



# REDEMOS

RECONFIGURING EU DEMOCRACY  
SUPPORT. TOWARDS A SUSTAINED  
DEMOS IN THE EU'S EASTERN  
NEIGHBOURHOOD

**REDEMOS Policy Paper D4.2**

DOI: [10.5281/zenodo.19630734](https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.19630734)

# Separatism and Territorial Disputes as Factors Underpinning Democratization and Authoritarianization

**Igor Gretskiy, ICDS**

**Kakha Gogolashvili, GFSISE**

**December 2025**



Funded by  
the European Union

The REDEMOS project has received funding from the European Union's Horizon Europe research and innovation programme under grant agreement No 101061738. The Associated Partner University of Surrey has received funding from UK Research and Innovation (UKRI) under the UK government's Horizon Europe funding guarantee under grant number 10040721. The Associated Partner University of St. Gallen has received funding from the Swiss State Secretariat for Education, Research and Innovation (SERI). Views and opinions expressed are, however, those of the author(s) only and do not necessarily reflect those of the European Union, UKRI and SERI. Neither the European Union nor UKRI or SERI can be held responsible for them.

## Executive Summary

This paper examines the relationship between separatism, territorial disputes, and democratization in the countries of the European Union's Eastern Neighbourhood. Drawing on comparative analysis of Armenia, Azerbaijan, Georgia, Ukraine, and Moldova, it argues that externally driven separatism fundamentally alters the dynamics of democratic development by prioritizing state survival over institutional consolidation. While existing literature often treats democratization and conflict resolution as mutually reinforcing processes, the cases analysed demonstrate that, under conditions of sustained external interference - primarily by Russia - these processes become structurally antagonistic. The study challenges the reliability of standard democracy indices in conflict-affected environments, highlighting discrepancies between formal indicators and empirical realities. It shows that unresolved conflicts redirect economic, institutional, and human resources toward security imperatives, constrain international integration, and enable ruling elites to instrumentalize threats to justify authoritarian practices. At the same time, variation across cases suggests that democratization remains possible where institutional resilience, civil society engagement, and external anchoring - particularly through European integration - are sufficiently strong. The findings underscore the need to incorporate geopolitical context into analyses of democratization in contested states. The paper concludes that institutional reforms alone are insufficient to sustain democratic trajectories in the presence of external destabilization, and that effective democratization requires parallel progress in security, state capacity, and resistance to foreign interference.

## Table of contents

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY .....	2
TABLE OF CONTENTS .....	3
ACKNOWLEDGEMENT .....	4
LIST OF TABLES .....	5
LIST OF ACRONYMS AND ABBREVIATIONS .....	6
1 INTRODUCTION .....	7
2 COUNTRY CASES .....	9
3 CONCLUSIONS .....	24
4 RECOMMENDATIONS.....	26
5 REFERENCES.....	27

## Acknowledgement

This report is the result of a collaborative effort between the teams of the International Centre for Defence and Security and the Georgian Foundation for Strategic and International Studies. Special thanks are extended to Madalina Dobrescu (NTNU) for her valuable comments and suggestions, as well as to the country experts who contributed to the research: Mamuka Komakhia (Georgian case), Elkhan Mehtiyev (Azerbaijani case), Mikayel Hovhannisyan (Armenian case), and Giorgi Bidzinashvili (for review and comments). The authors also thank the REDEMOS consortium for its constructive feedback and ongoing support throughout the preparation of this study.

## List of Tables

Table 1. Public expenditure in sectors for the period between 1995 and 2025 (Average %)	10
Table 2. Georgia: From Conflict to Statehood Erosion — An Analytical Diagram	17
Table 3. Comparative Impact of Separatist Conflicts on Statehood and Democratization in EN	25

## List of acronyms and abbreviations

AA – Association Agreement  
ASSR – Autonomous Soviet Socialist Republic  
CA – Closed Autocracy  
CCU – Constitutional Court of Ukraine  
CIS – Commonwealth of Independent States  
CSO – Civil Society Organisations  
CSOSI – Civil Society Organisation Sustainability Index  
CSTO – Collective Security Treaty Organization  
DCFTA – Deep and Comprehensive Free Trade Area  
EA – Electoral Autocracy  
ED – Electoral Democracy  
EDI – Electoral Democracy Index  
EMB – Electoral Management Body  
EN – Eastern Neighbourhood  
EU – European Union  
FSB – Federal Security Service (Russia)  
GDP – Gross Domestic Product  
IDPs – Internally Displaced Persons  
IRI – International Republican Institute  
LD – Liberal Democracy  
LDI – Liberal Democracy Index  
NABU – National Anti-Corruption Bureau of Ukraine  
NATO – North Atlantic Treaty Organization  
NGO – Non-Governmental Organization  
ODIHR – Office for Democratic Institutions and Human Rights  
OECD – Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development  
OSCE – Organisation for Security and Co-operation in Europe  
PAS – Party of Action and Solidarity (Moldova)  
RFE/RL – Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty  
RPA – Republican Party of Armenia  
RSF – Reporters Without Borders  
SAPO – Specialised Anticorruption Prosecutor's Office  
V-Dem – Varieties of Democracy dataset

# 1 Introduction

Separatism and territorial disputes are typically driven by a range of factors, including the aspiration to break away from discriminatory practices targeting an ethnic group, the desire to preserve a distinct collective identity, efforts to address economic inequalities, or, conversely, attempts to prevent the redistribution of wealth perceived as unfair. Territorial disputes, in turn, often stem from the refusal to accept historical changes in state borders or from broader geopolitical ambitions. Political actors frequently justify such disputes by invoking the need to restore historical justice, ensure national security, or protect the “vital interests” of the state.

This study aims to examine how separatism and territorial disputes influence the process of democratization in the countries of the European Union’s Eastern Neighbourhood. While a growing body of literature addresses the relationship between conflict and political development, it often assumes that democratization and conflict resolution are mutually reinforcing processes. However, the experience of post-Soviet states suggests a more complex and, in many cases, contradictory interplay.

Tracking these dynamics objectively remains a challenging task. Various country rankings and indices have been developed to measure levels of democracy yet doubts about their accuracy and relevance persist. A significant limitation is that many of their components rely heavily on subjective expert assessments or reflect coder bias (Little and Meng 2024). In the context of the Eastern Neighbourhood, widely used indices such as V-Dem sometimes fail to adequately capture developments on the ground. For example, the relatively positive trajectory of Belarus’s Liberal Democracy Index (LDI) between 2012 and 2019 appears inconsistent with persistent restrictions on political freedoms and the absence of meaningful systemic reforms (Coppedge et al. 2024; Viasna Human Rights Center 2023). These discrepancies suggest that conventional measurement tools may be insufficient for analysing democratization in conflict-affected and externally constrained environments.

Similarly puzzling is the fact that, despite numerous successful reforms following the 2013–2014 Revolution of Dignity, Ukraine’s score on the V-Dem’s LDI remained as distant from the ideal of liberal democracy as it had been under Leonid Kuchma. Against this backdrop, Armenia’s sharp increase on the same index after the 2018 Velvet Revolution also raises questions, as it appears to reflect not so much substantive institutional change as a surge in expectations regarding the country’s democratic trajectory. After 2020, both Armenia’s LDI score and these expectations declined rapidly. Even more problematic is that, according to V-Dem’s LDI, Armenia, Moldova, and Georgia were assessed as freer and more democratic than Poland for several years leading up to the 2023 parliamentary elections.

As a form of governance, democracy is closely tied to territory and population. One of the fundamental preconditions for democratization is a broad societal consensus regarding the legitimacy of state authority over a given territory. Where such consensus is absent -particularly among geographically concentrated groups - democratic development is significantly hindered (Linz and Stepan 1996, 27). Separatism and territorial conflicts thus tend to exacerbate domestic instability, weaken institutional cohesion, and create opportunities for external actors to interfere in internal affairs.

In the literature, it is often argued that democracies possess tools to channel separatist tendencies and transform them into manageable political processes, for example through federalization or decentralization arrangements (Stepan 1999; Encarnación 2024). However, such models are typically associated with well-established states that either lack powerful external challengers or possess sufficient institutional capacity to manage internal diversity. The EN states that emerged following the collapse of the Soviet Union developed under fundamentally different conditions. Many were required to build state institutions from scratch while simultaneously confronting unresolved territorial disputes and the enduring influence of a former imperial centre.

In this context, this paper argues that separatism - particularly when supported by a powerful neighbouring state - fundamentally alters the relationship between state-building and democratization. Rather than reinforcing each other, these processes often become structurally competing priorities. Under conditions of persistent external pressure, the imperative of state survival tends to take precedence over democratic consolidation, leading to institutional distortions, centralization of power, and the instrumentalization of security narratives by political elites.

Methodologically, the study employs a comparative qualitative analysis of five countries -Armenia, Azerbaijan, Georgia, Ukraine, and Moldova - drawing on academic literature, policy reports, and empirical indicators. By examining these cases, the paper seeks to identify common patterns in the interaction between conflict, state-building, and democratization, while also accounting for variations in political trajectories across the region.

The central premise guiding this analysis is that democratization in the Eastern Neighbourhood cannot be adequately understood without incorporating the broader geopolitical context. In particular, the role of external actors - most notably Russia - must be treated not as a secondary or contextual factor, but as a structural variable shaping both separatist dynamics and domestic political development. Ignoring this dimension risks producing incomplete or misleading interpretations of democratization processes in the region.

