

Is Russia Losing Credibility in Post-Soviet Space?

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Russia's inability to achieve its planned short-term objectives in its war against Ukraine and the prolongation of military operations have created serious reputational risks for Moscow. Moreover, the fact that the Russian army lost the initiative on the front in the autumn months of 2022 and [lost](#) half of the territories it occupied after February 24 have led to a widespread perception that Russia's failure in this war will undermine its creditability in post-Soviet space and on a global scale with partners such as China, Iran, India, and Turkey. The events in Ukraine are closely watched throughout the world, but much more attention is being paid to the countries of the former Soviet empire, particularly the Caucasus and Central Asia, because the final result on the battlefield will directly affect their decisions on their relationship with Russia going forward. This article deals with the initial geopolitical consequences and effects of the Russian-Ukrainian war in the post-Soviet region.

From the point of view of Russian-Ukrainian relations, this war can have only two outcomes: either Russia takes control of Ukraine and returns it to its sphere of influence (which was Putin's intention), or it loses Ukraine completely. Battles, which have dragged on for 10 months, are not waged in the zone of hostilities planned by Moscow, and although it is not yet clear how the war will end, it is safe to say that Ukraine has managed to avoid the prospect of *Belarusianization* while maintaining independence and sovereignty. As a result, Russia seems to have lost creditability and influence in Ukraine. Despite Russia's annexation of Crimea in 2014 and the occupation of a part of the Donbas region, Russian clout and power in the Ukrainian political and business elite and society remained.

After the government of Ukraine quickly recovered from the first shock of Russia's invasion launched on February 24, 2022, and managed to organize a serious armed resistance, it began to take steps to break Russia's soft power internally. The activities of 12 pro-Russian political forces, including the *Opposition Platform – For Life*, one of the largest factions in Ukraine's parliament, the Verkhovna Rada, were completely banned. All over the country, de-Russification measures have been started – the mass changing of street names and toponyms related to Russian history and culture, and the demolition of monuments. Preparations are underway to ban the activities of the Ukrainian Orthodox Church of the Moscow Patriarchate, an affiliate of the Russian Orthodox Church. In Putin's extensive article titled "On the Historical Unity of Russians and Ukrainians," published 12 July 2021, which unveiled the ideological justification of Russia's land grab in Ukraine a few months later, the Russian president claimed that the West is implementing an anti-Russian project in Ukraine and turning it into a springboard for future assaults, ideological and military, against Russia. However, it is Putin's own war that has turned Ukraine into *an anti-Russian project*, and even if peace is achieved, it is clear that relations between the two countries will never return to the way they were before.

Kazakhstan-Russia: The Erosion of the Alliance and the Trans-Caspian Priority

Kazakhstan, the second largest post-Soviet country by territory, has remained in Russia's orbit after the disintegration of the Soviet Union, co-founding with the Russian Federation integrative military and economic alliances aimed at maintaining Moscow's hegemony in the region. Mass protest in January 2022, some of which turned violent, resulted in the transfer of real power from the first president of independent Kazakhstan, Nursultan Nazarbayev, who had in 2019 resigned the post of president in order to take up the then more powerful and unelected position of Chairman of

the Security Council, to his successor President Tokayev. Tokayev navigated through the protests to achieve this real power and eventually dismiss the former president from the Security Council by appealing for help with the January protests to the Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO). This action, at first, validated the notion that Tokayev would be a backer, perhaps even a puppet of Moscow. The CSTO's peacekeeping forces consisting mostly of Russian army units were deployed in Kazakhstan on January 6, and their deployment was completed on the 10th of the month, but Tokayev unexpectedly—only 2 days later—appealed to the CSTO again, asking for the withdrawal of the peacekeepers by January 13. The CSTO military contingent had to leave Kazakhstan practically before the execution of its mission. The reasons why the mission was so short-lived—it ended almost before it started—are still unclear. Although there are speculative claims that one of the main political and economic partners of Kazakhstan, China, which has rapidly increased its influence in Central Asia in recent years, played a role in the requested withdrawal, Tokayev's interest in presenting himself to the world as an independent decision-maker and the only power holder in Kazakhstan seems more plausible. But just eight months after the January mass protests in September, Chinese President Xi Jinping made an official visit to Kazakhstan (this was his first foreign visit after the pandemic), and attracted attention with a [statement](#) in his meeting with Tokayev, saying “No matter how the international situation changes, we will continue our strong support for Kazakhstan in protecting its independence, sovereignty and territorial integrity, as well as firm support for the reforms you are carrying out to ensure stability and development, and we strongly oppose the interference of any forces in the internal affairs of your country.”

