, the war showed that power does not automatically produce influence.

Power refers to capacity, that is, the resources that allow a state to project force, impose costs, reward compliance, or shape its environment. In Russia's case, this includes military strength, energy exports, geographic scale, arms production, intelligence networks, and diplomatic reach. Before 2022, these resources helped sustain the image of Russia as the unavoidable centre of the post-Soviet region. Even governments seeking closer ties with the West often act cautiously around Moscow because they assume Russian power remains decisive.

Influence is narrower. It exists only when these resources alter the behaviour of others. It depends not only on capabilities, but also on credibility, legitimacy, and expectations about the future. Before the full-scale invasion, Russia often shaped decisions without using direct force. It brokered ceasefires, pressured governments economically, used energy dependence politically, and relied on informal networks linking elites across the region. Much of this influence works through anticipation. States adjusted themselves because they assumed that Russia would remain dominant.

The war damaged this assumption. Russia continues to possess coercive capacity, but its ability to translate pressure into durable political outcomes has weakened. Neighbours that once balanced carefully around Moscow increasingly searched for alternatives instead. Some have diversified economically. Others deepened their relations with the EU, Turkey, China, or the United States. Russian pressure remained real, but the willingness to defer to it has declined.

Control implies something stronger still. It means not simply shaping choices, but determining outcomes directly. Russia rarely exercised full control over independent post-Soviet states after 1991, though it came closest in Belarus and in territories shaped by frozen conflicts or troop deployments. The 2022 invasion can be understood as an attempt to move from influence to control in Ukraine, replacing indirect leverage

with direct political subordination. That attempt failed. Instead of restoring obedience, the invasion accelerated the rupture.

This distinction is central to the argument that follows. Russia did not lose all power after 2022. What weakened was the expectation that power alone would continue producing regional authority. In some places, Moscow retained leverage but lost trust. In others, it kept pressure but lost legitimacy. The erosion of influence therefore did not mean disappearance. It meant a change in the quality of Russian power.

Against this conceptual background, the central argument of this monograph is straightforward: Russia's invasion of Ukraine weakened the regional influence it was meant to restore. These shifts had deeper roots before 2022; the war accelerated them, made them more visible, and reduced Moscow's ability to manage their consequences. This outcome was neither immediate nor uniform. Russia did not disappear from the post-Soviet region after 2022. It still possessed military forces, economic connections, intelligence networks, and institutional footholds inherited from the Soviet collapse. Yet the war changed how that power was perceived. What had once looked stable began to look uncertain. In several cases, states that had long adjusted themselves around Moscow started looking for more distance.

The Kremlin appears to have expected a very different outcome. A rapid victory in Ukraine was meant to re-establish Russian dominance on several levels at once. Ukraine would either return to Moscow's orbit or lose its capacity to move further toward NATO and the European Union. Other neighbouring states would absorb the lesson and behave more cautiously. More broadly, Russia hoped to force a renegotiation of European security in which its claim to a privileged sphere of influence would again be treated as a political reality. Instead, the invasion produced a long war that exposed military weaknesses, narrowed Russia's diplomatic room for manoeuvring, and deepened regional distrust. This effect was not simply a matter of military overstretch. The war changed how Russia was read across the former Soviet region. Its presence increasingly resembles coercion without authority.

Russia's security role weakened as resources and attention were redirected to Ukraine. States that relied on Moscow as a guarantor began questioning the reliability of that protection, especially where Russian commitments appeared selective or ineffective. Economic dependence has also shifted. Sanctions, disrupted trade routes, and uncertainty around Russian markets have pushed neighbouring states to diversify more actively than before. In some cases, countries that once depended heavily on Russia discovered that Moscow had become more constrained and dependent on intermediaries.

The war also damaged Russia's claim to regional legitimacy. Images of destruction in Ukraine, together with increasingly aggressive rhetoric from Moscow, have weakened older narratives of fraternity, stability, and historical leadership. This mattered even when governments avoided direct confrontation. Fear remained, but the attraction weakened. Russia could still compel, pressure, or punish, but it was less able to settle into a state of trust, consent, or routine obedience.

The invasion also sharpened questions of sovereignty in the post-Soviet region. Independence no longer appears as a settled fact inherited from 1991. Again, it appeared vulnerable to force. This did not produce identical reactions everywhere. Some governments moved openly toward the West, others acted more cautiously, and some deepened their multi-vector strategies. However, across these different responses stood a similar concern: not to become too dependent on a Russia whose behaviour had become more unpredictable and costly.

The argument that follows is therefore not that Russian influence suddenly weakened after 2022. The process is uneven, incomplete, and still unfolding. Belarus remains deeply tied to Moscow, while parts of Central Asia continue to balance carefully around Russian power. Yet across much of the region, the same broader movement is visible. Russia still possesses power, but that power no longer produces the same degree of political compliance, ideological attraction, or regional deference it once did. The war in Ukraine did not initiate this shift. It made it harder to conceal.

The empirical analysis covers six cases: Ukraine, Moldova, Georgia, Armenia, Belarus, and Azerbaijan. They do not stand for the entire post-Soviet region, nor is that the aim. They were chosen because the war exposed Russia's position in each of them differently.

Ukraine is itself a rupture. Moldova shows how dependence can become a reason for moving away. Georgia remains harder to read: society looks westward, while the government avoids an open break with Moscow. Armenia matters because it was an ally, not an adversary, and yet the war showed how little Russian protection could mean when it was most needed. Belarus moves in the opposite direction, toward deeper dependence. Azerbaijan shows another route: not a Western turn, but a wider space to act while Russia is absorbed elsewhere.

These cases do not tell a neat story. That is the point. Some move fast, some slowly, some hedge, and one becomes more dependent. But together they show that Moscow's influence has become harder to sustain across very different settings.

The analysis follows these cases comparatively. It asks how Russian influence operated before 2022, what changed after the invasion, and why these changes unfolded differently across states. Political alignment, economic dependence, security relations, public discourse, and perceptions of legitimacy all matter here. Read together, the cases show not only the erosion of Russian influence, but also the uneven ways in which post-Soviet states have adapted to a regional order that no longer appears firmly centred on Moscow.

Russia remains the central actor, but not as one more case. It is the actor whose influence is being tested. The neighbouring states show how Russian power was absorbed, resisted, or worked around after 2022. The analysis therefore turns to theory, because this is not only an empirical story. It is also about power, legitimacy, identity, hierarchy, memory, and the question of what happens when a regional order loses the centre around which it was built.

Theoretical Framework

February 2022 cannot be read through a single theory. The war was about force, but not only force. It was also about the collapse of a regional order, the loss of legitimacy, and Russia's struggle to hold together an imperial narrative about itself and its neighbours. Read through one lens alone, important parts of the picture disappear.

Realism captures the language of power, security, and strategic competition. Yet material power alone cannot explain why coercion produces distancing rather than renewed obedience. Hegemonic decline approaches help explain overextension and the weakening of regional authority, but they say less about why the restoration of influence became tied to historical status and imperial identity. This is especially important in hierarchical regional orders, where authority depends not only on coercion but also on the recognition of leadership by subordinate states (Lake, 2009). The constructivist and ontological security approaches clarify this dimension. Approaches centred on legitimacy, discourse, and regional order show how influence depends on more than coercive capacity. The point is not that the war can only be explained by combining theories. It is that, even when approached from different theoretical directions, the result keeps returning to the same problem: Russia used force to restore authority, and in doing so, weakened the conditions that made authority possible. The analysis that follows separates these perspectives analytically, but they all return to the same problem: why a war launched to restore Russia's regional dominance instead exposed the limits of that dominance.

Realism and Power Politics

Realism remains one of the oldest and most influential approaches in international relations, precisely because it begins from a hard problem: there is no higher authority able to protect states from one another. Classical realists such as Hans Morgenthau (1948) and structural realists such as Kenneth Waltz (1979) start from this condition of

insecurity, self-help, and competition. In such a setting, power and security rarely remain in the background for long. John J. Mearsheimer's (2001) offensive realism pushes the argument further, suggesting that great powers try to increase their relative power and, where possible, dominate their regions. Seen from Moscow, Ukraine was not just another neighbour drifting away. It was the place where strategic depth, status, and the old idea of regional control met. Moscow used force to prevent this loss. But this is also where the realist story begins to turn against Russia itself.

Within realism, the distinction between defensive and offensive realism matters, but only up to a point. Defensive realists argue that states seek enough power to secure themselves and balance against threats, whereas offensive realists contend that great powers will seek as much power as possible, since only preponderance can make them feel safe. One can read Moscow's behaviour defensively, as a reaction to NATO enlargement and the fear of losing its buffer. One can also read it offensively, as an attempt to dominate a weaker neighbour and reassert a privileged sphere of influence. The two readings differ in emphasis, but both return to the same issue: Russia treated Ukraine's autonomy as a strategic problem and assumed that military power could solve it.

Realist scholars have long examined the balance of power as a core mechanism in international politics. The balance of power refers to a distribution of capabilities that prevents any single state from dominating completely (Little, 2007). During the post-Cold War period, a fragile regional balance has emerged in Eastern Europe and Eurasia. Russia remained the predominant military power in the post-Soviet region, but NATO and EU enlargement gradually changed its strategic landscape. From an offensive realist perspective, such balances are rarely settled; great powers continue to search for opportunities to improve their positions (Mearsheimer, 2001). Snyder's (2002) critique of offensive realism is useful here because it reminds us that power incentives matter, but do not exhaust the explanation. Institutions, domestic politics, and perceptions also shape how states act.

Realism provides a blunt but useful way of reading Russia's war and its aftermath. From a power-centred standpoint, the invasion can be seen as an attempt to alter the regional balance before it moved further against Moscow. After 2014, and more clearly by 2021, Ukraine was slipping beyond the kind of influence Russia still thought it could recover. A realist interpretation would stress that Russian leaders calculated, wrongly, that force could prevent this shift and preserve Russia's regional supremacy. This also resembles Schweller's (2006) account of dissatisfied revisionist powers seeking to revise an unfavourable order rather than merely preserving the status quo. In realist terms, if Ukraine were to leave Russia's orbit entirely, Russia's strategic depth and buffer against the West would have shrunk. The war can therefore be read as an attempt by a dissatisfied power to reverse the perceived decline. Yet the same move deepened the insecurity it claimed to prevent. Russia's neighbours did not become more obedient. They became more alert.

Realism also helps explain the reactions of other post-Soviet states once Russia's aggressive intentions were harder to ignore. Balance-of-power theory predicts that if a would-be hegemon overreaches, others will balance against it rather than simply accept its subordination. States that had spent years balancing carefully around Moscow began to stretch that space further. Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan kept their balance, but with more distance from Moscow than before. Armenia was a sharper case. It was not outside Russia's security system; it was inside it. Once Moscow looked unable to protect it, and still willing to demand loyalty, Yerevan began looking elsewhere for support. Several post-Soviet states responded not by openly breaking with Russia, but by diversifying their diplomatic, economic, and security partnerships. This shift was quiet in some places and sharper in others, but it pointed in the same direction: Moscow's ability to discipline regional choices weakened.

The failure to defeat Ukraine quickly also damaged something less visible but crucial: the belief that Russian force was inevitable. In realist terms, power is also about perception and credibility. A state that

cannot win a war on its own doorstep, despite massive investments in hard power, loses more than just equipment and manpower. It loses part of the fear that made others adjust to it in advance. Early signs of this appeared across the region. Some governments refused to recognise Russia's annexations. Others did not announce a break, but quietly widened their options. Central Asia looked more openly toward China, and the Caucasus gave Turkey more room than before. These moves were not always openly anti-Russian. But they showed that Russia was no longer the only point around which regional politics had to turn.

At the same time, realism draws attention to the capability constraints facing Russia. War and sanctions have strained Russia's economy and military-industrial capacity, limiting the tools Moscow can use to project power abroad. The loss of access to Western technology weakens long-term military modernisation. Russia's army remains large and dangerous, but its capacity to operate as an unquestioned regional enforcer has been damaged. Meanwhile, other states in and around Eastern Europe have increased their defence spending, diversified their suppliers, and sought security ties outside Russia's reach. These material shifts matter because realism treats power not as reputation alone, but as the ability to sustain pressure, deter rivals, and impose costs over time.

This is where realism turns back on Russia. Force was meant to stop the decline, yet it made the decline easier to see. The army became tied down in Ukraine, sanctions narrowed Russia's options, and the old image of military competence no longer carried the same weight. The neighbours adjusted accordingly. They did not all break with Moscow, and some remained careful, but automatic deference was weaker. In realist terms, Moscow's power play produced balancing, even if informal and uneven, among states seeking more autonomy from its dominance. The invasion accelerated the strategic erosion it was meant to reverse.

The realist perspective therefore illuminates a central part of the argument. Hard power still matters, but not only as a possession. It

matters as performance, credibility, and expectation. Russia entered the war trying to prove that it remained the decisive regional power. Instead, it showed that its power had limits. Realism does not fully explain why Moscow accepted such risks, or why coercive power failed to preserve loyalty once legitimacy and identity began to fracture. These questions require the other theoretical lenses that follow. But realism does show the material side of the paradox clearly: a coercive move designed to restore hierarchy produces balancing, caution, and wider strategic distancing. Power politics, in other words, swung against Russia as a result of its own power-driven initiative.

Hegemony, Order, and Spheres of Influence

While realism focuses on power in general, hegemonic stability theory is concerned with how dominant states sustain order. The basic assumption is that international systems, and by extension regional orders, tend to be more stable when a powerful state is able to enforce rules, provide security, and maintain economic coordination (Webb & Krasner, 1989). Kindleberger (1973) developed this argument through the experience of British and later American predominance, suggesting that hegemonic powers contribute to stability by managing economic relations and deterring major conflicts. When hegemonic power weakens, existing orders can begin to fragment. Rivalries intensify, rules lose force, and no actor remains able to sustain the system alone. Although hegemonic stability theory has most often been applied to global economic regimes, its logic can also illuminate regional dynamics. In the post-Soviet region, Russia has long seen itself, and has often been treated by others, as the de facto regional hegemon: the power expected to maintain security, coordinate integration, and shape the broader regional order.

For much of the post-Cold War period, Russia has functioned as the dominant power in its neighbourhood. It led security alliances such as the CSTO, sponsored economic blocs such as the Eurasian Economic Union, and repeatedly intervened in regional conflicts, from Tajikistan's

civil war to Nagorno-Karabakh. Moscow justified these policies through the language of stability, security, and protection from external influence. They also reinforced the Russian authority across the region. Whether this authority actually produced a stable regional order, or only managed dependence, became much less clear once the war in Ukraine began to weaken Russia's own position.

Closely related is the idea of spheres of influence: spaces where great powers claim exclusive or predominant control over the choices of weaker states (Jackson, 2020). In international law and diplomacy, such spheres are not officially codified today, but in practice they persist. Within them, the autonomy of smaller states is conditioned by the interests of the dominant power, while external powers are expected to stay out (Jackson, 2020; Hast, 2014). Moscow has explicitly invoked this logic. Putin and Medvedev both, at different moments, asserted a "privileged sphere of interests" for Russia in the former Soviet space. Russian policy therefore treated the post-Soviet region as a special zone where Russia's leadership should be acknowledged and where Western military presence, above all NATO, was unacceptable. The term "near abroad" itself carried this quasi-imperial assumption: these states were formally foreign, but not entirely so in Moscow's political imagination.

Hegemonic stability theory and the notion of imperial spheres intersect at this point. Russia's dominance was presented as stabilising, at least from Moscow's perspective. A Russian-led order would prevent local conflicts, contain Islamist militancy or other threats, and block what the Kremlin described as destabilising Western intervention. Russia's provision of subsidised energy, market access, security guarantees, and mediation can be read as an attempt to maintain regional order through selective public goods and strategic incentives (Webb & Krasner, 1989). But there was always a tension inside this arrangement. Stable hegemony requires more than mere dominance. It requires some degree of legitimacy, consent, or at least trust. An order seen as nakedly exploitative or coercive breeds resentment and defection. Busygina and Filippov (2021) capture this tension sharply: "the more Russia has acted

as a 'great power,' the less credible has been its promise to respect the national sovereignty of the former Soviet republics, [and] the less reason the latter have had to trust Russia." This trust deficit was significant before 2022. It helps explain why many Russia-led integration projects remained shallow, with neighbouring states participating while still trying to avoid excessive dependence on Moscow.

Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine delivered a major blow to the viability of this hegemonic role. In one stroke, Moscow showed the darker side of its regional dominance: it was willing to violate its neighbour's sovereignty in the most extreme way. For many post-Soviet governments, the war confirmed fears that had already existed. The implicit bargain of a benign hegemon — protection in exchange for deference — collapsed. Ukraine showed that closeness to Moscow did not guarantee security. It could become a source of danger. Even governments that avoided open confrontation with Russia became more cautious about their dependence on it.

The response inside Russia's own regional institutions was revealing. The CSTO did not become an instrument of collective support for Moscow's war. Russia's formal allies did not join the fighting, and most avoided direct endorsement of the invasion. Belarus allowed its territory to be used, but even Minsk avoided sending its army into Ukraine. This absence of automatic followership mattered. A hegemon whose closest partners no longer rally to its cause begins to look less like the centre of an order than the source of a demand.

The war also invited counter-hegemonic influences into the region. Where Russia had claimed to be the primary external actor in Central Asia and the Caucasus, China, Turkey, the European Union, and the United States became more visible. China deepened its role in Central Asia, Turkey gained more room in the South Caucasus, and the European Union moved closer to Ukraine and Moldova. When one hegemon falters, others move into the space it can no longer organise alone. This does not imply that Russia has disappeared from the region.

It means that the regional order has become more plural, fragmented, and less defined by Moscow's preferences.

The Caucasus shows this clearly. With Russia distracted, Azerbaijan asserted itself militarily in Nagorno-Karabakh in 2022–2023, sidelining Russia's peacekeeping role and altering a conflict Moscow had long helped manage. Armenia, once dependent on Russia for security, began to question the value of this dependence. Central Asian states avoided an open break, but also became more careful about being locked too tightly into Russia's orbit. Kazakhstan's refusal to recognise the self-proclaimed entities of Donetsk and Luhansk at the 2022 St. Petersburg International Economic Forum was symbolically important for precisely that reason (Klitina, 2022). It showed that even states trying to preserve working relations with Moscow were no longer willing to endorse its imperial claims.

From the sphere-of-influence angle, the war undermined the principle that had tacitly supported Russia's regional claim: that Moscow could dominate the region and still provide a measure of order within it. Instead, the war brought economic shocks, refugee flows, militarisation, sanctions spillover, and new fears about Russian minority politics. The ideology of the Russian sphere — that these countries belong to Russia's civilisational and political orbit — became harder to sustain. Central Asian governments began to cultivate more distinct regional and national narratives; in the South Caucasus, Azerbaijan acted more independently; Armenia questioned Russian protection; and even Belarus remained tied to Moscow more by regime dependence than by genuine regional legitimacy. This collapse of confidence is a hallmark of hegemonic failures.

Hegemonic stability presupposes that the dominant power contributes to regional order through public goods, such as security and relatively stable economic exchange. The war exposed Russia's diminishing capacity to perform these functions. Security commitments weakened as military resources were redirected to Ukraine. Sanctions and wartime disruptions have destabilised regional trade networks.

Neighbours that had benefited from the Russian market and transit routes began seeking alternatives, including corridors that bypassed Russia. Energy-exporting Central Asian states found new urgency in routes less dependent on Moscow. Some analysts have revisited hegemonic stability arguments to stress that durable order depends not only on material dominance, but also on the hegemon's capacity and willingness to sustain stability (Keohane, 1984; Ikenberry, 2001; Webb & Krasner, 1989). In Russia's case, willingness turned toward coercion and war, while its ability diminished. This combination weakened the foundations of the Eurasian hegemonic system.

The war exposed the limits of a regional order sustained primarily through coercion. Scholars of spheres of influence note that such arrangements can generate order, but also conflict when rival powers compete for dominance or when subordinate states resist external control (Jackson, 2020; Hast, 2014). Both dynamics appeared here. NATO and the EU expanded their influence into what Russia saw as its sphere, while Ukraine and other states increasingly resisted subordination. The 2022 invasion was an attempt to enforce Russia's sphere of influence through military coercion. The result was close to what sphere-of-influence logic would predict: heightened rivalry with the West and a surge of anti-imperial nationalism among the states Russia sought to discipline.

Scholars of hegemonic stability theory have long emphasised that coercion undermines the voluntary cooperation and legitimacy necessary for stable hegemony (Keohane, 1984; Ikenberry, 2001; Webb & Krasner, 1989). Russia still has troops, bases, institutions, and clients. But its political capital is much thinner than before. Countries are increasingly thinking beyond a Russia-centred order. The Central Asian republics hold more intra-regional meetings without Russia. Azerbaijan asserts that it can resolve regional issues with its partners, especially Turkey. Belarus remains Moscow's closest ally, but its position reflects regime dependence more than attractive leadership does. Russia can still compel, but compulsion is not the same as hegemony.

From a hegemonic stability and sphere-of-influence perspective, Russia's war in Ukraine can be read as a catalyst for hegemonic erosion. The war demonstrated that Russia was neither a benevolent hegemon nor an invincible one. It violated the implicit contract of its leadership by bringing disorder instead of stability. It also shows that Russia's version of order rests on the fragile foundations of coercion, dependence, and limited consent. The post-2022 period can be read as a kind of power transition, but not one in which another single hegemon simply replaces Russia. What appears instead is a more fragmented and plural regional order. Regional states no longer accept so readily that Russia alone should "manage" Eurasia. They are asserting sovereignty more openly, seeking other partners, and testing arrangements beyond Moscow's reach. Whether this produces greater stability or new uncertainty remains open, but Moscow's hegemonic authority has visibly weakened across several of the cases examined here.

Soft Power and Legitimacy

Joseph Nye's concept of soft power refers to the ability of a country to shape the preferences of others through attraction rather than coercion or payment. Hard power works through force, pressure, and material inducement, while soft power works through culture, values, diplomacy, reputation, and the sense that a state's leadership or model is worth following. It is closely tied to legitimacy. A state seen as successful, credible, or morally authoritative can often persuade where coercion would be costly. Nye (2004) defines soft power as the capacity to make others want what one wants. In the context of regional influence, this matters because leadership rarely rests on fear alone. It also depends on whether others find the leadership useful, familiar, or at least acceptable.

Russia understood this problem, even if it often approached it unevenly. In the 2000s, especially under Putin's second term and Medvedev's presidency, Moscow began investing more explicitly in soft power in the "near abroad" and beyond. Rather than competing

with Western universalist soft power on a global scale, Russia relied on more targeted forms of influence directed at specific audiences (Laruelle, 2021a). It promoted Soviet-era heritage, the Russian language, Russian media, Victory Day commemorations, and the memory of the Great Patriotic War. *Rossotrudnichestvo* and the *Russkiy Mir* Foundation supported cultural centres and Russian-language education abroad. The Orthodox Church was also used as a civilisational bridge in Orthodox countries such as Ukraine, Belarus, Georgia, and Armenia. At the same time, Russia presented itself as an alternative to the liberal West: conservative, sovereigntist, anti-revolutionary, and hostile to what it described as Western interventionism (Keating & Kaczmarska, 2017; Romanova, 2016). Eurasianist currents added another layer, portraying Russia as a distinct civilisational and geopolitical space with its own historical mission (O'Loughlin, Ó Tuathail, & Kolossov, 2005).

The results were uneven. Russian soft power had real traction in certain places and among certain groups. Older generations in parts of Central Asia, Russophone communities in Ukraine and the Baltics, labour migrants, students, and media audiences often remained linked to Russia through language, memory, work, and education. Russian television dominated much of the post-Soviet information space for years. Moscow also used prestige events, especially the Sochi Winter Olympics in 2014 and the FIFA World Cup in 2018, to project the image of a modern, confident Russia. Yet this appeal was never simple. Rutland and Kazantsev (2016) argue that Russian leaders tried to appropriate the concept of soft power but often misunderstood it. Moscow frequently blended attraction with propaganda, disinformation, and support for friendly political forces. Sergunin and Karabeshkin (2015) make a similar point: Russian strategists adopted the language of soft power, but often framed it through information warfare and state-managed influence rather than voluntary attraction. Russia could appeal, but it also tried to manage, discipline, and

manipulate. That tension limited the credibility of its soft power from the start.

The idea of the "Russian world" captured both the strength and weakness of this approach. It offered a story of shared language, culture, memory, and civilisational belonging, with Russia at the centre. For some audiences, especially where Soviet nostalgia or Russian-language identity remained strong, this narrative mattered. But it also contained a political claim. It suggested that cultural proximity should translate into geopolitical orientation. That was precisely where it began to fail. Feklyunina (2016) shows that Russia's soft power in Ukraine relied heavily on constructing a collective identity around the Russian world, but that this narrative increasingly clashed with Ukrainian national identity. By the late 2000s, it resonated only with some segments of Ukrainian society. Russia's soft power had a ceiling. It worked where identity overlaps remained strong and where Russian media was largely uncontested. It failed where local national projects had moved away from Moscow, or where Russian behaviour made its cultural claims look threatening.

The events of 2014 made these limits visible. The annexation of Crimea and the war in Donbas damaged Russia's attractiveness across much of the region. They may have strengthened nationalist pride inside Russia and among some sympathetic groups abroad, but they also weakened Russia's claim to be a stabilising or protective power. A basic condition of soft power is the consistency between rhetoric and behaviour. Russia claimed to defend sovereignty and stability, yet it violated Ukraine's territorial integrity and fuelled the war. Rutland and Kazantsev (2016) argue that Moscow failed to develop soft power as an effective instrument because it confused genuine attraction with propaganda and tactical influence. By 2019, attitudes toward Russia in Ukraine had already sharply deteriorated and become regionally fragmented (KIIS, 2019). In countries such as Georgia, Armenia, Moldova, and Azerbaijan, Russia is increasingly viewed less as a cultural patron than as a power associated with coercion, insecurity, and political pressure. In Belarus,

the pattern was different: Russian cultural and political influence remained much deeper, but even there it rested increasingly on regime dependence rather than broad regional legitimacy.

The full-scale invasion in 2022 accelerated this decline. If 2014 weakened Russia's appeal, 2022 made the damage harder to contain. The invasion was widely seen as an act of aggression and a violation of basic international norms. Moscow's claims that it was "defending Russian speakers" or "fighting fascism" found little support outside Russia and a narrow circle of aligned regimes. For neighbouring states, the war was not only a geopolitical shock but also an image shock. Images of destruction in Kyiv, Kharkiv, and Mariupol, together with the atrocities uncovered in Bucha made it difficult to sustain the idea of Russia as the protector, elder brother, or guarantor of order. Even groups that had once been culturally close to Russia found the war harder to defend. In Kazakhstan, where Russian media had long circulated widely, aggressive Russian state narratives about Ukraine prompted public debate and calls to limit such content. The government's efforts to encourage local alternatives reflected a broader regional tendency toward hedging and reduced dependence on Russia's information space (Dursun-Özkanca, 2025).

Soft power also depends on perceived competence. Russia's failure to achieve a quick victory, the exposure of its military weaknesses, and the association of Russian power with destruction rather than order damaged its image as a formidable and capable state. Instead of projecting strength, Moscow projected coercion and instability. This perception reinforced patterns of diversification and soft balancing in neighbouring states (Dursun-Özkanca, 2025; Primiano & O'Neill, 2025). Russia's domestic repression after 2022 has also weakened its appeal. Censorship, crackdowns on dissent, the exodus of educated Russians, and the militarisation of public life have made Russia less attractive as a model, especially for younger generations in countries such as Georgia and Moldova. Earlier cultural prestige did not disappear, but it was now overshadowed by authoritarian isolation and war.

Diplomatic isolation adds another layer to the loss of legitimacy. After 2022, Russia faced condemnation in the UN General Assembly and lost its standing in international institutions such as the UN Human Rights Council. This mattered not only diplomatically but also symbolically. A state that is treated as a violator of basic norms cannot easily present itself as a prestigious regional leader. At the same time, Ukraine's international standing has risen sharply. Zelenskyy became a globally recognised symbol of resistance, and Ukrainian resilience generated sympathy across Europe and beyond. This reversal affected the post-Soviet region directly. Moldova and Georgia, long caught between Russia and the West, saw European integration gain stronger emotional and political force. Petro (2023) observes that Russia's narrative of protecting Russian speakers largely failed; Russian-speaking communities outside Russia often feared being "protected" in the way Ukraine had been. This fits broader arguments that Russian public diplomacy has become increasingly dependent on narrative control, with a limited persuasive reach beyond already aligned audiences (Jović-Lazić, 2025).

The way former partners speak is also a measure of Russia's lost legitimacy. Kazakhstan's President Tokayev, despite relying on CSTO assistance during the January 2022 unrest, refused to endorse Russia's recognition of the Donbas "quasi-states" and publicly defended the principle of territorial integrity. This mattered because it was not a hostile state speaking, but a cautious partner signalling distance. Russia's war has made loyalty to Moscow more costly and embarrassing than before. Belarus remains the clearest exception, but even there, Russia's position rests far more on hard power, regime dependence, and fear than on genuine attraction. Lukashenko's regime depends on Moscow, but that is not the same as Russian soft power. It is an influence without admiration.

The crisis is therefore not only about lost popularity. It is about the weakening of Russia's claim to regional leadership. Before 2022, Moscow could still present itself as a defender of multipolarity,

sovereignty, tradition, and order. This rhetoric appealed to some governments and publics sceptical of Western dominance. But the war made the contradiction between Russia's language and its behaviour much harder to ignore. Forsberg and Mäkinen (2021) argue that Russian cultural statecraft was already weakened by the inconsistency between proclaimed values and actual conduct. After 2022, inconsistencies became central. Russia spoke of sovereignty while violating it, of stability while exporting war, and of fraternity while destroying Ukrainian cities. Some scholars describe a reverse effect: Ukraine's resistance and Western support produced a competing soft-power narrative of democracy, courage, and national self-defence (Zachara-Szymańska, 2023). Russia lost attraction at the same moment Ukraine gained it. This does not mean that all post-Soviet societies became pro-Western overnight. But it changed the moral balance of the conflict. Ukrainian symbols became visible even among young people in parts of Central Asia; the language of decolonisation and sovereignty gained force; and Russia's image shifted from that of an elder brother to a violator. These symbolic changes matter because regional influence is partly sustained through the stories people are willing to inhabit. Russia's story became harder to believe.

Legitimacy, in this context, means a right to lead. Russia's actions have weakened this claim. If before one could argue that Russia, as the largest and most historically connected state, naturally led regional integration, after 2022, that argument rang hollow. Uzbekistan and Kazakhstan have repeatedly emphasised international law and territorial integrity. Within Russia-led institutions, members have become more cautious and more willing to push back. These are small cracks, but together they show that Moscow's ability to set the agenda through persuasion has diminished. Keating and Kaczmarska (2017) show how Russia tried to craft an identity as a conservative great power, but the war made that identity less persuasive to its neighbours, who increasingly saw Russia as a threat rather than a guardian of tradition.

The war in Ukraine therefore marked a turning point for Russian soft power. Moscow lost much of the battle of narratives in its own neighbourhood. Where it once claimed to protect the shared heritage, it came to be seen as a source of instability and aggression. Without legitimacy, influence derived from consent becomes thinner, leaving coercion to do most of the work. This creates a vicious cycle: as soft power declines, Russia relies more on threats, pressure, and hard power; however, these same tools further alienate neighbouring states and confirm the loss of attraction. A great power's decline is not visible only in lost wars or weakened armies. It is also visible in the lost admiration and trust. By this measure, Russia's regional standing has declined sharply. The post-Soviet region has not become free of Russian influence, but Russia's cultural and political appeal is now more contested. For a state that wants to remain the centre of gravity in Eurasia, that is a strategic defeat of another kind.

Ontological Security and Identity

Beyond material power and institutional leadership lies another dimension of international relations: the need for a stable sense of self. Ontological security, first developed in sociology and later brought into IR by scholars such as Mitzen (2006) and Steele (2008), refers to an actor's need for continuity, identity, and a predictable narrative of its own existence. States do not seek only physical security. They also seek confidence in who they are, what role they occupy, and how their present connects to their past. A state that experiences an identity shock can therefore feel insecure even when its territory is not immediately threatened. It may then act to restore a coherent self-image, sometimes at a considerable material cost (Curanović & Szymański, 2022). Mitzen's argument that states can become attached to conflict routines is especially relevant here: conflict itself can provide certainty, purpose, and continuity.

The collapse of the Soviet Union was such an identity shock for Russia. The Russian Federation emerged smaller, weaker, and surrounded by

newly independent states that it had once governed. Moscow's status shifted from one of two superpowers to a diminished power struggling to define itself after the empire. The loss was not only territorial. It was also symbolic. Russia had to explain who it was without the Soviet mission, imperial space, and the status it had long treated as natural. Curanović (2021) argues that this sense of great-power identity is closely linked to a persistent narrative of mission rooted in imperial and Tsarist legacies, which continues to inform Russian foreign policy thinking. The idea of Russia as a *velikaya derzhava* has long been tied to its control over a vast multi-ethnic space. After 1991, that identity no longer rested on the same material foundations, but it did not disappear either. It became more anxious. Throughout the 1990s, Russian elites returned to the language of great power status and international respect. Hopf (2002) and Neumann (1996) show how deeply the search for recognition has shaped post-Soviet Russian identity debates. Even Yeltsin, despite his pro-Western orientation, reacted sharply to NATO's intervention in Yugoslavia because it suggested that Russia could be ignored. Material weakness makes the problem harder to bear. Russia still imagined itself as a great power, but it lacked the capacity to make others treat it that way consistently.

Ontological security theory helps explain why routine mattered so much. One routine was acting as the central power in the post-Soviet neighbourhood: brokering conflicts, maintaining peacekeeping roles, shaping integration projects, and treating the region as a space where Russia could still confirm its status. Another was the narrative of Russia as a victorious power and guardian of a distinct civilisation. Under Putin, these themes have intensified. Soviet symbols returned, the Second World War became even more central to political identity, and the collapse of the USSR was framed less as the end of communism than as a geopolitical and civilisational wound. Putin's claim that millions of Russians found themselves outside Russia after 1991 gave that wound a territorial and emotional form (Putin, 2021). This is where Ukraine became central. Ukraine was not only a strategic buffer. It

occupies a special place in Russian historical imagination: the cradle of Rus', a "brotherly nation," and a crucial part of both imperial and Soviet narratives. Ukraine's movement toward Western institutions therefore appeared in Moscow not only as a geopolitical loss, but also as a disruption of Russia's story about itself. If Ukraine could be fully sovereign, European, and separate from Russia, the idea of a unified "Russian world" became harder to sustain. Tsygankov (2016) and Feklyunina (2016) show how Ukraine's pro-Western turn challenged Russian identity narratives, especially those built around shared culture, language, and historical belonging. Renshon's (2017) work on status dissatisfaction is also relevant here: states may act forcefully to repair perceived status deficits, even when the material consequences are damaging to themselves.

Russia's search for ontological security has also produced routines of imperial nostalgia. One was the repeated assertion of a sphere of influence, as discussed earlier. Another was confrontation with the West. Even during periods of cooperation, Moscow preserved the idea of Russia as a distinct pole, different from and often opposed to Western liberalism. States define and represent threats in ways that simultaneously shape their own identities and self-understandings (Campbell, 1998). In Russia's case, NATO expansion, Western interventionism, and alleged plots against Russia became part of a story in which Russia was not simply defending its interests, but defending its historical role. Curanović and Szymański (2022) show how former imperial powers rely on mission narratives to cope with ontological insecurity. Russia's mission has appeared in different forms — protecting Orthodox Christians, defending traditional values, leading Eurasian integration, resisting fascism or Western decadence — but the underlying function is similar. It tells Russia that it still has a purpose.

Zarakol's work on stigma and loss also helps to explain this pattern (2010, 2017). Formerly dominant powers often respond to a diminished status by clinging to past glory or seeking recognition through assertive behaviour. In Russia, imperial nostalgia softened the disruption of 1991

by suggesting that the decline was temporary and that historical greatness could be restored. The revival of Soviet symbols, the rehabilitation of imperial language, the idea of Novorossiya, and Putin's essays on the "historical unity" of Russians and Ukrainians all worked in this direction. They made expansion or domination appear not as aggression, but as restoration.

These dynamics help explain the decision to launch a full-scale invasion and the determination to continue it despite enormous costs. A purely rational-strategic calculus struggles to account for the scale of risk. Russia was not directly attacked, and the invasion produced outcomes that worsened its security position: NATO reinforcement, Finland and Sweden's joining NATO, sanctions, isolation, and long-term military strain. But if Ukraine's departure from Russia's orbit was understood as an unbearable rupture in Russia's self-narrative, then war could appear as a way to prevent identity loss. Hansen (2006) shows how issues tied to identity can become securitised, making extraordinary measures appear necessary. Putin's rhetoric did exactly this. Ukraine's Western orientation was framed not simply as a policy problem, but as an existential threat to the "Russian world" and to Russia's status as the core of a historical civilisation.

Ontological security theory also helps explain why conflict itself stabilises the regime's identity. A peaceful acceptance of Ukraine's westward movement would have left the Kremlin with a difficult question: if Russia could not keep Ukraine close, what kind of great power was it? War gave a different answer. It restored familiar routines: Russia as a besieged fortress, Russia against the West, Russia continuing the struggle of 1941 in another form. This logic fits Mitzen's (2006) argument that states can become attached to conflict because it provides continuity. Even after the war became costly, the Kremlin doubled down on narrative. It annexed Ukrainian regions on paper, staged rituals of victory, and saturated public discourse with references to the Great Patriotic War. Admitting a strategic error would threaten the story itself.

Ontological security also matters for Russia's neighbours. Ukraine's resistance is not only territorial. It is also about identity. Since 1991, and especially after 2014, Ukraine has built a civic and European self-understanding defined partly against the role of Russia's "little brother." Maidan was an ontological moment in this sense: a claim about who Ukraine was and who it refused to be. Russia's invasion threatened not only borders, but that self-understanding. Capitulation would have meant more than military defeat; for many Ukrainians it would have meant identity erasure. This helps to explain the depth of the resistance.

Other post-Soviet states have their own versions of this problem. The Baltic states have long tied their security and identity to never again falling under Moscow's control. Georgia and Moldova have also defined parts of their post-Soviet identity by struggling to escape Russian pressure. Armenia's case is different, but the collapse of trust in Russian protection after 2022 also forced a rethinking of dependence and identity. The war therefore intensified not only Russia's ontological insecurity, but also the sovereign identity projects of its neighbours.

Meanwhile, Russia's own ontological pressure has grown. If the war does not produce a clear victory, the Kremlin faces a deeper problem: the narrative of restoration cannot easily survive visible failure. This is why official discourse has become increasingly civilisational. The war is presented not as a limited territorial conflict, but as Russia's struggle against Western decadence and for a different world order. By enlarging the story, the regime tries to protect itself from the meaning of the battlefield setbacks. Russia must remain the civilisation standing against the West, even when its influence in its own neighbourhood is weakening.

The ontological security perspective therefore reveals that Russia's erosion of regional influence cannot be separated from questions of identity and recognition. The war can be read as an attempt to repair an unresolved post-imperial identity crisis: Russia could not reconcile its self-image as a great power with the autonomy and westward

choices of its neighbours. Yet the action taken to resolve that anxiety produced the opposite result. It isolated Russia, alienated neighbours, strengthened Ukrainian identity, and made Russia's claim to respected great-power status harder to sustain.

Curanović and Szymański's (2022) comparison of Russia and Britain is useful here. Both rely on mythologised post-imperial missions, but Britain largely transformed its imperial memory into a global role within alliances, while Russia tried to resurrect elements of the empire in its neighbourhood (Curanović & Szymański, 2022). This strategy ignores the agency and identity of others. The result is greater ontological insecurity, not less. Russia has not restored wholeness. It has made fragmentation more visible.

This perspective returns to the central paradox of the monograph from another angle. Russia used war to defend a story about itself, but the war weakened the conditions under which that story could be believed outside Russia. Domestically, the Kremlin may cling more tightly to a great-power narrative. Regionally, however, that narrative has become more contested. As long as Russia's need for recognition collides with its neighbours' need for sovereign identity, relations in the post-Soviet space will remain unstable. The next section on post-imperial approaches extends this problem by placing Russia's behaviour within the longer history of imperial collapse and its aftermath.

Post-Imperial Approaches and the Post-Soviet Region

Russia's war on Ukraine and the ensuing loss of regional influence can be analysed as part of a broader historical process of imperial decline and attempted restoration. Post-imperial approaches ask how former empires adjust, or fail to adjust, after losing territory, authority, and status. They also ask how newly independent states define themselves in relation to the former imperial centre, and whether old patterns of informal empire continue after formal independence. In Russia's case, these questions are central. The Soviet Union was arguably the last great land empire, and its dissolution in 1991 produced fifteen new

states. Unlike overseas decolonisation, however, the Soviet/Russian imperial collapse happened in place. The imperial core and the former peripheries remained geographically contiguous, historically intertwined, and emotionally difficult to separate. This blurred the line between metropole and colony, especially in cases such as Ukraine, which was at once central to Soviet history and often treated as subordinate in Russian historical memory. Imperial nostalgia, grievance, and yearning for lost status therefore became powerful forces in post-Soviet Russian politics (Curanović & Szymański, 2022).

Pain's (2016) concept of "imperial syndrome" is useful here. It describes a condition in which a former imperial power cannot fully reconcile itself to the new reality and continues to behave as if the empire, or some modified version of it, should still exist. Russian political discourse repeatedly reflected this syndrome. The language of the "near abroad," the privileging of Russian diasporas, and the claim that Russia has a right or duty to lead in Eurasia all point to an imperial mindset. Tsygankov (2016) notes that Russia tends to treat the post-Soviet space as a sphere of privileged interests, even while formally recognising the sovereignty of neighbouring states. This overlaps with broader interpretations of the region as part of a "Russian world" (Suslov, 2018; Laruelle, 2018). The problem is the ambivalence itself: neighbours are recognised as states, but often imagined as wayward parts of a wider historical space. That tension has repeatedly undermined trust. Busygina and Filippov (2021; 2021a) similarly argue that many Russian-led integration projects, including the EAEU, struggled because Moscow's hegemonic habits clashed with the sovereign equality expected by its partners.

After 1991, competing expectations emerged about the post-Soviet region. One view expected pluralism: each republic would consolidate sovereignty and build relations with others through voluntary association. Another expected neo-imperial restoration: Russia would try to rebuild influence, not necessarily through formal annexation, but through military presence, economic dependence, political pressure,

and regional institutions. The 1990s initially looked more plural, partly because Russia was weak and preoccupied with internal crisis. By the 2000s, however, under Putin, the neo-imperial direction became clearer. Structures such as the CSTO, the EAEU, and the Union State with Belarus were not only mechanisms of cooperation. They also worked to bind neighbours to Moscow and preserve Russia's centrality.

Kevork Oskanian (2018) captures this posture as hybrid. Russia claimed to defend Westphalian sovereignty, partly as a reaction to its own experience of collapse and Western interventionism, while at the same time acting as though the post-Soviet region was an exceptional space where ordinary rules did not fully apply. This ambiguity allowed Moscow to justify intervention through both security arguments and civilisational language. It presented itself as a post-imperial power, but often behaved as if much of the former empire was still part of its domestic historical realm.

The 2022 invasion marked the point at which this ambiguity gave way to open neo-imperial aggression. Putin's rhetoric became explicitly restorative, denying Ukraine's full statehood and suggesting that older imperial geography should be reasserted by force. This recalls the pattern described by Kennedy (1988) and Florig (2010) as imperial overreach: the attempt of a declining or anxious power to reverse contraction by military means. Such attempts are dangerous precisely because former subjects are no longer passive. Once post-colonial national identities consolidate, efforts to restore domination tend to deepen resistance rather than reverse separation.

Ukraine demonstrates this clearly. Its national consciousness and will to remain separate from Russian domination developed after 1991 and intensified after 2014. Moscow misread this process. It assumed Ukraine would fragment, submit, or accept restoration of Russian authority. Instead, it encountered a society determined to assert its post-imperial independence. This miscalculation was not only strategic. It was imperial: a failure to recognise that the empire was gone, and

that those once treated as subjects had become political agents with their own will.

Comparison with Britain or France after the Second World War shows the peculiarity of the Russian case. Britain and France fought brutal colonial wars, including France in Algeria, but eventually relinquished direct control and channelled their influence through softer institutions such as the Commonwealth or Francophonie. They also had to downscale parts of their imperial self-image. Russia, by contrast, never had a clear moment of reckoning with its imperial past. The Soviet collapse was chaotic and was not widely narrated in Russia as decolonisation. Russian elites did not generally speak of 1991 as the liberation of colonised peoples, but as a loss of rightful territory, compatriots, and status. This difference mattered. It meant that Russian policy often aimed less at reconciliation than at restoration.

Scholars of Russian imperial history note that the Russian case also defies the simplest colonial models. Gerasimov et al. (2025) argue that the Russian Empire was not a European-style overseas empire, but a continent-spanning polity in which metropole and periphery were less clearly separated. Russians often imagined the imperial peripheries as integral to their own identity, not as distant territories to be eventually released. This helps explain why separation felt so unnatural to many in Russia and why post-imperial disentanglement remained incomplete.

On the other side, post-Soviet states have pursued their own state-building and nation-building projects, often aimed at reducing Russian influence. Ukraine's policies of Ukrainisation in education and state language (Carlà & Constantin, 2025), Kazakhstan's shift from Cyrillic to Latin script (Berdiqulov, 2024), and the revision of historical narratives in Central Asia are all ways of asserting a distinct identity outside the Russian imperial frame. Moscow often interprets such moves as artificial or anti-Russian. From the perspective of these states, however, they were defensive acts of sovereignty consolidation.

Obydenkova and Libman (2019) show that where Russia's grip was weaker, alternative alignments took root more easily, including projects

such as GUAM. The war in 2022 accelerated this tendency. Remaining vestiges of Russian-led integration came under pressure from revived national consciousness and from more open discussions of Russian rule as colonial. Rashidov et al. (2023) describe Central Asian intellectuals increasingly framing their post-Soviet trajectory as decolonisation and as a struggle to shed the imperial mindset left by Russian dominance. Once Russia is seen less as a brother or liberator and more as a coloniser, its moral claim to leadership weakens sharply.

The Ukraine war can therefore be read as a late imperial crisis. Comparisons with the Suez Crisis of 1956 are not exact, but they are suggestive. Suez exposed the limits of British imperial pretension; Ukraine exposed the limits of Russia's attempt to restore imperial control in a very different century and setting. The war has strengthened the regional resolve to avoid dependence on Moscow. Even relatively cautious or formerly Russia-oriented states, such as Armenia and Kazakhstan, have reassessed the risks of excessive reliance. Ukraine, if it survives as a sovereign state outside Moscow's control, will almost certainly be oriented away from Russia for generations. Other states will continue to seek alternative partners to avoid being trapped in Russia's shadow.

The war also exposes the fragility of neo-imperial institutions. The Eurasian Economic Union, Putin's flagship project for binding the region economically, has been shaken by sanctions, mistrust, and diverging interests. Kazakhstan declared that it would not help Russia evade sanctions (Reuters, 2023a). Armenia questioned the value of Russian protection. The CSTO, EAEU, and CIS did not disappear, but their limits became more visible. Busygina and Filippov (2021) had already argued that Russia's inability to treat partners as equals would weaken such projects. The events after 2022 confirmed much of that logic. Without trust, multilateral institutions remain shallow; Russia then falls back on bilateral pressure, but bilateral pressure is less effective when its overall influence is diminished.

This points toward more fragmented post-Soviet trajectories. Belarus remains under a tighter Russian grip, at least for now. Ukraine and Moldova have moved more clearly away from Moscow, while Georgia remains more contested. Armenia is rethinking dependence after the failure of Russian security guarantees. Azerbaijan and Central Asian states navigate between Russia, Turkey, China, the EU, and other partners with greater room for manoeuvre. The result is not a clean break everywhere. It is a more uneven loosening of Russia's post-imperial hold.

"The empire strikes back" captures something of the post-2022 moment (Dunn & Bobick, 2014). The empire, in terms of mindset, struck back violently in Ukraine. But the result was not restoration. It was a region more alert to the danger of imperial claims. Russia has long tried to become a "normal great power" while still holding on to special entitlements in its neighbourhood. The war forced that contradiction into the open. Whether Russia will eventually accept a post-imperial role remains uncertain, but the costs of refusing one have become much clearer.

The war has also pushed post-imperial and decolonial arguments from academic margins toward the centre of political debate. Suslov (2018) and Laruelle (2018) had already examined Eurasianism and the "Russian world" as ideological constructions with neo-imperial elements. After 2022, these frameworks gained wider relevance because policymakers, activists, and scholars across Eastern Europe and Eurasia increasingly spoke of Russian colonialism, imperial memory, and decolonisation. The vocabulary changed because the war made older questions unavoidable.

The post-imperial perspective therefore clarifies that this is not only a geopolitical conflict. It is part of a deeper historical process of imperial dissolution and resistance to restoration. The shockwaves of empire are still being felt more than thirty years after 1991. Russia's loss of regional influence does not mean the former empire has vanished in every practical sense. Troops, institutions, markets, and dependencies

remain. But the assumption that Moscow has a natural right to organise the region has been badly damaged.

Karatnycky (2023) asks how soon Russia can become a "normal" state rather than an empire. The events since February 2022 have sharpened this question. Russia may only be able to reconcile itself with a post-imperial future once it loses expectation of special authority over its neighbours. For those neighbours, the war has confirmed that sovereignty was not merely legal rhetoric after 1991, but a historical project still being defended. The process is uneven, violent, and incomplete, but the direction is difficult to miss.

Empires seldom die quietly. Russia's certainly has not. Yet the war has shown that trying to reverse imperial decline by force can accelerate the very outcome one fears. A war intended to reassert Russia's historical authority has instead strengthened the resolve of neighbouring states to move beyond it. The former empire's grasp has not disappeared everywhere, but it has become more contested, more costly, and far less secure.

Regional Order and International Society

The English School offers a way to read the post-Soviet region not only as a space of power, but as a space of rules, expectations, and contested order. International society, in this tradition, refers to a set of shared norms, institutions, and practices through which states recognise limits on their behaviour, even under anarchy. Bull (1977) identified diplomacy, international law, great-power management, balance of power, and war as institutions through which order is maintained among states. Regions can also develop their own international societies, with denser local rules and expectations than the global baseline (Stivachtis, 2015).

The post-Soviet region was always a complicated case of this kind. After 1991, a Eurasian regional order emerged around Russia's continued predominance, but it was never fully coherent. It rested on

several principles at once: formal sovereignty, territorial integrity, non-interference, inherited Soviet institutional links, and Russia's informal claim to act as a regional arbiter. Moscow mediated conflicts, preserved its influence through the CIS, later through the CSTO and EAEU, and presented itself as the manager of regional security. Yet this order was never simply accepted. It was held together by habit, hierarchy, institutional residue, and the fact that many states had limited alternatives.

Troitskiy and Hampson (2017) describe this post-Soviet arrangement as an "awkward equilibrium." That phrase captures the problem well. It was not a concert of equal powers, nor a cohesive society based on shared values. It was also not a pure domination. It functioned somewhere in between: Russia claimed the role of manager, its neighbours adjusted to that claim to different degrees, and outside powers often moved cautiously around it. In the 1990s, the West largely deferred to Russia in Central Asia and the Caucasus. China also initially treated Central Asia with caution, even while building bilateral economic ties. The order existed, but its foundations were already uneven.

Shared norms are central to any international society. In the Eurasian context, the key formal norms were sovereignty, territorial integrity, and non-interference. These were affirmed after 1991, including through the Alma-Ata framework that recognised the borders of the former Soviet republics. The difficulty was that Russia accepted these principles rhetorically while often treating them as conditional in practice. Frozen conflicts, peacekeeping missions, military bases, passportisation, and economic pressure all created a hierarchy beneath the language of sovereign equality.

Before 2022, Eastern Europe was increasingly shaped by two overlapping regional orders. One was Russia-centred: formally committed to sovereignty, but marked by Moscow's expectation of special rights. The other was Euro-Atlantic: centred on NATO, the EU, liberal institutions, and the idea that states could choose their own

alignments. Ukraine, Georgia, and Moldova stood most visibly between these two orders. The English School helps explain why this mattered. International societies expand not only through power, but also through norms and institutions. Watson (1984) and Bull (1984) treated the expansion of European international society as a historical process through which rules of diplomacy, sovereignty, and law spread beyond their original setting. After the Cold War, NATO and EU enlargement extended Euro-Atlantic norms deeper into Eastern Europe. Russia read this as encroachment. Many neighbouring states read it as exit.

The Ukraine crisis after 2014, and especially the full-scale invasion in 2022, exposed the collision between these orders. Christakis (2015) framed the earlier Ukraine crisis as a clash of norms: territorial integrity versus self-determination, non-interference versus claims of protection. Russia invoked protection of Russian speakers, historical rights, and civilisational belonging. Ukraine and its supporters invoked sovereignty, borders, and the right to choose alignment. By 2022, the ambiguity narrowed. Russia's invasion violated the very principles that had formally underpinned the post-Soviet order: territorial integrity, sovereign equality, and non-aggression.

From an English School perspective, this breach was deeply destabilising. A regional order cannot survive only on force; it also needs some shared understanding of legitimate conduct. When the dominant regional power breaks the rules it had itself formally accepted, it undermines the trust on which that order depends. Russia's action therefore did not simply challenge Ukraine. It damaged the normative basis of the wider regional society.

The reactions of other states were revealing. Even governments that avoided openly condemning Moscow rarely accepted its territorial claims. Many invoked international law, the UN Charter, sovereignty, and territorial integrity. This shows that the basic norms of the global international society had real weight even in Russia's neighbourhood. The region did not simply accept Moscow's claim that history or

security gave it special rights over Ukraine. Russia's attempt to impose an exceptional regional logic instead pushed many states back toward more general principles of sovereign equality.

Bull (1977) argued that great powers have special responsibilities in international society. They help manage relations, prevent major wars, and uphold order at least to some degree. Russia increasingly moved in the opposite direction. It shifted from claiming to be the guarantor of regional order to becoming a revisionist power challenging that order. In English School terms, Moscow stopped acting like a great power managing a society and began acting like a power trying to rewrite the rules of that society by force.

The distinction between pluralist and solidarist international society also matters here. The post-Soviet order had long been more pluralist: it tolerated regime diversity, prioritised stability, and treated sovereignty as a formal principle even when hierarchy shaped practice. The war disrupted that arrangement. By violating basic pluralist norms — borders, non-aggression, coexistence — Russia made stronger solidarist reactions more likely. NATO expanded. The EU moved closer to Ukraine and Moldova. Western support for Ukraine became framed not only as strategic assistance, but as defence of a basic rule: that borders cannot be changed by force.

The English School's tension between order and justice is also useful. For years, parts of the post-Soviet order preserved stability by freezing conflicts, tolerating authoritarian allies, and avoiding direct confrontation with Russian hierarchy. That was order, but not necessarily justice. The invasion of Ukraine made the trade-off harder to sustain. Questions of aggression, occupation, self-defence, and national survival came to the front. Ukraine's resistance was not only a defence of territory; it was also a claim to equal standing in international society. Russia's effort to preserve order on hierarchical terms ended by making that order morally and politically harder to defend.

Regional institutions reflected this crisis. Before the war, the CSTO, EAEU, CIS, and SCO could be read as parts of a loose Eurasian

institutional environment, with Russia central in some and Russia-China coexistence visible in others. After 2022, these institutions did not disappear, but their meaning changed. The CSTO's failure to answer Armenia's security concerns in 2022 and 2023 damaged its credibility. The EAEU continued to function, but sanctions, parallel trade, and divergent interests made it less a sign of shared order than of pragmatic adjustment. The SCO remained useful to Russia as a diplomatic platform, but even there Moscow could not count on unqualified support. At the 2022 Samarkand summit, Putin acknowledged that China and India had "questions and concerns" about the war. That was a small phrase, but it showed that Russia's narrative was not dominant even inside forums it valued.

Still, the old order has not simply collapsed into chaos. A rudimentary form of great-power caution remains. NATO has armed Ukraine but avoided direct military confrontation with Russia. China has benefited from Russia's weakness in Central Asia, but has not openly displaced Moscow as a military-security manager. Other actors have expanded their role while calibrating their moves around escalation risks. In that sense, some form of order persists — but it is thinner, more cautious, and based less on shared norms than on deterrence and risk management.

What has largely broken down are the older channels of East-West regional management. The NATO-Russia Council and many OSCE-centred formats lost much of their practical meaning. Diplomacy became less about common order and more about deconfliction, sanctions, deterrence, and crisis control. Russia's vision of Eurasian order — built around great-power bargains and exclusive spheres — collided directly with the Western and increasingly regional insistence on sovereign choice. The war made the incompatibility harder to disguise.

By violating the core norms of the regional order, Russia weakened its own claim to be that order's guarantor. Moscow became less a manager of Eurasian stability than a source of disruption. The response of many neighbouring states was to lean more heavily on global rules and broader institutions. Ukraine, Moldova, and Georgia deepened their

EU trajectories. Finland and Sweden joined NATO. Even states that remained cautious around Moscow used the language of sovereignty and territorial integrity to mark distance from Russia's claims. In effect, the more Russia tried to impose a closed regional sphere, the more its neighbours looked for protection in wider international society.

This represents a real reordering, but not a neat one. Eastern Europe is moving more clearly toward the Euro-Atlantic institutional space. Russia and Belarus stand increasingly apart. The South Caucasus and Central Asia are becoming more plural, with Turkey, China, the EU, and local actors all playing larger roles. Busygina and Filippov (2021) capture part of this outcome: Russia's attempt to impose a nineteenth-century sphere contradicted the twenty-first-century norm of sovereign equality and helped produce the bloc politics it claimed to oppose.

From a regional order standpoint, new alignments are already visible. Russian-led institutions have weakened, while alternative frameworks have gained importance: the Ukraine-Moldova-Georgia track toward European integration, the Turkic Council's links across Central Asia and Turkey, and greater involvement of broader institutions in conflicts once treated as Moscow's domain. Even within residual Russia-centred bodies, members act more autonomously and use institutional spaces to protect their own interests rather than simply follow Moscow.

The English School perspective therefore adds another layer to the central paradox. Russia used force to defend a regional order built around its privileged role. But force damaged the norms, institutions, and shared expectations that made any such order possible. The post-Soviet regional society once centred on Moscow has not vanished completely, but it has become more fragmented and less deferential. The idea of a distinct Eurasian normative space led by Russia has weakened, while the more basic Westphalian claim — that each state, large or small, has sovereignty and cannot be coerced into another's sphere — has gained force. Russia tried to preserve order through violation. In doing so, it helped unravel the order it claimed to defend.

Discursive Power and Resistance

International politics is not only a struggle of armies, economies, and institutions. It is also a struggle over meaning. Discursive power refers to the ability to shape the terms through which political reality is understood: who is named as aggressor, who appears as victim, what counts as defence, and which histories are treated as legitimate. This idea, rooted in constructivist and post-structuralist thought, matters because language does not merely describe power after the fact. It helps organise it. A successful narrative can make coercion appear defensive, hierarchy appear natural, and domination appear like protection.

Campbell's *Writing Security* is useful here. Campbell (1998) argues that foreign policy is performative: states construct their own identity by naming dangerous "Others." During the Cold War, American discourse repeatedly produced the Soviet Union as the hostile Other against which the American self could be stabilised. Similar dynamics appear in the Russian case. Well before the invasion, the Kremlin had built a narrative in which Ukraine was not a fully sovereign nation, but an errant part of the Russian world; the West was using Ukraine against Russia; and Moscow was forced to act in self-defence. Russia tried to construct a reality in which NATO was the aggressor, Kyiv was controlled by "Nazis," and the invasion was not a war but a "special military operation." That is the point of discursive power: if the frame is accepted, violence can be made to look like defence.

Neumann's work on Russian identity and the West deepens this point. In *Uses of the Other*, Neumann (1999) shows that Russian identity has long been formed through representations of "the West" — sometimes as model, sometimes as threat, but always as a reference point. Putin's Russia continued this pattern, defining itself as a distinct civilisation with a special mission and presenting the West as decadent, interventionist, and hostile. Curanović and Szymański (2022) show how this mission narrative became part of Russia's post-imperial search for status and recognition.

Hansen's (2006) approach to discourse and security also helps explain why Russia's language mattered politically. Once an actor is represented as fascist, terrorist, artificial, or existentially threatening, extraordinary measures become easier to justify. Russia's labelling of the Kyiv government as a "Nazi" regime was therefore not accidental rhetoric. It drew on the memory of the Great Patriotic War and placed the invasion inside a morally familiar story: Russia once again fighting fascism. The claim was false, but its function was clear. It sought to delegitimise Ukraine and make Russian violence appear historically necessary.