## 2 Country Cases

### 2.1 Armenia

The Nagorno-Karabakh conflict has profoundly shaped Armenia's state-building process and, conversely, Armenia's political development has influenced the trajectory of the conflict. Central to this relationship has been the tension between security and democracy, a recurrent theme in Armenia's political discourse. The debate has often been framed in binary terms: should Armenia resolve the conflict in order to democratize, or is democratization a prerequisite for conflict resolution? This dilemma has persisted since the earliest years of independence.

One of the first explicit articulations of this tension occurred in the spring of 1990 in the Supreme Council of Soviet Armenia, during deliberations on the draft Declaration of Independence. Ashot Navasardyan, leader of the Republican Party, proposed removing the word "democratic" from the text, arguing that a country in conflict might require authoritarian rule and that reference to democracy could invite Russian interference. Although his proposal was rejected, its rationale was later echoed by the Republican Party of Armenia (RPA), which came to power in 1998 and governed until 2018, presiding over a steady decline in democratic standards.

This early debate revealed not only the perceived incompatibility of security and democracy, but also the enduring weight of the Soviet legacy and external interference. As Linz and Stepan (1996) argue, Soviet-type federalism created incentives for the politicization of ethnicity by providing institutions and resources that could be mobilized for ethno-political claims. This legacy helped transform the conflict's framing - from a human rights question into one primarily defined by territoriality - thus shaping Armenian understandings of the relationship between statehood and democracy.

The impact of Nagorno-Karabakh on state-building is inseparable from the competing principles at the heart of the conflict: self-determination versus territorial integrity. Self-determination, grounded in international legal and normative frameworks, emphasizes the aspirations of peoples seeking recognition, while territorial integrity underscores the sovereignty and inviolability of the state. The clash of these principles renders the conflict existential: for Armenians, it embodies the pursuit of national self-determination; for Azerbaijan, the preservation of sovereign borders. Krasner (1999) observes that while territorial integrity is a cornerstone of modern sovereignty, it remains in tension with self-determination, which challenges state authority by legitimizing autonomy or independence claims within existing states.

The Nagorno-Karabakh conflict thus exemplifies structural contradictions within the international system. The conflict can be further understood through three overlapping layers. The first is geopolitical-historical: for nearly two centuries, the South Caucasus was under imperial and then Soviet control, leaving local entities with weak traditions of independent statehood. As centralized authority weakened, especially in the peripheries of the Soviet Union, political disintegration led to numerous conflicts that have been variously characterized as anything from "liberation struggles" to "separatist uprisings."

The second layer can be broadly defined as cultural-historical, as the conflict has deep-rooted historical tensions with recurrent clashes and violent escalations dating back to the early twentieth century and even earlier.

The third is specific to Armenia's independence movement. Two major slogans of the 1988 mobilization - Azat, Ankakh Hayastan (Free, Independent Armenia) and Miatsum (Reunification) - demonstrated the inextricable link between Armenian sovereignty and the Karabakh issue. The liberal values underlying the independence movement initially situated Nagorno-Karabakh within a human rights framework, fostering the belief that conflict resolution was a precondition for democratization. This perspective was championed by Armenia's first president, Levon Ter-Petrosyan, who argued that compromise was necessary for long-term stability and democratic consolidation. His stance, however, contributed to his resignation in 1998 and the

transfer of power to Robert Kocharyan and the RPA, who emphasized security and national unity over democratic reform.

The interconnection between security and democracy has therefore been central to Armenia’s state-building process. While democratic aspirations framed the conflict as a human rights cause in the late 1980s, successive governments increasingly prioritized national security, often at the expense of political liberalization. The unresolved nature of the conflict reinforced this trade-off, embedding the perception that sovereignty and survival took precedence over democratic reform. When analysing the relationship between conflict and state-building, several key parameters must be taken into account. The interaction between these two processes creates overlapping areas where they often compete for the same limited resources. The allocation of public finances, infrastructure development, the prioritization of economic sectors, and the state’s ability to attract domestic and foreign investment are referred to as economic resources. Conflict often redirects resources toward military needs, diverting them from developmental goals (Table 1).

<b>Sector</b>	<b>1995-1998</b>	<b>1999-2018</b>	<b>2018-2020</b>	<b>2020-2025</b>
<b>Defence</b>	4.7	5.5	5.9	6.0
<b>Education</b>	3.1	3.0	2.4	2.4
<b>Judiciary &amp; Public Order</b>	2.1	2.9	3.7	4.0
<b>Science &amp; R&amp;D</b>	0.16	0.22	0.25	0.25
<b>Economic Development</b>	2.7	3.8	4.5	4.6
<b>Healthcare</b>	2.6	3.1	3.6	3.8
<b>Social Protection</b>	3.2	3.9	4.5	4.7

**Table 1. Public expenditure in sectors for the period between 1995 and 2025 (Average %)**

Source: Yeghiazaryan 2022; Economic Development and Research Centre [EDRC] 2025.

The table illustrates that the share of defence expenditures remains consistently high throughout the entire period and increases with each escalation. This indicates that additional resources are reallocated from other important areas such as education and research. A simplified way to describe this balance in terms of human resources would be “soldiers versus taxpayers,” but in reality, this equation is far more complex. It encompasses issues such as internal and external migration, human rights, education, and the broader social, cultural, and psychological well-being of the population. Prolonged conflict can severely strain these dimensions, hindering the creation of a stable and productive citizenry. Collier (2007) similarly highlights the economic trap created by civil wars and protracted military conflicts: low income and slow growth increase the likelihood of conflict, while conflict itself undermines development, thus forming a self-reinforcing cycle. In Armenia, long-term conflict has redirected spending toward military needs, deterred foreign investment, stimulated emigration, and restricted integration into regional and global markets. These dynamics reflect a structural tension between the immediate imperatives of security and the longer-term requirements of democratization and institutional development.

Involvement in a military conflict for small states such as Armenia reduces the benefits of participation in international economic integration projects, restricts opportunities for diplomatic manoeuvring, and increases the risk of becoming unduly dependent on a single security provider. Armenia’s reliance on Russia and Russia-led structures has limited cooperation with the United States and NATO, obstructed reconciliation with Turkey, and excluded Armenia from regional initiatives such as the Baku–Tbilisi–Ceyhan pipeline and the Middle Corridor. Under direct pressure of Moscow, Armenia withdrew from the process of signing the Association Agreement with the EU, instead joined the Russia-led Customs Union (CRRCA Armenia 2015). Political elites often instrumentalize both processes to consolidate power. On the one hand, ongoing conflict is invoked to justify democratic stagnation, restrictions on speech and assembly, and reduced government transparency - conditions enabling corruption and electoral manipulation under the guise of national

security. On the other hand, state-building initiatives can serve as a mobilizing force around issues of justice and reform, thereby challenging entrenched political interests.

In Armenia, the persistent security threat has frequently been utilized by ruling elites as a tool for political consolidation and as a rhetorical device against opposing forces. Accusations of “betraying Karabakh” or prioritizing democracy (understood as material well-being or liberal values) over national security and territorial integrity (unification) have become central themes in political competition.

Conflict outcomes - whether perceived as triumphs or traumas - profoundly shape collective identity, drawing on socio-cultural resources. They structure collective memory, narratives of space, and perceptions of regional and international roles, all of which shape views of neighbours, enemies, and allies. Schwartz (2000) argues that collective memory is not merely a repository of facts but an active force shaping identity, cohesion, and conflict. Collective identity thus becomes central to state-building by fostering cohesion, influencing expectations of state functions, and defining ideological trajectories. These trajectories depend on dominant interpretations of past conflicts (Hobsbawm 1990; Anderson 2006; Alexander 2003).

The role of Russia in the Armenian-Azerbaijani conflict has been both decisive and ambivalent, reflecting its broader strategy of maintaining leverage over both parties. During the early stages of the conflict in the 1990s, Russia provided substantial military and logistical support to Armenia, contributing to its battlefield advantages (De Waal 2013; Cornell 2011). At the same time, Moscow institutionalized its role as a mediator through the OSCE Minsk Group, thereby preserving its influence over the conflict dynamics. In the post-Soviet period, Russia maintained a formal security alliance with Armenia, including a military base and membership in the Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO). However, this alignment did not preclude a pragmatic approach toward Azerbaijan. Moscow developed parallel relations with Baku, including large-scale arms sales, which over time contributed to shifting the regional military balance (Broers 2019). Following the political changes in Armenia after the 2018 Velvet Revolution, which brought to power a leadership committed to democratization and the strengthening of independent institutions along European lines, Russia’s approach became more visibly conditional. Armenia’s efforts to pursue a more sovereign and autonomous domestic and foreign policy - reducing reliance on traditional patron-client dynamics - were met with a more distant and transactional stance from Moscow. While Russia formally upheld its alliance commitments, its limited response during the 2020 war suggested a recalibration of priorities. This has been interpreted as a signal that political loyalty and alignment with Russia’s regional order remain key factors shaping the depth of its security commitments (International Crisis Group 2020).

