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Ukraine's Resilience as a Catalyst for the Decline of Russia's Geopolitical Influence and the Reorientation of Foreign Policy in the Post-Soviet Space

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ABSTRACT

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The relevance of this study lies in the radical transformations of the geopolitical landscape of the post-Soviet space, triggered by the prolonged aggression of the Russian Federation against Ukraine. The war has served as a catalyst for the rethinking of foreign policy strategies by numerous former Soviet republics. Against the backdrop of Russia's weakening status as a geopolitical actor, countries in Central Asia, the South Caucasus, and the Eastern Partnership have increasingly pursued diversified foreign policy trajectories. The objective of this research is to identify and systematize key trends in the behavior of post-Soviet states in response to the shifting balance of power in the international system caused by Russia's war against Ukraine. The study employs comparative historical analysis, case study methodology, elements of geopolitical analysis, and inductive reasoning to derive general patterns from empirical observations. Findings indicate a growing tendency among post-Soviet countries to engage in foreign policy maneuvering and reduce their dependence on Russia. Armenia has initiated a strategic rapprochement with the United States, Azerbaijan has expelled Russian peacekeepers from Karabakh, and Kazakhstan has pursued a policy of balancing between Russia, China, and the West. Similar tendencies can be observed in Georgia, Moldova, Kyrgyzstan, and Uzbekistan. For its part, Russia has attempted to compensate for its declining influence through military presence, energy leverage, and control over domestic political elites in neighboring states — tools that are becoming increasingly ineffective. The decline in Russian influence creates favorable conditions for a new configuration of international relations in the region. The study demonstrates that the key factor driving changes in the geopolitical orientation of post-Soviet countries is not only pressure from the Euro-Atlantic community but also the enduring resilience and resistance of Ukraine. This motivates political elites across the region to seek alternative pathways in security, economics, and international cooperation. Future empirical research on individual countries is recommended to explore strategies for further reducing Russian influence and strengthening the sovereignty of post-Soviet states within the international system.

KEYWORDS

post-Soviet space, foreign policy, Euro-Atlantic community, geopolitical transformation, Central Asia, Eastern Partnership, war in Ukraine.



Стійкість України як каталізатор зменшення геополітичного впливу РФ та переорієнтації зовнішньої політики країн пострадянського простору

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СТАТТЯ

АНОТАЦІЯ

Дослідницька

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Актуальність дослідження обумовлена радикальними трансформаціями геополітичного ландшафту пострадянського простору, викликаними тривалою агресією Російської Федерації проти України. Війна стала каталізатором переосмислення зовнішньої політики для багатьох держав, що колись входили до складу СРСР. На тлі ослаблення Росії як геополітичного гравця активізувалися процеси диверсифікації зовнішньополітичного курсу у країнах Центральної Азії, Кавказу, а також серед учасників програми «Східне партнерство». Мета дослідження полягає у виявленні та систематизації основних тенденцій у поведінці пострадянських держав, зумовлених змінами у співвідношенні сил на міжнародній арені внаслідок війни Росії проти України. У дослідженні використано порівняльно-історичний метод, аналіз кейсів окремих держав, елементи геополітичного аналізу та індуктивного підходу для виведення загальних закономірностей на підставі емпіричних спостережень. Встановлено, що країни пострадянського простору демонструють дедалі більшу схильність до зовнішньополітичного маневрування та зниження рівня залежності від Росії. Зокрема, Вірменія започаткувала курс на стратегічне зближення з США, Азербайджан витіснив російських миротворців із Карабаху, а Казахстан проводить активну політику балансування між Росією, Китаєм і Заходом. Подібні процеси простежуються також у Грузії, Молдові, Киргизстані й Узбекистані. Росія, зі свого боку, прагне компенсувати втрачені позиції за рахунок військової присутності, енергетичної залежності країн та впливу на їхні політичні еліти, однак цей арсенал дедалі менше дає очікувані результати. Зниження впливу Росії створює сприятливі умови для формування нової конфігурації міжнародних відносин у регіоні. У дослідженні доведено, що ключову роль у зміні векторів геополітичного розвитку пострадянських держав відіграє не лише тиск з боку євроатлантичного співтовариства, а й послідовна стійкість та опір України. Це стимулює еліти інших держав до пошуку альтернатив у сфері безпеки, економіки та культурної співпраці. У перспективі доцільним є проведення подальших емпіричних досліджень конкретних країн з метою моделювання стратегій зменшення впливу Росії та зміцнення суб'єктності пострадянських держав у системі міжнародних відносин.

КЛЮЧОВІ СЛОВА

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1. Introduction

Russia's long-term adventurous and bloody war against Ukraine, which culminated in the full-scale invasion of 2022, has caused a radical transformation in the international arena. One of the key consequences of this aggression is the gradual curtailment of Russia's geopolitical influence, especially in the post-Soviet space, where the Russian Federation has traditionally acted as a dominant player.

Ukraine's national resilience and resistance, the process of forming a self-sufficient democratic state, unprecedented support from the Euro-Atlantic community, international solidarity, and the irreversibility of democratic transit have become key factors that have changed the regional and global balance of power. The Russian strategy of weakening or destroying Ukrainian statehood had the opposite effect: it strengthened Ukraine's international subjectivity and intensified its integration into the Euro-Atlantic space.