Ukraine and its supporters answered with a different discursive frame. Ukraine was presented as a sovereign democracy resisting imperial aggression; Russia as the violator; Zelenskyy as the voice of national survival; and the war as a struggle for freedom, sovereignty, and the right of smaller states not to be absorbed by larger ones. This counter-narrative travelled quickly. It transformed Ukrainian resistance into a global political language and helped convert sympathy into sanctions, military support, reconstruction commitments, and diplomatic backing.

The clash between Russian and Ukrainian narratives also became an information war. Russia had long invested in RT, Sputnik, troll networks, disinformation campaigns, and covert influence operations to project preferred narratives and muddy the information environment. Before the invasion, Moscow circulated claims about "genocide" against Russian speakers, NATO plots, secret laboratories, and Western control over Kyiv. The aim was to make Russian action appear reactive rather than aggressive. Outside Russia, however, much of this failed. Satellite images, destroyed cities, testimonies, battlefield footage, and open-source investigations made the gap between Russian claims and visible reality difficult to sustain.

Russia's discursive power proved much stronger at home than abroad. Inside Russia, state television, censorship, and repression narrowed the space for competing narratives. Outside Russia, the Kremlin faced a more open and hostile information environment. Horncastle (2024) notes that in hybrid media systems, state narratives can be rapidly

countered by non-state actors in cyberspace, making monopoly over truth much harder to sustain. Ukraine used this environment effectively. Officials, journalists, soldiers, and citizens turned Telegram, Twitter/X, video footage, memes, and open-source intelligence into instruments of narrative resistance. The phrase "Russian warship, go f*** yourself" became more than a slogan. It condensed Ukraine's message: refusal, dignity, and resistance against a larger aggressor (Politico, 2024).

Discursive resistance also moved beyond immediate wartime communication. Across the post-Soviet region, the war strengthened efforts to retell history outside the Russian imperial frame. In Ukraine, this built on an already established tendency to treat the Holodomor as genocide and as a central element of national memory (Kasianov, 2021), a memory that became even more politically salient in the context of the war and competing historical narratives (Makhortykh et al., 2022; Westin, 2024). In the Baltic states, Soviet rule was again foregrounded as occupation and repression (Ekmanis, 2024). Recent scholarship has also framed Central Asia and the Caucasus as spaces shaped by Tsarist and Soviet colonial exploitation (Göksel & Hüseynova, 2024). These debates are not only academic. They weaken the older Russian narrative of Moscow as benevolent unifier of Eurasia.

Public space became part of the same struggle. Statues of Russian imperial figures, Soviet generals, and cultural symbols linked to imperial memory were removed or contested in places from Ukraine to the Baltics and beyond. These acts are discursive in material form. They decide whose memory occupies the square, whose suffering is recognised, and whose version of history is allowed to stand in public. By changing monuments, street names, school curricula, and commemorative practices, post-Soviet societies also change the symbolic conditions under which Russian influence operates.

Another form of resistance was refusal to adopt Moscow's vocabulary. Russia called the war a "special military operation." Most of the world did not. Even states that avoided harsh condemnation rarely embraced

the Kremlin's language in full. This refusal mattered. Strategic narrative theory suggests that a state's justificatory framing succeeds only when it resonates with wider normative commitments (Miskimmon et al., 2013). In the case of Ukraine, Russia's "anti-fascist" framing gained limited traction beyond domestic audiences and a narrow circle of aligned actors. Even in parts of the Global South where criticism of Western double standards remained strong, discussion of the war often continued to rely on sovereignty and territorial integrity (Verma, 2024). Moscow could complicate the debate, but it could not fully impose its terms.

Inside Russia, the picture was different. The Kremlin's discursive control became much tighter after 2022. Independent media were silenced or pushed into exile, dissent was criminalised, and official language disciplined public understanding of the war. Terms such as "denazification," "liberation," and "special military operation" structured the domestic narrative. This created a sharp split between Russia's internal discourse and the narratives dominant in Ukraine, Europe, and much of the wider international arena. Steele (2008) and Subotić (2016) show how states cling to autobiographical narratives for ontological security. Russia's current autobiographical narrative — besieged fortress, historical victim, civilisational defender — may still function domestically, but it is increasingly rejected outside Russia.

Discursive power is also about framing the future. Competing narratives shape whether Russia will be treated as a legitimate interlocutor or as an aggressor; whether Ukraine will be seen as a European democracy deserving reconstruction and security guarantees; and whether sanctions and diplomatic isolation can be sustained. Ukraine's discourse of defending Europe helped mobilise EU and NATO support. Russia's nuclear rhetoric, however, shows that Moscow's narrative power did not disappear entirely. Threats of escalation created a darker form of discursive coercion. Even when Western governments rejected Russia's justification for the war, they took its nuclear language seriously. Giles (2023) and Mills (2024b) show

how such threats shaped escalation management and constrained some Western options. As Forrester and Ramsden (2000) argue in another context, threatening language can itself become a weapon.

Culture and sport also became arenas of discursive contestation. Russia had long used ballet, literature, classical music, Olympic success, and major sporting events to sustain an image of civilisational prestige. After 2022, that image became harder to separate from war. Russian athletes were banned from many competitions, and cultural institutions distanced themselves from performers closely associated with the Kremlin. This did not erase Russian culture, but it changed the frame in which it was discussed. Many began to reassess Russian cultural prestige in relation to imperial ideology and nation-building (Kneper, 2020; Posokhin, 2023). Ukraine, meanwhile, used culture to strengthen its own narrative. Kalush Orchestra's Eurovision victory in 2022 became a symbolic affirmation of Ukraine's place in Europe during wartime.

The broader contrast was between open and closed information systems. Ukraine, despite wartime restrictions, operated within a more plural media environment involving journalists, civic activists, international media, open-source investigators, and digital publics. Russia relied on a sealed and authoritarian discursive order. Such systems can impose language for a time, but they become brittle when official narratives diverge too sharply from lived experience. Criticism from nationalist bloggers, public frustration over mobilisation, and anger over battlefield failures showed that even controlled discourse is not fully stable. Reality keeps pressing against it.

The Russia-Ukraine war therefore shows that narrative control is a form of power, and that failed narrative control can hasten the erosion of influence. Ukraine's ability to tell its story helped generate material support. Russia's attempts to promote its narrative abroad were widely challenged, contributing to diplomatic isolation, sanctions, and distrust. Klaas (2022) suggests that Russian propaganda remains strongest inside Russia's domestic information space, while often diverging sharply

from international perceptions. Beyond that space, Moscow's narratives met scepticism, rejection, or counter-narratives stronger than its own.

For the post-Soviet region, this matters deeply. Russian influence had long depended not only on troops, markets, pipelines, and institutions, but on stories: shared victory, shared civilisation, common history, Russian protection, Russian centrality. The war damaged those stories. It gave neighbouring states new reasons to tell their own histories differently, to call Russia an aggressor or coloniser, and to frame sovereignty as resistance to domination. The post-Soviet states have learned that voice is itself a form of power. By crafting new national narratives and challenging imperial myths, they weaken the ideological foundations of Moscow's influence.

The discursive perspective therefore returns to the same paradox. Russia tried to impose a story that would justify restored dominance. Instead, the war made that story less credible outside Russia and strengthened rival narratives of sovereignty, decolonisation, and resistance. Moscow still controls much of the story at home. But across the region it sought to dominate, its words carry less authority than before.

Integrated Analytical Framework

Taken together, these perspectives show why Russia's war on Ukraine weakened the influence it was meant to restore. Each lens isolates a different mechanism, but they point toward the same reversal. Russia tried to recover authority through force. Instead, it exposed the limits of the power, legitimacy, identity, institutions, and narratives on which that authority had rested.

From a realist perspective, the war revealed a shift in the balance of power. What was meant to be a demonstration of Russian strength became evidence of military strain, economic vulnerability, and strategic overextension. Neighbours adjusted accordingly. Once Russian hard power appeared less overwhelming and more costly to follow, states such as Kazakhstan, Uzbekistan, and Armenia had

stronger incentives to diversify their ties, avoid automatic alignment, and seek room beyond Moscow's reach (Davidzon & Peters, 2025; Busygina & Filippov, 2021). In realist terms, Russia did not lose all its power, but it lost part of the fear and credibility that had made others accommodate it in advance.

The hegemonic stability perspective adds another layer. Russia had long presented itself as the organiser of post-Soviet order: provider of security, mediator of conflicts, sponsor of integration, and guarantor of stability. Yet a hegemon must offer more than pressure. It must provide order that others see as useful or at least tolerable (Webb & Krasner, 1989). The war did the opposite. It brought insecurity into the very region Russia claimed to manage. The CSTO's paralysis, the EAEU's strains, and the caution of Russia's own partners all showed that Moscow's institutions were thinner than they had appeared (Busygina & Filippov, 2021). The old bargain — deference in exchange for order — became harder to defend.

Soft power and legitimacy reveal the same decline in a different register. Russia had once drawn on language, culture, memory, media, labour migration, and the idea of shared history. Those resources did not disappear, but the war made them harder to convert into attraction. A state that destroys Ukrainian cities cannot easily present itself as protector of Slavic brotherhood or regional stability. Rutland and Kazantsev (2016) were right to warn that Russia's approach to soft power was already weakened by its reliance on propaganda and coercive influence. After 2022, that weakness became more visible. Russia could still compel, but it became much less able to attract.

Ontological security helps explain why Moscow took such a costly path. The war was not only a calculation about territory or NATO. It was also tied to Russia's unsettled post-imperial identity and its need to preserve the image of itself as a great power with a privileged role over Ukraine (Curanović & Szymański, 2022). But the attempt to repair that identity through war produced the opposite effect. Ukraine's national identity consolidated, neighbouring states became

more alert to Russian domination, and the "Russian world" became less a source of attachment than a warning. Russia sought recognition; it deepened alienation.

The post-imperial perspective places this reversal in a longer historical frame. Since 1991, the former Soviet republics have been engaged in uneven processes of state-building, decolonisation, and distancing from the imperial centre. The war accelerated that process. Russia's attempt to reassert imperial authority confirmed the fears of those who had long argued that Moscow had not accepted the sovereignty of its neighbours. Rather than restoring the former imperial space, the invasion strengthened the resolve of many states to move beyond it. The old post-Soviet sphere did not vanish everywhere, but it became more contested and less natural.

The English School perspective shows that the shift is also normative. Russia violated the very principles that had formally underpinned the post-Soviet order: sovereignty, territorial integrity, and non-aggression. Even states unwilling to condemn Moscow directly often avoided endorsing its claims. This mattered because regional order depends not only on power, but on shared expectations about legitimate conduct. Once Russia broke those rules so openly, its claim to be the guarantor of order weakened. In English School terms, Moscow lost much of the consent required to sustain regional society.

Finally, discursive power shows how the language of the region changed. Russia tried to impose a story of defence, historical unity, anti-fascism, and Western aggression. Outside Russia, that story largely failed. Ukraine and other post-Soviet states advanced rival narratives of sovereignty, resistance, decolonisation, and imperial violence. The vocabulary shifted: Russian "peacekeeping" increasingly appeared as occupation; "integration" as dependence; "protection" as threat. This discursive change matters because influence depends partly on the ability to make one's role sound legitimate. Russia's words now carry less authority in many parts of the region it sought to dominate.

The theories therefore do not simply sit side by side. They converge. Realism shows the weakening of coercive credibility. Hegemonic stability theory shows the collapse of order-provision. Soft power shows the loss of attraction. Ontological security explains the identity anxiety behind the gamble. Post-imperial theory situates the war within the unfinished dissolution of empire. The English School shows the normative breach. Discursive analysis shows the loss of narrative control.

Together, they make the central paradox clearer. Russia launched the war to stop decline, but the war accelerated decline across several dimensions at once. It weakened fear, trust, legitimacy, institutional loyalty, identity attachment, and narrative authority. Rebuilding influence would require Russia not only to recover military capacity, but also to regain trust, accept its neighbours' sovereignty, develop genuine attraction, and offer a story of regional order that others can believe. Under the current political and strategic trajectory, that appears unlikely.

The war's deepest irony is therefore not only that Russia failed to restore control over Ukraine. It is that the attempt itself demystified Russian power. It made Moscow look less like the natural centre of Eurasia and more like a state struggling to hold together a regional hierarchy whose foundations had already begun to erode. The different theoretical approaches used here help show the scale of that reversal: a war launched to preserve dominance has made Russia's dominance more contested, more costly, and far less secure.

Literature Review

Russia's place in the post-Soviet region has long divided scholars of international relations. Some described Moscow as a resurgent regional hegemon rebuilding influence after the disorder of the 1990s. Others argued that Russian power rested on shakier foundations than it appeared, constrained by economic limits, weak legitimacy, and the growing ability of neighbouring states to seek alternatives.

Stent (2019), for example, identifies several "pillars" of Putin's foreign policy, including the belief that Russia is entitled to a privileged sphere of interests around its borders and that neighbouring states are not fully sovereign in their strategic choices. Bobo Lo (2024) similarly presents Russia as a power shaped by disorder in the international system and by the conviction that it "was, is and always will be a great power." From this perspective, the wars in Georgia and Ukraine, as well as Russia's intervention in Syria, were not isolated episodes. They were attempts to preserve great-power standing and prevent further erosion of regional primacy.

Yet even before 2022, Russia's dominance in Eurasia was not absolute. China's economic rise, the European Union's normative pull, and the growing agency of post-Soviet states created alternatives that Moscow could not fully control. Acharya's (2014) idea of a "multiplex world order" captured this broader shift toward multiple centres of power and overlapping regional arrangements. Cooley and Nexon (2020) likewise argued that hegemonic orders weaken not only because rivals rise, but because smaller states gain opportunities to hedge, diversify, and partially exit dependence.

The annexation of Crimea in 2014 sharpened the debate. Was it a successful reassertion of Russian hegemony, or did it plant the seeds of long-term decline by galvanising resistance? By 2021–2022, the disagreement had become clearer. One view held that force could restore influence through fear and fait accompli. Another argued that overt aggression would backfire, weakening legitimacy and pushing neighbours away. Early post-2022 assessments increasingly pointed toward the latter outcome: Russia's influence in the neighbourhood was waning, though unevenly and with important variations across cases (Melin et al., 2023; Rumer, 2023). The literature therefore already contained the central tension this monograph addresses. Russia was often analysed as an assertive neo-imperial power, but also as a power whose regional authority was more fragile than it seemed. The 2022 full-scale invasion turned that tension into a critical test. The question is no

longer only how Russia exercised influence, but how a war meant to restore that influence ended up exposing the mechanisms of its erosion.

Russian Foreign Policy and the Post-Soviet Regional Order

Prior to 2022, a rich body of work looked at how Russia exercised power in the post-Soviet region. Much of it describes Moscow's approach as a mix of pragmatic policy and a sense of historical entitlement, aimed at keeping neighbouring states within its orbit. Angela Stent (2019) argues that since Putin came to power, Russia has tried to reassert control over its near abroad and to treat it as a buffer against NATO and EU expansion. In practice, this took several forms. Russia pushed regional integration projects and built security ties. It also relied on different kinds of influence. The Collective Security Treaty Organisation (CSTO) and the Eurasian Economic Union (EAEU) were central here, giving Moscow a leading role in security and economic cooperation (Stent, 2019). These arrangements offered clear benefits, like trade or defence cooperation, but they also expected political alignment in return. At the same time, Russia did not rely on institutions alone. It kept military bases and "peacekeepers" in a number of neighbouring states. When needed, it used force. The wars in Georgia (2008) and Ukraine (2014) are the clearest examples. From Moscow's point of view, this was about stopping further Western expansion into the region (Stent, 2019). Taken together, this suggests a fairly consistent position. Russia treats the post-Soviet space as a privileged sphere. In practice, that limits how far countries like Ukraine or Georgia can go in choosing their alliances. The underlying idea is simple: without influence in this region, Russia's claim to great power status becomes much harder to sustain.

Other scholars have underscored the methods by which Russia projected influence short of outright war. One prominent theme is the use of so-called "soft" or normative power to cultivate allegiance. Makarychev and Yatsyk (2017) note that Russian policy in its neighbourhood is not just about territory or military power. It also has

to do with how people see themselves. The idea of the "Russian World" is part of this, along with language, religion, and practices such as passportisation in contested areas. These are ways of keeping a link with neighbouring societies beyond formal borders. This is not only about force. It also works through narratives and identity. Crimea in 2014 shows this quite clearly. The takeover involved the military, but it was presented as a return of historically Russian land. In that sense, force and narrative went together. Makarychev and Yatsyk describe this as a kind of neo-imperial policy, where Russia positions itself as both the protector of compatriots and regional hegemon. Similarly, Oskanian (2018) describes Russia's posture as a "very ambiguous empire" built on hybrid exceptionalism – Moscow insists on a special mission or uniqueness that justifies its dominance, even as it denies being an empire in the classical sense. This narrative casts Russia as a benevolent leader of an informal empire, obscuring the coercive underpinning of its influence. In practice, as Lukas Aubin (2024) observes, the Kremlin has employed an "arsenal of tools" – from controlled media and disinformation to economic levers like energy supplies – to sway politics in neighbouring states and undercut pro-Western forces. The net effect, according to these analyses, was a form of control without occupation in the post-Soviet region: Russia could often achieve its aims by shaping local elite decisions, freezing conflicts, and exploiting dependencies, all without formally recolonising states (Aubin, 2024).

However, scholarship also notes significant limits and evolution in Russia's regional strategy, especially after 2014. Lo (2024) presents Russia as a power whose ambitions often exceed its practical capabilities. He suggests that many of Moscow's larger projects remain constrained by limited resources and uneven external appeal. In this sense, ambitions to build a more integrated Eurasian political and economic space have remained largely aspirational. After Western sanctions and ostracism following Crimea's annexation, Russia pivoted to new partnerships – notably with China. Korosteleva and Paikin (2020)

note that Moscow launched a "Greater Eurasia" vision, aligning with Beijing's Belt and Road and courting powers like Turkey and Iran, in an attempt to bolster its influence via a multi-vector coalition. This was a pragmatic adaptation: having partially "lost" the contest for influence in parts of Europe (e.g. the Baltics and Ukraine post-2014), Russia sought to reinforce its role in Central Asia and the Middle East. Even so, this led to an *anxious Russia* rather than a confident one – the Kremlin was reacting to uncertain dynamics beyond its control (Korosteleva & Paikin, 2020). Meanwhile, some post-Soviet states began quietly hedging. For instance, Belarus (prior to its own 2020 crisis) intermittently resisted Russian pressure and flirted with the West, and Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan cultivated Chinese investment and refused to recognise Moscow's interventions in Georgia or Ukraine. Cooley and Nexon (2020) emphasise that even weaker states have agency to exit or dilute a hegemon's influence, especially if alternative patrons exist. This is evident most clearly in Ukraine's case: despite heavy dependence on Russia in the past, Ukrainian society's turn toward Europe (solidified by the 2013–14 Euromaidan) demonstrated the limits of Russia's soft power—even among a populace where it once had significant cultural sway. By the eve of the 2022 invasion, Ukraine was increasingly seen in Russian debates as moving outside Moscow's sphere of influence, a development many in the Kremlin found difficult to accept. Tsygankov (2023) shows that Russian analysts framed the situation in terms of deteriorating relations with both Ukraine and the West, and debated responses ranging from prolonged confrontation to negotiated settlement. At that point, the use of force followed. Rather than accepting Ukraine's shift, the Kremlin tried to pull it back. Yetim (2024) sees the invasion as an attempt to discipline Ukraine and send a warning to other post-Soviet states. It was also a response to Western influence. At the same time, it showed that earlier tools were no longer enough.

Literature on Russian foreign policy in the post-Soviet realm paints a picture of an aspiring hegemon employing diverse means—alliances, economic integration, cultural appeal, and raw coercion—to preserve

a sphere of influence. It reveals a strategic dualism: Russia has sought both to attract and to intimidate its neighbours into compliance. Yet, the scholarship also flags growing cracks in this strategy. Regional order was never as firmly Russian-led as the Kremlin envisioned; alternative powers and local nationalism constrained Moscow's reach. By 2022, the turn toward full-scale war suggested that earlier instruments of influence were no longer producing the outcomes Moscow expected. The question was no longer simply how Russia maintained influence, but why the attempt to restore it by force appeared to weaken it further.

Hegemony, Empire, and Legitimacy in International Relations

Russia's post-Soviet ambitions can also be read through broader IR theories of hegemony and empire. Gilpin (1981) is a useful starting point here. In *War and Change in World Politics*, he argues that international orders are created and sustained by dominant powers. Over time, however, this becomes harder. Costs rise, power shifts, and the system moves out of balance. That is the basic logic. From this perspective, Russia's 2022 invasion can be seen as an attempt to respond to a perceived loss of influence. The Kremlin itself framed the war in terms of reshaping Europe's "security architecture" on Russian terms, which suggests an effort to revise the post-Cold War order. At the same time, the outcome so far points in a different direction. Rather than restoring its position, the war has made Russia's weakened role in its neighbourhood more visible. But this leaves something out. Gilpin's framework is mostly about material power, and says less about legitimacy and consent. That is where Ikenberry comes in. In *After Victory*, Ikenberry (2001) shows that leading powers do not rely on coercion alone. After major wars, they tend to build institutions and rules that other states are willing to accept. This is how dominance becomes more stable over time.

Hegemony, in this sense, depends on both power and legitimacy. States follow not only because they are forced to, but because the order offers

something in return. Seen in this light, Russia's regional role looks more fragile. After the Soviet collapse, it struggled to build an order that others would view as legitimate. Unlike the United States, which tied its influence to institutions such as NATO or the Bretton Woods system, Russia's initiatives—like the CIS, CSTO, or EAEU—often looked one-sided. For many of its neighbours, these arrangements were less about cooperation and more about maintaining Russian dominance. As a result, Russia's influence rested more on inertia and pressure than on shared commitment. That worked for a time, but it also meant that the system had little depth. Once conditions began to change, it proved easier to challenge.

The concept of empire offers another lens. Empires traditionally rely on a hierarchy of authority and the ideational justification of that hierarchy. Oskanian's (2018) notion of Russia's "hybrid exceptionalism" can be seen in this light: it is a narrative strategy to legitimise an imperial-like hierarchy in the absence of formal empire. By casting itself as both a unique Eurasian civilisation and the heir of rightful great-power privileges, Moscow sought to justify special rights in its near abroad. But such exceptionalism has a limited audience. Morozov (2015) incisively calls Russia a "subaltern empire", meaning it carries imperial ambitions regionally while itself feeling subordinate in a Western-centric global order. This identity complex has driven Russia to simultaneously demand equality with top-tier powers (insisting, for example, on veto rights over European security arrangements) and dominance over smaller ex-Soviet states. The contradiction here is that to the West, Russia portrays itself as a victim of post-Cold War injustice, yet to its neighbours it often behaves as an aggressor or patronising metropole. This two-level legitimacy problem – seeking recognition from above while imposing authority below – has hindered Russia's hegemonic project. Neighbours do not necessarily share Russia's view of its own greatness or entitlement to lead. Cooley and Nexon (2020) introduce the idea of "exit from hegemony," arguing that contemporary hegemonic orders can unravel

not just from great power rivalry but from the defections and resistance of secondary states. They note that lesser powers and even non-state actors can exploit global connectivity to find new alignments, thereby chipping away at a hegemon's dominance. This framework aptly describes what has happened in Eurasia: countries like Azerbaijan and Kazakhstan have cultivated partnerships with Turkey, China, or Western firms, reducing their over-reliance on Russia (and in Baku's case, even militarily outperforming a Russian ally, Armenia, in 2020). Through such exits – partial and varied – the once unitary post-Soviet area has fragmented into a more plural region.

A related theoretical strand concerns legitimacy in hegemonic orders. Ikenberry's work (2001) again is instructive: he argues that liberal hegemonic orders endure because the leading power abides by rules and institutions that constrain its arbitrary exercise of power, reassuring others. By contrast, Russia's regional leadership has been seen as more coercive and transactional, lacking an attractive ideological or institutional framework. Joseph Nye's concept of "soft power" dovetails with this: a hegemon that can shape the preferences of others through attraction has far less need to use force or inducements (Nye, 2004). In practice, Russia has struggled to generate true soft power among most of its neighbours. Its state-controlled media and Russophone cultural outreach did create a shared information space in parts of the former USSR, and nostalgia for Soviet ties lingered among some older generations. But surveys have long shown that aside from Belarus (and to an extent Kazakhstan), many post-Soviet publics did not consistently "want what Russia wants." For example, even before 2014, most Ukrainians and Georgians favoured EU integration over joining Russian-led projects, reflecting the greater pull of Western soft power (democracy, prosperity) compared to what Russia was offering (authoritarian patronage, status quo economics). This gap between Russia's hard-power clout and soft-power deficit was noted by scholars like Lukyanov (2016) and Nye himself. The war in Ukraine has magnified it tremendously: Moscow's willingness to violate

international norms and inflict massive destruction has severely undermined its appeal and legitimacy. Even countries historically friendly to Russia are uneasy; as one analyst puts it, Russia has become a source of threat without attraction. Thus, Russia's regional hegemony lacked the consent, legitimacy, and moral authority that could have made it more stable (Oskanian, 2018). Instead, it relied on dominance that had to be continually enforced – a costly and ultimately self-defeating model once neighbours had alternatives.

Finally, Acharya's (2014) vision of a post-hegemonic multiplex order provides a macro-context. Acharya argues that the era of singular hegemons is fading; regions will see more diffused power and localised orders, rather than being neatly aligned under one superpower's umbrella. The post-Soviet region can be viewed as an example: rather than evolving into a coherent Russia-led bloc, it is increasingly a mosaic. Some states gravitate towards Europe, others towards China or Turkey, some remain loosely aligned with Russia, and many hedge in between. This pluralism means that Russia's imperial-style aspirations face structural headwinds. No longer can it count on a passive international environment – Western sanctions, Chinese inroads, and global normative backlash (e.g. "decolonising Russia" discourse) all counteract its influence. In short, theories of hegemony and empire suggest that without legitimacy, a hegemon's coercive dominance is brittle, and that the changing international system empowers smaller states to resist or escape a would-be regional hegemon. The literature reviewed here implies that Russia's failure to cultivate genuine consent, combined with the emergence of external competitors, set the stage for a dramatic weakening of its regional grip after 2022.

Theoretical perspectives on hegemony illuminate why Russia's regional dominance was vulnerable: durable hegemony requires legitimacy, institutionalisation, and willing followers, not just brute force. Russia's approach, rooted in hierarchy and exceptionalism but short on broadly accepted norms, lacked these stabilisers. Empire as an idiom of rule further underscores the importance of narrative and consent in

sustaining the hierarchy. The reviewed theories converge on a critical point: when a hegemon's legitimacy crumbles, coercion alone cannot hold an order together. Russia's war can thus be seen as both a symptom and an accelerator of hegemonic decay, aligning with IR expectations that overextension and illegitimacy spell an empire's undoing. This is where the next theme becomes important: Russia's influence did not depend only on power and institutions, but also on attraction, identity, and the ability to make its leadership appear legitimate.

Power, Soft Power, and Ontological Security

International Relations scholars distinguish between hard power – the ability to coerce through military or economic might – and soft power – the ability to co-opt and attract others to "want what you want" (Nye, 2004). Russia's case is useful here because it has traditionally wielded ample hard power in its neighbourhood but has struggled with soft power and, relatedly, with its own identity (ontological security) as a great power. Joseph Nye's seminal concept of soft power emphasises that influence is greatest when others internalise one's values or aspirations, reducing the need to rely on force or payments (Nye, 2004). According to Nye's measures, Russia did not start from a strong position after the Soviet collapse. Its political model and cultural appeal were not especially attractive to most of its neighbours, many of whom were trying to distance themselves from the Soviet past. Moscow has tried to build influence through softer means, such as media like RT and Sputnik, education programmes, the *Russkiy Mir* Foundation, and references to the shared memory of the Second World War. But the results were mixed. In some places, this messaging found an audience − in others, it did not. It was often tied to Soviet nostalgia or ideas of Orthodox Slavic unity that did not carry the same weight everywhere, particularly among the younger generations. At the same time, Russia's actions made this task more difficult. The 2008 war in Georgia hurt its image, and the 2022 invasion of Ukraine made the problem much more serious. It not only generated fear, but also weakened Russia's claim to

play a protective or leading role in its neighbourhood. In this sense, reliance on hard power ended up undermining soft power. This fits Nye's broader argument that attraction depends on legitimacy and behaviour: when power produces fear or resentment, it is more likely to repel than to attract (Nye, 2004; Nye, 2011).

Beyond these tangible aspects of power, the literature points to ontological security as an important factor in Russia's foreign policy behaviour. Ontological security refers to an actor's need for a stable sense of self and continuity in identity (Mitzen, 2006). Jennifer Mitzen (2006) argues that states, like individuals, seek security not only of their physical survival but also of their identity. States achieve ontological security by routinizing relationships with others, which provides a consistent narrative about who they are. Mitzen (2006) notes that even dangerous routines can provide ontological security, meaning that a state may become attached to conflict if that conflict confirms its sense of self. Brent Steele (2008) extends this idea by showing how states may undertake bold or risky actions in order to avoid shame and preserve their self-image. Applied to Russia, this perspective intersects with work on status, identity, and recognition, which treats the collapse of the Soviet Union as a major blow to Moscow's sense of great-power standing and historical continuity (Larson & Shevchenko, 2010; Morozov, 2015). Practically overnight, Russia went from superpower to a materially diminished state that was no longer automatically respected as primus inter pares. The 1990s reinforced a narrative of humiliation: NATO's eastward expansion, economic crises, and internal separatism in Chechnya all challenged Russia's great-power identity. The anxieties produced by this loss of status and continuity are often treated as an important element in Putin's worldview (Zevelev, 2016; Narozhna, 2021). Steele's framework would suggest that Russian leaders felt a need to redefine Russia autobiographically as a strong and sovereign actor in order to escape the stigma of defeat and chaos. Ayşe Zarakol's *After Defeat* (2011) explicitly compares Russia with other states that experienced a major loss of status. She argues that

states marked by historical defeat often become especially sensitive to questions of status and recognition, and may adopt assertive or revisionist policies in response. In Russia's case, this perspective overlaps with arguments that Moscow has long resented the West for failing to acknowledge its due place as a great power after 1991. This sense of injured status has often coexisted with a paternalistic or hierarchical view of smaller neighbours.

Building on this status-centred explanation, the concept of ontological security offers a complementary lens. It helps explain why Russia has sometimes acted in ways that appear to undermine its material interests (for example, by accepting sanctions in pursuit of more assertive policies): maintaining a consistent identity narrative – Russia as a great power that cannot be pushed around – may have been as important to the Kremlin as tangible economic benefits. As Prina (2024) argues, contemporary Russian elite discourse about "spiritual-moral values" and "sovereignty" functions to protect a threatened sense of collective self, reflecting deeper ontological (in)security. Mitzen's (2006) insight that states may become attached to familiar patterns of interaction, even when they involve conflict, is relevant here. Russia's confrontational posture – vis-à-vis NATO, or in protracted conflicts with Georgia, Moldova, and Ukraine – can be interpreted as reinforcing a particular self-image of Russia as a resurgent great power and counter-hegemonic actor. This perspective also helps explain why escalation in February 2022 may have been seen as preferable to maintaining an unsatisfactory status quo, even in the absence of an immediate territorial threat. Ukraine occupies a central place in Russia's self-understanding as a great power and within the broader "Russian World" framework (Tsygankov, 2016; Suslov, 2018). From this perspective, ontological insecurity – the fear of losing a coherent sense of historical self – may have contributed to decisions that a purely material or strategic logic would not predict.

The war's outcome so far also illustrates a tragic irony of ontological security dynamics: in trying to alleviate its identity anxiety by forcefully

reasserting its empire, Russia has triggered an even deeper crisis of identity. It is increasingly isolated, seen by former partners as an aggressor or unreliable ally, and facing the very status loss it feared. In Belarus, for example, dependence on Russia has deepened to the point where Minsk's sovereignty is eroding – an outcome that many Belarusian elites resent, which could sow future discord. In Central Asia, Kazakhstan's stronger emphasis on its own language, sovereignty, and historical distinctiveness can also be read as part of a broader response to Russia's war and the imperial assumptions it revealed. These developments feed back into Russia's narrative: some Russian hardliners now dub those neighbours "traitors," doubling down on a siege mentality. Ontologically, Russia appears increasingly caught between adapting to a more limited international role and reinforcing more confrontational forms of civilisational and anti-Western rhetoric, trends that were already visible in Russian ideological discourse before the full-scale invasion (Laruelle, 2021a). As Laruelle (2021b) notes, contemporary Russian political discourse increasingly frames the confrontation with the West in civilisational and ideological terms, combining conservative rhetoric with narratives of antifascism and moral opposition to liberal values. Meanwhile, Laruelle and Limonier (2021) point out that much of Russia's influence abroad has been carried by entrepreneurs of influence – including oligarchs, private actors, and networks operating in political and security "grey zones" – often motivated by personal gain as much as by state interest. This underscores that Russia's soft power and even parts of its hard power projection (e.g., Wagner Group) are fragmented and not fully under state control. The lack of a cohesive, positive narrative emanating from the Russian state itself limits its ability to regain influence. Nye's concept of "smart power" – combining hard and soft power effectively – has been notably absent in Russia's strategy (Nye, 2009, 2023). Instead, the heavy reliance on hard power has undermined the softer forms of influence built over previous decades.

The interplay of power and identity in Russia's regional strategy reveals critical gaps. Russia possessed hard power and could compel behaviour in the short term, but it lagged in soft power and legitimacy, which are crucial for long-term influence. Ontological security studies suggest that Russia's aggression was partly an identity-driven endeavour – a cure for its post-Cold War status anxieties. Ironically, this "cure" has undermined the very goals of stable influence and recognition it sought. The literature here indicates that without addressing the identity component (Russia's need to be seen and to see itself as a great power), purely strategic analyses fall short. Conversely, without factoring in material power dynamics, identity analysis alone would miss why neighbours are now empowered to resist. The next step is to look at how these dynamics appeared across the cases, and what they reveal about Russia's changing regional position after 2022.

Post-Soviet and Regional Transformation Studies

The war in Ukraine has prompted scholars and regional experts to reassess the political landscape of Eurasia. A new wave of studies – some comparative, some country-specific – is examining how Russia's erstwhile allies and neighbours are adjusting in the face of a more belligerent and weakened Moscow (Bogdanova et al., 2023). Even before 2022, there was recognition that the so-called post-Soviet region was not a monolith and was undergoing diversification. Some scholars had questioned the utility of the term "post-Soviet" as states forged distinct paths (Holland & Derrick, 2016). The past decade saw several regional turning points: Ukraine's Euromaidan (2014) and subsequent westward pivot, Armenia's "Velvet Revolution" (2018) signalling societal change even within a Russian alliance, and upheavals in Central Asia (like Kazakhstan's 2022 unrest) revealing latent frustrations. The literature on regional transformations often intersects with comparative politics and postcolonial studies, exploring themes of state sovereignty, regionalism, and great power competition.

One key insight is that 2014 was an initial rupture: after Russia seized Crimea and instigated conflict in Donbas, many neighbours quietly started hedging against over-reliance on Moscow. Bugajski and Assenova (2016) argue that Russia's increasingly assertive policies exposed the fragility of its broader Eurasian project, as several neighbouring states became more cautious about political and economic dependence on the Kremlin. For example, Kazakhstan and Belarus refused to recognise Crimea's annexation and sought closer ties with China and the EU respectively in economic domains. Georgia and Moldova signed Association Agreements with the EU in 2014, undeterred by Moscow's objections. Laruelle and Limonier (2021), in their study of Russia's global influence toolkit, highlighted the fragmented nature of Russia's influence networks, emphasising how many of Moscow's activities abroad relied on local intermediaries, informal actors, and loosely coordinated initiatives. In essence, the infrastructure of Russian influence was more ad hoc and less resilient than often assumed.

The full-scale invasion of Ukraine in 2022 proved to be a second, far more drastic rupture, marking a deeper break with the post-Soviet order. Russia's influence has weakened across several important parts of the former Soviet space, although unevenly and with major exceptions, especially Belarus and parts of Central Asia (Engvall, Khan, & Melin, 2023). A clear pattern is emerging: countries are either deepening their alliance with Russia due to lack of choice or historic ties (like Belarus), or more commonly, realigning away from Russia in their foreign policy orientation. The Central Asian republics offer a clear example. Long treated as part of Russia's backyard, they have acted with greater autonomy since 2022 (Engvall, 2023). Tokayev made that visible at the 2022 St. Petersburg International Economic Forum, when he said Kazakhstan would not recognise the self-proclaimed Donetsk and Luhansk People's Republics despite Putin's presence on the stage (Kussainova, 2022).

Kazakhstan has welcomed Western and Chinese investment to bypass Russian routes and has also hosted international summits that exclude Russia. Uzbekistan has voiced support for Ukraine's territorial integrity and cooperated with Turkey and other partners to diversify its trade. Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan, while still security clients of Russia, have faced Moscow's inability to help them in their own border disputes, leading them to quietly seek other guarantors (even looking to China's growing security presence). This does not amount to a full break with Russia, which still plays a major economic role, but it does point to a gradual loosening of its central position. In practice, Russia has become less able to serve as the dominant frame through which regional politics is organised.

In the South Caucasus, Russia's role as a power-broker has greatly diminished. Azerbaijan emerged as the most assertive player, capitalising on Russia's distraction to pursue its long-standing goal of regaining control of Nagorno-Karabakh from Armenian (and indirectly Russian) oversight. Baku provided humanitarian assistance to Ukraine, while avoiding a full anti-Russian alignment, and used Russia's distraction to alter the post-2020 Nagorno-Karabakh settlement, effectively sidelining Moscow's peacekeeping role. Moscow, keen to keep Azerbaijan from fully turning to the West or Turkey, acquiesced to Baku's manoeuvres even when it harmed Armenia, Russia's formal ally (Brusylovska & Maistrenko, 2024). The result is a perception in Yerevan that Russia had failed as a reliable security patron: Armenian leaders openly accused Russia and the CSTO of abandonment, and in 2023 Armenia began steps to distance itself (e.g., refusing to host CSTO drills, sending humanitarian aid to Ukraine, and exploring defence ties with the U.S. and EU). Brusylovska & Maistrenko (2024) see the South Caucasus as a clear example of Russia's declining role, pointing out that it no longer has the strength to shape outcomes in the region. They note that Russia's attempt to play both arsonist and firefighter – stirring conflict (allowing Azerbaijan's advances) while claiming to keep peace – has backfired, leaving it marginalised and its guarantees untrusted.

Armenia's pivot West, while not total, is the most profound since it gained independence, and Azerbaijan has achieved a degree of strategic independence unimaginable a decade ago, partly thanks to Turkey's rise and Russia's descent. Georgia, for its part, remains in a delicate internal balance (its government is hesitant to provoke Russia, but society is strongly pro-Western). Still, even in Georgia there are signs that Russian influence faces resistance: public protests in 2023 forced the government to retract a Russia-style "foreign agents" law, although a revised version was later adopted in 2024. This sequence illustrates both the strength of pro-European societal pushback and the continuing ambiguity of Georgia's state-level orientation.

Belarus stands as the major outlier – often cited as the one case where Russian influence has increased since 2022. After helping Russia diplomatically and logistically in the war (short of direct troop deployment), Alexander Lukashenko's regime has become more dependent than ever on the Kremlin. Russian troops remain stationed on Belarusian soil, and the announced deployment of Russian nuclear weapons has further underscored the depth of Belarus's dependence on Moscow (Melin et al., 2023). Paradoxically, even this deepened "integration" is not a straightforward success for Russia's regional vision. It is a coerced outcome of Lukashenko's post-2020 political vulnerability, and it carries long-term risks: the Belarusian public shows little enthusiasm for Russia's war (polls indicate majorities against joining the fighting), and an identifiable Belarusian national consciousness – including an opposition in exile – has grown precisely in reaction to fears of a de facto Russian takeover. In other words, while Russia tightened control over Belarus on one level, it also appears to have alienated many Belarusians in the process, weakening the softer foundations of that alliance. Moreover, Belarus's entanglement has alarmed other neighbours: seeing what effectively amounts to vassalisation of Minsk, countries like Moldova have redoubled efforts to escape Russia's orbit. Moldova, historically one of the more Russia-friendly post-Soviet states (due to Transnistria conflict and energy

dependence), applied for EU membership less than a week after Ukraine did in 2022. The war in Ukraine produced a new geopolitical landscape in Eurasia and confirmed that the notion of a unified post-Soviet region no longer holds relevance (Engvall, Khan, & Melin, 2023). The Kremlin's ability to intimidate Moldova has weakened as Russia's military resources and political attention are tied up in Ukraine. At the same time, Russian attempts at destabilisation, including disinformation and energy pressure, have only reinforced Moldova's turn toward closer cooperation with Western partners (Melin et al., 2023). Ukraine itself, of course, is the clearest transformation: from a formally non-aligned, Russian-linked country prior to 2014, it is now a fiercely independent nation intent on Euro-Atlantic integration, with a battle-hardened military and a populace overwhelmingly hostile to Russia. Putin's war, intended to pull Ukraine back into Russia's sphere, has instead accelerated Ukraine's psychological and geopolitical break from Moscow, while Russian debates increasingly revolve around how relations with Ukraine and the West can be redefined after the rupture (Tsygankov, 2023).

Recent empirical studies and analyses across Eastern Europe, the Caucasus, and Central Asia suggest that Russia's regional influence has declined since 2022, although this decline has been uneven and marked by important exceptions (Melin et al., 2023). For instance, security ties remain intact in some cases (Armenia still hosts a Russian base and is formally in CSTO, the Central Asian states still engage in multilateral drills with Russia), and Russia's economic pull via labour markets and remittances remains significant in Central Asia. The overall trend, however, is clear: the post-Soviet regional order is fragmenting and reconstituting itself without Russia at the centre. A more polycentric Eurasia appears to be emerging, reflecting broader trends toward a "multiplex" world order identified by Acharya (2014). Regionally, this suggests that the idea of a coherent "Russian-led bloc" is increasingly difficult to sustain. Each sub-region's transformation has been documented in emerging scholarship, but the broader comparative

picture remains less developed. Most studies understandably focus on one country or sub-region. Few have attempted to synthesise these into a coherent picture of how Russia's war has altered the entire post-Soviet landscape. Notably, Brusylovska and Maistrenko (2024) are among those beginning to fill this gap, but their works point to many avenues for further research. For example, how durable are these shifts? Will they persist if or when the war ends, or could Russia regain influence under a different leadership or scenario? Comparative politics insights also raise questions about regime type: Russia's authoritarian turn and violation of norms may have alienated even autocratic partners, who may fear becoming vulnerable to similar pressure (as seen in Central Asian elites' uneasy reaction to Putin's annexation rhetoric).

A further issue is methodological: much of the post-2022 analysis has been by policy think-tanks or in special issue journal symposia, given the immediacy of events. There is a need for more systematic academic studies that use comparative methods, possibly quantitative indicators of influence (trade patterns, voting alignment in UN, military cooperation frequency, public opinion trends) to measure the change rigorously. Early data points (e.g., UN General Assembly votes in 2022–23 on Ukraine-related resolutions) show more post-Soviet states voting against Russia or abstaining than ever before, which quantifies diplomatic distancing. Economic data show a sharp redirection of Central Asian trade from Russia to China/Turkey in 2022. These empirical trends bolster the qualitative assessments in the literature.

Area-focused scholarship and recent analyses confirm that Russia's war on Ukraine has been a watershed for the region's geopolitics. Across cases, patterns of balancing and realignment are evident: what was once a relatively cohesive (if coerced) Russian sphere is now a more contested and pluralistic space. This shift challenges earlier assumptions of regional orderliness under Russian hegemony. At the same time, an analytical gap becomes apparent. Many of these changes are still only partly understood when examined in isolation, and a fully developed

theoretical explanation for the rapid erosion of Russia's influence across multiple settings remains absent. Looking across these regional studies, certain recurring drivers come into view—declining Russian credibility, the availability of alternative partners, and the rise of domestic nationalism—although some cases clearly diverge. Taken together, these patterns show why the decline of Russian influence has to be studied comparatively, rather than as a set of isolated national adjustments.

Identifying the Research Gap

The literature reviewed above shows that Russia's regional influence before 2022 was more fragile than it appeared. Scholars have identified Moscow's hegemonic ambitions, imperial habits, soft-power limits, and the growing diversification of the post-Soviet region. However, these strands often remain separate. Realist accounts explain power and coercion. Hegemonic and imperial approaches explain hierarchy. Soft power and legitimacy studies show why consent matters. Ontological security approaches clarify the identity anxieties behind Russia's behaviour. Regional studies have documented changes on the ground. What remained less developed was an account of how these dynamics worked together once Russia attempted to restore its influence through a full-scale war.

The theoretical problem is therefore not simply that existing theories are wrong. Rather, each explains only part of the reversal. Realism helps explain why a declining power might use force to halt strategic loss, but it says less about why the use of force can weaken the authority it seeks to restore. Theories of empire and hierarchy show that domination requires legitimation, but they often treat legitimacy as a background condition rather than as something that can collapse quickly under the pressure of war. Ontological security explains why Moscow may have chosen a risky course despite the obvious costs, but it does not by itself explain why neighbouring states responded by distancing themselves. The Russian case therefore requires an approach that links coercion, legitimacy, identity, and regional agency in the

same analysis.

The empirical gap is similar. Much of the literature examines separate countries, sub-regions, or instruments of Russian influence: energy, military bases, media, integration projects, frozen conflicts, or diasporic politics. These studies are valuable, but the post-2022 shift cuts across them. Ukraine's break with Moscow, Moldova's European turn, Armenia's doubts about Russian protection, Azerbaijan's greater freedom of action, Belarus's deeper dependence, and the hedging of Central Asian states are not identical developments. But they form a broader pattern. Russia's influence has not disappeared, and it has not declined in the same way everywhere. Still, across cases, it has become more conditional, more contested, and less able to rest on routine deference.

This monograph addresses that problem comparatively. It does not treat the post-Soviet region as a single bloc, nor does it assume that all states are moving in the same direction. Instead, it asks why the same shock produced different outcomes, and what those differences reveal about the changing quality of Russian influence. The aim is not only to describe national adjustments, but to explain the wider reversal: how a war intended to restore Russia's regional authority exposed the limits of that authority. The gap, then, lies at the intersection of theory and region. Existing scholarship has shown that Russia possesses coercive tools, institutional leverage, cultural resources, and imperial narratives. It has also been shown that neighbouring states have their own agency and alternatives. What is still needed is a comparative explanation of how these elements interact after 2022. This monograph argues that Russia's loss of influence cannot be understood through material power alone. It resulted from the combined erosion of credibility, legitimacy, attraction, institutional trust, and narrative authority. In that sense, the war was not only a military failure or diplomatic setback. It was a broader crisis of regional influence.

Methodology

This study adopts a qualitative and comparative approach. Its aim is not statistical generalisation, but a contextual explanation of how Russia's regional influence changed after the full-scale invasion of Ukraine. The central question requires attention to sequence, meaning, and variation across cases: what Russia could do before 2022, what changed after the war began, and why the effects differed from one country to another.

The analysis draws on official documents, security strategies, foreign policy concepts, treaties, leaders' speeches, public statements, media reporting, investigative journalism, think-tank analysis, and academic literature. These sources are read comparatively and, where possible, cross-checked against one another. This is especially important because the subject concerns an ongoing war, contested narratives, and political systems where information is often partial or strategic. The study therefore treats official claims, Russian narratives, Western interpretations, and local regional perspectives as evidence to be assessed, not as neutral descriptions.

The empirical part follows six cases: Ukraine, Moldova, Georgia, Armenia, Belarus, and Azerbaijan. They are not selected to represent the entire post-Soviet space. They are selected because each shows a different form of Russia's changing influence after 2022. Ukraine is the central rupture. Moldova shows movement away from dependence under conditions of vulnerability. Georgia reveals ambiguity between a cautious government and a strongly pro-Western society. Armenia shows the crisis of Russian security guarantees. Belarus shows the opposite tendency: deeper dependence where regime survival is tied to Moscow. Azerbaijan shows how a state can gain room for manoeuvre without becoming pro-Western.

The comparison is structured around a common set of questions. How did Russian influence operate before 2022? What changed after the invasion? Which decisions or turning points mattered most? Which mechanisms best explain the change: coercion, loss of credibility, institutional weakness, soft-power decline, identity politics, or

alternative partnerships? This structure allows the cases to stand on their own while still making comparison possible.

Within each case, the study uses process tracing to connect Russia's war to subsequent political and strategic shifts. The aim is not to claim that the invasion explains everything. Domestic politics, leadership choices, pre-existing conflicts, economic ties, and external actors all mattered. But the war acted as a catalyst. It made some dependencies more dangerous, some alliances less credible, and some alternatives more attractive. Process tracing helps show how these shifts unfolded through decisions, public statements, institutional moves, and changes in diplomatic or security behaviour.

The analysis is theory-driven, but not theory-bound. Realism directs attention to power, military credibility, and balancing. Hegemonic stability theory highlights order, institutional leadership, and the provision or failure of public goods. Soft power and legitimacy approaches focus on attraction, trust, and the loss of moral authority. Ontological security and post-imperial approaches help explain why Russia viewed Ukraine's autonomy as a threat to its own self-understanding. Discursive approaches show how narratives of protection, sovereignty, empire, and resistance shaped the meaning of the war. These lenses are used together because the decline of influence was not only material, institutional, or ideational. It was all of these at once.

There are limits to this approach. The war is ongoing, and some outcomes remain unsettled. Georgia's long-term course, Armenia's final security orientation, Belarus's degree of dependence, and Russia's future capacity to recover influence cannot be known with certainty. Some data are incomplete or politicised. The study therefore avoids treating current trends as irreversible. It focuses instead on the direction and quality of change visible since 2022.

The monograph does not claim neutrality between aggression and sovereignty. Russia's full-scale invasion violated Ukraine's sovereignty and territorial integrity. At the same time, the analysis takes Russian

arguments, regional hedging, and local ambiguities seriously as objects of study. The aim is to explain how influence works, how it weakens, and why a war intended to restore Russian authority instead made its limits more visible.

UKRAINE AND THE EROSION OF RUSSIAN INFLUENCE

Introduction: Ukraine as the Strategic Test of Russian Influence

Ukraine matters because Russia tested there the claim it had repeated for years: that the post-Soviet space still had limits set in Moscow. The invasion of February 2022 was supposed to make that claim real. It was meant to stop Ukraine's drift away from Russia and close the question of its strategic orientation. Instead, the war pushed Ukraine further out of Moscow's reach — politically, militarily, and psychologically — and made Russia's wider regional authority harder to defend (Dunay, 2022; Zaporozhchenko, 2024).

The realist logic is visible enough. Moscow treated Ukraine's westward movement as a loss of strategic depth and as a problem linked to NATO and U.S. influence (Lawrence, 2023). But the use of force did not solve that problem. It made it larger. Ukraine became more consolidated, more openly Western-oriented, and more determined to cut the remaining channels of Russian influence. Russia gained destruction and occupation in parts of Ukraine, but not obedience. This is why Ukraine cannot be treated only as a military case. It is also about legitimacy and identity. Before 2022, Russia still had ways of reaching into Ukraine through history, language, religion, and culture. The invasion made many of those links harder to use politically. Putin's claim that Ukraine is not fully separate from Russia points to the deeper identity struggle behind the war (Lawrence, 2023). Ukrainian resistance answered that claim directly: Ukraine would not be defined from Moscow. Before 2022, Russian influence in Ukraine was not built on one channel. It ran through energy, party networks, media, church ties, language, Soviet memory, and the conflict left open after 2014. Some of this had already weakened after Crimea and Donbas. But Moscow still assumed that enough pressure points remained to pull Ukraine back. February 2022 showed how little that assumption understood Ukraine.

The chapter traces this change from the pre-war instruments of Russian influence to the rupture produced by the invasion. It asks why Ukraine matters not only as a battlefield, but as the case in which Russia's wider regional claims were most directly tested. The argument is simple: Russia did not merely fail to restore control. It damaged many of the channels through which its influence in Ukraine had once operated.

Ukraine is therefore the sharpest case of hegemonic reversal in this monograph. Russia could still coerce and destroy. It could not turn coercion into authority. That is the difference on which the chapter rests.

Russia's Pre-2022 Influence and Instruments: Hard Power, Economic Leverage, and Soft Power

Before 2022, Russia still retained considerable, albeit waning, influence over Ukraine through a combination of hard power threats, economic entanglements, and soft-power ties rooted in shared history. Understanding this pre-war dominance requires a blend of Realist and Hegemonic Stability perspectives – emphasising material power and spheres of influence – along with a Soft Power lens highlighting culture and legitimacy. In realist terms, Ukraine was long seen by Moscow as the keystone of its security perimeter: without Ukraine, as Brzezinski (1997) argued, Russia would cease to be a Eurasian empire. Russia's policy toward Ukraine thus operated on an assumption of a privileged imperial sphere, where Moscow could assert decisive influence over Kyiv's strategic orientation (Zaporozhchenko, 2024). This was visible across several domains. Russia consistently wielded hard power to intimidate Ukraine and enforce its geopolitical red lines. After the Soviet breakup, Ukraine had inherited a large Russian-speaking population and a geostrategic position that Russia deemed vital for its security buffer. When Ukraine's politics drifted out of Moscow's orbit, the Kremlin used military action to pull it back. This was seen in 2014 when Russian forces seized Crimea and fomented a separatist war in Donbas after Ukraine's pro-Russian president was ousted. Those interventions fit a realist logic: force was used to stop a neighbouring

state from moving closer to Western alliances. In the years that followed, Moscow kept tens of thousands of troops stationed near Ukraine's borders and maintained the frozen conflict in eastern Ukraine as leverage. The credible threat of escalation hung over every Ukrainian election and policy choice, exemplifying Russia's hegemonic strategy of coercive stability: it acted as the regional hegemon enforcing order (on its terms) in the post-Soviet region. As Pál Dunay (2022) observes, however, this "order" was brittle – it relied on fear of Russian power, but by the late 2010s many post-Soviet states perceived that Russian might was not absolute and could even be counterproductive. In Ukraine's case, the Russian military threat constrained Kyiv for years but also bred resentment and a desire for alternatives. Notably, Ukraine strengthened its own armed forces after 2014 and received Western training and arms in limited quantities, slowly chipping away at Russia's absolute military edge.

Moscow also exercised influence through energy dependence and trade ties – a neomercantilist strategy consistent with hegemonic stability theory (where the hegemon uses economic carrots and sticks to maintain a sphere). Ukraine's Soviet-era integration meant a heavy reliance on Russian natural gas. Throughout the 1990s and the 2000s, the Kremlin did not hesitate to use gas supplies as a political weapon – cutting off gas in winter during pricing disputes (2006, 2009) and pressuring Kyiv to join its economic bloc. On the eve of 2014, President Yanukovych was coerced by Moscow with promises of cheap gas and loans to abandon an EU association agreement, a move that triggered the Maidan revolution. Even after 2014, Russia remained a significant trading partner for Ukraine in certain industries, and pipelines crossing Ukraine gave Russia leverage (transit fees and the threat of rerouting flows). This reflects Russia's attempt to be a regional hegemon providing economic public goods on its terms (discounted energy) and punishing defection with embargoes or price hikes. However, these tools had been weakening: Ukraine had begun diversifying its energy sources (importing gas in reverse flow from the EU after 2015) and

cutting trade links after Russia's annexation of Crimea. By 2021, the EU had surpassed Russia as Ukraine's largest trading partner. Still, Russia's market mattered for some Ukrainian exports (like metals and machinery), and oligarchic business networks spanned the border. Thus, on the eve of the 2022 invasion, Russia's economic influence in Ukraine was much reduced compared to a decade prior, but not yet wholly eliminated – a point Putin likely misjudged. He believed economic interdependence and Ukraine's weaker economy would limit Kyiv's capacity to resist a full rupture. Hegemonic stability theory posits that a hegemon can use economic incentives to bind weaker states, but in Ukraine's case those bonds were fraying fast by 2021.

Perhaps Russia's most subtle instruments were in the realm of soft power – the cultural, linguistic, and ideological ties that long linked Ukrainians and Russians. Prior to 2014, Russia cultivated extensive influence through media (Russian television was widely watched in Ukraine), the Russian Orthodox Church (the Moscow Patriarchate had a large following in Ukraine), and shared historical narratives (the notion of Ukrainians and Russians as "brotherly peoples" with common origins in Kyivan Rus). These formed the backbone of what the Kremlin termed the "Russian World" (*Russkiy mir*) – a civilisational sphere binding former Soviet (especially East Slavic) populations via language and Orthodox Slavic culture. Even after 2014's rupture in relations, millions of Ukrainians still spoke Russian as their first language, and Russian popular culture remained present. Moscow banked on these affinities to constrain Ukraine's Western pivot, using cultural affinity as a political constraint. For example, pro-Russian political parties in Ukraine (such as the Opposition Platform – For Life) leveraged linguistic and cultural grievances to garner votes in the East and South. Russian state media repeatedly circulated narratives in Ukraine portraying the 2014 change of government as a fascist coup and claiming Crimea/Donbas revolts were organic. This discursive influence was meant to legitimise Russia's interference and keep Ukrainian public opinion divided. Additionally, the Moscow-aligned

Ukrainian Orthodox Church provided a religious channel of influence, often resisting Kyiv's nationalist policies and echoing Moscow's talking points. Through these means, Russia tried to maintain a degree of legitimacy in the eyes of Ukrainians, or at least to delegitimise the pro-Western authorities in Kyiv.

Realism underscores the primacy of Russia's hard power – its willingness to use force in 2014 and threaten more to prevent an unfavourable shift in the balance of power. Indeed, Russia's invasion planning in 2022 was premised on a classic realist calculus that superior military power could swiftly compel Ukraine's submission. Hegemonic stability and imperial sphere theories highlight how Russia saw itself as the core of a regional order in Eurasia, entitled to deference from neighbours. It pursued a neo-imperial vision of Ukraine as part of its rightful sphere, and many in the world, as Squires (2024) notes, tacitly treated Ukraine as belonging to Russia's "backyard." Western countries often hesitated to challenge Russia's grey-zone aggression for the sake of stability, effectively acknowledging an informal Russian hegemony in parts of the former USSR. This indulgence fostered what Squires calls a sense of impunity in Moscow – the belief that it could act aggressively (as in Crimea) without decisive punishment, reinforcing its hegemonic mindset. Soft power theory, on the other hand, draws attention to how Russia's influence in Ukraine was not only about tanks and trade but about legitimacy and public perception. To the extent Moscow retained influence pre-2022, it was partly due to lingering sympathies and a shared information space. However, by the late 2010s this soft power was crumbling: Russia's actions in 2014 had significantly delegitimised it among many Ukrainians, especially younger generations, and Kyiv had begun asserting its own cultural nationhood through policies promoting the Ukrainian language and through the recognition of the autocephalous Orthodox Church of Ukraine in 2019 (Mykhaleyko, 2019).

On the eve of the 2022 invasion, Russia's influence in Ukraine reflected declining strengths alongside growing illusions. Militarily and

economically, Ukraine was not fully free of Russia, but the trends were against Moscow's dominance. Ideologically, Ukraine was increasingly estranged, yet the Kremlin still appeared to treat Ukraine as politically fragile and vulnerable to pressure (Squires, 2024). This miscalculation – grounded in imperial hubris and flawed intelligence – set the stage for the failure that followed in the full-scale war. The competition between Russian and Western integration models also matters here. This competition reflected a deeper crisis in EU–Russia relations: Jović-Lazić and Lađevac (2021) argue that the 2008 war in Georgia and the 2014 Ukraine crisis exposed incompatible approaches to the shared neighbourhood, where EU integration projects increasingly collided with Russia's sphere-of-influence logic. Ukraine found itself "in between" competing projects: Russia's proposed Eurasian Economic Union on one side and the European Union/NATO on the other. This was already visible during the 2013–2014 crisis, when Ukraine's suspended Association Agreement with the EU became the trigger for mass protests and exposed the wider clash between Russia's effort to preserve dominant influence in Ukraine and the EU's eastern integration agenda (Jović-Lazić & Lađevac, 2017, 2018; Petrović, 2022a). Azzarone and da Silva Bezerra (2023) show that since the 1990s, duelling regional initiatives pulled Ukraine in opposite directions, and Kyiv's responses to these initiatives fuelled geopolitical tension. Ukraine's gradual tilt toward EU association (a choice for an open, rules-based order) directly challenged Russia's plan to form a bloc of its own. The zero-sum mindset hardened after 2014 – any Ukrainian move toward Europe was seen in Moscow as a loss to its imperial sphere. Thus, when diplomatic and economic pressures failed to keep Ukraine compliant (e.g., the failure to reverse the Maidan revolution and Ukraine's continued NATO aspirations), Russia turned increasingly to coercion. By late 2021, Russia issued ultimatums effectively demanding a Finlandisation of Ukraine (no NATO, partial demilitarisation). In realist terms, this was an attempt at preventive action to stop an undesirable shift in the balance of power. But from a legitimacy standpoint, Russia had already lost much of its appeal in

Ukrainian public opinion – most Ukrainians no longer accepted Russia as a benign regional leader. This gap between Russia's perceived sphere of influence and the reality of Ukrainian resistance was the underlying tension that snapped in February 2022.

