

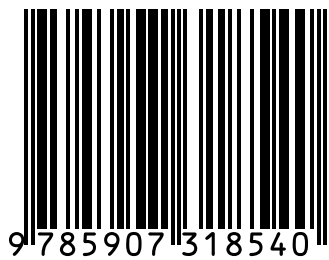


Coming-of-Age Stories: Foreign Policy as Formative Experience for New Eurasian States

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During the first 30 years after the breakup of the Soviet Union, the former Soviet republics were like teenagers who graduated school at a time of historical transformation. Three of them enrolled at EU universities, found employment in the EU, grew old, had no children, and look down on their classmates as enlightened Europeans. Others joined their fathers' businesses, worked hard, made a career, had big families, are respected by their neighbours, but could not hold a conversation with graduates of European universities. The dreamer in school still sings his own songs on the guitar, imagining himself to be a Mayne Reid character. One got involved in tracing his own genealogy. Another wanted to study in Europe too, but was rejected. The kid in the next row is a business owner. The one in the front row made a career in the military. As in most cases when classmates meet 30 years after graduation, they learn that nobody turned out to be a massive success or failure, and everyone thinks that they have something to be proud of. Some are sure that they have made it in life and pity their classmates. These reunions are usually quite lively, and while there are cliques, they are quite different than 30 years ago.

Any comparison of the former Soviet republics is bound to be inaccurate, because they are such wildly disparate countries with hardly a common parameter for comparison. They have different foreign policy goals. What is a blessing to some is a curse to others. Sharing its sovereignty with the United States is a dream come true for Estonia. For Russia, this would be a historical catastrophe. At best, they can be classified according to approximate parameters, such as the growth of per capita GDP over the past 30 years, population growth/decline, and involvement in international alliances and armed conflicts.

Growth of per capita GDP and population as criteria of success

The rapid growth of per capita GDP in Moldova and the three Baltic states can be explained by the fact that the World Bank's review starts in 1995. By that time, the former Soviet states had managed to slow the decline caused by the breakup of the Soviet Union. Moldova is a perfect example of the low baseline effect: its per capita GDP is approximately one-third of Lithuania's. The three Baltic states were obviously very successful economically: only they jumped from the middle-income to the high-income group in 1995. The success of the other post-Soviet states was relatively modest, although Russia, Belarus, Kazakhstan, Armenia, Uzbekistan, Turkmenistan and, to a degree,

TABLE 1. NEW EURASIAN STATES, 1990–2020

Country	Growth of per capita GDP, %*	Population growth, %*	Number of defence pacts and/or non-aggression treaties**	Number of armed conflicts per country***	Country classification by income level, World Bank, 2020
Russia	251.4	-2.6	25	14	Upper middle income
Ukraine	78.7	-14.9	8	8	Lower middle income
Belarus	286.3	-7.6	7	0	Upper middle income
Moldova	308.3****	-11.8	4	2	Upper middle income
Lithuania	554.7****	-24.4	7	5	High income
Latvia	482.1****	-28.6	8	5	High income
Estonia	486.7****	-15.1	6	6	High income
Azerbaijan	169.8	41.2	4	5	Upper middle income
Armenia	379.1	-16.2	4	7	Upper middle income
Georgia	159.5	-22.6	5	5	Upper middle income
Kazakhstan	223.3	14.7	4	1	Upper middle income
Kyrgyzstan	95.1	58.3	5	1	Lower middle income
Tajikistan	46.1	80.5	5	2	Lower middle income
Uzbekistan	196.1	66.9	9	2	Lower middle income
Turkmenistan	198.1*****	63.7	4	0	Upper middle income

* World Bank data, GDP, PPP (current international \$)

** The Correlates of War project, 1990-2012

*** Uppsala University, Yearly Datasets covering 1946-2020 UCDP/PRIO Armed Conflict Dataset version 21.1.

**** The first year for which the World Bank provided the data is 1995

***** The 2019 figure, because the data for 2020 is not available

Azerbaijan were more successful economically during the past 30 years as a whole. Ukraine, Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan failed to double their per capita GDP during the past 30 years. At the same time, the populations of Tajikistan and Kyrgyzstan are growing rapidly, whereas Ukraine is losing population almost as rapidly as Armenia.

Economic success is accompanied in some countries by population decline. Russia, Belarus, Moldova, the three Baltic states, Armenia and Georgia are reporting rising per capita GDP because the pie is divided among a declining number of people, though they have different views on this problem.

Demography has been a major political priority in Russia for many years. Our political class believes that population decline can prevent Russia from maintaining its great power status. Armenia is also concerned about demographic decline, which is substantial although not at record high levels for the post-Soviet space. But Armenia lacks resources for stimulating population growth, and its simple economy is a reason why Armenians are looking for employment abroad. In addition, Armenia has not yet decided on its place in the world: Yerevan's belief in its military superiority over its old neighbour and rival was destroyed by the 2020 Karabakh war, and it is still trying to formulate a new strategy.

Some countries are not concerned about their shrinking populations. Latvia, which has lost more than 25 percent of its population, more than any other post-Soviet state, does not view it as a problem. Georgia has lost over 20 percent, and while the issue is a fixation in conservative circles, the authorities have not done anything to halt the decline. The logic of these countries is simple: people are leaving in search of a better life. The process has been simplified by the EU membership of Lithuania, Latvia and Estonia and Georgia's association agreement with the EU. From the liberal viewpoint, leaving one's country is the free choice of each individual, and people should be glad to have it. On the other hand, these countries' foreign policy is based on the expectation of US and NATO security guarantees. The Baltic states should feel at least a little more confident relying on them than Georgia.

Another interesting and underestimated factor is rapid population growth in the countries that are growing stronger economically as well: Uzbekistan, Turkmenistan, Azerbaijan and Kazakhstan. This growth is mostly based on access to natural resources, and although their per capita GDP has doubled or even tripled over the past 30 years, their economic

health is not ideal. But a growing economy coupled with population growth allows their political class to look to the future with confidence, unlike in the countries in a demographic hole.