At the same time, there was a significant weakening of the influence of the Russian Federation on political processes in countries that, until recently, were considered by the Kremlin as zones of privileged interests. Despite the fact that the post-Soviet space is politically and historically heterogeneous, there is a clear trend towards a decrease in Russian influence in the key states of the former USSR. The scientific interest is also due to the lack of thorough research on the negative consequences of Russian aggression for the geostrategic position of the Russian Federation in the post-Soviet space compared to its status before 2014. This problem requires a systematic analysis in the context of the formation of a new security architecture in Europe and the post-Soviet region.

2. Literature Review

Certain aspects of strengthening Ukraine's role in the armed conflict, in particular in the context of rapprochement with Euro-Atlantic structures, the formation of national resilience, the growth of defense capabilities, and the development of self-sufficient military-industrial potential, have already become the subject of the author's research in several scientific publications [14; 16]. At the same time, certain conflicts in the post-Soviet space, which the Russian Federation actively uses in its own interests, in particular, the situation in Transnistria [12], Kazakhstan [13; 15], Tajikistan [11], as well as in the South Caucasus [16], including regarding the latest events in Georgia [69] — have already been analyzed by the author of this study within the framework of previous publications.

In the scientific and socio-political discourse, a special place is occupied by the works of such authors as Leonid Kuchma [46], Serhiy Plokhii [59], Yaroslav Hrytsak [38], Mykola Doroshko [25], Taras Kuzio [47], who carried out a thorough analysis of the war of the Russian Federation against Ukraine through the prism of historical continuity. Their research traces a consistent change in the tactics and strategies used by Russia in different historical periods to subjugate Ukraine — from overt military campaigns to political pressure, ideological control, the use of hybrid tools and subversive activities.

Special attention should be paid to the doctoral dissertations of Volodymyr Lipkan and Oleg Kondratenko, which are significant contribution to the formation of a modern scientific approach to the study of the geostrategy of both Ukraine and the Russian Federation. In his work, V. Lipkan carried out a thorough study of the conceptual dimension of Ukraine's geostrategy in the context of the transformation of the international order, proposing new terms, definitions, and models that allow a deeper understanding of the political foundations and tools for the implementation of the national geostrategy [48]. Instead, O. Kondratenko analyzed the theoretical and practical foundations of the geostrategy of the Russian Federation, in particular, its mechanisms of influence on the post-Soviet space and attempts to establish itself as a superpower by initiating conflicts and restraining integration processes on the eastern flank of Europe [43].

Among the latest research, it is worth noting the works of Oleksandr Alekseychenko [3] and Yulia Livinska [49], as well as Pavlo Lysianskyi and Vira Yastreboha [50] and Oleksandr Maiboroda [51], who carried out a comprehensive analysis of the geostrategic methods of influence of the Russian Federation in the post-Soviet space.

Despite the depth of the research and the interdisciplinary nature of the analysis of the geostrategic behavior of the Russian Federation — both in the broad historical context of its confrontation with Ukraine and in the context of a specific phase of the Russian-Ukrainian war — it is worth noting the presence of a scientific gap.

3. Problem Statement

To analyze the political and international processes related to the evolution of the geopolitical influence of the Russian Federation in the post-Soviet space in the context of its armed aggression against Ukraine. The objectives of the study are: firstly, to establish causal relationships between the actions of the Russian Federation against Ukraine and specific political events that indicate the weakening of its influence in certain regions of the post-Soviet space; secondly, the study of specific cases (historical, political, comparative) illustrating the reorientation of the countries of the former USSR to other areas of foreign policy cooperation.

4. Methods and Materials

The study employs a problem-chronological, historical, retrospective, and descriptive methodological framework to analyze the sequence of political events, the stages of formation and implementation of the Russian Federation's geostrategy, and the responses of post-Soviet states to these developments. The geopolitical analysis method facilitated an examination of the Russian Federation's behavior as a geostrategic actor within regional and global contexts, taking into account its aspirations to maintain influence over former Soviet republics and to compete with Euro-Atlantic structures in matters of security, politics, and ideology. The theoretical foundation of the research is grounded in the works of classical thinkers in geopolitics and strategic analysis, whose concepts have laid the groundwork for contemporary understandings of geostrategy. These include K. von Clausewitz, N. Machiavelli, A. Mahan, H. von Moltke, F. Ratzel, A. Toynbee, S. Huntington, K. Haushofer, R. Challen, O. Spengler, as well as later scholars such as G. Kennan, N. Spykman, and H. Mackinder. Their approaches — ranging from the concept of sea power to the analysis of "heartland" territories — provide a methodological framework for interpreting the contemporary decline of the Russian Federation's geostrategic influence as a natural process within an evolving security and civilizational environment.

5. Results and Discussion

The most recent military parade in Beijing, held on September 3, 2025, to commemorate the anniversary of the victory over Japan, astonished the global community with its scale and ostentatious display, surprising even many international experts. In this context, analysts from Chatham House note that China leveraged both the parade and the concurrent Shanghai Cooperation Organization summit to underscore its vision of a new world order and its role as a gravitational center for nations distancing themselves from Western structures [19]. For the Russian Federation, participation in the Beijing parade on September 3, 2025, primarily served as a political opportunity to strengthen not only bilateral relations with China — described by Putin as having reached an "unprecedentedly high level" — but also to intensify contacts with a broader range of countries in the Asia-Pacific region and the Eurasian direction. Particular attention was paid by the Russian side to demonstrating partnership with its allies in the war against Ukraine, notably North Korea, whose leader, Kim Jong Un, also arrived in Beijing ahead of the ceremonial events [35]. The alignment of Russia with China and North Korea, juxtaposed against the parallel deterioration of relations with most post-Soviet states, has emerged as one of the key geopolitical trends shaped by Putin's foreign policy. This policy markedly diverges from the course pursued by Russia during Boris Yeltsin's presidency, when Moscow's positions in the post-Soviet space remained relatively stable and robust, both in military-political and economic dimensions. However, under Putin's leadership, particularly following the onset of overt aggression against Ukraine in 2014 and throughout the Russo-Ukrainian war, a degradation of the Russian Federation's foreign policy has been observed, alongside an active reliance on illegitimate instruments to achieve its objectives [45], whether interpreted as manifestations of Rashism [62] or imperial revanche [73]. Recent trends indicate the collapse of Putin's revanchist policy in the post-Soviet space.