The 2022 Turning Point: Invasion, Rupture, and Ukrainian Identity

Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine on February 24, 2022 marked a clear rupture. What Moscow envisioned as a swift regime change operation to reassert control turned into a protracted war that weakened nearly every remaining channel of Russian influence in Ukraine. This section analyses the immediate and longer-term effects of this turning point, focusing on how Russia's coercive power was blunted and how Ukraine's national identity and purpose were reshaped under wartime conditions. The analysis is guided by two lenses: ontological security, which helps explain how the war sharpened Ukraine's identity while exposing Russia's identity-driven aggression, and discursive power, which shows how narratives and information shaped domestic resolve and international support.

Breakdown of Coercion and the Limits of Russian Hard Power

The first few weeks of the invasion saw the failure of Russia's coercive strategy. Expecting minimal resistance, Russian forces advanced on multiple fronts, reaching the outskirts of Kyiv in a matter of days. Western intelligence and even some Ukrainian officials initially feared a quick "decapitation" of Ukraine's government was likely (Kudelia, 2022). However, rather than collapsing, the Ukrainian state and military held firm, defeating Russia's plans for a lightning victory. As Serhiy Kudelia (2022) documents, the assault revealed the resilience of Ukrainian institutions and society. Local authorities in cities like Kherson (captured early by Russia) refused to cooperate with occupiers, and ordinary citizens staged protests despite the danger (Kudelia, 2022). There was no large-scale replay of the 2014 scenario in which Russia could stir up a

"Russian Spring" in the southeast; this time, even in predominantly Russian-speaking areas, the populace largely rebuffed the invaders. Moscow's expectation that Ukraine would be internally divided and politically brittle – an assessment tied to its ontological dismissal of a distinct Ukrainian nationhood – proved wrong. Instead, the invasion produced a strong "rally-around-the-flag" effect.

From an ontological security perspective, Russia's miscalculation stemmed from its inability to see Ukraine as a consolidated political community. Putin's narrative denied Ukrainian agency, portraying Ukrainians as essentially Russians led astray by "Nazi" usurpers. This narrative, repeated in Russian state discourse, was an attempt to secure Russia's identity as the rightful hegemon and protector in the region (Cavandoli & Wilson, 2022). But the brutal reality of a full-scale attack instantly forged a unifying counter-narrative for Ukrainians: the fight became one for their very existence as a nation – a classic ontological security crisis driving people to defend their core identity. Early analyses of the war suggested that the conflict would have lasting and potentially irreversible effects on the social and historical bonds between Russians and Ukrainians (Plokhy, 2023). This indeed happened; whatever remained of fraternal feeling was shattered by the sight of Russian tanks and missiles in Ukrainian cities.

Not only did Russia's military coercion falter, but its intimidation power over other states also diminished. The image of the Russian army – once touted as the world's second most powerful – was tarnished by logistic failures, high casualties, and evident battlefield setbacks. Dunay (2022) emphasises that the war exposed the limits of Russia's hard power and undermined the aura of invincibility that Moscow had cultivated. The fact that Ukraine, a smaller power, successfully resisted and even rolled back Russian advances (e.g., the defence of Kyiv, the Kharkiv counter-offensive, and the liberation of Kherson in 2022) sent shockwaves through the post-Soviet region. It demonstrated that the Kremlin's will alone could be defied if met with determined national resistance and external support. Thus, the

invasion's immediate outcome was to weaken the fear-based compliance on which much of Russia's regional influence had rested. If Russia could not intimidate Ukraine – and indeed was suffering defeat – then its threats rang hollow elsewhere too.

One aspect of the war's onset was Russia's use of "maskirovka" and active measures – deception operations – to mislead Ukraine and the world about its intentions. Staun and Eikeland (2023) note that Russian deception measures complicated Ukrainian assessments of the scale and distribution of the initial attack. For instance, Moscow built up forces in Belarus and hyped an attack from the north, which indeed came, but also masked the scale of its push from the east and south. Ukraine's military was stretched by this misdirection in the initial days, an old Soviet trick that nearly paid off. However, whatever advantage Russia gained from information war tactics was short-lived. Once the reality of all-out war set in, Ukraine's discursive counter-strategy began to operate. President Zelenskyy refused evacuation and broadcast defiant messages "I need ammunition, not a ride" (Braithwaite, 2022), galvanising Ukrainians to fight and discrediting Russia's narrative that Ukraine's government would flee. Internationally, Ukraine rapidly won the information battle: its portrayal of an unjust, imperial invasion versus Russia's flimsy pretext of "denazification" convinced most of the world's democracies to back Ukraine. The discursive power shifted – Russia's propaganda about liberating Ukraine found little purchase outside of its domestic audience, while Ukraine's plea for support as a sovereign democracy under attack resonated widely. In this sense, the invasion also marked the collapse of Russia's narrative dominance in Ukraine. All major Ukrainian media, even Russian-language ones, rallied around the patriotic line, and Russian state media were banned. The war became a clear story of Ukrainian resistance against aggression, leaving no ambiguity for Russia to exploit.

Reconstruction of Ukrainian National Identity: Unity, Patriotism, and "Derussification"

Perhaps the most profound consequence of the 2022 invasion has been the transformation of Ukrainian national identity. What years of nation-building efforts had not fully accomplish was achieved within months by wartime conditions: a near-total unification of Ukraine's people in defence of their sovereignty, accompanied by a conscious shedding of Russian influence in culture and politics. This can be viewed through the dual lenses of ontological security – Ukraine solidifying its sense of self – and discursive resistance – the deliberate reframing of Ukraine's national story in opposition to Russia.

Several empirical indicators illustrate this shift. Immediately after the invasion, surveys recorded unprecedented levels of national pride and unity among Ukrainians. By mid-2022, over 80% of Ukrainians said they were proud to be citizens of Ukraine, a figure that had been around 60% in 2020; by mid-2023, it exceeded 90% (Razumkov Centre, 2024). Regional differences in identity largely evaporated. Kudelia (2022) observes that the war "produced a rare moment of political unity" – the long-standing internal divide between a pro-Western vs. pro-Russian orientation narrowed dramatically. Whereas before 2022 some Ukrainians (especially in the east and south) harboured ambivalent or positive attitudes toward Russia, now overwhelming majorities across all regions viewed Russia as the enemy. Identification with the broader "post-Soviet" or "Russian world" region declined sharply. In essence, Putin's war catalysed the birth of a fully consolidated Ukrainian nation, one defined in direct contrast to Russian imperialism. This is a clear example of ontological security under pressure: Ukrainians coalesced around a stable collective identity ("We are Ukrainians, not Russians") that provides psychological security even amidst physical insecurity.

The unity was not just abstract; it translated into action. Hundreds of thousands of citizens mobilised to defend the country. Beyond the regular armed forces (which expanded rapidly under general

mobilisation), voluntary Territorial Defence units sprang up in every town. Civilians volunteered *en masse* to support the war effort – whether by making camouflage nets, funding equipment, or providing food and shelter to displaced compatriots. Notably, many who took up arms or supported the resistance were Ukrainians whose primary language is Russian or who might have previously felt closer to Russian culture. The absence of any significant "fifth column" was striking. Even individuals or communities that Moscow might have expected to welcome Russian troops (based on language or ethnicity) largely chose loyalty to an independent Ukraine.

General Valerii Zaluzhnyi became a national hero associated with bravery and determination (Torop et al., 2023). His popularity suggested that resistance to Russia was understood as a struggle for sovereignty and national survival, not language or cultural background. Kudelia (2022) suggests that Ukraine's resilience in 2022 reflected a much greater degree of political and societal consolidation than had been visible in 2014, while Melin et al. (2023) situate this development within a broader pattern of declining Russian influence across the post-Soviet neighbourhood. This nationwide solidarity made Russia's old divide-and-rule assumptions much harder to sustain.

One of the most dramatic opinion shifts came regarding Ukraine's foreign alignment. Prior to 2014, support for NATO membership in Ukraine was very low (under 20%). Even by 2021, only around half of Ukrainians wanted to join NATO, reflecting lingering scepticism especially in the east. The invasion flipped this calculus overnight. By early 2023, roughly 80–85% of Ukrainians supported joining NATO, and similarly high numbers favoured EU membership (Kudelia, 2022; Rating Group, 2023). NATO, once a contentious issue, became broadly accepted as necessary for security – an irony given that Russia invaded ostensibly to stop NATO expansion. Now virtually the entire Ukrainian polity is oriented toward the West. Politically, Ukraine's government enshrined this course: within months of the invasion, Ukraine applied for EU membership and was granted candidate status in June 2022.

The war thus accelerated Ukraine's entry into European integration processes that might have taken decades under other circumstances. Using discursive power, Ukrainian leaders consistently framed their struggle as part of a wider civilisational choice – "Ukraine is Europe," and Russia's war is an attack on European values of freedom. This narrative resonated, leading European states to fast-track Ukraine's candidacy. In NATO's case, while formal membership is delayed due to the war, Ukraine has effectively become a *de facto* ally of the Alliance, receiving advanced Western weaponry and training. The key takeaway is that any ambiguity about Ukraine's geopolitical identity has been resolved in practice: Ukraine is far less likely to return to Russia's orbit. It now firmly sees its future with Euro-Atlantic structures, an alignment that enjoys overwhelming domestic support (something unimaginable before). Hegemonic stability theory is inverted here – rather than Russian hegemony providing order, Ukrainians came to believe that only Western alignment and NATO protection can bring true stability and security.

Culturally and symbolically, Ukraine underwent a conscious unbinding from Russia. What one might term a post-colonial turn occurred, as Ukraine sought to undo the legacy of centuries of Russian imperial influence. This included policies and spontaneous social movements to remove Russian symbols, language dominance, and institutional links. For instance, city councils across Ukraine hastened to rename streets that had Russian or Soviet names, often replacing them with Ukrainian national heroes or European figures. Statues of Russian figures (from Tsarist generals to Pushkin) were taken down. The Ukrainian language, already the sole official language, gained even more prominence as many Russian-speaking Ukrainians switched to speaking Ukrainian as an act of patriotism. In media and education, the Russian language and content were greatly reduced – by 2023, Ukrainian-language media completely dominated, whereas Russian TV/radio broadcasts (which had been significant pre-war) were banned as enemy propaganda. Perhaps the most significant break was in the religious sphere. The

Ukrainian Orthodox Church (Moscow Patriarchate) – which had still been formally under Russia's Patriarch – declared independence from Moscow in May 2022 due to Patriarch Kirill's open blessing of the war. This was a landmark moment: a spiritual severing of one of the last bonds tying Ukraine to the "Russian world" concept. In effect, Ukraine is undergoing a "decolonisation" process, redefining its national narrative to emphasise its distinctiveness and suffering under Russian domination historically. Agadjanian (2025) notes that Russia's invasion triggered intense new discussions about the imperial legacy in Eurasia and amplified calls for decolonising that region. Ukraine's conscious derussification can be seen as a practical implementation of post-colonial theory – rejecting the coloniser's symbols and recovering an autonomous identity. It is a form of discursive resistance too: the narrative of Ukraine as a victim of Russian imperialism has become central, and reclaiming Ukrainian language and culture is framed as both an act of resistance and liberation.

The 2022 war solidified Ukraine's ontological security as a nation-state. Ukrainians now broadly agree on who they are (a sovereign European nation), who the adversary is (Russian imperialism), and what they aspire to (integration with the West). This newfound unity and clarity came at a horrific cost, but it has proven enduring. The effect on Russian influence is devastating: ideationally, Russia's position in Ukraine has been damaged for the long term. Surveys indicate that favourable views of Russia among Ukrainians have collapsed to single digits, essentially within the margin of a small fringe (Kudelia, 2022; Rating Group, 2023). The concept of Russians and Ukrainians as 'brotherly peoples' has been profoundly undermined – often replaced by analogies of Russia as a coloniser or even outright hatred after the atrocities of Bucha, Mariupol, etc. Even if Moscow were to attempt a charm offensive in the future, it would find very little receptive audience. Ukraine's national identity has been reconstructed in direct antithesis to Russian hegemony: to be Ukrainian now almost by definition means to oppose Kremlin domination. This represents a

major failure of Russia's soft power and discursive control. The war was meant to subdue Ukraine, but it gave Ukraine a powerful story of resistance and self-determination, one that now reinforces the break from Russia in politics, memory, and everyday life.

Domestic Politics and Identity: From Zelenskyy's Leadership to a Pro-Western Consensus

The domestic political landscape of Ukraine and the broader climate of public opinion have been profoundly shaped by the war. The focus here is on Ukraine's internal response to the invasion: Zelenskyy's wartime leadership, the mass mobilisation of society, and the consolidation of a pro-Western, anti-imperial consensus. Post-imperial perspectives help explain Ukraine's distancing from Russian dominance, while discursive power highlights the role of rhetoric, symbols, and narratives in that domestic transformation.

Rallying Leadership and Democratic Resilience

Prior to the war, Volodymyr Zelenskyy was a political newcomer (elected in 2019) known for his background in entertainment and a centrist stance that included seeking dialogue with Russia to end the Donbas conflict. Many doubted how this relatively untested leader would handle a full-scale invasion. Zelenskyy's response – choosing to stay in Kyiv under bombardment, communicating with his people through nightly video addresses, and lobbying the world for support – turned him into one of the central symbols of Ukrainian resistance. His personal transformation mirrored that of his country: from a pragmatist who once tried to accommodate Moscow to a wartime president uncompromising in defence of independence. Zelenskyy's leadership had a unifying effect on Ukraine's domestic politics. Almost all political factions (save a few marginal pro-Russian elements that were swiftly banned or sidelined) rallied behind the government. In wartime, Ukraine imposed martial law and suspended normal party

politics, but this did not lead to autocracy – instead it led to a high degree of political unity. Even opposition figures put aside differences to support the national effort.

From a discursive standpoint, Zelenskyy's speeches and actions were powerful in shaping public sentiment. He consistently framed the war as a defence of the free world, invoking not just Ukrainian patriotism but universal democratic values. This framing helped maintain domestic morale and also reassured Ukrainians that, in fighting, they were part of a bigger community of nations. Crucially, Zelenskyy communicated in whichever language or cultural reference would resonate – at times speaking Russian to address Russian-speaking Ukrainians or even Russians (appealing to them to reject the war), other times switching to Ukrainian or English to address different audiences. This adaptability underlined a new, inclusive Ukrainian identity: confident and multi-faceted, yet firmly independent. Discursively, Zelenskyy and his administration succeeded in shaping much of the domestic narrative about the war inside Ukraine by providing constant transparency about battlefield developments (even bad news) and by celebrating Ukrainian heroism. This stood in stark contrast to Russian propaganda and secrecy. The trust built through such communication further cemented the government-society bond.

Additionally, Ukraine's institutions proved resilient. Local governments kept functioning, civil society organisations (many formed or strengthened after 2014) took on key roles in humanitarian relief and even procurement of supplies for the army, and the media (operating under a joint informational policy to prevent panic or disunity) nonetheless continued to report and even critique issues like corruption or mismanagement. In short, Ukraine's domestic reaction showcased a reinforcement of democratic norms under fire – a phenomenon where, paradoxically, war solidified Ukrainians' commitment to accountable governance and pluralism, as those were part of what they felt they were defending against Russian autocracy. Post-imperial theory might suggest newly independent states often

struggle to build strong institutions, but Ukraine's war experience has in many ways accelerated state-building. The concept of Ukraine as a political nation – multi-ethnic, democratic, oriented to rule-of-law – became more firmly embedded in public and political life.

Total Societal Mobilisation and Civil Resistance

Societal transformation was another key domestic reaction. Ukraine became a "national mobilisation" state in which nearly every citizen contributed to the war effort. Scholars have described the war as accelerating the consolidation of a civic and political nation in Ukraine (Onuch, 2023; Wilson, 2024). Volunteers organised through social media to support frontline troops, host internally displaced persons, or raise funds for drones and medical kits. This civic response also had a social and humanitarian dimension: in wartime and displacement contexts, trauma-affected populations require not only emergency assistance, but also longer-term psychological, educational, and community support, especially in informal learning and integration settings (Meštrović & Bandov, 2024). The Ukrainian diaspora, too, rallied and sent enormous financial and material support. This bottom-up civic energy is an extension of Ukraine's vibrant civil society (notably seen in the Maidan revolution) now directed toward national defence. It also reflects discursive power from below – citizens created powerful grassroots narratives like "#StandWithUkraine" that reinforced their resolve and also engaged foreign publics (Marigliano et al., 2024). Memes of Ukrainian tractors towing Russian tanks or the defiant response of the Snake Island guards ("Russian warship, go f*** yourself") (Visontay, 2022), became widely circulated symbols, contributing to a shared sense of pride and dark humour that bolstered morale. These narratives of resistance circulated widely, helping Ukrainians process trauma and sustain unity.

A striking feature of this societal response is how it undercut traditional divisions. Ukraine historically had cleavages – linguistic, regional, ideological. The war blurred these lines. Russian-speaking Ukrainians

from Odessa or Kharkiv stood shoulder-to-shoulder with Ukrainian-speaking westerners from Lviv in volunteer battalions. The common identity of being Ukrainian eclipsed sub-identities. As Kudelia (2022) noted, internal divides that plagued Ukraine since independence were effectively overcome by the necessity of resistance. In doing so, Ukraine undermined a key pillar of Russian influence: the exploitation of Ukraine's pluralism.

Moscow could no longer play "divide and rule" among Ukrainians; the space for pro-Russian political positioning narrowed considerably after the 2022 invasion, as several parties associated with Moscow were banned and existing political networks disrupted (Freedom House, 2023). Even Ukraine's formerly Moscow-leaning politicians and oligarchs either converted to the national cause or found themselves marginalised, with some former members of pro-Russian parties reorganising into new parliamentary groupings aligned with the government (Freedom House, 2023). For instance, Viktor Medvedchuk, often cited as Putin's close proxy in Kyiv politics, was arrested in 2022 and later exchanged in a prisoner swap in September 2022 (Walker, 2022), symbolising the weakening of Moscow's hope of installing him or similar figures in power. Ukrainian politics, usually fractious, attained a high degree of consensus on key issues, including the rejection of Russian diktat and the pursuit of EU/NATO membership.

This societal cohesion can be interpreted through post-imperial theory as a further step of a colonised people rejecting the coloniser's influence. Ukraine's social mobilisation carried a strong anti-imperial ethos – many volunteers explicitly framed their fight as one against centuries of Russian subjugation, drawing analogies to Ukraine's struggles against the Russian Empire or Soviet rule. This long historical memory fed contemporary resolve. Squires (2024) argues that Russia's war created an opportunity for the global community to learn the importance of confronting imperial aggression rather than appeasing it. Within Ukraine, the lesson was learned viscerally: they concluded that only by complete national solidarity could they fend off an empire

that had disregarded their very existence as a nation. Thus, national unity became one of the central organising principles of wartime political life.

Constructing a Unified Pro-Western Identity

The cumulative effect of Zelenskyy's leadership, democratic resilience, and civic mobilisation has been the construction of a unified national identity that is emphatically pro-Western and anti-imperial. By late 2022 and into 2023, being Ukrainian in the political sense meant prizing independence, democracy, and looking toward Europe, while vehemently rejecting Russian claims or cultural tutelage. This identity shift was cemented in everyday life and state policy alike. Education policy, for example, moved to further integrate European standards and away from any remnants of Soviet curricula. The Ukrainian government's discourse increasingly referenced Ukraine's place in a European family – a stark change from even a decade earlier when "European integration" was a slogan contested in elections. Now it was practically a consensus goal.

One illustrative arena is public opinion on international alignment, as already mentioned. Support for EU and NATO membership reached record highs across all regions (over 80% for each). This points to a significant ideological reorientation of Ukrainian society. Back in 2010, Ukraine formally declared a non-aligned status under pressure from Russia. In 2019, integration aspirations were put into the constitution, but public opinion remained divided. By 2022–2023, neutrality was off the table in the public mind. Notably, even those who once might have favoured balancing between East and West came to see Western alignment as the only safeguard of sovereignty. Russia's invasion thus did what years of advocacy could not: it ended the debate in Ukraine about geopolitics. In this regard, if earlier some Ukrainians viewed Russia as a protector or economic benefactor, that position has become marginal; instead, institutions like NATO and the EU gained legitimacy as Ukraine's desired community. This is a profound ideational change.

It is important to highlight that this new identity is civic and inclusive, not ethnonationalist in a narrow sense. Ukraine did not turn anti-Russian in terms of ethnicity – it turned anti-imperial. Ethnic Russians or Russian-speaking citizens are accepted as fully Ukrainian so long as they are loyal to the state. In fact, many of the war's heroes (military commanders, celebrated soldiers, mayors of eastern cities) come from traditionally Russophone communities. The idea that "Ukrainian" = loyalty to the nation's freedom and European choice, regardless of one's mother tongue or heritage, gained ground. This inclusivity is another reason Russia's propaganda about "Nazis" or ethnic persecution in Ukraine failed to gain any traction internally. Ukraine's wartime nationalism has been civic in nature, focused on political independence and cultural self-determination without state-sanctioned hostility to minorities. Even the moves to limit the Russian language's public role have been framed in terms of breaking imperial influence, not suppressing a people – for example, schools pivoted to Ukrainian not to punish Russian speakers, but to strengthen a single civic language space against Russian state propaganda.

From a discursive power standpoint, the Ukrainian state adeptly shaped this identity narrative. It declared that the war is about Ukraine "finally decolonising" and "returning to Europe." These phrases, repeated in speeches and media, helped normalise the idea that Ukraine's future lies outside Russia's sphere and that its westward trajectory corrects a longer history of subordination. This narrative has been internalised widely. Agadjanian (2025) notes that Putin's aggression sparked passionate scrutiny of Russia's imperial history and a revival of decolonisation discourse. In Ukraine, this translated to a societal mission of casting off the last vestiges of empire. One could observe, for instance, how quickly Ukrainians adopted changes like calling Russia "Muscovy" (an old term) in casual usage to symbolically downgrade its stature – a small but telling discursive rebellion against Moscow-centric narratives.

In conclusion, Ukraine's domestic political and ideational reaction to the war can be characterised as a dramatic consolidation of a post-imperial national identity. The country's leadership and citizens together demonstrated that Ukraine is not a failed state or artificial entity (as Russian ideologues claimed) but a robust nation capable of defending itself and charting its own course. The implications for Russian influence are substantial. The space available to openly pro-Russian actors has narrowed sharply, while Russia's symbolic and ideological position in Ukraine has been deeply weakened. The internal cohesion of Ukraine around a European future and a rejection of Russian hegemony is therefore one of the clearest defeats for Putin's neo-imperial project, regardless of the territory Russia may still hold by force. As long as this pattern of national consolidation endures, the prospects for restoring Russian influence in Ukraine appear extremely limited.

Post-2022 Alignments and Regional Reconfiguration: Ukraine's Centrality in a New Order

Russia's war on Ukraine has not only transformed Ukraine itself, but has also accelerated wider geopolitical realignments. In the post-2022 environment, Ukraine moved rapidly toward integration with Western institutions, while Russia's leverage in the post-Soviet region and beyond has markedly declined. The focus here is Ukraine's external alignments since 2022 and how the war has reconfigured the regional order, invoking the English School notion of international order and society. The analysis examines the decline of Russia-led institutions (e.g., the Eurasian Economic Union, Collective Security Treaty Organisation) and Ukraine's emerging role in reshaping the balance of power in Eastern Europe. An English School perspective, which emphasises the rules and institutions of regional international society, helps frame these shifts: the war undermined the old norms of Russia's "privileged sphere" and gave impetus to a new order premised more on Westphalian sovereignty and Western integration.

Accelerated EU and NATO Integration

One of the most immediate changes in Ukraine's alignment was the fast-tracking of its bid to join the European Union. In a historically swift decision, the EU granted Ukraine candidate status in June 2022, recognising Ukraine's "European perspective" while it was literally under fire. This was as much a political signal as a legal status – it demonstrated that Ukraine is now considered part of the European family, a stark reversal of the previous hesitancy to extend such a promise. After candidate status was granted, Ukraine worked, even amidst war, to implement EU-required reforms, particularly on the rule of law and anti-corruption, in order to move toward formal accession negotiations. Formal accession negotiations were opened on 25 June 2024, when the first EU–Ukraine Intergovernmental Conference was held at ministerial level in Luxembourg (Council of the European Union, 2024a). The trajectory, which could normally take a decade or more, has been dramatically shortened in political terms by the war's exigencies. Ukrainian officials often say they are "earning Europe with blood." The war created a moral imperative among EU states to not leave Ukraine in a grey zone again. This westward thrust fulfils the long-standing aspiration of many Ukrainians and stands as a repudiation of Russia's hegemonic goal of keeping Ukraine in its orbit. Importantly, Ukraine's pursuit of EU membership did not begin with the 2022 invasion. As Petrović (2022a) notes, Kyiv had sought a membership perspective for many years, viewing the Eastern Partnership and Association Agreement as steps toward eventual accession rather than alternatives to it.

On the security side, NATO's response to Ukraine's plight has brought Ukraine closer to the Alliance than ever, even if full membership remains pending. NATO countries have provided unprecedented levels of military aid, training, and intelligence to Ukraine, effectively making Ukraine a de facto ally. At the 2023 Vilnius Summit, NATO Allies reaffirmed that Ukraine's future lies in NATO and established the NATO–Ukraine Council to deepen political dialogue, cooperation, and

Ukraine's interoperability with the Alliance; they also agreed to develop the Comprehensive Assistance Package into a multi-year programme to help Ukraine transition toward full interoperability with NATO (NATO, 2023). While the legal status of Article 5 protection could not be extended during active conflict, steps were taken to ensure Ukraine's armed forces meet NATO interoperability standards. In practice, Ukraine's military is now heavily equipped with NATO-standard weapons and works intimately with Western militaries. This integration was unimaginable before the war – previously NATO had been cautious not to "provoke" Russia; that hesitation evaporated after the invasion. If we consider the English School's idea of institutions and norms, one could say that the earlier Western caution about NATO enlargement in Russia's immediate neighbourhood weakened sharply after 2022. Instead, the norm of supporting a sovereign nation's right to choose its alliances took precedence (at least among Western democracies).

Furthermore, Russia's war triggered NATO's own expansion: Finland and Sweden, two long-neutral Nordic states, applied to join NATO in 2022 and subsequently joined the Alliance, marking a major break with their long-standing traditions of neutrality and nonalignment (Jović-Lazić, 2026). This enlarged NATO's presence on Russia's borders and indicated that the regional order is tilting decisively in favour of the Western security architecture. Ukraine, by resisting Russia, proved that Russia's attempts to veto NATO enlargement could be overcome. Although Ukraine itself has not yet joined NATO, its candidacy is now seen as a matter of timing, not principle. Meanwhile, Ukraine has received long-term security commitments from G7 countries through the Joint Declaration of Support for Ukraine adopted in Vilnius on 12 July 2023, and has since concluded a series of bilateral security agreements promising sustained military, financial and political support (G7, 2023). All of this means Ukraine is firmly embedded in the Western security sphere – the exact scenario Russian realists most feared. Lawrence (2023) interprets Russia's invasion largely as an attempt to push back NATO and challenge U.S.-led hegemony, but

ironically the result has been NATO's strengthening and a more united Western stance.

From Ukraine's vantage point, these developments cement its post-2022 identity as a frontline European state. The populace overwhelmingly welcomes EU/NATO integration, seeing it as both just reward for their sacrifice and the only viable path for post-war reconstruction and security. Importantly, even the concept of neutrality (once floated as a possible compromise in peace talks) has little support. Ukrainians argue that Russian aggression proved neutrality is perilous. This consensus ensures that any future Ukrainian government is likely to continue on the Western integration course, making a U-turn back to Russia-led structures politically difficult domestically.

Collapse of Russia's Institutional Leverage in the "Near Abroad"

Russia's ability to control or guide the post-Soviet region through multilateral institutions and alliances has taken a severe hit as a consequence of the war. Before 2022, Russia had established bodies like the Eurasian Economic Union (EAEU), the Collective Security Treaty Organisation (CSTO), and maintained influence in the Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS). These were often cited as evidence of a Russian-led regional order. However, as Dunay (2022) notes, many of these arrangements were shallow and dependent on bilateral patronage ("hub-and-spoke") rather than true collective action. The Ukraine war exposed and exacerbated those weaknesses.

Firstly, Ukraine was never part of the EAEU or CSTO (having charted its own course after 2014), but its victory and Western trajectory send a powerful message to members of those groups. The inevitability of Russian hegemony became much harder to sustain. Countries like Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan, which had balanced between powers, have grown bolder in asserting autonomy. For example, Kazakhstan openly refused to support Russia's claims on Ukraine, citing respect for territorial integrity, and has sought alternate trade routes to reduce dependence on Russia. This distancing aligns with what Dunay (2022)

describes as an "unprecedented pace" of diversification away from Moscow. Russia's ability to enforce discipline in the EAEU (for instance, halting members from re-exporting sanctioned goods or from pursuing independent foreign policies) has been limited because its focus and resources are tied down in Ukraine. The war has drained Russia's economic attractiveness – with heavy sanctions, Russia is a less useful economic partner. It also drained military prestige – CSTO allies saw Russia struggle and thus may doubt the value of its security guarantees.

The CSTO in particular has suffered a serious loss of credibility. One telling episode was in late 2022 when Armenia, a CSTO member supposedly under Russia's security umbrella, faced renewed Azerbaijani pressure. Yerevan appealed to CSTO for help, but received virtually nothing as Russia was preoccupied in Ukraine. By 2023, Armenian leaders like Prime Minister Pashinyan began openly criticising the CSTO and Russia's inability or unwillingness to assist, even suggesting Armenia might withdraw from the CSTO. This would have been unthinkable prior to the Ukraine war when Russia's influence in Armenia was paramount. Additionally, Armenia's later refusal to host CSTO exercises and its reduced participation in CSTO meetings further indicated a breakdown of trust in the alliance (Dunay, 2022; Caucasus Watch, 2023). The English School concept of a regional international society can be applied here: the rules and expectations within the post-Soviet security community (i.e., that Russia would be the regional policeman/arbitrator) have eroded. Instead, the society of states in Eurasia is becoming more Westphalian – states looking out for their own interests, seeking multiple partnerships (including with China, Turkey, EU) rather than rallying under a Russian-led normative order.

Belarus remains an outlier, as a close ally that has doubled down on dependence on Moscow. Yet even Belarus has not directly entered the war with its own army, reflecting perhaps wariness within its regime of overextension. Other allies like the Central Asian states have trod carefully, sometimes abstaining or hedging in UN votes rather than overtly backing Russia's war. As Dunay (2022) concludes, there is a

"rapid growing apart" in the former Soviet area – a distancing that the war accelerated. The net effect is that Russia's institutional leverage – its capacity to bind neighbours through treaties and organisations – is diminished. The CIS is moribund for anything beyond symbolic gatherings; the EAEU is economically hampered; the CSTO is seen as ineffective. Even where these institutions continue to function, their members are less compliant with Russian wishes than before. For instance, when Russia pushed for strong statements supporting its war (or at least blaming NATO) in multilateral forums, it often got lukewarm responses. Most tellingly, none besides Belarus have recognised the Russian annexations of Ukrainian territory (not even Russia's CSTO or EAEU partners recognised the 2022 claims over Donetsk, Luhansk, Kherson, Zaporizhzhia). This non-recognition underscores a reluctance to buy into Russia's revisionist project, signalling a lack of normative consensus.

For Ukraine and the region, the weakening of Russia's regional grip creates a more pluralistic order. Ukraine's case shows that a post-Soviet state can largely exit Moscow's political orbit and seek integration with a different international society (the Euro-Atlantic one). Moldova is following a similar path (it also became an EU candidate in 2022). Georgia, while more cautious, remains broadly oriented toward the West. In the Caucasus and Central Asia, some states are exploring greater ties with China, Middle Eastern powers, or simply pursuing non-alignment rather than reflexive alignment with Russia. The English School would note a potential redefinition of regional primary institutions – sovereignty is being more strongly asserted, balance of power dynamics are in flux (with Turkey's role growing in the Caucasus, China's in Central Asia), and the idea of a Russia-centric civilisation area is under question.

Ukraine's New Centrality in Eastern Europe

As the war continued, Ukraine has emerged as a central actor in shaping the security architecture of Eastern Europe. No longer seen as

a peripheral "buffer" or a prize in great power competition, Ukraine is now often regarded as a key pillar of European security. Western analysts speak of a "new Eastern flank" of Europe where Ukraine (along with Poland and the Baltic states) forms a bulwark against aggression. This newfound centrality is partly due to Ukraine's proven military capacity and strategic importance. Ukraine's armed forces by 2023 are battle-hardened and one of the largest in Europe. Post-war (should Ukraine retain territorial integrity), it will likely have the most experienced army in Europe. Already, Ukraine is being integrated into European defence conversations (e.g., inclusion in EU's Military Mobility project, joint weapons procurement). Some have even floated that Ukraine, in the long run, could become a net security provider for Europe (for instance, its large army could contribute to future EU or UN missions once its own war is resolved).

Moreover, Ukraine's experience has driven conceptual changes in NATO and EU. NATO has refocused on territorial defence in Europe, something largely prompted by Ukraine's situation. The EU, traditionally a soft-power actor, has even moved to provide lethal aid via the European Peace Facility, primarily because of Ukraine. These adaptations show Ukraine's impact on institutions' evolution. In essence, Ukraine is no longer at the periphery of the European international society, but moving toward an insider role, with voice and agency.

Regionally, Ukraine's stance has also emboldened neighbouring pro-Western states. Moldova, fearing it could be next, has accelerated its own Western integration and security measures (like reducing dependence on Russian gas and tackling Russian propaganda). Georgia, despite internal political wrangling, has its public firmly on Ukraine's side and pushing the government not to lag behind in the EU candidacy race. Even within Belarus and Russia, Ukraine's resistance is a symbol for opposition groups – a proof that the Kremlin is not omnipotent. Ukraine thus emerges as a fulcrum of realignment: Eastern Europe is coalescing into a more coherent security community

with shared anti-imperial norms. The flip side is the consolidation of a Russian-led camp that is much smaller (essentially Russia and Belarus, with maybe tacit backing from Iran or North Korea, and ambivalent neutrality from others like China or India). The regional order has bifurcated much more clearly as a result of the war: the dividing line between a rules-based European order and a coercive Moscow-centric order now runs starkly at Ukraine's borders.

English School theorists often talk about great power management and international society rules. Here we witness the breakdown of Russia's role as a would-be manager of the post-Soviet region and the reassertion of global norms (sovereignty, non-aggression) with Ukraine as the cause célèbre. At the United Nations, Ukraine-related votes in 2022 and 2023 garnered overwhelming support for principles of territorial integrity (e.g., the UN General Assembly condemned Russia's invasion with 141 states in favour). Many of Russia's usual partners in the global South abstained or expressed unease. This indicates that beyond the region, Russia's violation in Ukraine has strained the tolerance for revisionism – a notable reconfiguration in the normative environment.

Zaporozhchenko (2024) argues that the war in Ukraine has set in motion disintegration processes in Eurasia and possibly the end of Russian hegemonic order. This process is observable: Ukraine's breakaway is the most dramatic piece, but it reflects a broader pattern of former Soviet states loosening their ties to Moscow's orbit. In Central Asia, for example, there is growing discussion of more collective self-reliance or leaning on China's infrastructure investments rather than Russia. The Shanghai Cooperation Organisation (SCO) and other China-involved platforms may partially supplant Russian-led ones. The effect is a more multipolar or at least diffused regional arrangement.

Post-2022, Ukraine has moved from being treated mainly as an object of great-power contention to becoming an active participant in shaping the regional order in Europe. By withstanding Russia's invasion, Ukraine has secured its own independent path and contributed to the

weakening of Russia's hold on the near abroad. The "Eurasian" vision promoted by Moscow has been damaged by the failure to subdue Ukraine. Instead, a more plural regional order is emerging, in which many former Soviet states are linked more closely either to Western institutions or to other poles such as China and Turkey, rather than to a single Russian-led bloc. In English School terms, the region is moving away from a separate Russian-led regional society and toward a broader, more contested international society. Ukraine stands near the centre of that change.

Ukraine and the Erosion of Russian Influence

The case of Ukraine illustrates how a combination of material resistance, identity assertion, and international realignment can strip a would-be hegemon of its influence. Russia's multi-pronged control mechanisms – military domination, economic dependence, ideological affinity, and symbolic authority – have all been substantially weakened in Ukraine since the 2022 invasion. The pattern is visible across several dimensions. Militarily, Russia has failed to subjugate Ukraine; instead, Ukraine's armed forces have grown stronger and are integrated with Western support, nullifying Russia's coercive power over Kyiv. Economically, nearly all ties have been severed – Russian exports to Ukraine and vice versa have plummeted, energy leverage is gone, and Ukraine's economy is now westward-looking (with massive Western aid replacing any need for Russian credit or trade). Ideologically, Russian narratives have very little credibility in Ukraine – terms like "fraternal peoples" are mocked given the atrocities of war. The Ukrainian populace holds an overwhelmingly negative view of Russia, unprecedented in modern history, and Russian cultural footprints in Ukraine have been erased or marginalised. Symbolically, Ukraine has withdrawn or been cast out of Russia-led organisations and agreements (from CIS cooperation to decades-old friendship treaties). The institutional, political, and emotional ties that once linked Ukraine to Russia's sphere have largely lost their binding force.

Which theoretical paradigms best explain this sweeping erosion of influence? Each of the seven paradigms employed sheds light on different facets:

From the perspective of realism and power politics, the theory correctly anticipated some aspects – notably, it was Russia's perception of a shifting balance (Ukraine drifting West, NATO expanding) that led to the war in the first place (Lawrence, 2023). Realism explains Russia's motives (security dilemma, desire for power) and Ukraine's response (balancing against aggression with external aid). However, realism alone might have predicted a Russian victory given its material power advantages. This gap between expected and actual outcomes also reflects the problem of performative power. As Jović-Lazić (2026) argues, Russian foreign policy often projects strength through symbolic performance, strategic narratives, and geopolitical spectacle, creating an image of power that can exceed Russia's actual material and strategic capacity. In Ukraine, the invasion exposed precisely this gap between performed power and effective influence. The failure of Russia's power to translate into influence highlights realism's limitations. Material power was offset by intangibles like will, morale, and external support – elements realism sometimes underplays. Ukraine's case shows that power is not just about tanks; the quality of leadership, the resolve of a population, and alliance dynamics matter enormously. Realism would also predict other states balancing against a flailing hegemon – indeed we saw that as neighbours sought alternatives once Russia looked weaker (consistent with balance of power logic). So, realism contributes understanding of why states behaved as they did externally, but falls short in accounting for the internal collapse of Russia's influence in Ukrainian society.

Hegemonic stability and imperial-sphere approaches point to another layer. Prior to the war, one might have argued (as Putin likely did) that Russian dominance was essential to regional order – a hegemonic stability idea. The war decisively disproved this in Ukraine: Russian hegemony was not stabilising but rather profoundly destabilising and

illegitimate. The concept of an "imperial sphere" held together by Moscow's leadership has been shattered. Zaporozhchenko (2024) points out that the hegemonic order Russia aspired to is in ruins as disintegration processes take hold. Hegemonic stability theory would predict chaos in the absence of the hegemon, but Ukraine found order by reorienting to a different hegemonic framework (the Western-led order). In other words, Russian hegemony was not replaced by anarchy but by an alternative hierarchy that Ukraine voluntarily joined. This suggests that hegemony to be stable must have some legitimacy; Russia's lacked that in Ukraine. The paradigm does, however, explain Russia's dogged insistence on treating Ukraine as within its sphere – a classic hegemonic mindset unable to adapt to the reality of Ukraine's independence. The war's outcome in Ukraine shows that when a hegemon loses legitimacy and coercive success, its sphere can evaporate rapidly.

Soft power and legitimacy are especially important here. Russia's soft power in Ukraine had been eroding for years and the war weakened it further. Nye's concept of soft power – the ability to attract and co-opt – was largely absent in Russia's approach; instead, Russia relied on hard power, which in turn killed any remaining attraction. Ukraine's defection from Russia's influence sphere is fundamentally a story of lost legitimacy. The Ukrainian public decisively rejected the notion that Moscow has any rightful say in their affairs. The importance of legitimacy is seen in how swiftly pro-Russian actors inside Ukraine weakened in 2022 – they had no social base left once Russia revealed itself as an aggressor. Soft power also works on the international stage: Ukraine garnered massive international support not because of its material might but because of its credible moral stance and effective communication (Zelenskyy's emotional appeals). Russia, meanwhile, became increasingly discredited in Western publics, its narratives dismissed. Thus, soft power theory adeptly explains how Ukraine's resistance was amplified by its attractiveness (as a brave underdog defending democracy) and Russia's influence waned as its

repulsiveness grew (seen as a brutal aggressor). The war vividly demonstrates Joseph Nye's dictum that overreliance on hard power can undercut soft power – Russia's brutality made it lose legitimacy and public sympathy globally and especially in Ukraine. In the end, influence depended on more than hard power in determining influence: Ukraine, with far less hard power, gained greater narrative and political traction than Russia.

Ontological security adds a further dimension. The Ukraine case is a clear example of these dynamics. Russia's invasion was in part driven by its ontological insecurity – Putin's Russia appeared unable to reconcile Ukraine's separate existence with its own identity as a great power and heir of empire (Cavandoli & Wilson, 2022; Agadjanian, 2025). This identity dimension was closely intertwined with Ukraine's broader geopolitical significance, as earlier analyses had already highlighted Russia's determination to preserve a dominant political and strategic position in Ukraine and to prevent its full integration into Western structures (Jović-Lazić & Lađevac, 2017). This led to actions that sought to restore a sense of self (resurrecting a Russian world including Ukraine) but instead plunged Russia into greater insecurity and crisis. For Ukraine, the war forced a reckoning with its own identity and produced a much stronger sense of ontological security: Ukrainians have rarely been more certain of who they are. The clarity of Ukraine's self-concept now (European, not Russian; sovereign and unified) provides a psychological stability that was perhaps lacking in earlier decades of wavering policies. This newfound certainty in identity solidifies the break from Russia – because Russia's influence often flowed through identity ambiguity (e.g., Russian-Ukrainian fluidity, nostalgia for USSR). With identity boundaries now hardened, Russia's ability to penetrate Ukraine's sense of self is gone. The war demonstrated how strongly identity can shape political alignment: once Ukraine's people overwhelmingly identified Russia as the "other" (enemy), the prospects for Russian hegemony died. Ontological security theory best explains the depth and irreversibility of Ukraine's

shift – this shift concerns not only policy or regime orientation, but also, but the underlying narratives of self and other.

A post-imperial lens places Ukraine's relationship with Russia in a longer historical frame. From this view, Ukraine's assertion of its agency and decoupling from Russia is akin to a colonised nation throwing off the coloniser's yoke. Agadjanian (2025) notes the revival of debates on Russian imperial legacy in Eurasia due to the war. Ukraine has adopted decolonisation language – "derussification," revisiting historical interpretation, emphasising Ukrainian distinctiveness long suppressed by empire. The war catalysed what might be called a decisive stage in Ukraine's decolonisation. In this sense, Russia's influence eroded because it was fundamentally an imperial vestige that Ukrainians no longer accepted. Post-imperial theory would say that empires often try a violent rearguard action to prevent loss (the war itself), but such actions typically only harden the resolve of subject peoples. Ukraine is a prime example: Russian violence hardened Ukrainian nationalism and severed remaining imperial ties. The contrast with Georgia's balancing strategy is illustrative here. Georgia, another post-Soviet state, was also part of the Russian/Soviet empire and fought a war with Russia in 2008. However, Georgia's approach since has been more cautious – effectively a partial acceptance of some constraints (not provoking Russia overtly, even as society desires the West). Georgia's strategy reflects that its post-colonial break was not complete; it still contends with Russian power (20% of its territory occupied) and thus balances. Ukraine's strategy post-2022 is the opposite: a far more decisive political and symbolic break. In post-imperial terms, Georgia might be seen as pursuing a more cautious and incomplete form of distancing from Russia (still navigating the old master's shadow), whereas Ukraine, through war, moved much further toward political and symbolic separation from Russia.

The English School helps contextualise the broader regional fallout through its emphasis on international society. Ukraine's struggle affirmed the importance of the core norms of Westphalian order – sovereignty and non-aggression – and rallied an international coalition

in defence of those norms. In doing so, it weakened Russia's attempts to establish an alternative regional order based on spheres of influence. The war showed that the majority of states (at least in Europe and the democratic world) would not accept outright conquest becoming normal again. In the post-Soviet region, the "rules of the game" are shifting: where previously tacit acceptance of Russian dominance often prevailed (e.g., limited responses to 2008 Georgia or 2014 Crimea), after 2022 many states and institutions actively contested Russia's actions (through sanctions, UN votes, etc.). The regional society of states in Eastern Europe has become sharply divided – a solidarity among those upholding international law versus Russia and a much narrower circle of partners. This evolution can be explained by the breach of fundamental norms by Russia and the consequent social pressure to reaffirm those norms. Ukraine's centrality in reshaping order (as discussed earlier) suggests a move toward a more pluralistic regional society where no single power dictates to others simply by might. Instead, Ukraine and neighbours are seeking frameworks of cooperation that dilute hegemonic control (EU, Turkic cooperation, etc.). The English School notion of Great Power responsibility also comes in: Russia's abdication of responsible great power behaviour (by launching an aggressive war) effectively voided any special rights it claimed in the region, freeing smaller states to pursue their own paths. Thus, the erosion of Russian influence is also a story of the regional international society rejecting Russia's claims to a privileged status.

Discursive analysis underscores how control over the narrative was crucial. Russia lost the narrative in Ukraine – its descriptors ("Nazis in Kyiv", "liberation") were overwhelmed by Ukraine's counternarratives ("Russian aggression", "freedom fight"). Ukraine's adept use of media, from Zelenskyy's direct appeals to viral stories of Ukrainian bravery, created a discursive environment where supporting Ukraine became the norm for its citizens and sympathisers abroad. This public discourse dimension means that any pro-Russian sentiment was socially delegitimised; it is hard to overstate how important that is. Even those

Ukrainians who might have had sympathies for Russian culture found it nearly impossible to voice anything but support for Ukraine once the dominant discourse equated Russia with brutality and Ukraine with heroism. Discursively, Russia's narratives increasingly lost credibility, especially claims about biolabs and "denazification," while Ukraine's narrative of sovereign resistance gained wider acceptance. This asymmetry in narrative credibility is a key reason Russia cannot win back influence. No message from Moscow can currently compete with the lived narrative Ukrainians have experienced. In Foucauldian terms, the struggle was also over what could count as truth: Ukraine's narrative of sovereign resistance gained credibility, while Russia's claims were increasingly treated as state propaganda. In the long run, this discursive defeat means any future Russian engagement with Ukraine will require a complete rethinking of tone and approach (something the current Russian regime is unlikely to do). On the international stage, too, Russia's reputation as a violator makes even its allies careful in embracing its discourse (most of them abstain or stick to neutral talking points). Therefore, discursive power heavily contributed to the collapse of Russian hegemonic influence – Ukraine and its partners effectively reframed the conflict in a way that nullified Russia's justifications and thus any moral or intellectual sway Russia hoped to have.

In reflecting on Ukraine's rupture versus Georgia's balancing: Ukraine's case shows a rupture driven by the combination of overwhelming external aggression and an internal decision to fight at all costs. Georgia, which faced aggression in 2008, chose a different post-war path – one of gradual, cautious distancing from Russia without open confrontation. Georgia still trades with Russia, hasn't imposed sanctions, and its government often avoids anti-Russian rhetoric (even as it pursues EU candidacy). This balancing act is likely because Georgia's leadership calculated that another war or total break could be disastrous given Georgia's small size and Russia's proximity. It also reflects that Georgia did not experience the same all-consuming

conflict that Ukraine now does; the 2008 war, while traumatic, was short and limited to two regions. In terms of theory, Georgia's approach aligns more with realism (a small state hedging to survive) whereas Ukraine's aligns more with constructivist drivers (identity and principle). The contrast underscores that the erosion of Russian influence can take different forms: abrupt and complete (Ukraine), or slow and partial (Georgia). In Georgia, Russian influence has eroded compared to pre-2008 (public opinion is very anti-Russian, and Russia's ability to dictate Georgian policy is limited), but it has not entirely disappeared – Georgia must still be mindful of provoking Russia. In Ukraine, by contrast, there is little concern for Moscow's preferences now, as the relationship is overtly hostile.

Taken together, soft power, legitimacy, and ontological security emerge as an explanation for why Russian hegemony collapsed in Ukraine. Military might and economic ties alone could not hold Ukraine once legitimacy was lost and identities shifted. Realist power considerations certainly shaped the war's outbreak and international response, but it was the less tangible forces – national resolve, legitimacy of leadership, narrative dominance – that proved decisive for the erosion of Russian influence. Ukraine's case shows how a great power's attempt at imperial control in the twenty-first century can be defeated not only by military resistance, but also by sustained societal and narrative resistance. As Russia becomes a "threat without attraction," its ability to hold sway over other former Soviet states is also in doubt. Ukraine has provided a model of successful defiance that others may emulate in their own ways.

For Russia, the implications are sobering: without Ukraine, its claim to lead a broader Eurasian project has become much harder to sustain. Ukraine's final departure from Moscow's orbit significantly reduces the geopolitical, economic, and ideological weight of any notional "Eurasian" bloc Russia leads (Dunay, 2022). In the long term, this erosion of influence may force Russia to redefine its identity and role in a more clearly post-imperial direction. Otherwise, as long as it clings

to imperial nostalgia, it risks further costly attempts to reassert dominance, with similarly disastrous results. The war in Ukraine has shown that Russia's claim to an imperial sphere in Eastern Europe has been weakened, replaced by an order where even mid-sized countries can assert their agency if backed by international solidarity and firm identity. Ukraine, at great human cost, has opened the door to a new regional reality – one where Russian hegemony is no longer the defining feature.

GEORGIA – BETWEEN RESILIENCE AND REALPOLITIK

Introduction

Georgia's post-Soviet trajectory has been defined by its exposed position in Russia's struggle to maintain hegemony over the post-Soviet region. Buffeted by the 2008 Russo-Georgian War and Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine in 2022, Georgia has become an important case for examining Russian coercive influence and the limits of Moscow's dominance. As a small state bordering Russia, Georgia faces acute security pressures (including the occupation of Abkhazia and South Ossetia) even as it nurtures a strong pro-Western identity. This dynamic has produced what one might call strategic ambiguity in Tbilisi's foreign policy and discursive divergence between elite rhetoric and popular sentiment. The ruling Georgian Dream (GD) party treads a cautious line: it avoids openly aligning with Moscow yet frequently undercuts Western partners domestically, sending "mixed and contradictory messaging" – attacking EU and U.S. institutions and civil society critics while simultaneously insisting that European integration remains a national priority. In contrast, Georgian society has repeatedly affirmed its Euro-Atlantic orientation; public opinion polls consistently show about 80% support for EU and NATO membership (Civil Georgia, 2023), and mass protests have erupted to defend democratic ideals and Euro-Atlantic aspirations. This gap between an increasingly pragmatic ruling elite and a resilient pro-European society lies at the heart of Georgia's post-2022 trajectory.

Georgia's case brings together several of the themes explored throughout this study. A Realist lens emphasises the stark power asymmetry with Russia and the brute fact of military vulnerability that drives Georgian leaders' caution. Meanwhile, Hegemonic Stability theory and notions of Imperial Spheres help explain Moscow's longstanding influence mechanisms in Georgia – from troops on the

ground to economic levers – aimed at preserving a regional order under Russian tutelage. At the same time, Russia's use of soft power and quests for legitimacy (through cultural-religious ties and media narratives) have tested whether coercion can be supplemented by consent in the Caucasus. Georgia's domestic struggles invoke Ontological Security and Identity theories: the 2022 war triggered renewed anxieties about sovereignty, security, and national orientation, forcing a renegotiation of "who we are" and "where we belong" between East and West. Competing narratives – a government framing itself as the guardian of peace vs. a society rallying around solidarity with Ukraine and European identity – reflect a clash of discursive power. In this chapter, the analysis examines Georgia's cautious balancing strategy after 2022 through these multiple lenses, highlighting how resilience without rupture has gradually eroded Russian hegemony. The chapter traces Russia's pre-war instruments of influence and the 2022 turning point that exposed a growing elite–society cleavage. It then examines domestic political and ideational reactions, including debates over neutrality, sovereignty, and the role of the Orthodox Church, before assessing Georgia's post-2022 regional alignments and its continued Euro-Atlantic aspirations under the shadow of Russian power. It concludes that Georgia exemplifies a subtle but significant form of hegemonic erosion: despite an asymmetry of hard power favouring Moscow, Georgian society's identity resilience and the country's careful realpolitik adjustments are weakening Russia's capacity to shape Georgia's choices. This outcome, achieved without a definitive geopolitical rupture, stands in contrast to more dramatic shifts in neighbours like Armenia – where initial balancing has turned into open disillusionment with Moscow's protection, as explored in the next chapter (Gvineria, 2025). Georgia's case thus offers insight into how a frontline state can slowly recalibrate its orientation away from a regional hegemon, negotiating between immediate security imperatives and long-term identity-driven goals.

Russia's Pre-2022 Influence and Instruments

Prior to the 2022 invasion of Ukraine, Russia wielded considerable leverage over Georgia through a combination of hard power, economic dependency, and soft power – a classic hegemonic toolkit. Within a realist logic and power politics, Georgia's security was directly constrained by Russia's military presence and coercive capabilities. Since the 2008 war, Russia has stationed troops in the breakaway regions of Abkhazia and South Ossetia (amounting to roughly 20% of Georgia's territory de facto outside Tbilisi's control), using these occupied territories as forward bases of influence and deterrence. The unresolved status of Abkhazia also illustrates how breakaway regions can become long-term socio-political and strategic constraints for small states, shaping both domestic identity debates and external alignment choices (Petrović, 2022b). Moscow sought to entrench a form of hegemonic stability by unilaterally framing itself as the security guarantor of the separatist regimes – effectively freezing the conflict on its terms. This was accompanied by continual pressure along the Administrative Boundary Lines: Russian forces carried out illegal "borderisation", creeping annexation of Georgian land, and periodic kidnappings of Georgian citizens near the occupation lines (Gvineria et al., 2024). Such tactics kept Georgia in a state of insecurity and dependence, reinforcing the perception that Moscow could escalate military pressure at will. The persistent possibility of renewed conflict has acted as a powerful deterrent against Georgia's westward pivot, underscoring the realist logic that a small state's behaviour is heavily constrained by the proximate power of a regional hegemon. As Jović-Lazić (2009) notes, Russia has traditionally regarded the South Caucasus as a zone of vital security interest, while Georgia's strategic location, unresolved frozen conflicts, and growing links with Euro-Atlantic institutions have made it a focal point of competition between Russia and Western actors.

Economically, Russia also exercised significant influence over Georgia through trade, investment, and energy ties, reinforcing its broader

regional position. Even before 2022, Russia was one of Georgia's top trading partners and sources of income. Georgian exports like wine and mineral water rely heavily on access to the vast Russian market – a vulnerability Moscow has exploited in the past with embargoes (notably the 2006 ban on Georgian wine). As Transparency International Georgia noted, in 2022, these economic links deepened further: Georgian exports to Russia grew by 11% year-on-year (Jan–Sept) and imports from Russia surged by an alarming 73%, reaching 1.2 billion USD (13.1% of Georgia's total imports, the highest share in 16 years). Russia flooded Georgia with cheap fuel (a 350% increase in Russian oil product imports) and remained Georgia's near-exclusive supplier of wheat (over 95% of wheat and flour imports). Such dependence accorded Moscow significant leverage: at any moment, Russia could impose bans or cut supplies, with painful effects on Georgia's economy (as it did in earlier disputes). Moreover, remittances from Georgians working in Russia have long been a lifeline for many families and a source of hard currency. After Moscow's invasion of Ukraine, this channel swelled dramatically. In April–June 2022, remittances from Russia to Georgia increased 6.5 times and amounted to approximately $678 million, largely due to an influx of Russian nationals and their capital into Georgia (Transparency International Georgia, 2022). By late 2022, Georgia was earning about 2.2 billion USD from Russia (through remittances, trade, and tourism) in just nine months – 2.6 times the amount in the same period of 2021. This amounted to roughly 12.6% of Georgia's GDP, up from 6.3% a year prior, reflecting a sharp increase in economic dependence (Transparency International Georgia, 2022). From a Hegemonic Stability perspective, Moscow's economic clout in Georgia functioned as both carrot and stick – integrating Georgia into a Russia-centred economic network that could provide growth (e.g. Russian tourists and investors boosting Georgian businesses) but also punish deviation (through sanctions or trade cut-offs). Crucially, while these ties benefited segments of Georgia's economy, they also constrained Tbilisi's political freedom of manoeuvre. Georgian policymakers had to weigh every decision (such as joining sanctions

against Russia) against potential retaliation that could destabilise trade, remittances, or energy supply (Khundadze & Wade, 2025). In this way, Russia cultivated a form of structural power over Georgia, consistent with an imperial sphere logic: Georgia's prosperity – even its basic energy and food security – was kept partially contingent on good relations with Moscow.

Equally important were soft power and legitimacy tools employed by Russia. Shared religion and historical-cultural ties gave Moscow avenues to influence Georgian society subtly, beyond overt state coercion. The Georgian Orthodox Church, an institution with high public trust, has been one such avenue. While formally independent, parts of the Georgian clergy have echoed narratives emanating from the Russian Orthodox Church (ROC), aligning with the Kremlin's conservative and anti-Western messaging. ROC-linked clergy in Georgia have propagated the line that NATO and the EU pose threats to traditional Christian values, casting Russia as a guardian of Orthodoxy against Western decadence (Odarchenko, 2025). These messages resonate with a segment of Georgian society that prioritises traditionalism and may feel alienated by some liberal Western norms. By positioning itself as the defender of faith and family, Moscow has attempted to legitimise its influence in Georgia – framing alignment with Russia not as subjugation, but as cultural defence. This is a classic soft-power appeal, leveraging identity and values. Similarly, Russian-language media and disinformation campaigns have targeted Georgia. Kremlin-backed outlets (including TV channels and online media accessible in Georgia) amplify narratives favourable to Moscow – for instance, portraying the West as dragging Georgia into war or painting Georgian Pro-Western politicians as puppets of foreign agendas. Such information warfare seeks to shape public perceptions or at least sow doubt about the West. Moscow's strategy has focused on applying economic, political, and ideological pressure to expand its influence in Georgia, including strengthening economic ties, leveraging shared Orthodox identity, and promoting pro-Russian narratives within the

media space (Anjaparidze, 2025). The existence of openly pro-Russian parties and NGOs in Georgia (though marginal in electoral terms) further attests to Russia's soft-power penetration. In short, the Kremlin has deployed a broad repertoire: hard military power to coerce, economic interdependence to incentivise or punish, and soft power via religion and propaganda to cultivate local consent for its hegemony.

From the perspective of hegemonic stability theory, one might say Russia provided a kind of order – albeit illiberal – in its Caucasian sphere through these instruments. Moscow acted as a regional hegemon asserting stability (no further war as long as Tbilisi toed the line) and offering economic outlets, but at the cost of Georgia's sovereign decision-making. However, this stability was always brittle, resting on coercion and the threat of force more than genuine legitimacy. Georgian society never truly consented to Russian leadership; indeed, surveys show that an overwhelming majority of Georgians viewed Russia as an "enemy" and felt Russia's actions in Ukraine were criminal (Civil Georgia, 2022c). Moscow's soft-power efforts via the church and media, while influential among some conservative circles, failed to shift the fundamental pro-Western identity of the broader Georgian public. Thus, by 2022, Russia's leverage over Georgia remained strong in material terms but weak in moral-authoritative terms. It had leverage without legitimacy. This contradiction set the stage for what would happen when Russia's war on Ukraine upended the regional status quo: Georgia's elites would lean further into pragmatism (to avoid provoking their powerful neighbour), but Georgian society would respond more strongly through solidarity with Ukraine and Western values. The collision of these tendencies in 2022 marked a pivotal moment in Georgia's post-Soviet story, as we examine next.

The 2022 Turning Point: Elite Caution vs. Societal Sympathy

Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine in February 2022 was a watershed moment for Georgia, triggering what scholars of ontological security describe as an existential crisis for the nation's sense of self

(Tsintsadze-Maass, 2024). The war starkly reminded Georgians of 2008 – when they themselves were invaded by Russia – and raised the question of whether Georgia could be next. Very quickly, Georgia's public and its leaders were forced to navigate a high-stakes choice between solidarity with Ukraine (and the West) and the imperatives of survival under Russia's shadow. This produced a visible elite–society cleavage. On one hand, the GD government responded with marked caution – a posture of realpolitik driven by security concerns. On the other hand, Georgian society at large responded with a surge of empathy and moral alignment with Ukraine – a manifestation of Georgia's resilient identity as a freedom-seeking, post-Soviet nation that sees its destiny in Europe.