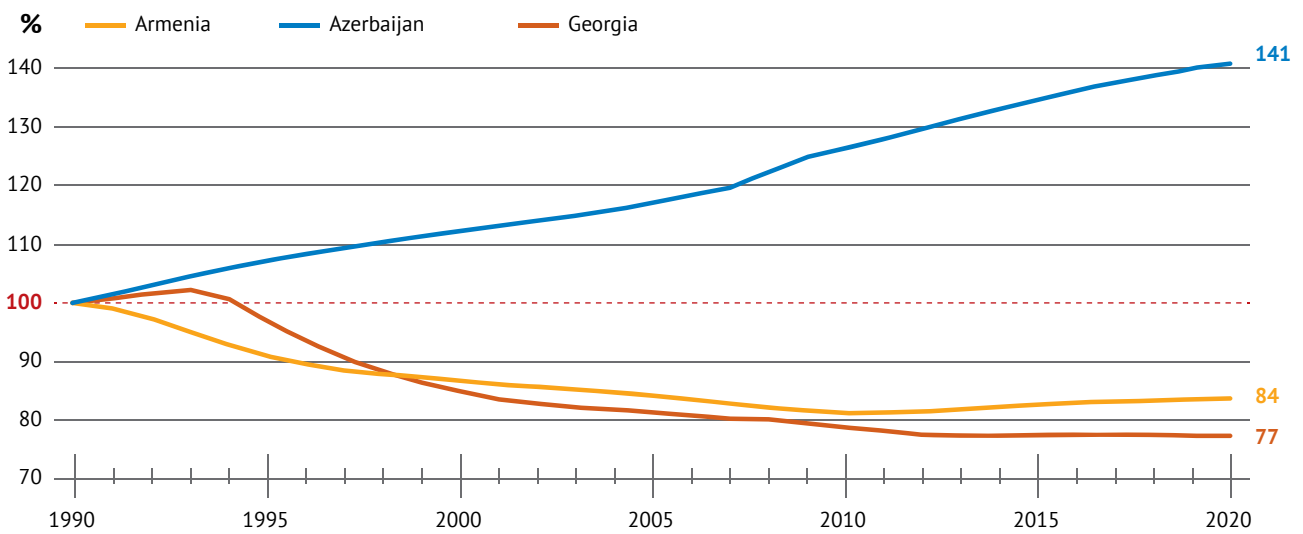
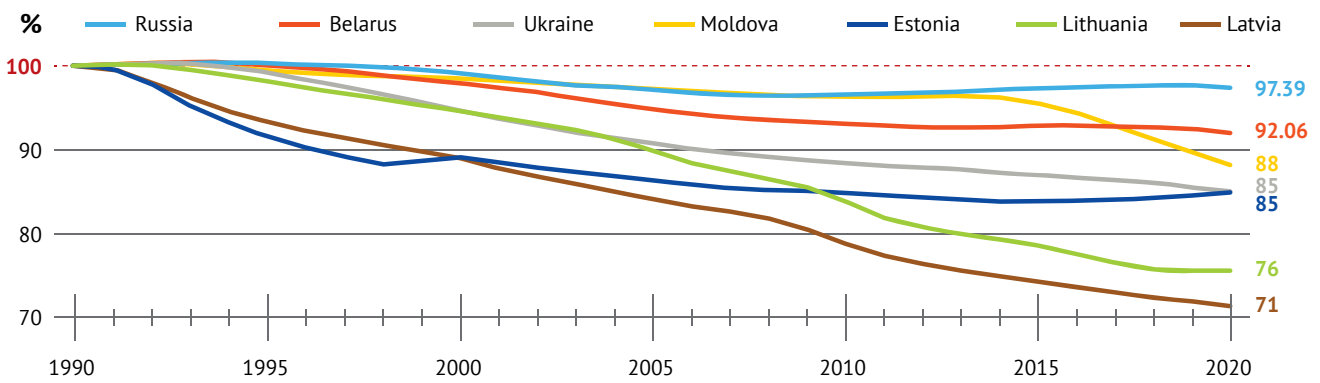
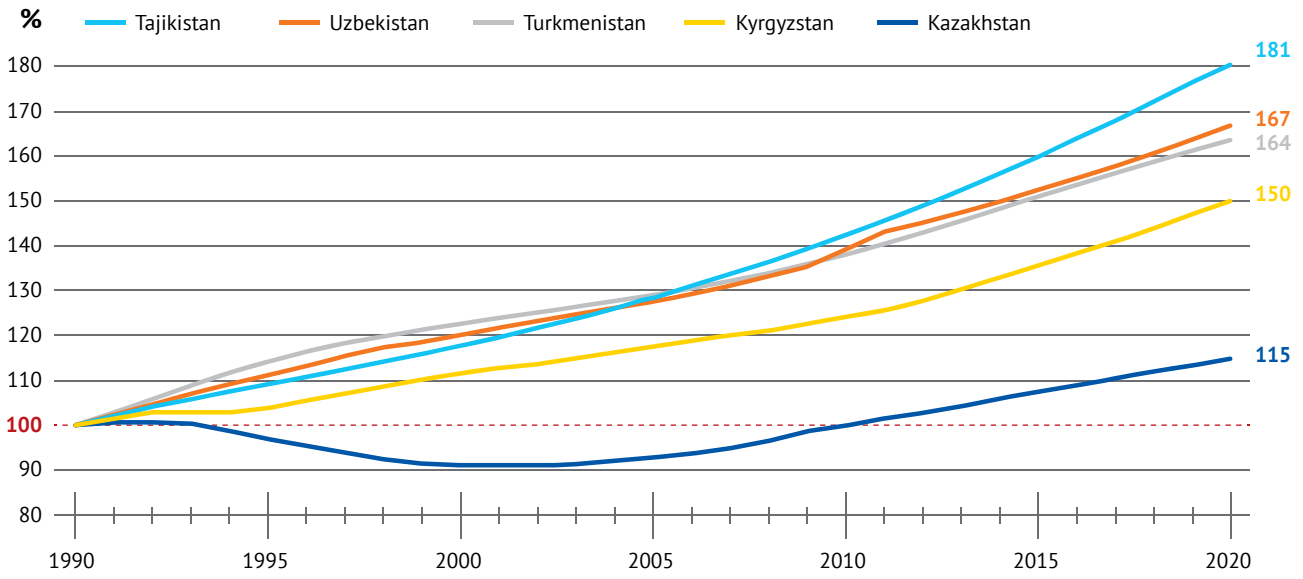
A web of international contacts and military conflicts

How do the former republics of the USSR manage their international ties? The majority of them avoid armed conflict, though some have enjoyed 30 years of absolute peace, while a portion participated only in US military operations somewhere on the other side of the Eurasian continent. They are not overly eager to join alliances: some have only four defence/nonaggression agreements apiece, and that includes OSCE or CIS membership. As for the former Soviet countries' foreign policies, one must be aware that the majority of them pursue a far from active foreign policy.