In light of the classification of post-Soviet states and their interactions with Ukraine's key partners within the Euro-Atlantic community, this study adopts a conditional division of countries (excluding the Russian Federation, the aggressor state, and the Baltic states, which are already integrated into the European Union and NATO) into two primary groups. The first comprises the Eastern Partnership countries, including Ukraine, Moldova, Georgia, Armenia, Azerbaijan, and Belarus. This format, initiated by the European Union, aims to foster political and economic convergence, strengthen institutional ties with the EU, and support democratic reforms. The second group consists of the so-called C5+1 format, encompassing five Central Asian states — Kazakhstan, Uzbekistan, Tajikistan, Kyrgyzstan, and

Turkmenistan — which collaborate with the United States on political dialogue, economic development, security, and sustainable regional growth. This approach enables a more precise understanding of the foreign policy orientations of post-Soviet states, accounting for diverse models of engagement with the West.

The rise of Putin's authoritarianism in Russia. In the 1990s and early 2000s, Russia was regarded by most regional countries as a key security and economic partner. The preservation of military-political and economic ties with the majority of post-Soviet states during Yeltsin's era can be seen as a manifestation of the Soviet Union's political legacy. The relatively peaceful dissolution of the USSR, which did not precipitate a large-scale armed conflict or a collapse of international security, has been evaluated in academic circles as a unique historical phenomenon. Notably, Professor Stephen Kotkin of Princeton University, in his work *Armageddon Averted: The Soviet Collapse, 1970–2000*, examines the USSR's disintegration as an event that could have culminated in a global-scale catastrophe but instead occurred “with surprising gentleness” [44]. It should be noted that in the early 2000s, the post-Soviet space remained marked by the dramatic aftermath of the USSR's collapse, with most former Soviet republics having experienced or recently concluded armed conflicts.

Conversely, Vladimir Putin's ascent to power in early 2000 compelled leading analytical centers and political elites of the Euro-Atlantic community to reassess their approaches to relations with the Russian Federation. For instance, as early as March 2000, Michael McFaul — a prominent American expert on the post-Soviet space — in an article in *The Washington Post* highlighted the early signs of authoritarian tendencies in Vladimir Putin's governance style. McFaul argued that Putin's initiatives did not yet signify the end of democracy, but their combination could recreate a system where a dominant “party of power” — the Kremlin — again plays a central role [52].

Michael McFaul proved prescient in his assessments: subsequent events only reinforced the trend toward intensified authoritarian governance in the Russian Federation. In one of his books, Mikhail Khodorkovsky compared Putin's Russia to a resurrected State Committee on the State of Emergency (GKChP), noting: “Literally two months after I, against my will, left Russia, the country changed. More precisely — it became again what it was before perestroika. As if the resurrected GKChP finally decided to play out an alternative historical scenario. The failed attempt to stifle the revolution in Ukraine, the subsequent annexation of Crimea, which in turn provoked the war in Donbas — these events turned everything in Russia upside down. In just a few months, Russia was politically thrown back decades” [42].

The onset of the Russian Federation's revanchist foreign policy in the post-Soviet space. It is worth emphasizing that Russia's political rollback to authoritarian practices was neither accidental nor spontaneous but resulted from a deliberate and consistent foreign policy strategy under Putin, originating with the so-called “Munich Speech” of 2007 [54] and gradually shaping a confrontational course toward the West and the Euro-Atlantic community. One must agree with the assessment of Ukrainian historian Pavlo Hai-Nyzhnyk, who contends that Putin's Munich Speech on February 10, 2007, was not merely a critique of the existing world order but a public challenge to the Western model of global governance. Putin's address at the security conference marked the beginning of a new phase of international confrontation, encompassing not only politico-diplomatic but also ideological, informational, and security dimensions [33; 34].

However, it is pertinent to recall that during the “late Yeltsin” period (1999) and the early stages of Putin's political career, Russia actively sought to maintain and enhance its geopolitical influence beyond its borders — particularly in the Balkans. A striking example was the Kosovo crisis of 1999, during which Russia executed the so-called “dash to Pristina,” attempting to leverage military demonstration, diplomatic pressure, and historical-cultural ties to preserve its influence in the Balkans. In English-language academic and journalistic discourse, this event is known as the *Incident at Pristina Airport*. Some Western experts suggest that the escalation could have provoked a serious international confrontation — potentially even a Third World War [36; 74]. Nevertheless, despite bold statements and displays of resolve, Russia faced significant pressure from the West and the international community. Ultimately, this military-political campaign concluded with the withdrawal of Russian troops from Kosovo in 2003.

It is noteworthy that Russia refrained from direct military intervention in Ukraine's internal political processes during and after the Orange Revolution of 2004. Analyzing the geopolitical implications of the “Orange Revolution,” Ukrainian scholar Felix Rudych in his work *The Geopolitical Dimension of the 2004 Presidential Elections: An Attempt at Political Analysis* [63] aptly observed that, although Russia did not resort to military force during the 2003–2004 events, it was precisely after these revolutionary changes that political relations between Russia and Ukraine began to deteriorate

gradually. Rudych emphasized that, aware of losing influence over the Baltic states, with American troops in Georgia and strained relations with it, and the expansion of American presence in several Central Asian countries, Moscow would strive not to lose its grip on Kyiv.