From day one of the invasion, ordinary Georgians made their sympathies clear. Tens of thousands flooded the streets of Tbilisi and other cities in pro-Ukraine rallies, waving Ukrainian flags and demanding stronger support for Kyiv. Polls conducted in March 2022 found that 88% of Georgian respondents were "cheering for Ukraine", with only a statistically negligible fraction siding with Russia. 87% agreed that "Ukraine's war is our war too," and 72% believed that "if Russia wins in Ukraine, Georgia will be next in line" (Civil Georgia, 2022c). These numbers reflect a profound identification of Georgian society with Ukraine's plight. For many Georgians, Ukraine's fight against Russian aggression was viscerally familiar – a continuation of the struggle Georgia itself had waged in 2008 and, in a broader sense, ever since independence in 1991. In other words, supporting Ukraine was not just a foreign policy preference; it was an expression of Georgia's own ontological security needs – affirming the country's identity as a sovereign nation rejecting Kremlin domination. Public discourse in early 2022 was suffused with this narrative: civil society groups, opposition parties, and citizens alike framed Ukraine's resistance as a fight for the free future of all post-Soviet states, Georgia included. As the then President Salome Zourabichvili declared on 24 February 2022, "Today is a tragic day for Ukraine. Although it had

done its best to maintain peace until the end, it could not avoid full-scale Russian aggression," she added, "Today, when it is trying to cope with this difficult situation, Georgia stands by its side" (Civil Georgia, 2022a). This statement, coming from the (nominally non-partisan) President, encapsulated the sentiment of a broad swath of Georgian society, tying Ukraine's defence to Georgia's own European identity and aspirations.

In stark contrast, the Georgian Dream government took a markedly prudent and ambivalent stance. While formally condemning the invasion at the United Nations and offering humanitarian aid, the government carefully avoided any action that could be seen as directly antagonising Moscow. Prime Minister Irakli Garibashvili and the GD party chairman Irakli Kobakhidze repeatedly stressed that Georgia would not join international sanctions against Russia (Civil Georgia, 2022b). Garibashvili argued that sanctioning Russia would do disproportionate harm to Georgia's own economy and would not affect the outcome of the war – a justification rooted in cost-benefit logic. More revealing was the rhetoric the ruling party deployed: Georgian Dream framed its stance as a necessity to preserve peace and "second-front" neutrality. Kobakhidze went so far as to accuse domestic opposition and unnamed Western actors of seeking to drag Georgia into the conflict, labelling them a "party of war" wishing to open a second front against Russia in the Caucasus (Lolomadze, 2025; Khundadze & Wade, 2025). This narrative – that Georgia was under pressure to "Ukrainise" itself while the government resisted such pressure – became central to GD's messaging in 2022. Since Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine, the ruling party has presented itself as a guarantor of peace, while at the same time implying that Ukraine bears responsibility for not preventing Russian aggression (Civil Georgia, 2025b). This view was criticised by parts of public opinion in Georgia and Ukraine for shifting too much responsibility onto Ukraine. It also reflects the government's general caution, especially its focus on avoiding anything that might provoke Russia or escalate tensions.

Garibashvili summed this up by saying that under "the given circumstances, any emotion, any unjustified step, any unreasonable word or action contains a huge risk" (Tsintsadze-Maass, 2024). In other words, the government believed that a misstep or overly assertive statement could invite Russian retaliation. This reflects Georgia's post-2022 approach: a small state navigating an existential threat through political caution in both words and actions. The prime minister's restrained position aligns with what scholars describe as ontological insecurity – a deep concern over the state's continued existence (Khundadze & Wade, 2025). With Russian forces stationed in nearby occupied territories since 2008, questions of national survival tend to take priority over more assertive foreign policy positions.

The result of these divergent reactions was a marked discursive cleavage between the Georgian state and society. Two parallel narratives took hold. The first, pushed by the GD leadership, was a narrative of pragmatism and preservation: Georgia must maintain strategic ambiguity and stay neutral in deeds (if not entirely in words) to avoid catastrophe. Georgia would continue its formal EU/NATO bids, officials said, but on the Ukraine war it would be positioned as a bystander – sympathetic but not involved. The second narrative, emanating from society, opposition, and even some within the government such as the President, was a narrative of solidarity and shared destiny: Georgia should not (and in fact cannot) remain neutral in a struggle that so closely mirrors its own. In this view, neutrality was seen as both morally problematic and strategically risky, because it could leave Georgia either exposed to Russian influence or detached from its European orientation (Kondrat, 2023).

These duelling discourses exposed a rift in Georgia's identity. The government's stance – realist, security-focused, and cautious – drew on one facet of Georgia's experience: the trauma of war with Russia and the lesson (as the Georgian Dream leadership interprets it) that open confrontation leads to devastation. The societal stance – idealist, values-driven, and defiant – drew on another facet: the historic striving for

independence and the conviction that Georgia's identity is fundamentally European and anti-imperial. Both narratives are deeply embedded in Georgian collective memory. Thus, the 2022 war created a dilemma of ontological security characterised by "multiple insecurities demanding contradictory responses" (Tsintsadze-Maass, 2024).

Tsintsadze-Maass (2024) further suggests that Georgian leaders manage this tension through a form of "compartmentalisation" of insecurities: President Zourabichvili takes on the role of articulating Georgia's identity insecurity – voicing full support for Ukraine to reinforce Georgia's self-image as a Western ally – while Prime Minister Garibashvili addresses physical security fears – toning down criticism of Russia to mitigate the immediate threat. This internal contradiction in Georgia's foreign policy thus becomes more visible to external observers. It has puzzled analysts that the President and Prime Minister of the same country (operating within the same governing political environment) can speak in such different registers on a critical issue. Yet from the inside, this reflects an adaptive response to an acute crisis: Georgia is effectively trying to pursue two roles at once – a loyal friend to Ukraine and a cautious neighbour to Russia.

However, this balancing act came at a price. The GD government's cautious approach – not joining sanctions, avoiding strong condemnation of Moscow beyond set phrases, and welcoming Russia's 10 May 2023 decision to restore visa-free access for Georgian citizens and lift its 2019 ban on direct flights between the two countries (Light, 2023) – led to serious friction with Western partners and with the Georgian public. Georgia's relations with Ukraine's government deteriorated sharply; Kyiv recalled its ambassador from Tbilisi in 2022, and by 2023 President Zelenskyy openly criticised the Georgian government's stance as unsupportive. Meanwhile, in Georgia, public trust in the government eroded. Many Georgians felt embarrassed by their government's limited support for Ukraine when fellow Eastern Partnership countries were vocally siding with Kyiv. The opposition accused GD of covertly appeasing the Kremlin – an accusation

strengthened when audio leaks and statements suggested some in Georgian Dream believed the West wanted to "sacrifice" Georgia to weaken Russia (Khundadze & Wade, 2025). GD officials seized on this, doubling down on their "party of peace" vs "party of war" rhetoric to discredit opponents. By late 2022 and early 2023, Kobakhidze was regularly using the term "Global War Party" to label certain pro-Western Georgian figures and even Western diplomats, implying they were part of a conspiracy to drag Georgia into conflict (Lolomadze, 2025). This conspiratorial language – unusual in Georgia's recent political discourse – marked a turn to a more overtly anti-Western tone by the ruling party, even as it maintained that EU membership was still on its agenda. Thus, the Ukraine war's fallout in Georgia was not only a foreign policy balancing act, but a catalyst for domestic polarisation and discursive battles over Georgia's fundamental orientation.

The year 2022 was a turning point that crystallised Georgia's predicament: caught between resilience and realpolitik. Georgian society's resilience was evident in its overwhelming moral support for Ukraine and its reassertion of a European identity – a rejection of Russia's attempt to define the region's destiny. The Georgian government's realpolitik was evident in its careful hedging and narrative of neutrality – a reluctant deference to the reality of Russian power. The tension between these two has continued to define Georgian politics since, shaping everything from protests in the streets to the country's progress (or lack thereof) on the EU path. The next section examines how this tension played out in Georgia's domestic arena – through political struggles, civil society activism, and the clash of ideas around sovereignty, neutrality, and nationhood.

Domestic Political and Ideational Reactions Post-2022

The divergence between Georgia's pro-Western society and its ambivalent government has manifested in sharp domestic debates and political struggles since 2022. These contests can be understood through post-imperial lenses – as Georgia grapples with the legacies of being a

former imperial possession – and through the lens of discursive power and resistance, as various actors seek to define the national narrative. Key themes include: debates over sovereignty versus neutrality, the mobilisation of civil society in defence of a European future, the role of the Orthodox Church and conservative groups in echoing or resisting Kremlin-friendly discourse, and the gradual authoritarian drift of the ruling party as it tries to maintain control amid growing public dissent.

Sovereignty vs. "Neutrality"

One foundational debate has been whether Georgia should continue pursuing full Euro-Atlantic integration (seen as the expression of its post-Soviet sovereignty) or whether it should adopt a form of permanent neutrality to placate Russia. Although Georgian Dream officially denies abandoning the NATO/EU course, actions by pro-government figures have signalled a gradual "neutralist" agenda. In 2022, shortly after the Ukraine war began, voices within GD's orbit suggested that Georgia might benefit from a neutral status. By 2023–24 this crystallised: a faction associated with the ruling party launched a movement called "United Neutral Georgia," explicitly advocating for Georgia to renounce its NATO ambitions (Chedia, 2024). Notably, this initiative was led by a former military officer and included others with past Western ties – illustrating the complex post-imperial identity struggles, where even Western-educated elites can pivot under domestic political influence. Analysts observed that calls for Georgian neutrality tend to originate from pro-Russian or ruling party circles and resurface whenever East–West tensions spike, as they did in 2008 and again after 2022. The neutrality narrative is broadly compatible with Moscow's preferred framing: it implies Georgia should accept being in Russia's sphere and foreswear the "provocation" of Western integration. This directly clashes with the public's long-standing will. As of 2023, around 70% of Georgians still support joining NATO and similarly high numbers back EU membership (Civil Georgia, 2025a). These figures have remained robust despite years of Russian

propaganda and the absence of a Membership Action Plan. Therefore, when GD figures flirt with neutrality, they are moving against prevailing public opinion. This has political repercussions. For instance, Bidzina Ivanishvili – GD's billionaire founder and shadow influence – re-emerged from semi-retirement in late 2022 and began openly questioning Georgia's Western trajectory. He blamed a "global war party" in NATO and the EU for provoking Russia in 2008 and insinuated that pro-Western forces want to use Georgia as a pawn (Chedia, 2024).

Such statements legitimise the neutrality camp and signal a possible strategic U-turn at the highest levels. In response, opposition parties and many citizens have decried any talk of neutrality as unacceptable, equating it to capitulation of Georgia's sovereignty. Given Russia's past behaviour, neutrality was presented as a dangerous option: at best, it could leave Georgia in a Finlandised position; at worst, it could expose the country to further loss of sovereignty (Vincent, 2022; Kondrat, 2023). Here we see a classic post-imperial tension: a struggle between those counselling accommodation with the former imperial power (for survival) and those insisting on a clearer break and full sovereignty expressed via Western alignment. Each side wields historical narratives – the former warning against repeating the "recklessness" of the 2008 leadership, the latter warning that forsaking NATO would doom Georgia to vassalage as in Soviet times.

Civil Society and "Resistance Identity"

If the government has leaned toward realpolitik, Georgia's civil society and urban middle class have become the carriers of a "resistance" identity, actively pushing back against any drift towards Russia. Since 2022, Tbilisi has seen some of the largest demonstrations in years, often organised by NGOs, student groups, and opposition coalitions. These are more than just anti-government protests; they represent a grassroots effort to keep Georgia anchored to its pro-Western course. One of the most dramatic episodes came in March 2023, when the

Georgian Dream-dominated parliament advanced a draft "foreign agents" law through its first reading, ostensibly to increase transparency of NGO funding. The law was a near-copy of a Russian law used to label and stifle independent NGOs and media. Interpreting this as a blatant attempt to emulate Kremlin-style repression, Georgians poured into the streets by the tens of thousands, waving EU flags and chanting no to Russian law. (Mills, 2024a)

The scale and intensity of the protests – which continued for days and saw clashes with riot police – forced the government into a rare backtrack: GD withdrew the bill. This victory for civil society became an important symbol of Georgian resilience. Contemporary reporting described the protests as persistent and difficult to contain, with demonstrators continuing to gather despite police pressure and government efforts to restore control (The Economist, 2025). The message was clear: a critical mass of Georgia's population will actively resist measures that appear to pivot the country toward Russia or authoritarianism. Discursively, the protesters reclaimed the narrative. They framed the issue not as East vs. West per se, but as democracy vs. oligarchy, freedom vs. fear. This framing resonates strongly in a nation that sees its post-Soviet journey as a fight to build a real democracy. Indeed, Georgian civil society has become adept at tying local struggles to broader values. In protests, EU flags fly alongside Georgian flags, reinforcing the idea that to be Georgian is to be European – an identity that people are willing to defend on the streets. Over the past year, such resistance has even won tacit support from Western diplomats, who have openly praised the Georgian People's European aspirations even as they criticise the government. The European Parliament in 2022–2023 passed several resolutions supporting Georgian civil society and warning GD against democratic backsliding (Khundadze & Wade, 2025). Discursive power in Georgia is increasingly wielded from below: activists use rallies, social media, and independent outlets to push a narrative of Georgia as a European nation whose will cannot be subverted by either Kremlin pressure or domestic oligarchs. This

ongoing societal activism has constrained GD's room for manoeuvre. Notably, despite its confrontational rhetoric toward Western partners, Georgian Dream has had to publicly maintain that EU and NATO integration remain official policy, enshrined even in the constitution (Khundadze & Wade, 2025). The legitimacy of any Georgian government would be seriously damaged if it openly renounced those goals; this is largely thanks to the normative power that civil society and public opinion hold.

The Orthodox Church and Conservative Discourses

While civil society has pushed liberal-democratic narratives, another influential domestic actor – the Georgian Orthodox Church (GOC) – has been more ambivalent, and at times aligned with Russian-influenced conservative discourse. The GOC is an interesting study in soft power at the domestic level: it embodies Georgia's pre-Soviet identity and enjoys immense respect (often above 80% trust in polls) (Chedia, 2021; Gegeshidze & Mirziashvili, 2021). The Church's official stance on geopolitical matters is usually cautious or neutral, but individual bishops and priests have not shied away from political commentary. The Georgian Orthodox Church has sought to maintain a formally neutral stance, though it has often been perceived as more sympathetic to Moscow, reflecting the broader influence of the Russian Orthodox Church as a foreign policy instrument (Chedia, 2023). Some of those comments mirror Russian talking points. For example, prominent clerics have warned that Westernisation threatens Georgia's traditional values, often citing LGBT rights or secularism as evidence of moral decay from Europe. These assertions dovetail neatly with Moscow's portrayal of the West. In the wake of the 2022 war, a few GOC figures implicitly echoed Russia's position, calling for peace and dialogue (which in practice meant opposing harsher measures on Russia) and criticising internal "warmongers" in language similar to GD's "war party" narrative. A risk assessment by regional analysts argued that the influence of Russian Orthodoxy has strengthened the

visibility of conservative narratives in Georgia that often align with Russian messaging, thereby reinforcing elements of Russian soft power (Chedia, 2022). Odarchenko (2025) similarly argues that the Kremlin has used Russian Orthodox Church networks abroad to circulate anti-Western messages; in Georgia, ROC-linked clergy have framed NATO and the EU as threats to traditional Christian values. This trend puts the Church in a complicated position. On one hand, the GOC is a staunch pillar of Georgian national identity – it vehemently opposes the loss of Abkhazia and South Ossetia and, officially, the Russian Church even recognises those territories as under GOC canonical jurisdiction (U.S. Department of State, 2024). Patriarch Ilia II generally avoided endorsing any pro-Russian political project (Górecki, 2020). On the other hand, the Church's conservative social stances can provide fertile ground for Russian influence operations, which can exploit shared Orthodox identity to drive wedges between Georgia and the liberal West (Górecki, 2020; Odarchenko, 2025). The Church thus embodies a discursive battleground: whether Orthodox Christian identity in Georgia will be read mainly through conservative and sovereigntist narratives, or whether it can be reconciled with Georgia's European choice (Górecki, 2020; Caliskan, 2025). But the Russian effort to harness religion as a political tool remains a significant factor (Odarchenko, 2025).

Authoritarian Drift and Discursive Control by GD

Domestically, Georgian Dream's response to growing criticism has been to tilt toward illiberal methods and tighten its control over the narrative – moves characteristic of a ruling elite insecure about its legitimacy. This represents another facet of post-imperial syndrome: some analysts argue that GD, under Ivanishvili's influence, is reviving patterns of governance reminiscent of other post-Soviet autocracies aligned with Moscow (Gvineria et al., 2024). Since 2022, GD officials and their loyal media have adopted a strident tone against Western diplomats, Georgian opposition, and NGOs. They frequently accuse

these actors of being agents of foreign influence or even conspirators aiming to stage a Euromaidan-style revolution in Tbilisi. The aforementioned notion of a "Global War Party" became a propaganda staple on pro-government TV, used to delegitimise anyone advocating for stronger action against Russia or for quicker EU integration. This weaponisation of discourse serves to rally GD's conservative base and justify repressive steps. For example, GD leaders framed the 2023 foreign agents bill as necessary to expose "agents" doing the West's bidding internally, echoing language used by Putin's regime (Khidasheli, 2025). Although that law was shelved after protests, similar legislation was reintroduced and adopted in 2024, and the government expanded these measures further through the 2025 Foreign Agents Registration Act, which ODIHR warned could further curtail the activities of civil society organisations and negatively affect the rights to freedom of association, peaceful assembly, and expression (OSCE/ODIHR, 2025). GD has also continued to exert pressure on critical media and political opponents, with the arrest and treatment of ex-President Mikheil Saakashvili remaining a prominent example. These actions have often been justified through narratives of protecting the state from foreign influence, "Western puppets," or efforts to drag Georgia into war. GD politicians also accused Ukraine's government of colluding with the Georgian opposition to destabilise the government, a claim for which no evidence was publicly provided and which further strained Georgia–Ukraine relations (Anjaparidze, 2025).

Through this discursive offensive, Georgian Dream has tried to cultivate a segment of the population that sees peace at any cost as the priority and is sceptical of the West. There is some audience for this: older generations who remember the chaos of the 1990s, or those in rural areas more influenced by Church conservatism and Russian media, may find GD's promises of stability and neutrality appealing. However, polls indicate this remains a minority view. As noted, high numbers continue to support EU membership and overwhelmingly blame Russia for the war in Ukraine (Civil Georgia, 2023a). GD's "war

vs. peace" propaganda did not shift the fundamental public alignment – instead, it mostly served to deepen polarisation and undermine GD's own relations with Western partners. By late 2023, the ruling party's anti-West turn had "deeply alienated the European Union and led to the effective freezing of Georgia's membership bid," as Chedia (2024) put it bluntly. This is a striking self-isolation for a government that still claims to represent the country's European aspirations. It highlights an irony: the more GD tries to entrench its power by borrowing Russian-style tactics and narratives, the more it jeopardises Georgia's strategic goals and even its internal cohesion. Georgian society's resilience – manifest in sustained pro-EU protests, independent media investigations, and the refusal of opposition parties to be cowed – means that any attempt to fully pivot Georgia toward Moscow will likely trigger domestic upheaval. Indeed, Moscow appears to recognise this structural weakness in GD's position. As Gvineria (2025) argues, the ruling party has not been able to create a Russia-oriented majority, while sustained protests suggest that a large part of Georgian society rejects a Russia-centred political future. This reality acts as a brake on how far GD can slide. It also represents a form of discursive resistance that has strategic effects: it signals to both the Kremlin and the West that Georgia's public orientation cannot easily be reversed from above. In effect, the people are asserting a veto over any outright reversal of Georgia's pro-Western course.

On the home front Georgia is experiencing a contest between two visions: one of pragmatic accommodation, often bordering on illiberalism, espoused by an elite that emphasises security and stability; and one of democratic resilience and Western integration, espoused by civil society and the general public as a fulfilment of Georgia's post-imperial identity separate from Russia. These opposing forces have not (yet) broken the state, but Georgia's competitive political and civic spaces now coexist with democratic backsliding and growing uncertainty over the country's institutional trajectory. This tug-of-war has slowed reforms and left Georgia in a more uncertain position. It

has also left Georgia somewhat isolated: neither fully embraced by the West (due to democratic concerns) nor of course by Russia (which still distrusts even the GD regime). How this domestic struggle resolves – whether through elections, reforms, or further instability – will determine how effectively Georgia can proceed on its chosen path. What is clear is that societal resilience has prevented a wholesale drift into Russia's orbit, illustrating that power asymmetry alone cannot determine a small state's trajectory if the populace remains psychologically oriented toward a different future. This theme of popular identity countering hegemonic pressure will carry into our examination of Georgia's external alignments after 2022.

Post-2022 Alignments and Regional Reconfiguration

Despite the internal tumult, Georgia's strategic orientation did not undergo a sudden pivot after 2022. Rather, the country entered a phase of careful recalibration in its external alignments – seeking new partnerships and regional roles that could reduce reliance on Russia, while avoiding direct confrontation. In many ways, the geopolitical landscape of the South Caucasus and Black Sea region has been reconfigured by Russia's war on Ukraine, and Georgia initially sought to adapt to this emerging regional order. Using the English School concept of international society and regional order, we can see Georgia at the time engaging in new cooperative arrangements, adhering to international norms of sovereignty (at least rhetorically), and contributing to nascent regional institutions – all initially signalling an effort to integrate into a non-Russian-centric order. Yet Georgia does so with extreme caution, mindful of its fraught security environment. This section examines Georgia's post-2022 foreign policy moves: the pursuit of EU candidacy and NATO ties amid setbacks, participation in regional connectivity projects like the Middle Corridor and Black Sea energy corridor, and the subtle distancing from Russia (short of outright rupture) in diplomatic and economic terms.

EU and NATO Aspirations: Between Progress and Paralysis

In the wake of Ukraine's candidacy and the new momentum for EU enlargement, Georgia accelerated its push for formal EU membership status – only to encounter limited success. In June 2022, the EU postponed Georgia's candidate status, citing governance shortfalls, even as it granted candidacy to Ukraine and Moldova. This was a blow to Georgian society (which had rallied in a massive "March for Europe" in Tbilisi) and a clear warning to GD. After a year of frenzied (if uneven) reform attempts and diplomatic brinkmanship, a breakthrough came: on 8 November 2023, the European Commission recommended that Georgia be granted EU candidate status – recognising Georgia's European perspective but with the understanding that key reforms be completed (The European Council & The Council of the EU, 2024). The European Council followed suit on 14 December 2023, formally granting Georgia candidate status, on the understanding that Georgia would implement the reform priorities identified by the European Commission (European Council, 2023). Optimism in Tbilisi was short-lived. By mid-2024, Georgia's accession process had stalled. After the adoption of the Law on Transparency of Foreign Influence in May 2024, the European Commission warned that the law would undermine Georgia's progress towards EU membership and jeopardise its European trajectory (European Commission, 2024). The reason was not Moscow's opposition, but Georgia's own domestic backsliding. The Council of the EU noted that the Georgian government's course of action ran counter to the EU's founding values and had effectively put Georgia's progress on hold (Council of the EU, 2024). EU leaders also expressed regret over the Georgian government's statement on suspending the country's EU accession process until 2028 (Council of the EU, 2024). The EU's reaction – indicating that Georgia's candidate status was increasingly disconnected from meaningful accession progress in its 2025 assessment – highlights how the Georgian elite's realpolitik (maintaining power at the expense of reform) undermined the country's long-term strategic alignment. Nonetheless, the EU has

kept the door open, pointedly stating it is ready to support Georgians' European aspirations… should the authorities reverse course (European Council & Council of the EU, 2025). In English School terms, Georgia is caught between two international societal pulls: the European international society (with its norms of democracy, rule of law) which Georgia wants to join, and the post-Soviet regional society (authoritarian-leaning, Russia-dominated) which Georgia is partly still in. The coming years will show which way the balance tilts. On the NATO front, developments were similarly cautious. Georgia remains an Enhanced Opportunities Partner of NATO and continues joint exercises and defence capacity building with the Alliance. But political ties have cooled. Western officials privately worry about GD's Moscow-leaning rhetoric, and this translated into public signals. While NATO's 2023 Vilnius Summit Communiqué still reaffirmed the Bucharest Summit decision on Georgia, the 2024 Washington Summit Declaration omitted the traditional formulation that Georgia would eventually become a member of the Alliance, reflecting growing concern about Georgia's domestic political trajectory (NATO, 2023; NATO, 2024). This was widely interpreted as a diplomatic snub, reflecting NATO's unease with Georgia's internal politics and perhaps a desire not to provoke Russia further while it is bogged down in Ukraine. Inside Georgia, this omission "angered and alarmed" the pro-Western public, while GD downplayed it. Meanwhile, figures close to GD stepped up arguments that NATO membership might never happen and that neutrality could be an alternative – as discussed earlier (Dupuy, 2024). Despite this, Georgia has not formally altered its NATO policy. It still contributes (albeit in smaller scale now) to NATO-led missions, and Georgian officers train to NATO standards. In sum, Georgia's Euro-Atlantic path since 2022 has been a tale of aspiration meeting reality: the aspiration remains enshrined (even in Georgia's constitution), but the reality is that under current governance, progress has slowed to a crawl. The regional order implications are significant: Georgia risks lagging behind Ukraine and Moldova, potentially becoming a "grey zone" country, which is exactly what the English School would warn against

– a state with ambiguous status in the society of states is often a zone of instability.

Middle Corridor and Black Sea Initiatives: Weaving a New Regional Web

One area where Georgia has moved forward is in regional connectivity and infrastructure projects that bypass Russia. With war severing conventional Eurasian transit routes via Russia, the so-called Middle Corridor (Trans-Caspian International Transport Route) has gained strategic importance. Georgia lies at the heart of this corridor, linking the Caspian Sea (and thus Central Asia/China) to the Black Sea and Europe via Azerbaijan and Turkey. Recognising the opportunity, Georgia joined Azerbaijan, Kazakhstan, and Turkey in early 2022 to sign cooperation agreements on boosting the Middle Corridor's capacity. In March 2022, just a month after the invasion of Ukraine, these governments issued a declaration to streamline customs and invest in infrastructure along the route. The results are already visible: trade along the Middle Corridor has surged. In 2021, only about 530,000 tons of cargo went this way; by 2023 it was about 2.3 million tons, a more than fourfold jump (Dupuy, 2024). In the first half of 2023 alone, volume was up 77% year-on-year (Dupuy, 2024). Although still a fraction (~5%) of the capacity of the massive Northern Corridor through Russia, the Middle Corridor's growth is a direct consequence of actors like Georgia aligning to provide alternatives to Russian routes (Dupuy, 2024). This reflects a nascent regional order where countries of the Caucasus and Central Asia cooperate for mutual benefit and reduce dependence on the former hegemon. Georgia's role here is pivotal: as the only Caucasus country with Black Sea ports not under Russian control, it is the gateway to Europe. Tbilisi has capitalised on this by reviving the Anaklia deep-sea port project (stalled for years, now with a new investor) and expanding the Poti port. Furthermore, Georgia, Azerbaijan, Turkey, and Armenia (interestingly) have discussed potentially reopening transport links like the Zangezur corridor,

although that remains fraught with political tension. Still, the trajectory is clear – Georgia is investing in East–West corridors, not North–South (i.e., not routes that increase reliance on Russia or Iran). This is geopolitical alignment via infrastructure. It strengthens ties with Turkey (a NATO member that has become Georgia's top trading partner) and with Central Asian states looking westward. It also aligns with EU interests: the EU launched a Global Gateway initiative, part of which supports Middle Corridor development, and European firms are increasingly interested in these routes for China-Europe trade. In English School terms, Georgia is participating in building a regional international society based on commerce, multilateral agreements, and shared interest in freedom of navigation – elements of order quite distinct from a hegemonic sphere.

Another landmark initiative is the Black Sea "Green Energy" Corridor. In December 2022, Georgia, Azerbaijan, Romania, and Hungary – with EU backing – signed an agreement to lay an undersea high-voltage cable connecting the South Caucasus to Europe. This ambitious project envisages exporting Azerbaijan's and Georgia's renewable electricity under the Black Sea to Romania, and onward to the European grid. The consortium was formalised in 2023–2024, and by mid-2026 the project remained under development, with the feasibility study expected to be completed in July 2026 (Interfax, 2026). If completed, laying the cable is expected to take three to four years, and the European Commission plans to provide €2.3 billion for the project (Interfax, 2026). Strategically, this is a game changer: it links Georgia directly into the European energy network, reducing its (and the region's) reliance on Russia or Iran for energy transit. It also cements Georgia's partnership with Azerbaijan and Romania. Interestingly, this idea was born directly out of the 2022 war's fallout – when Russia weaponised energy, the EU looked for new sources and routes. Georgia stepped up to offer its geography as part of the solution. From a regional order perspective, the Black Sea cable represents the kind of emerging cooperative institution that the English School notes as part of international society

building – here we have four states pooling resources for a common good, within a broader normative framework of green transition and connectivity. It is explicitly aligned with EU priorities, showing Georgia integrating itself into European structures functionally, even as formal political integration stalls. Georgian officials have touted the project as "Georgia becoming an energy hub linking Europe and Asia" – a positive vision quite at odds with the dependence on a Russia-centred regional order. Indeed, Moscow was notably displeased with this project and with Georgia's overall traffic in sanction-compliant goods, but it has limited tools to intervene short of open aggression.

Cautious Distancing from Russia

While Georgia has not joined Western sanctions on Russia, it has quietly moved to distance itself from Moscow in certain domains since 2022 – careful not to cross red lines that would invite retaliation. For example, unlike Belarus, which backed the Kremlin politically, Georgia firmly condemned the moves and remains resolute in not recognising Russia's annexation of Crimea, Donetsk, Luhansk, or any other Ukrainian territories. Tbilisi also kept a longstanding policy: no restoration of diplomatic relations with Russia until Moscow withdraws its recognition of Abkhazia and South Ossetia's "independence." Top officials reiterated this in 2023 when rumours of talks arose – Georgia will not normalise with Russia on Moscow's terms (Anjaparidze, 2025). This is a principled stance anchored in the international norm of territorial integrity, and it signals to the world (and Georgians) that however accommodating GD might be in practice, it has not conceded on the fundamental issue of sovereignty. Additionally, Georgia has continued to cooperate with Western export control regimes to prevent sanctions-busting through its territory (albeit under pressure). The government insists it is "strictly monitoring" sanctioned individuals and cargo with Western partners (Khundadze & Wade, 2025). Western reports have indeed found Georgian authorities turning back some suspicious shipments, though

critics say enforcement should be tighter. Another subtle shift: Georgia's tone in international forums. Georgia has voted for every UN General Assembly resolution condemning Russia's aggression against Ukraine and has co-sponsored others. In the OSCE and Council of Europe, Georgia aligned with Western statements on Ukraine. These are not new – Georgia traditionally voted this way – but in 2022–2023 it sometimes took a more vocal role than before, perhaps to compensate for not sanctioning. For instance, Georgia joined 42 other States Parties in referring the situation in Ukraine to the International Criminal Court in March 2022 (International Criminal Court, 2022). In bilateral terms, high-level visits with Russia have remained frozen (no Georgian PM or FM has met their Russian counterparts openly in this period). Meanwhile, Georgian outreach to other partners increased: cooperation with Türkiye deepened on security (border, defence industry) and economic fronts; ties with China also saw a boost with negotiations on a strategic partnership and Chinese interest in Georgian ports (here Georgia hedges a bit, engaging China as a balance). But crucially, ties with Russia's own allies have cooled – for example, Georgia kept its distance from the Eurasian Economic Union and CSTO discussions, and its relations with Iran are minimal (despite Iran being a major actor in the region, Georgia aligns more with Western concerns about Iran).

However, true to the notion of "cautious distancing," Georgia also avoided provocative steps. Rather than opposing the restoration of direct air links, the Georgian government welcomed Russia's unilateral lifting of the 2019 flight ban in 2023, a move criticised by the EU (Gvineria et al., 2024; Light, 2023). The government justified it on humanitarian and economic grounds (Georgians in Russia needing connectivity, plus tourist revenue). Likewise, trade with Russia actually increased in 2022–23 (as noted earlier), partly due to Russia re-routing exports through friendly countries. Georgian wine exports to Russia hit record volumes (Transparency International Georgia, 2022). This economic pragmatism shows the limit of how far Tbilisi will distance itself: as long as direct confrontation can be avoided, they will continue

certain ties. Indeed, Georgia became a haven for Russian exiles ("relokanti") fleeing mobilisation – over 100,000 Russians took up temporary residence, boosting the local economy but also stirring some social unease (Gvineria et al., 2024). GD saw this influx as economically favourable and refused to impose visa requirements on Russians, again citing human rights and business. This indicates Georgia's balancing act: distancing in the political-security sphere (no alliances with Russia, no recognition of territories, votes against Russia in UN) while maintaining a degree of engagement in the economic-social sphere to avoid provoking Moscow.

From the vantage of regional international society (English School), Georgia's post-2022 external alignments reveal an increasingly contested orientation. While society and much of the country's strategic discourse remain anchored in aspirations for EU and NATO integration, government policy has often reflected a more cautious approach toward Moscow. Even so, the broader trajectory suggests a gradual movement away from the old Russian-led "Near Abroad" concept and toward a more plural regional order. The South Caucasus region as a whole is in flux: Armenia, frustrated with Russia's security failures, is looking more actively toward Western partners and Iran; Azerbaijan is acting with greater strategic independence and is aligned with Türkiye; Türkiye itself is acting as a regional power with its own influence in the Caucasus. Russia's grip is loosening: its peacekeepers in Karabakh have proved ineffective, and its credibility as a security guarantor has weakened sharply, especially in Armenian eyes. In this context, Georgia's value to both the West and the regional balance has arguably increased. Western powers see Georgia as a critical transit and communication node. Regionally, Georgia could integrate further into the emerging lattice of connections across the Black Sea and Caspian. This is essentially the formation of a more plural regional order, with rules and practices distinct from those under a hierarchical Russian hegemon. Georgia's challenge is to move more deeply into that order without triggering Russian ire in the short term.

Internationally Georgia after 2022 can be characterised as aligning West and regionally, but without crossing the Rubicon into outright opposition to Russia. It continues to proclaim Euro-Atlantic aspirations and has made concrete gains (EU candidate status) even as those hang in the balance. It has embraced regional projects that diminish Russian centrality (Middle Corridor, Black Sea cable), weaving itself into a cooperative fabric with neighbours and EU/Turkey. And it maintains a firm stance on its own territorial sovereignty, refusing to legitimise Russia's conquests. All this points to a long-term trajectory of loosening from Moscow's orbit – a gradual erosion of hegemonic influence. The fact that Russia has not aggressively retaliated (beyond verbal warnings) is telling; Moscow is bogged down in Ukraine and likely calculates that as long as Georgia isn't blatantly joining NATO or sanctioning it, it can tolerate these steps. Indeed, the Kremlin's primary goal seems to be to keep the current GD government in power, as it views GD (or specifically Ivanishvili) as preferable to a more pro-Western alternative (Gvineria, 2025). Gvineria (2025) further argues that Georgia has become central to Russia's remaining position in the South Caucasus and that a renewed Georgian commitment to Euro-Atlantic integration would further weaken Moscow's regional influence. That is the strategic big picture: Georgia is the final piece that could flip in the South Caucasus, after Armenia and Azerbaijan have started moving out of Moscow's shadow. The war in Ukraine has accelerated these trends and opened new possibilities for Georgia, but fully capitalising on them will depend on internal political will and stability.

Georgia's Balancing Strategy and the Limits of Russian Influence

Georgia's trajectory since Russia's war on Ukraine exemplifies resistance without rupture – a nuanced case of a small state incrementally shedding the influence of a regional hegemon through a combination of societal resilience and strategic ambiguity. Under conditions of extreme power asymmetry, where a full break with Moscow could provoke severe retaliation, Georgia has not staged a

dramatic westward leap (no "second Rose Revolution" in foreign policy). Yet, Russia's influence in Georgia has faced growing limits. This erosion is evident in Georgia's enduring pro-Western public identity, its participation in alternative regional orders, and the diminishing returns of Russia's soft-power and coercive tactics. Theoretically, Georgia illuminates how hegemonic stability can decay when the hegemon's material power is not matched by legitimacy or ideological appeal. Despite Russia's military dominance and economic leverage, it has failed to gain broad legitimacy in Georgian society; indeed, its actions (2008 war, 2022 invasion of Ukraine) have reinforced an oppositional Georgian identity. In an ontological security sense, Russia's aggression created an "other" against which Georgians define themselves – as a nation that stands for independence and European belonging. This has provided a wellspring of societal resilience that constrains what any Georgian government can do.

From a Realist perspective, Georgia's cautious policies are rational: no small state would invite war with a vastly stronger neighbour. Realism explains GD's balancing act and reluctance to join sanctions or military aid to Ukraine. But realism alone cannot explain why Georgia hasn't simply bandwagoned with Russia to ensure security (as some regimes might have). That's where identity and ontological security approach provide insight: Georgia's national narrative of striving towards the West acted as a kind of ideational structure that even the ruling elite could not completely overturn. The elite's legitimacy partly rests on at least lip service to that narrative (hence GD insisting it is pro-EU even while attacking Western officials). Meanwhile, Soft Power dynamics show that Russia's attempts to co-opt Georgian influencers (through the church, media, business ties) have hit a ceiling. They have nurtured a pro-Russian fringe, but not a majority – arguably because the legitimacy of the Western model (democracy, prosperity, "return to the European family") remains very attractive in Georgia (Gvineria, 2025).

Hegemonic stability and imperial sphere concepts remind us that Russia's influence was built on a certain order – one where Georgia's

economic and security needs were met within a Russia-centric system. That system is now weakening: economically, Georgia is finding alternative markets and routes; in security, Russia's distraction and underperformance (Ukraine proving that the Russian military can be bogged down) reduces the awe of its power. Russia's credibility as a regional hegemon has weakened across the post-Soviet region (Gvineria, 2025). Post-Imperial theory would say Georgia is moving further away from inherited imperial frameworks – a process that started in 1991, saw setbacks in 1993 and 2008, but gained new urgency in 2022. The debates in Georgia (neutrality vs. sovereignty, East vs. West) are essentially post-imperial conversations about national destiny after empire. The fact that younger Georgians overwhelmingly see their future with Europe suggests the post-colonial identity has tipped towards European, even as older and rural populations retain some nostalgia or fear-based caution tied to the old imperial centre.

The English School's regional order perspective highlights how Georgia's case fits into a broader pattern in Eurasia post-2022: the old Russia-led order is fracturing, and a more pluralistic regional society is emerging, with new rules and participants (Turkey, EU, China to some extent). Georgia is aligning with an order predicated on sovereign equality and voluntary cooperation, in contrast to the hierarchical order Russia tried to impose. Even as domestic governance issues delay Georgia's formal integration with the West, Georgia is socially and materially integrating through regional infrastructure and normative convergence with Europe.

Finally, the concept of discursive power and resistance has been central to Georgia's story. Competing discourses – "peace vs. war," "West vs. tradition," "democracy vs. foreign agents" – have been wielded by different actors to shape policy. Georgian civil society's adept use of discourse connecting national pride with European integration was a form of resistance that blunted both Russian and domestic hegemonic narratives. Meanwhile, GD's use of nearly Orwellian doublespeak ("foreign agents" = those seeking Western-style transparency, "war

party" = those supporting Ukraine) shows the power of discourse to polarise and possibly redirect a country's course. For now, the resistance discourse seems to have the upper hand: it has prevented an outright U-turn in foreign policy and kept Georgia's European dream still alive. The contested 2024 parliamentary elections became a crucial test of whether Georgia's pro-European resistance discourse could translate into political change. However, concerns over an uneven playing field, pressure on voters, and deep political polarisation contributed to a post-election crisis that further deepened the country's institutional and geopolitical uncertainty (OSCE/ODIHR, 2024).

Georgia presents a compelling case of a small nation navigating between resilience and realpolitik. It has not ruptured relations with Russia – no dramatic exit from the Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS) occurred (Georgia already left CIS in 2009), nor has it joined sanctions – but through myriad small steps, it is less and less within Russia's orbit. In the long game, this amounts to a significant erosion of Russian regional influence. Georgia's experience resonates with that of other post-Soviet states under pressure, notably Armenia. Yerevan long practiced a balancing act, reliant on Russia for security while flirting with the West. But after seeing Moscow's inaction during the 2020 Karabakh war and subsequent Azerbaijani advances, Armenia has shifted from balancing to overt disillusionment with Russia (Gvineria, 2025). It is openly questioning its alliances and seeking new partners, even at the cost of angering the Kremlin. In a way, Armenia's change is more abrupt – a sharp pivot born of betrayal. Georgia's shift has been slower and more society-driven, but both point to a weakening of the post-Soviet hegemonic order. In Georgia's case, the interplay of power, identity, and discourse produced an outcome where the country resisted subordination to Moscow's will without a direct collision. This model – of gradual hegemonic erosion under asymmetric power conditions – may well characterise the next phase of international politics in Russia's neighbourhood. It underscores that the decline of influence can happen not just through revolutions or alliances, but

through the steady accumulation of societal choices, minor alignment shifts, and the failure of the hegemon to win legitimacy. Georgia stands as a testament to the idea that even under the shadow of a great power, small nations have agency – the agency to inch toward freedom in ways that, over time, can redefine the regional landscape.

ARMENIA – BREAKDOWN OF TRUST AND A TENTATIVE WESTERN TURN

Introduction

Armenia's strategic realignment in the wake of the 2020 and 2023 Nagorno-Karabakh crises illustrates how Russia's war on Ukraine and its spillover effects have eroded Moscow's influence in the post-Soviet region. Historically, Armenia was one of Russia's most loyal security partners – a member of the Collective Security Treaty Organisation (CSTO) hosting a Russian military base – often cited as a "Russian stronghold in the South Caucasus" (Sukiasyan, 2024). Yet in the past few years, Yerevan's disillusionment with Russia's security role has deepened, with Armenian Prime Minister Nikol Pashinyan now openly questioning the value of the alliance with Moscow. This chapter analyses Armenia's shift through a combination of realist and post-imperial lenses, alongside concepts of hegemonic stability, ontological security, and regional order, to capture both the material and ideational dimensions of this transformation.

Empirically, the chapter traces Russia–Armenia relations from a pre-2022 period of apparent loyalty to the post-2022 rupture following two Karabakh wars. The analysis shows that Armenia's security dilemma vis-à-vis Azerbaijan, once assuaged by reliance on Russian protection, has been exacerbated by Russia's failure to defend Armenian interests (Sukiasyan, 2021). The result is a breakdown of trust and a tentative turn toward Western partners, an inflection point in Russia's post-Soviet hegemony. Armenia's shift brings together several of the theoretical concerns developed in this study: power asymmetry, security provision, legitimacy, identity, regional order, and discursive resistance. In short, Armenia's estrangement from Russia is an example of the broader erosion of Russia's regional influence after 2022 – a trend that, as the Conclusion will note, finds parallels in cases like Moldova's westward turn.

Russia's Pre-2022 Influence and Instruments in Armenia

Before 2020, Russia exercised extensive influence over Armenia's security and foreign policy, consistent with a hegemonic stability arrangement in the Caucasus. Through the CSTO alliance and a bilateral defence treaty, Russia was Armenia's principal security guarantor, deterring Azerbaijani or Turkish aggression by its very presence. A Russian military base in Gyumri and regular arms transfers (often at subsidised prices or on credit) underpinned this hard power leverage (Sukiasyan, 2021; Bocharnikov, 2021). In return, Armenia closely aligned with Moscow's strategic agenda: it joined the Eurasian Economic Union (EAEU) in 2015 and abstained from Western security initiatives. This patron–client dynamic resembled classic realist bargaining: Armenia traded some sovereignty for Russia's protection. Agnieszka Miarka (2022) observes that Armenia, as a mid-sized state, had "limited capacity to be a patron for [the Nagorno-Karabakh Republic] including being a guarantor of [its] survival" on its own.

Yerevan therefore outsourced its security to Moscow; a calculus grounded in power asymmetry. Russia buttressed its influence with soft power and economic ties as well. Public opinion in Armenia historically viewed Russia favourably as a "big brother" and protector of the Armenian people (a narrative dating back to Tsarist and Soviet times). Soviet-era affinities – the widespread use of the Russian language, the Armenian Apostolic Church's cordial ties with the Russian Orthodox Church, and memories of Russia's historical role as a protector of Armenians in the Ottoman-Russian imperial context – all contributed to a reservoir of goodwill. Economically, Russia became Armenia's largest trade partner and source of remittances. By 2020, remittance inflows accounted for about 10.5% of Armenia's GDP, with Russia remaining a major source of labour-related transfers, giving Moscow an important but not overwhelming source of economic leverage over Yerevan (Trading Economics, 2026). Culturally and informationally, Russian media had a strong presence in Armenia, reinforcing pro-Russian narratives and the notion of Armenia

belonging to a Russian-led "civilisational space." These instruments align with soft power and legitimacy paradigms: Russia cultivated an image as Armenia's indispensable ally, bolstering Moscow's legitimate authority (in Armenian eyes) to lead regional affairs.

Crucially, the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict was the linchpin of Armenia's reliance on Russia. Since the first Karabakh war in the 1990s, Armenia had effectively supported the ethnic Armenian authorities in Nagorno-Karabakh (the unrecognised Artsakh Republic). This put Armenia at odds with Azerbaijan and Turkey, making deterrence of Azerbaijani attack the top national security priority. Moscow positioned itself as the arbiter of this conflict: it armed both Armenia and Azerbaijan (maintaining leverage over both) and led the OSCE Minsk Group mediation efforts. While this "managed conflict" strategy kept Baku and Yerevan dependent on Moscow, it meant Armenia often had to follow Russia's lead. For example, Russia discouraged Armenia from formally recognising Nagorno-Karabakh's independence to keep leverage in negotiations; Yerevan complied, deferring to Moscow's diplomatic strategy. As Alexander Krylov (2025) notes, Russia and Armenia long described their relationship as a strategic partnership, but even then "each of the states had its own interests, and they often did not coincide," particularly on the Karabakh issue and relations with Turkey. Tensions existed beneath the alliance rhetoric: Pashinyan's rise to power in the 2018 Velvet Revolution brought a reformist government that sought to prosecute former officials closely associated with the old pro-Russian establishment and assert greater autonomy in foreign policy, raising concerns in the Kremlin (Sukiasyan, 2021). Still, until 2020 Armenia proceeded carefully. Pashinyan reassured Moscow that Armenia's foreign and security policy priorities would remain unchanged after the revolution (Sukiasyan, 2021). Any moves toward autonomy were measured: Pashinyan did attempt to curb some Russian influence internally, but the need to sustain the strategic alliance forced his government into a policy of appeasement toward Russia (Sukiasyan, 2021). In sum, on the eve of 2020, Armenia

epitomised the "loyal ally" in Russia's post-Soviet sphere: militarily and economically dependent, diplomatically aligned, and socially conditioned to accept Russian leadership. The expectation from a realist standpoint was that this hierarchy would persist so long as Russia provided security and Armenia had no alternative patron.

The 2020–2023 Turning Point in Karabakh and Russian Credibility

The Second Karabakh War of 2020 (Sep–Nov 2020) and its aftermath marked the beginning of Armenia's rupture with Moscow. Azerbaijan's Turkish-backed offensive overwhelmed Armenian defences in Nagorno-Karabakh, resulting in a decisive Armenian defeat. Moscow's role during this war was ambivalent: it declined direct military intervention on Armenia's behalf (arguing that CSTO obligations did not extend to Karabakh, since it is internationally recognised as Azerbaijani territory), yet it negotiated the ceasefire of November 9, 2020. As Jović-Lazić (2021) argued, Russia's priority in 2020 was not unconditional support for Armenia, but the preservation of its broader regional position: maintaining influence over Armenia, preserving working relations with Azerbaijan, limiting Turkey's role, and reaffirming itself as the key mediator through the deployment of peacekeepers. At the same time, Turkey's open political, logistical, and military support for Azerbaijan reflected a more assertive and autonomous Turkish foreign policy, and helped shift the military and regional balance in Baku's favour (Jović-Lazić, 2022). Under that trilateral armistice, Azerbaijan regained large swathes of territory, while Russia inserted approximately 1,960 peacekeepers into the residual Armenian-controlled part of Nagorno-Karabakh. The outcome generated a profound sense of insecurity and disappointment in Armenia, with many questioning the reliability of Russia's security guarantees. Domestically, protests erupted in Yerevan against Pashinyan's government for the defeat – but criticism also turned to Russia, whom many Armenians blamed for not doing enough to save Karabakh. Pashinyan initially stayed the course with Moscow, hoping

to salvage security guarantees. Sukiasyan (2021) argues that Armenia's defeat in the 2020 war deepened its security dilemma and increased its dependence on Russia, since Russian peacekeepers became the main force separating Karabakh Armenians from further Azerbaijani advances. For a time, Armenia had little choice but to cling to Russia, even as trust frayed. This dynamic is captured by asymmetric alliance theory: the junior ally feared abandonment but also entrapment in Russia's schemes, while the patron could exploit the client's vulnerability (Çakmak & Cüneyt Özşahin, 2023).

However, Armenian trust in Russia deteriorated further in the events of 2022–2023. Two developments – Russia's own war in Ukraine and Azerbaijan's renewed aggression – combined to dramatically expose the limits of Russian power. Moscow's February 2022 invasion of Ukraine was a strategic earthquake that drew Russia's attention and resources away from the Caucasus. Suddenly, Armenia's patron was bogged down in a costly European war and facing unprecedented Western sanctions. Azerbaijan sensed an opportunity: in September 2022, Baku launched major cross-border attacks into Armenia proper (not just Karabakh), resulting in hundreds of casualties and renewed fighting on internationally recognised Armenian territory. Pashinyan appealed to the CSTO for assistance under the mutual defence clause, but no meaningful military support followed (The Guardian, 2022). Russia's "inertia" in responding to its ally's plea was widely noted (Çakmak & Cüneyt Özşahin, 2023). One interpretation is that Moscow's reluctance reflected broader strategic considerations, including the desire to preserve relations with Azerbaijan and avoid a confrontation with Turkey (Safiyev, 2025). Regardless of motive, the effect was clear: Armenia concluded that the CSTO's security guarantees could no longer be relied upon. Pashinyan later lamented that the CSTO was seen as a threat in Armenia after it did nothing to stop Azerbaijani aggression (Sukiasyan, 2024). By early 2023, Yerevan refused to host CSTO military exercises and began seeking alternative security partnerships, a notable shift for a treaty ally.

The final straw came with a brief but decisive Azerbaijani offensive in Nagorno-Karabakh on September 19, 2023. At this point, a Russian peacekeeping contingent was stationed in Karabakh (mandated until 2025), ostensibly to prevent exactly such an escalation. Yet when Azerbaijan moved to capture the remaining Armenian enclaves, the Russian peacekeepers did not intervene. Within one day Azerbaijan achieved its objectives, forcing the disarmament of the Karabakh Armenian forces (Tolstykh, 2024). The self-proclaimed Nagorno-Karabakh Republic announced its dissolution shortly thereafter. The offensive was followed by a weeklong exodus of over 100,000 ethnic Armenians from Nagorno-Karabakh, amounting to more than 80% of the region's residents (Associated Press, 2023). For Armenians, this was a national catastrophe – and Moscow's failure to prevent it was seen as a betrayal. Vladislav Tolstykh (2024) argues that the outcome of the 2020 war, marked by Azerbaijan's clear military dominance and uncertainties in the ceasefire, set the stage for renewed conflict in 2023. When that war came, Russia did not act as protector: a Russian-brokered ceasefire was announced, but only after Azerbaijan had achieved complete victory. Many Armenian observers concluded that Moscow had prioritised its relationship with Baku over Armenian security concerns, reinforcing perceptions of alliance unreliability in an asymmetric relationship. Armenian officials openly questioned what value Russia's peacekeepers had if they could not even keep a corridor (the Lachin corridor) open for humanitarian aid in the preceding months of blockade. By late 2023, Pashinyan offered his sharpest critique yet, stating that relying on Russia for security had been a strategic mistake. He added that Armenia would need to depend on its own capabilities or seek new partners in the future, clearly signalling a shift toward the West (Osborn, 2023).

The change in Armenian policy was symbolised by a diplomatic shift: In 2023, Pashinyan publicly affirmed Armenia's recognition of Azerbaijan's territorial integrity, including Nagorno-Karabakh, as part of efforts to advance a peace process (Sahakian & Musayelian, 2023).

This amounted to conceding Karabakh – a bitter decision forced by strategic reality. Koibaev and Revazov (2024) note that despite this recognition (anathema to many Armenians), the issue of Karabakh's status "remains relevant" and contentious in regional security debates. Indeed, Armenia's move was part of a broader shift to salvage peace and reorient its foreign relations. Armenian-Turkish relations, too, saw tremors. Turkey's direct military support to Azerbaijan in 2020 – including armed drones, military advisors, and Syrian mercenaries – had "renewed long-dormant Armenian perceptions of a neighbouring threat," drawing analogies to the 1915 genocide (Papazian, 2024). Any post-2020 attempts by Yerevan to normalise relations with Ankara (there were talks of opening the border) stalled once the 2023 Karabakh war confirmed Turkey's role in Armenia's defeat. As Hrag Papazian (2024) further observes, for many Armenians, the historical enemy had returned in force, actively aiding Azerbaijan in a region that had long been considered part of Moscow's sphere of influence. This underscored Russia's waning clout: NATO-member Turkey was now the power broker alongside triumphant Azerbaijan, while Russia appeared increasingly unable or unwilling to shape events on the ground. By Realist metrics, the balance of power in the Caucasus had shifted decisively.

From a hegemonic stability perspective, Russia's inability (or unwillingness) to uphold regional order – by protecting an ally or enforcing a ceasefire – dealt a severe blow to its authority. Scholars have begun describing Russia's position in Eurasia as increasingly weakened after the war in Ukraine (Fridrichová & Kříž, 2025). Safiyev (2025) similarly identify the loss of Karabakh in 2023 as one of Russia's major foreign losses of face in the post-Soviet region. Armenia's strategic breakdown with Russia thus represents a critical stage in the unravelling of Moscow's sphere of influence. Ontologically, Russia has prided itself on being the protector of Armenian security since the 19th century; that narrative now lies in tatters, undermining an element of Russia's identity as regional hegemon. Conversely, Armenia's own

ontological security – its sense of self as a sovereign state with a secure identity – was threatened by dependence on an unreliable patron. The stage was set for domestic political and ideational reactions to this dramatic shift.

Domestic Political and Ideational Reactions in Armenia

The fallout of the 2020 and 2023 defeats produced seismic shifts in Armenian domestic politics and identity discourse. Immediately after the 2020 war, Armenia underwent a period of soul-searching and political turmoil. Prime Minister Pashinyan faced fierce criticism and calls to resign (he eventually survived a 2021 election, renewing his mandate). Notably, the loudest opposition voices were allied to former presidents Kocharyan and Sargsyan – figures seen as staunchly pro-Russian. They argued that Pashinyan's insufficient deference to Moscow had "provoked" Armenia's plight. This reflects a discursive struggle internally: one narrative blamed the West (and Pashinyan's Western contacts) for undermining the alliance with Russia, while another emergent narrative blamed Russia itself for betraying Armenian interests. Over 2021–2023, the latter view gained unprecedented traction among the Armenian public. Surveys tell the story. A 2019 poll found a majority of Armenians named Russia as their country's closest friend and security partner (far ahead of any other country). By contrast, an International Republican Institute survey in late 2023 revealed that 66% of Armenians viewed relations with Russia as "negative," and 40% now considered Russia a "political threat" – a stunning reversal of sentiment (Center for Insights in Survey Research, 2024; Chukhuran et al., 2024). This collapse in public trust illustrates the free-fall of Russian soft power and legitimacy in Armenia. Where Moscow once enjoyed heartfelt gratitude, it is now openly reviled in Armenian media and popular culture. For example, Russian state TV broadcasts – once common in Armenia – have been curtailed amid accusations of biased coverage. Armenian social media brims with anger at Russia's "betrayal," and even Armenia's normally Russia-

friendly Apostolic Church has struck a more nationalistic tone, emphasising Armenia's need for self-reliance.

Politically, Pashinyan's government has navigated a delicate path, but with a clear trend: moving away from its previous dependence on Moscow. Throughout 2022–23, Pashinyan issued unprecedented critiques of the CSTO and Russia's peacekeepers. In a pointed symbolic move, Armenia sent humanitarian aid to Ukraine for the first time since Russia's 2022 invasion, and Pashinyan's wife, Anna Hakobyan, visited Kyiv in September 2023 to deliver it—gestures that would have been highly unlikely only a few years earlier (Khulian, 2023). In 2023, Armenia ratified the Rome Statute of the International Criminal Court, with the Statute entering into force on 1 February 2024; because the ICC had issued an arrest warrant for Vladimir Putin, the move was widely perceived in Moscow as an unfriendly political signal (ICC, 2023). Such actions reflect Armenia's assertion of agency and a reorientation of its identity from Russia's junior ally to a more independent, perhaps even Western-leaning, state. This shift can be interpreted through post-imperial lenses: Armenia is shedding the expectations of the old patron-client framework and renegotiating its place in the international system. Narek Sukiasyan characterises it as Armenia seeking "diversified security cooperation, especially with Western countries and India," after CSTO inaction – a pivot catalysed by Azerbaijan's aggression and "the perceived inaction, if not complacency, of the CSTO." (Sukiasyan, 2024). At the same time, Armenia remains economically intertwined with Russia (for example, trade with Russia actually surged in 2022–25 due to rerouted commerce under sanctions). This has tempered the speed of Armenia's turn away, resulting in "a new and modified balancing act" – engagement with the West is deeper than ever, but some pragmatism tempers full abandonment of Russia (Sukiasyan, 2024). Indeed, Pashinyan has generally framed these decisions in terms of Armenian national interests rather than explicit anti-Russian rhetoric.

From an ontological security standpoint, Armenia's identity narrative is shifting from that of a steadfast Russian ally (part of Russia's imagined community) to that of a sovereign nation charting its own course. This involves reframing historical memory – for instance, emphasising that Armenia survived for centuries before Russian rule, and that independence (even from Russia) is essential for security. The ontological "imperial anxiety" on the Russian side (the fear of losing its status and historic role) has met with an ontological awakening on the Armenian side (the realisation that clinging to the imperial protector endangers Armenia's existence). The clash of these narratives has manifest political effects. In late 2023, as Yerevan hosted European diplomats and even U.S. troops for a small joint exercise, Moscow retaliated rhetorically and practically – e.g., Russia's border guards in Armenia were reported to have scaled down cooperation, and Russian officials accused Pashinyan of "ingratitude." The discursive power Moscow once wielded in Armenian politics – through local proxies, media, and shared language – is being met with discursive resistance. Pashinyan's speeches now stress "sovereignty" and hint that Armenia's alliance choices must serve *Armenian* security above all, not anachronistic loyalty. In a series of symbolic moves, Armenia increasingly departed from Moscow's line in international affairs, including voting in 2025 for a UN resolution referring to "Russian aggression" against Ukraine and declining to host the December 2024 Eurasian Economic Union summit in Yerevan (Azatutyun, 2025; Galstian, 2024). Each of these small acts signals a recalibration of Armenia's strategic identity. As Krylov observes, by 2025 the once "strategic partnership" between Armenia and Russia had degraded into "strategic uncertainty" – neither open confrontation nor genuine alliance, but a limbo reflecting broken trust. The differences in positions on key issues (Karabakh's status, relations with Turkey, and Armenia's democratisation) have come to the fore and are no longer papered over by polite rhetoric (Krylov, 2025).

Domestically Armenia has undergone a paradigm shift: where once pro-Russian sentiment and elite consensus on the alliance reigned, now there is plurality of debate and significant anti-Russian undercurrents. This is not to say Armenia has become "anti-Russian" overnight or aligned with the West as a fait accompli. Rather, Armenia is in the throes of "ontological reorientation," testing a new identity as a state that can say "no" to Moscow. Notably, Pashinyan remains in power despite Russian rumoured efforts to undermine him – suggesting that Armenian voters prioritise peace and sovereignty over clinging to a failing protector. The crushing experiences of 2020 and 2023 have forged a new collective memory: one where reliance on an external hegemon is seen as dangerously naive. This lays the groundwork for Armenia's foreign policy realignment discussed next, and it underscores how discursively and politically, Armenia is resisting Russia's erstwhile hegemonic narrative. In IR terms, Armenia is transitioning from a bandwagoning strategy to a hedging or balancing strategy vis-à-vis Russia, reflecting a dramatic change in threat perception.