Let's go back to the metaphor of a graduating class to describe the post-Soviet space. It includes powerful patriarchs with rising incomes and big families: Azerbaijan, Kazakhstan, Uzbekistan, and Turkmenistan. Their foreign policies are mostly conservative and cautious, formulated more in response to external challenges than anything else. People in this position in society are said to be "uninterested in politics." One exception, of course, is Azerbaijan, for which conflict with a neighbour was a strong motivating factor and source of tensions throughout these three decades.

There are the graduates of European universities, who are childless and (by European standards) poor, but their childhood friends still regard them as well-off (especially if they don't have to admit the size of European heating bills in winter). These are Latvia, Lithuania, and Estonia. Georgia and Moldova would like to join them. They were not accepted into any European universities, but hopefully their children will be. For them, the main thing for now is to be able to blend in with European company, which is the aim of their foreign policy. The group also includes Ukraine, the class dreamer, who imagines a special heroic fate for himself, for which he is prepared to sacrifice everyday needs and concerns. But if inventing a heroic fate is usually a preoccupation

POPULATION CHANGE IN THE FORMER SOVIET REPUBLICS, 1990-2020. (1990 = 100%)



Source: The World Bank

of youth to be left behind as we mature (a case in point is Georgia), Ukraine is moving in the opposite direction and succumbing even more to these tendencies.

Tajikistan and Kyrgyzstan are your average poor families. There are a lot of children, but jobs are few and far between. Yet, things could be even worse, you could be “lower middle income”. But here foreign policy is far from the main concern either. To be more precise, it is subordinated to the need to provide for the kids.

There is, however, **one** exception, Russia. It is definitely an international careerist – not the most successful in the world compared with the United States and China, as classmates are quick to remind, but still one that has managed to achieve a lot in international affairs. Russia is the only country among the former Soviet republics which sees itself as a great power with global influence and is ready to fight to maintain this position. It has the most extensive network of alliances and has participated the most in armed conflicts of any single post-Soviet country. Russia is the classmate who has made politics a profession. The **second** exception is Armenia, which hardly fits into any post-Soviet classification.

But what about their inheritance?

No matter how much our graduates lament their lot in life, it must be admitted that they are comparatively well-off. If we continue with this analogy, all of them have graduated from a good Moscow school and started leading an independent life during a specific time in history, when the very existence of states was supported, for the first time in centuries, by international law and the nuclear balance maintained by the major powers.

The post-war era is remarkable in that the conquest of one state by another was effectively banned. Even if you are unable to support a working state apparatus within your borders (there are many such countries in the world, and even the most successful states, such as Kazakhstan, are not invulnerable to threats), your right to exist as a sovereign state cannot be legitimately challenged by foreign powers. Robert Jackson defines this as “negative sovereignty” as distinct from “positive sovereignty” by which he means being able to exercise power, however unevenly, on your own territory (*Jackson, 1990*). In this sense, our graduates all benefited from a certain safety net. Not all of them have managed to preserve intact the property they inherited from their parent, the Soviet Union. But all have survived.

Sustainable management? Comparing living standards

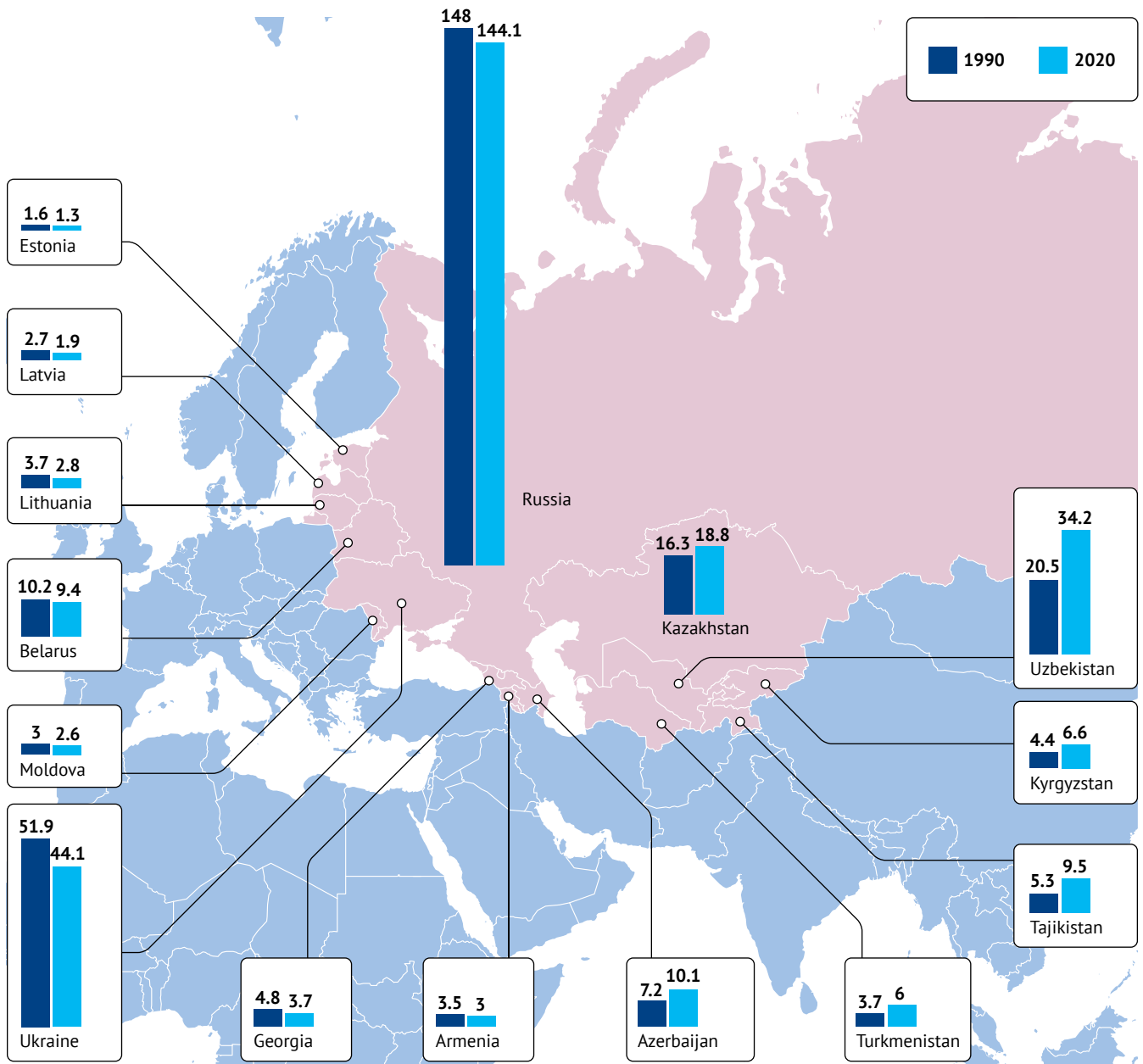
So, what did they inherit from the Soviet Union? Quite a few things, if not evenly distributed.