A question arises: where does the threat to the territorial integrity and independence of Kazakhstan come from, and who is the power that can interfere in its internal affairs? It is

not difficult to find possible answers to this question: the power centers that come to mind are Russia and the West. Looking at how Kazakhstan's relations with Russia and the West have developed over the past year, we can observe several problems and misunderstandings in communication with Moscow, and mutual understanding in relations with the West.

On 21 February 2022, a day after Russian President Vladimir Putin unilaterally declared the independence of two separatist enclaves in the east of Ukraine, the Minister of Foreign Affairs of Kazakhstan Mukhtar Tleuberdi, feeling the need to explain his country's position, said that Kazakhstan will act only on the basis of the UN Charter and the principles of international law, meaning it would not recognize Russia's declared breakaway republics. Timur Suleimenov, the First Deputy Chief of Staff to the President of Kazakhstan, developed this position further by noting that Kazakhstan does not recognize and will not recognize the Russian annexation of Crimea, and at the same time, it will not help Russia to evade Western sanctions imposed on Moscow. Deputy Minister of Defense Sultan Kamaladdinov's answer to the question of whether the Kazakhstani army would be ready to resist a similar Ukraine-style invasion of Russian forces into Kazakhstani territory was also telling. He noted that "everyone is worried about this issue," thus showing that the potential threat from Russia is not ignored in Astana.

Aggressive claims against Kazakhstan by prominent Russians—particularly statements by Duma faction leaders such as the Communist Party of the Russian Federation leader Gennady Zyuganov and A Just Russia leader Sergey Mironov, as well as other lawmakers—have created uneasiness among Kazakhstani leaders. One thing which irritates officials in Moscow is that immediately after the West imposed sanctions against Russia, Kazakhstan began an active policy of adapting to those sanctions. President Tokayev stated that Kazakhstan will continue working with the Russian government in an intensified manner, but will not violate international

sanctions against Russia. The Ministry of Finance of Kazakhstan has recently drawn up a special [directive](#) targeting the delivery of sanctioned goods to Russia and Belarus. The audience at the St. Petersburg Economic Forum on 17 June 2022, did not welcome Tokayev when in response to a question from the moderator at a panel discussion with Russian President Putin, [called](#) Donetsk and Luhansk *quasi-state entities* and said that he did not recognize these territories, giving preference to the principle of territorial integrity. Incidentally, at this forum Putin once again announced his view of post-Soviet space, [claiming](#) that all former Soviet territories are historical Russian territories.

After the initial reactions of the Kazakh government to the Ukraine invasion and sanctions, suspicious events began to occur within the Caspian Pipeline Consortium, which represents Kazakhstan, Russia and Western companies. More than 80% of Kazakhstan's crude is exported via the CPC pipeline across Russian territory to the port of Yuzhnaya Ozerneyevka at Novorossiysk. Beginning in March, the operation of two of the three berths of the terminal were periodically stopped, and the reason for this was sometimes explained as an [accident](#), sometimes as a discovery of [mines](#) left over from World War II in the terminal area, and sometimes as the fault of a [technical inspection](#). After these problems in the activities of the Caspian Pipeline Consortium, Kazakhstan realized the importance of diversification and decided to focus on alternative routes. President Tokayev announced the Trans-Caspian transport corridor as a [priority](#) direction at a conference on the development of the country's transport-transit potential. In this context, the use of the opportunities afforded by the Baku-Tbilisi-Ceyhan and Baku-Supsa oil pipelines [was on the agenda](#). However, these pipelines can move approximately 100,000 barrels of Kazakh oil per day to the European market, which is 8 percent of the oil exported through the CPC. For this reason, President [Tokayev](#) ordered the activation of all existing capacities of the ports

of Aktau and Kuryk in order to increase the capacity and bring the volume of oil transportation up to 20 million tons per year.