Between 2004 and 2005, the Russian Federation encountered a series of events in the post-Soviet space that were geopolitically undesirable. As noted by Western researchers, the “color revolutions” in Georgia (2003) and Kyrgyzstan (2005) — termed the “Rose Revolution” and “Tulip Revolution,” respectively — are considered a common phenomenon of regime change in the post-Soviet space, though each had unique characteristics. Contrary to the widespread belief in the decisive role of opposition unity, researchers emphasize that opposition forces in both countries lacked cohesion, with significant tactical disagreements among their leaders post-election. The popular thesis of a decisive Western influence on these events is also refuted. Overestimating the role of external actors hinders an understanding of the true dynamics of internal political processes that led to the ousting of Shevardnadze and Akaev [58].

Regarding Moldova, Moscow actively exploited the Transnistrian conflict, balancing between Chişinău and Tiraspol in settlement efforts. A vivid expression of this scenario was the so-called “Kozak Memorandum” (2003), drafted under Russian initiative, which proposed an asymmetric federation, autonomous status for Transnistria, and Russian military presence in the region during a transitional period — combined with a “5+2” negotiation format. Western experts criticized this memorandum as an attempt by Russia to “hold Moldova hostage to its interests” and an unacceptable concession that threatened Moldova’s sovereignty and constitutional foundations [71]. Paralleling the use of the Transnistrian conflict as a geostrategic tool, Moldova’s economic weakness, corruption, and multiparty political crisis deepened internal divisions against the then pro-Russian government. In 2009, significant mass protests erupted in Chişinău against the pro-Russian communist government of Vladimir Voronin, with the opposition accusing it of electoral fraud and seeking to oust it from power. Although no radical change of government occurred, these events served as a signal to both the West and Moscow of serious polarization within Moldovan society, including regarding the country’s external course [55; 72].

Subsequent years revealed the formation of a new Russian geostrategy, which gradually transformed into an overtly revanchist foreign policy. Accordingly, in 2007, the Munich Security Conference platform was utilized to proclaim Russia’s conceptual claims to a new world order. The following year, at the Bucharest NATO Summit of 2008, the Western community declared that Ukraine and Georgia “will become NATO members,” though no specific Membership Action Plan (MAP) was provided [56]. This signal was interpreted by the Kremlin as a sign of Western weakness and indecision, likely reinforcing Russia’s confidence in the possibility of military intervention in the region. In August 2008, the Russo-Georgian war became an open military conflict, definitively demonstrating Russia’s intentions to restore influence in the post-Soviet space. The conflict resulted in the so-called “Sarkozy Plan” [65] — an agreement on ceasefire and troop withdrawal that de facto entrenched new spheres of Russian control over Georgian territory and the broader South Caucasus.

As noted by experts from the Atlantic Council, the international response to Russia’s military campaign against Georgia in August 2008 was remarkably restrained: Moscow faced no significant negative consequences. On the contrary, EU leaders initiated the ceasefire, effectively serving Russian interests, and shortly thereafter, the new U.S. administration under Barack Obama called for a “Reset” in relations with the Kremlin [24]. Moreover, influenced by Russia’s aggressive actions against Georgia in 2008, the European Union adopted a political decision to establish a unique cooperation format with those former Soviet states aspiring to align with the European community. In this context, the Eastern Partnership was launched in Prague in 2009 — a political initiative institutionalizing interaction between the EU and six countries: Ukraine, Moldova, Georgia, Azerbaijan, Armenia, and Belarus [27].

As experts noted, the aforementioned “Reset” policy failed for several reasons: 1) Divergence of national interests: U.S. expectations of cooperation did not account for the strategically divergent interests of Moscow and Washington; 2) Influence of third actors: Partnerships with other states (notably China and regional actors) complicated bilateral relations; 3) Domestic factors: The implementation of the Reset was undermined by internal risks in both the U.S. and Russia [23]. Paralleling the deterioration of relations with the U.S. and the European community, Russia began actively aligning with China. This process accelerated significantly after Xi Jinping’s rise to power in Beijing in 2012. In a metaphorical sense, this foreign policy course was termed a “pivot to the East” by Daniel Yergin, who stated: “The numbers vividly illustrate the ‘pivot to the East.’ They confirm the construction of the ESPO (Eastern Siberia–Pacific Ocean) oil pipeline, stretching 2,800 miles and costing \$25 billion. In 2018, Russia supplied 1.85 million barrels of oil to Asia, two-thirds of which went to China.

In 2005, only 5% of Russia's oil exports went to China. Today, this figure is nearly 30%, with Russia overtaking Saudi Arabia as China's largest oil supplier. The financial backbone of this trade is secured by an \$80 billion prepayment that China will make to Rosneft for oil supplies over the next 25 years" [76].