In conclusion, the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict has profoundly shaped Armenia’s state-building trajectory, reflecting a complex and often contradictory relationship between security imperatives and democratic aspirations. The persistent conflict has redirected economic, human, and institutional resources toward defence and security needs. It has shaped Armenia’s international integration strategies, limiting its manoeuvrability and fostering dependence on traditional allies, particularly Russia, thereby constraining broader regional cooperation and reform opportunities. Russia’s approach can be understood not as consistent support for one side, but as a strategy of controlled instability, aimed at preventing definitive conflict resolution while preserving political and security dependence of both Armenia and Azerbaijan. At the same time, political elites have used the ongoing conflict to consolidate power and justify democratic backsliding, often framing opposition voices as threats to national unity. The Armenian experience illustrates the intricate interplay between unresolved conflict and state-building: democratization and conflict resolution are not strictly linear or sequential but mutually constitutive processes, each dependent on progress in the other, mediated by historical legacies, geopolitical realities, and domestic political dynamics.

## 2.2 Azerbaijan

The Armenian–Azerbaijani conflict over Nagorno-Karabakh originated in the late Soviet period, beginning in early 1988 with mass rallies in Armenia (Sovetskiy Karabakh 1988; De Waal 2013) and in the Nagorno-Karabakh Autonomous Region of Azerbaijan demanding incorporation of the latter into Armenia. Both Azerbaijani leaders and Soviet central authorities rejected these claims as unconstitutional, maintaining that perestroika did not entail border changes (Cornell 2011). The dispute thus centred less on minority rights than on territorial revisionism, as the Armenian movement sought full unification of Nagorno-Karabakh with Armenia (Broers 2019). Azerbaijan signalled readiness to address cultural and social demands but firmly opposed secession.

The conflict rapidly escalated into ethnic violence, forced displacement, and armed confrontation, generating large refugee flows (De Waal 2013). Simultaneously, confrontation between pro-independence forces and Moscow-aligned communist authorities weakened nascent republican institutions (Cornell 2011). The state of emergency imposed in 1990 hindered institutional development, leaving Azerbaijan at a disadvantage compared to other Soviet republics. This institutional fragility significantly affected early state-building, particularly in the security sector.

Until mid-1992, Moscow retained substantial influence over Azerbaijan (Cornell 2011). The election of President Abulfaz Elchibey, representing a reformist and strongly pro-sovereignty political orientation, marked a strategic rupture: relations with Russia were redefined, Commonwealth of Independent States's (CIS) membership rejected, and Russian troops withdrawn. Subsequent reforms—including a more transparent test system for university admissions, land privatization, and support for small entrepreneurship—laid foundations for state-building (Cornell 2011; World Bank 2021). The emergence of a multi-party system, independent media, and minority legislation indicated initial democratic aspirations.

However, key democratic processes remained incomplete. Parliamentary elections were delayed due to the conflict, undermining institutional legitimacy (Cornell 2011). The government also failed to consolidate control over irregular armed groups. This weakness enabled opposition forces, supported by armed units, to overthrow the government, facilitating the return of former communist leadership. In a context of insecurity and territorial losses, society largely accepted this shift, as democratic priorities receded (De Waal 2013).

State-building was further undermined by Armenia's military advances and internal political instability (Broers 2019). Within one year, two presidents and an interim leader resigned. Even after the May 1994 ceasefire, President Heydar Aliyev faced coup attempts from former allies, including Karabakh warlords embedded within state structures.

Three developments proved decisive for state consolidation. First, the 1994 ceasefire enabled restoration of internal stability and the dismantling of criminal and paramilitary structures (Cornell 2011). Second, the outbreak of the Russian–Chechen war reduced Moscow's capacity to pressure Azerbaijan, particularly regarding energy resources and military presence (Halg Gazeti 2001; Azadlyg 1995). Exploiting this window, Aliyev launched strategic energy projects with Western and Turkish support, securing economic autonomy crucial for state survival (World Bank 2021). Third, the suppression of the March 1995 rebellion marked a turning point in consolidating state control over the use of force.

While Azerbaijan consistently maintained its objective of restoring territorial integrity, its ability to act militarily was long constrained by the broader regional balance of power, in which Russia played a central role. Following the 1994 ceasefire, Moscow's position as the primary security provider in the South Caucasus and its strategic alliance with Armenia effectively limited Azerbaijan's capacity to alter the status quo (De Waal 2013; Cornell 2011). Russia's broader regional posture thus contributed to the preservation of de facto Armenian control over the occupied territories, while simultaneously positioning Moscow as an indispensable arbiter of the conflict (International Crisis Group 2020; APRI 2024).

Stability was subsequently framed by the government as the central pillar of state-building. Official discourse emphasized the elimination of civil conflict, suppression of coups, and neutralization of illegal armed groups, portraying stability as a precondition for national development and delegitimizing pro-democratic actors as destabilizing forces (Presidential Decree 1994; AzerTac 1998).

Aliyev's prioritization of stability over democratization justified restrictions on political freedoms and delays in reform. Simultaneously, he positioned himself as the architect of economic and institutional transformation (while dismissing demands for deeper democratization as threats to stability (Aliyev 1998)). Political stability was thus elevated as the cornerstone of state-building and socio-economic development, supported by state-driven narratives that equated dissent with instability (Cornell 2011).

At the same time, the political leadership sought to maintain a reformist image while marginalizing opposition forces and civil society (Broers 2019). Democratic demands were framed as disruptive, in contrast to state-led reforms such as privatization and institutional consolidation. This dual strategy reinforced elite control while shaping Azerbaijan's post-independence trajectory.

Official propaganda discouraged political participation and subordinated public debate to state narratives, despite the authorities constantly denied any accusations of ideological control (Aliyev 1999). The narrative of stability was also instrumentalized in the context of the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict. By centralizing control over negotiations and limiting pluralism, the government monopolized the peace process, framing the absence of territorial restoration as an external constraint rather than a policy failure (Aliyev 2001; De Waal 2013).

Excessive secrecy in the security sector further constrained democratization, as parliamentary oversight remained limited and justified by wartime and post-conflict conditions (Cornell 2011). The lack of accountability was long justified by the state of war and was later perpetuated under the pretext of post-war challenges.

Despite territorial losses, Azerbaijan preserved sovereignty and pursued an independent foreign policy, supported by growing economic autonomy (World Bank 2021). Domestically, the authorities often invoked Azerbaijan's geopolitical location – caught between Russia and Iran – as an informal justification for restricting democratic practices, although the credibility of such arguments has always been questionable (Broers 2019).

The OSCE mediators largely approached the conflict as a matter of management rather than resolution, prioritizing stability and continuity of negotiations (OSCE 2018; International Crisis Group 2020). Within this framework, Azerbaijan cultivated an image of commitment to peaceful settlement, reinforcing its international legitimacy.

Although the political system remained vertically centralized and authoritarian, Azerbaijan occasionally demonstrated flexibility in negotiations, including proposals for extensive decentralization and autonomy arrangements (Turan 1998). Heydar Aliyev was ready to discuss prospects for significant decentralization and self-governance of Nagorno-Karabakh, resembling a quasi-microstate arrangement in which only limited sovereignty would remain with Baku. His successor, Ilham Aliyev, largely maintained this policy, at times accompanied by sharper rhetoric, while consistently signalling willingness to grant self-governance as the final stage of a negotiated settlement.

In Azerbaijan, however, such flexibility was widely interpreted as weakness, emboldening separatist actors and creating precedents that risked undermining the country's multiethnic cohesion. Ultimately, the uncompromising position of the separatists and Armenia contributed to the collapse of these negotiation frameworks and the resort to military confrontation.

The 44-day war of 2020 ended nearly three decades of occupation, enabling Azerbaijan to restore control over significant portions of its territory and its borders with Iran and Armenia. Baku initiated direct engagement with the Armenian population of Nagorno-Karabakh, emphasizing prospects of Azerbaijani citizenship. However, separatist leaders rejected subsequent negotiations and refused disarmament. In September 2023, Azerbaijani forces conducted a brief operation that led to their surrender. Despite proposed security guarantees and frameworks for self-administration, most Armenians departed via the Lachin corridor. Within a year, Russian peacekeepers and the joint Russian–Turkish monitoring mission withdrew.

Through combined military and diplomatic efforts, Azerbaijan restored its territorial integrity and sovereignty after decades of uncertainty. A detailed peace agreement with Armenia has since been drafted, bringing the parties closer to a potential long-term settlement.

Nevertheless, democratic expectations remain unmet. Parliamentary elections continue to be tightly controlled, and the ruling elite shows limited willingness to pursue substantive reform despite the absence of serious political challenges. The detention of investigative journalists, NGO representatives, and opposition figures illustrates the persistence of authoritarian rule and the systematic suppression of independent voices. This continuity indicates that both periods of crisis and moments of success - from the instability of the early 1990s to the post-2020 consolidation - have been instrumentalized to reinforce the ruling elite's dominance at the expense of fundamental rights.