The *Trans-Caspian International Transport Route (TITR)*, commonly known as the *Middle Corridor*, is a rail freight corridor linking China and Europe through Kazakhstan, the Caspian Sea, Azerbaijan and Georgia. The route includes a network of 10,000 km of railroads and 10 seaports with cargo throughput capacity of up to 10 million tons of cargo per year. Until recently, 95% of freight traffic between China and the European Union (EU) was carried through the Northern Corridor, that is, Kazakhstan-Russia-Belarus, but after the outbreak of war in Ukraine, the importance of the Northern Corridor has decreased due to geopolitical reasons and security issues. Therefore, the importance of a transport corridor bypassing Russia has increased for both the EU and China. It is no coincidence that the European Bank for Reconstruction and Development (EBRD) [is boosting](#) the financial and operational resilience of Kazakhstan Temir Zholy (KTZ or Kazakhstan Railways) by investing KZT 50 billion (up to US \$100 million) to modernize the middle corridor. The volume of cargo transportation along the TITR route from January through September this year [grew](#) by 2,7 times compared to the same period of 2021, amounting to 1,84 million tons. One of the important events in the last month of the year was that Kazakhstan for the first time began exporting natural uranium via the Trans-Caspian route. The uranium [was sent](#) to the port of Poti through Azerbaijan and Georgia, and from there it was delivered by sea to Canada. Kazakhstan is the world's biggest supplier of uranium and has so far exported its milled uranium to global markets via Russia. In December, Uzbekistan [exported](#) copper concentrate to Europe bypassing Russia for the first time. The product was shipped to Bulgaria along the middle corridor-through Turkmenistan, Azerbaijan, and Georgia.

A Cold Attitude to Putin's Proposal to Create a Gas Union

The Russian president in late November proposed a new strategic partnership to create a [gas union](#) with Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan. Putin's plan is to export Russian natural gas to the Asian market through the territory of Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan. Since the start of the war, Russia has lost its role as a strategic supplier in the European energy market as a result of both sanctions and its own unilateral decisions, and it is doubtful that it will regain this position if peace is achieved. For this reason, Russia is looking for alternative markets and is interested in the construction of new pipelines, as the existing eastward gas transportation infrastructure is insufficient. (*The Power of Siberia* gas pipeline from Russia to China has a maximum capacity of 35 billion cubic meters per year, which is one-fifth of the volume transported to Europe before the war.) Although Kazakhstan did not immediately reject the proposal, Deputy Foreign Minister Roman Vasilenko [said](#) his country is still "evaluating" the proposal – and cites Western sanctions imposed on Russia as the main stumbling block. "Kazakhstan will not allow its territory to be used to circumvent sanctions," Vasilenko was recently quoted as saying. Uzbekistan also took a cool line on Putin's plan. Uzbek Energy Minister Jo'rabek Mirzamahmudov [reiterated](#) that Uzbekistan does not share a border with Russia. "Therefore, negotiations are conducted to deliver it through neighboring Kazakhstan. This would be a technical contract ... not a union. We will never compromise our national interests. Even if we [agree to receive natural gas from Russia], we will proceed via commercial sales contracts. We will not allow any political conditions to be imposed in return."

The European Union is Slipping into Russia's Sphere of Influence

Now let's take a look at the trend in relations between Central Asia and the West during the same period. First of all, it should be noted that after the start of Russia's invasion of Ukraine, the West and especially the EU have

launched more active political interventions in post-Soviet space. Even if the West did not accept the former Soviet geography as Russia's sphere of influence in the past, it respected some of Moscow's interests and red lines here. This can be explained by the example of Ukraine and Georgia: both countries chose the path of Euro-Atlantic integration and were subjected to heavy pressure and direct military interventions from Russia, but they failed to win the support they were expecting from the West. EU leaders did not recognize the EU membership perspective for the two countries, and NATO membership seemed a distant prospect – even though they had signed an association agreement with the EU and got NATO's formal commitment (at the 2008 Bucharest summit) to accept them at some point. The main reason why the two countries, which risked conflict with Russia for the dream of joining Euro-Atlantic structures, were left alone and helpless in military conflicts with Russia was due to Western politicians following Putin's red lines, even if they did not admit it. As a whole, the policy of the West in post-Soviet space did not fundamentally differ from that of the Soviet era because it continued to pursue a Moscow-centered policy. German Social Democratic Party's leader and Federal Chancellor Willy Brandt's (1969-1974) famous formula of *change through rapprochement (Wandel durch Annäherung)* remained in force seemingly even after the Cold War, and European leaders so believed that continental security can only be achieved together with Russia that they did not want to see Putin undermine this security.