What does this mean *exactly*? Russia inherited the most important thing, nuclear weapons, and the highest international status as a permanent member of the UN Security Council that goes with them. Some even thought that Russia had finished off the Soviet Union and could keep its assets without the accompanying obligations to members of the family/class. Others believed that Russia should not have kept even the assets but rather should have become “a normal European country” (as if there were in nature even a single country of this sort). Whatever the case, the qualitatively different capabilities possessed by Russia and the rest of the former USSR republics have been the reality for post-Soviet states since the cradle, or more exactly since the “graduation party.” It permeates their life, influences their foreign policies, and creates a dilemma for them: to enter an alliance with Russia or enlist foreign forces against it. It has turned certain former Soviet republics into an arena of global geopolitical confrontation, thereby elevating their importance in international politics, while simultaneously dooming them to suffer.

Another type of inequality stems from the availability of resources. The USSR’s natural wealth was split between ethnic territories, with some of them having a great deal, and others nothing or next to nothing. The resource-rich countries – Russia, Kazakhstan, Azerbaijan, Turkmenistan, Uzbekistan, and Ukraine – got a head start in the form of revenues from oil, gas, coal and metal exports. But rarely was this head start translated into the state’s wealth and power. Russia went a long way towards imposing reliable state control over exporters of raw materials. Azerbaijan and Turkmenistan have kept them under state control from the start. In Ukraine, export revenues have helped to nurture several omnipotent oligarchic groups that have survived numerous governments and two coups and remain the key players in domestic politics to this day.

While the simple economic model based on exporting resources or low value-added products was killing the Soviet Union’s technological achievements and entrenching the economic weakness of all post-Soviet countries, the only alternative to it in the post-Soviet space was an economy of labour migration. Ukraine, however, was able to combine both models.

POPULATION CHANGE IN THE FORMER SOVIET REPUBLICS, 1990–2020, (million people)



Source: The World Bank

Exporting raw materials helped to stabilise the elites and encouraged long-term planning. Most importantly, however, it supported incomes that made it possible to implement existing plans. It is no accident that all exporters of raw materials from among the former republics of the USSR have been increasingly active, in the last decade, in channelling export revenues into the development of other industries. In the past, these incomes helped to preserve more or less effective

government machines, and now these machines either instinctively or consciously are seeking ways to ensure their long-term stability, including by diversifying their countries' economies.

Raw material exports have also defined foreign policy trends by encouraging stronger relations with importers and transit states. Pipeline routes became a central issue in post-Soviet geopolitics, and given the centrality of Nord Stream 2 today, little has changed.

As for the evenly distributed heritage, it includes government bureaucracy and nationalism. The Soviet Union created across the country a universal government administration, something that the Russian Empire failed to do before it. To be sure, this government administration was closely intertwined with the Communist Party's rule and the functions of the economic and government bureaucracies were not clearly delineated. This is why it took so many years to create government systems in their place. Of course, though the external forms were identical, a district party committee in Estonia was a far cry from its counterpart in Georgia (*Derluquian 2010: 451*). But the external forms, too, dictated a certain way of doing business. In this sense, all post-Soviet countries inherited from the USSR administrative structures that are accustomed to managing certain territories and people who are used to certain bureaucratic procedures.

It was first remarked long ago that the Soviet Union mass-produced nations and nationalisms, which emerged as a necessary administrative tool in a heterogeneous country (*Martin 2001*). Moreover, Soviet nationalism, which was reflected both in bureaucratic procedures (the nationality column in passports) and social theory (Academician Yulian Bromley's "ethnos"), closely associated ethnicity, as an inborn characteristic, with a territory and the administrative power of that territory. This could be both a positive and a negative factor for our post-Soviet "graduates."

The upside was that at the moment of the USSR's collapse the bureaucracies in the newly independent states had a fairly good understanding of what peoples they were ruling, the territories over which they had power, and what procedures were available for exercising said power. It was logical that the former Soviet administrators (the *nomenklatura*) either retained power following the collapse of the USSR, or regained it after a brief interval: there were just no other people capable of running a country, for better or for worse. In many instances,

Soviet foreign ministry-trained officials became diplomats in newly independent states. Some examples are the Georgian leader Eduard Shevardnadze, Ukrainian Foreign Minister Boris Tarasyuk, and Grigol Vashadze in Georgia. We don't even mention the fact that the Ukrainian and Byelorussian Soviet Socialist Republics were members of the United Nations. The republics of the former Soviet Union were much better prepared for an independent existence than the majority of European colonies in different parts of the world, and that is why graduation is a better metaphor than birth.

The downside was that the Soviet notion of ethnicity, as embodied, let us repeat, in government institutions, was resistant to complexity or reasonable compromise. The land is "only our land." The titular nation's language is sacred and only it should be the state language. Every nation should have a history of struggling for national liberation and its own myth of overcoming colonial dependence. This has engendered a chain of bloody and often senseless wars, which continue to this day and form, along with pipelines, the post-Soviet geopolitics of Eurasia.