Post-2022 Alignments and Regional Reconfiguration

Armenia's strategic pivot since 2022 is reconfiguring alignments in the South Caucasus and exemplifies the broader erosion of Russian-led regional order. On the security front, Armenia has increasingly looked to Western and non-Russian partners to fill the vacuum left by Moscow. In 2023, Armenia hosted an EU monitoring mission on its border with Azerbaijan; the EU Mission in Armenia was launched on 20 February 2023 under the Common Security and Defence Policy (Council of the European Union, 2023), marking a significant departure from Armenia's previous reliance on Russian-led security arrangements. It also conducted a small military exercise with U.S. forces (Exercise "Eagle Partner" in September 2023), signalling a willingness to deepen security cooperation with Western partners (Sukiasyan, 2024). These steps were modest in capability terms but highly symbolic: they demonstrated to the world (and to Moscow) that Armenia no longer

considers its foreign policy a one-club membership. Concurrently, Yerevan deepened defence cooperation with France and India: France supplied military equipment, including armoured vehicles, air-surveillance radars, and artillery systems, while India signed major arms deals with Armenia, including air-defence, artillery, and missile systems (Petrosyan, 2026). Such diversification aligns with balance-of-power logic: Armenia is seeking multiple security partners to avoid over-reliance on any single patron. We might interpret this as a classic "hedging" strategy by a small state in an uncertain environment (Safiyev, 2025; Pipoyan & Meibauer, 2025).

Economically, Armenia remains in the Russia-led EAEU, while trade with Russia expanded sharply after 2022, largely due to the reorientation of regional trade flows and the rise of re-exports following sanctions on Russia (Caucasus Watch, 2024). This paradoxical increase in economic ties even as political ties fray is a reminder of path dependence and structural constraints. It illustrates the English School notion of regional order adapting rather than abruptly breaking – Armenia has not exited the EAEU and has not formally withdrawn from the CSTO, but the meaning of its participation in Russian-led institutions has changed. CSTO membership is no longer viewed in Yerevan as a reliable security guarantee, while participation in the EAEU increasingly reflects economic necessity rather than broader strategic loyalty. In parallel, Armenia continued implementing the EU–Armenia Comprehensive and Enhanced Partnership Agreement (CEPA) and remained actively engaged in the EU's Eastern Partnership programmes (Sukiasyan, 2024). In September 2023, the Armenian parliament even voted to join the ICC, as noted, despite strong criticism from Moscow (Sauer, 2023). On the diplomatic front, Pashinyan has met frequently with Western leaders – attending the European Political Community summits and engaging in US/EU-mediated peace talks with Azerbaijan (the Brussels and Washington channels) which operate without Russia's involvement. All these moves point to Armenia's tilt toward the West in political orientation. This realignment is cautious

but significant: for instance, Pashinyan has stated that while Armenia seeks closer EU relations, it does not currently aspire to NATO membership (which would be a red line for Moscow and too provocative given Armenia's vulnerability). Instead, Yerevan's approach resembles Finland's or Sweden's during the Cold War – increasing Western ties while stopping short of formal alliance, at least for now.

Regionally, the implications of Armenia's pivot are profound for Russia's influence. The South Caucasus, once seen as Russia's "near abroad" domain, is becoming a more polycentric arena. Azerbaijan, emboldened by victory and backed by Turkey, has little incentive to defer to Moscow; Baku has in fact deepened its strategic partnership with Ankara, forming a Turkic axis that marginalises Russia in Caucasus affairs (Koibaev & Revazov, 2024). Azerbaijan's alignment can be described as strategic hedging – it maintains civil ties with Russia (e.g. energy cooperation, arms purchases) but clearly prioritises Turkey and its own autonomy. Russia's clout with Baku was already limited (Azerbaijan had never joined CSTO/EAEU); after 2023 it is arguably at its lowest point, given Aliyev's open snubbing of Moscow's peace proposals and his rhetorical defiance (even accusing Russia at one point of "occupying" Azerbaijani lands in the past (Safiyev, 2025). Georgia, for its part, quietly benefits from Russia's preoccupation – while officially staying neutral on Ukraine, Tbilisi continues its long-term westward orientation and entertains thoughts of regaining Abkhazia and South Ossetia eventually if Russia's power further erodes. Turkey has reemerged as a key arbiter in the Caucasus, reflecting a shift from a Russia-centric regional order to a more multipolar one. Indeed, the 2020 Karabakh war revived Turkey's role as a longstanding arbiter in Caucasian affairs, as noted by Koibaev and Revazov (2024). The English School's concept of great-power management in a regional international society might note that Turkey and (to a lesser extent) the EU are now performing functions – conflict

mediation, peacekeeping presence, economic investment – that Russia used to dominate.

For Russia's hegemonic aspirations, this is a clear setback. As Zameer Shah observes in a 2025 realist evaluation, Russia tried a "dual engagement" strategy in the Caucasus – keeping a formal alliance with Armenia via CSTO while also cultivating energy and arms ties with Azerbaijan – to maintain influence over both and exclude Western powers (Shah, 2025). Initially, in the aftermath of 2020, this approach appeared effective, as Russia strengthened its regional influence by brokering a truce and deploying peacekeepers, thereby reinforcing its position as an indispensable actor (Shah, 2025). But by 2023, that perception of indispensability weakened. Instead of demonstrating effective hierarchical control, Russia appeared as an unreliable bystander. The strategic landscape in 2025 is thus one where Russian hegemony is contested and greatly reduced. Armenia's defection (in all but name) is especially symbolic because Armenia was often cited as the one Caucasus state fully in Russia's camp. Losing Armenian trust means that Russia's position in the South Caucasus has become significantly more constrained: Georgia remains formally pro-Western but politically cautious, Azerbaijan is non-aligned and increasingly aligned with Turkey, and Armenia is estranged from Moscow. In realist balance terms, the Caucasus is becoming less Russia-centred, with regional actors increasingly balancing among several poles, including Turkey, the EU, and, to a lesser extent, Iran. This undermines the concept of a "Russian imperial sphere" in Eurasia – a core theme of hegemonic stability theory as applied to post-Soviet region (Pipoyan & Meibauer, 2025).

Armenia's case also reverberates in other post-Soviet regions. One can draw a parallel with Moldova, as noted in the Summary. Moldova, like Armenia, is a small post-Soviet state that historically was constrained by Russian influence (e.g. via the frozen conflict in Transnistria and energy dependence). Russia's war in Ukraine sent similar shockwaves to Chişinău: it heightened perceptions of Russia as a security threat and

galvanised pro-EU forces. Indeed, in 2022 Moldova did what was once unthinkable: it applied for EU membership (and received candidate status), openly positioning itself away from Moscow's orbit. Moldovan President Maia Sandu intensified efforts to reduce Russian influence – banning Russian propaganda channels, exposing alleged Russian-backed coup plots, and urging the removal of Russian troops from Transnistria. Public opinion in Moldova, much like in Armenia, has shifted toward viewing Russia with wariness and the West (EU/Romania) as security anchors. While Moldova's situation differs (it never was in a military alliance with Russia), the trend of emancipation is common. Both Armenia and Moldova demonstrate that when Russia uses coercive power (or fails to protect allies) in a dramatic way, it often undermines its soft power and legitimacy, pushing erstwhile dependent states to seek alternatives (Safiyev, 2025). In a sense, the Ukraine war was a catalyst for these states to break inertia and reevaluate their strategic alignments – a catalyst for democratisation and westward orientation in the case of Moldova (Burmester, 2025), and for security realignment in the case of Armenia. These trends attest to an ongoing reconfiguration of the post-Soviet regional order: the old paradigm of Moscow-centred integration is giving way to a mosaic of different alignments, with Russia no longer the uncontested centre.

Armenia's Break with Russian Security Dependence

Armenia's disillusionment with Russia's security role, punctuated by the Karabakh debacles of 2020 and 2023, represents a crucial stage in the erosion of Russia's regional influence. Empirically, we have seen Armenia transition from being a pillar of Russia's "near abroad" dominance to a state seeking security autonomy and new partnerships. Theoretically, this narrative weaves through all seven paradigms outlined in Part I:

The Armenia–Russia saga underscores realist dynamics of alliance and balance. When Russia (as the patron) could no longer credibly protect

Armenia (the client), Armenia shifted from bandwagoning to balancing. This confirms realist expectations that state behaviour changes when the balance of threat changes. Armenia now perceives Russia less as a shield and more as a potential liability, leading it to hedge and seek power projection through other means (e.g., bilateral ties with France and India and closer Western security cooperation). Realist theory also helps explain Russia's behaviour, as it prioritised its strategic interests, such as maintaining ties with Azerbaijan and avoiding overextension, over loyalty to Armenia. Shah (2025) concludes that the conflict highlighted how each actor pursued power, with Armenia and Azerbaijan prioritising military strength, alliances, and territorial control over legal norms, while Russia's role reflected a pragmatic strategy aimed at maintaining influence over both sides and limiting Western involvement in the region. That strategy ultimately backfired, as Armenia's pivot has invited greater Western presence.

Armenia's case illustrates the breakdown of a regional hegemonic order. Hegemonic stability theory posits that a hegemon must provide public goods (security, economic benefits) to maintain a stable sphere. Russia manifestly failed to provide security goods to Armenia when it mattered most. The result was instability (war) and the alienation of the junior partner – exactly what hegemonic stability theory would predict when the hegemon's commitment erodes. Krylov (2025) characterises the Russia–Armenia relationship as moving from strategic partnership to strategic uncertainty, reflecting the growing divergence between Moscow and Yerevan. Read through the lens of imperial-sphere theory, this uncertainty points to a broader weakening of Russia's regional authority: Armenia's gradual westward diversification challenges Moscow's claim to a stable sphere of influence in the South Caucasus. Notably, experts see the 2023 Karabakh outcome as a major loss of face for Russia's imperial image (Safiyev, 2025). This does not mean that Russia's influence disappeared, but rather that its authority became less capable of structuring regional outcomes. Russia remained present as a military, diplomatic, and

economic actor, yet its failure to prevent the loss of Nagorno-Karabakh and its inability to reassure Armenia exposed the limits of a hierarchy based on dependence without reliable protection.

The collapse of Armenian public support for Russia is a vivid demonstration of soft power loss. Moscow's legitimacy as a regional leader was deeply undermined by what many Armenians see as treachery or at best incompetence. Once Russia "lost hearts and minds" in Armenia, its influence decayed rapidly because Armenian politicians gained latitude to break away (democratic accountability played a role here: Pashinyan, needing public approval, adjusted policy to align with popular disillusionment). In contrast, Western actors gained some soft-power appeal by expressing support for Armenia's plight (for instance, the EU sending monitors and humanitarian aid signalled normative commitment). This aligns with Joseph Nye's concept that cooptive power (attraction) can be more crucial than coercion in sustaining influence. As of 2025, Russia's brand is tarnished in Armenia – a dynamic mirrored in Moldova, where Russia's war on Ukraine similarly made EU integration more attractive and Russian ties less legitimate (Ibragimova, 2023). The outcome suggests an interesting paradox: Russia's use of hard power in Ukraine and tolerance of Azerbaijan's hard power in Karabakh undermined its soft power across the neighbourhood.

From this vantage, Armenia's pivot can be seen as an attempt to restore its ontological security after the trauma of war and abandonment. Dependent relationships can undermine a state's self-narrative – in Armenia's case, the narrative of being a proud, independent nation was compromised by over-reliance on a patron that dictated its fate. By breaking away (to some degree), Armenia is reasserting an identity of sovereignty. On the Russian side, losing Armenia strikes at Moscow's ontological anxiety about being a great power. Putin's Russia has long framed itself as a protector of loyal allies and historically connected Christian peoples; watching Armenia, once one of Moscow's closest security partners, turn away is therefore a symbolic blow to Russia's

self-image as a regional protector. This may in part explain the vitriolic reaction of Russian state media to Pashinyan's moves – Moscow fears a domino effect of others questioning its reliability, which would shatter the carefully cultivated narrative of Russia as benevolent hegemon. The concept of "ontological insecurity" helps explain why Russia might act irrationally or punitively (e.g. holding back arms deliveries to Armenia or courting Armenian opposition figures) – such actions are attempts to re-anchor its identity and punish the deviation to maintain narrative control.

Armenia's experience resonates with post-imperial transition theories that describe former metropoles struggling to accept new realities. The South Caucasus was traditionally treated by Moscow as a "sphere of privileged interests." Armenia's recent assertiveness therefore illustrates the growing agency of post-Soviet states in renegotiating, rather than simply escaping, neo-imperial structures. The "revolution to war" trajectory identified by Nikoghosyan and Ter-Matevosyan (2022) showed Armenia initially trying to balance autonomy and appeasement; by 2023, that balance had shifted more clearly toward autonomy, as the costs of appeasement — loss of territory, dignity, and security — became too high.

This can be viewed as part of a wider post-Soviet realignment where states are redefining their foreign policies away from the old Moscow-centric model. Moldova's open pivot to Europe, Ukraine's decisive break with Russian domination, and Central Asian states' increased engagement with China and Turkey all point to a post-imperial diffusion of power. Armenia may be late to this trend, but once even a long-standing Russian ally begins to distance itself, it underscores how Russia's post-Soviet sphere has become increasingly fragmented and contested. The costs for Russia are not just strategic but also ideational – it undercuts the ideology of the "Russian World" binding former Soviet peoples together.

An English School analysis would focus on the institutions, norms, and great-power roles in the Caucasus regional society. Here we see a shift

in primary institutions: where the CSTO and Moscow-centred mediation were once primary, now new institutions and norms are emerging. The presence of an EU mission in Armenia introduces European normative influence (rule of law, human rights concerns at the border), diluting the Russian normative order that prioritised sovereignty and non-interference (often to freeze conflicts). The fact that Armenia prefers OSCE or EU observers to CSTO ones indicates a normative realignment with a different international society. Moreover, great-power management in the region now involves Turkey and the EU as actors, whereas previously Russia asserted an exclusive right to manage conflicts like Karabakh. The evolving regional order is more pluralistic. Armenia and Azerbaijan have engaged in peace talks under EU auspices (e.g. the 2022–23 Brussels meetings mediated by Charles Michel), reflecting a new norm that external mediation need not mean Russian mediation. The English School's idea of regional international society thus helps explain Armenia's behaviour as seeking a new society of states where its security is better guaranteed by shared norms (like inviolability of borders, if backed by the West) rather than power politics alone. However, the nascent order is fragile – the 2023 war showed the limits of norms without enforcement. Thus, Armenia now advocates for clear legal guarantees and Western engagement to lock in any peace deal, implicitly acknowledging that Russia-led arrangements (like the vague 2020 ceasefire statement) lacked the rule-of-law character of a more stable order.

Discursive power shows why control over narrative mattered. We observed how Armenian leaders have reframed the discourse about Russia from that of a "brotherly ally" to essentially a failed guarantor. This discursive shift empowers resistance: by telling a new story – that Armenia must "stand on its own feet" and that the old paradigm brought disaster – Pashinyan's government justifies policy changes that once would have been taboo. The narrative of "victimisation" has also been reshaped: instead of positioning Armenia solely as a victim of Turkish/Azeri aggression (with Russia cast as saviour), there is now

rhetoric about Armenia being – in part – a victim of great-power neglect or exploitation. For instance, many Armenians came to believe that Russia's security commitments were far more limited than they had previously assumed, fostering perceptions that Armenian interests had been subordinated to broader regional calculations (Iskandaryan, 2021). This new discourse implicitly resists Russia's power by challenging the moral foundation of Russian involvement. If Russian influence was previously buttressed by a narrative of protector/protégé, that story has been subverted. In parallel, Moldova's leadership has used discourse strategically to consolidate society against Russian interference, framing European integration as a civilisational choice and branding pro-Russian factions as traitorous or corrupt. Thus, discourse is a battleground where Russian influence is being rolled back through ideational framing. The ultimate act of Armenian discursive resistance may be yet to come: a formal declaration of foreign policy reorientation in doctrine, perhaps even an exit from CSTO, which would be justified to the public as aligning policy with the new reality that "no one else will defend Armenia if we don't defend ourselves."

Armenia's break with Russia over the latter's security failures encapsulates how a combination of military defeats, alliance breaches, and shifting identities can precipitate the unravelling of regional hegemony. It is a potent example of Russia's war on Ukraine producing unintended consequences: rather than cementing loyalty through fear, it accelerated multi-vector tendencies and the search for new allies in places like Armenia (Bocharnikov, 2021). The case also demonstrates the interdependence of power, influence, and control – Russia's brute power remains considerable, but its influence (attractiveness and trust) and control (authority over partners' choices) have diminished. As Armenia and potentially others (e.g. Moldova) pivot away, Russia faces a stark reality: its approach to retaining a sphere via coercion and neglect is failing. For Armenia, the journey ahead is fraught – navigating a "new and modified balancing act" between West and East (Sukiasyan, 2024) – but its current approach differs markedly from the

period when Russia occupied a far more central place in Armenia's security strategy. Theoretically, this underscores that even in a region long described by realism and imperial nostalgia, ideas, perceptions, and legitimacy can decisively alter state behaviour. Armenia's strategic fallout with Russia is not just a bilateral story; it is a chapter in the broader saga of post-Soviet Eurasia's transformation in the face of war and hegemonic decline, with lessons that reverberate from the Caucasus to Eastern Europe and Central Asia.

MOLDOVA – GEOPOLITICAL DETACHMENT UNDER CONSTITUTIONAL NEUTRALITY

Introduction

If Armenia reveals the limits of Russian protection, Moldova shows how a small neutral state could use the shock of war to move more decisively out of Moscow's orbit. Moldova stands out as one of the post-Soviet states that has most visibly reoriented away from Moscow's orbit since Russia's 2022 invasion of Ukraine. Long considered a "neutral" country balancing between East and West, Moldova has historically been deeply entangled in Russia's sphere through energy reliance, trade ties, and cultural links. The full-scale war in neighbouring Ukraine, however, became a watershed that accelerated Chișinău's strategic reorientation toward Europe. This chapter asks: How did the 2022 war catalyse Moldova's gradual detachment from Russian dominance? In addressing this question, Moldova can be framed as the "quiet case" of post-Soviet realignment – a country that, without a dramatic rupture or direct confrontation, has gradually loosened Moscow's grip and repositioned itself toward the EU.

Three theoretical lenses help illuminate Moldova's trajectory. First, from a soft power perspective, Russia's appeal and legitimacy in Moldova have eroded; the war undermined the attractiveness of the "Russian world" (*Russkiy mir*) narrative, leading a growing part of Moldovan society to view Moscow less as a model to emulate and more as a source of insecurity and coercion. Second, through a hegemonic stability lens, Russia's failure to provide public goods or security to its smaller partners became evident – instead of upholding regional order, Moscow's war generated instability and exposed the costs of over-reliance on a declining hegemon. Third, in terms of ontological security, the shock of war spurred Moldova to clarify and solidify its identity: anchoring itself as a European state has been a way to ensure its own sense of security and continuity in the face of external threat. Thus,

Russia's hard-power gambit backfired, prompting Moldova's leaders to reinforce a European identity and align more deeply with Western institutions as a survival strategy.

Empirically, this analysis is grounded in Moldova's political and economic shifts after 2022. It integrates data on trade and energy flows, public opinion, and policy moves, applying the theoretical and analytical framework established in the preceding chapters. Moldova's gradual reduction of dependence has been quiet but strategic. Rather than a dramatic rupture, it has been a calculated reorientation — accelerated by war — that leveraged opportunities for European integration while Russia was preoccupied and discredited. The chapter first examines the instruments of Russian influence in Moldova prior to 2022. It then analyses how the Ukraine war marked a turning point for Moldova's foreign policy orientation. Next, it explores domestic political and ideational changes after 2022, including shifts in discourse and the handling of the Transnistrian issue. It then assesses Moldova's accelerated alignment with Europe and the broader regional reconfiguration, contrasting Moldova's silent emancipation with cases such as Armenia's frustrated dependence. The chapter concludes with a theoretical reflection: Moldova exemplifies how the erosion of Russian soft power and hegemonic legitimacy enabled a small state to reinforce its identity and reduce its exposure to a domineering orbit — foreshadowing the next chapter on Belarus's very different path of coerced loyalty.

Russia's Pre-2022 Influence and Instruments

Before 2022, Russia exercised multifaceted influence over Moldova, deploying economic leverage, political patronage, and cultural soft power alike to keep Chișinău in its orbit. From a realist standpoint, Moscow understood the power asymmetry and leveraged Moldova's vulnerabilities – especially in energy and trade – as tools of coercion. For most of the post-Soviet period, Moldova was heavily dependent on Russian energy: natural gas was supplied by Gazprom, which retained

major influence over Moldova's gas sector through its stake in Moldovagaz and long-standing supply arrangements. This dependency generated major vulnerabilities, including Gazprom's disputed claim that Moldova owed more than $700 million, while a much larger debt was associated with gas consumed in Transnistria, allowing Russia to use gas as a political instrument (Molis & Jardan, 2023). This created asymmetric interdependence, often described in terms of a hegemonic-stability dynamic, in which Moldova's dependence on Russian energy and trade increased Moscow's leverage. Russia at times applied coercive pressure through trade and energy instruments, including restricting market access or adjusting supply conditions in response to politically undesirable developments. For example, the Kremlin imposed bans on Moldovan wine, fruits, and other exports in 2006 and again in 2013 in the context of Moldova's EU-oriented policies (Devyatkov, 2017). Such tactics aimed to raise the costs of Western alignment and deter deviation from Russia's "sphere of vital interests."

Politically, Russia cultivated patronage networks and sympathetic elites within Moldova. During the 1990s and 2000s, overtly pro-Russian political parties – notably the Communist Party under Vladimir Voronin and later the Socialist Party under Igor Dodon – enjoyed Russian backing, whether through favourable media coverage, financial support, or diplomatic endorsement. Oligarchic figures with business ties to Russia also played a role in capturing segments of the Moldovan state; for instance, Moscow maintained links with Moldova's business elites and regional authorities (particularly in the autonomous region of Gagauzia) to secure leverage from within. These local actors often acted as conduits of Russian influence, advocating against EU integration and for maintaining close ties to Moscow. In hegemonic terms, Russia tried to act as a regional patron, trading economic carrots (cheap gas, loans, migrant labour access) for political loyalty – a strategy in line with an "imperial bargain" logic (Burmester, 2025). However, unlike a benign hegemon providing stability, Russia's

approach skewed toward coercion and inducements that preserved Moldova's dependence.

Culturally and ideationally, soft power was another pillar of Russia's influence. Moldova's population has linguistic and historical ties that Russia consistently exploited. A significant Russian-speaking minority, including many in Transnistria, and widespread understanding of Russian gave the Kremlin a direct line to Moldovan society (Simionov, 2023). Russian television channels were widely watched, while Moldova's Orthodox landscape was divided between the dominant Moldova Metropolis, subordinate to the Moscow Patriarchate, and the smaller Metropolis of Bessarabia, linked to the Romanian Orthodox Church. Pro-Kremlin media pushed familiar Moldovanist and *Russkiy mir* themes: Moldova was presented as naturally close to Russia, while Romania, the EU and the West were cast as threats to Moldovan statehood and identity (Enachi, 2023). Harward (2024) shows that the same logic continued in newer Russian influence operations, which used media, political networks and information campaigns to obstruct Moldova's EU path. By the mid-2010s, support for the pro-European course had fallen sharply, a trend that coincided with the continued strength of Russian media and identity narratives (Enachi, 2023; Simionov, 2023). Moscow's influence therefore did not rest only on gas or trade, but also on language, media, religion and memory.

The frozen conflict in Transnistria was arguably Russia's single most effective instrument of control (Jović-Lazić, 2023). Since the 1992-armed conflict, the breakaway Transnistrian "Republic" – with its own Moscow-backed authorities and the stationing of around 1,500 Russian troops – served as a long-term source of Russian leverage over Moldova's domestic and foreign policy. The Kremlin consistently used Transnistria as a pressure point to warn Chișinău against moving too far West. Russia had strong incentives to preserve the Transnistrian status quo, as it limited Moldova's ability to pursue deeper Western integration. The unresolved conflict hindered Moldova's full sovereignty and gave Moscow a degree of veto-like leverage over

Moldova's geopolitical trajectory (Jović-Lazić, 2023). In realist terms, the Russian military presence in Transnistria was a tangible hard-power asset deterring Moldova's westward pivot, while in constructivist terms it perpetuated Moldova's ontological insecurity – a liminal statehood where part of the country remained under Russian tutelage, complicating national identity.

Russia's pre-2022 influence: economic coercion, political penetration, and cultural narrative management worked in tandem. Moldova's energy reliance meant that Moscow could exert direct pressure on gas and electricity supplies, making energy dependence a major instrument of political leverage (Molis & Jardan, 2023). Its export dependence (historically, Russia was a top destination for Moldovan wine, produce, and migrant labour) meant the Kremlin could seriously damage parts of Moldova's economy through embargoes – a threat used more than once. Simultaneously, Russia's soft-power networks cultivated a sense of shared identity or at least ambivalence in Moldova toward the West. From a hegemonic stability viewpoint, Russia offered a Russian-centred order of dependence: access to its market and protection (through cheap energy or security management) if Moldova remained compliant. Yet by the late 2010s this formula was faltering. Moldova had begun decreasing its reliance on Russia in some areas (for example, by 2016 Moldovan exports to the EU far exceeded those to Russia, thanks to EU trade preferences – $1.3 billion versus $230 million, respectively), and Western financial aid was supplanting Russian aid as the key external support (Devyatkov, 2017). Even so, on the eve of 2022 Russia still wielded considerable leverage: Gazprom's control over Moldovagaz, unresolved gas debt claims (Molis & Jardan, 2023), a cadre of domestic politicians ready to echo pro-Kremlin talking points, and Russian troops stationed on Moldovan soil. The stage was set such that Moscow could often expect pressure to constrain Chișinău's choices – an equilibrium of dependence that Russia expected would persist. The next section shows how this equilibrium

was upset by the Ukraine invasion, altering the cost-benefit calculations in Moldova's foreign policy (Burmester, 2025).

The 2022 Turning Point

Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine in February 2022 was an external shock that fundamentally altered Moldova's strategic calculus. The war broke out next door – across a roughly 1,200 km shared border – and immediately confronted Moldovans with the spectre of violence spilling over. In the conflict's first days, there was palpable alarm in Chișinău that Moldova could be Moscow's next target should Ukraine falter (Sauer, 2022). Early Russian advances in southern Ukraine (toward Mykolaiv and Kherson) raised a grave scenario: if Russian forces reached Odesa, they might push west to link up with Transnistria, effectively encircling Moldova (Brezar & Necsutu, 2022). This possibility heightened anxiety in Moldova and prompted both public debate and official concern about the country's security. The war thus created an acute sense of ontological insecurity in Moldova: a fear that the state's very existence and identity were in peril. Neutrality, enshrined in Moldova's constitution since the 1990s, suddenly appeared insufficient as a shield, as highlighted in recent policy analyses emphasising its practical limitations under conditions of hybrid warfare (Thompson, 2026). As President Maia Sandu has noted in the context of multiple incidents since 2022, Moldova's constitutional neutrality has not prevented violations of its airspace, including cases in which Russian missiles crossed its territory during strikes on Ukraine, with debris from such attacks also falling on Moldovan soil. In other words, the war exposed the limits of Moldova's neutrality: remaining formally unaligned did not by itself keep the country safe from the consequences of Russian aggression.

Moldova's initial policy responses to the war were careful but significant. At the United Nations General Assembly, President Maia Sandu unequivocally condemned Russia's invasion of Ukraine, signalling a moral and diplomatic stance against Moscow's actions

(Presidency of the Republic of Moldova, 2022). However, wary of provoking the Kremlin, Chișinău initially refrained from joining sanctions against Russia in the early stages of the war, citing Moldova's extreme vulnerability, particularly its dependence on Russian gas (Ukrinform, 2022). Russia had just months earlier pressured Moldova during gas contract negotiations in late 2021, contributing to an energy crisis. Moldova's leadership emphasised the country's constitutional neutrality in its diplomatic positioning during the initial phase of the conflict. Yet even as Chișinău hesitated to fully align with Western punitive measures, it quietly opened Moldova's doors to refugees and Western assistance. In the first months of the war, hundreds of thousands of Ukrainian refugees transited through Moldova, and Moldovan society — along with the government — mobilised to shelter and support them. By mid-2025, around 132,000 Ukrainian refugees still remained in Moldova, equivalent to roughly 4% of the country's population (UNHCR, 2025). This humanitarian response, widely praised in Europe, further integrated Moldova into Western crisis-management frameworks: the EU and international donors rushed aid to Moldova to help manage the refugee influx and buttress its economy amid the crisis. In practice, Moldova was moving closer to the Western response to Russia's aggression, even as it avoided overt security commitments.

By late spring 2022, it became evident that neutrality would not shield Moldova from the war's fallout or from Russian pressure. From late 2022 onward, Russian missiles targeting Ukraine repeatedly crossed or affected Moldovan airspace, while unexplained explosions in Transnistria in April 2022 heightened fears of spillover (Tanas, 2022). Sensing a narrowing window of opportunity and growing domestic support for a clear direction, the Moldovan government made a decisive strategic pivot: it formally applied for EU membership on 3 March 2022, just one week after Ukraine did the same. This move was extraordinary – Moldova had long proclaimed European integration as a goal, but full membership application had been left for a distant

future. The war accelerated that timeline dramatically (Cebotari & Bevziuc, 2022). Within months, in June 2022, the European Council granted Moldova EU candidate status, alongside Ukraine, marking a historic milestone. As Cebotari and Bevziuc (2022) further note, the Russian invasion accelerated the dynamics of Moldova–EU relations, orienting Moldova's foreign policy more decisively toward Brussels. President Sandu framed the EU application as a direct response to the security threat emanating from Russia's war: aligning with Europe was presented not just as an economic or civilisational choice, but as "a strategic response to the war to ensure national security" (Melin et al., 2023). In her speeches, Sandu argued that only by "anchoring" Moldova in European structures could the country safeguard its sovereignty and freedom in the long term (Sandu, 2025). This reflects an ontological security logic – Moldova sought a sense of safety in a firmer European identity.

Alongside the EU pivot, Chișinău began shedding some of the neutrality-era reticence in its rhetoric. By the autumn of 2022, as Russia's campaign in Ukraine grew more brutal, Moldovan officials more openly denounced Moscow's aggression. President Sandu in September declared that Moldova was facing a "hybrid war" waged by Russia to undermine the country's stability and block its European path (Melin et al., 2023). In an unprecedented step, Moldova aligned itself more closely with EU foreign policy positions and restrictive measures toward Russia, while still avoiding steps that could immediately imperil its energy security (European Commission, 2023). This symbolic break with the past (Moldova had never sanctioned Russia before) indicated a growing willingness to absorb the political costs of diverging from Moscow, or conversely, a calculation that *not* aligning with the West was riskier than angering the Kremlin. The government also moved to correct what it called "strategic vulnerabilities" exploited by Russia. For instance, in December 2022 Moldova suspended the broadcast licences of several Russian state-affiliated TV channels known for war propaganda (Melin et al., 2023). While Russia decried this as censorship,

Chișinău justified it as a security measure under its state of emergency. In short, the war precipitated a narrative rupture: Moldova's leaders rejected the old discourse of equidistance and neutrality, and instead adopted a new discourse of European integration as existential imperative. As the Foreign Minister Nicu Popescu put it, "Our neutrality is a constitutional article, but neutrality does not mean indifference to blatant violations of international law" – implying that Moldova's identity is firmly on the side of a rules-based European order, not in any "Russian world" sphere. The discursive shift was clear: European Moldova versus Putin's Russia became the defining binary of the country's strategic orientation.

Notably, the war also led to the weakening of certain myths of Russian soft power in Moldova. For years, segments of Moldovan society believed that close ties with Russia were benign or even beneficial, given cultural affinities and economic links. But witnessing Russia's onslaught against a fellow ex-Soviet republic (Ukraine) dealt a heavy blow to the legitimacy of Moscow's claims to moral leadership in the region. The Kremlin's narrative of protecting Russian speakers or "historic lands" – sometimes applied to Moldova – rang hollow when juxtaposed with the devastation in Ukraine. Public opinion in Moldova shifted in a more pro-European direction after the invasion. A survey conducted in May–June 2022 found that 44% of respondents sided with Ukraine, while only 15% sided with Russia; support for Vladimir Putin had fallen to 19%, while 68% expressed disapproval of his actions. The same survey recorded 63% support for Moldova's integration into the European Union (Koneva et al., 2022). Although pro-Russian sentiment by no means vanished – a significant minority still echoed Russian media narratives – the overall trend was a shift in public opinion toward the West. This represented an erosion of Russian soft power: the "attraction" of Moscow's orbit dimmed as its brutality was broadcast on Moldovan screens. The Ukraine war in 2022 was a major exogenous shock that strengthened the position of Moldova's pro-European forces: it broke the inertia of neutrality, delegitimised the

pro-Russian camp's talking points, and gave Chișinău a historic opening to lock in a Western trajectory.

Domestic Political and Ideational Reactions

The geopolitical turn of 2022 was accompanied by profound domestic political shifts in Moldova. In the immediate aftermath of the invasion, Moldova's governing elites unified around a pro-Western course with a resolve not seen before. President Maia Sandu's administration – which had already won a strong mandate in the 2020 (presidential) and 2021 (parliamentary) elections on an explicitly pro-EU, anti-corruption platform – treated the war as an existential test of Moldova's statehood. As the crisis unfolded, Sandu and her Party of Action and Solidarity (PAS) moved to consolidate power at home in order to implement swift changes. This consolidation was facilitated by the weakness and disarray of pro-Russian opposition forces, who suddenly found themselves on the defensive both morally and politically. The information shock of the war, coupled with the government's firm messaging, led many Moldovans to view local pro-Moscow actors with increased scepticism – if not outright as security risks. In this environment, Chișinău undertook a series of domestic measures to dismantle Russian influence networks and fortify a European-oriented national narrative.

One major development was the decline (and in some cases dismantling) of openly pro-Russian parties and figures. The most notable case is the Șor Party led by oligarch Ilan Șor (a fugitive businessman sanctioned by the West for corruption and alleged Russian links), which had sought to capitalise on public discontent in 2022 by organising anti-government protests over rising prices. Moldovan authorities subsequently took measures against political structures associated with Șor, including banning the Șor Party and other affiliated political projects from participating in elections on national security grounds. These actions followed accusations by security services that networks linked to Șor had channelled funds into

Moldova to support protests and influence political processes. Prime Minister Dorin Recean described these activities as part of a broader "hybrid war" against Moldova, allegedly involving Russian backing (Reuters, 2023c). In response, Moldovan authorities cracked down: protest organisers were investigated for money laundering, and in June 2023 the Moldovan courts banned the Șor Party as unconstitutional. Ilan Șor himself, safely abroad, was hit with Moldovan and Western sanctions. Similarly, the once-dominant Socialist Party (PSRM) of ex-president Igor Dodon – long a recipient of Russian political support – lost much of its clout. Dodon was indicted on graft and treason charges in 2022 (including allegations of taking funds from a Russian source), effectively sidelining him. Although the Socialists formally remain legal, their public support dwindled amidst Moldova's pro-European wave and the discrediting of Russia's image. In short, by 2023 the traditional pro-Russian political camp had been significantly weakened – some leaders imprisoned or in exile, others struggling to find an electorate. This cleared the way for Sandu's PAS to press ahead with reforms and EU-oriented policies without the fierce internal obstruction that previous pro-EU governments faced. From the perspective of discursive power, the Moldovan authorities increasingly portrayed pro-Russian actors not as ordinary opposition forces but as channels of external interference – a narrative buttressed by concrete evidence of Russian meddling in protests and even an alleged coup plot. By labelling Russia's local proxies as threats to national security, the government neutralised much of their domestic appeal or at least justified strong measures against them.

Another area of domestic realignment was the media and information space. Cognisant that Russian propaganda had corroded Moldova's resilience for years, the authorities undertook unprecedented steps to curtail it. In addition to banning the handful of Russian TV channels in 2022, Moldova's broadcast regulators and parliament introduced stricter content requirements to counter disinformation. In 2023, Moldova established the Centre for Strategic Communication and

Combating Disinformation and introduced additional regulatory measures aimed at countering foreign information manipulation and war propaganda (CSO Meter, 2023). The government also worked closely with civil society and Western partners on media literacy campaigns, trying to immunise the public against external manipulation. These steps coincided with a weakening of Russian state media's position in Moldovan public discourse (accessible only online to a shrinking audience). While critics, including the Kremlin, complained of censorship, polls indicated a slight but notable improvement in the public's ability to detect and reject false narratives. For instance, the portion of Moldovans blaming Ukraine or NATO for the war – a view heavily propagated by Russian media – decreased over time, whereas those attributing blame to Russia increased. This suggests that the reduced presence of Russian propaganda, together with facts on the ground (e.g. refugee testimonies, Western media reports) to shape opinions more strongly. The erosion of Russia's informational power in Moldova was thus a key domestic consequence of the war. From a soft-power angle, Russia's loss of narrative dominance meant a loss of legitimacy: the idea of Russia as a protective "elder brother" figure became far less credible when the elder brother was seen bombing a neighbour and subverting Moldova itself. The very discourse of neutrality and East-West balancing, once mainstream, has been supplanted by an increasingly polarised discourse contrasting pro-European patriotism with suspicion toward pro-Russian political positions.

Public opinion trends reinforce this narrative, but also indicate the limits of Moldova's post-2022 reorientation. In 2023, 49.7% of respondents supported Moldova's accession to the European Union, while 32.8% opposed it. When asked to choose between the European Union and the Eurasian Union, 47.0% chose the EU and 32.5% the Eurasian Union. By contrast, support for NATO remained much weaker, with 26.5% in favour and 54.0% opposed. Attitudes toward Russia's war in Ukraine were also divided: 33.9% considered Ukraine to be right, 25.1%

considered Russia to be right, and 23.9% believed that neither side was right. Taken together, these figures suggest that Moldova's public mood had become more favourable to European integration than to Russia-led alternatives, without producing a comparable shift toward military alignment (Institute of Public Policies, 2023).

This uneven reorientation matters because Moldova's vulnerabilities were not only political or discursive, but also territorial — most visibly in the unresolved question of Transnistria, the Kremlin-aligned breakaway region (Jović-Lazić, 2023; Jović-Lazić & Kuvekalović-Stamatović, 2020). Transnistria remains a *de jure* part of Moldova, but for three decades it has operated as a Russian client mini-state with its own security services (the *KGB*), economy (heavily subsidised by Russia), and a contingent of Russian "peacekeeper" troops. Before 2022, every Moldovan government had to calibrate its policies with an eye to not inflaming the Transnistrian issue, effectively giving Moscow significant leverage over certain strategic decisions. For instance, Moldova hesitated to fully implement EU energy market reforms after Russia used its influence in the energy sector and the Transnistrian question to oppose measures associated with the EU's Third Energy Package (Devyatkov, 2017). The Ukraine war, however, altered the equation. Ukraine's forces sealed the border with Transnistria early in the conflict, isolating the Russian troops there and preventing reinforcements or resupply. This eroded the immediate military threat Transnistria posed to the rest of Moldova – suddenly the Russian garrison was itself encircled and deterred by Ukraine's army. Moreover, the war cut off Transnistria's economic lifelines (trade routes via Odesa, for example), making the enclave more dependent on goodwill from Chișinău and the EU (which continued to allow Transnistrian companies to export to the EU market under Moldova's trade preferences). These developments gave the Moldovan government a stronger hand. Moldovan officials suspended the long-stalled "5+2" negotiations (the international format including Russia and Ukraine as mediators) once it became clear that Russia had

violated the basic peace in the region (Cebotari & Bevziuc, 2024). Instead, Chișinău began to treat the Transnistria question in a new way, insisting that Moldova's path of EU integration would apply to the country's entire internationally recognised territory and would not hinge on granting Transnistria a special status. In October 2022, President Sandu similarly made clear that European integration was intended for the whole country, including Transnistria (Melin et al., 2023). This was a subtle but important shift: previously, Moldova had tiptoed around Transnistria, but now it signalled an intent to proceed with or without the breakaway region's consent.

Unsurprisingly, Moscow bristled at Moldova's new stance. Russian officials issued menacing statements about Moldova "mistreating" the Russian-speaking population in Transnistria and warned of unspecified consequences. Yet significantly, Russia has so far not escalated in Transnistria beyond rhetoric – likely because its military position there is weak and it cannot easily supply a conflict. Transnistria's own leadership, for its part, adopted a surprisingly cautious tone regarding the Ukraine war. In a notable divergence from Moscow's line, Transnistrian authorities avoided openly endorsing Russia's justification for the invasion; they kept an officially neutral tone and maintained practical cooperation with Chișinău, especially where trade and energy were concerned (Kolstø, 2025). Kolstø (2025) describes this stance as shaped less by ideological loyalty to Moscow than by self-preservation: Tiraspol had little interest in being drawn into the war or antagonising Ukraine and Moldova. This suggests that even the archetypal "Russian proxy" region was not simply following orders – it was hedging in an uncertain situation. In effect, Russia's discursive and patronal power over Transnistria showed cracks once Russia's own strength was in doubt. From Chișinău's perspective, this opens a possibility (however distant) that a post-war regional order could finally address Transnistria through diplomacy on Moldova's terms, especially if Russia's patronage wanes (Boman, 2025). For now, Moldova has maintained internal calm regarding Transnistria,

avoiding provocations while quietly enhancing its security posture on that flank (e.g. deploying more patrols on the demarcation line, coordinating with Ukraine). The ontological security of the Moldovan state — its wholeness and identity — no longer appeared as dependent on the Transnistrian question as it had before 2022. In sum, the war induced Chișinău to reimagine Transnistria not as a permanent "frozen" excuse for stagnation, but as a challenge that cannot be allowed to block Moldova's existential choice for Europe. This marks a discursive and strategic departure from the past, when Transnistria was often cited as the reason Moldova had to keep Russia friendly or delay Western integration. Now, Chișinău increasingly treated EU integration as a process that should not be indefinitely delayed by the unresolved status of Transnistria – effectively flipping the script that Russia had written.

Post-2022 Alignments and Regional Reconfiguration

After 2022, Moldova's external alignments and regional posture underwent an accelerated westward reconfiguration. The country that once practiced a careful equidistance openly cast its lot with the European and Western partners. The most dramatic shift was in Moldova's relationship with the European Union. Having obtained EU candidate status in June 2022, Moldova moved rapidly to embrace the obligations and opportunities of candidacy (European Council, 2022; Cebotari & Bevziuc, 2022). The government in Chișinău declared EU accession to be the "national project" and mobilised the bureaucracy to meet the European Commission's conditions for opening accession talks. These conditions – ranging from justice sector reform to curbing oligarchic influence – overlapped considerably with the ruling party's own reform agenda. By late 2023, the European Commission assessed that Moldova had made significant progress on several of the reform steps recommended for opening accession negotiations (European Commission, 2023). Indeed, in November 2023 the European Commission delivered a largely positive report on Moldova's candidacy,

and in December 2023 the European Council decided to open accession negotiations with Moldova, with the first intergovernmental conference following in June 2024 (Council of the European Union, 2024). This timeline – application to negotiations in under two years – was extraordinarily fast, reflecting both Moldova's political will and a sympathetic geopolitical context in Europe. Moldova's pro-European trajectory was further tested in the 2024 constitutional referendum and the 2025 parliamentary elections, both of which took place amid strong allegations of Russian interference. The narrow pro-EU referendum result in 2024 and PAS's renewed parliamentary majority in 2025 confirmed that Moldova's European course remained politically viable, though still socially contested (OSCE/ODIHR, 2025, 2026). From an English School perspective, Moldova was rapidly being accepted into the "international society" of European states, seeking legitimacy through institutional alignment. The harmonisation of Moldovan law with the EU acquis became a top priority. Moldova's interest in EU accession is "above all a legal question" – requiring extensive adoption of EU norms – and this process was turbocharged after March 2022 (Oleinic, 2024). By late 2023, Moldovan authorities had completed a comprehensive "European Commission questionnaire" and passed dozens of legislative acts to synchronise national legislation with European standards (Ion & Dincă, 2024). Ludmila Oleinic (2024) notes that the new geopolitical context essentially flipped a switch: Moldova submitted its EU application on the very day of 3 March 2022 as a direct result of Russia's aggression, and within months it had to start tackling nine clusters of reforms the EU outlined as prerequisites for moving forward. The urgency of war injected momentum into what had been a sluggish Europeanisation process.

Economically, Moldova has accelerated efforts to decouple from Russia and integrate with Western markets. Even before 2022, Moldova's trade had been shifting substantially toward the European Union, especially after the 2014 DCFTA, while Russia's relative importance as an export market had declined. The war reinforced this trend. Trade routes via

Ukraine and Russia were disrupted, forcing Moldova to rely even more on Romania and EU corridors for both imports and exports. In 2022–2023, Romania emerged as Moldova's leading individual trade partner, accounting for over a quarter of Moldova's external trade – a position Russia once held in the 1990s but lost over time. By 2023, the EU clearly dominated Moldova's trade structure, while Russia's share had fallen sharply compared with the pre-2014 period. In essence, Moldova's economy has been re-geared westward, a process facilitated by the 2014 Moldova-EU Deep and Comprehensive Free Trade Agreement and now cemented by candidacy status. European investors have also stepped up engagement: FDI stocks from EU countries (led by the Netherlands, Romania, France, and Germany) comprise the bulk of foreign investment in Moldova's economy (Hagemejer & Dąbrowski, 2025). This growing economic interdependence with Europe not only brings development benefits but also decreases Moscow's leverage. Russia's ability to influence Moldova through trade restrictions has become more limited, as Moldova now has alternative markets. As Duhlicher and Burbulea (2024) succinctly put it, "the advantages of the European integration process are multiple, and their exploitation represents an optimal solution for the development of the Republic of Moldova." The implication is that Moldova increasingly sees its future prosperity as tied to the EU rather than to Eurasian economic structures. This aligns with the soft power notion that the EU's model (and its incentives of aid and market access) now holds greater attraction for Moldovans than the Russian model. Indeed, in 2022 the EU announced a major increase in financial assistance to Moldova – including a €600 million support package and a pledge of €1.6 billion in longer-term assistance – signalling to average Moldovans that "Europe delivers" in times of need (Molis & Jardan, 2023). This infusion helped Moldova cushion the economic blows of war (energy price spikes, refugee costs), further validating the pro-EU pivot in the public eye.

One of the most significant realignments occurred in the energy sector, where Moldova achieved in months what had stalled for years: a

significant reduction of dependence on Russian supplies. Energy has long been one of Russia's strongest instruments of leverage in Moldova – a means to apply immediate pressure. In the winter of 2021–22 (just before the war), Gazprom had already shown its willingness to squeeze Moldova by cutting gas flows during a pricing dispute, leading Moldova to declare a state of emergency. During 2022, Gazprom reduced gas deliveries to Moldova, officially invoking contractual and transit-related disputes, while analysts interpreted the cuts as part of Russia's broader effort to pressure the pro-European government in Chișinău (Pieńkowski, 2023; Litra, 2023). The Kremlin also leveraged the fact that Moldova's electricity was largely supplied by the Cuciurgan/Moldavskaya GRES power plant in Transnistria, owned by Russia's Inter RAO and fuelled by Russian gas. In autumn 2022, Russian missile strikes on Ukraine's power grid repeatedly disrupted Moldova's electricity supply, dramatically illustrating the vulnerability of Moldova's energy network to Russian-inflicted shocks. Rather than capitulating, the Moldovan government treated these episodes as a wake-up call. With emergency help from Romania and the EU, Moldova swiftly diversified its gas procurement – purchasing gas on European markets and using storage in Romania and Ukraine. By late 2022, Moldova was able to fill gas storage in Romania and Ukraine and meet much of its winter demand without relying solely on Gazprom. The Iași–Ungheni–Chișinău pipeline significantly expanded Moldova's ability to import gas from Romania and other European sources, thereby reducing Gazprom's leverage over Chișinău. In parallel, Moldova synchronised its electricity grid with continental Europe in March 2022 (an emergency measure done jointly with Ukraine) (Molis & Jardan, 2023). This allowed Moldova to import electricity from Romania when deliveries from the Transnistrian plant halted. New infrastructure projects – such as a high-voltage power line linking Moldova to Romania's grid – are being fast-tracked to permanently connect Moldova to the European electricity system (Molis & Jardan, 2023). The Energy Community, of which Moldova is a Contracting Party, has facilitated these efforts through regulatory reforms designed

to implement EU unbundling rules, thereby reducing the sector's dependency on Gazprom. By mid-2023, right-bank Moldova had significantly reduced its reliance on direct Gazprom deliveries, whereas previously Russian gas had dominated the country's energy sector. In essence, right-bank Moldova has substantially reduced its longstanding dependence on direct Russian gas by finding alternative suppliers and improving efficiency (van der Togt, 2025). This diversification deprives Moscow of what was once a potent weapon. A clear illustration came from late 2022 onward, when Gazprom's remaining deliveries were largely redirected toward Transnistria, while right-bank Moldova avoided widespread energy shortages by relying on stored gas, diversified supply arrangements, and emergency energy cooperation with European partners (European Commission, 2023; Molis & Jardan, 2023). Despite Russia's repeated use of energy pressure, Moldova substantially reduced its dependence on direct Gazprom supplies. From a hegemonic stability viewpoint, Russia's attempt to use negative sanctions (cut-offs) appears to have been counterproductive, reducing its long-term leverage and pushing Moldova closer to Western partners – a real-time demonstration of how coercion can erode rather than enforce hegemony (Burmester, 2025).

In the security domain, Moldova has carefully expanded its cooperation with Western institutions while still formally upholding neutrality. Joining NATO outright remains off the table politically, but Moldova has found other avenues to boost its security. The EU has ramped up its involvement: under the European Peace Facility (EPF), the EU committed substantial assistance for equipment, vehicles, medical support, command-and-control capacities and other defence-related needs of the Moldovan Armed Forces. By April 2025, this support had reached nearly €200 million, while the EU stressed that it was provided in full respect of Moldova's neutrality (Council of the European Union, 2025). In addition, the EU in 2023 launched the European Union Partnership Mission in Moldova (EUPM Moldova) to advise and assist in countering hybrid threats (like cyberattacks and disinformation).

NATO, for its part, increased training opportunities for Moldovan officers and support for capacity-building. A NATO Liaison Office in Chișinău, opened before the war, saw its role grow as a point of contact for coordinating assistance and exercises. Importantly, Western countries such as Romania, the United States, and Germany stepped up bilateral security aid: the U.S. provided radar systems and other equipment (with over $40 million in security assistance announced in 2022–23), Romania pledged to expand military training and broader security cooperation with Moldova, and Germany supplied drone detection devices and armoured SUVs for the national police (Molis & Jardan, 2023). While these are modest steps compared to full military integration, they build on an earlier pattern in which Moldova cooperated with NATO in limited forms without abandoning formal neutrality (Jović-Lazić & Kuvekalović-Stamatović, 2020). Domestically, Sandu's government also opened a broader discussion about the meaning of neutrality, with Sandu arguing that neutrality does not mean Moldova should remain defenceless, but that it must strengthen its own defence capacity while countering Russian disinformation on NATO and security issues (Eruygur, 2023). In a telling sign of changing attitudes, Moldova distanced itself from Russia-centred regional institutions after 2022 and began withdrawing from CIS-related agreements. By April 2026, this process had reached the level of the CIS founding documents: parliament denounced the CIS founding agreement and statute, confirming Moldova's withdrawal from the organisation's statutory bodies. By then, Moldova had already denounced around 70 agreements within the CIS framework (Teleradio-Moldova, 2026). This gradual withdrawal from the CIS framework was largely symbolic at first, but it underscored Moldova's determination to reduce its institutional dependence on Russia-centred post-Soviet structures and align with the institutions of the liberal international order. In English School terms, Moldova is reorienting from the post-Soviet/CIS international society, with its Russia-centred norms and institutions, toward a European order shaped primarily by EU rules, partnerships and standards. Yet this process continues to be constrained by the unresolved status of Transnistria and

by the tensions between constitutional neutrality and external security guarantees (Jović-Lazić & Kuvekalović-Stamatović, 2020). The regional order in Eastern Europe is thus being reshaped: Moldova's governing elites now identify the country more clearly with the European camp, leaving Russia with a shrinking circle of closely aligned partners. Belarus and Moldova responded to Russia's war in opposite ways: Belarus deepened its alignment with Moscow, while the war accelerated Moldova's movement out of Russia's orbit (Melin et al., 2023).

Comparatively, Moldova's case of gradual emancipation contrasts sharply with some other Eurasian states – notably Armenia, which has also been deeply dependent on Russia but has experienced far more frustration in detaching. Both Moldova and Armenia historically relied on Russia for security (Armenia for protection against Azerbaijan/Turkey, Moldova regarding Transnistria) (Burmester, 2025). However, the Ukraine war's fallout saw Armenia attempt a hesitant pivot West, frustrated by Moscow's failure to support it in the 2020 Karabakh war, only to find itself constrained by an active conflict and Russia's military presence. Unlike Moldova, Armenia is locked into the CSTO alliance and hosts a large Russian base; it cannot reorient quietly without jeopardising its immediate security vis-à-vis Azerbaijan. Indeed, in late 2022 and 2023, Armenia's appeals for help from Russia went unanswered, revealing the breakdown of trust – yet Armenia remains constrained, as it lacks alternative security guarantors and faces coercive pressure to stay loyal to Moscow. Yerevan's frustrated dependence is evident in its begrudging compliance with some Russian demands despite growing anti-Russian sentiment at home. Moldova, in contrast, benefited from a unique alignment of factors: the war incapacitated Russia's ability to intervene (with Ukraine as a buffer), the EU offered a fast-track integration carrot, and Moldova's own lack of a Russian military alliance gave it freedom of manoeuvre. In essence, Moldova was able to pivot without direct confrontation, whereas Armenia's tentative reorientation was more immediately constrained by Russian military presence, CSTO ties, and the unresolved conflict with Azerbaijan. This

juxtaposition reinforces a theoretical point: the erosion of Russian hegemony is playing out unevenly. Moldova demonstrates that where Russia's hard-power hold is weakest, a determined small state can reorient more easily to an alternative order. In Armenia's case, Russia's entrenched role (militarily and geographically) makes realignment far more fraught. Nonetheless, as Chapter 6 noted, even Armenia has started to question Moscow's reliability – a trend that validates the broader hypothesis of hegemonic decline.

By 2024–25, the regional reconfiguration around Moldova was plain to see. Moldova was invited to and hosted high-profile European gatherings (most notably, the European Political Community (EPC) summit in June 2023 where 50 heads of state and EU leaders convened in Chișinău). This event symbolised Moldova's arrival as a de facto part of the European family. Meanwhile, Russia's influence in Moldova has been reduced to mostly *negative leverage*: the ability to foment trouble or instability, rather than to guide Moldova's course. Moscow can still stir protests (as it tried via Șor), spread disinfo, or issue threats via Transnistria, but these actions are reactive and ultimately undermining of Russia's long-term position. With Moldova now backed by the EU's political and financial support, the Kremlin's old playbook is less effective. Moldova's gradual movement away from Russia's sphere of influence accelerated after 2022, as the war reinforced the perception that neutrality was insufficient and that deeper integration with the European Union offered a more credible framework for security and development (Baltag & Eaglestone, 2025). In other words, the Ukraine invasion served as the catalyst for a strategic separation that had long been in the making. This shift illustrates a broader pattern developed throughout the monograph: coercion can weaken regional influence when it destroys credibility and attraction. As Russia came to be seen less as a source of security and more as a source of instability, Moldova increasingly sought political, economic, and institutional anchoring in Europe.

Before concluding, it is worth reflecting on Moldova's transformation in light of the seven theoretical frameworks introduced earlier. Realism and

power dynamics are evident: when Russia's hard power threatened to engulf Moldova through the war in Ukraine, Moldova balanced against that threat by deepening its ties with Western institutions, particularly the EU and NATO, while maintaining its constitutionally mandated neutrality. It is classic balance-of-power behaviour by a small state under threat – albeit using institutional and economic alignment rather than military alliance, due to neutrality. Hegemonic stability (or instability) is also clearly illustrated: Russia's inability to act as a reliable regional hegemon — bringing war and coercion instead of order — undermined whatever stability it had previously provided, leading Moldova to prefer an alternative hegemonic centre in the form of the EU, which offers order through rules, incentives and institutional integration. The soft power and legitimacy angle shows that Russia's legitimacy was gravely damaged – it is now seen more as an aggressor and source of instability, which erodes voluntary adherence to its leadership. Conversely, the EU's soft power – as a community of peace and prosperity – has grown in Moldovan perceptions (the EU facilitated aid, helped keep lights on, etc., bolstering its attractiveness). From an ontological security standpoint, Moldova's quest for a secure sense of self drove its policies: the country chose to define itself as part of "Europe" (a democratic European state) rather than part of a nebulous "Russian world." This identity consolidation was both top-down (elites pushing European identity as Moldova's future) and bottom-up (societal shifts rejecting the corrupt, oligarchic past associated with Russian influence). Post-imperial theory underscores how Moldova, like other post-Soviet states, is navigating the aftermath of empire: by shedding Russian imperial legacies (language laws, Soviet-era "Moldovan" identity distinctions, CIS memberships), it is finalising a decolonisation of its politics and culture. Indeed, in 2023, the Moldovan parliament symbolically changed the official language reference from "Moldovan" to "Romanian" (Reuters, 2023b), directly linking national identity to European (Romanian) heritage and discarding a Soviet-imposed appellation. This identity shift is deeply post-imperial – a rejection of the Russified narratives of the past. The English School's regional order concept is seen in Moldova's

embrace of European institutions: by integrating into the EU's normative order, Moldova seeks international legitimacy and security within a rules-based regional society, stepping away from the Russian-led order that is increasingly viewed as illegitimate or doomed. Finally, regarding discursive power and resistance, the Moldovan case demonstrates how discourses of resistance to Russia formed quietly but firmly – the government's narrative of a "European Moldova" at peace versus a "Russian empire" bringing war has taken hold, and even Russia's attempts at counter narrative (e.g. blaming the West for Moldova's woes) have found diminishing purchase.

Moldova's Gradual Detachment from Russia's Sphere

Moldova's detachment from Russian dominance has been a story of erosion through quiet reorientation rather than open confrontation. Unlike Ukraine or even Georgia, which challenged Moscow more overtly (and paid heavy prices), Moldova gradually moved away with measured steps – leveraging the distraction of the Ukraine war and the goodwill of the EU to loosen what was once a tight web of dependence. The 2022 war was the catalyst that transformed Moldova's strategic outlook: it crystallised the threats inherent in remaining under Moscow's shadow and provided the impetus for Moldova to do what previously seemed too risky – apply for EU membership, diversify energy supplies, crack down on Russian-linked influence networks, and speak openly of its European integration path. Several theoretical frameworks developed earlier help elucidate aspects of this trajectory:

Russia's soft power in Moldova weakened after 2022, although it did not disappear. The narrative of Russia as a fraternal protector became harder to sustain in the context of the war in Ukraine, while the public opinion data discussed above indicate that Russia-led integration projects lagged behind the European alternative. The Moldovan government sought to build on this opening by presenting European integration as a framework of modernisation, democracy and security. In the battle for hearts and minds, the EU gained a clearer advantage,

but Russia retained influence among parts of society. This qualifies Nye's insight on soft power: coercion can still generate pressure, but without legitimacy its capacity to secure durable consent is limited.

The Kremlin's inability to provide regional public goods or credible security undermined its hegemonic claim. Instead of stability, Russia gave Moldova insecurity – gas cut-offs, embargoes, and the looming threat of military action. A hegemon that becomes a net security liability rather than a security provider will lose its periphery. Moldova is a case in point: once it realised that Moscow's hegemony meant exposure to war and blackmail, the cost-benefit calculus of remaining in Russia's sphere turned negative (Burmester, 2025). Thus, Moldova increasingly sought anchoring in the EU, which offered a more predictable framework of rules, assistance and market access. In theoretical terms, Russia's regional hegemonic stability was built on coercion (negative sanctions) rather than consent – a fragile foundation that the shock of war collapsed. The "buffer zone" Moscow long sought in Moldova no longer functions in the way Moscow envisaged.

Moldova's journey since 2022 can be seen as a small state seeking a stable identity in a turbulent environment. By doubling down on a European identity – through policies, symbols, and international alignment – Moldova reduced the ambiguity about "who we are" that had plagued it since independence (oscillating between East and West). This firmer sense of self (as part of Europe) provides a feeling of control and continuity: it answers the anxiety raised by the war (will we survive as a free nation?) with a path toward inclusion in a powerful community of states. Ontological security theory posits that states need a consistent narrative about their place in the world; Moldova increasingly found that narrative in EU integration, while neutrality came to be debated less as a sufficient security framework and more as a principle requiring external partnerships. As a result, even while facing ongoing risks such as Transnistria, Moldova appears more confident in the direction it has chosen. EU candidacy has increasingly been framed by the government as a national endeavour, although

public opinion data show that Moldova's European reorientation remained socially contested rather than fully consensual (Institute of Public Policies, 2023).