The Ukrainian war clearly revealed the failure of this policy. After seeing that close economic cooperation with the increasingly aggressive and imperialist Putin dictatorship did not lead to security and progress, the West began to act in this direction by defining a new strategy at an incredible speed, as if trying to correct and compensate for the mistakes of past years as soon as possible. For example, the radical transformation of Germany's foreign policy, security and

energy policy is amazing. EU leaders have entirely reversed course on former Soviet applicants by voting to promote Ukraine and Moldova to candidate [status](#), and to recognize the EU membership perspective for Georgia.

We can observe that the West is seriously increasing presence not only in the European part of the former USSR, but also in the Central Asia and the South Caucasus subregions. The focus at present is on Kazakhstan due to its rich mineral resources and geostrategic position. In the past months, German Foreign Minister Annalena Baerbock and all high-ranking EU representatives, President of the European Council Charles Michel, President of the European Commission Ursula von der Leyen, High Representative of the European Union for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy Joseph Borrell have visited the region. Kazakhstan and the EU signed a [Memorandum of Understanding](#) between the EU and Kazakhstan on a strategic partnership in the field of raw materials, batteries and renewable hydrogen, as part of von der Leyen's visit to Kazakhstan. On 6 July, the Enhanced Partnership and Cooperation [Agreement](#) between the Republic of Uzbekistan and the European Union was signed in Brussels. The first EU-Central Asia [summit](#), which Astana hosted on 27 October, can be considered the beginning of a new stage in EU-Central Asia relations.

The main areas of mutual interest between the parties are that the EU sees Central Asia (including Azerbaijan) as one of the main alternatives to Russia as a source of raw materials. The countries in the region, especially Kazakhstan, Uzbekistan and Turkmenistan, catch the attention of Europe because of their potential in terms of oil, natural gas, natural uranium, rare earth elements, chemical industry products, and crops. These countries, in turn, need Europe's investment and technologies. European manufacturing companies, which left the Russian market, are also interested in Central Asia, mainly due to the availability of cheap labor force and raw materials in the region, and that of the world's largest consumer market in

terms of population. In November, President of Uzbekistan Shavkat Mirziyoyev and President of Kazakhstan Kassym-Jomart Tokayev paid official visits to France, and both heads of state invited French companies to invest in their country. Thirty-five [documents](#) on various areas of cooperation were signed as part of Tokayev's official visit to France. Accords with a total value of more than 6 billion euros were signed as part of Mirziyoyev's official visit to France.

In October, Kazakhstan hosted a Russia-Central Asia Summit. However, rather than discussing cooperation issues, this event was best remembered by the [complaint](#) from President of Tajikistan Emomali Rahmon who directed an emotional outburst at Putin, asking him not to treat the Central Asian countries as Moscow's subordinates as they were under former Soviet Union. "Vladimir Vladimirovich, want respect. Nothing else. Respect," he added.

Interestingly, Kyrgyzstan in October [cancelled](#) without explanation military exercises on its territory that were due to be held by the Moscow-led CSTO. The move is believed to be related to Russia's response to the September clashes on the Kyrgyzstan-Tajikistan border that killed more than 100 people.

Azerbaijan is one of the markets that Europe has chosen redouble its efforts in search of alternative energy suppliers, and Brussels has received a positive response from Baku. The parties on 18 July signed a new [Memorandum of Understanding on a Strategic Partnership in the Field of Energy](#). The new Memorandum includes a commitment to [deliver](#) at least 20 billion cubic meters of gas to the EU annually by 2027. However, such a strategic partnership in the field of energy with the West is Azerbaijan's traditional policy and does not arise from the geopolitical realities that emerged after the Ukrainian war. Baku does not act as an ally of Moscow, despite the fact that it signed a [Declaration on Allied Interaction between the Republic of Azerbaijan and the Russian Federation](#) just 2 days before the war, and there is a

provision in it that the two countries shall hold the same or similar positions on topical international issues. On the contrary, the government of Azerbaijan has been sending humanitarian aid (including fuel) to Ukraine since the first days of the war, with a truck convoy carrying 45 power transformers and 50 generators being recently [delivered](#) to Ukraine due to the serious damage to its energy infrastructure as a result of Russian missile strikes.