When it comes to foreign policy, Azerbaijan developed a pragmatic approach, combining diversification of external partnerships with sustained engagement with Russia. This gradual rapprochement reduced the risks associated with escalation and allowed Baku to improve its strategic position. At the same time, evolving tensions between Armenia and Russia—particularly after the 2018 “Velvet Revolution”—began to reshape the regional balance. Armenia's increasing dissatisfaction with Russian security guarantees, especially following Russia's limited response to escalations in 2020–2022, further weakened the credibility of Moscow's role as a security guarantor (International Crisis Group 2020; Carnegie Endowment 2024). In this changing environment, Azerbaijan was able to pursue a more assertive strategy, culminating in the 2020 war and the subsequent consolidation of control in 2023. Russia's limited intervention during these developments has been widely interpreted as reflecting a more transactional and interest-based approach, in which Moscow sought to preserve influence over both parties rather than prevent a shift in the territorial status quo (Zolyan 2026; The Diplomat 2024).

This external repositioning also had important political implications. Improved strategic flexibility and reduced external constraints strengthened the Azerbaijani leadership's capacity to prioritize security and territorial objectives over political liberalization. The military success of 2020–2023 further reinforced this model, providing additional legitimacy to the ruling elite while diminishing incentives for democratic reform.

## 2.3 Georgia

Georgia emerged from the Soviet collapse as one of the most destabilized states in the post-Soviet space. The government had to defend sovereignty and territorial integrity on several fronts simultaneously: the civil war that culminated in the overthrow of the government in 1992; armed conflicts with separatist movements in Abkhazia and the Tskhinvali region; tensions between the central authorities and regional leadership in Adjara; and the need to dismantle illegal armed formations in order to restore state authority. Confronted with limited political, military, and economic resources, the Georgian leadership struggled to address these challenges concurrently and was compelled to make difficult compromises with Moscow, which exploited Georgia's vulnerabilities to expand its influence.

The legacy of these conflicts, as well as the 2008 Russia's military aggression, continues to shape Georgia's security environment, as the country still faces separatism and the Russian occupation of Abkhazia and the Tskhinvali region (Kalichava 2021, 113–18). Historically, Russian imperial rule in the nineteenth century

consolidated control over Georgia through administrative restructuring and demographic policies intended to secure political loyalty. Within both the Tsarist and later Soviet systems, Abkhazia and the Tskhinvali region were incorporated into governance arrangements that reinforced Moscow's leverage, contributing over time to the development of separatist sentiments and creating enduring obstacles to the consolidation of Georgian statehood (Kalichava 2021). Following the Bolshevik takeover, Moscow exploited ethnic divisions, establishing the Abkhazian ASSR and South Ossetian Autonomous Oblast in the 1920s. These institutions strengthened central control but later empowered local separatist elites, particularly as the USSR weakened. The 1990 Soviet law granting autonomous regions the right to determine their status in case of secession from the Union further legitimized separatist claims (National Statistics Office of Georgia 2003). Later, backed by Russian military elements, Abkhaz and Ossetian movements became strategic tools against newly independent Georgia (Kalichava 2021).

On the brink of gaining independence the Georgian government identified the autonomous entities as threats to Georgia's sovereignty. On December 11, 1990, the Georgian Supreme Council adopted a law abolishing the South Ossetian Autonomous Oblast, formally eliminating its autonomous status within the Georgian SSR. This step came in direct response to the South Ossetian Supreme Soviet's earlier declaration (September 1990) elevating its status to a "Soviet Democratic Republic" within the USSR.

In January 1991, hostilities in the Tskhinvali region (South Ossetia) erupted as tensions escalated between Georgian security forces and Ossetian armed groups. The violence was driven by Georgia's efforts to reassert control over the separatist region and by South Ossetian demands for independence (secession) from Georgia, which were encouraged by Moscow as part of its broader strategy to maintain influence in the disintegrating Soviet Union. Thousands of Ossetians were displaced as a result. By 1992, president Zviad Gamsakhurdia was ousted, and Eduard Shevardnadze assumed leadership amid economic collapse and paramilitary control (de Waal 2010, 131–66). A ceasefire in South Ossetia followed with the Dagomys Agreement (June 1992), but conflict reignited when Georgian forces entered Abkhazia in August. The formal reason given by the Georgian government for sending troops into Abkhazia was to protect the railway line running through Abkhazia from Russia to Georgia and to rescue Georgian officials (including members of the State Council and Interior Ministry) who had been kidnapped by pro-Gamsakhurdia armed groups operating in the region. Abkhaz armed separatists, supported by Russian forces, confronted intervening Georgian detachments and secured victory in a following two-year war by 1993. A ceasefire in 1994 introduced CIS "peacekeepers," dominated by Russia (de Waal 2010).

Georgia's defeat forced Shevardnadze to accept Russian military assistance, join the CIS, and tolerate Russian bases and influence over the security sector (Komakhia 2023). By late 1993, conflict subsided, but separatism left Georgia unable to control one-fifth of its territory. State institutions were weakened, corruption endemic, and the economy reliant on international aid, giving Georgia features of a failed state (de Waal 2010). The war also triggered a mass displacement of hundreds of thousands from Abkhazia and the Tskhinvali region. With limited resources, the government could provide little support for IDPs, many of whom remain in poor conditions even decades later, facing unresolved resettlement and justice issues (Social Justice Centre 2025; Komakhia 2023)

For newly independent Georgia, economic collapse, separatist conflicts, and civil war represented the principal obstacles to stable development. After the cessation of hostilities, Shevardnadze faced the challenge of consolidating authority in a context dominated by paramilitary groups and organized crime. By 1995, however, he managed to improve security and stabilize the internal situation, despite a severe socio-economic and energy crisis. The end of armed confrontation and relative stabilization in government-controlled areas created space for potential dialogue with separatist regions. Russia actively positioned itself as mediator but used the peace process to advance its geopolitical interests and redirect Georgia's foreign policy orientation. Negotiations with Abkhaz representatives produced no substantive results, and after renewed fighting in the Gali region in May 1998, talks collapsed. The Abkhaz side subsequently rejected discussion of a "common state" framework (Topuria 2023; Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty 1997).

By late 90s and early 2000s Georgia had already become a captured economy. Studies categorized 13 out of 15 former Soviet republics under State Capture (Young 2011). It has been common in various states where the post-conflict obscurement has been utilized by influential individuals for personal gains (Rose-Ackerman 2008). Unresolved conflicts provide incentives for politicians to overlook good governance principles and disregard corrupt networks. In many cases, conflicts empowered either military warlords or criminals, who rose to having leverages through weak state institutional control. This, in turn, resulted in significantly uneven distribution of former state-owned assets during privatization. These individuals have then moved on to affecting policymaking through influence peddling and various illicit activities, ultimately eroding trust in institutions (Shelley 1995).

The Rose Revolution of 2003 marked a turning point in Georgian-Russian relations. While Moscow formally recognized Georgia's territorial integrity, the Putin administration escalated support for separatist territories. Early measures included mass distribution of Russian citizenship to residents of Abkhazia and South Ossetia and the reopening of railway links between Russia and Abkhazia. Sabotage and terrorist incidents in government-controlled territory also became more frequent during this period (Khashig and Akhvediani 2002; Bakhtadze 2003; Peuch 2002; Tsamalashvili 2005).

Besides, the Russian Federation has widely used cash and networks of cronies to hollow out Georgian democracy, thus exploiting vulnerabilities in economies and politics (White et al 2025). The breakaway regions have not ceased ramping up militarization and hostile rhetoric towards the central government of Georgia. Russia further pressed alienation by building more military facilities and accelerating "creeping occupation" (Rzeszutko 2022).

The post-revolution Saakashvili government began implementing first anti-corruption measures, placing tackling of corruption as its top priority in institutional capacity-building. However, life under constant fear of armed conflict had already fostered a narrow particularistic culture, hindered civil participation, and made appliance of bottom-up and decentralized anti-corruption approaches effectively implausible (Hiedler and Rohles 2025). Inclusive governance reform, even with all its shortcomings in developing economies, requires, at minimum, peace to achieve sustainability (Verdenicci and Hough 2015).

Tensions with Moscow culminated in August 2008, when Russia launched its military intervention in Georgia. Russia unilaterally recognized Abkhazia and the so-called Republic of South Ossetia on August 26, while Tbilisi designated them as occupied territories. Since then, Russia has entrenched its presence in both regions across political, economic, and security dimensions. Russian officials oversee governance, while the Ministry of Defence and FSB maintain full control of local security. Military bases of the Southern Military District were established, and FSB border guards assumed responsibility for the "occupation line." These deployments severely constrain Georgian sovereignty. Ongoing discrimination against ethnic Georgians, illegal detentions for "border violations," and the process of "borderization" - marked by barbed wire, boundary markers, and trenches - have deprived thousands of residents of farmland, water sources, and cemeteries (Komakhia 2023; State Security Service of Georgia 2016; Amnesty International 2019).

Russia's 2022 full-scale aggression against Ukraine has further deepened Moscow's influence in Georgia's occupied regions, particularly Abkhazia. Plans to establish a permanent Russian naval base in Ochamchire, near key Georgian maritime infrastructure, illustrate the growing militarization of the Black Sea region. At the same time, Georgia's domestic politics have shifted. Since 2022, the ruling Georgian Dream Party has intensified anti-Western rhetoric, introduced antidemocratic legislation, and instrumentalized the issue of occupied territories for internal political purposes (Komakhia 2024).

To sum up, the separatist wars in Abkhazia (1992–1993) and South Ossetia (1991-1992) resulted in tens of thousands of deaths and displaced over 250,000 people (Kalichava 2021, 113–118). These conflicts gravely undermined Georgia's territorial integrity and its monopoly on legitimate force, key prerequisites for statehood and democratic consolidation (King 2001). The emergence of unrecognized entities supported by Russia produced protracted frozen conflicts, diverting priorities from democratization to survival and security.