Moldova's emancipation from Russian influence thus illustrates the dynamic interplay of power, institutions, and ideas. A coercive great power war can, paradoxically, erode that great power's influence elsewhere by shattering illusions and pushing smaller states into new alignments. Moldova today is more firmly anchored in a European trajectory, supported by deeper engagement with European institutions and partners. To be sure, challenges remain: reforming governance, weathering economic hardships, and keeping the public consensus intact through upcoming elections will test Moldova's resolve. Russia has not given up interfering, and could still leverage any opening to slow Moldova's Western trajectory (for example, by exploiting discontent or the Transnistria issue). But for now, the trajectory is clear and appears difficult to reverse in the medium term – a setback for Moscow's regional ambitions.

Moldova's partial but accelerating reduction of dependence sets the stage for comparison with a very different case – that of Belarus, examined in the next chapter. If Moldova is the example of erosion through reorientation, Belarus is the example of entrenchment through coercion. Under Alexander Lukashenko, Belarus has doubled down on alliance with Russia during and after the Ukraine war, to the point of sacrificing elements of its sovereignty. Yet even in Belarus, Russia's war has created strains and popular unease, hinting that hegemonic control secured by force may also be unsustainable in the long run. Moldova and Belarus thus bookend the spectrum of post-Soviet responses: one pivots West to secure its future, the other is dragged further into Russia's embrace – a "quiet emancipation" versus a "coerced loyalty." The tale of these two countries encapsulates the strategic fallout of Russia's war: a near abroad that is increasingly unwilling or unable to remain in Moscow's orbit, each state navigating its own path amid the waning gravitational pull of a faltering regional hegemon.

BELARUS:
LOYAL ALLY OR CAPTIVE STATE?

Introduction

Belarus's trajectory in the wake of Russia's war on Ukraine presents a paradox of coerced loyalty and dependent sovereignty. Once touted as Russia's closest ally, Belarus increasingly displays characteristics of a client state – loyal on the surface but largely because its beleaguered regime has no alternative. President Alexander Lukashenko's authoritarian government has tethered itself to the Kremlin for survival, especially after domestic unrest in 2020 and international isolation. In return, Moscow enjoys hegemonic persistence through subordination: it maintains decisive control in Minsk without the formal complications of annexation (Liubakova, 2025). This analysis examines how the 2022 war cemented Belarus as a case of sustained Russian influence, asking whether Belarus is a genuine ally or essentially a state whose sovereignty has become increasingly constrained by dependence on Moscow. It is empirically grounded and engages different theoretical paradigms to explain Belarus's unique trajectory.

Belarus stands out among post-Soviet states for doubling down on alliance with Moscow during and after Russia's invasion of Ukraine, in stark contrast to neighbours that have drifted away from Russian influence. On one hand, Minsk's unwavering alignment – allowing its territory to be used for the invasion and echoing Kremlin narratives – portrays the image of a loyal ally. On the other hand, the extent of Russian leverage over Belarus's economy, military, and foreign policy raises the question of whether this loyalty is voluntary or extracted under duress. The very sovereignty of Belarus has been eroded by integration measures that blur the line between an independent state and a Russian vassal. This tension between outward loyalty and inward captivity is central to understanding the Belarus-Russia relationship after 2022.

Crucially, Belarus's case illustrates how Moscow's regional hegemony endures in one corner of the former USSR – but at the cost of legitimacy and stability. In theoretical terms, realist power dynamics are evident in Russia's use of military and economic leverage to keep Minsk in line. The logic of hegemonic stability (or imperial sphere) is tested: Russia retains a foothold in Eastern Europe by keeping Belarus in a position of deep subordination, suggesting a persistence of imperial-like hierarchy even as its wider sphere unravels. However, Russia's soft power and legitimacy in Belarus are dubious; support for Moscow in Belarusian society is lukewarm and largely manufactured by state propaganda (Mudrov, 2022). Issues of ontological security and identity loom large – Lukashenko's regime clings to a Soviet-Russian identity to justify its alliance, while many Belarusians quietly question their nation's course (Bekus, 2023). Post-imperial theories come into play as Belarus exemplifies how a former metropole (Russia) can reproduce asymmetric dependency decades after the USSR's collapse (Kluczewska & Silvan, 2025). From an English School perspective, the regional order is bifurcating: Belarus remains in Russia's "anti-Western" international society, even as others like Ukraine, Moldova, and Georgia seek a Western-oriented order. Finally, discursive power and resistance are evident in the battle over narratives: the Belarusian state amplifies Kremlin talking points to legitimise its choices (Mudrov, 2022), while opposition voices (largely in exile) craft a counter-discourse of national liberation from Russia's grip.

The sections that follow first survey Russia's influence in Belarus before 2022 and the instruments that underpinned it. Next, attention turns to the turning point of 2022, when the Ukraine invasion pushed Belarus much further away from its earlier limited balancing strategy. The analysis then examines domestic political and ideational reactions inside Belarus, including regime rhetoric and public sentiment. It continues with an assessment of Belarus's post-2022 alignments and the broader regional reconfiguration, drawing explicit comparisons with Moldova's "quiet emancipation" from Moscow and Armenia's

"ontological disillusionment" with its patron. Finally, the analysis summarises the findings and reflects theoretically on what Belarus's case means for understanding the erosion (or persistence) of Russian influence in the post-Soviet region. Throughout, the analysis underscores Belarus as a sobering case where Russia's control has not eroded but rather intensified — albeit through coercive dependency that may prove brittle in the long run.

Russia's Pre-2022 Influence and Instruments

Before the 2022 war, Russia's influence over Belarus was extensive, built on decades of close ties and a deliberate strategy of binding Belarus into Moscow's orbit. Unlike other post-Soviet states that pursued pro-Western trajectories, Belarus under Lukashenko remained within Russia's "privileged sphere" through a combination of hard security alliances, economic dependence, cultural-ideational affinity, and regime patronage. Moscow's instruments of influence ranged from military agreements and subsidies to soft-power penetration.

Russia and Belarus formed a nominal Union State in the 1990s, an ambitious project envisioning supranational structures and even common citizenship. In practice, full integration stalled, but the Union State framework signalled Belarus's unique closeness to Russia. Belarus also joined Russian-led blocs like the Collective Security Treaty Organisation (CSTO) and the Eurasian Economic Union (EAEU), embedding itself in Russia's regional architecture (Shykhutsina, 2023). These alliances gave Moscow institutional leverage. For instance, as a CSTO ally, Belarus routinely hosted joint military exercises and coordinated defence policy with Russia. Moscow maintained two military facilities on Belarusian soil (a radar station and a naval communication centre) and long sought a full-fledged airbase – though Lukashenko, wary of sovereignty optics, resisted permanent basing before 2022 (Liubakova, 2025). Still, by being in the CSTO and Union State, Minsk effectively conceded a degree of strategic control to Moscow; Belarus's own military doctrine and procurement were

closely aligned with Russia. From a realist power standpoint, Russia's larger military and nuclear umbrella underwrote Belarus's security – at the cost of tying Minsk's hands in foreign policy. Belarus never developed a fully independent defence posture.

A cornerstone of Russian influence was economic patronage. Throughout Lukashenko's rule (since 1994), Belarus was sustained by Russian energy subsidies – notably cheap oil and gas – which propped up its Soviet-legacy industries. Russia allowed Belarus to import crude oil at below-market prices and re-export refined products to the West, a scheme that provided Minsk billions in revenue. In essence, the Belarusian economy was structurally intertwined with Russia's: by 2020, roughly half of Belarus's trade was with Russia, and Russia was the primary market for Belarusian exports (machinery, foodstuffs) as well as the source of critical imports and loans. Western sanctions after Lukashenko's 2020 crackdown only increased this dependence. As Kosowska & Kosowski (2024) note, the breakdown in dialogue with the West deprived Minsk of its balancing options and forced it to lean overwhelmingly on Russia economically. Belarus joined the EAEU in 2015, ostensibly for mutual benefit, but the institutional structure of the union reflected a significant asymmetry of power in which Russia remained the dominant actor, given the scale of its economy and its central role in the integration framework. Via mechanisms like the EAEU, Russia was able to shape the broader economic environment of integration, while Belarus sought to use the arrangement pragmatically to secure more favourable conditions within its relationship with Moscow, though with limited ability to fully balance Russian influence (Preiherman, 2025).

The carrot of economic integration came with the stick of potential cut-offs: the Kremlin periodically used gas price disputes or oil supply cuts to remind Lukashenko of his reliance. This economic statecraft kept Belarus in a position of asymmetric interdependence, where Minsk's survival was linked to Moscow's favour. Even on the eve of the war,

Belarus's strategic dependence was evident: it had few viable economic partners besides Russia, a vulnerability Moscow could exploit.

Unlike in the Baltic states or Ukraine, Russia enjoyed considerable soft-power resonance in Belarus, owing to shared language, religion, and historical narratives. The majority of Belarusians speak Russian as their first language, consume Russian media, and many feel cultural affinity with the broader "Russian world." The Kremlin cultivated this through state media broadcasts and cultural programmes. Russian television had a wide reach in Belarus, framing news in ways favourable to Moscow (Mudrov, 2022). Historical memory – especially the shared victory in the Great Patriotic War (World War II) – was emphasised by both Moscow and Minsk as a core of union. Lukashenko's regime, particularly after the early 2000s, reappropriated Soviet legacy as part of Belarus's national narrative (Bekus, 2023). This meant that Belarusian state ideology overlapped with Russian nostalgia, creating an ideational consonance that legitimised close alliance. At the same time, indigenous Belarusian national identity (language, symbols, European orientation) was sidelined or even repressed by the Lukashenko government. As a result, alternative identities that could anchor a more independent course were weak. Scholars have described Belarus as being characterised more by statehood than nationhood, with the regime fostering loyalty to state stability and Soviet-style order rather than a distinct civic nationhood that might distance itself from Russia (Manaev, Manayeva & Yuran, 2011). This identity factor, related to ontological security, worked in Russia's favour: Belarus's ruling elite did not define their identity in opposition to Russia, but in brotherhood or continuity with it. Lukashenko himself often proclaimed the closeness of Belarusians and Russians, at times even hinting they are "one people in two states." Such rhetoric signalled to Moscow that Belarus would not succumb to Western cultural influence easily.

Perhaps the most critical instrument was the patronage relationship between Putin and Lukashenko. For years, Lukashenko played a "multi-vector" game – flirting with the European Union or China to

extract better terms from Russia – but ultimately, he depended on Moscow's political backing. This became stark after the 2014 Ukraine crisis: alarmed by Russia's aggression in Ukraine, Lukashenko briefly courted the West (e.g. hosting peace talks in Minsk, releasing some political prisoners) and refused to recognise Russia's annexation of Crimea. He even stalled deeper Union State integration in 2018–19, rejecting Putin's pushes for closer political union (Țicălău, 2023). Yet, these acts of defiance were bounded. When push came to shove – especially after mass protests in Belarus in 2020 – Lukashenko had to turn to Putin for rescue. In August 2020, facing unprecedented demonstrations against his fraudulent re-election, Lukashenko secured Moscow's promise of security assistance and a $1.5 billion loan, tilting decisively back toward Russia (Soldatkin, 2020). Western sanctions and isolation following the 2020 crackdown further cemented this dependency (Katarzyna Kosowska & Kosowski, 2024). By 2021, Belarus was increasingly isolated in Europe; Lukashenko's only viable ally was the Kremlin. This patron-client dynamic meant Russian influence over Belarus became personalised: Putin's regime essentially guaranteed Lukashenko's political survival in exchange for loyalty. A telling episode was the "Allied Resolve" joint military drills in Feb 2022 – conducted just before the Ukraine invasion – which Lukashenko hosted in line with Moscow's strategic needs, showcasing his subordinated position (Reuters, 2022a; Țicălău, 2023). In summary, Russia's pre-2022 influence in Belarus was an amalgam of hard power leverage, economic entanglement, soft-power penetration, and autocratic alliance, all of which made Minsk uniquely susceptible to Moscow's will.

From a theoretical perspective, this is a classic hierarchical relationship of the kind realism and hegemonic stability theory would predict: the stronger power, Russia, provides security and economic goods, while the weaker actor, Belarus, yields policy autonomy. Yet unlike a voluntary alliance, this one was coercive and contingent, lacking genuine soft power legitimacy. Belarus's leadership instrumentalised the Russian relationship to maintain its own rule, actively co-

constructing the dependency to extract benefits (Kluczewska & Silvan, 2025). As Kluczewska and Silvan (2025) note, Belarusian elites navigated this asymmetry to their advantage, using Belarus's geographic importance (as Russia's gateway to Europe) and Moscow's neo-imperial mindset to their advantage. For years, Lukashenko pursued a multi-vector strategy that combined loyalty to Moscow with periodic resistance to deeper political and military integration (Țicălău, 2023). That balancing act, however, had finite limits. By the eve of 2022, Belarus's multi-vector room for manoeuvre had largely collapsed. The stage was set for what came next: when Russia went to war in Ukraine, Belarus would effectively become an extension of Russian strategy, revealing just how captive Lukashenko's regime had become.

The 2022 Turning Point

February 2022 marked a fateful turning point for Belarus. As Russia launched its full-scale invasion of Ukraine, Belarus decisively moved from being a quasi-independent partner to an active enabler of Russian aggression. Lukashenko's decision to allow Russian forces to attack Ukraine from Belarusian territory – reversing years of careful hedging – underscored the new reality: Minsk's policy was now effectively an appendage of the Kremlin's war plan (Liubakova, 2025). This section examines how the outbreak of war transformed Belarus's status, pushing it into unprecedented dependency and altering its domestic and international calculus.

In the early hours of February 24, 2022, Russian troops and tanks poured over the Ukrainian border from Belarus, aiming toward Kyiv. Belarusian soil, airspace, and infrastructure were made fully available to Moscow's war machine (Oksentiuk et al., 2025). This included launching ballistic missiles and air raids from Belarus, and allowing supply lines through Belarusian railways and roads to support the northern front of Russia's invasion (Liubakova, 2025). Such use of Belarus as a staging ground was agreed in advance under the guise of joint exercises ("Allied Resolve 2022"). Lukashenko publicly justified it

by echoing Putin's claims – that Ukraine or NATO posed threats and that Belarus had to assist its ally for regional security (Mudrov, 2022). In reality, this move crossed a Rubicon. Belarus lost any remaining veneer of neutrality; it became, in Western eyes, a co-belligerent. The EU and United States quickly expanded sanctions on Belarus alongside those imposed on Russia, targeting Belarusian banks, industries, and officials for aiding the aggression. Lukashenko's long effort to cast Belarus as a distinct, sovereign entity — insisting that Belarus had not started the war and bore no moral responsibility for it — rang hollow (Lisiecka, 2023; Mudrov, 2022). The 2022 invasion thus locked Belarus into Russia's war, binding its fate to Moscow's.

It is important to note that Lukashenko accepted this role under conditions of severe dependence on Moscow, while still trying to limit Belarus's direct military exposure. As Țicălău (2023) documents, throughout 2022 Putin repeatedly attempted to drag Belarus deeper into the war – even urging Lukashenko to deploy Belarusian troops into combat – but Lukashenko resisted those extreme steps. In the initial phase, he yielded to Moscow on key points: adopting a new Union State military doctrine and hosting tens of thousands of Russian soldiers for the assault (Țicălău, 2023). However, Belarus's own army never directly entered the fighting. Lukashenko publicly vowed that Belarusian forces would not join the "special operation" unless Ukraine attacked Belarus first – a pledge aimed at both domestic and international audiences. This stance aligns with Țicălău's (2023) argument that after the initial invasion phase, Lukashenko acted cautiously and sought to avoid direct involvement of the Belarusian army. His calculus was clear: providing territory and logistics was one thing (hard for him to refuse given his debt to Putin), but sending Belarusian conscripts to die in Ukraine could backfire, potentially sparking internal backlash or fracturing his loyal security apparatus. Thus, 2022 saw Lukashenko performing an awkward balancing act under duress – fully aligning with Russia's war effort rhetorically and materially, yet quietly drawing a red line at committing his own troops.

This underscores Belarus's status as a captive ally: obedient but not enthusiastic, fearing the domestic consequences of Putin's venture.

The war's onset also precipitated legal-institutional shifts that entrenched Belarus's subordination. In late February 2022, as Russian missiles rained on Ukraine, Belarus held a hastily organised constitutional referendum. Under conditions of repression, the regime pushed through amendments that removed the constitutional commitment to make Belarus a nuclear-free zone and a neutral state (Liubakova, 2025). These changes, passed in a managed vote, had profound implications. The referendum also strengthened Lukashenko's domestic position by creating the possibility for him to assume leadership of the All-Belarusian People's Assembly, a body placed above the national parliament, while the absence of independent monitoring and the broader climate of repression further undermined the vote's legitimacy (Moshes & Nizhnikau, 2022). By dropping the neutrality provision (in place since 1994) Belarus signalled it no longer even aspired to an equidistant foreign policy – it openly embraced alliance with Russia. More dramatically, deleting the nuclear-weapons ban opened the door for Russian nuclear deployment on Belarusian soil, something unthinkable a few years prior. Indeed, within a year, Putin announced that Russia would begin deploying tactical nuclear weapons in Belarus once special storage facilities were ready in July 2023 (Faulconbridge, 2023). Liubakova (2025) notes that the timing of the constitutional shift was not accidental: it occurred just days before the invasion, effectively synchronising Belarus's legal framework with Russia's wartime agenda. From a hegemonic stability perspective, this was Russia tightening its control over a dependent ally, ensuring Minsk's full strategic compliance. For Belarus, it meant a further loss of sovereignty: key decisions on defence posture were now essentially made in Moscow. Western observers argued that by enabling Russian nuclear deployment in Belarus, Lukashenko traded away a pillar of independence for Putin's continued support (Liubakova, 2025).

As a result of these choices, Belarus's international position after February 2022 became one of deep isolation (aside from Russia and a few other authoritarian states). Comprehensive Western sanctions severed much of Belarus's trade with Europe and the US, cut off its access to international finance, and even impacted its potash fertiliser exports (a lifeblood of the economy). The Council of Europe suspended all relations with the Belarusian authorities in March 2022, while Belarus's participation in the Eastern Partnership had already been suspended by Minsk in 2021 (Council of Europe, 2022). By October 2022, Belarus had no EU ambassador in-country (Shykhutsina, 2023). In effect, Belarus sacrificed its remaining ties to the West by siding with Moscow in the war. This fulfilled a long-standing Russian objective – pulling Belarus irrevocably into its geo-economic orbit – but it also meant Belarus became almost wholly dependent on Russia (and to a lesser extent China) for economic survival. Kosowska and Kosowski (2024) describe the situation as one of extreme turbulence for the Belarusian economy, facing unprecedented external shocks (war and sanctions) that undercut sustainable growth. With its export markets in the West largely closed, Belarus had to reroute trade through Russia or engage in sanctions evasion schemes as a junior partner to Moscow. This process intensified the "consolidation of strategic dependence" identified by Eberhardt (2025): Belarus's capacity for independent economic and foreign policymaking was severely constrained by 2022–23. The war thus catalysed Minsk's international marginalisation while tethering it ever closer to Russia's side.

From Moscow's vantage point, Belarus in 2022 became a case of maintained influence. While Russia's sway was diminishing in many other neighbouring states, in Belarus it reached new heights. Putin could boast that a "Union State" partner not only stayed loyal but expanded Russia's strategic depth westward. By mid-2022, Russia began deploying new military assets to Belarus: e.g. training newly mobilised Russian troops there, integrating air defence systems, and later moving toward basing nuclear-capable missiles (Liubakova, 2025). In Putin's

words, Belarus and Russia's military had become effectively "one" (a reflection of the Union State doctrine). The Kremlin even announced in March 2023 that tactical nuclear weapons would be stationed in Belarus – the first deployment of Russian nuclear weapons abroad since the collapse of the Soviet Union (Faulconbridge, 2023). As Horovitz and Wachs (2024) argue, the deployment reflected both Moscow's effort to bind Minsk more closely to Russia and Belarus's growing military dependence on its patron. It signalled a deeper incorporation of Belarus into Russia's security realm, giving Moscow forward-deployed deterrence while further constraining Belarus's sovereignty.

Yet, this "success" is double-edged. The loyalty of the Belarusian regime in 2022 was secured through coercion and Lukashenko's political dependence, not by popular acclaim or mutual values. Lukashenko remains in charge in Minsk, but he does so as Putin's junior partner, reliant on Russian indulgence. The next section explores how this dynamic has been received domestically within Belarus – where the war and Belarus's role in it elicited anxiety, suppression, and identity struggles. The year 2022 marked an inflection point in Belarus's post-Soviet trajectory: its room for independent manoeuvre narrowed sharply, while its dependence on Moscow's political, military and economic support deepened. As Liubakova (2025) aptly put it, "Belarus remains a state in name – but increasingly, a satellite in function".

Domestic Political and Ideational Reactions

The fallout of the war and Belarus's subservient role has reverberated inside the country, shaping domestic politics and national consciousness. Internally, the Belarusian regime has doubled down on repression and propaganda to manage public opinion, while the opposition (mostly in exile or underground) struggles to assert a pro-democracy, pro-sovereignty narrative. The result is a society in limbo: many Belarusians are uneasy about the war and their nation's complicity, yet they are atomised by fear and inundated with official discourse justifying the Kremlin's actions. This section examines the domestic political reactions

– regime tactics and opposition responses – and the ideational currents – identity and public sentiment – in Belarus since 2022.

Regime Discourse and Justifications

Lukashenko's regime has tightly controlled the narrative around the war. State media, already monopolised, largely followed Moscow's line from February 2022 onward. Mudrov (2022) shows that Belarusian state-controlled outlets justified Russia's "special operation" by repeating several Kremlin claims: that the Donbas conflict had to be "settled," that Ukraine pursued an aggressive policy toward Belarus, that Nazism had taken root in Ukraine, and that NATO posed a security threat. Lukashenko used a similar defensive register, presenting Belarus not as an aggressor but as a state forced to respond to alleged Ukrainian and Western threats against Belarus and Russia. The phrase "We did not unleash this war. Our conscience is clear" – the title of Mudrov's (2022) article – encapsulates the official line that Belarus bore no responsibility for the outbreak of the war and acted in response to security threats as defined by the regime. Lukashenko has repeatedly claimed that he is keeping Belarus out of direct fighting, even while allowing Russian forces to operate from Belarusian territory. In 2022, this language of external threat became sharper: Belarusian TV and officials portrayed Ukraine, under its "nationalist regime," as hostile to Belarus and accused Kyiv of provocations or plans to drag Belarus into the war (Mudrov, 2022). By constructing the war as preventive and defensive, the regime sought to legitimise its alliance with Moscow in the eyes of Belarusians who otherwise have no quarrel with Ukrainians.

Repression of Dissent

Any discordant voices against the war were swiftly stifled. In the initial days of the invasion, small groups of Belarusian citizens bravely protested, and railroad workers sabotaged train lines to slow Russian movements. The regime's response was draconian: arrests of anti-war demonstrators, harsh prison sentences for "saboteurs," and an

expanded definition of treason to target those criticising the war. Independent media and civil society, already decimated after 2020, faced further crackdowns if suspected of "extremism" (a label liberally applied to anti-war sentiment). Essentially, Lukashenko criminalised opposition to the war, equating it with being a fifth-column for the West. Hundreds of NGOs and independent outlets had been liquidated post-2020; that trend continued unabated. By 2022–23, Belarus had thousands of political prisoners, including journalists and activists who dared speak against Russia's aggression. The regime even persecuted people for privately voicing pro-Ukraine views in social media or for displaying the Ukrainian flag. This intense coercive pressure contained overt dissent within Belarus. It also drove even more opponents into exile, where a Belarusian democratic government-in-exile (led by Sviatlana Tsikhanouskaya) has been lobbying against Lukashenko and supporting Ukraine. However, inside the country, fear prevails. The lack of street protests after the first weeks of the war was not evidence of broad support for Lukashenko's policy, but rather of the highly repressive character of the Belarusian state. This illustrates how authoritarian resilience on the domestic front enables Belarus's foreign alignment: the regime's survival strategy is to eliminate dissent, thereby making its foreign policy choices (even unpopular ones) uncontestable at home.

Public Opinion and Sentiments

Gauging genuine Belarusian public opinion is challenging under these conditions – independent polling is severely restricted and people are reluctant to speak freely. Still, the available evidence suggests a lukewarm and ambivalent attitude among the populace. On one hand, years of state propaganda and cultural affinity mean some segment of Belarusians does accept the Kremlin's narrative. Mudrov (2022) suggests that, in the absence of reliable surveys, many Belarusians may have been receptive to Moscow's interpretation of events. Given the dominance of state-controlled media and the limited space for

alternative narratives, official explanations of the war likely resonated with a significant part of the population. On the other hand, there is little evidence of enthusiasm for Belarus's direct involvement in the war. Chatham House Belarus surveys in 2022 (clandestinely conducted online) indicated that a majority of Belarusians did not support sending Belarusian troops to Ukraine, and only a small minority favoured Belarus taking an active part on Russia's side. Most preferred either neutrality or simply rhetorical support for Russia. This aligns with Lukashenko's own calculus to avoid deploying his army – he knew it would be deeply unpopular and potentially destabilising. Furthermore, while many Belarusians harbour friendly feelings toward Russians, they also value their own statehood and peace. This attachment to statehood helps explain why many were uneasy about Belarus being absorbed by Russia or fully drawn into the war (Liubakova, 2025). The shock of the Ukraine war – a Slavonic neighbour being invaded – likely resonated with ordinary Belarusians.

In essence, Belarusian society appears split between passive acceptance and silent disapproval of the war. The prevailing mood might be described as *resigned cynicism*: people feel they cannot change the situation and so focus on daily life, tuning out politics. A quantitative study of Belarusian identity in 2023 (FES survey) found neutrality and detachment in attitudes toward the war – many were not following it closely, reflecting either apathy or self-censorship under repression (Bikanau & Nesterovich, 2023). Meanwhile, the regime's intensive propaganda has had some effect: by demonising Ukraine's government and portraying Russia as a necessary ally, it seeks to manufacture consent. But any such consent is brittle, resting on misinformation and fear, not genuine conviction.

Identity and Ontological Security

The war and Belarus's role have also stirred deeper questions of national identity and existential security. For years, Lukashenko cultivated a peculiar Belarusian identity that was *statist and Russo-*

centric – emphasising stability, Soviet-era symbols, and the Russian language, while marginalising nationalist or European-leaning identities (Bekus, 2023). This approach largely succeeded in preventing the emergence of a strong anti-Russian nationalism in Belarus. However, it also created an identity vacuum: if being Belarusian was defined by loyalty to the state (and by extension to Russia's "elder brother"), what happens when that very state's sovereignty is in jeopardy? Nelly Bekus (2023) argues that Belarus's nation-building took an exceptional path – instead of a clean break from the Soviet past, it "recycled" Soviet identity under Lukashenko, and up until 2020 this hybrid identity insulated the regime. (Bekus, 2023). The 2020 protests, with their revival of the historical white-red-white flag and national poetry and language, showed the resurgence of an alternative Belarusian identity centred on democracy and independence. That wave was suppressed, but not extinguished.

Now, in 2022–25, the war in Ukraine has further strained Belarusian identity. Bekus (2023) argues that the war in Ukraine exposed the limits of Belarusian sovereignty and weakened society's ability to mobilise in its defence. Indeed, Belarus's de facto loss of agency (being dragged into a war by Russia) is a psychological blow to Belarusians who cherish that they are not Russia. There is a growing realisation among parts of society that Lukashenko's subordinate policies endanger the very existence of Belarus as a distinct nation-state. This realisation fuels an ontological insecurity – a fear about the continuity of Belarus's identity and statehood if it becomes fully dominated by Russia. Some independent voices (historians, artists, the exiled opposition) frame the war as an existential fight not only for Ukraine but for Belarus's own future – arguing that a Ukrainian victory and a weakened Putin are preconditions for a free Belarus. On the flip side, the regime and its loyalists leaned more heavily on the idea of a shared Belarusian-Russian security space against the West, leaving less room for narratives of Belarusian distinctiveness. Lukashenko frequently speaks

of Russians and Belarusians as essentially one people, reinforcing a Soviet-style union identity.

This identity tug-of-war has profound implications. If Russia's hegemonic control continues, Belarus could undergo accelerated Russification, eroding Belarusian language and culture (trends already visible in the education system and media). A recent Estonian intelligence assessment described Belarus as a "Russian vassal state" (Estonian Foreign Intelligence Service, 2026), reflecting how far Minsk has been drawn into Moscow's political and security orbit. On the other hand, should conditions change (e.g. a Kremlin crisis or a leadership change in Minsk), the pent-up desire for an authentic Belarusian identity could resurface strongly, as seen in 2020. For now, Lukashenko's repression has weakened society's capacity to mobilise in defence of national sovereignty (Bekus, 2023). The populace is atomised and largely voiceless domestically, which is exactly how the regime maintains control and justifies its external allegiance. This dynamic – internal repression enabling external subordination – illustrates the synergy of discursive power and coercion: the regime's narrative defines patriotism as loyalty to Russia, and its forceful silencing of dissent prevents any counter-narrative from rallying momentum.

Belarus's domestic scene since 2022 is one of quiescence under the shadow of war. Lukashenko has fortified his police state, aligned its messaging entirely with Moscow, and eliminated avenues for popular expression. Public opinion is difficult to measure but likely remains divided, with a significant undercurrent of discontent or war-weariness that cannot manifest. The identity of the nation is at a crossroads: official ideology pulls it toward a Russia-centric orbit, while an undercurrent (mostly outside the country) yearns for a Belarus that is truly independent and aligned with European norms. This ontological duality – subordination vs. aspiration – remains unresolved. What is clear is that, for now, any latent societal resistance is frozen by fear. Belarusian society has been pushed into Lukashenko's narrative of loyalty to Russia, yet this loyalty, like Lukashenko's own, is coerced

and fraught. It lacks the legitimacy that true soft power would entail, highlighting a key weakness in Russia's hold: it rests on a brittle foundation of propaganda and policing, not genuine popular consent.

Post-2022 Alignments and Regional Reconfiguration

The aftermath of 2022 has seen Belarus further locked into Russia's camp, even as the broader post-Soviet region undergoes strategic realignments away from Moscow. This section analyses Belarus's alignments since 2022 – politically, militarily, economically – and contrasts them with developments in other states, notably Moldova's quiet emancipation from Russian influence and Armenia's ontological disillusionment with its security patron. The comparison highlights how atypical Belarus's path is. While others recalibrate their foreign policies in response to Russia's war (often reducing dependence), Belarus has moved in the opposite direction: toward *more* integration and dependence, arguably becoming the last true satellite in Russia's near abroad.

Deepened Integration with Russia

After 2022, Belarus accelerated the implementation of long-discussed Union State programmes and bilateral agreements, effectively erasing many remaining distinctions between Belarusian and Russian systems. The Union State programmes on economic and regulatory integration — which Lukashenko had stalled for years — are now being enacted. Taken together, these concessions have further narrowed Belarus's capacity for independent policymaking (Liubakova, 2025). Notably, post-2022 integration increasingly extended beyond trade and energy into financial, regulatory, and fiscal coordination, including efforts to create a common financial market and align economic governance, tax administration, and regulatory frameworks (Leukavets, 2026). Russia also extended new loans to prop up Belarus's sanctioned economy, binding Minsk with debt. The Union State took on new military

significance: joint command structures have been strengthened, and Belarus revised its military doctrine in 2024 to explicitly allow Russian forces and even nuclear weapons on its territory (Liubakova, 2025). In April 2023, President Alyaksandr Lukashenko stated that approximately 80% of the 28 Union State programmes between Belarus and Russia had been implemented, primarily in the economic sphere (RIA Novosti, 2023).

Militarily, as detailed earlier, Belarus has become a de facto extension of Russia's armed forces. Even after the initial invasion phase, Russian troops continued to use Belarus as a training and logistics hub. The formation of the Regional Group of Forces (RGF) in late 2022 institutionalised Russia's troop presence under a joint command. Although many of those units rotated out in 2023, the legal and infrastructural framework remains for rapid reintroduction (Oksentiuk et al., 2025). Moreover, by late 2024 Moscow and Minsk signed a Treaty on Security Guarantees within the Union State. The agreement enabled the deployment of Russian military facilities in Belarus and formalised mutual defence commitments, including in response to threats to sovereignty or "constitutional order" (Liubakova, 2025). This treaty significantly commits Belarus to come to Russia's aid — and vice versa — not only against external attack but also against internal regime-threatening scenarios framed as threats to constitutional order. The latter phrase implies that Russia could claim a role in Belarusian internal crises, including a future challenge to Lukashenko's rule — a further indication of Belarus's dependent position within the alliance. It also means Belarus is treaty-bound to support Russia in conflicts on arguably any pretext. In short, Belarus's post-2022 alignment is one of near-complete military integration: Russian troops, joint military infrastructure, and even nuclear weapons are now part of the Belarusian security landscape (Oksentiuk et al., 2025). For Moscow, this secures a military outpost on NATO's doorstep; for Minsk, it means ceding control over its own defence and territory.

Economically, Belarus's orientation after 2022 is almost entirely towards Russia (and secondarily China). Western sanctions severed traditional export routes for potash and oil products through Baltic ports, so Belarus rerouted shipments via Russian ports and railways. By 2023 it was using 20 Russian ports, and exports through them had risen by 130% year on year (Alachnovič et al., 2024). Trade with Russia surged too: over 60% of Belarusian exports went to Russia in 2023 (Alachnovič et al., 2024). This has made Belarus even more dependent on Russia's economic health — if Russia slows, Belarus feels it directly. Kosowska and Kosowski (2024) highlight that Belarus's loss of Western markets and capital after 2020 pushed it into an imbalanced reliance on Russia's economy. With no IMF or EU support available, Minsk could turn only to Russian-led institutions and limited Chinese financing, but neither offered an alternative comparable to Russia's cheap energy, market access, and logistical infrastructure. Belarus's economy became more tightly integrated with Russia's than at any point since independence. This contrasts with Moldova, which in the same period worked to reduce energy dependence on Russia. Belarus, by contrast, continued to receive subsidised Russian oil and gas, with energy subsidies rising again after 2022 (Alachnovič et al., 2024). The broken dialogue with the West left Minsk with little leverage to resist Russian economic demands (Kosowska & Kosowski, 2024).

Comparison – Moldova's Quiet Emancipation

Moldova provides a foil to Belarus. Though historically also within Russia's sphere, Moldova's response to the Ukraine war was to quietly but decisively pull away from Moscow's orbit. In 2022, under the shock of the war, Moldova applied for EU membership and accelerated reforms to integrate with Europe. By 2023, it was receiving substantial Western aid, diversifying gas supplies, and even holding high-profile EU summits on its soil. Public opinion shifted toward blaming Russia for the war and supporting EU integration. Moscow's leverage in Moldova (via Transnistria or energy) was increasingly blunted by

coordinated Western backing. In effect, the war acted as a catalyst for Moldova to exit Russia's sphere – a "quiet emancipation" wherein Moldova did not loudly confront Moscow but simply drifted out of its grasp. Russia's influence eroded as Moldova deepened its alignment with European and Western institutions and adopted a new strategic narrative. The contrast with Belarus is stark: while Moldovan leaders declared their future "firmly European," Lukashenko hitched Belarus's fate even tighter to Moscow. The two countries demonstrate opposite outcomes of the war's regional impact – one breaking free, the other becoming more ensnared. The Moldovan case also underlines that Russian hegemony is not immutable: even a small, economically weak state can shift course if domestic politics and external support align. Belarus lacked those factors – its regime was unwilling to risk a break and indeed was complicit in the war, foreclosing Western support. Additionally, Belarus's authoritarian leadership (versus Moldova's democratic government) meant public sentiment had little influence on policy.

Comparison – Armenia's Ontological Disillusionment

Armenia, like Belarus, is formally allied with Russia (a CSTO member) and historically relied on Russia for security (particularly against Azerbaijan). However, the 2020 Karabakh war and especially the events during Russia's Ukraine war have led to a profound disillusionment in Armenia about Russia's reliability. In 2022–2023, as Azerbaijan pressed its advantage, Russia failed to robustly support Armenia; for example, Russian peacekeepers did little to stop Azerbaijani incursions in Karabakh, and Moscow appeared too distracted by Ukraine to uphold Armenia's security needs. This culminated in the collapse of Armenian control over Nagorno-Karabakh in 2023 – a traumatic outcome that many Armenians partly attribute to Russian inaction or impotence. Consequently, Armenia's leadership (under Prime Minister Pashinyan) has made unprecedented criticisms of Moscow and taken steps to diversify partnerships (e.g. military exercises with the US,

sending humanitarian aid to Ukraine). This shift can be described as "ontological disillusionment": Armenia's sense of itself as a cornerstone ally of Russia, and Russia as the guarantor of its security (a key part of Armenia's post-Soviet identity), has been shattered. The ontological security that Armenia derived from the Russia-led order is gone, leaving a search for new anchors (perhaps closer ties with the West or renewed national self-reliance). Importantly, Armenia has not fully broken with Russia – it remains in CSTO on paper – but the relationship's narrative foundation (fraternal protection) has eroded. Pashinyan even stated that relying solely on Russia was a mistake. Again, compare this with Belarus: Lukashenko, rather than experiencing disillusionment, appears to have doubled down on the ontological narrative of union with Russia. Despite evidence that Russia's war is risky and destabilising, Lukashenko's regime clings to the notion of Russia as Belarus's security bedrock and civilisational kin. The Belarusian state media never criticises Moscow's failures; in contrast, Armenian media and officials now openly question the CSTO's worth after it did nothing when Azerbaijan attacked. Essentially, Armenia is inching toward the realisation that its sovereign identity may require loosening ties with Russia, whereas Belarus has relinquished more sovereignty to Russia to preserve its regime identity.

These divergent paths underscore a key theme: Russia's war in Ukraine has splintered its erstwhile sphere. Some allies are reconsidering and readjusting (Armenia, Kazakhstan to some extent, even Central Asian states asserting more autonomy), some adversaries have become more openly anti-Russian (Georgia's public, Moldova's government), and only Belarus has escalated its integration. In doing so, Belarus finds itself more isolated regionally. It has alienated even traditionally friendly neighbours – Ukraine has severed all ties and views Lukashenko as complicit in aggression (President Zelenskyy warned that Lukashenko "will pay" for allowing the invasion) (Zakharchenko, 2025). The Baltic states and Poland now consider Belarus a direct security threat. Within the CSTO/EAEU context, Belarus and Russia

increasingly stand as a dyad apart: for instance, when Armenia refused to host CSTO exercises in 2023 and hinted at leaving the bloc, Belarus (holding CSTO presidency at the time) still toed Moscow's line, urging members to close ranks. From an English School perspective, the regional order might be read as a pluralistic society of states is emerging in Eurasia where sovereignty and non-interference are valued (by countries exiting Russia's influence), but Belarus remains in a more hierarchical, solidarist sub-order with Russia, prioritising regime survival over sovereign equality.

From Minsk's strategic viewpoint, post-2022 alignments mean short-term regime security but long-term precariousness. Eberhardt (2025) concludes that the war "entrenched Minsk's subordination to Moscow" and eliminated its multi-vector foreign policy options. Belarus's international marginalisation has intensified, while the country has increasingly acquired the characteristics of a *de facto* client state. Belarus's room for independent diplomatic and economic manoeuvre has narrowed considerably. Its dependence on Russia has deepened, while its capacity to attract investment, alternative partnerships, or diplomatic flexibility beyond Moscow has become far more limited.

One potential reconfiguration scenario is that, if Russia's war effort continues to falter, Moscow might press for even more direct control over Belarus, possibly through deeper institutional integration, although outright annexation remains speculative. Leaked strategy documents reported in 2023 suggested that Russian planners envisaged extensive political, economic, and military integration of Belarus by 2030 (Shyian, 2023). Lukashenko has so far avoided outright annexation by remaining useful to Putin while guarding limited autonomy. By tying Belarus's fate so closely to Moscow, however, he has narrowed the space for independent manoeuvre and exposed Belarus to a continuing, gradual erosion of sovereignty (Huterer & Sahm, 2024). In contrast, countries like Moldova and Armenia, by moving out of Russia's shadow, place themselves in a different emerging regional alignment — one oriented to Europe or genuine non-alignment. Belarus, for now, is the outlier that

has deepened its dependency when most others reduced theirs. This may leave Lukashenko as one of Moscow's most dependent remaining allies, but it also means Belarus's fortunes rise and fall largely with those of Russia.

The post-2022 regional landscape finds Belarus firmly in Russia's embrace, even as the notion of a Russian-led regional order is crumbling elsewhere. This "loyal ally or captive state" dynamic is essentially unique to Belarus. The comparative cases of Moldova and Armenia show that alternative trajectories – emancipation and disillusionment – are unfolding in parallel, underscoring the contingency of Belarus's path. Belarus remains a case of hegemonic persistence: Russia's influence endures through Belarus's subordination, showcasing one remaining sphere of dominance. But it is an influence born of coercion and circumstance, not broad consent. The next section reflects on what this means for theories of regional power and how Belarus's example fits (or not) into the pattern of Russia's eroding influence in the post-Soviet region. The analysis then turns to Azerbaijan, a country that, unlike Belarus, has leveraged the changing geopolitics to assert greater autonomy and strategic balance.

Belarus and the Persistence of Russian Control

The war in Ukraine has largely eroded Russia's regional influence, yet Belarus represents an important exception – a case of hegemonic persistence through enforced subordination. This section has shown how Belarus moved from a quasi-independent, if authoritarian, partner to an even more tightly bound client state of Moscow as a result of the war. Lukashenko's regime, beset by domestic illegitimacy and sanctioned by the West, effectively traded what remained of Belarus's sovereignty in exchange for Russia's support to stay in power (Liubakova, 2025). The outcome is a Belarus that is nominally an ally but in substance increasingly resembles a captive state: militarily exposed, economically dependent, diplomatically isolated from the West, and institutionally tied to Russia through the Union State

framework. This illustrates that Russia's hegemony, where it survives, has taken on an increasingly neo-imperial character — reliant on coercion and the personal dependencies of autocrats, rather than voluntary allegiance or soft power appeal.

Belarus's trajectory offers rich insights across several paradigms. It underscores classic realist dynamics of power asymmetry: Russia used both military might and economic leverage to compel Belarus's compliance. The security guarantee Russia extends (however dubious its quality) and the physical presence of Russian forces are hard-power tools ensuring Minsk's alignment. In realist terms, Belarus bandwagoned with its powerful neighbour out of necessity. However, this bandwagoning is fragile – it is not the result of a calculated gain in power by Belarus, but rather a desperate move by a regime to avoid collapse. This suggests a caveat in realist expectations: bandwagoning under duress may secure short-term survival but can undermine the state's long-term power (Belarus is weaker internationally and even militarily, since its forces are effectively under foreign command now). The Belarusian case also demonstrates the concept of hierarchical power: Russia has achieved a de facto hierarchy with Belarus (a mini "empire" relationship) in an otherwise anarchic region.

From a hegemonic stability perspective, Russia's continued dominance in Belarus provides a form of stability – at least ensuring a friendly buffer on NATO's border. Yet this is a Pyrrhic form of stability. It comes not from Russia's benign leadership in a sphere, but from a coercive imperial grip. The imperial-sphere model fits: Moscow treats Belarus as part of its rightful domain, intervening directly in its affairs and integrating it structurally. Belarus thus exemplifies how a would-be hegemon (Russia) clings to the remnants of an imperial sphere even as that sphere dissolves elsewhere. Notably, sustaining hegemony in this way carries costs: Russia must devote resources (troops, subsidies, nuclear sharing) to lock in Belarus, and it gains an ally of limited utility (an isolated regime with little legitimacy or international sway). This resonates with theories of overextension – that imperial persistence can

sap a hegemon's strength. Still, the Belarus case shows that a hegemon can maintain influence if it is willing to subordinate a client and the client has no escape options. It is a contemporary echo of great-power vassalage dynamics.

The near absence of genuine soft power in Russia's influence over Belarus is striking. Russia's appeal to Belarusians is shallow – grounded more in shared Soviet nostalgia and relentless propaganda than any positive vision of the future. The fact that Belarusian regime's loyalty had to be enforced by threat (in 2020, offering security forces to crush protests) and material inducements indicates a deficit of Russian attractiveness. Indeed, Russia's war has made it less attractive globally and regionally, and Belarus is no exception; without Lukashenko's iron grip, Belarusian society would likely display a more visible plurality of positions toward Russia and the war. The lack of legitimacy is twofold: Lukashenko lacks domestic legitimacy after stealing elections and brutalising dissent, and Russia lacks legitimacy as an external actor (seen more as an oppressor than a benefactor). This tandem illegitimacy means the Belarus-Russia alignment rests on force and fear, not on consent or shared values beyond those manufactured by state ideology. Nye's concept of soft power – getting others to want what you want – applies only weakly here; Belarus's people were not truly persuaded to "want" the war or deeper integration. Rather, they were told they had no choice. In the long run, this undermines the resilience of the alliance. A regime maintained by coercion can unravel quickly if circumstances shift (e.g., if there were a leadership change in either Minsk or Moscow). Thus, Belarus illustrates the limit of hegemonic influence without soft power: it can be effective in the short term but is inherently brittle.

The interplay of identity in Belarus's loyalty is complex. For Russia, keeping Belarus tethered is part of sustaining Russia's own ontological security as a "great power" with a sphere of influence. Losing Belarus would be symbolically devastating to Moscow's self-conception (nearly all of European ex-USSR would then be outside its orbit). This explains,

in part, why Putin has invested in binding Belarus (including the nuclear stationing, which has a symbolic resonance of restored imperial reach). For Belarus, Lukashenko's regime has its ontological security tied to the Soviet-Russian narrative; it fears the identity rupture that would come from a democratic, West-leaning Belarus (which would unmake the regime's founding myth). Hence, Lukashenko has clung to Russia as an identity anchor – portraying himself as the defender of the Great Patriotic War legacy and Slavic unity. However, for many Belarusians, especially younger generations and the opposition-minded, the events since 2020–22 have induced an crisis: the country's nominal sovereignty feels hollow, leading to questions like "what is Belarus if it is effectively ruled by Moscow?" This could be a precursor to identity-driven change in the future. Armenia's recent disillusionment is instructive: when Russia failed Armenia, it spurred an identity shift where Armenians reconsider their alignment. If a similar breach of expectation (e.g., Russia forcing Belarus into a truly unpopular action or Russia itself facing upheaval) occurs, Belarusians' suppressed frustrations could surface in a bid to reclaim a sovereign identity. Thus, the war has planted seeds of ontological insecurity in Belarus – currently masked by repression, but potentially potent.

Belarus's case confirms patterns observed in post-imperial settings. As Kluczewska & Silvan (2025) note, asymmetric relations from Soviet times were reproduced after 1991, but the subordinate actors (like Belarus) tried to shape them to their benefit. Lukashenko did so for decades, milking Russia's support while staving off deeper integration. However, post-imperial dependency is a dynamic process: external shocks (like the Ukraine war) can upset the equilibrium. In Belarus, the war allowed the metropole (Russia) to finally assert fuller control, tipping the balance toward a more colonial-like dependency**.** In multiple post-Soviet cases, divergence is visible: some states capitalised on the Soviet collapse to assert authentic independence, while others (Belarus, until now Armenia, some Central Asians) remained in a "managed independence" status. Belarus now appears closer to a neo-

Soviet dependency in function, an outlier as others shed that legacy. The post-imperial lens also highlights the personalism involved: unlike formal empires, Russia's influence often operates through personal ties with local strongmen. The Putin-Lukashenko relationship – sometimes tense, ultimately symbiotic – has been the linchpin. Should either exit the scene, the relationship could alter drastically. Post-Soviet region remains fluid; Belarus might be a last gasp of imperial nostalgia playing out through a single client state.

In terms of international society, the war has clearly fractured norms and order in Eurasia. Belarus under Lukashenko has aligned with Russia's challenge to the Western-led order, embracing the Kremlin's narrative of opposing NATO expansion and defending a Eurasian civilisational space. This puts Belarus in the camp of a revisionist regional order. Meanwhile, states like Moldova, Georgia, the Baltic countries, and now even Ukraine (defending itself) rally around Westphalian norms and European integration – a very different regional society. The English School concept of pluralism vs. solidarism can be applied: Belarus and Russia profess a form of solidarism between them (shared values of authoritarian stability, state sovereignty absolutism when it comes to internal affairs, and a common narrative of the historic Russian-led civilisation). However, that solidarism is not widely shared beyond them. The region is no longer one security complex but at least two. Belarus finds itself, along with Russia, increasingly isolated diplomatically – outside the European security community and not fully embraced elsewhere. Even China, while supportive of Lukashenko rhetorically, keeps a cautious distance in strategic terms. So, Belarus's alignment illustrates the emergence of a smaller, Russia-centric regional order that is at odds with the broader international community's rules (e.g., Belarus voted with Russia in UN votes on Ukraine, while most other post-Soviets abstained or supported Ukraine). This bodes ill for Belarus's international legitimacy and ties it to a declining power's fortunes. It is essentially locked out of the new regional realignments (such as

emerging partnerships of South Caucasus with Europe, or Central Asian states with multiple external players). In an English School sense, Belarus has cast its lot with a pluralist logic (emphasising regime sovereignty, non-interference by West) taken to an extreme of accepting interference only from its hegemon, Russia.

Finally, Belarus highlights a contest of discourses. The Lukashenko regime and Russian authorities have constructed a discursive framework wherein Belarus's subordination is portrayed as righteous and protective. Terms like "Union State," "brotherly peoples," and "common defence" pervade official rhetoric. They frame the loss of sovereignty as the fulfilment of sovereignty in another sense – as part of a greater whole that gives security and identity. This narrative is powerful when unchallenged in the media space, and indeed within Belarus, alternative voices have been quashed. However, the very need for such intense propaganda indicates underlying resistance. The Belarusian opposition, though largely silenced at home, uses social media, independent outlets abroad, and diplomatic channels to push a counter-narrative of national liberation: that Belarus must eventually throw off Russian domination and that Lukashenko is an illegitimate administrator of Moscow's interests. This narrative harks back to historical Belarusian dissidents who saw Moscow's rule as the primary obstacle to a free Belarus. While currently the regime's discourse dominates domestically, the resistance discourse lives on in the diaspora and underground. Symbolically, this is seen in continued use of banned national symbols (the old flag, Pahonia coat of arms) by those who reject the Russified state narrative. Over time, discursive power can shift; if the regime weakens, the counter-narrative could rapidly spread among a populace that has quietly retained pride in their distinctiveness. Thus, the battle for Belarus is not only on the ground but in the minds – a battle between a discourse of subordination-as-safety and a discourse of sovereignty-as-dignity. Whichever prevails will dictate Belarus's future orientation.

Belarus in the post-2022 context is a study in the limits and costs of Russia's hegemonic ambitions. It demonstrates that Moscow can still hold an ally tightly, but only by hollowing out that ally's autonomy and wedging it against its own people's latent wishes. This kind of influence is arguably unsustainable in the long term; it faces the entropy of public disillusionment, economic strain, and overreliance on specific leaders. If Russia's war aims continue to falter or if Putin's regime faces turmoil, Belarus could quickly transform from loyal outpost to fragile domino. Conversely, as long as both Putin and Lukashenko remain in power and see utility in each other, Belarus will likely remain in Russia's grip – a satellite state whose orbit is secured not by gravity of attraction but by the tether of coercion.

As the analysis turns to Azerbaijan, the focus shifts to yet another distinct response to Russia's war. Unlike Belarus's subservience or Armenia's disillusionment, Azerbaijan has charted a path of assertive opportunism – leveraging Russia's distraction to advance its own interests (notably against Armenia) and carefully balancing between Moscow, Ankara, and other powers. Azerbaijan's case highlights a form of post-Soviet statecraft that is almost the mirror opposite of Belarus: a country increasing its autonomy and regional clout amid Russia's weakened position. In this transition, the analysis moves from the model of the captive ally to that of a strategic balancer, further illustrating the war's divergent fallout across the former Soviet Union.

AZERBAIJAN: PRAGMATISM AND POST-SOVIET AUTONOMY

Introduction

Azerbaijan has emerged as one of the most strategically autonomous actors in the post-Soviet region, navigating a complex multi-vector foreign policy that balances relations with Russia, Turkey, the West, and Iran as well. Unlike many of its neighbours, Baku has long charted an independent course outside Moscow's formal alliances, leveraging its energy wealth and geopolitical location to maximise its own autonomy. This chapter examines how Russia's war on Ukraine in 2022 accelerated Azerbaijan's geopolitical independence while preserving pragmatic cooperation with Moscow. The guiding question is: How did the 2022 invasion prompt Baku to expand its room for manoeuvre vis-à-vis Russia, without provoking direct confrontation?

From a realist perspective, Azerbaijan's behaviour reflects classic balancing of power. Facing a historically dominant neighbour, Baku has pursued a hedging strategy, combining cooperation with Moscow with partnerships with Turkey, Western states, and others to preserve room for manoeuvre (Jović-Lazić & Bošković, 2024). At the same time, post-imperial theories of international relations emphasise the agency of post-Soviet states in asserting autonomy within, and sometimes against, the fading Russian hegemonic sphere. Azerbaijan exemplifies this agency: after 2022, it became increasingly assertive in challenging Russian hegemony in the Caucasus, while still avoiding a full rupture with Moscow (Brusylovska & Maistrenko, 2024). The English School's concept of regional order transformation is also pertinent: Baku appears to be contributing to a new, more pluralistic order in Eurasia, acting in some respects as a normative entrepreneur that seeks legitimacy through balance, sovereignty, and selective appeals to international law. By taking the lead in initiatives such as the Southern Gas Corridor and the 2021 Shusha Declaration with Turkey, which

formalised the alliance, Azerbaijan projects the image of a state shaping regional norms — energy connectivity, strategic partnership, and mutual defence — outside Russia's shadow.

The argument developed here draws on these approaches without reducing Azerbaijan's post-2022 strategy to any one of them. Realism helps explain the hedging and the stronger defence ties with Turkey. The weakening of Russian primacy shows why new space opened for Baku after the invasion of Ukraine. Post-imperial autonomy explains how a former Soviet republic could use that space rather than merely adapt to it. The English School is useful for the part of the argument that concerns order itself. Russia remains present in the Caucasus, but it is no longer able to set the terms as it once did. The chapter follows this change through Azerbaijan's relations with Russia before 2022, the shock of the war in Ukraine, reactions inside Azerbaijan, the subsequent reworking of external partnerships, and what Baku's pragmatic assertiveness tells us about post-hegemonic autonomy.

Russia's Pre-2022 Influence and Instruments

Prior to 2022, Russia exercised significant – albeit carefully circumscribed – influence in Azerbaijan through several instruments: security roles, energy ties, and cultural presence. However, Azerbaijan was never a compliant satellite; it maintained a degree of independence unusual among post-Soviet states. Moscow's influence can be understood through the lens of hegemonic stability theory, wherein Russia sought to act as the region's principal arbiter, and through soft-power and cultural-linkage strategies aimed at binding former Soviet republics to Moscow.

Security and Conflict Mediation

A major channel of Russian influence was in the protracted Nagorno-Karabakh conflict between Azerbaijan and Armenia. Russia traditionally cast itself as the key mediator (co-chair of the OSCE Minsk Group) and,

importantly, as Armenia's security patron, which gave Moscow leverage over Baku. In the wake of the Second Nagorno-Karabakh War (2020), Russia deployed roughly 1,960 peacekeepers as guarantors of the ceasefire. This deployment marked the first Russian military presence in Azerbaijan since the 1990s (when Baku evicted Soviet/Russian troops and closed Russian bases) (Jović-Lazić, 2021). By 2021, Russian peacekeepers were a tangible reminder of Moscow's role as a regional stabiliser. From a hegemonic stability perspective, Russia still presented itself as the indispensable power managing local conflicts and preserving order in its neighbourhood. At the same time, Azerbaijan played a careful game. President Ilham Aliyev engaged Moscow diplomatically to ensure Russian neutrality or mild support for Azerbaijan's position on Karabakh (Jović-Lazić & Bošković, 2024). For instance, throughout the 2010s Baku spent heavily on Russian weapons (over $4–5 billion in arms purchases since 2010) (Harutyunyan, 2014), a move widely seen as buying Russia's goodwill or at least acquiescence in the conflict. Indeed, Aliyev openly acknowledged in 2018 that Azerbaijan had paid Russia billions for military equipment (Wezeman et al., 2021) in effect subsidising Russia's arms industry so as to keep ties warm and deter Russia from tilting fully toward Armenia. This pragmatic arms relationship exemplified Azerbaijan's realist strategy of influence: rather than join Russia's security bloc (it pointedly stayed out of the CSTO), Baku found other ways to mollify Moscow's security elite (Jović-Lazić & Bošković, 2024). On 22 February 2022 – just a few days before Russia invaded Ukraine – Aliyev even signed a "Declaration on Allied Interaction" with Putin in Moscow, a broad partnership communiqué some dubbed a quasi-alliance (President of Russia, 2022). While largely symbolic, it reassured the Kremlin that Azerbaijan was not an enemy at the gate, perhaps buying Aliyev a degree of trust or at least keeping Russia complacent on the eve of its Ukraine venture.

Energy Cooperation and Transit

Economically, Azerbaijan was not dependent on Russia – quite the opposite, it was an energy competitor and alternative. Since the late 1990s, Azerbaijan has exported oil (and later gas) via pipelines bypassing Russia, notably the Baku–Tbilisi–Ceyhan (BTC) oil pipeline to Turkey and the Southern Gas Corridor to Europe. This lessened Moscow's leverage, as Azerbaijan did not rely on Russian pipelines or energy markets for its main revenue. However, there were still points of contact and cooperation. Russian companies like Lukoil held significant stakes in Azerbaijani oil and gas fields (e.g. the Shah Deniz gas project), entwining Russian capital with Azerbaijan's energy sector. In addition, a Soviet-era pipeline from Baku to Novorossiysk in Russia was sporadically used for exporting some Azerbaijani oil, indicating a minor ongoing transit link. Russia was also a consumer market for some Azerbaijani products (like petrochemicals and agricultural goods), and conversely a key source of imports for Azerbaijan. Russia also remained economically present in more ordinary ways: as a market for Azerbaijani goods and as a major source of imports. In 2021, it accounted for 17.7% of Azerbaijan's imports, including grain, food products, metals, chemicals, and machinery components. Bilateral trade was close to $3 billion, so Russia still mattered as a trading partner, even if Azerbaijan's export profile was much more tied to energy links with Europe and Turkey (Ibadoghlu & Askerov, 2025). Energy trade between Russia and Azerbaijan also included swap deals – for example, the Azerbaijani state oil company SOCAR at times cooperated with Russian firms to swap or blend oil for re-export. This pragmatic energy interaction meant that, on the eve of 2022, Moscow and Baku had a working economic relationship, even as Azerbaijan's strategic oil pipelines pointed westward. Under hegemonic stability theory, one could say Russia tolerated Azerbaijan's independent energy policy as long as it didn't threaten core Russian interests – and indeed, Azerbaijan carefully balanced its pipeline geopolitics (offering some collaboration with Russia while investing in non-Russian routes).

Cultural and Soft Power Influence

Culturally, Russia wielded lingering soft power in Azerbaijan, though perhaps less than in Armenia or Central Asia. As a post-Soviet multiethnic society with a sizable Russophone population (especially in Baku), Azerbaijan maintained strong Russian-language education and media. Russian is widely spoken in Azerbaijan's cities; Russian schools and departments operate, and many Azerbaijanis study abroad in Russian universities. This legacy remained institutionally visible: by 2023, demand for Russian-language schooling had grown, with Russian-sector enrolment rising substantially since 2018, suggesting that Russian retained practical value in education and employment even as its broader cultural-political appeal became more limited (Movlamli, 2023). This is notable, as some other post-Soviet states (e.g. Ukraine or the Baltics) moved to curtail Russian-language education, whereas Azerbaijan did not. Such cultural openness gave Russia a degree of soft influence – for example, Russian TV channels and news were accessible and often watched, potentially allowing Russian narratives a foothold. Azerbaijan's government, however, has been vigilant in controlling overt propaganda; it permitted cultural affinity but limited political subversion. Still, soft power and legitimacy tools were part of Moscow's pre-2022 arsenal: the shared Soviet history (and the victory in World War II narrative), the appeal of Russian pop culture, and the presence of an estimated 2 million Azerbaijanis living and working in Russia, all contributed to a web of societal ties. These ties made Azerbaijan ontologically secure in its identity to some extent as a post-Soviet, secular republic that could engage Russia culturally without subsuming its own national identity. Indeed, Baku prided itself on a strong national consciousness (steeped in Turkic and independent state traditions) that inoculated it from the more dependency-driven identities seen in Belarus or Armenia. This aligns with Ontological Security theory: Azerbaijan's sense of self – as a sovereign, Turkic-Muslim yet secular state – was stable enough that it did not need to cling to Russia for identity affirmation. In fact, Azerbaijan

has often contrasted its independent path with Armenia's reliance on Russia, thereby reinforcing its own narrative of sovereign legitimacy.