Russia's Problem: Pashinyan; Azerbaijan's Problem: Russian Peacekeepers

Of the independent states of the former Soviet Union, Armenia, until recently, had established the deepest alliance with Russia. Their military alliance has a strict contractual and legal basis. However, the situation began to change after Nikol Pashinyan came to power as a result of a people's revolution that took place in May 2018. Despite the fact that the signed alliance documents remained in force, Russia's policy in the 2020 Karabakh War and in the subsequent period suggests that the Russian-Armenian military alliance has actually become a formality and mutual trust has been lost. Distrust towards Russia in Armenia is manifested not only on a government level, but also in public opinion. The most obvious proof of this is the fact that, despite the heavy defeat and heavy losses in the war, the people once again voted for Pashinyan's Civic Contract Party, not for the pro-Russian opposition in the snap elections. (We at the Baku Research Institute had posted an [article](#) entitled *The Defeated Leader's Triumph* dedicated to the results of these elections.) Pashinyan's [veto](#) of a draft declaration adopted at the Summit of the CSTO with Russian President Putin's participation in Armenia in November, and the [refusal](#) of the Armenian side to participate in a tripartite meeting of the Foreign Ministers of Russia, Azerbaijan, and Armenia in Moscow on 23 December also show that Moscow-Yerevan relations are destined to face turbulence in 2023.

As for Moscow-Baku relations, there are no serious problems at an official level yet; on the contrary, interests coincide in the issue of pressure on Armenia, specifically on Pashinyan's government. But at the same time, both the government and Azerbaijani citizens are unhappy about the activities of the Russian peacekeeping forces in Karabakh, and this can be seen in the action of civil society representatives organized by the state in the Lachin corridor, although this action was not directed against the peacekeepers. It is impossible for the Azerbaijani state television to broadcast a [harsh criticism](#) of Russian peacekeepers and to say that Russia is pursuing [an aggressive policy](#) in Ukraine without the permission of Azerbaijani official circles. (In general, Baku conspicuously has been using the media actively to drum up domestic support for its foreign policy.)

Another issue of concern in Baku relates to the arrival of Russian billionaire Ruben Vardanian, an ethnic Armenian, in Karabakh and his role in the local Armenian separatist administration. During a meeting with the EU delegation on 17 November: President Aliyev [stated](#) that "We are ready to talk about that with Armenians who live in Karabakh, not with those who have been sent from Moscow, like this person named Vardanian who was transferred from Moscow with a very clear agenda." There are serious demand and expectation in Azerbaijani society for the Russian military contingent to leave Karabakh at the end of the 5-year period, and as the year 2025 approaches, this problem will become particularly acute in Azerbaijan-Russia relations.

Conclusions

It has been exactly 100 years since the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics (USSR) came into existence. (The Bolsheviks officially established the Soviet Union on 30 December 1922.) Putin is a leader who attaches great importance to symbolic dates and numerology. If the invasion of Ukraine had gone to Russian plans, and Ukraine were

returned to the Russian sphere of influence, this event and 2022 as a whole would have gone down in history as Putin's triumph. There is no doubt that Ukraine would also join the Union State with Russia and Belarus after the establishment of a Moscow-affiliated puppet regime in Kyiv. Lukashenko [made](#) clear his intention to [suggest](#) that even Kazakhstan, Armenia and other former Soviet republics could join the Union State as well. In short, there was talk of Moscow's readiness to seek complete hegemony over the entire geography of the former USSR on the basis of the Russia-Belarus-Ukraine Union State (regardless of whether or not other former Soviet republics would join it). This was the master plan of Putin when he ordered Russia's attack on Ukraine. According to this plan, after Ukraine's subordination to the will of the Kremlin, other post-Soviet countries would have had no choice, and thus, the consequences of the event (the collapse of the USSR), which Putin called a geopolitical catastrophe in the 100th anniversary year, would have been virtually eliminated. But the plan failed: we can predict that even if the war is not over yet.

With this article, we are not claiming that all post-Soviet countries are pursuing a policy of moving away from Russia. Of course, they are interested in continuing their relations with Russia, a nation with a large economy, natural resources and a seriously weakened, but still sizable military. These countries have close economic and political cooperation arrangements with Russia, with millions of their citizens working in Russia as labor migrants and sending their earnings back home to support their families and relatives, which in turn contribute to social stability in those countries. Russia's influence at the regional and global level is obviously not as considerable as it was on 23 February 2022. Russia's allies in the CIS and partners in the Eurasian Economic Union, with the exception of Belarus whose sovereignty is significantly limited, are trying not to violate Western sanctions against Russia and to adapt to these

restrictions.

Russia's defeat on the Ukrainian front in 2023, even the chance of losing Crimea, does not appear to be impossible, in which case it will not be generally possible to talk about Russia as a major player in global geopolitics.