Institutionally, the conflicts obstructed the development of inclusive governance. Reliance on militarized and ethicized narratives by early Georgian leaders marginalized minorities and weakened the rule of law (Komakhia 2009). Although the 1989 census recorded minorities as nearly 30% of the population (GeoStat 2003), the post-independence state was often perceived as a project of the titular nation, fuelling alienation and further fragmentation.

Furthermore, the weak legitimacy of early governments, combined with the lack of control over breakaway regions, delayed necessary reforms. The state’s administrative and judicial institutions remained underdeveloped, while political competition was constrained by instability. Even after the Rose Revolution of 2003, which marked a democratic turning point, unresolved conflicts continued to constrain democratic deepening. Efforts to reassert control over Adjara in 2004, which was ruled by authoritarian non-transparent government, exercising own policy, including foreign relations without coordination and any collaboration with Tbilisi, showed the potential of non-violent conflict resolution, but similar approaches failed in the cases of Abkhazia and South Ossetia due to Russian military and political involvement (Wheatley 2005).

<b>Period</b>	<b>Key Events</b>	<b>Russian Role</b>	<b>Impact on Statehood</b>
Late USSR (1920s–1990)	Creation of autonomous regions	Institutional engineering	Seeds of separatism
1990–1993	Civil war + Abkhazia and South Ossetia conflicts	Military and political backing	State collapse
1993–2003	Shevardnadze era	Peacekeeper dominance	Weak state, corruption
2003–2008	Rose Revolution reforms	Increasing pressure	Partial recovery
2008 War	Russian intervention	Recognition of independence of regions	Loss of control over territories
2008–2022	Occupation, recognition and bowdlerisation	Military consolidation	Frozen conflict

**Table 2. Georgia: From Conflict to Statehood Erosion — An Analytical Diagram**

The long-term consequences of internal conflicts include institutional centralization, often justified by the need to preserve national unity. This centralization has sometimes come at the cost of democratic checks and balances and minority inclusion. Although Georgia has made considerable progress in building democratic institutions, the incomplete sovereignty over its territory continues to be a structural limitation in its democratic development. Georgia’s internal conflicts have had a multifaceted and lasting impact on its democratic and institutional evolution. They have diverted attention from governance reforms, contributed to political polarization, and hindered the development of a fully inclusive national identity. Resolving these conflicts remains not only a matter of territorial integrity but also a precondition for democratic consolidation.

## 2.4 Ukraine

Many scholars studying separatism in Ukraine often delve too deeply into the specifics of the conflict between central and regional authorities, overlooking the broader context that includes external destabilizing factors. They sometimes failed to consider Russia as the most serious threat to political stability in Crimea and saw the solution to separatism in compromise-based institutional reforms that would satisfy both Kyiv and the defiant region (Sasse 2007, 273).

History, however, has shown that institutional solutions alone were not, and could not be, an effective response to separatism if the subversive activities of a neighbouring state were ignored. It is telling that flare-ups of the separatism issue in Crimea consistently occurred at moments when Ukraine took steps to reduce Russian influence over its internal affairs. Interestingly, even Ukrainian proponents of closer ties with Moscow acknowledged that the “Crimea issue” was largely artificial and that it could only become real as part of Russia’s efforts to obstruct Kyiv’s Euro-Atlantic ambitions (Yanukovich 2008). Indeed, prior to the annexation of Crimea, while quite a visible portion of the peninsula’s population sympathized with the idea of joining Russia (23% in 2013), the majority preferred to maintain Crimea’s status as an autonomous region within Ukraine (IRI 2013). Although pro-Russian activists were free to register political organizations, in reality their numbers and clout were quite limited (Voznyak 2011). Moreover, candidates from radical pro-Russian parties consistently failed to gain meaningful support from Crimean voters in parliamentary elections (Belous 2012).

As for Luhansk and Donetsk regions, the idea of seceding from Ukraine and joining Russia was even less popular than in Crimea. Tellingly, during the critical period of 2013–2014, actions aimed at undermining Ukrainian authority were, for the most part, carried out with direct involvement and support from Moscow (Kazdobina, Hedenskog, and Umland 2024, 5). Research shows that after the beginning of Russia’s hybrid invasion, even in the occupied areas of Donbas the absolute majority of residents still wanted to remain part of Ukraine (Sasse and Lackner 2019, 11–12).

The problem of separatism confronted Ukraine from the very first days of its independence, with Russian authorities playing a role in one way or another. In the late 1980s, Russia’s first president, Boris Yeltsin, and his inner circle were locked in a power struggle with Mikhail Gorbachev, and the disintegration of the USSR was not part of their plans. In the fall of 1990, Yeltsin promoted mutual recognition of Soviet republics’ sovereignty within their administrative borders to gain the support of republican elites. Following the August 1991 coup, however, he aligned with Gorbachev in an attempt to preserve the Soviet state.

One method used to preserve the Soviet state involved coercing unity through threats of separatism and territorial claims. For example, in late August 1991, while delegations from the Russian and Soviet parliaments travelled to Kyiv to persuade Ukrainian authorities to reconsider their declarations of independence, Yeltsin’s press secretary Pavel Voschanov stated that Russia preserved the right to make territorial claims (Voschanov 1991). Despite these pressures, Ukraine successfully held a referendum and exited the USSR. However, political instability in Crimea persisted, and calls from Moscow to revise Crimea’s status continued. Even politicians considered proponents of democratic reforms in Russia, such as Anatoly Sobchak, adopted revanchist positions toward Ukraine (Mandeville 1991). Members of the Russian Supreme Soviet repeatedly demanded the reversal of the 1954 transfer of Crimea and Sevastopol. In a society shaped by Soviet nostalgia and imperial ambitions, such rhetoric often brought political advantage. The situation was further complicated by fierce political infighting in Ukraine over the distribution of powers between the executive and legislative branches, which lasted until 1996. Meanwhile, tensions escalated in Crimea as local authorities, emboldened by support from the Kremlin, aggravated the Crimean Tatar issue. After the Soviet decree rehabilitating the Crimean Tatars, tens of thousands returned to Crimea, but local authorities delayed land restitution and inflamed tensions through attacks on the community and the destruction of their temporary settlements.

By the beginning of the 2000s, Leonid Kuchma gradually managed to stabilize the situation in Crimea. This was facilitated not only by Kyiv’s policies but also by the fragmentation of pro-Russian forces and the

Kremlin's reluctance to engage in open military confrontation with Ukraine (Kubicek 2002, 245). The protracted process of consensus-building between the central government and Crimean authorities, together with selective autonomy measures adopted by Ukraine to address regional grievances, was even viewed by some scholars as a model for the peaceful resolution of frozen conflicts in the post-Soviet space (Sasse 2007, 7).

Meanwhile, Russia steadily intensified its subversive activities in Ukraine, including disinformation campaigns and support for pro-Russian politicians and organizations. These efforts escalated significantly after the Orange Revolution of 2004. Following the failed Kremlin-inspired attempt to declare an Autonomous Eastern Ukrainian Republic in November 2004 (Smoliy 2016, 377–378), Moscow shifted its focus to promoting the concept of federalization in Ukraine and gradually increased its pressure on this issue (Lavrov 2014).

The Kremlin has never concealed that the federalization of Ukraine was considered “one of the main guarantees of keeping Ukraine within the orbit of special relations with Russia” (Zatulin 2005). According to Konstantin Zatulin, a prominent Kremlin mouthpiece, Russia was not interested in a united Ukraine but rather in having “multiple Ukraines” (Terekhov-Kruglyj 2021). In other words, the persistent calls by Russian politicians and pro-Russian agents to federalize Ukraine were essentially a strategy to weaken the country from within and keep it within Russia's sphere of influence (Sherr 2020, 12). Moscow envisioned the Minsk Agreements as the first step in this plan, which would grant the territories of Donbass the ability for “partial foreign policy self-determination” and their reintegration into Ukraine's legal framework, serving as a “catalyst for Ukraine's federalization” (Hisamov 2017; Lavrov 2023; Sidorenko 2014).

Ukrainian authorities repeatedly rejected the idea of federalization, rightly viewing it as a Trojan horse imposed by Russia aimed at dismantling the Ukrainian state (Radio Svoboda 2015). Instead, the Ukrainian government pursued an extensive decentralization program, transferring considerable powers to regional and municipal levels while preserving the country's unitary structure.

One of the narratives promoted by the Kremlin to justify Ukraine's federalization was fearmongering about the alleged “forcible Ukrainization” of the Russian-speaking population. The Ukrainian governments did place greater emphasis on developing the state language but avoided discriminatory measures. Notably, Crimea - the only region of Ukraine with a predominantly ethnic Russian population - had unique approaches to education and language policy. According to studies conducted before the annexation, only 7.8% of schoolchildren in Crimea and 2.9% in Sevastopol were educated in Ukrainian (Texty.org.ua 2012).