“Europeans:” A dream come true

Russia often underestimates to what extent Latvia, Lithuania and Estonia's foreign policy has been successful in terms of the balance struck between the goals set and the results achieved.

The three countries joined NATO and the European Union in 2004. They not only joined these associations, but, to a large extent, influenced their interpretation of World War II in Europe as a "clash of two totalitarian regimes" which was enshrined in European Parliament resolutions and directly aimed at excluding Russia from the European security system. In addition, the example of the three Baltic states gave rise to illusions in NATO and other post-Soviet countries, namely, Ukraine and Georgia, that continued NATO expansion within the borders of the former Soviet Union would be just as quick and problem-free. It appears that this ease convinced the United States to make NATO openness to new members a cornerstone of its foreign policy. Finally, once members of the EU and NATO, the Baltic countries have become self-styled "experts on Russia and the post-Soviet space" thus securing influence over Eastern policy in both associations.

However, a dream come true does not always mean happiness. The three countries' eagerness to join the West has given rise to a number of problems. Relations with Russia turned sour and have stayed that way for a long time now. In the 1990s, Moscow put up with its dependence on transit through the Baltic ports and began to build its own transport infrastructure in the Baltic Sea in the 2000s, which led to a decline in the flow of goods through the ports of Lithuania, Latvia and Estonia. After Taiwan opened a mission in Lithuania, the latter started having problems with China. In an effort to leave Russia out of the European security system, the three countries are isolating themselves from Greater Eurasia: overland transit from China to Europe is on the rise, but Latvia and Estonia, not to mention Lithuania, are unlikely be able to benefit from it.

EU membership has driven out-migration from the three countries. Latvia and Lithuania rank first and second, respectively, among the former Soviet republics in terms of out-migration. They are now free from the influence of Moscow, but it remains unclear how many people are actually enjoying this achievement.

In addition, the security situation started changing in the wake of NATO expansion. At some point, the Alliance was expanding almost unstopably, and its new members received significant advantages in the form of protection offered by the most powerful military alliance, coming at almost no cost to them (*Wohlforth, Zubok 2017*). For example, out of the three Baltic countries, only Estonia still meets the NATO defence spending benchmark (2 percent of GDP). Russia, which is strongly opposed to NATO expansion, had no choice but to drive these costs up. In an absurd turn of events, NATO is expanding to protect itself against threats caused by this expansion. Moreover, 17 years ago, no one in Brussels or Washington was thinking that security guarantees for new NATO members would become a practical concern. But the Ukraine crisis has shown that doubts may arise here as well, otherwise why, in addition to Article 5 of the Charter, would "old" NATO members be deploying their troops to the Baltic countries? On the one hand, this is a show of resolve and, on the other hand, evidence that legal guarantees do not seem reliable enough. It is likely that politicians in the three countries derive benefits from being self-styled "frontline" states. Whether this suits their voters is still an open question.

Finally, Estonia and Latvia fulfilled their Euro-Atlantic dream by denying citizenship to their Russian residents and excluding them from political participation. The moral costs are clear, but there is another aspect to it. It turns out, in order to become part of the community of liberal democracies that respect the interests of minorities, one has to

violate some of this community's fundamental principles. If the policy for joining NATO and the EU were based on values (at least that's what they told us), this policy had the effect of eroding those very values, with the old geopolitics peeking through the holes. But if that's the entire point, then why sacrifice relations with Russia?

“Aspirants:” A tough lesson

When Georgia and Ukraine applied for NATO membership in the spring of 2008, they became known as aspirants. The world appeared to be very straightforward. Here's a bus to Brussels with Baltic passengers riding along, happily waving. The fare is cheap: all you need to do is recognise the United States as global hegemon. There are still standards to comply with, but help is on the way and compliance can be achieved as long as the driver has the political will. Then, a road to the EU opens with its open labour market, subsidies and other trappings. So what if Russia is against that? It was not enthusiastic about NATO's expansion before, either, but it could do nothing about it.

As it turned out, the hegemon's political will was not enough. Georgia doubled down by attacking South Ossetia. Had Russia failed to intervene, that would have meant that Moscow's opinion on European security issues is negligible, which would be a strong argument against the position of the NATO members who opposed Ukraine and Georgia joining the Alliance. But that didn't happen. Since then, Georgia has been stuck in the position of “aspirant,” that is a country eager to join the EU and NATO, but still standing at the doorstep.

It's not that Georgia hasn't learned to benefit from this situation. Without legal guarantees from NATO, it can nevertheless count on political support. Both the United States and the EU unreservedly share Georgia's position on Abkhazia and South Ossetia, although in the immediate aftermath of the August war the EU's position was slightly more balanced. The US military activities in Georgia are essentially unrestricted, except for certain supply-related limitations. Georgian politicians have entangled the West in the web of their domestic affairs where not a single conflict between the ruling party and the opposition is resolved without the intervention of European or American diplomats. If Georgian nationalism's goal was to distance itself from Russia, it has been achieved. It is difficult to imagine Georgia as a member of Russian economic, political or military

alliances for decades to come. At the same time, Georgia coexists with Russia as calmly as possible given its claims on Abkhazia and South Ossetia and in the absence of diplomatic relations.

Ukraine failed to achieve stable relations with Russia. Unlike in Georgia, where support for NATO membership is solid, a substantial majority of Ukrainian society has never supported NATO membership. Before 2014, Ukraine successfully navigated between Russia and the West. Even Viktor Yushchenko's efforts failed to throw its foreign policy off balance, particularly when the president of Ukraine made a big show of visiting Tbilisi, which had just suffered a devastating defeat from Russia, and the Donetsk and Lugansk regional councils were collecting humanitarian aid for South Ossetia.

However, the Ukrainian balance was based on an unreliable foundation. The country chronically lagged behind its neighbours in terms of economic performance. Among former Soviet republics, only Tajikistan fared worse in terms of per capita GDP growth over 30 years. In fact, the Ukrainian elite was busy burning through the Soviet inheritance for its personal benefit. It suffered from a lack of legitimacy and was unable to integrate a heterogeneous country. Hence, the resort to radical anti-Russian Ukrainian nationalism which, to varying degrees, was fueled by all leaders of independent Ukraine without exception.