The onset of Russian aggression against Ukraine in 2014 and its impact on the foreign policy of post-Soviet states. In 2014, Russia initiated a military operation in Crimea and Donbas, marking the beginning of a new phase of open confrontation with the West and neighboring states in the post-Soviet space. An innovative yet bloody approach in Russia's foreign policy within its revanchist endeavors was the adoption of the so-called "Gerasimov Doctrine." Analyzing this doctrine, renowned scholar Volodymyr Horbulin noted that Russia's vision of hybrid warfare evolved in early 2013, when Chief of the General Staff of the Russian Armed Forces Valery Gerasimov outlined a concept shifting the focus of confrontation methods toward extensive use of political, economic, informational, humanitarian, and other non-military instruments. Horbulin also highlights Russia's adaptive use of combat elements, combined with innovative approaches to informational influence, cyberwarfare, and asymmetric actions, resulting in a distinct type of conflict — hybrid warfare — where the center of gravity shifts toward the information sphere, with military operations reinforcing achieved effects [37].

Despite serious internal challenges, Ukraine's resilience in 2014–2015 convinced leading Western states — primarily the U.S., the UK, Canada, and the EU — of the need to support Ukraine and impose stringent sanctions against Russia. It is worth agreeing with Western experts' view that the use of such influence tools as sanctions, combined with diplomacy, enabled the West to assist Ukraine in countering Russian aggression and sent a clear signal to Moscow that support for fundamental international norms, such as territorial integrity and sovereignty, remains a priority [66].

These circumstances compelled the Kremlin to reorient toward other geopolitical directions, notably the Middle East. Accordingly, in late 2015, Russia launched an open military operation in Syria to support the regime of Bashar al-Assad. Meanwhile, Russia's policy in the post-Soviet space became increasingly contradictory in subsequent years, with the war against Ukraine reshaping the geopolitical orientations of Moscow's traditional allies, prompting several countries to reassess or adjust their foreign policy courses.

For instance, as early as 2014, Kazakh analysts noted the growing influence of China in Central Asia, increasingly displacing Russia from its traditional positions. An intriguing aspect of Western expert literature lies in the significant divergence in assessments of Russia's and China's influence in the region. American analyst Stephen Blank argued that due to its weak position and foreign policy missteps, Russia would continue to lose influence, particularly to China's benefit [1, p. 269]. The foundation of Kazakhstan's intensified economic orientation toward China in the 2010s rested primarily on economic factors. In a speech on November 30, 2015, Nursultan Nazarbayev emphasized: "We live in a new global reality. The world is changing rapidly. This new Address to the Nation of Kazakhstan aims to prevent a production decline, adapt to the new challenges of the global world, where economic growth is the primary condition for overcoming the crisis" [57]. This forecast was subsequently validated. Amid the trade confrontation between the U.S. and China, which intensified in 2018, Kazakhstan increasingly felt China's economic influence [6].

Similar foreign policy steps were taken by other Central Asian countries. For example, under President Shavkat Mirziyoyev, who succeeded Islam Karimov in 2016, Uzbekistan adopted a clear course toward political and economic liberalization, dubbed the "New Uzbekistan" [53]. Within this strategy, the country began actively pursuing regional integration in Central Asia, strengthening cultural, economic, and security ties with Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, and Turkmenistan. Additionally, Uzbek leadership at all levels declared an enhancement of strategic partnership with China. It should be noted, however, that even during Islam Karimov's tenure, numerous disagreements arose between Uzbekistan and the Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO), led by Moscow. Tashkent repeatedly expressed concerns about the effectiveness and actual capacity of the CSTO to ensure regional stability. In 2012, Uzbekistan officially suspended its CSTO membership, citing a desire to avoid excessive Russian influence on its security policy [21].

In this context, it is also important to mention Tajikistan, where, as in Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan, economic motives play a decisive role in alignment with China. Specifically, trade turnover between the Republic of Tajikistan and China grew to approximately \$30 million, with Tajikistan emerging as a notable partner among China's trading counterparts by 2011. The country implements around 50 joint projects across various economic sectors with China's involvement; the geography and nomenclature of goods imported from China expand annually, alongside growing investments and credit programs aimed at infrastructure and project development with China [77]. Furthermore, Kazakhstan, Uzbekistan,

and Tajikistan are active participants in China's Belt and Road Initiative, serving as a tool for economic integration and the transportation of resources, investments, and technologies in the region [75].

Distinct from the aforementioned countries were Turkmenistan and Kyrgyzstan. Turkmenistan, whose status of permanent neutrality was recognized by the United Nations in the mid-1990s [70] and which, under both Saparmurat Niyazov and Gurbanguly Berdimuhamedov, consistently adhered to a policy of non-interference, sought to avoid joining any military-political alliances or foreign policy formats. As for Kyrgyzstan, a country within the CSTO and traditionally under significant Russian influence, it has experienced three revolutions accompanied by complete changes in political leadership over the years and generally pursued a cautious foreign policy. Nevertheless, despite such caution, both states joined the C5+1 engagement format with the U.S. in 2015 [68], formalized by the Samarkand Declaration, marking an unprecedented step toward high-level politico-diplomatic dialogue. This may indicate the Central Asian republics' desire to diversify their foreign policy amid Russia's growing aggressiveness.

Generalizing the regionalization processes in Central Asia, linked to deepened cooperation among the five republics by late 2018 and following the onset of Russian aggression against Ukraine, Western analysts emphasized that successful implementation of this process requires full participation of less influential states — Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, and Turkmenistan, particularly considering the latter's historically cautious and neutral stance, distancing itself from regional blocs. At the same time, successful regionalization in the region is feasible only under conditions of constructive partnership between Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan, regarded as the cornerstones of Central Asian cooperation [40].