Russian was also widely used for official documentation, judicial proceedings, television broadcasting, film dubbing in cinemas, and public transport announcements. Even deputies of the Crimean Supreme Council could deliver their speeches in Russian. Evidently, the Russian language was not discriminated against in Crimea or anywhere else in Ukraine. Nevertheless, from time to time, the idea of federalization was introduced into Ukrainian public discourse allegedly due to the contentious nature of the language issue and as a means of avoiding political divisions. The country's regional differences were portrayed as insurmountable obstacles to the existence of a unified state (Barbieri 2020).

Most often, calls for federalization were voiced by pro-Russian experts and politicians, such as Mykhailo Pohrebynskyi (Censor.net 2011), Viktor Medvedchuk (Geda 2012), Vadym Kolesnichenko (Ukrainska Pravda 2014), Oleh Tsaryov (24 Kanal 2014), Petro Symonenko (UNIAN 2011), and Mykola Azarov (Azarov 2015, 504-505). Many of them have been accused by Ukrainian authorities of crimes against the state and of justifying Russia's armed aggression, and according to media reports several currently reside in Russia. Even some high-profile European politicians, including Sigmar Gabriel (Chambers 2014) and Herman Van Rompuy (European Council 2014), have at times expressed support for the federalization of Ukraine.

Interestingly, to stimulate political chaos and centrifugal tendencies within Ukraine, the Kremlin occasionally encouraged Ukrainian presidents, during periods of political tension, to relocate from Kyiv to other cities such as Kharkiv or Donetsk. For example, according to former president Viktor Yushchenko, after mass protests began in November 2004, Russian State Duma Speaker Boris Gryzlov suggested to Leonid Kuchma that he leave Kyiv (Kowal et al. 2019, 731–732). A similar proposal was reportedly made to Viktor Yanukovich

in February 2014, and unlike Kuchma, Yanukovich accepted it. After Viktor Yanukovich came to power, Ukraine began to move away from democratization, and its democratic institutions underwent significant erosion. During this period, the provisions of the 2004 constitutional reform that had introduced a parliamentary-presidential system were repealed, and Ukraine fell to one of the lowest levels in the Corruption Perceptions Index (Transparency International 2023).

In contrast, following the 2013–2014 Revolution of Dignity, many observers noted renewed progress in Ukraine’s democratization. The country returned to a parliamentary-presidential system which, despite criticisms of limited functionality, facilitated decentralization and strengthened the system of checks and balances. It was during this period that Russia annexed Crimea and initiated the war in Donbas while using local separatist forces as a cover.

Despite Russia’s hostile actions, the new Ukrainian government continued on its path toward democratization. Faced with aggression from a militarily superior neighbour, Ukraine prioritized not only strengthening its defence capabilities but also developing democratic institutions. The local government reform - including the consolidation of municipalities, the devolution of broader powers, and enhanced governmental accountability - was widely regarded as one of the most successful reforms (OECD 2022, 311).

A system of institutions dedicated to combating corruption at the highest levels of government was also created. Although confronted with enormous challenges and internal resistance, Ukraine gradually initiated reforms in the judiciary and law-enforcement sectors. Throughout these processes, a vibrant and cohesive civil society played a consistently active role. Notably, until the full-scale invasion Ukraine - unlike many other post-Soviet states - held competitive elections and ensured peaceful transfers of power, both of which were significant steps toward democratic consolidation.

Russia’s full-scale invasion has slowed many of these processes. Since February 2022, the survival of the Ukrainian state and population has become the top priority. Following the introduction of martial law, elections at all levels were postponed and regular television broadcasting was replaced with a unified national telethon. Nevertheless, even under such conditions, the Ukrainian government remains committed to the long-term goal of building a consolidated democracy, generally respecting media freedom and supporting the development of civil society (Szostek and Toremark 2023; RSF 2024).

## 2.5 Moldova

Like Ukraine, Moldova has long been perceived by Russia as part of its sphere of special interests (International Crisis Group 2004). To emphasize this, Russian politicians and propagandists have often referred to Moldova as a “quasi-state” (Belyaev and Kolerov 2011). Internal conflicts, separatism, and the creation of pseudo-independent governance structures have been key tools used by the Kremlin to weaken Moldova (International Crisis Group 2004).

After the collapse of the USSR, the main centres of separatism in Moldova were Transnistria and Gagauzia. As highlighted in the literature, centripetal tendencies in these regions significantly complicated Moldova’s democratization process, as separatist structures received consistent support from Moscow (Crowther 1997). Although several factors contributed to the rise of separatist movements - including language issues and the complexities of Moldova’s political development (Kolstø, Edemsky, and Kalashnikova 1993; Roper 2004; Popescu 2006) - it was the military intervention of the Russian army on the side of pro-Russian separatists that played the decisive role in the emergence of a “Soviet-style outpost” in Transnistria (Haynes 2020).

After the active phase of fighting ended, Russia delayed decisions on withdrawing its troops from Moldova, thereby complicating the process of building an effective governance system. Russian leadership openly expressed its strategic interest in this situation. For example, in November 1994, Russian Ground Forces

Commander Vladimir Semenov stated that Transnistria should be considered “historically Russian territory” and supported the establishment of a Russian military base there (Bulavinov 1994).

Since the spring of 1994, Russia has repeatedly attempted to impose a model of statehood on Moldova that would expand and legitimize its influence (Romashkevich 1994). One of the most notable examples is the 2003 Kozak Memorandum, which proposed embedding regions with different statuses into Moldova’s constitutional framework, effectively transforming the country into an “asymmetric federation.” The plan also included maintaining a Russian military presence for 20 years. In 2019, Russian Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov stated that the Kozak Memorandum was essentially analogous to the Minsk agreements and that Russia’s position on Transnistria had not changed (Solov’ev and Chernenko 2019). Chişinău has consistently rejected such proposals, as federalization under these terms would effectively paralyze the state (Solov’ev 2019).

Although separatism in Transnistria and Gagauzia has been a major destabilizing factor, it did not completely derail Moldova’s democratic reforms. In the 1990s, Moldova underwent a difficult process of recalibrating the balance of power between executive and legislative branches. The absence of an institutionalized party system--characterized by frequent party switching, unstable coalitions, and weak ideological platforms--contributed to a chaotic reform process. Political competition was driven less by programs than by personalities, often originating from the former Soviet nomenklatura. Attempts to consolidate power through a strong presidential system (notably under Mircea Snegur in 1995 and Petru Lucinschi in 1999) were consistently blocked by other political actors. This ultimately led to the 2000 constitutional reform establishing Moldova as a parliamentary republic.

According to Freedom House data, between 1998 and 2003 Moldova ranked as the leading post-Soviet state in terms of aggregated indices of political rights and civil liberties (Freedom House 2024; Ambrosio 2009). However, by the early 2000s Moldova had become the poorest country in Europe, facing a growing debt burden, an expanding shadow economy, and rising corruption, particularly in the service sector. Nearly half of the population lived below the poverty line, triggering a large wave of emigration (World Bank 2004). By 2006, approximately 25% of the economically active population was working abroad, and remittances accounted for 32.8% of GDP (World Bank Group 2016).

Meanwhile, the Kremlin continued to exploit separatism to influence Moldova’s foreign policy orientation. After negotiations on the Kozak Memorandum stalled, Moldova increasingly demanded that Russia fulfil its commitments under the 1999 Istanbul OSCE Document to withdraw its troops. In December 2004, Moldova’s Foreign Minister Andrei Stratan declared that Russian troops were illegally stationed on Moldovan territory, effectively occupying part of it and consolidating the separatist regime rather than facilitating reintegration (OSCE 2004). In response, Russia imposed trade embargoes on Moldovan agricultural products.

Russia similarly sought to obstruct Moldova’s signing of the EU Association Agreement ahead of the 2013 Vilnius Summit. In September 2013, Russia’s special envoy Dmitry Rogozin warned that closer ties with the EU could threaten Moldova’s territorial integrity (Mirtvmoldova 2013). Shortly thereafter, Russia imposed a ban on Moldovan wine imports (Interfax 2013), later partially lifting it only for producers in Gagauzia (Interfax 2014).

At the same time, Gagauzia intensified its separatist rhetoric. On the day of the Vilnius Summit, its People’s Assembly called for a referendum on EU integration versus joining the Russia-led Customs Union, alongside a proposal for “deferred self-determination” (Narodnoe Sobranie Gagauzii 2014). Regional authorities also announced plans to establish autonomous legal institutions (Gamova 2013).

Russia’s repeated use of economic coercion has contributed to Moldova’s gradual reorientation of trade toward the European Union. Since 2013, Romania has become Moldova’s largest trading partner, and even Transnistria now exports more than 80% of its goods to EU markets (Government of Moldova 2024).

Importantly, Moldova has consistently ruled out military solutions to the Transnistrian conflict. A 2005 law explicitly stipulates that reintegration should occur through peaceful means, democratization, and demilitarization (Parliament of Moldova 2005). Improvements in living standards and diversification of energy sources are considered key drivers of this process (Serebrian and Nicu 2024). Despite its former economic strength, Transnistria has become one of Moldova's least developed regions due to prolonged isolation, authoritarian governance, and dependence on subsidized Russian energy (World Bank 1998). While income levels between the two banks of the Dniester were comparable until 2011, disparities have since widened. By 2024, real wages in Transnistria are estimated to be more than twice as low as in the rest of Moldova (Macari 2024; Procopciuc 2024).