Ukraine's foreign policy was an extension of its domestic policy. The liberal-nationalist coalition, which came to power first in 2005 and then in 2014, saw institutional convergence with the West as a way to close the deep rift in society by suppressing dissent. Latvia and Estonia overcame a similar predicament by denying citizenship to their Russian residents. Even though for the past eight years Ukraine has been dominated by anti-Russian nationalism, which does not recognise the basic right of Russian citizens to teach their children in their native language, Kiev is unable to follow in Latvia's footsteps. The war has become a tool for suppressing dissent: as long as skirmishes in Donbass continue, the authorities can easily keep emotions about the "internal enemy" running high, turn a blind eye to the terror unleashed by radicals against Russian activists and invent new ways to deprive ethnic Russians of political representation. While after 2008 Georgia could simply admit that there was no military solution for it in Abkhazia and South Ossetia, from the point of view of Kiev today, recognising this is tantamount to a defeat.

The war in Donbass was a disaster for Ukraine and a triumph for Ukrainian nationalism. None of Ukraine's European or American friends

is asking it questions about the glorification of Nazi collaborators or the “indigenous peoples law” which borders on racism. The United States eagerly accepts Ukraine as it is, while Germany and France do so with carefully concealed disgust. To the extent that the West imposes a certain model of foreign policy on Kiev, Kiev also imposes its agenda on the West. And now the European Union, which uses every opportunity to spout happy talk about inclusiveness and the rights of minorities, cannot say the same about the conflict in Donbass or about Ukrainian legislation on language or education.

Just like Ukraine and Georgia, Moldova signed an association agreement with the EU. Not long ago, its president Maia Sandu stated that the country intended to join the EU. Chisinau has so far avoided getting overexcited and applying for NATO membership, but there is no end to the drama in Moldovan-Romanian relations. Thirty years ago, the prospect of unification of these two countries was one of the causes behind the Transnistrian conflict. Since then, the Romanian issue has faithfully served Moldova’s foreign policy, relying on Romania in the EU and NATO bodies and receiving Romania’s support when needed. Romanian passports make it easier for Moldovan citizens to travel for work in the EU, which, alongside labour migration to Russia, helps keep the country’s economy afloat. The threat of Romanianisation works as an argument for Russia whenever Chisinau needs to get something from Moscow.

Sometimes Moldovan politicians have to pay a high price for navigating between Russia and the West, especially when they are trying to trick both at the same time. In June 2019, to everyone’s surprise, Russia, the United States and the EU demanded collectively that the Democratic Party of Moldova step down. Just like key state bodies of power, it was controlled by Vladimir Plahotniuc, the country’s richest entrepreneur. Plahotniuc himself left the country in a hurry. Prior to this, the entrepreneur, facing several criminal cases in Russia, published articles in American and European media calling for protecting Moldova’s European choice in the face of Russia’s expansion.

Compared to Ukraine and Georgia, Moldova pursues a restrained policy towards breakaway Transnistria. There have been no recurrences of armed confrontation since 1992. This is partly due to the fact that the country is too weak to achieve a military triumph. But settling the conflict is impossible, because it would mean making a final choice in favour of building an independent state based on Moldovan rather than Romanian identity. So far, Moldovan politicians find it more beneficial to maintain uncertainty.

The “solid earners:” How solid are they?

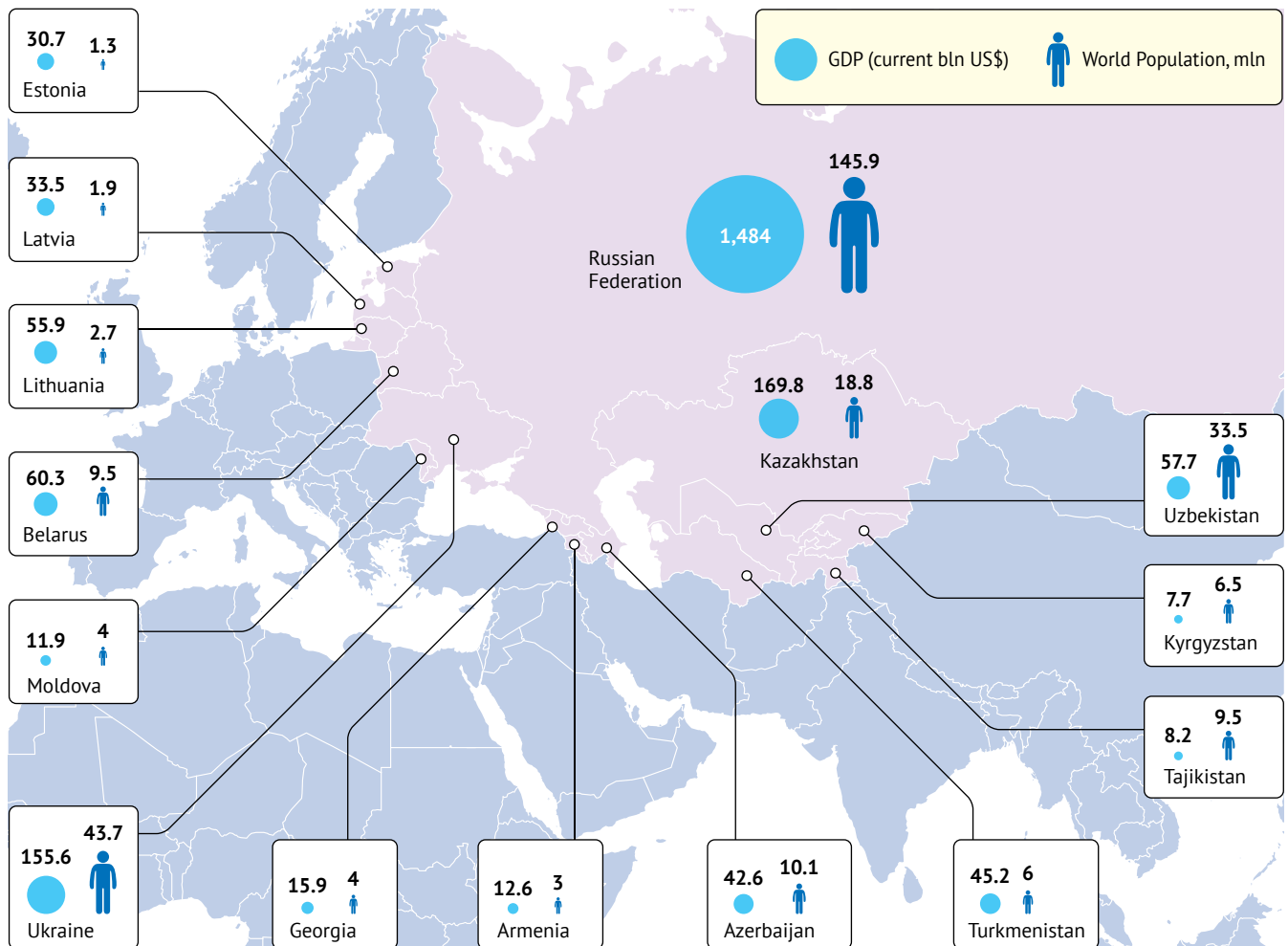
Azerbaijan, Belarus, Kazakhstan, Turkmenistan, and Uzbekistan have little in common in terms of participation in alliances. Belarus is Russia’s closest ally; Kazakhstan is a member of the CSTO and the EAEU; Azerbaijan, Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan are neutral states. Turkmenistan is also one of the world’s most isolated countries. They do not overlap much in terms of the hydrocarbons or other commodities they export either: Belarus is one of the world’s largest exporters of mineral fertilisers, but this is not its main economic advantage.