However, subsequent political events temporarily reinforced the dependence of certain Central Asian countries on Moscow. For instance, after Nursultan Nazarbayev's resignation as president of Kazakhstan and the transition of power to Kassym-Jomart Tokayev, the country embarked on a course of accelerated liberalization of certain processes. Yet, the events of January 2022, marked by attempted state coups, compelled President Tokayev to seek Putin's assistance to stabilize the situation. In response, a decision was made to deploy CSTO forces to Kazakhstan, including, likely, Russian troops, some of whom may have subsequently participated in the armed aggression against Ukraine [64].

Meanwhile, in Belarus in 2020, during unprecedented protests against the Lukashenko regime, Vladimir Putin's political statement in August of that year about creating a reserve of law enforcement officers [67] to potentially support Lukashenko significantly influenced the course of events. This decision, to some extent, rescued the regime from serious destabilization and a potential change of power. It cannot be ruled out that, as in Kazakhstan in January 2022, this statement increased the personal dependence of the leadership on Russia.

At this juncture, it is also worth noting the South Caucasus, where Azerbaijan's Operation in the fall of 2020, supported by Turkey, posed a significant challenge to Russia. Through military actions, Azerbaijan regained control over most territories of Nagorno-Karabakh, which had remained under Armenian control for decades. On November 10, 2020, a trilateral agreement was signed between Armenia, Azerbaijan, and Russia under Moscow's mediation [20], resulting in a temporary cessation of hostilities. Under the agreement, Russia deployed approximately two thousand peacekeepers to Nagorno-Karabakh to "stabilize the situation," effectively ensuring the preservation of its influence in the region.

However, prior to these military events, Azerbaijan had already undergone a significant foreign policy reorientation toward Turkey — a NATO member. It should be added that relations between Azerbaijan and Turkey have steadily strengthened over recent years, particularly in the realms of security and defense cooperation. Following Azerbaijan's successful actions in the fall of 2020 to restore its territorial integrity in Nagorno-Karabakh, these relations reached a new level of strategic partnership. Effectively, Turkey became Azerbaijan's primary ally and guarantor of security in the region, significantly bolstering Baku's position in the South Caucasus [7].

At the same time, the political leadership of Armenia, particularly Prime Minister Nikol Pashinyan, repeatedly expressed public criticism toward Moscow and the CSTO throughout 2021 for their passivity and non-intervention in the conflict. This situation highlighted growing tensions in relations between Russia and its formal allies, as well as a gradual erosion of trust toward Moscow from official Yerevan [17].

The full-scale invasion of Ukraine by the Russian Federation in February 2022 and its impact on the foreign policy of post-Soviet states. The full-scale invasion of Ukraine by the Russian Federation and the failure of its rapid military campaign radically altered not only the strategic situation in the region but also resulted in significant losses and damages for Russia itself. Particularly notable were the losses in the naval sphere. According to analysts, the Russian Black Sea Fleet experienced a substantial

reduction in combat potential: the destruction of the flagship *Moskva*, numerous attacks by unmanned systems, and the continuous redeployment of ships from Sevastopol indicate a loss of control over the Black Sea waters and a decline in force projection. For instance, as of June 8, 2024, the Ukrainian Armed Forces conducted at least 42 effective strikes on Russian military vessels in the Azov-Black Sea region — both in ports and open waters — using missiles, small surface unmanned vehicles, and unmanned aerial vehicles. Total losses as of June 8, 2024: Destroyed (excluding those damaged and deemed unrepairable): 22 ships and boats; Damaged (including those unrepairable): 20 ships and boats [8].

Overall military losses of the Russian armed forces have also been significant. Analysts note that throughout 2024, the Russian Federation lost approximately 1,400 main battle tanks (MBTs) and over 3,700 infantry fighting vehicles (IFVs) and armored personnel carriers (APCs). Since the beginning of the full-scale invasion, losses in this category of equipment total approximately 14,000 units. Despite these catastrophic figures, the Russian army partially compensates for losses by repairing and modernizing outdated Soviet-era equipment from long-term storage depots. In 2024 alone, over 1,500 MBTs and approximately 2,800 IFVs and APCs were restored or manufactured. However, a significant portion of equipment from storage is in poor condition, complicating its effective use and preventing full compensation for losses. Regarding human losses, as of early January 2025, the International Institute for Strategic Studies (IISS) estimates that at least 172,000 Russian servicemen have been killed, with 611,000 wounded, of which at least 376,000 sustained severe injuries leading to disability. Approximately 235,000 represent wounded who may return to service. Russia's total mobilization resource, including forced mobilization in occupied Donbas, the 2022 mobilization campaign, and recruitment from the penitentiary system, amounts to around 976,000 individuals. Estimates suggest that by the end of 2024, approximately 617,000 personnel were deployed at or near the front, including those recovering from wounds and undergoing training [39].

Sanctions imposed by Euro-Atlantic community countries have also inflicted significant damage on Russia's economy. According to recent studies, restrictions on the export of high technologies, financial sanctions, capital flight, and the loss of Western markets have caused structural degradation of the Russian economy and a reduction in its long-term development prospects. Economic indicators reflect a phenomenon termed "military Keynesianism" in Western economic literature — namely, the artificial stimulation of the economy through state expenditures, particularly in the military sector. Russia has effectively redirected a significant portion of its budget to the defense industry, social transfers, and support for consumer demand, relying on surplus revenues from energy resources, mobilization of reserves, and increased fiscal spending. Real income growth of 8.7% in 2024 and 7.3% in 2023 represents anomalously high figures, especially under conditions of high inflation, sanctions, and limited access to technology. However, this dynamic is not sustainable: it is sustained solely by state financing, which cannot replace a normal investment climate, labor productivity growth, or integration into global markets in the long term. The anticipated decline in real wage growth rates in 2025–2027 — from 7% to 4.1% — indicates the exhaustion of fiscal effects and increasing structural pressure on the economy. In other words, Russia has temporarily "purchased" the loyalty of parts of its population and business community at the expense of future economic opportunities [28].