Summing up the pre-2022 picture, Azerbaijan's relationship with Russia was one of pragmatic equilibrium. Realist power-balancing was evident: Baku cooperated with Moscow when advantageous (weapons purchases, diplomacy) but always hedged with alternative partnerships (Turkey, NATO, EU). Russia could claim a *de facto* sphere of influence role – it had troops on the ground (peacekeepers), business interests, and cultural clout – yet Azerbaijan never fell under Moscow's dominion in the way some other post-Soviet states did. This delicate balance set the stage for what would happen when Russia's hegemonic position began to unravel after its invasion of Ukraine in 2022.

The 2022 Turning Point

Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine in February 2022 was a geopolitical earthquake for the Eurasian region, exposing the limits of Moscow's ability to act as a regional security guarantor and forcing neighbouring states to recalibrate their foreign policies. For Azerbaijan, the war proved to be a decisive turning point that accelerated its strategic autonomy. Baku adeptly turned the war's fallout into an opportunity to weaken Moscow's grip in the South Caucasus while carefully avoiding direct antagonism. Several key shifts unfolded in 2022–2023. The Ukraine invasion gravely undermined Russia's credibility as a security arbiter in the Caucasus. Azerbaijan watched as Russia became bogged down and internationally isolated, its military mystique tarnished by battlefield setbacks. The Kremlin's attention and resources were overwhelmingly redirected to Ukraine, creating a vacuum of influence in other regions. In Baku's eyes, Putin's failure to swiftly subdue Ukraine showed the limits of Russian hard power – an insight with immediate relevance for the Nagorno-Karabakh situation. If Russia could not decisively assert itself in Ukraine, would it really have the capacity (or will) to confront Azerbaijan militarily or even enforce the status quo in Karabakh? Likely not. This reasoning

emboldened Baku. Brusylovska and Maistrenko (2024) similarly identify Azerbaijan as the South Caucasus state that most consistently challenged Russia's regional dominance after 2022. President Aliyev and his advisors appeared to conclude that Russia's deterrent power had diminished; Moscow could no longer simply dictate outcomes in the Caucasus through the threat of force. Furthermore, by waging a brutal war justified in neo-imperial terms, Moscow lost much of the goodwill (and fear-based compliance) that it previously enjoyed among post-Soviet elites. Aliyev, ever the pragmatist, did not overtly criticise Russia's war – but he certainly took note of its self-inflicted strategic damage. In realist terms, Russia's power equilibrium shifted, and Azerbaijan moved swiftly to exploit the new balance.

The Ukraine war also upset the regional balance among other powers relevant to Azerbaijan. Turkey also mattered more after 2022. Its role in Ukraine, its drones, and its position inside NATO while still acting with a degree of independence all strengthened Ankara's hand. For Baku, this made the Turkish alliance more valuable. The Shusha Declaration had already formalised that relationship in 2021, but after Russia's invasion of Ukraine the Turkey–Azerbaijan axis carried greater weight. Joint military drills continued, and Turkish backing gave Baku more confidence in Karabakh. Iran, by contrast, became more uneasy about Azerbaijan's gains and its closer links with NATO-aligned actors. Its military exercises near the Azerbaijani border in late 2022 were one sign of this tension. Baku responded by deepening ties with Israel, an important arms supplier and Iran's adversary, and by presenting its own secular-national narrative against Tehran's more Islamist rhetoric. Meanwhile, China showed growing interest in the Caucasus as part of its Eurasian transit routes (the "Middle Corridor" that runs through Azerbaijan became more attractive due to Russia's sanctions woes). Baku welcomed this as well, signing deals to develop new transit infrastructure. In short, the Ukraine war weakened the influence of traditional actors such as Russia and opened space for new actors — China, Pakistan, India, and the Gulf states — to engage more actively in

the region (Gulamirli, 2025). Azerbaijan adjusted to this multipolar opening by doing what it had already learned to do well: keeping several doors open at once. It offered energy to Europe, transit to China, and political usefulness to other regional and extra-regional actors. In post-imperial terms, this was a way of turning Moscow's weakened position into room for manoeuvre: Azerbaijan did not replace one dependency with another, but tried to spread its options across several partners.

Immediately after the invasion in February 2022, Azerbaijan adopted a calibrated stance of neutrality plus opportunism. Baku did not join Western sanctions against Russia – doing so would cross a red line for Moscow and jeopardise the cooperative elements of their relationship. However, Azerbaijan also made clear it respected Ukraine's territorial integrity: it did not recognise Russia's annexations of Ukrainian lands (just as it has always insisted that its own territories occupied in Karabakh must be recognised as part of Azerbaijan). In the UN and other forums, Azerbaijan walked a tightrope – avoiding explicit condemnation of Russia, but also avoiding any endorsement of the aggression. President Aliyev offered humanitarian aid to Ukraine and humanitarian gestures (such as facilitating some Russia–Ukraine prisoner exchanges), presenting himself as a neutral problem-solver. By late 2022, Azerbaijan had provided substantial aid to Ukraine (over $30 million in humanitarian assistance) and sent fuel and generators to help with Ukraine's electricity shortages (Bedford & Aliyev, 2024). These acts signalled solidarity with Ukrainian civilians without directly blaming Russia. This careful neutrality was a form of what one analysis calls "silent diplomacy", whereby Azerbaijan signalled its positions subtly rather than through loud rhetoric (Valiyev et al., 2022).

At the same time, Azerbaijan seized a significant economic opportunity: Europe's urgent search for non-Russian energy. In July 2022, the EU and Azerbaijan signed a landmark Memorandum of Understanding to double Azerbaijani natural gas exports to the EU by 2027 (up to 20 billion cubic metres per year). Ursula von der Leyen flew to Baku to hail Azerbaijan as a "key partner" in replacing Russian gas. Already in

2022, Azerbaijan ramped up gas deliveries to Europe from about 8 bcm in 2021 to 12 bcm in 2022, helping fill the gap as Russian supplies dwindled (Reuters, 2022). For Baku, this was a major geopolitical gain: it greatly enhanced Azerbaijan's importance to the EU (and to European energy security), giving Aliyev leverage and goodwill in Western capitals. Energy analysts note that Azerbaijan became the EU's largest trading partner in the South Caucasus, accounting for the vast majority of EU–Caucasus trade (due to oil and gas exports) (Bayramov, 2022). In essence, Russia's war created a strategic opening for Azerbaijan to solidify its long-cultivated role as an energy corridor to the West. This is a prime example of realist adaptation: Azerbaijan capitalised on Russia's self-inflicted loss of reliability by offering itself as an alternative hub, thereby both enriching itself and tying Europe closer to its interests (which include, notably, support for Azerbaijan's territorial integrity in Karabakh).

From a theoretical standpoint, these post-2022 recalibrations reflect rational adaptation to declining hegemony. Realism expects secondary powers to adjust when the main power's strength weakens. Azerbaijan did not seek protection by moving closer to Moscow. It looked elsewhere. Ties with Turkey became more important, contacts with the EU widened, and Baku kept adding partners so that Russia's weakness would not turn into a new form of dependence. In post-imperial terms, this is the familiar moment when a former periphery uses the centre's weakness to enlarge its own space. This was visible in Baku's effective bypassing of the 2020 ceasefire framework and in its greater readiness to act in Karabakh without expecting a strong Russian response. For Brusylovska and Maistrenko (2024), the significance of 2022 lies less in creating a new direction than in reinforcing an existing one. The war gave Azerbaijan greater freedom to pursue policies that had already been taking shape before the invasion, particularly in relation to Ukraine and Karabakh. Baku read Russia's campaign in Ukraine as a long distraction and recalibrated accordingly: it strengthened non-Russian partnerships, advanced its interests in Karabakh more boldly,

and still kept a cordial surface in relations with the Kremlin. The next sections show how these shifts appeared in domestic discourse and in the hard geopolitics of the Caucasus by 2023–24.

Domestic Political and Ideational Reactions

On the domestic front, Azerbaijan's leadership and public navigated the Ukraine war through pragmatic neutrality alongside limited symbolic alignment with the West. The Aliyev government tightly managed public discourse, projecting an image of cautious neutrality externally, while internally cultivating a narrative of Azerbaijan's sovereign independence and even empathy for Ukraine's plight (given parallels to Azerbaijan's own territorial conflicts). This balancing act can be analysed through Discursive Power and Ontological Security lenses, as Baku engaged in what might be called a strategy of "strategic silence" – using careful rhetoric and selective silence as tools of statecraft.

Official Discourse – Neutral but Sovereigntist

From the first days of the war, Azerbaijani official statements emphasised principles rather than taking sides. President Aliyev and the Foreign Ministry reiterated support for territorial integrity of states (a principle dear to Azerbaijan due to Karabakh), implicitly upholding Ukraine's sovereignty. At the same time, they studiously avoided direct criticism of Russia. Azerbaijan did not join any sanctions against Russia and even refrained from voting on certain UN resolutions that might anger Moscow (Sanchez, 2022). This balancing was reflected in state media: coverage of the war was factual but restrained, avoiding the overtly emotional or pro-Ukrainian tone seen in Western media, yet also avoiding Russian propaganda tropes. Notably, Azerbaijani state outlets highlighted Baku's humanitarian aid deliveries to Ukraine, subtly signalling compassion for Ukrainians without editorialising against Russia.

The concept of "strategic silence" aptly describes this approach. Rather than loud denunciations or endorsements, silence (or neutral bureaucratic language) was deployed where speaking might provoke a reaction. This discursive restraint served as a form of resistance to Russian narratives without openly attacking them. The message was that Baku had its own policy and principles, but would not present them in a way that forced a direct confrontation with Moscow. Such discursive strategies are a tool of the weak to manage great-power sensitivities – aligning with Discursive Power theory, which examines how control of narrative and silence can itself be a form of power. By choosing what not to say, Baku maintained room for policy flexibility. Observers termed this a "silent diplomacy" – Azerbaijan signalled independence in action more than words (Valiyev et al., 2022).

An example of narrative framing was Azerbaijan's emphasis on the economic opportunities arising from the war's fallout (for instance, new energy contracts, the Middle Corridor), rather than the war's ideological battles. State media frequently discussed Azerbaijan's rising role as an energy supplier to Europe, implicitly casting Azerbaijan as a strategically important international partner at a time when Russia was seen as unreliable. This built domestic pride in Azerbaijan's increasing global stature. Simultaneously, Aliyev's speeches began drawing a contrast between Azerbaijan's successful recovery of its lands (Karabakh in 2020) and Russia's failing war – without naming Russia, the subtext was that military overreach leads to decline, whereas Azerbaijan's combination of diplomacy and force, confined by international law (since Karabakh is legally Azerbaijan's territory), was more legitimate. This narrative bolstered ontological security for Azerbaijan: it reinforced a stable self-identity as a victorious, sovereign nation that respects law and order, unlike the chaos wrought by imperial aggression elsewhere. The implication for domestic audiences was that Azerbaijan's path – pro-independence, multi-vector, and pragmatic – is justified and superior to both the Russian approach and, implicitly, the plight of allies who over-rely on Russia (like Armenia).

Public Sentiment and Media

Azerbaijani public opinion, insofar as it can be gauged, showed both sympathy for Ukraine and caution toward Russia. Many Azerbaijanis drew parallels between Ukraine's fight against invasion and their own decades-long struggle to reclaim Karabakh from Armenian occupation. This fostered a natural sympathy for Ukrainians as fellow victims of aggression. Independent and opposition-leaning media outlets in Azerbaijan were more openly pro-Ukraine, sometimes celebrating Ukrainian victories and highlighting Russian atrocities – although such coverage had to stay within red lines to avoid government backlash and to avoid needlessly antagonising Moscow. Leading Azerbaijani news sites and commentators expressed admiration for Ukraine's resistance, framing it as reminiscent of Azerbaijan's own experience of war and territorial loss. A number of opinion pieces in Azerbaijan noted that if Ukraine succeeds, it further proves that forcible redrawing of borders cannot be normalised – echoing Azerbaijan's stance on its own borders.

At the same time, there were limits to public displays. No large anti-Russia demonstrations occurred (unlike in some other post-Soviet states), partly due to government control and partly to genuine wariness – Russia remains a neighbour with potential to retaliate. The Azerbaijani public is also mindful of the many compatriots working in Russia; outright Russophobia is neither present nor encouraged. In fact, cultural affinity with Russia persisted: Russian popular culture continued to be consumed, and many Azerbaijanis separated their feelings about the Kremlin from their feelings about the Russian people or culture. Thus, the domestic mood could be described as pragmatically neutral with an undercurrent of pro-Ukraine sympathy. Public attitudes in Azerbaijan generally combined sympathy for Ukraine with caution toward Russia. Support for Ukraine was visible in public rallies, humanitarian initiatives, and widespread expressions of solidarity, while overt support for Russia remained limited (Valiyev & Nazamova, 2024). This balancing in the public reflects Azerbaijan's ontological security – the nation is confident enough in its independent identity that it can

empathise with Ukraine yet not be swept into any anti-Russian identity shift. Unlike, say, the Baltic states where national identity is partly defined in opposition to Russia, Azerbaijan's identity is defined by its own story of survival and success (especially after 2020). Therefore, Baku's careful line on Ukraine did not cause an identity crisis at home; rather it reinforced the narrative that Azerbaijan charts its own destiny and supports principles (territorial integrity) consistently.

State Narratives of Autonomy

Baku's official language in these years kept returning to sovereignty. In Aliyev's Victory Day speech, the central claim was simple: Azerbaijan had restored not only its territorial integrity but also its national dignity through its own military strength, economic resilience, diplomatic activity and independent state policy (Aliyev, 2022). The contrast with Armenia was hard to miss. As Yerevan complained that Moscow had failed to protect it, Azerbaijani pro-government commentators presented this as the price of building security around an external patron. Azerbaijan, by contrast, was said to have relied on its army, Turkey, and a wider set of partnerships. The point was not only to defend Baku's foreign policy, but also to make dependence on Russia look like a strategic mistake. The message was clear: Azerbaijan's independence was its strength, and the Ukraine war showed the risks faced by states too closely tied to Russia. This framing can be read as a form of resistance to imperial narratives: without directly attacking Moscow, Azerbaijan advanced a counter-narrative in which smaller states do better when they rely on balanced partnerships and room for manoeuvre.

Domestically, Azerbaijan managed the Ukraine war's political discourse with considerable cohesion. Through strategic silence and controlled messaging, Baku avoided both Kremlin ire and domestic confusion. The ruling elite kept support for Azerbaijan's posture broad and cross-cutting: aid to Ukraine's civilians, new energy opportunities, and the avoidance of direct confrontation with Russia could all be

presented as serving national interests. National identity narratives were also strengthened. Azerbaijanis could see their country gaining respect and autonomy internationally at a moment when others appeared more constrained. This internal stability and clarity of purpose gave Baku a firmer basis for the more assertive foreign-policy moves examined next.

Post-2022 Alignments and Regional Reconfiguration

By 2023–2024, the geopolitical map of the South Caucasus had been redrawn in practice: Azerbaijan emerged in a significantly stronger regional position, Armenia was profoundly weakened and pivoting away from Russia, and Russia's role had diminished from that of the principal arbiter to that of a weakened but still relevant actor. Azerbaijan's foreign alignments underwent significant shifts in this period, contributing to a more decentralised multipolar order in the Caucasus – essentially a post-hegemonic regional configuration. In crafting this new balance, Azerbaijan expanded cooperation with Turkey, the EU, and even China, while recalibrating (but not severing) ties with Moscow. An English School perspective on regional order is useful here: Azerbaijan acted increasingly as an agenda-setting regional actor – forging bilateral and multilateral ties that collectively underpin a new regional order less centred on Russia.

The Turkey–Azerbaijan alliance became the linchpin of the South Caucasus security order after 2022. The Shusha Declaration signed in June 2021 had already formalised a far-reaching military partnership, and in the wake of Russia's Ukraine invasion this alliance took on greater significance (Jović-Lazić, 2022; Jović-Lazić & Bošković, 2024). Turkey, a NATO power with its own complex relations with Moscow, trod a careful line during the Ukraine war – but importantly for Baku, Turkey remained steadfast in backing Azerbaijan's regional ambitions. Joint military exercises intensified, and Turkey's defence industry (which supplies Bayraktar drones and other hardware to Azerbaijan) continued to equip Baku's forces (Jović-Lazić, 2022). In essence,

Azerbaijan leaned more heavily on Turkey as its principal security partner, compensating for Russia's diminished credibility. This was a remarkable inversion of the 1990s situation, when Turkey had been cautious in the Caucasus due to Russia's shadow. Now, with Russia distracted and weakened, the Ankara–Baku axis operated with much greater freedom. For example, when Azerbaijan launched a brief offensive in September 2022 and occupied parts of Armenia's internationally recognised territory, Turkey strongly supported Baku, while Russia's CSTO refused to provide military assistance to Armenia despite Yerevan's appeals (Górecki, 2022; Sukiasyan, 2022). This demonstrated to the region that Turkey and Azerbaijan together were reshaping facts on the ground. The English School concept of regional international society applies: Turkey and Azerbaijan, bound by ethnolinguistic kinship and aligned interests, started to create their own norms (e.g. mutual defence commitments, coordinated diplomatic positions) that define order in the Caucasus – an order in which Russian primacy is absent. Turkey's strategic influence thus grew; it not only provided hard power backing but also joined with Azerbaijan in regional projects like the Zangezur corridor (a proposed transport link through Armenia) and energy transit. Turkey became a second centre of gravity in the Caucasus, alongside Russia and, in some respects, increasingly overshadowing it. For Azerbaijan, this fulfilled a long-standing goal of its multi-vector policy: to have a powerful friend to balance Russia. In theoretical terms, this is external balancing via alliance – a classic realist move – but it is embedded in kinship and soft-power ties (panturkic identity, cultural affinity), showing an interplay of soft power and legitimacy as well. The Ankara-Baku partnership carries legitimacy in the eyes of their populations ("One nation, two states" as they say) in a way a hypothetical Moscow-Baku alliance never could.

In parallel, Azerbaijan solidified its relations with the West, especially the European Union. Energy was the cornerstone: as detailed, the Southern Gas Corridor expansion made Azerbaijan a crucial supplier

for Europe's energy diversification (Reuters, 2022). Beyond energy, the EU ramped up political engagement. The President of the European Council, Charles Michel, facilitated direct talks between Aliyev and Armenia's Prime Minister Nikol Pashinyan throughout 2022–2023 in Brussels, providing an increasingly important alternative to Russia-led mediation efforts (Sammut, 2023). Baku welcomed the EU's involvement as an additional diplomatic channel at a time when Russia's regional role was increasingly questioned. In economic terms, the EU became Azerbaijan's largest trade partner, accounting for more than 40% of the country's external trade, while energy remained the cornerstone of the relationship (Gouliev, 2025).

This intensification of ties was mutually beneficial: the EU gained a more important alternative energy supplier, while Azerbaijan benefited from investment and increased strategic relevance. EU companies have shown interest in investing in the recaptured Karabakh regions, particularly in renewable energy and reconstruction projects, which Baku has actively promoted as part of its broader development strategy (Zabanova, 2024). From an English School viewpoint, Azerbaijan sought legitimacy through selective cooperation: by aligning with selected European norms — signing memoranda on green energy, participating selectively in Eastern Partnership initiatives, and presenting itself as a reliable energy and connectivity partner — Baku bolstered its image as a useful and predictable member of the international community, despite its authoritarian governance at home, which Western leaders largely set aside in light of strategic interests. EU–Azerbaijan relations in this period increasingly took the form of a pragmatic exchange: Azerbaijan supplied energy and offered a place on the Middle Corridor, while the EU gave priority to energy security, trade and connectivity over a more forceful human-rights agenda (Campaign to End Repression in Azerbaijan, 2025). In short, the war in Ukraine propelled Azerbaijan further into the role of a key Western partner in the Caucasus – a dramatic shift from the early 2000s when Azerbaijan was seen as equidistant. By 2023, Baku was still formally

non-aligned, but its interests often converged with the West's (for instance, on isolating Iran or diminishing Russia's regional sway).

Another significant realignment has been Azerbaijan's promotion of the "Middle Corridor" – the trans-Caspian transportation route that connects Turkey and Europe to Central Asia and China via Azerbaijan. With Russia sanctioned and the traditional Eurasian land routes disrupted, this Middle Corridor gained new attention. Azerbaijan, Georgia, and Kazakhstan increased coordination to handle rising cargo flows. In 2022, Azerbaijan signed a roadmap with Kazakhstan and Georgia to simplify customs and increase capacity on this route (World Bank Group, 2023). By 2023, freight volumes through the corridor had more than doubled from the previous year (Dolidze, 2025). This brings China more directly into Azerbaijan's strategic calculus. Beijing sees Azerbaijan as a critical link in its Belt and Road if the Russian route is unreliable, and Chinese companies have started investing in Azerbaijani port and rail infrastructure. Azerbaijan has adroitly welcomed these investments, seeing China as a useful counterweight to both Russia and the West (economically). Other new actors include India (which has shown interest in using the corridor to reach Russia avoiding Pakistan), Pakistan (Azerbaijan has grown military ties with Pakistan, another implicit message to Iran), and Gulf Arab states (who have started investing in Azerbaijan's liberated territories and energy sector). According to Gulamirli (2025), the entry of new players into the South Caucasus creates opportunities to diminish the influence of traditional actors and may stimulate positive competition through investment, connectivity, and infrastructure projects. Azerbaijan exemplifies this trend: by embracing a multi-vector network of partnerships, Baku has reduced any over-reliance on a single patron and created a decentralised regional order where multiple external powers have a stake. This aligns with the English School's pluralist conception of regional order – one maintained not by hierarchy under a hegemon, but through a network of regional and external actors

balancing their interests. Azerbaijan's role has been central in shaping that network in the South Caucasus after 2022.

Given all the above, what of Azerbaijan's ties with Russia after the turning point? Interestingly, Baku has managed to maintain a working relationship with Moscow even as the regional balance shifted in its favour. This can be characterised as moving from cautious deference to selective partnership on Baku's terms. Azerbaijan continued to engage Russia in areas of mutual benefit – for instance, trade between the two countries expanded after 2022, while Azerbaijan benefited from new transit and commercial opportunities created by the reorientation of Russian trade flows (Bedford & Aliyev, 2024). Rather than enforce Western sanctions, Baku tacitly allowed itself to be a logistical outlet for Russia, which Moscow certainly appreciated. Diplomatically, Aliyev kept open lines: high-level visits continued, Azerbaijan participated in CIS meetings, and public rhetoric from Baku remained polite, emphasising "partnership" with Russia. These moves can be seen as hedging – maintaining enough cooperation with Moscow to avoid direct confrontation (Jović-Lazić & Bošković, 2024). Russia, for its part, tolerated Azerbaijan's assertiveness likely because it had little choice: Putin needed to avoid opening a new front of confrontation and was keen not to drive Azerbaijan fully into the Western camp. The result was a somewhat peculiar situation by 2023: Russia and Azerbaijan relations were outwardly cordial, yet fundamentally realigned in terms of influence. Russia no longer had sufficient leverage to dictate outcomes to Baku, as seen by Russia's inaction during Azerbaijani military steps. For example, when Azerbaijan blockaded the Lachin corridor (the lifeline between Karabakh Armenians and Armenia) from late 2022 onward, Russian peacekeepers on the ground did very little to restore access (Light & Bagirova, 2023). Moscow's passivity increasingly reflected a reluctant acceptance that Baku had gained the initiative in Karabakh. Baku made clear that Karabakh's future would be determined within Azerbaijan's sovereignty, while the subsequent withdrawal of Russian peacekeepers confirmed the new

status quo and exposed the limits of Moscow's influence in the South Caucasus (Huseynov & Muradov, 2024). Brusylovska and Maistrenko (2024) argue that Russia's international isolation after 2022 increased Azerbaijan's importance for Moscow. As a result, the Kremlin became more willing to accommodate Baku, even when this strained relations with its long-standing ally Armenia. In other words, Russia had growing reasons to preserve functional ties with Azerbaijan: trade, the need to avoid having two hostile Caucasus states on its southern flank, and perhaps the possibility of maintaining an indirect channel to Ukraine. Azerbaijan, by contrast, had become far less dependent on Russia. This reversal of roles is the clearest indicator of Russia's hegemonic decline in the region as a result of the Ukraine war's fallout.

To conceptualise the regional reconfiguration: by 2024, the South Caucasus had become less Russia-centred in political terms, though not fully post-Russian. Azerbaijan had aligned its security increasingly with Turkey and deepened its economic ties with Europe; Armenia – Russia's formal ally – was exploring Western options out of disillusionment with Moscow; while Georgia remained formally committed to European integration but also showed growing ambiguity, as domestic political developments created openings for renewed Russian influence. The old idea of a Russian "sphere of influence" or "near abroad" dominance had crumbled. Instead, a more decentralised multipolar order took shape, with Turkey and Azerbaijan at its core, the EU and U.S. increasingly involved diplomatically and economically, and Russia relegated to one player among many. From an English School perspective, this points to a new regional international society in the making: one based not on Russian hegemony, but on a balance and shared understandings among regional states and outside stakeholders — including stability, open trade routes, counterterrorism, and managed cooperation. Russia can still take part in this order, but increasingly as a junior partner rather than its organiser. Azerbaijan, by virtue of its strategic successes and multi-vector ties, had substantial influence in setting the regional

agenda – whether it was convening talks on transport corridors or leveraging its energy role for political capital. This marked Baku's emergence as a leading regional actor: not simply balancing between blocs, but using that balance to advance its own agenda. After 2022, that prognosis came true.

Azerbaijan's post-2022 alignments strengthened its status as one of the clearest examples of post-hegemonic autonomy in Eurasia. It managed to befriend Turkey, court Europe, welcome China, and yet keep functional ties with Russia – a feat of multi-alignment reflecting great skill in foreign policy. The South Caucasus region, once a playground of great powers, is now much more of a level playing field where local agency (especially Azerbaijan's) has weight. While this new order is not without its tensions (Azerbaijan-Armenia issues remain, Iran is a wild card, and Russia could seek revenge in the future), the trend is clear: the war in Ukraine significantly tilted regional dynamics in favour of independent-minded actors like Azerbaijan and decentred Russia's influence.

Azerbaijan's Strategic Autonomy after 2022

Azerbaijan's trajectory since 2022 exemplifies how a mid-sized post-Soviet state can leverage a hegemon's blunders to achieve pragmatic autonomy without direct confrontation. The synthesis points to three interlocking themes. Baku's foreign policy behaviour can be interpreted as a case of realist balancing and hedging. Facing a once-dominant power (Russia), Azerbaijan long pursued a "middle-ground orientation" or strategic hedging strategy (Jović-Lazić & Bošković, 2024) – neither fully balancing against nor bandwagoning with Russia, but keeping its options open. The 2022 war allowed Baku to tip the scales further toward balancing: it increased alignment with alternative powers at Russia's expense, yet still avoided open antagonism. In classical realist terms, Azerbaijan maximised its security and power by exploiting the window when the regional power hierarchy shifted. It did so rationally – pressing advantages (Karabakh, energy deals)

exactly when Russia's ability to counter was hamstrung. Notably, Azerbaijan did *not* overreach; it calibrated each move to avoid provoking an existential reaction from Moscow. This careful approach meant there was no need for a direct military clash or hostile break with Russia. Thus, Azerbaijan realised gains in influence without incurring the costs of war with the hegemon. Realism also explains how Azerbaijan consistently sought to control resources (energy routes, military capabilities) that enhanced its independence. By 2024 it was clear that Baku had balanced successfully: Russia's clout in Azerbaijani decision-making was minimal, while Azerbaijan's own power – militarily vis-à-vis Armenia, economically via energy exports – had grown. In essence, Azerbaijan confirmed a realist insight: when a great power falters, smaller states with sufficient capacity can pivot to new alignments and improve their relative position. From a post-imperial or post-colonial standpoint, Azerbaijan's experience underscores the agency of former peripheral states in transforming dependence into selective cooperation. Even before 2022, Azerbaijan was never a compliant part of a Russian "empire 2.0": it maintained deliberate autonomy by staying outside the CSTO and the EAEU. Russia's invasion of Ukraine accelerated this process, as Azerbaijan became more assertive in challenging Russian hegemony in the South Caucasus and the credibility of Russian mediation and security guarantees weakened further (Brusylovska & Maistrenko, 2024). Azerbaijan can be seen as having moved into the void through a policy of assertive autonomy. Baku was not simply standing aside as Russia's position weakened. It used the moment to reshape the regional order. When it saw fit, it moved beyond the Russian-brokered 2020 ceasefire framework and acted unilaterally. Its autonomy was not only military or diplomatic: it also rested on an alliance with another former imperial centre — Ankara, heir to the Ottoman imperial tradition — and on a narrative of territorial integrity that challenged Russia's traditional logic of spheres of influence. This reflects a post-imperial transition where local actors do not just drift away from the metropole but rather redefine regional order on their terms. As Brusylovska and Maistrenko

(2024) argue, Moscow and Baku arrived at a mutually beneficial arrangement in 2022–23: Russia gained an Azerbaijan that would not join sanctions, while Azerbaijan gained a Russia willing to tolerate its recovery of territory. Yet these same transactions also weakened Russia's position and reduced the credibility of its security guarantees in the region. In other words, Azerbaijan achieved what it wanted within the framework of seeming cooperation, thereby eroding the former hegemon's role. This is a pattern in post-imperial settings: cooperation is not submission; it can be a means of a weaker party advancing its own autonomy. The Caucasus in 2025 looks like a region where the post-Soviet states are no longer orbiting around Russia, each is following its own vector – and Azerbaijan's multi-vector success has arguably set a model for others (Kazakhstan, for instance, also hedging more visibly now). Thus, Azerbaijan epitomises the post-hegemonic archetype: it demonstrates that genuine independence can be achieved not through outright confrontation or severing of ties (which might provoke a backlash), but through astute accommodation and incremental assertion of one's interests as the hegemon's power wanes. Finally, Azerbaijan's approach can be seen as an attempt to gain legitimacy and regional leadership by crafting a balanced order. Aliyev's government often invokes international law (e.g., UN resolutions on Karabakh) and portrays Azerbaijan as a constructive player (facilitating energy to Europe, offering mediation between Russia and Ukraine, engaging in connectivity projects). This is not just window-dressing; it is how Azerbaijan differentiates itself from Russia's coercive image. Azerbaijan strives to be seen as a reliable, sovereign actor that abides by certain norms (like respect for state borders) – ironically the very norm Russia violated in Ukraine. Through active participation in diverse institutions (from the Non-Aligned Movement, which Azerbaijan chaired recently, to partnering with the EU, to the Organisation of Turkic States), Baku has been order-seeking rather than revisionist. From an English School perspective, the concept of a regional international society applies: Azerbaijan and its partners, particularly Turkey and Georgia, share an interest in a

stable Caucasus where trade flows and conflicts are managed through negotiations shaped by shifting military and diplomatic balances, rather than by external great-power intervention. By 2025, Azerbaijan could be seen as having helped shape a new regional order: one marked by the breaking of the Russia–Armenia security monopoly and the insertion of the EU and Turkey as mediators and guarantors. In English School terms, Azerbaijan increased the plurality of regional order by drawing more actors into the South Caucasus and weakening the assumption that the Armenia–Azerbaijan conflict should remain under Russian management. Baku's careful balance of great powers also earned it a reputation as a "bridge" or neutral facilitator, enhancing its international standing. For instance, when Aliyev offered to host Russia-Ukraine talks, it was taken seriously – a stark contrast to how Belarus (a staunch Russian client) is viewed with suspicion. This shows Azerbaijan garnered a form of soft legitimacy as an independent actor. It is building what could be considered a sub-regional international society in the Caucasus, one that is more in line with principles of sovereign equality (Armenia and Azerbaijan negotiating directly) and regional solutions, as opposed to the old Moscow-centric order.

Azerbaijan's experience since 2022 validates the central hypothesis that Russia's war on Ukraine eroded Moscow's regional influence, and in that erosion, countries like Azerbaijan found the opening to achieve unprecedented autonomy and influence of their own. Azerbaijan's pragmatic positioning brought tangible gains. Without committing itself fully to any camp, it expanded its partnerships, consolidated control over Karabakh, improved its regional standing, and strengthened its role in energy exports and transcontinental transport routes (Gulamirli, 2025; Reuters, 2022). In doing so, Baku underscored that the so-called Russian "near abroad" is no longer a unipolar sphere but a contested space where local states can balance among larger powers to preserve their sovereignty. Compared to other cases: Belarus, for example, doubled down on dependency and now faces the prospect of vassalisation by Russia, whereas Armenia, disillusioned by

perceived Russian abandonment, is scrambling to pivot West but from a position of weakness. Azerbaijan, by contrast, was able to convert years of strategic preparation into significant geopolitical gains, acting from a position of relative strength when regional circumstances became favourable.

Azerbaijan thus represents the post-hegemonic archetype in the post-Soviet region: a state that has secured its independence and advanced its national interests through strategic accommodation rather than frontal opposition. It neither idolised nor demonised the former hegemon; rather, it increasingly operated beyond the constraints of Moscow-centred regional order. In adapting to Russia's decline, Baku combined realist power plays, post-imperial self-assertion, and savvy diplomatic balancing. The result is a South Caucasus increasingly ordered not by Moscow's diktat, but by a complex interplay in which Azerbaijan is a central node. As the monograph turns to its final synthesis, the case of Azerbaijan illuminates the overarching theme of Russia's hegemonic unravelling: when the threat without attraction emanates from a waning hegemon, determined states can navigate away from its shadow and redefine the regional landscape in the process. Azerbaijan did exactly that – pragmatically and with post-Soviet autonomy.

WHAT REMAINS OF THE "NEAR ABROAD"?

The Unravelling of a Sphere of Influence

Three decades ago, Russian policymakers popularised the term "near abroad" (*ближнее зарубежье*) to describe the newly independent post-Soviet states as a privileged zone of Russian influence. This concept implied a cohesive geopolitical sphere where Moscow would maintain political, security, and cultural primacy. Before 2022, this logic was also reflected in Russia's efforts to preserve institutional, economic, and security linkages across the post-Soviet region, first through the CIS and later through the CSTO, the EAEU, and its policies toward the near neighbourhood (Jović-Lazić, 2015). Having examined the different trajectories of Ukraine, Georgia, Armenia, Moldova, Belarus, and Azerbaijan, this final part asks what these cases reveal about the fate of Russia's "near abroad" as a regional order. In the wake of Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine in 2022, however, the notion of a unified Russia-centric region has become increasingly difficult to sustain. The case studies in this monograph reveal a stark but uneven pattern: Russia's influence across much of the former Soviet space has weakened and fragmented in different ways across the region. While Moscow still wields certain hard-power levers – proximity, military bases, energy pipelines – the idea of a coherent "near abroad" under Russian tutelage has lost much of its force. What remains instead is a mosaic of states pursuing disparate paths, with Russia's role varying from ally to adversary but rarely commanding genuine loyalty. Recent analyses argue that the war in Ukraine produced a new geopolitical landscape in Eurasia and suggest that the notion of a unified "post-Soviet" region has lost much of its analytical coherence (Engvall, Khan, & Melin, 2023). In effect, Putin's attempt to restore a sphere of influence has backfired, producing fragmented bilateral asymmetries rather than any Russia-led bloc.

The responses of post-Soviet states to Russia's war reveal a region that is no longer politically cohesive. Instead of closing ranks around Moscow, states have responded in markedly different ways. Ukraine is fighting for survival, while Moldova's pro-Western leadership has accelerated its effort to loosen Russia's hold and move closer to the EU (Melin et al., 2023). Georgia presents a more ambiguous case: its society has shown strong solidarity with Ukraine and repeatedly protested laws seen as Russian-style, while the government's course since 2024 has strained relations with the EU. Even without direct conflict, public attitudes from the Caucasus to Eastern Europe have become markedly less favourable towards Moscow. In Armenia, for example, assessments of relations with Russia deteriorated sharply after 2019, while Moldova has also seen a clear weakening of Russia's political and symbolic appeal (de Waal, 2024). On the other hand, some states have walked a line of wary neutrality. Much of Central Asia (e.g. Kazakhstan, Uzbekistan) refused to endorse the invasion and quietly distanced themselves from Moscow's dictates. Kazakhstan's government has publicly refused to recognise Russia's proxies in Donbas and allowed anti-war Russians to take refuge, asserting its sovereignty despite remaining formally aligned in Russian-led blocs. Central Asian leaders are hedging their bets – maintaining working ties with Moscow (in trade or the Collective Security Treaty Organisation) but simultaneously deepening partnerships with China, Turkey, and the West. Then there is Belarus, the outlier ally. Minsk has bound itself to Moscow's war effort, but even this alliance rests on shaky foundations: it is sustained by President Lukashenko's personal dependence on the Kremlin rather than genuine popular support. Were his regime to falter, Belarus's orientation could pivot swiftly, as the Belarusian public's loyalty to Russia is far from assured. Finally, states like Azerbaijan have pursued opportunistic autonomy – cooperating with Russia when convenient (e.g. in energy deals or managing the Nagorno-Karabakh issue) while methodically reducing reliance on Moscow and expanding their own regional influence. In sum, there is little basis for speaking of a coherent "post-Soviet bloc." The war has

made clear that the countries formerly labelled the "near abroad" no longer share a single geopolitical stance vis-à-vis Russia. Many of Russia's neighbours have increasingly come to see Moscow less as a security guarantor than as a source of threat, opening space for the weakening of ties that once bound them to a former imperial centre (de Waal, 2024). The "near abroad" has thus evolved into a spectrum ranging from open resistance to uneasy cooperation, rather than a region cohering around Russia.

This centrifugal trend is mirrored in the weakening of Moscow-led regional organisations. Institutions that once symbolised a Russian-led "sphere" – the Collective Security Treaty Organisation (CSTO), the Eurasian Economic Union (EAEU), even the loose Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS) – have become increasingly hollow in practice. The CSTO, intended as a collective defence alliance based on mutual-defence commitments and tying several post-Soviet allies to Russia, has seen its credibility seriously weakened. When fighting broke out on Armenia's internationally recognised territory in September 2022, Yerevan appealed to the CSTO for assistance, but received no meaningful military support (Putz, 2024). A token fact-finding mission was all the CSTO mustered, as Russia, preoccupied with Ukraine, declined to intervene. This perceived betrayal profoundly shocked Armenia, leading its leaders to publicly question the CSTO's worth and even "freeze" Armenia's participation (de Waal, 2024).

By 2023–24, Armenia had refused to host CSTO drills, boycotted high-level CSTO meetings, and frozen its participation while stopping short of formal withdrawal (Putz, 2024). From Armenia's perspective, Russia's failure to provide meaningful support to a treaty ally during a major security crisis weakened its standing as a regional security guarantor and contributed to a broader erosion of trust in Moscow's protective role. Other CSTO members have taken note: when clashes erupted between Tajikistan and Kyrgyzstan in 2022, despite both being CSTO members, the CSTO again did nothing (Castillo, 2023). The one instance of CSTO action – the January 2022 intervention in Kazakhstan

– now stands as an exception rather than evidence of a reliable collective-defence mechanism (von Essen & Hedenskog, 2022). The net effect is that the CSTO's cornerstone principle of mutual defence has lost credibility. Russia's hegemonic guarantees ring hollow, undermining the institutional control it once exercised through this bloc (Putz, 2024).

Similarly, the Eurasian Economic Union (EAEU), Moscow's flagship project for economic integration, has struggled to function as a vehicle of deeper political and regional integration. Launched in 2015 with five members (Russia, Belarus, Kazakhstan, Armenia, Kyrgyzstan), the EAEU was from the start a hierarchical construct "made to the design of one core power, Russia," rather than a truly collaborative union (de Waal, 2024). Moscow's dominance (accounting for ~87% of the bloc's GDP) meant the EAEU often served its interests at others' expense (de Waal, 2024). Notably, Moscow's attempt to draw Ukraine into its Eurasian integration project failed; Kyiv's refusal to abandon its European course became one of the central triggers of the 2013–14 crisis. After the 2022 invasion, the EAEU initially looked imperilled by the shock of war and sanctions. Russia even banned certain exports to EAEU partners, including grain, early on, straining the "union" ethos. Yet as Western sanctions bit, Moscow scrambled to repurpose the EAEU (and the CIS) as informal conduits to mitigate its isolation (de Waal, 2024). Paradoxically, this gave the EAEU a second wind of relevance – but not as a step towards genuine Eurasian integration. Instead, the bloc became a transactional platform for side-deals and possible sanctions circumvention. A May 2023 EAEU summit in Moscow drew not just member state leaders but even the president of non-member Azerbaijan (and remote participation by Uzbekistan and Tajikistan) (de Waal, 2024). Russia sought to showcase that it still has friends or at least economic partners. But this spectacle underscored a shift: economic alignment now revolves less around long-term institutional loyalty and more around immediate self-interest. Kazakhstan, for one, has been outspoken in avoiding violation of

sanctions – it does not want the EAEU to become a channel for sanctions circumvention that could jeopardise its own access to Western markets. Indeed, Kazakh President Kassym-Jomart Tokayev publicly refused to recognise the Donetsk and Luhansk entities, stating at a 2022 forum with Putin on stage that Kazakhstan would not recognise "quasi-state formations" in Donbas, just as it does not recognise Taiwan, Kosovo, South Ossetia or Abkhazia (Kussainova, 2022). Such assertions of economic and diplomatic autonomy by EAEU members illustrate the geoeconomic fragmentation underway: the putative economic union is splintered by each state's pursuit of its own trade opportunities and risk calculations. The CIS, never more than a loose association, has fared no better – several states (Georgia, Ukraine, the Baltics) long since exited, while Moldova suspended participation in CIS meetings after 2022 and later moved towards formal withdrawal. In practice, CIS mechanisms carry little weight. In short, Moscow's institutional influence is eroding: alliances and unions on paper cannot compel loyalty when their benefits are uncertain and their security guarantees prove unreliable. What remains are bilateral bargains, often short-term and pragmatic, between Russia and individual neighbours – a far cry from the integrated "near abroad" Moscow once envisioned.

Shattered Normative Legitimacy

Perhaps the most damaging blow to Russia's regional standing has been the severe erosion of its normative appeal – its soft power and narrative legitimacy. Prior to 2022, the Kremlin still cultivated considerable influence through culture, media, and shared identity. The Russian language remained a lingua franca across much of Eurasia (Alley-Young, 2017). Many older citizens harboured nostalgia for Soviet-era ties; Russian state media (First Channel, RT, Sputnik) enjoyed wide reach, often outperforming local outlets (U.S. Department of State, 2022). Through vehicles like the Russkiy Mir foundation and the Orthodox Church, Moscow projected itself as the guardian of a common civilisational space – emphasising conservative values, the

shared victory in World War II, and a narrative of brotherly Slavic/Eurasian unity (Odarchenko, 2025). This soft power strategy aimed to get others to "want the same outcomes" as Russia through attraction rather than coercion. As Joseph Nye defined it, soft power is the ability to shape the preferences of others so that they willingly align with your interests (Nye, 2019). For a time, Russia's soft power had real traction in its neighbourhood – uneven, but not insignificant. Even after Russia's 2014 annexation of Crimea, polls and politics in countries like Kazakhstan, Armenia, and parts of Ukraine showed sizeable segments of society still favourably inclined towards Russia or at least towards Russian culture and media narratives. That reservoir of goodwill has now been severely damaged by the war in Ukraine. Moscow's aggression – the images of bombed Ukrainian cities, mass atrocities in Bucha and Mariupol, and the openly imperial rhetoric justifying the invasion – has made it exceedingly difficult for even Russia's culturally close neighbours to view it as a benign leader. Soft power is fragile when a state's attractive image is undermined by its own actions. Indeed, Russia's actions since 2022 have directly contradicted any pretence of brotherly affinity. The result is a normative backlash across much of the region: what was left of Russia's moral authority or cultural magnetism has sharply diminished.

This is evident in multiple realms. Public opinion has swung decisively against Moscow in countries that once balanced between East and West. Beyond the dramatic poll drops in pro-Russian sentiment noted earlier for Armenia and Moldova, surveys in Central Asia also show wariness. In Kazakhstan – traditionally one of the most Russia-friendly publics – support for Russia has fallen as its war stirred fears of Kazakh sovereignty being next; a 2023 poll found over 60% of Kazakhs now prioritise a neutral or multi-vector foreign policy over alignment with Russia (Reuters, 2023d). In Ukraine, of course, any residual sympathies towards Russia have been obliterated: 80–90% of Ukrainians identified Russia as an enemy and supported cutting ties (KIIS, 2025). Even in Belarus, where Lukashenko suppresses dissent, there are signs of

popular resentment at being dragged into Russia's war designs (e.g. sabotage of rail lines carrying Russian military supplies). Meanwhile, Russia's media influence is being curbed throughout the region. Moldova, the Baltics, and Ukraine have banned Russian propaganda channels; Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan have increasingly fact-checked or limited Russian state TV content to avoid inflaming their publics. The Russian language itself, once a tool of soft influence, is gradually losing some of its privileged position in some places – Ukraine has accelerated policies to promote Ukrainian language over Russian in public life, and Kazakhstan has advanced plans to shift to Latin script (reducing the legacy of Cyrillic). Moscow's narrative about the war – framing it as a fight against "Nazis" or against NATO encroachment – has found few takers outside its own echo chamber. Instead, many post-Soviet societies increasingly perceive the war as evidence of Russia's neo-imperial ambitions. As Thomas de Waal observes, Putin's invocation of historical entitlement to dominate neighbours now sends shudders through those neighbours rather than acceptance. The Kremlin's discursive power has thus greatly diminished. Where once Russian officials could count on some resonance for phrases like "Slavic brotherhood" or a shared "Eurasian destiny," today those ring hollow or outright menacing. Kazakhstan's president pointedly rejected Russia's rationale for carving up Ukraine in front of Putin, repudiating the concept of quasi-states and spheres of influence (Kussainova, 2022). Across the region, governments and even many Russian-speaking communities are rejecting the idea that Russia has any "privileged say" in their affairs. Moscow's "soft power" has increasingly given way to deterrence and fear – neither of which provides a durable basis for legitimate influence.

What remains of Russia's clout is increasingly limited to coercive tools, which carry their own limits. Moscow can still instil dread – its military might, nuclear threats, and ability to foment instability are taken seriously – but this is coercive power without corresponding attraction. Countries may comply with Russia under duress, yet such compliance

is brittle and often paired with quiet resistance. For instance, the war has led many neighbours to quietly disengage from Russian-led cultural initiatives, such as reducing participation in joint commemorations or reassessing the place of Russian language education, even if they haven't formally broken with Moscow. In Armenia and Kazakhstan, where Russian media and language remain present, there is nonetheless a surge in local content and alternatives to limit Russian cultural dominance. This normative severing signifies that Russia's "sphere of influence" has largely transformed into a sphere of resentment or indifference. The unifying ideas Moscow once relied on – whether the legacy of WWII or the notion of a common civilisational mission – no longer unify as they once did. As a theoretical point, hegemonic influence rests on both power and legitimacy; by squandering the latter, Russia has undercut its own long-term position. In the English School conception, great-power leadership in an international society depends on recognition by others of its legitimacy and role (Finnemore, 2009). That recognition has been weakened. Instead of being accepted as regional leader, Russia is now widely seen as a bully to be placated or avoided, but not admired. The Kremlin's soft power collapse means Russia can command little normative loyalty: it can frighten its neighbours, but it can no longer inspire or persuade them.

Geoeconomic Fragmentation
– The Reworking of Regional Interdependence

The third pillar of Russia's pre-war regional influence – economic interdependence – is also weakening. Moscow's economic leverage rested above all on asymmetric dependence: cheap gas, pipeline access, trade restrictions, and the Russian labour market. If a neighbour drifted out of line, the Kremlin could cut gas supplies, ban imports such as Georgian wine or Moldovan produce, or otherwise use economic pressure to pull it back. Since 2022, however, sanctions, war, and Europe's move away from Russian energy have disrupted this model

and forced Russia and its neighbours to rework old economic ties. Crucially, the European Union – once the primary consumer of Russian oil and gas – has largely severed or committed to phasing out those imports. This has knock-on effects: Russia must pivot its energy exports eastward or find alternative routes, often through neighbouring states. Russia has sought increased use of the Kazakhstan–China pipeline network to send oil to Asia, while also expanding the use of railway links via Kazakhstan for other trade with Asian markets. Moscow has also explored routing some oil through Azerbaijan's pipeline system via swap arrangements. Moldova is the clearest case here: once heavily reliant on Russian energy, it has reduced that dependence as part of its broader turn towards Western partners (Melin et al., 2023). The Baltics have ceased importing Russian gas entirely. Kazakhstan is investing in the Trans-Caspian route to export oil that bypasses Russia, after repeated disruptions to CPC exports, including actions by Russian authorities, highlighted the risks of over-reliance on Russian transit infrastructure (PSCRP, 2025). In Central Asia, new rail links southwards (through Turkmenistan to Iran) or east to China are being developed to reduce the historic chokehold of Russian transit routes.

Trade dependencies are also realigning. With Russia cut off from much of Western markets, it has flooded neighbouring economies with redirected trade and sought critical imports (like electronics, machinery) through them. This has given some neighbours short-term windfalls – for example, Armenia, Kyrgyzstan, and Kazakhstan have seen booming re-export businesses of sanctioned goods into Russia (Rumer, 2023). However, this dynamic carries risks and is not a stable basis for influence. These states are profiting from Russia's isolation, not integrating deeper into a Russian-led economy. In fact, the power balance in trade has partially flipped: whereas before Russia could use access to its market as a carrot or stick, now Russia needs its neighbours' markets and logistical channels to obtain goods it can no longer buy directly from the West (Rumer, 2023). The Kremlin's wartime economic scramble has thus diminished its coercive leverage

– countries like Kazakhstan or Uzbekistan know that Moscow depends on them to work around sanctions, which somewhat empowers those smaller states to say no to demands that go too far (lest they face secondary sanctions themselves). Additionally, labour migration flows (millions of Central Asian workers in Russia), which once were a source of Russian leverage (remittances making those states pliant), have become a double-edged sword. Russia's mobilisation and economic downturn have caused many migrant workers to return home or consider China and the Gulf for opportunities, while hundreds of thousands of young Russians fleeing conscription have turned up in Georgia, Armenia, and Central Asia (de Waal, 2024). The spectacle of Russians emigrating *en masse* to "taste freedom" in countries they once patronised also captures the reversal. Instead of acting as an attractive centre drawing in talent and capital from the periphery, Russia increasingly appears to be losing both to neighbouring states. This has weakened Moscow's economic pull and reduced some of the leverage that once came from asymmetrical interdependence. It can still impose costs, including through trade restrictions and energy pressure, but these tools now often encourage neighbours to diversify and seek outside support. In Moldova's case, Russian pressure over gas accelerated efforts to secure alternative supplies with Western backing, thereby weakening Gazprom's position in the country (Melin et al., 2023). In the grander scheme, the war has prompted an external reorientation: Ukraine, Moldova, and Georgia are looking West for trade and aid; Central Asia is leaning into Chinese-led initiatives and Middle Eastern investment; the South Caucasus is courting the EU, Türkiye, and others for economic partnerships. The result is a geoeconomic fragmentation of what was once Russia's integrated sphere: multiple powers and markets are now competing in Eurasia, and Russia's share – though still significant – is no longer uncontested.

Hegemonic Stability Upended

The disintegration of Russia's "near abroad" sphere can be interpreted through two international relations frameworks highlighted earlier: hegemonic stability theory and the English school's concept of international society. Classical hegemonic stability theory posits that a dominant power can provide order and stability in its sphere – but only if it commands a blend of material capabilities and legitimacy such that lesser states consent to its leadership. Russia's case since 2022 illustrates the breakdown of these conditions. Materially, the would-be hegemon has undermined its own position through military overreach and the economic self-harm of sanctions. More profoundly, it has lost much of other states' acceptance of the regional order — the social recognition that underpins legitimacy (Finnemore, 2009). Without that acceptance, Moscow's unilateral attempts to enforce order produce instability and pushback instead. Russia had long presented itself as the main security arbiter in Eurasia. But in the crises that mattered — Armenia-Azerbaijan and the Tajik-Kyrgyz clashes — it either could not or would not act (de Waal, 2024). That failure weakened the basic claim on which its regional leadership rested: that Russian dominance at least brought security. Instead of stability, Russia's actions bred insecurity, leading many neighbours to view the supposed protector as a source of risk rather than security (de Waal, 2024). From a hegemonic stability perspective, this is a case of a "hegemon" producing instability by undermining its own legitimacy, a dynamic also observed in past great powers that pursued coercion at the expense of consent (e.g. the United States' difficulties after the Iraq invasion, which eroded its soft power).

English School theory further enriches this understanding by examining how Russia's regional dominance was embedded (or not) in norms and institutions of an international society. Hedley Bull and English School scholars would note that great powers can only sustain special rights in managing order if other members of international society acquiesce to those rights. In the post-Soviet region, Russia tried to play the role of regional great power without achieving a normative

consensus around its leadership. In the 1990s and early 2000s, Russia still had a recognised place in the post-Soviet order. It mediated some conflicts, kept troops on the ground, and sponsored regional organisations. This role was contested, but it was not yet openly built on the denial of neighbouring states' sovereignty. Georgia in 2008, Crimea in 2014, and the full invasion of Ukraine in 2022 changed that. After these steps, it became much harder to speak of any consensual regional order around Russia. The regional order shifted from one in which Russia had a degree of legitimate authority to one in which Moscow became a violator of its fundamental norms: sovereign equality and non-aggression. In English School terms, Russia moved outside the bounds of regional legitimacy, prompting neighbours to seek support from broader global norms and institutions against Russia's claims. In effect, Moscow's imagined "sphere of influence" turned into a sphere of resistance – a region where states coordinate not under Russian leadership, but in shared wariness of Russian domination. Regional diplomatic society is adjusting accordingly: for instance, nearly all post-Soviet states, apart from Belarus, either condemned Russia's invasion at the UN or abstained rather than siding with Moscow. Moreover, newer formats have gained weight without Russia at the table – such as Ukraine, Moldova, and Georgia's enhanced cooperation with the EU, or Central Asian leaders holding summits with China independent of Russia. The English School emphasises that international order is maintained not just by force, but by institutions and shared understandings. Russia's war damaged the shared understandings that underlay its regional influence (e.g. the understanding that former Soviet borders were inviolable, or that Russia would act as a defender of common security rather than an aggressor). With those gone, the institutional veneer (CSTO, EAEU, CIS) quickly lost substance. What remains is a more pluralistic set of relationships where Russia is just one power among several – and increasingly an untrusted one.

The demise of the "near abroad" as a coherent concept teaches a crucial lesson about hegemonic decline. A hegemon's power is multidimensional – encompassing control (coercive dominance), influence (persuasion and attraction), and material capabilities. Russia's regional hegemony has been weakened and increasingly contested along all three dimensions. Its control mechanisms – like alliance structures and client relationships – failed to hold when truly tested, revealing that coercion alone cannot sustain a sphere of influence if allies lose faith. Its influence via soft power weakened sharply once its actions defied its rhetoric, showing the brittleness of influence built on fear or nostalgia rather than genuine consent. And even its raw power now faces limits, as the Ukraine war has strained its military and economic clout. In essence, Moscow's attempt to tighten its grip resulted in that grip slackening – a classic case of imperial overreach accelerating hegemonic decline. Hegemonic stability theory would predict that if a hegemon ceases to deliver benefits and instead imposes excessive costs on subordinates, the order will destabilise; that is exactly what can be observed in Eurasia post-2022. The English School perspective adds that Russia's failure to adhere to shared norms (sovereignty, non-aggression) delegitimised it in the eyes of the regional international society, making resistance to its hegemony normatively justifiable for its neighbours. "The near abroad" no longer functions as a coherent Russian sphere – it has fragmented into a region of independent actors. The war in Ukraine has made Russia look less like a regional patron and more like a source of disruption (de Waal, 2024). Yet Russia is not irrelevant. It remains a major regional actor, but it is less able to turn power into accepted leadership. The next chapters examine this shift: a Russia relying more on coercion than attraction, and a Eurasia moving beyond Russian hegemony.

Moscow's long-held concept of a "near abroad" under its sway has been fundamentally undermined by its war on Ukraine. Regional unity has given way to fragmentation: some states resist Russia outright, others cautiously hedge, and even allies are uneasy. The institutional

pillars of Russian influence – CSTO, EAEU, CIS – are either paralysed or repurposed for ad-hoc gains, not genuine integration. Russia's soft-power appeal and normative legitimacy in the region have sharply weakened, replaced by fear and backlash. Economic ties that once bound the region to Russia are fraying and reorienting under the pressure of sanctions and new partnerships. The result is a post-2022 landscape in which Russia can instil fear but not fealty. The "near abroad" as a coherent and uncontested Russian sphere of influence has been severely weakened; only a patchwork of bilateral relationships remains, many of them trending towards greater distance from Moscow. This outcome validates theoretical expectations about hegemonic failure: when a would-be hegemon relies on coercion without consent and violates the norms of order, it erodes the very foundations of its dominance. Russia's neighbours, no longer willing to acquiesce in a Moscow-centred region, are charting a course towards a more pluralistic Eurasia where Russian hegemony is no longer the defining reality (Rumer, 2023). At the conceptual core of this transformation lies Russia's evolution into a power seen less as a protector than as a threat — a state whose influence rests increasingly on coercion rather than attraction.

RUSSIA AS COERCIVE POWER WITH DIMINISHED ATTRACTION

From Regional Hegemon to Contested Power

Russia's war against Ukraine has precipitated a dramatic shift in how Russia is categorised in international relations – from a flawed regional hegemon to what might be termed a coercive power with diminished attraction. This phrase captures a condition where a state possesses and exercises coercive power but lacks corresponding soft power or legitimacy in the eyes of others. This concept is developed as the central theoretical contribution.

Russia's regional position increasingly rests on coercive capacity rather than on the forms of attraction, legitimacy, and routine consent that once helped sustain its influence. This stands in contrast to traditional notions of hegemony that involve at least some degree of acceptance or leadership by example. To theorise Russia's condition, different frameworks are integrated – each illuminating a facet of how a once-proud power came to be seen as a threat rather than a magnetic centre. The evidence from Ukraine, Armenia, and Moldova – three very different cases – converges on a common theme: Moscow's loss of narrative credibility and identity-based appeal has left it with coercion as its primary tool, and even that coercion is increasingly reactive and counterproductive. In other words, Russia has become a power that neighbours fear but do not follow. This section unpacks how and why.

The Collapse of Soft Power and Narrative Legitimacy

At the heart of "attraction" in international politics is the idea of soft power – the ability of a country to shape the preferences of others through appeal and persuasion rather than force (to get others to want what you want). Russia's soft power was never as globally potent as that of some great powers (like the United States or EU), but within the

post-Soviet region it once had significant reach. Common language, intertwined histories, and Russian cultural exports (literature, media, education) gave Moscow a reservoir of goodwill and influence. Before 2014, sizeable Russia-leaning constituencies existed in countries such as Ukraine and Moldova, where Russia was often seen as a kindred nation and a source of stability or opportunity. However, the events of 2014 (Crimea and Donbas) already inflicted damage on Russia's image. Many in those countries began to see Moscow not as a benevolent big brother but as a dangerous bully. Still, even after 2014, Russia retained some attraction – for instance, opinion polls in Armenia until around 2020 showed overwhelming positive sentiment towards Russia (over 90% in 2019) (de Waal, 2024), rooted in the belief that Russia was Armenia's protector and cultural ally. Moscow's invasion of Ukraine in 2022 proved to be a major turning point in the decline of that remaining soft power.

Why was 2022 so transformative? First, the scale of the war and its openly revisionist character destroyed the credibility of Russia's narratives about itself and the world. Putin had long cultivated certain key narratives to legitimise Russian actions: that Russia stood for conservative values against Western decadence; that it was defending Orthodox civilisational values and historical justice; that NATO's expansion was the root of conflict, not Russian aggression. These discourses found some sympathetic ears in the near abroad when Russian behaviour hadn't yet fully contradicted them. But the invasion – justified by absurd claims of "denazifying" a democratic government and denigrating Ukrainian nationhood – exposed the growing gap between Russia's narratives and its actions. It is hard to claim to be a champion of stability or shared civilisation while raining missiles on Kyiv and Kharkiv. As Finnemore (2009) notes, unrestrained hypocrisy by a dominant power undermines the legitimacy of its power. Russia's rhetoric versus reality gap became unbridgeable in 2022: preaching brotherhood while killing "brothers," invoking international law while flouting it, decrying Nazism while unleashing ultranationalist rhetoric.