These countries are similar in terms of foreign policy: not just pragmatic (even Ukraine is pragmatic in its way) but fully subordinated to the interests of the state. All five countries have consolidated political elites, closely connected with the government bureaucracy. Actually, the state machine *is* the elite. If we take Ukraine or Moldova – both eloquent examples – one of the elite groups grabs power and then constructs its foreign policy with the goal of holding onto it. In contrast, the solid earners have long since settled the question of who holds power. The state long ago became the only form by which local elites organise themselves, and their interests *are* the interests of the state. Opposition groups immediately get shut out of the elite.

In all those countries, the local elite has become consolidated through state control of key sectors of the economy. As a result, their foreign policy sometimes appears to be focused on economic interests such as access to foreign markets and ensuring the best conditions for their goods in those markets. Azerbaijan was prepared to take risky action against Russia (opening a representative office of the Chechen Republic of Ichkeria in the 1990s) as it fought to diversify export routes for its hydrocarbons. Kazakhstan, landlocked in the heart of the continent, is interested in Eurasian integration. After Alexander Lukashenko became president, the local political elite’s legitimacy became linked with its ability to maintain employment in industry, and so Belarus opted to form the Union State with Russia in order to gain access to the Russian market.

Such solid earners avoid any ideology in their foreign policy, except in cases where it reflects their most long-term interests. For example, Lev Gumilyov’s fiction about the “Great Steppe” easily fit Kazakhstan’s foreign policy (and domestic policy, too, for that matter – given its large Russian

SOCIO-ECONOMIC CAPACITY OF FORMER SOVIET REPUBLICS



Sources: UN, The World Bank

community), although part of the Kazakh elite is drifting towards the ideology of Kazakh nationalism, which is much more conflict-prone.

The ideological formulas of these solid earners sometimes exhibit a truly striking degree of ambivalence. The “one nation, two states” formula advanced by Heydar Aliyev for Azerbaijan’s relations with Turkey makes it possible to highlight the ethnic unity or differentiate between the two states as needed.

There is a reason why none of the solid earners denies the Soviet experience, as Ukraine, Georgia or the Baltic countries do, without making it their guiding star either. They invoke the common Soviet past whenever necessary – which is usually the case when negotiating with Russia.

However, when their current domestic policy goals of consolidating the nation require criticising Soviet power, a rant is sure to follow. Lukashenko publicly referred to the Great Patriotic War as “not our war.” One can easily imagine the stir this would have created in Russia had Kiev said that. But with Minsk, they put up with it.

It is curious that almost all the solid earners maintain nationalism under state control. Nationalists are not an independent political force, but an ideological extension of the state machine. The Baltic countries, Georgia and Ukraine are telling the world a story of a nation that has always fought for independence and finally won. In this narrative, the state is a tool to achieve the nation’s goals such as reuniting with Europe and/or finally breaking with the “empire.” Even a coup d’état can be staged on behalf of the nation, if necessary – as happened twice in Ukraine. The solid earners are different. In their case, the state absorbs the nation and acts as the only, or at least the most authoritative, voice of the nation. In Kazakhstan, they artificially invented a nation of Kazakhstanis, which includes all nationals regardless of their native language or cultural differences. Azerbaijan has done a great job of fusing the late-Soviet-period conglomeration of territorial and ethnic groups into a community of Azerbaijanis. True, that was achieved by inventing an enemy in the form of the Armenians and suppressing ethnic minorities, but on the outside, they will be judged by the result.

This notion should not be confused with civic nation, which is a popular but somewhat misleading term. With the solid earners, their nations can exhibit simple xenophobia or debate the place of the titular language and culture in the societal hierarchy. The point is the deep connection between the state and the nation. Diasporas do not usually play a significant political role in those countries. Even the Azerbaijani diaspora has been specially constructed by the state in recent decades as a foreign policy instrument; it has not developed independently as a unique custodian of the Azerbaijani culture and experience.

The respect that the solid earners show to Russia’s interests is to a greater or lesser extent a reflection of these states’ fundamental priorities. If the state is seen as the ultimate and highest value, it cannot be placed at the service of any other values, such as a “European choice.” Placing the state at the centre of their foreign policy logic, they automatically achieve a realistic vision of the world, which implies a consideration of the balance of power. And that means respect for the interests of one’s nuclear power neighbour. All the solid earners without exception seek to find a counterbalance to Russia’s influence, but they never make this an end in itself.

This is why their foreign policy runs smoothly, without sharp turns or upheavals. The exception is Azerbaijan, which retraced Georgia's trajectory in the early 1990s: rise of dissident nationalists, defeat in ethnic wars, return of the old Soviet nomenklatura (Heydar Aliyev and Eduard Shevardnadze). The Karabakh problem was a legacy of that era, and the return of the territories became the national idea undergirding the construction of the Azerbaijani state. Having returned most of the lands it lost during the second Karabakh war, Azerbaijan is faced with the need to reconfigure its foreign policy in peacetime.