In addition to material losses, the Russian Federation has suffered significant geopolitical and reputational damage. According to analytical findings from the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, prolonged international isolation has forced Moscow to orient itself toward partnerships primarily with authoritarian regimes — such as China, Iran, North Korea, and Belarus [18]. This reorientation toward a limited circle of politically incompatible states with Western democracy not only reduces Russia's political maneuverability but also deepens its strategic vulnerability. In the long term, this suggests the gradual marginalization of the Russian Federation within a global system of international relations increasingly shaped by democratic alliances and value-oriented coalitions.

The progressive weakening of the Russian Federation, which gained particular momentum following the full-scale invasion of Ukraine, has created a broad field for foreign policy maneuvering for states in the post-Soviet space. A notable marker of the growing foreign policy agency of Central Asian countries was the public statement by Tajikistan's President Emomali Rahmon, delivered during the CIS summit in Astana in October 2022. In his speech, Rahmon openly criticized Russian President Vladimir Putin regarding Moscow's treatment of Central Asian countries. Specifically, he emphasized the unacceptability of a patronizing and inattentive approach to partnerships with regional republics, which, he argued, resembles the Soviet model of center and periphery [60]. Given Moscow's previous engagement with post-Soviet states, this statement is unprecedented. For the first time, a Central Asian head of state openly and directly addressed criticism to Russian leadership, which can be interpreted as a symptom of growing reorientation of foreign policy priorities in the region.

Particular attention deserves the strategic communication between Kazakhstan and China, which gained significant depth following the onset of the full-scale war in Ukraine. During an official visit by Chinese President Xi Jinping to Kazakhstan in September 2022, he made a symbolic statement emphasizing respect for Kazakhstan's sovereignty and territorial integrity [2]. Although no direct security guarantees were formally offered, this signal was perceived as confirmation of China's readiness to act as a political guarantor of foreign policy support for Kazakhstan in the event of regional escalation.

Furthermore, there is accelerated alignment of Central Asian countries with key actors of the Euro-Atlantic community. For instance, the strengthening of ties between Turkey and Central Asian states increasingly occurs within the cultural-political concept of the "Turkic World," implemented notably through the Organization of Turkic States. The introduction of the strategic vision "Turkic World Vision 2040" reflects a desire to institutionalize interstate interaction based on shared historical and linguistic-cultural heritage [41]. Additionally, the European Union officially proclaimed the beginning of a "new era" in relations with Central Asian countries, symbolizing and practically demonstrating Brussels' growing interest in the region. During the Samarkand Summit on April 4, 2025, the EU announced its intention to invest €12 billion in development projects focusing on infrastructure, green energy, digitalization, and human capital in the region's five states. This step is not only part of the broader "Global Gateway" strategy but also a response to the transformation of the geopolitical balance in Eurasia, particularly amid Russia's weakening position [22].

Overall, it is worth agreeing with the conclusions of several Ukrainian experts who thoroughly analyzed regional shifts in Central Asia post-2022, noting that despite increased engagement with BRICS and the aspirations of some regional states to join this bloc, the political elites of Central Asian countries demonstrate a consistent policy of diversifying their foreign policy course. This is manifested in the growing significance of "CA + 1" cooperation formats, particularly with the European Union, Turkey, China, Japan, and the United States, as well as in maintaining a multi-vector approach to strategic security, energy, and infrastructure. Amid Russia's declining influence and intensifying geopolitical competition, Central Asian countries seek to avoid unilateral dependence, balancing among various international actors and gradually strengthening their own agency. This trend — toward foreign policy maneuvering and risk reduction through multilateral diplomacy — has become a defining characteristic of regional transformation in recent years [29; 30].

Moreover, the geopolitical dynamics in the South Caucasus also exhibit noticeable changes, reinforcing the general trend of declining Russian influence and increasing foreign policy independence of regional states. For instance, in 2023, Azerbaijan fully regained control over Karabakh, leading to the withdrawal of Russian peacekeepers from the region, confirming the completion of their mission in light of shifting power balances and local conditions [5]. Parallely, Armenia suspended its participation in the Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO), effectively "freezing" its membership, with growing discussions about a potential future exit due to dissatisfaction with the CSTO's ability to guarantee its security amid Azerbaijani offensives [61]. Meanwhile, the United States intensified its diplomatic influence: during Biden's presidency, the official recognition of the Armenian Genocide underscored historical justice and support for the memory of its victims [9]. Under Trump's administration, another initiative emerged — support for a transport corridor project through Armenian territory, connecting Azerbaijan with the Nakhchivan enclave, which holds significant symbolic and practical importance in the context of regional cooperation and the role of external actors in the South Caucasus [26].

Parallely, diplomatic scandals periodically flared between Baku and Moscow, linked to incidents of persecution of the Azerbaijani diaspora, including arrests, deportations, and deaths of diaspora members during raids in the Sverdlovsk region, prompting a sharp reaction from Azerbaijan and straining relations between the countries [32].