Consequently, Russia's ability to shape regional narratives collapsed outside its own borders. In Ukraine, any Russian narrative is now met with scorn; even Russian-speaking Ukrainians overwhelmingly reject Moscow's storyline of "one people" or liberation (Stent, 2025). In Moldova, President Maia Sandu openly accused Russia of waging a hybrid war aimed at destabilising the country and obstructing its European path, rather than acting as a benign partner (Melin et al., 2023). And in Armenia, where pro-Russian sentiment was once a default, the discourse has shifted – Armenian leaders and public intellectuals increasingly speak of Russia as having betrayed Armenia or being an unreliable ally, something unthinkable a few years prior. In short, Moscow's voice no longer carries moral authority in the region; its statements are often treated with suspicion rather than acceptance.

This loss of narrative legitimacy is tightly linked with the collapse of Russia's identity-based affinity with its neighbours. During the 1990s and 2000s, a key aspect of Russia's soft power was the notion of a shared identity – whether framed as Slavic brotherhood (with Ukraine, Belarus), Eurasian multicultural empire (with Central Asia, Caucasus), or the common Soviet legacy. Many Russians and non-Russians alike nurtured the idea that they belonged, at least to some degree, to a broader Russkiy Mir (Russian world) or Soviet diaspora that transcended new national borders. This fostered feelings of affinity – e.g., older generations in Kazakhstan often viewed Russia fondly as the centre of a world they knew, and many Ukrainians had relatives across the border and consumed Russian culture regularly. The 2022 war has profoundly disrupted those cultural and emotional affinities. Ukrainians, even in Russophone regions, have overwhelmingly rallied around a distinct Ukrainian identity explicitly opposed to Russia. Sociological surveys in Ukraine show a powerful trend: citizens identifying primarily as "Soviet" or primarily with a Russian-speaking identity has dwindled practically to zero, while a civic Ukrainian patriotism has surged. This is a direct reaction to the invasion – being pro-Russian is now widely treated as disloyalty or worse. In Armenia,

the shift is more about trust than identity per se, but it is stark: where virtually all Armenians once saw Russia as their security guarantor (hence the 93% favourable view in 2019), the traumas of 2020 (the Nagorno-Karabakh war where Russia stayed neutral) and 2022 (feeling abandoned again) led to a precipitous drop in positive sentiment to 31% (de Waal, 2024). Armenians have staged public demonstrations against Russia's peacekeepers and against CSTO inaction, and there is burgeoning interest in Western partnerships – a sea change in a country that traditionally anchored its identity to alliance with Russia. Moldova too has experienced an identity pivot: under the pressure of war and energy intimidation, the Moldovan government accelerated efforts to emphasise a European identity and reduce the lingering influence of Russian language and media in daily life. Notably, in 2023 Moldova suspended several Russian news outlets and acted against networks linked to the Kremlin, arguing that such measures were needed to protect the country from Russian destabilisation (Melin et al., 2023). All these examples illustrate a broader phenomenon: the historical and cultural ties that once bound these countries to Russia are fraying or being actively cut. The war has made Russian identity politically suspect in many contexts – something people distance themselves from, rather than embrace.

This can be analysed through the lens of ontological security, which concerns the need of states (and individuals) for a stable sense of identity and predictability. Russia's neighbours, especially Ukraine and smaller states like Moldova, have long grappled with balancing a post-Soviet identity that included positive links to Russia against the imperatives of their own statehood and security. The invasion forced a hard rupture: to be secure in their own identity, these nations feel they must reject the Russian-centric identity narrative outright. Ukraine's case is emblematic. As Volodymyr Kulyk has noted, the war catalysed the consolidation of a Ukrainian national identity that is civic and anti-imperial, leaving little room for the kind of "biographical continuity" with Russia that some older Ukrainians had maintained. In effect,

Russia's aggression helped turn Russia into the ontological "Other" – the threatening outsider against which Ukraine defines itself. A similar, if less intense, process can be seen in other countries. This has profound implications: identities are hard to reverse once redefined in opposition. Even if Russia were to dial down its aggression, the sense of separate destiny in these countries (and of Russia as a foe) is likely to endure for generations.

With attraction sharply diminished, what remains for Russia is an increasingly coercive presence – the ability to impose costs or threats. Indeed, Moscow seems to be increasingly relying on what can be termed "reactive coercion" as a substitute for lost influence. With fewer carrots available, it doubles down on sticks. Over the past two years, Russian behaviour towards neighbours has often taken a punitive turn whenever they defy its wishes. Several examples illustrate this pattern: when Kazakhstan's Tokayev maintained his refusal to endorse the Ukraine invasion, Russia abruptly suspended some oil exports through the Caspian Pipeline, officially on "technical" grounds, in a move widely read as political pressure. When Moldova leaned West and exposed Russian covert meddling, Gazprom cut Moldova's gas volumes and Russia's foreign minister threatened that Moldova's pro-Western course could provoke severe responses. When Armenia flirted with closer ties to the EU, Moscow reacted harshly and warned against Western involvement. And of course, in Belarus since 2020, Russia's security and economic support for Lukashenko coercively binds Minsk to Moscow's line; Belarus had little choice but to allow its territory to be used in the Ukraine invasion. This pattern – compellence in lieu of influence – underscores Russia's reliance on coercion rather than consent. Without a positive vision to offer, the Kremlin increasingly falls back on making itself feared. It signals that any neighbour moving too far Westward will face its wrath, whether through military means, economic pressure, or subterfuge. In theoretical terms, this is Russia leveraging what power resources it has left: hard power and disruptive capacity.

However, reactive coercion is a poor long-term strategy for hegemony. Coercion can compel certain actions but typically breeds resentment and diminishing returns. For instance, while Russia's gas cut-off and propaganda offensives strained Moldova through winter 2022–23, they also galvanised Western support for Moldova and hardened Chişinău's resolve to free itself from Russian energy dependence (Kuczyński, 2022). Moldova fast-tracked agreements to get gas from alternate sources and received generators and electricity from Romania to get through blackouts caused by Russian strikes on Ukraine's grid. In effect, Russia's coercion pushed Moldova further away. Likewise, in Armenia, Russia's perceived acquiescence in Azerbaijan's advances succeeded only in convincing more Armenians that they should seek security guarantees elsewhere – some even talk of a possible Western or UN peacekeeping mission to replace Russia's failing role. In a broader sense, Russia's reliance on threats over allure may be accelerating the formation of counter-alliances. Countries that fear Moscow more than they value partnership with it are naturally driven to band together or to seek protection from powers like the EU, U.S., or China. Finland and Sweden's rapid decisions to join NATO, albeit not post-Soviet states, show how Russia's threat-based posture can produce balancing against it. In the Caucasus, we see something analogous with Azerbaijan and Turkey drawing closer to fill a security vacuum and Armenia contemplating the need for Western backing. The tragedy for Russian statecraft is that by abandoning even the pretence of attraction, it forfeited the flexibility and goodwill that could have kept its neighbours from outright balancing.

The concept of coercive power without corresponding attraction can be further illuminated by historical analogues. Consider the late Ottoman Empire in the 19th–early 20th century: it was often seen by its subject peoples as an oppressive force ("the sick man of Europe") that retained control largely through coercion (e.g. military might, harsh reprisals) but had lost much of the ideological and religious appeal it once held for many Christian minorities. As nationalism rose,

the Ottomans' former subjects no longer saw belonging in the empire as advantageous or legitimate, and the empire's attempts to hold on by force ultimately failed. The parallel to Russia is not exact, but instructive – the erosion of the multi-ethnic empire's integrative ideology left only fear, and fear proved insufficient to preserve cohesion. Similarly, the Soviet Union in its final years could be seen in this light: by the 1980s, much of its ideological appeal had faded, while coercive institutions and party control played an increasingly important role in holding the system together. Once glasnost exposed past abuses and weakened the politics of fear, the union's underlying national and political tensions surfaced rapidly. Another example is the United States in the post-Iraq War period. The U.S. still retains vast alliances and soft power, but the Iraq invasion (2003) notably damaged America's attractiveness worldwide, especially in the Middle East. For a time, the U.S. presence in the region was regarded by many as a "threat without legitimacy" – seen as an occupying force without moral authority. The U.S. subsequently devoted significant diplomatic effort to repairing its international image. Russia's situation is arguably more dire because it lacks the democratic soft-power reserves the U.S. could draw on; its legitimacy problems appear more deeply rooted, reflecting tensions between traditional great-power ambitions and contemporary norms of sovereignty and self-determination.

A closer analogue might be the case of the post-World War II French in Algeria or Portugal in Angola and Mozambique: colonial powers that by the mid-20th century were increasingly seen as suppressing local aspirations, offering little attractive vision and relying primarily on force to hold territory. In each case, the metropole's intransigence led to protracted conflict, and ultimately the collapse of their will to maintain control in the face of local resistance and international censure. Russia today, in trying to subdue Ukraine and browbeat its neighbours, increasingly resembles an imperial power operating against the grain of contemporary norms, doubling down on violence as its legitimacy crumbles. This raises the question: can a power whose

influence rests increasingly on fear rather than consent sustain that influence even in the medium term? History suggests it cannot – not without some dramatic change in either policy or leadership that rebuilds trust. Coercion alone tends to degrade over time, as targets adapt or find sponsors to help resist (Ukraine's rallying of Western support is a case in point).

Ontological Insecurity and Aggressive Posture

To fully theorise Russia's behaviour, it is also necessary to consider how Russia's own identity anxieties contribute to its increasingly confrontational and coercive posture. Russia's transition to overt aggression is partly a symptom of its ontological insecurity – a deep-seated sense of uncertainty about its post-Cold War identity and role. Zarakol (2011) has argued that Russia, like other non-Western great powers, has often felt stigmatised and humiliated by the Western order, seen as an outsider to the "civilised core". This has produced a kind of existential anxiety in the Russian elite: they seek recognition as a great power equal to the West, yet fear they will always be seen as second-rate or "backward" in a Western-dominated system. Morozov (2013) conceptualises Russia as a "subaltern empire" – subordinated in global hierarchies vis-à-vis the West while simultaneously asserting imperial dominance over its own periphery. This dualism creates ontological ambiguities and inconsistent policies. In practical terms, it means Russia swings between seeking acceptance by the West and lashing out against it – and the latter often entails acting as a bully in its neighbourhood to compensate for the lack of global status. Putin's insistence on a "sphere of influence" and his denial of Ukraine's legitimacy as a nation can be read as attempts to cement Russia's great-power identity through control over others, in the face of what he perceives as Western encroachment and disrespect (Stent, 2025). A similar interpretation is offered by Trapara (2025), who argues that the invasion can also be understood through Morgenthau's concept of a policy of prestige, in which the pursuit of recognition, status, and

historical greatness becomes an important driver of foreign policy behaviour. The tragedy is that this quest for ontological security through dominance achieved the opposite: it heightened Russia's insecurity by isolating it further and turning its neighbours into adversaries.

Ontological security theory tells us that when a state's identity narrative is challenged, it may resort to conflict to reassert a stable self-image (Prina, 2024). Russia's narrative – as the core of an illustrious "Russian World," rightful heir to the Soviet superpower legacy, and protector of the Orthodox-Slavic civilisation – was deeply shaken by the Soviet collapse and subsequent NATO/EU expansion. The Maidan revolution in Ukraine (2014) and Ukraine's westward pivot were especially threatening to Russia's self-concept: a fraternal Eastern Slavic nation choosing the Western path undermined the story that Russia leads a viable alternative civilisation. Narozhna (2021) argues that this deepened an incoherence in Russia's biographical narrative: Russia could not reconcile Ukraine's departure from its orbit with its desired identity as a great power. The invasion of 2022 can thus be seen as an extreme measure to address that incoherence by force, to "secure" Russia's identity. Indeed, Putin's own speeches and essay in 2021 explicitly denied Ukrainian nationhood and asserted that Ukrainians and Russians are "one people" (Stent, 2025), reflecting a determined attempt to lock in a narrative where Russia cannot lose Ukraine without losing itself. This ontological motivation intertwines with security concerns in driving Russia's aggression.

Why does this matter for understanding Russia's transformation into a power defined more by threat than attraction? It suggests that Russia's leadership may accept being isolated and feared if that is the price of asserting its identity. Putin and his hardliners seem willing to forsake soft power (which would require compromise, self-restraint, integration into a Western-led order) in exchange for hard assertions of sovereignty and greatness on their own terms. In their ontology, being feared is preferable to being taken lightly or pitied. As Fiona Hill

and Angela Stent note, Putin sees the Ukraine war as a civilisational battle to force the West to respect Russia's sphere (Stent, 2025). This is a dangerous logic, because it means traditional measures of success (like economic well-being or international prestige) are subordinate to a narrative of revival and defiance. If Russia's leadership defines success as being acknowledged as a great power through the capacity to instil fear, then coercive influence without legitimacy is not an unfortunate by-product – it becomes an objective in itself. However, this is a pyrrhic and unstable form of "success." It isolates Russia from genuine alliances and makes its influence brittle. A state that is only an object of fear finds that its partnerships are shallow and opportunistic (witness how even China, ostensibly a Russian strategic partner, maintains a careful distance and extracts benefits from Russia's pariah status, rather than sacrificing for Russia). Over time, ontological insecurity could deepen as Russia realises that ruling by fear yields neither loyalty nor secure gains – leading to a potential vicious cycle of more insecurity and more aggressive behaviour.

Case Studies of Coercion and Backlash

The dynamics of coercion without attraction can be illustrated through the cases of Ukraine, Armenia, and Moldova:

Ukraine

The most direct case – Russia attempted outright coercion to pull Ukraine back into its fold (from 2014 through the full invasion in 2022). Far from winning Ukrainian hearts, this turned an overwhelming majority of Ukrainian society against Russia. Ukraine's Western integration, once contentious domestically, became overwhelmingly supported. The war elevated President Zelenskyy's pro-sovereignty agenda and marginalised pro-Russian parties (which have been banned or are politically defunct). In essence, Russia's military threat united Ukraine in resistance and oriented it definitively Westward

(Ukraine is now an EU candidate and a de facto close security partner of NATO). The more Russia threatens Ukraine (with bombings, nuclear sabre-rattling), the more Ukrainians double down on fighting and on rejecting any Russian role in their future. This is normative backlash in the extreme – Russia's claim of fraternal ties now rings hollow to many Ukrainians after so much bloodshed. Survey evidence collected since the full-scale invasion points to a dramatic strengthening of Ukrainian civic identity and a corresponding decline in Soviet and Russia-oriented identifications. By 2023, identification with the Soviet tradition had fallen to very low levels, while an overwhelming majority of respondents identified primarily with Ukraine and the Ukrainian political nation (Kulyk, 2024; Razumkov Centre, 2023). This indicates a nearly complete erasure of Russia's soft-power legacy in Ukraine. Russia's coercion has given Ukraine what decades of nation-building could not: a consolidated national identity separate from Russia. The pattern of coercive influence without legitimacy is fully evident – Russia can still destroy (as daily strikes show), but it cannot persuade or entice any significant Ukrainian actor to support its goals.

Armenia

This small Caucasus republic was long one of Russia's staunchest allies, reliant on Russian protection against Azerbaijan and Turkey. For years, Russia's soft power in Armenia was immense – Russian language is widely spoken, and many Armenians saw Russian troops and bases as essential guardians of peace in Karabakh. Yet in 2020 and again in 2023, Armenia discovered that Russia's protection was limited and self-interested. The CSTO's failure to aid Armenia against Azerbaijani incursions on Armenia's recognised territory led Prime Minister Nikol Pashinyan to publicly lambaste the alliance and freeze Armenia's participation in the CSTO (Putz, 2024). By 2023, Yerevan began conducting military exercises with the United States and the Armenian First Lady delivered humanitarian aid to Ukraine – symbolic but telling gestures of drifting from Moscow. The Armenian example underscores

how quickly trust and affinity can collapse when a patron power is seen as abandoning a client. Armenians now view Russia not as an attractive partner but as an unreliable one, and possibly complicit in their adversary's gains. Popular protests in Yerevan have included chants against Putin and Russia for the first time in recent memory. All of this is remarkable given Armenia's deep historical ties to Russia – ties that survived even the end of the USSR, but are now in question. Russia still has leverage (it maintains a military base in Armenia and controls certain economic assets), but its leverage is increasingly coercive now. Indeed, Moscow threatened consequences if Armenia formally exits the CSTO or hosts Western observers. In September 2023, when Armenia's parliament was considering ratifying the International Criminal Court treaty (which would oblige them to arrest Putin if he visited), Russia's Foreign Ministry issued dark warnings. Thus, Russia is resorting to threats to keep Armenia in line – but those threats only further alienate the Armenian public. Pashinyan has openly stated that Armenia can no longer rely on Russia and must diversify its security partnerships (Putz, 2024). This is a classic case of coercive influence without trust: Russia's value proposition to Armenia (security, friendship) is discredited, and only fear of Russian punitive action (or fear of Azerbaijan, which Russia might exploit) hangs over the relationship. If Armenia finds alternative security guarantees, one can expect it to pivot fully away, since few positive soft-power bonds remain strong enough to tether it securely to Moscow.

Moldova

Moldova historically has been split between pro-European and pro-Russian orientations, with Russia exerting influence via Moldova's dependence on Russian gas and via the frozen conflict in Transnistria, where Russian troops are stationed. Prior to 2022, Russia still had a substantial constituency in Moldova – about half the country voted for politicians calling for good ties with Moscow, and Russian media was popular. The war has significantly diminished this influence.

Gazprom's sharp reduction of gas supplies in 2022–23, widely interpreted in Moldova and the EU as political pressure, backfired by strengthening Moldova's push for energy diversification. Moldova secured emergency electricity from Romania and hastened plans to connect to the European power grid, and by early 2023, right-bank Moldova had sharply reduced its direct dependence on Gazprom supplies, while the gas relationship with Transnistria remained more complex. At the same time, the Moldovan government exposed and expelled suspected Russian-linked networks accused of stirring unrest. It also suspended broadcast licences of several Kremlin-aligned TV channels for spreading war disinformation (Melin et al., 2023). Public opinion in Moldova has also shifted: while a segment of the population, especially Russian-speakers and supporters of the Russia-friendly Shor Party, remains sympathetic to Russia, overall trust in Russia has fallen and support for EU integration reached record highs in 2022–2023. Moldova's President Maia Sandu explicitly frames her country's future as part of the European family, declaring that Moldova "will break free from the past" of corruption and Kremlin influence. Still, Russia's reaction has been to issue threats: Foreign Minister Lavrov in early 2023 claimed the West was turning Moldova against Russia and ominously said Moscow "will take measures" if Russian interests or Russian speakers in Moldova are threatened. Such veiled and sometimes open threats – suggesting perhaps that Russia could instigate unrest in Transnistria or worse – are now the primary language of Moscow's policy towards Moldova. But instead of scaring Chişinău into compliance, these moves have arguably accelerated Moldova's Westward trajectory; Moldova formally applied for EU membership shortly after the invasion and obtained candidate status in June 2022, and opened accession negotiations in 2024. Even within Transnistria, interestingly, the war's dynamics have made the separatist region more cautious: the Transnistrian authorities have largely avoided provocations, and some reports indicate they have kept channels with Chişinău quietly open, not wanting to be drawn into Russia's war. This

suggests that Russia's ability to shape the behaviour of even its closest partners is weakening.

Each of these cases – Ukraine's outright defiance, Armenia's disillusionment, Moldova's westward shift – reinforces the picture of Russia as a beleaguered would-be hegemon that increasingly depends on pressure rather than consent. Rather than exercising broad ideological attraction, Moscow increasingly relies on residual dependencies, security pressure, and pragmatic accommodation. At best, some may still cooperate due to geographic and economic realities (Central Asian states will still trade with Russia and host migrant flows, Belarus's regime will stick with Moscow as its lifeline), but this is pragmatic accommodation, not ideological alignment. A telling detail: even Belarus's leader Lukashenko, arguably Putin's closest client, has at times dragged his feet – for example, resisting sending Belarusian troops to Ukraine – suggesting that without genuine popular support, even a client regime worries about over-dependence on a feared patron. Lukashenko publicly acknowledges many Belarusians do not want deeper integration with Russia, which constrains how far he can go in binding Belarus to Russia's war (Melin et al., 2023). This again underscores that Russia's lack of attraction forces it to rely on narrow regime interests and coercion, which are inherently unstable foundations.

Historical Parallels

In drawing parallels with past great powers in decline, one is reminded of how Great Britain managed the retreat from empire. Britain after WWII recognised, however reluctantly, that the age of colonial empires was ending; it sought to shed colonies in a largely controlled fashion and reinvent its international role, eventually as a U.S.-aligned power and trading nation. Russia's elites, in contrast, never fully accepted the loss of empire in 1991 as legitimate or permanent – Putin called the USSR's collapse the "major geopolitical disaster of the century" (Putin, 2005). This refusal to reconceive Russia as anything other than an imperial centre set the stage for the current predicament. Now, having

tried and failed to restore empire by force, Russia faces a different kind of post-imperial reckoning – but finds itself largely friendless. Although Britain's decolonisation was often violent and uneven, it was cushioned by its integration into a new Western order and by a soft-power narrative of transition to the Commonwealth; Russia has no comparable cushion. Its actions have estranged it from the West, and its relationships elsewhere, including with China and Iran, are largely transactional, not underpinned by deep trust or shared ideology. This again recalls the late Ottoman situation: the Ottomans at the end had few reliable great-power sponsors left and were seen by many rising national movements as an oppressive imperial force. Their fate – collapse and republican rebirth in Turkey only after a harsh confrontation with reality – may hold a lesson for Russia. The Russian Federation's future could lie in a painful but necessary confrontation with the consequences of overextension and a revaluation of national identity away from imperial nostalgia. Zarakol's (2011) work suggests that post-imperial states can reduce ontological insecurity by reworking the stories they tell about defeat, status, and national purpose. In this sense, the early Turkish Republic under Atatürk is a useful parallel: it recast legitimacy around Turkish nationhood and republican statehood, rather than around the restoration of Ottoman imperial authority. Whether Russia can do something analogous, shedding the "we must rule our neighbours" mindset and finding a post-imperial identity, remains an open question, to be touched upon in the conclusion.

Russia's current condition challenges some conventional ideas. Realist theories focusing on balance of power might be puzzled: Russia retains nuclear superpower status and a sizeable military, yet its influence is waning – highlighting that power is not just about capabilities, but how they are used and perceived. Constructivist insights (like Finnemore's on legitimacy and social structure) prove essential to explain why Russia cannot translate its military might into desired outcomes in its near abroad (Finnemore, 2009). Without legitimacy, raw power faces

constant friction. Moreover, Joseph Nye's framework reminds us that the most effective power is power that is not seen as power at all by those subject to it – i.e., when others willingly follow because their values align. Russia starkly lacks this now; it is closer to Lukes' "hard power" (coercive face of power) without the second or third faces (agenda-setting and preference-shaping) that win compliance without force. The relevance of soft-balancing theories is also evident: states like Kazakhstan or Uzbekistan aren't militarily opposing Russia, but they are using international institutions, including the UN, and their own multi-vector diplomacy to quietly counteract Russian dominance (Finnemore, 2009). Institutions and norms become tools of the weak against a hegemon that lacks legitimacy – providing, as Finnemore further notes, a "corridor" for resistance within the system. Central Asian states invoking international law to maintain neutrality, or Moldova using EU energy frameworks to escape Russian gas leverage, are examples of this phenomenon.

Russia as a coercive influence without corresponding legitimacy represents a failure of hegemonic socialisation. Moscow has not been able to convince its near abroad that its leadership is beneficial or benign – rather, it increasingly must compel and coerce, which in turn further alienates those states. It is a spiral familiar from empire studies: empire that cannot persuade, over time, cannot endure. The next, final chapter examines how this situation ushers in a post-hegemonic Eurasia – a regional order no longer defined by one dominant power, but by a more plural set of actors and arrangements.

Russia's evolution into a power increasingly dependent on fear rather than consent underscores several broader IR lessons. First, it validates the concept that soft power and legitimacy are not luxuries but necessities for sustained influence. As Nye argues, when a state can get others to want what it wants, it avoids costly conflicts; Russia's loss of this ability has been strategically costly. Its hard power, however formidable, cannot produce durable political influence when each use of force generates further resistance. Second, the Russian case

highlights the role of ontological security in driving state behaviour. A profound insecurity about national identity can lead a state to prioritise symbolic status and historical narratives over pragmatic interests – explaining why Putin would incur huge economic and diplomatic costs in a war that actually diminishes Russia's security to address a perceived historical humiliation. This aligns with the view that states are social beings seeking recognition: Russia's persistent dissatisfaction with its international status contributed to efforts to preserve regional primacy, yet these efforts ultimately produced neither broader recognition nor stable dominance. Third, discursive power – control over narratives – is a component of influence that, once lost, makes coercion the fallback. Russia's narratives failed to convince even many former sympathisers once its actions starkly contradicted its rhetoric; as a result, Russia lost credibility in international forums and in the court of public opinion across neighbouring states. Constructivist theorists like Finnemore (2009) note that legitimacy is conferred when power is exercised within accepted norms; Russia's disregard for norms cost it narrative legitimacy and thus the ability to have its claims taken seriously. Fourth, the notion of coercive influence without corresponding legitimacy pushes us to refine hegemonic stability and power transition theories: it is not enough to examine rising or declining material power – one must assess whether a power's leadership is seen as rightful or not. Russia's regional hegemony eroded not simply because its relative power declined (indeed, in raw terms Russia still far outguns any neighbour except China), but because its legitimacy deficit made that power usable mainly as brute force, which in turn accelerated balancing against it. Finally, historical parallels remind us that this pattern – a declining empire doubling down on coercion – is a well-trodden path that usually ends in either reform or collapse. The late Ottomans, the Soviet Union, apartheid South Africa – various regimes that lost legitimacy tried to hang on through fear; none succeeded in the long run without undergoing fundamental change. In essence, Russia's post-2022 posture fits into a category of powers that are strong enough to threaten the peace but

too isolated to shape the peace. This has immense implications for Eurasian order, as explored in the following section: it paves the way for alternative powers and arrangements to step in, heralding a new, post-hegemonic era in the region.

TOWARDS A POST-HEGEMONIC EURASIA

Eurasia as a Contested Multipolar Region

With Russia's regional hegemony significantly contested and weakened in several key areas, the region is entering a more plural and competitive phase. The space opened by Moscow's weakened influence is not being filled by a single new hegemon, but rather by a mosaic of actors – local and external – each pursuing limited aims. The South Caucasus and Eastern Europe are prime examples of this emerging order. In these subregions, plural alignment strategies can be observed: states are diversifying partnerships and hedging bets rather than subordinating themselves to any one patron. For instance, Armenia, disillusioned with Russia, is exploring closer ties with the EU, United States, and even improving relations with Turkey – a notable turn driven by necessity. Azerbaijan, following the collapse of Russia's practical peacekeeping role in Karabakh after its 2023 takeover of the region, is leaning on Turkey and courting investment from the EU and the Middle East. Georgia remains officially committed to Euro-Atlantic aspirations, but its political trajectory has become increasingly contested despite strong pro-Western sentiment in society. In Eastern Europe, Moldova has one foot out of Russia's sphere and one in the European project. Belarus is a stark exception in alignment (locked to Russia), but even there the long-term future is uncertain given domestic pressures and the mortality of the current regime.

Crucially, Central Asia – historically considered Russia's unquestioned backyard – is also exhibiting more assertive multi-vector behaviour than in the previous decade. Kazakhstan leads the way: under President Tokayev, Astana has expanded engagement with the United States, deepened cooperation with China through regional initiatives such as the China–Central Asia format, and strengthened ties with Turkey. At the same time, Kazakhstan has remained a member of both

the EAEU and CSTO while increasingly emphasising its sovereignty and independent foreign policy vis-à-vis Moscow (Agybay & Tolen, 2025). Uzbekistan, never a Russian ally in the same vein, is deepening its outreach to China, Turkey, and South Korea. Even smaller states like Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan, though still very Russian-dependent, are welcoming Chinese economic influence and in Tajikistan's case even Chinese security presence. No single power holds unchallenged sway across the post-Soviet region now: Russia's hand is much reduced, but neither is the region coalescing under another hegemon. Instead, a competitive but still partly cooperative environment is emerging, reminiscent of 19th-century "great game" dynamics but in a modern, institutional context.

This transformation can be read through the English School as a shift from a hierarchical regional order towards a more Westphalian pluralism. In the earlier period (1990s–2010s), one could argue that Eurasia had elements of a hierarchical order with Russia at the top and neighbours as junior partners, even if that hierarchy was often contested. Now, the region is normalising into a system where each state jealously guards its sovereignty and engages in balance-of-influence tactics – inviting multiple external powers so none can dominate. The South Caucasus provides a vivid example: in the wake of Russia's diminishing role, there is an EU monitoring mission (EUMA) along Armenia-Azerbaijan border, Türkiye deploying its influence as Azerbaijan's ally, Iran concerned and involved on its northern frontier, and the United States actively mediating peace talks between Baku and Yerevan alongside the EU. This involvement of different external actors would have been hard to imagine a few years ago when Russia was the default mediator. Now, order-building in the Caucasus is more dispersed – if not exactly coordinated, then at least distributed among several players. Such a post-hegemonic situation is admittedly fragile, as the 2023 Azerbaijani takeover of Karabakh showed, but it also means regional states have more agency to choose their alignments.

In Eastern Europe, Ukraine is essentially breaking the mould of post-Soviet constraints by aspiring to full NATO and EU membership, thereby seeking to anchor itself in a different international and normative order altogether. This, in turn, has ripple effects: Belarus, under its current regime, remains tethered to Russia, but a future democratic Belarus might seek a similar opening towards Euro-Atlantic structures, given the popular sentiment visible in 2020. Moldova's trajectory is already Westward. Thus, Eastern Europe, or the western part of the former USSR, may align more closely with the European security community, effectively exiting the Russian sphere. The South Caucasus may become an arena of different external influences (Russia, Turkey, Iran, EU, U.S., with possibly China economically), and Central Asia might increasingly lean towards wider Asian and Middle Eastern economic links more than Russian ones, while keeping Russia as one partner among several.

Eurasia is becoming multipolar not in the global sense of great powers, but in the regional sense of no single hegemon. This represents a return to a more classic balance-of-power system in the region – something resembling earlier periods when Persian, Ottoman, Russian, Chinese, and indigenous Central Asian powers all intersected in this region. During the 19th–20th centuries, the Russian Empire/Soviet Union eliminated most regional multipolarity by imposing itself across Eurasia. That era has been substantially weakened and is no longer the region's uncontested organising principle. This can be understood as the "normalisation of the decline of empire" in Eurasia – a process akin to what happened in other parts of the world where empires receded and former peripheries reorganised into new patterns. The end of the Soviet Union was the formal trigger, but Russia's continued hegemony attempt delayed some consequences; the 2022 war against Ukraine, however, has accelerated the political and mental decolonisation of many of these states. As Zarakol (2022) notes in her study of Eastern orders, declines of imperial orders often unleash larger structural

changes that enable new actors to rise and new norms to form. Eurasia appears to be at such a juncture.

The Rise of Alternative Order-Builders

In a post-hegemonic Eurasia, several external and regional powers are stepping in as partial order-builders or sources of support, thereby accelerating the pluralisation of alignment.

The European Union has emerged as a significant strategic player to the west of Russia. The EU was long reluctant to engage in hard security issues in the post-Soviet region, but the Ukraine war has changed that. The EU has given billions in aid to Ukraine, imposed sweeping sanctions on Russia, and taken the unprecedented step of supplying arms through the European Peace Facility. For Moldova and Georgia, the EU's offer of membership candidacy has become a powerful pull factor, though Georgia's trajectory became more contested after 2024. Even without NATO, EU integration promises security through economic and institutional anchoring. The EU has also deployed a monitoring mission along the Armenia-Azerbaijan border and brokered talks between Armenia and Azerbaijan alongside the U.S. through the Brussels format. While the EU cannot replace Russia as a military guarantor, it is positioning itself as the pillar of reconstruction, reform, and economic opportunity for countries willing to adopt European norms. This is a form of order-building: creating a zone of stability and development that contrasts with Russia's coercive model. If Ukraine and others succeed in joining the EU, a major part of the "near abroad" would be redefined as part of the European political space.

China is the other giant whose role is growing. Beijing has steadily expanded its economic footprint in Central Asia over the past two decades (Belt and Road projects, energy pipelines, trade). Now, with Russia distracted and weakened, China is increasing its diplomatic profile and cautiously expanding its security-related engagement. In 2023, China convened the first China–Central Asia heads of state

summit in Xi'an, without Russia present, signalling Beijing's intention to engage the region through its own multilateral format (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the PRC, 2023). China offers investment and market access that Russia cannot match, and Central Asian elites see Beijing as a counterbalance to over-reliance on Moscow. That said, China is cautious not to trigger backlash or assume a full security role. Instead, China's order-building is economic and infrastructural: linking Central Asia southward and eastward, thereby diluting the old Russia-centric connectivity. One concrete example is the China-Kyrgyzstan-Uzbekistan railway, launched after years of delay, which would create a new artery outside Russian territory. China's vision, often phrased as a "community of common destiny," provides an alternative pole of attraction, though Central Asians remain wary of China's dominance too. In a post-hegemonic setting, however, China's presence ensures Russia is not the only game in town. Interestingly, China also works through multilateral formats like the SCO, implying a willingness to work in concert rather than as a sole hegemon.

Turkey has significantly raised its profile, especially in the Caucasus and Central Asia. As a Turkic power with cultural ties to those regions, Turkey presents itself as both a partner and, for some actors, a model of nationalist, multi-directional diplomacy. Turkey was instrumental in Azerbaijan's military victory in 2020 and remains Baku's closest ally, reducing Russia's role as a security actor in Azerbaijan's strategic calculations. Turkey also engages with Central Asia through organisations like the Organisation of Turkic States, which has taken on more prominence. While Turkey cannot project power everywhere, President Erdoğan has skilfully positioned Turkey as a broker and a regional patron – offering to mediate conflicts, including early in the Ukraine war and in the grain deal, selling drones and weapons to states that mistrust Russia, and providing a loose framework for Turkic solidarity. Turkey's interests do not always align with Western ones, but its presence contributes to the dispersion of influence. No longer can Russia dictate terms in the Caucasus without contending with

Turkey's stance. And in Central Asia, Turkish cultural, educational, and defence ties have grown alongside, rather than simply at the expense of, Russian influence. Turkey thus functions as a mid-level order-builder: not creating a new system per se, but championing regional cooperation and offering security ties that loosen Russia's grip.

Additionally, regional middle powers are incrementally more involved. Iran has obvious interests in the Caucasus (bordering Azerbaijan and Armenia) and has tried to assert red lines (e.g. opposing any blockade of Armenia or Western military presence). It is also building north-south trade routes that include Azerbaijan and Russia (International North-South Transport Corridor), giving Caucasus states more options. India, keen to counter China's influence and maintain access to Central Asia, has deepened ties with countries like Kazakhstan (in energy) and invested in Iran's Chabahar Port to link to Central Asia – moves which indirectly ensure no single power dominates Central Asian transit. The Gulf states (Qatar, UAE, Saudi) have begun investing in Central Asian infrastructure and energy, and interestingly also in Georgia and Azerbaijan, as part of expanding their geopolitical reach. While these players are not "order-builders" in a traditional sense of providing security guarantees, their economic and diplomatic engagement adds layers of connectivity and interdependence that make it harder for any hegemon to monopolise the region. They diversify the partnerships available to Eurasian states, which is the essence of a post-hegemonic environment – multiple options, multiple vectors.

Finally, the United States and NATO continue to play an important role, especially in Eastern Europe and to some extent the Caucasus. The U.S. is the principal military supporter of Ukraine and has signalled long-term commitment to Ukraine's defence. It also provides security assistance to other vulnerable states, including training and equipment for Georgia, Moldova's armed forces, and Central Asian border guards. NATO has sharply increased its presence on the eastern flank, especially in the Baltics and Poland, while expanding surveillance and

coordination around the Black Sea in response to the war. Ukraine's military itself is becoming a formidable force partly integrated with Western systems, and if Ukraine prevails or at least maintains its sovereignty, it effectively becomes a new pillar of Eastern European security independent of Russia. Some analysts have linked growing cooperation among states between the Baltic and Black Seas to a revived "Intermarium" logic, especially in response to Russian aggression and the wider insecurity it has generated in the region (Pizzolo, 2024; Polegkyi, 2021). This would have been far less likely when Russia was more deeply integrated into European political and economic structures. Today, however, security cooperation across Eastern Europe has intensified in response to the war. While U.S. influence in Central Asia is modest, especially after the end of the U.S. and coalition basing arrangements connected to Afghanistan operations, including Manas in Kyrgyzstan and Karshi-Khanabad in Uzbekistan (Nichol, 2014), Washington has rekindled ties there too – hosting the C5+1 summit and increasing diplomatic visits (Oblaqulov, 2025). In essence, American involvement is no longer confined to the old Soviet frontier; it is expanding selectively where governments are willing to engage with it.

All these developments indicate a broad rebalancing: Eurasia is no longer organised around a single "hub-and-spoke" model, with Moscow as the hub. Instead, multiple centres of influence exist — Brussels, Beijing, Ankara, Washington, and others — and Eurasian states are connecting to several of them at once. This is the hallmark of a post-hegemonic, or multiplex, order in which no single power can organise the region alone (Acharya, 2014). In theoretical terms, it points not simply to a redistribution of capabilities, but to the weakening of hierarchy itself: Russia remains powerful, yet it is increasingly unable to translate asymmetry into accepted regional authority (Lake, 2009). Importantly, such an order does not mean harmony or lack of competition – on the contrary, it is rife with contestation as various powers jostle for influence. But it tends to be more institutionally open

and fluid, allowing smaller states more leverage to play others off against each other. For example, Kazakhstan can welcome Chinese investment to negotiate better terms with Russia, or Uzbekistan can use its relationship with Turkey to avoid overdependence on China, and so on.

Decline of Empire and Regional Normalisation

The decline of Russia's imperial influence can be seen as part of a wider pattern in international politics: the long arc of decolonisation and empire dissolution that defined the 20th century. In many ways, the Soviet/Russian empire was one of the last multinational empires to collapse (1991), and the struggle since then has been over the terms of its aftermath. Seen from the perspective of imperial decline, the war against Ukraine represents an attempt to reverse rather than manage the consequences of imperial collapse (Motyl, 2001). This marks a later stage of that collapse – the emergence of independent polities that are increasingly unwilling to accept subordination to the former metropole. Post-imperial regions often go through turbulence (think of post-Ottoman Middle East, or post-colonial Africa and South Asia with their conflicts) before stabilising into new arrangements. Eurasia's post-imperial transition was perhaps delayed by the 1991 dissolution occurring mostly peacefully and Russia's partial reassertion thereafter. But the 2022 war, with its brutality, may have been the decisive shock to break the remaining imperial bonds. The hopeful view is that once the dust settles, Eurasia could stabilise on the basis of sovereign equality and regionalism rather than hegemonic control. Central Asian republics hold regular five-way summits among themselves to solve regional problems (water sharing, transport) without a "big brother" present (Kurmanova, 2025). The GUAM organisation (Georgia, Ukraine, Azerbaijan, Moldova), long considered marginal, has gained renewed attention as its member states seek closer coordination on transport, trade, and regional connectivity (Freund, 2024). From a "post-imperial" theoretical framework, Eurasia is moving towards a

more rule-based regional order, albeit on a regional scale. Instead of hierarchy, a configuration closer to a pluralistic security community or overlapping institutional arrangements may emerge. For instance, if the current Armenia–Azerbaijan peace process results in a lasting settlement, it is unlikely to rest on Russian troops in the way the 2020 ceasefire did. Pashinyan stated that the agreed treaty text would exclude the deployment of third-country personnel along the Armenia–Azerbaijan border, so any future order would depend more on bilateral commitments, border delimitation, and diplomatic backing from actors such as the EU and the United States than on a Russian security presence (Light & Bagirova, 2025). Central Asian states, meanwhile, are discussing better coordination on issues like climate and trade among themselves, which indicates a kind of Westphalian maturity – solving problems collectively as equal states rather than deferring to Moscow.

Certainly, challenges abound. A multipolar Eurasia can also mean an unstable Eurasia if rival powers clash (e.g., Russia and Turkey historically have competing aims in the Caucasus; China and the West might compete in Central Asia). There is also the risk that Russia, even weakened, remains a spoiler – akin to a weakened but still disruptive power that is more dangerous in its unpredictability. After 2022, Russia could still act as a regional spoiler, but its role increasingly relied on ambiguity and selective inaction rather than credible order-building. In Nagorno-Karabakh, Russian peacekeepers did not prevent Azerbaijan's September 2023 offensive; their failure, followed by Russia's 2024 withdrawal from Karabakh, undermined Moscow's claim to be Armenia's reliable security guarantor and further weakened Russia's peacekeeping role in the South Caucasus. A post-hegemonic order might thus require managing a declining Russia to prevent destructive revanchism. This is where international institutions and norms must play a role: deterring aggression while leaving open a future framework for Russia to accept the new regional realities. Some have floated ideas of a new "Helsinki 2.0", referencing the 1975

Helsinki Accords which stabilised East-West relations by codifying borders and principles (Saxer, 2024). Perhaps after the Ukraine war, a new conference on Eurasian security could help formalise the end of spheres of influence – guaranteeing, for example, Ukraine's sovereignty and maybe offering Russia some face-saving assurances in return for peace. However, such an outcome is speculative at this stage; it hinges on a change in Moscow's behaviour or leadership.

The English School's notion of international society is useful here: Eurasia may be forming a more complex regional international society where Russia is one member, not a ruler. That society will have to negotiate its new norms – likely emphasising sovereignty, non-aggression, and mutual benefit, as those are the principles that states like Kazakhstan, Uzbekistan, and other post-Soviet states want upheld (given their fear of being dominated). Indeed, one positive result of the war is that neighbours have re-emphasised basic norms: most post-Soviet states have affirmed, via UN votes, abstentions, or public statements, the principle that one state cannot unilaterally annex parts of another. Kazakhstan's Tokayev did so explicitly in Putin's presence (Kussainova, 2022). This is essentially a revalidation of Westphalian norms in a region that Russia previously treated as quasi-domestic. If Eurasia's states stick to this normative stance collectively, it forms a basis for a more stable order: one where changes in borders or allegiance happen through consent (like via referenda under international auspices or negotiated settlements) rather than force. It is notable that even Russia's formal allies like Belarus have not recognised the annexed territories in Ukraine (Lukashenko has treated Crimea as Russian in practice but has not signed any treaty of annexation, and on the newer annexations he's been silent), and others in CSTO/EAEU have pointedly not endorsed Russia's land grabs. This subtle diplomatic distancing suggests a broad reluctance among Russia's partners to legitimise territorial revision. Such a stance could provide the basis for a new regional understanding centred on sovereignty and the inadmissibility of changing borders by coercion.

Ontological Reconciliation and Russia's Post-Imperial Dilemma

Finally, the focus shifts to the introspective question: what of Russia itself in this post-hegemonic landscape? For lasting regional order, Russia would need to undergo a process of ontological reconciliation – coming to terms with the loss of empire and integrating into the new Eurasia as a less dominant but still important state. In other words, Russia would have to redefine greatness without dominion. This is as much a psychological and ideological adjustment as a geopolitical one. Historically, states have managed this with difficulty: France, after decolonisation, clung to a "grandeur" narrative and only gradually recalibrated its role (focusing on European leadership instead of colonial empire). The UK took solace in the "special relationship" with the U.S. and the Commonwealth ties. Russia's path to reconciliation is complicated by its isolation from Western alliances and its narrative of grievance. Yet, perhaps counterintuitively, the shock of failure in Ukraine could open space for rethinking. Already some Russian intellectuals and opposition figures in exile talk of building a "future Russia" that abandons imperial pretensions and focuses on domestic development and a different relationship with Russia's regions and non-Russian peoples.

IR theory suggests that a power's integration into international society, especially after defeat, often requires status adjustment and recognition of that adjustment by others (Zarakol, 2011). In Russia's case, any future settlement would likely need to leave room for Russia to have a respected role as a rule-abiding state, rather than as a regional overlord – for example, through inclusion in economic initiatives or cooperative security frameworks, provided it abides by agreed rules. A future Pan-European security arrangement, broadly comparable to the OSCE, could eventually emerge and reduce zero-sum competition between Russia, Ukraine, and other states. However, such visions depend on profound changes in Russia's political leadership and national narrative. The current regime shows no such inclination – on the contrary, the Putin regime appears determined to dig in on an anti-

West, neo-imperial identity, even as it harms Russia. Thus, the work of ontological reconciliation might fall to Russia's next generation of leaders or society after this war has run its course.

From a theoretical perspective, the Russia-Ukraine war and its regional aftermath speak directly to debates on power transition and identity. The conflict can be read as a failed power transition: Russia sought to revise the post-Cold War order by force in order to restore regional primacy, but it misjudged both its own capabilities and the cohesion of the opposition, producing not a new Russian-led order but a more diffuse regional configuration in which Russia's authority has weakened. The outcome so far may confirm liberal theories about how aggressive challengers are often contained by balancing coalitions (here NATO/EU plus local resistance) and by their own internal weaknesses. It also supports constructivist arguments that legitimacy and narrative control form part of power: despite being materially weaker than Russia, Ukraine has used international norms and political narratives to mobilise support, isolate Russia, and strengthen its own position. In doing so, Ukraine has helped reshape the regional order in its favour. Small states can thus be order-makers too when they tap into prevailing norms – a point often noted by English School writers who emphasise that even lesser powers, by aligning with primary institutions of international society, such as international law and sovereignty, can influence outcomes.

Another theoretical implication is in the realm of post-colonial IR: discourse in many Eurasian countries increasingly frames Russian domination as a form of colonialism. Ukrainian scholars and policymakers now openly refer to Russia as a colonial empire and frame Ukraine's struggle as an anti-colonial war of independence. This reframing can resonate with Global South audiences and links Eurasia's experience to the broader narrative of ending empire. If that framing takes hold, IR theory may need to further adjust Euro-centric views and incorporate the idea that colonial empire building and un-building is not just a 19th–20th century phenomenon but continues to

play out in places such as Eurasia. Scholars like Morozov (2013, 2015) have long argued that Russia's identity has a post-colonial dimension — a coloniser that also sees itself as subordinated by the West. The events since 2022 validate the complexity and peril of such an identity: Russia's inability to reconcile those roles contributed to a violent outburst that ultimately accelerated the loss of its empire. For IR scholars, this case underscores the importance of psychological and cultural factors in great power behaviour; pure realpolitik analysis, focusing on NATO expansion, cannot fully explain why Russia embarked on such a costly and strategically damaging course, whereas understanding Putin's historical grievances and mythologised narratives goes further (Stent, 2025).

The erosion of Russian hegemony in the post-Soviet region does not necessarily lead to chaos; it may also open the way to a reordering on more pluralistic and potentially more sustainable foundations. Eurasia is becoming a contested yet institutionalising multipolar region, where many states are increasingly stakeholders in their own right. Great-power competition now coexists with stronger local agency and more selective partnerships. This is a hopeful sign for long-term stability: when states are free to choose and have multiple avenues for support, they are less likely to feel desperate or cornered, and more likely to cooperate on mutual interests. Of course, the immediate future still hinges on the outcome of the war in Ukraine. A decisive Ukrainian victory, or a negotiated settlement that preserves Ukrainian sovereignty, would likely hasten the formation of a more peaceful post-hegemonic order; a protracted conflict or a frozen frontline, conversely, could prolong instability and give Russia (or hardliners in Moscow) periodic chances to meddle anew. Nonetheless, the trend lines examined in this study strongly suggest that empire-centred regional order in Eurasia may be approaching its limits – and a new chapter of international relations, one with more distributed power and hopefully more respect for sovereignty, is unfolding.

EPILOGUE:
RUSSIA, EMPIRE, AND THE LIMITS OF HEGEMONY

From a theoretical perspective, Russia's war against Ukraine and its regional consequences illuminate the extent to which hegemonic power depends not only on material capabilities but also on legitimacy, historical self-understanding, and the wider structure of international order. The case also shows that hegemony collapses most visibly when coercion remains available but consent disappears.

Legitimacy and Hegemony

One of the clearest lessons is that power without legitimacy is inherently brittle. Russia's attempt to assert hegemony by force, devoid of consent from those it sought to lead, turned out to be self-defeating. This reinforces the arguments of scholars like Finnemore and Sikkink (1998), who show that legitimacy can act as a force multiplier for states, enabling compliance through shared norms and tacit acceptance rather than coercion. Buzan (2004) complements this view by emphasising the role of international society and the social structures that shape state behaviour, highlighting how power and legitimacy operate together in sustaining order. A hegemon that ignores this – relying on sheer coercion and "organised hypocrisy" – will eventually face resistance that blunts its power (Finnemore, 2009). The Russia case illustrates the proposition that international order rests on social approval: when Putin shattered the shared norms of the regional order, he lost the tacit approval that had previously allowed Russia to wield disproportionate influence. In practical terms, this meant that even states traditionally friendly to Russia felt justified in distancing or defying it. For IR theory, this underscores that hegemonic stability theory must be coupled with constructivist insights: material preponderance alone cannot secure an order – a hegemon must exercise self-restraint, provide public goods, and align with prevailing norms to be durable (Finnemore, 2009). The

U.S.-led post-1945 order, for all its flaws, succeeded in part because the U.S. embedded its power in institutions and alliances that gave others voice and benefits (Ikenberry 2001; Finnemore, 2009). Russia attempted the opposite – a hegemony of unilateral domination – and saw its "near abroad" increasingly distance itself from Moscow. Thus, the downfall of Russia's regional primacy serves as a cautionary tale that might is not right, and that in the 21st century, any sphere of influence lacking voluntary adherence is likely unsustainable.

Imperial Trauma and State Behaviour

The conflict also highlights how historical narratives and traumatic identity losses can drive international outcomes. Russia's war was not solely a geopolitical move; it was also the product of an identity crisis, a refusal to accept the post-Cold War settlement and the sovereignty of former subjects. This aligns with psychological and ontological security theories which posit that states may act irrationally, from a cost-benefit view, to preserve a sense of self or restore a cherished narrative. There are echoes of past powers that struggled with imperial decline: for example, post-World War I Hungary's irredentism over lost territories, or Serbia's actions in the 1990s trying to hold onto Yugoslavia – both motivated by a trauma of national diminution. Drawing on Zarakol's work on stigmatised states, Prina (2024) argues that Russia's feeling of being denied great-power status has fed a policy of assertiveness aimed at reclaiming honour. More broadly, ontological security scholars such as Mitzen (2006) and Steele (2008) show how states may cling to identity-preserving routines even when these produce insecurity. In Russia's case, the bid to negate the "catastrophe" of Soviet dissolution yielded an even greater catastrophe for Russia itself – a war that weakened its military and economic strength and left it increasingly isolated from the West, even as it retained important partnerships outside the Euro-Atlantic world. For scholars of international relations (Mitzen, 2006; Zarakol, 2011), this underscores that the psychological scars of imperial collapse can linger for decades,

influencing leaders' worldviews in dangerous ways. Decolonisation is not just a formal process but a cognitive one: a nation must reconceive its identity without dominion over others. Japan and Germany achieved this after WWII through total defeat and subsequent reinvention. Russia's journey has been halting – it never experienced a clear moral-political repudiation of its imperial past (indeed, Putin's regime glorified the czarist and Soviet empires). The current war may represent the convulsive attempt to avoid that repudiation, but it may also make such a reckoning harder to postpone. The implication for IR theory is to pay closer attention to status and memory as drivers of conflict. Realist power calculations alone did not make Russia invade; it was also driven by the pull of historical narratives and myths about Ukraine's place within Russia's sphere of history and identity (Stent, 2025). International stability in post-imperial contexts may depend on addressing such myths, perhaps via reconciliation processes or security guarantees that ease existential anxiety. In Eastern Europe, one can envision long-term peace requiring Russia to confront its past and for neighbours (and the West) to find ways to reincorporate a post-imperial Russia into a community where it is secure but not dominant.

Post-Hegemonic Order – A New Normal

The emerging Eurasian order, and indeed aspects of the global order, are moving towards what can be described as post-hegemonic multipolarity. This is characterised not by a single overriding hierarchy, but by multiple centres of power and influence, and a premium on multilateral institutions to manage their interplay. The decline of Russia's regional hegemony contributes to this broader trend: regional subsystems are less defined by superpower patronage and more by complex interdependence. For IR scholars, Eurasia may become a valuable case study of a transition from hegemonic to pluralist order. There are relatively few well-documented instances of this. One historical parallel might be the Eastern Mediterranean after the Ottoman retreat – where no single power fully controlled the region

and local actors navigated between Britain, France, Russia, Austria-Hungary, and later other external powers. Another might be Southeast Asia after U.S. withdrawal from Vietnam, where ASEAN helped manage regional autonomy and balance external influence without a single hegemon. In Eurasia, if Russia's role diminishes, regional cooperation frameworks might strengthen in its absence, for example through Central Asian states working together or aligning with global regimes on their own terms. The involvement of the EU, China, Turkey and others in a collaborative fashion – for instance, joint efforts on connectivity or climate in Central Asia – could become the building blocks of a non-hegemonic regional governance. Hedley Bull's (1977) concept of international society might manifest regionally, where common norms, such as the inviolability of borders, are maintained by collective will rather than imperial enforcement. Such an order would be more in line with the UN Charter ideal of equal sovereignty, even if great powers still have outsized influence.

On a global scale, Russia's actions have indirectly reinforced some elements of the liberal order (NATO is more united, and the defence of international legal principles has become more prominent in diplomatic discourse), but they have also accelerated multipolar dynamics (including Russia's turn towards China and India's continued neutrality). A hybrid order is emerging: not a return to unipolarity, but a multipolar system in which certain liberal rules continue to enjoy broad acceptance (e.g. the continuing strength of the norm against territorial conquest, evidenced by repeated UN General Assembly votes condemning Russia's annexations). The challenge for IR theory is to account for how order can be maintained when power is diffuse. Classical realist balance-of-power logic may reassert itself regionally (as states align to check threats), but beyond that, institutions and normative networks will be crucial. The OSCE, United Nations, and other multilateral forums remained important venues during this crisis (for example, the UN General Assembly became the venue to isolate Russia diplomatically). This suggests that post-hegemonic order

will rely heavily on institutions as platforms for coordination among middling powers and for managing great-power competition. If no single hegemon can lay down the law, then negotiation and coalition-building become the way to set rules. This may indicate a shift towards what some call a "new concert of powers" (Haass & Kupchan, 2021) or "cooperative multipolarity" (de Aguiar Patriota, 2020), though that is an aspirational label given current tensions.

For the specific field of post-Soviet studies, the events support a line of scholarship that argued the "Russia-centric lens" would eventually give way to a more decentred view. Scholars like Cooley and Nexon (2020) wrote of "exit from hegemony" in the global context, where U.S. dominance erodes; in Eurasia, a comparable exit from Russian hegemony appears to be unfolding. The result may be a more fragmented but also more plural regional landscape, where countries pursue diverse paths (some West, some East, some non-aligned) – in essence, a fuller realisation of the independence they obtained in 1991 but that remained constrained by regional geopolitics for much of the post-Soviet period.

Russia's war against Ukraine has been a watershed that not only redrew strategic realities but also offered a clear illustration of several core themes in international relations: it starkly illuminated how power, without legitimacy, can become self-defeating; how identities and historical narratives can spark wars as much as security dilemmas do; and how international order is a social construct that can unravel or rebuild in surprising ways. The near abroad – once a shorthand for Russian dominion – is now a fading concept, replaced by talk of sovereign neighbours. From the perspective of sovereignty and self-determination, this marks a significant shift in the regional order. But it also ushers in a period of uncertainty: a post-hegemonic Eurasia is freer but also more indeterminate. Navigating this new landscape will require adept diplomacy from all players – and nuanced understanding from scholars and practitioners alike, informed by both realist and constructivist insights.

If there is a silver lining, it is that such profound shifts can create opportunities for positive-sum outcomes that were previously blocked. A Eurasia not tethered to one empire could, in theory, flourish through connectivity across Europe and Asia, becoming a bridge of commerce and culture from Beijing to Brussels. New regional institutions might arise that include Russia but on equal terms with others, fostering habits of cooperation over competition. For Russia itself, relinquishing imperial ambitions could eventually allow it to focus on internal development and perhaps build a different kind of greatness – based on innovation or cultural contribution – that does not rely on dominating neighbours. These are long-term possibilities. In the near term, the focus will rightly remain on securing a just peace in Ukraine and stabilising the region. Looking beyond the immediate war, IR theory and history suggest that the end of one order often opens the way for another. The post-Soviet region appears to be moving out from under the long shadow of empire towards a more pluralistic regional order. In that sense, "what remains of the near abroad" is neither a vacuum nor a settled order. It is a contested post-imperial space in which Russia remains powerful, but no longer uncontested. The central finding of this monograph is therefore not that Russia has ceased to matter, but that it can no longer organise the region on the assumption that its primacy will be accepted as natural. Whether this becomes a more stable Eurasian order will depend on whether regional states and external actors can replace hierarchy and coercion with sovereignty, restraint, and negotiated coexistence.

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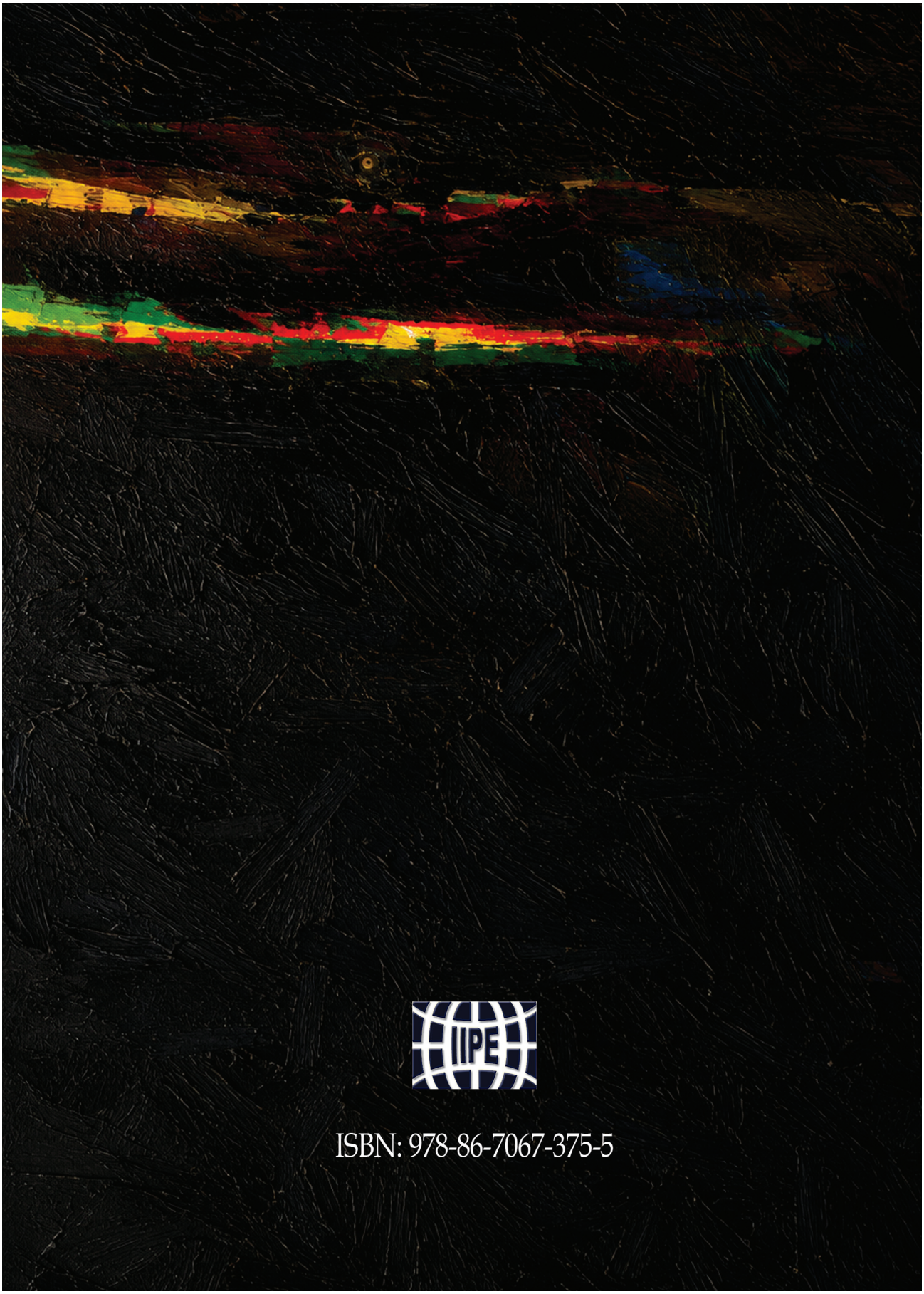
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