But how solid are "the solid earners?" The stability of their foreign policy rests on the stability of their internal structure. Kazakhstan has shown that economic success is possible with weak state institutions that are unable to protect themselves. Demographic growth gives local elites confidence in the future of the state, but also creates social problems that are difficult to solve with a primitive economic structure. A multi-vector foreign policy may be a source of pride, but it fails in time of crisis. In some cases, a close connection between the state and the elite has been substituted by ties between the state and a few select families. The solid earners still have to address many problems in the construction of their states.

Large family poverty: Is there a solution?

Despite the differences in the experience of Tajikistan and Kyrgyzstan during the past 30 years, they have common elements, such as poverty, weak government institutions and strong demographic pressure. Nevertheless, they are doing much better than any other state with similar problems in other parts of the world. The revolts that have happened in Kyrgyzstan were not violent. The 1992-1997 civil war in Tajikistan was stopped with Russia's assistance, but this peacekeeping experience has not been appreciated or sufficiently studied.

These two countries have modest raw materials and so they cannot emulate the experience of the solid earners. Neither do they have funds to pursue an active foreign policy. Russian military bases, CSTO membership (Kyrgyzstan is also a member of the EAEU) and access to the Russian labour market are helping Tajikistan and Kyrgyzstan to maintain stability and preventing their slide into chaos. In addition, "classmates" also benefit from mutual assistance.

Two exceptions

According to this classification, Russia is closer to the solid earners, including when it comes to the elite's attitude to the state, the focus on realism in foreign policy, nation development and available resources for state development. It is not surprising that Moscow mostly has good relations and mutual understanding with the other solid earners.

Russia's distinguishing features are a different historical pace of state development and a different quality of foreign policy challenges. Russia became a foreign policy player in relations with the other European empires between the 17th and 19th centuries and accumulated the experience of a foreign policy superpower in the 20th century. It probably has the best institutional experience among the modern states. Russia's task in the past 30 years was not to learn to be an independent state but to adjust to its new geopolitical place after the breakup of the Soviet Union. It is the main source of misunderstanding in Russia's relations with the other former Soviet republics.

What sets its foreign policy challenges apart is that, paradoxically, Russia does not enjoy the main achievement of post-war international relations that makes the existence of the other post-Soviet countries relatively comfortable. More precisely, its "negative sovereignty" and its right to exist can be put in question by external forces. Unlike all other countries, nuclear powers rely on the good old balance of power more than on international institutions. In addition, the West has serious intentions regarding Russia and will disregard its territorial integrity if Russia ever finds itself in dire circumstances. Russia is used to thinking about international relations in terms of existential threat, and it has to be stronger than the average solid earner.

Armenia is another exception. It is similar to the solid earners in terms of the strong link between the elite and the state, especially if the Armenian diaspora is not included in this equation (on the other hand, the Armenian political class has learned to exclude the diaspora from the adoption of important decisions during the past few decades). Like European states, Armenia has a long history of nationalism. Like the "aspirant" countries, it has a long, even if so far platonic interest in the "European path." But it is similar to Russia because it looks at foreign policy challenges in existential terms.

However, the lack of state-controlled economic resources is preventing Armenia from becoming a solid earner. Armenian nationalism is not so much addressed to the modern state (or two states – Armenia

and Nagorno-Karabakh, as this issue is seen in the country) as to an eternal nation which regards the historical forms of the state as nothing more than transient episodes. Armenia's "European choice" is a utopia, considering its close security ties with Russia and Western intolerance of post-Soviet clients who maintain close and confidence-based relations with Moscow.

In 1994, Armenia won a major victory over Azerbaijan in extremely difficult conditions and through a huge exertion of strength. For decades after that, this experience shaped Armenia's foreign and domestic policies. Basking in their military pride, the generation that won the first Karabakh war failed to strengthen the national economy and the state and find a reasonable compromise with Azerbaijan. The price they paid was high: the loss of power in 2018 and a defeat in the second Karabakh war in 2020. Armenia will now need to chart a new course.

Thwarted expectations and the tracks of history

For many countries, the 30 years after the breakup of the Soviet Union were passed in anticipation. Many people in Russia expected the former Soviet republics to "return," but they never explained how this could happen. Some post-Soviet republics waited for and are still waiting for Russia to break up as well. Inspired by "colour revolutions," the United States waited for "the fourth wave of democracy." These expectations stem from disappointment with the fact that the former Soviet Union did not fit in the customary schemes of historical process and perspective.

Take the idea of power transition in personalised political regimes. It has been argued that the physical departure of post-Soviet leaders would result in chaos with terrible consequences for the international system. During the period under review, there were four power transitions in countries with strongly personalised rule: Azerbaijan (2003), Turkmenistan (2007), Uzbekistan (2016) and Kazakhstan (2019). However, their foreign policy lines have not changed, although there was an internal political crisis in Kazakhstan when its former leader stepped down.

The foreign policy of post-Soviet states is not based on the use of an optimal common scheme but on questioning the schemes that are effective in this region of the world and on looking for historical patterns. Uzbekistan rejects the schemes that look rational to Georgia.

Not all of Russia's neighbours accept its realistic foreign policy because of lack of good sense or evil intent, but because they have a different view of the world rooted in the political experience accumulated during the past 30 years. You don't automatically understand your classmates' thinking just because you happened to graduate the same year. Therefore, Russia's communication with its former classmates should be based on empathy and patient explanations of its actions, however self-evident their justification may appear.

All the post-Soviet republics depend on their Soviet and pre-Soviet past. But this dependency is not linear. There is no use speaking about it in terms of "overcoming the Soviet legacy," because different countries have a different legacy. Even those who have done more to overcome it are travelling down the tracks they inherited from the Soviet Union. On the other hand, the Soviet legacy is still alive, even if does not bring the post-Soviet states closer together. In fact, it is increasing the divide between them, like the Karabakh problem that has turned Azerbaijan and Armenia into bitter enemies. Nevertheless, the fact that the states that rose from the ruins of the Soviet Union are making rational choices to move in different directions is proof of their viability.



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