Lastly, in analyzing the situation, it is worth mentioning Georgia and Moldova. These countries, alongside Ukraine, have taken the most significant steps toward geopolitical integration with the Euro-Atlantic community. In the case of Georgia and Moldova, it is appropriate to agree with Ukrainian analysts who have repeatedly emphasized the special significance of these countries within the broader context of Euro-Atlantic integration. Starting in 2022, Ukraine, Georgia, and Moldova coordinated their applications for European Union membership, effectively declaring a joint foreign policy course to distance themselves from Russia's sphere of influence. However, unlike Moldova and Ukraine, Georgia adopted a cautious stance of "strategic silence," seeking to maintain a pragmatic balance in relations with Russia — particularly by refraining from joining sanctions against the RF, despite providing humanitarian support to Ukraine in the war's early months. Granting Georgia candidate status for EU membership on November 8, 2023, was seen as a certain advance by Brussels in recognition of its pro-

European rhetoric, notably from former President Salome Zourabichvili. However, events in 2024 — parliamentary elections, allegations of fraud, mass protests, and the victory of the Georgian Dream party — ultimately revealed a split within Georgia's political class regarding its European course. This led to a decision by EU leaders to suspend Georgia's accession process, announced on June 27, 2024, in Brussels. Consequently, Georgia's foreign policy underwent significant adjustment, shifting toward Russia, which demonstrated its ability to maintain influence over parts of Georgian elites through tools such as economic pressure, political corruption, informational operations, and security blackmail. The temporary success of the Kremlin in restraining Georgia's Euro-integration, as highlighted by Ukrainian researchers, is largely attributable to the sluggish response of the Western community and a strategy of "appeasing" Russia, which traditionally results in negative consequences for small post-Soviet states [4].

Regarding Moldova, as noted by analysts from the German Marshall Fund, following the onset of Russia's full-scale aggression against Ukraine, Moldova strengthened its resolve to "break away from the Russian orbit" and solidify a pro-Western course. Moldovan authorities emphasize that the country has consciously chosen the path of European integration despite hybrid threats and political pressure from Moscow. The Fund's report highlights that "Moldova is increasingly distancing itself from the Kremlin's influence, previously considered stable and systemic," while deepening cooperation with the EU and Western partners, particularly in security, energy, and informational resilience [31].

6. Conclusions

The full-scale invasion of Ukraine by the Russian Federation and the failure of its initial plan for rapid occupation, notably the unsuccessful attempt at a "blitzkrieg," significantly transformed the foreign policy orientations of most post-Soviet states. Except for the Republic of Belarus, which has effectively become Russia's ally, no other country in the region supported Moscow's military actions against Ukraine. Moreover, all other post-Soviet states, despite varying degrees of dependence on the RF, publicly endorsed Ukraine's territorial integrity within its internationally recognized borders. In this context, the Republic of Belarus, under the authoritarian regime of Alexander Lukashenko, which serves as Moscow's leading partner, stands as the sole post-Soviet state effectively participating in the aggression against Ukraine. It should be noted, however, that none of the states within the "Central Asia 5 + 1" format, nor any of the countries historically involved in the Eastern Partnership program, have joined the sanction policies of leading Euro-Atlantic community states against the Russian Federation. This fact reflects the cautious or neutral stance of these countries toward the military conflict, as well as their desire to maintain a balance in relations with both Russia and Western actors within the international system. Nevertheless, subsequent political events and processes indicate that this balance is shifting to the detriment of the RF.

The aforementioned analysis suggests that, against the historical context and political dynamics of Russia's multi-year war against Ukraine, Moscow's influence in the post-Soviet space is undergoing significant weakening. This has increasingly emboldened the leaders of countries in the South Caucasus, Eastern Partnership states, and Central Asia to capitalize on the opportunity. Each of these nations, drawing on its national interests, strategic position, and domestic political situation, is formulating autonomous geopolitical strategies: some are intensifying relations with China, others with the European Union, the United States, or Turkey. However, the very fact of multi-vectorality and diversification of foreign policy reflects an unwillingness to deepen cooperation with Russia in areas where alternatives exist.

Sociocultural or value-based commonality with Russia is currently minimal or absent. The preservation of cooperation with it within Central Asia or Eastern Partnership countries is predominantly based on coercive factors — energy dependence, political pressure, or economic co-optation. Moscow's primary instruments of influence remain military presence (in Belarus, South Ossetia, Abkhazia, Transnistria, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, and Armenia), energy blackmail, and interference in internal politics through maintaining influence over parts of political and economic elites.

Nevertheless, the growing activity of the Euro-Atlantic community, Ukraine's resilience amid the full-scale war, and the strengthening of regional multi-vector discourse contribute to a reevaluation of the foreign policy orientations of post-Soviet states. Russia's weakening due to its own aggression, ongoing since 2014, has become a powerful motivational factor for regional elites to seek alternatives in security, energy, and economic integration.

If these processes are correlated with the key tenets of Russia's strategy of geopolitical revanche, actively promoted by the RF leadership since 2008 (beginning with the aggression against Georgia), the

analysis reveals that Russia not only failed to strengthen its position but also suffered a significant loss of geopolitical influence. For example, pressure on Armenia and attempts to control Azerbaijan did not yield the desired results. Baku relies on a strategic partnership with Turkey, while Armenia has initiated active dialogue with the United States. At the same time, it must be acknowledged that Russia retains considerable military-political and energy potential, particularly in Belarus and states where its military presence serves as a de facto control mechanism.

In view of the above, a promising direction for future scholarly research lies in the systematic study of specific case studies — such as Moldova, Georgia, Kazakhstan, or Armenia — in the context of identifying mechanisms to reduce Russian influence, diversify foreign policy, ensure energy security, and foster more resilient international connections. Such analysis could form the basis for practical recommendations to support the policy of European integration and the resilience of post-Soviet states against the challenges posed by Russian revanche.

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