At the same time, Chişinău has introduced legislative measures to limit separatism. Amendments to the Criminal Code in 2023 criminalized separatist activities, while the 2024 Customs Code removed long-standing privileges for Transnistrian companies. Moldova has also reduced its energy dependence on Russia through infrastructure projects such as the Iaşi–Ungheni–Chişinău gas pipeline and electricity interconnections with Romania.

Nevertheless, Russia retains significant leverage over Moldova's internal political dynamics. As of 2024, approximately 220,000 Russian passport holders reside in Transnistria (Russian MFA 2024), providing Moscow with a pretext for intervention. Russia has also supported pro-Russian political forces through opaque financing. Following the electoral defeat of Igor Dodon, Russian actors intensified cooperation with the Şor Party. Its leader, Ilan Şor, convicted for involvement in a major banking fraud, fled abroad but continued to influence Moldovan politics (Belton 2022). The party has been accused of organizing paid protests and was declared unconstitutional in 2023 (BBC 2023). Nevertheless, pro-Russian networks have remained active, including attempts to influence elections through voter bribery (Nistor 2024). At the same time, Moldova's EU integration trajectory has supported democratic consolidation. According to the European Commission (2024), Moldova's institutional and legal frameworks--particularly in law enforcement, minority protection, and gender equality - are broadly aligned with EU standards. While media freedom has historically been constrained by political and economic pressures (Cukrowski, Gortat, and Kazmierkiewicz 2003), significant progress has been achieved under President Maia Sandu. Moldova currently ranks 31st in the Reporters Without Borders Press Freedom Index (RSF 2024), the highest among Eastern Neighbourhood countries.

However, even under conditions of economic development and institutional reform, the reintegration of Transnistria remains a long-term challenge. Beyond Russia's continued interference, deeply embedded political culture shaped by undemocratic practices continues to reproduce itself, sustaining demand for anti-systemic and pro-Russian political forces (Popescu and Litra 2012).

Recent electoral cycles in Moldova have become critical tests of the country's geopolitical orientation, particularly in the context of the 2024 presidential and 2025 parliamentary elections, both widely perceived as decisive for Moldova's European integration trajectory. During this period, Russian-linked actors intensified hybrid interference aimed at undermining public trust in pro-European authorities and weakening support for EU accession. These efforts included coordinated disinformation campaigns, illicit political financing, voter bribery, cyber and media manipulation, and the orchestration of protests designed to simulate widespread social dissatisfaction--tactics characteristic of contemporary hybrid warfare and information manipulation (Galeotti 2016; Pomerantsev 2019). Investigations by Moldovan authorities revealed extensive networks associated with Ilan Şor and affiliated structures, which were used to channel financial resources and mobilize participants for destabilizing activities (Nistor 2024).

In fact, Russia-linked actors' actions sought not only to influence voter preferences but also to delegitimize electoral processes and erode confidence in democratic institutions. However, the Moldovan government, under President Maia Sandu and the Party of Action and Solidarity (PAS), demonstrated a comparatively high level of institutional resilience. Authorities adopted a series of legal and administrative countermeasures, including the banning of the Şor Party as unconstitutional, tightening regulations on political financing, strengthening electoral oversight, and enhancing cooperation with international partners to detect and

expose foreign interference (BBC 2023). Public communication strategies were also employed to counter disinformation narratives and reinforce trust in state institutions.

At the same time, Moldova's European integration process functioned as a key source of resilience. The prospect of EU membership provided both a normative anchor and practical support for reforms in areas such as rule of law, electoral integrity, and media governance (European Commission 2024). This external anchoring strengthened domestic institutions and increased their capacity to withstand external pressure during politically sensitive periods.

Overall, the 2024–2025 electoral cycle demonstrates that while hybrid interference can significantly challenge democratic processes, its effectiveness depends on domestic institutional strength, political leadership, and external anchoring. In Moldova's case, sustained reform efforts combined with a clear strategic orientation toward the European Union enabled the country not only to resist destabilization attempts but also to preserve its pro-European trajectory in a highly contested geopolitical environment.

### 3 Conclusions

Observation of the above cases confirms that the level of democracy in states facing separatism and territorial claims is closely interconnected with the nature of their political systems, the vision and intentions of ruling elites, and the extent to which democratic institutions—such as free elections, independent media, transparency, and a democratic political culture—are genuinely practiced. At the same time, these domestic factors must be understood within the broader geopolitical environment in which they operate.

In many such contexts, democratization has long been perceived by governing elites as a process that could weaken the state, undermine military capabilities, and potentially facilitate political change that threatens incumbent leadership. As scholars of weak states have argued, “democratization requires a radical shift in the nature of political power, something which is likely to be opposed by those that stand to lose from such political change” (Söderberg and Ohlson 2003). This dynamic is particularly evident in the countries of the European Union’s Eastern Neighbourhood, where unresolved conflicts and persistent external pressure reinforce the tendency to prioritize regime stability and territorial control over democratic consolidation.

At the same time, it is important to note that in several cases separatism was not solely the result of direct external intervention, but rather a phenomenon that was subsequently exploited and sustained by external actors. In the post-Soviet space, Russia has frequently leveraged existing internal divisions, unresolved identity conflicts, and institutional weaknesses in newly independent states to expand its influence. Rather than consistently initiating separatist movements, Moscow has often acted as a strategic opportunist—fuelling, instrumentalizing, and preserving such conflicts in order to maintain political leverage over neighbouring countries. This approach has had broader systemic implications. By perpetuating unresolved territorial conflicts, Russia has contributed to weakening state institutions and undermining the development of political systems based on broad societal legitimacy. In this sense, separatism functions not only as a security challenge but also as a structural constraint on democratization, limiting the ability of states to consolidate effective governance and pursue independent political trajectories.

This external dimension fundamentally reshapes the relationship between state-building and democratization. Rather than evolving as mutually reinforcing processes, as often assumed in the literature, they tend to become structurally competing priorities. Under conditions of sustained security threats, political elites often justify restrictions on democratic freedoms as necessary measures to safeguard sovereignty and national security.

Domestic political debates are frequently reframed by authorities as expressions of separatism or attempts to destabilize the state, allowing the survival of the state to be equated with the survival of the ruling regime. Such framing enables the consolidation of power, the weakening of opposition forces, and the marginalization of civil society under the pretext of defending national unity.

Importantly, the comparative analysis also demonstrates variation across cases. In some contexts, such as Azerbaijan, conflict has contributed to the consolidation of stable authoritarian governance, while in others—particularly Ukraine and Moldova—democratization has progressed despite ongoing external pressure. However, even in these cases, institutional reforms have been constrained by the inability of state institutions to fully counter external interference and by inconsistent political will to implement deep structural changes (D’Anieri 2007, 70–71).

Case	Nature of Conflict	External Role (Russia)	Domestic Political Trajectory	Impact on Statehood	Impact on Democracy
<b>Georgia</b>	Protracted separatism (Abkhazia, South Ossetia)	Direct military + political control	Hybrid → increasingly illiberal tendencies	Partial territorial loss, constrained sovereignty	Democratic development constrained by security priorities
<b>Ukraine</b>	Territorial conflict → full-scale war	Direct military aggression	Competitive democracy (with disruptions)	Severe sovereignty challenge but strong state consolidation	Democratization continues under pressure
<b>Moldova</b>	Frozen conflict (Transnistria)	Military presence + political leverage	Fluctuating between pro-EU and pro-Russian forces	Limited control over territory	Partial democratic progress, fragile institutions
<b>Azerbaijan</b>	Conflict resolved through military victory	Limited direct role (more indirect influence)	Stable authoritarianism	Territorial integrity restored	Democratization limited, strong regime consolidation
<b>Armenia</b>	Conflict with Azerbaijan over Karabakh	Security dependence on Russia	Hybrid → partial democratic opening	Security vulnerability	Mixed trajectory, constrained reforms

**Table 3. Comparative Impact of Separatist Conflicts on Statehood and Democratization in EN**

Source: Author's synthesis based on case(s) analysis.

These findings suggest that conventional approaches to democratization, which focus primarily on institutional reforms and internal political bargaining, are insufficient in conflict-affected environments. As experience in the EN shows, institutional reforms alone remain fragile in the face of hybrid or armed intervention by neighbouring states. Without addressing the external dimension, such reforms are vulnerable to reversal, manipulation, or capture. Therefore, when analysing the impact of separatism and territorial disputes on democratization, it is essential to incorporate the international and geopolitical context as a central explanatory variable. Excluding this dimension—particularly the role of Russia—leads to a distorted understanding of political development in the region. Russia actively fuels separatism and promotes governance arrangements, such as federalization, that weaken state institutions and increase its leverage over domestic and foreign policy choices.

In this context, democratization and conflict resolution should not be treated as sequential processes but as interdependent and mutually conditioned dynamics. Progress in democratic governance depends not only on internal institutional development but also on the reduction of external destabilizing pressures. Conversely, sustainable conflict resolution is unlikely without functioning democratic institutions capable of ensuring legitimacy, accountability, and inclusive governance.

Ultimately, the cases examined in this paper illustrate that democratization in contested states is shaped by a complex interaction of domestic and external factors. Where external interference is effectively countered and institutional resilience is strengthened, democratic development remains possible even under conditions of conflict. However, where separatism is sustained by external actors and internal governance remains weak, it is likely to reinforce authoritarian tendencies and hinder long-term political transformation.

## 4 Recommendations

- Since separatism in EN countries is closely linked to Russia's hostile influence, the EU should prioritize strengthening domestic security and defence capacities, alongside expanding joint programs in civil education and countering disinformation. Support should be designed in a way that aligns democratic reforms with the specific conditions of conflict-affected states.
- To reduce threats to Moldova's democratization, the EU should actively support initiatives aimed at the withdrawal of Russian troops illegally present on its territory and strengthen Moldova's institutional capacity and resilience.
- Following the restoration of Ukraine's control over its internationally recognised borders, authorities should consider targeted post-conflict governance measures, including differentiated legal arrangements (such as non-citizen passports), as part of a broader reintegration strategy.
- In the case of Armenia, the EU should support the implementation of peace agreements, promote regional normalization, and facilitate continued Europeanisation and democratic reform.
- Engagement with Azerbaijan should remain pragmatic but conditional, encouraging gradual progress in rule of law and human rights through measurable institutional benchmarks.
- In Georgia, the EU should strengthen support for civil society and pro-European actors, while combining engagement with targeted conditionality and available restrictive measures to incentivize a return to a democratic trajectory.

## 5 References

- Alexander, Jeffrey C. 2003. *The Meanings of Social Life: A Cultural Sociology*. New York: Oxford University Press.
- Aliyev, Heydar. 1998. Meeting with National Security Ministry Personnel. March 28. In *Heydər Əliyev və Qanunçuluq*. Baku.
- . 1999. "Speech at the First Congress of the New Azerbaijan Party." December 20.
- . 2001. Statement in the Milli Majlis (Parliament of Azerbaijan), February 23.
- Ambrosio, Thomas. 2009. *Authoritarian Backlash: Russian Resistance to Democratization in the Former Soviet Union*. Burlington, VT: Ashgate.
- Amnesty International. 2019. "Behind Barbed Wire: Human Rights Toll of 'Borderization' in Georgia." July 2, 2019. <https://www.amnesty.org/en/documents/eur56/0581/2019/en/>.
- Anderson, Benedict. 2006. *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism*. Rev. ed. London: Verso.
- Azadlyg. 1995. "Russia Sealed off Azerbaijani–Russian Border." February 8.
- AzerTac (Azerbaijan State News Agency). 1998. "President Heydar Aliyev's Meeting with the Council of Europe Delegation." April.
- Azarov, Mykola. 2015. *Ukraina na Pereput'e: Zapiski Prem'er-Ministra*. Moscow: Veche.
- Bakhtadze, Revaz. 2003. "Railway to the Dead End." *Civil.ge*, January 6, 2003. <https://civil.ge/archives/106963>.
- Barbieri, Jaroslava. 2020. "The Dark Side of Decentralization Reform in Ukraine: Deterring or Facilitating Russia-Sponsored Separatism?" In *Decentralization, Regional Diversity, and Conflict*, edited by Hanna Shelest and Maryna Rabinovych, 211–256. Cham: Palgrave Macmillan.
- BBC. 2023. "Moldovan Court Bans Pro-Russian Party Şor." *BBC News*, June 19, 2023. <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-65952878>.
- Belous, Aleksandr. 2012. "Russkie Natsionalisty Kryma Zhdut Poyavleniya Sobstvennoy 'Svobody'." *Zerkalo Nedeli*, November 2, 2012.
- Belton, Catherine. 2022. "Russia's Security Service Works to Subvert Moldova's Pro-Western Government." *The Washington Post*, October 28, 2022. <https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/2022/10/28/russia-fsb-moldova-manipulation/>.
- Belyaev, Aleksej, and Sergej Kolerov. 2011. "Ukraina: Itogi – 2010 i Vyzovy – 2011." *Regnum*, January 20, 2011. <https://regnum.ru/article/1365715>.
- Broers, Laurence. 2019. *Armenia and Azerbaijan: Anatomy of a Rivalry*. Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press.
- Bulavinov, Ilya. 1994. "V Planovuiu Boievuiu Podgotovku Vyvod Voisk Ne Vkhodit." *Kommersant*, November 30, 1994. <https://www.kommersant.ru/doc/96534>.
- Chambers, Madeline. 2014. "Germany's Vice-Chancellor Backs 'Federalization' in Ukraine." *Reuters*, August 23, 2014. <https://www.reuters.com>.

Collier, Paul. 2007. *The Bottom Billion: Why the Poorest Countries Are Failing and What Can Be Done About It*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Coppedge, Michael, John Gerring, Carl Henrik Knutsen, Staffan I. Lindberg, Jan Teorell, et al. 2024. *V-Dem Dataset v14*. Varieties of Democracy (V-Dem) Project. <https://www.v-dem.net/data/the-v-dem-dataset/>.

Cornell, Svante E. 2011. *Azerbaijan Since Independence*. Armonk, NY: M.E. Sharpe.

CRRC Armenia. 2015. "Trends in the Data: Changes in the Level of Trust in Social and Political Institutions in Armenia." <https://crrc.ge>.

Crowther, William. 1997. "The Politics of Democratization in Postcommunist Moldova." In *Democratic Changes and Authoritarian Reactions in Russia, Ukraine, Belarus, and Moldova*, edited by Karen Dawisha and Bruce Parrott, 292–325. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Cukrowski, Jacek, Radzislawa Gortat, and Piotr Kazmierkiewicz. 2003. *Moldova: Assessment of Civil Society and Democratic Institutions*. Warsaw: Center for Social and Economic Research.

D'Anieri, Paul. 2007. *Understanding Ukrainian Politics: Power, Politics, and Institutional Design*. Armonk, NY: M.E. Sharpe.

de Waal, Thomas. 2010. *The Caucasus: An Introduction*. New York: Oxford University Press.

-----, 2013. *Black Garden: Armenia and Azerbaijan through Peace and War*. Rev. ed. New York: New York University Press.

Economic Development and Research Center (EDRC). 2025. "Public Finance and Budget Expenditure Data of Armenia." <https://www.edrc.am>.

Encarnación, Omar G. 2024. "Why Separatism Is No Match for Democracy." *Journal of Democracy* 35 (1): 134–146.

European Commission. 2024. *Republic of Moldova 2024 Report*. SWD (2024) 698 final. Brussels, October 30, 2024. <https://neighbourhood-enlargement.ec.europa.eu>.

European Council. 2014. *European Council Conclusions (EUCO 256/14)*. Brussels, November 25, 2014.

Freedom House. 2024. *Freedom in the World 2024: Country and Territory Ratings and Statuses*. <https://freedomhouse.org>.

Galeotti, Mark. 2016. "Hybrid War or Gibrinaya Voyna? Getting Russia's Non-Linear Military Challenge Right." *Small Wars & Insurgencies* 27 (2): 282–301.

Gamova, Svetlana. 2013. "Gagauzy Delayut Shag k Nezavisimosti." *Nezavisimaya Gazeta*, December 17, 2013.

Geda, Elena. 2012. "Ukrainu Raskladyvayut po Chastyam." *Kommersant-Ukraina*, July 16, 2012.

GeoStat (National Statistics Office of Georgia). 2003. *Results of the 2002 First Population Census in Georgia*. Tbilisi.

Government of the Republic of Moldova. 2024. "New Record: Share of Exports from the Transnistrian Region of Moldova to EU Countries." July 24, 2024. <https://gov.md>.

Haynes, Rebecca. 2020. *Moldova: A History*. London: I.B. Tauris.

- Hiedler, Stefan, and Sebastian Rohles. 2021. Discussion Paper 7/2021. Bonn: German Institute of Development and Sustainability (IDOS).
- Hisamov, Iskander. 2017. "Konstantin Zatulin: Rossiya Vyderzhit Ispytanie Ukrainoj." *Ukraina.ru*, December 18, 2017.
- Hobsbawm, Eric J. 1990. *Nations and Nationalism since 1780: Programme, Myth, Reality*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- International Crisis Group. 2004. *Moldova: Regional Tensions over Transdnistria*. Europe Report No. 157, June 17, 2004.
- . 2020. *Nagorno-Karabakh: Getting to a Durable Ceasefire*. Brussels.
- International Republican Institute (IRI). 2013. *Public Opinion Survey of Residents of Crimea*. Washington, DC.
- Kalichava, Kakhaber. 2021. *Kosovo, Abkhazia, Tskhinvali Region: Historical and Comparative Analysis of Contemporary Conflicts*. Tbilisi: Color Group.
- Kazdobina, Julia, Jakob Hedenskog, and Andreas Umland. 2024. *Why the Donbas War Was Never "Civil"*. Stockholm: Swedish Institute of International Affairs.
- King, Charles. 2001. "The Benefits of Ethnic War: Understanding Eurasia's Unrecognized States." *World Politics* 53 (4): 524–552.
- Kolstø, Pål, Andrei Edemsky, and Natalya Kalashnikova. 1993. "The Dniester Conflict: Between Irredentism and Separatism." *Europe-Asia Studies* 45 (6): 973–1000.
- Komakhia, Mamuka. 2009. "Ethnic Minorities During the Transitional Period." In *Georgia in Transition: Experiences and Perspectives*, edited by Lorenz King and Giorgi Khubua, 97–113. Bern: Peter Lang.
- . 2023. *Who Forms and Who Implements the Kremlin's Policy in the Occupied Regions of Georgia: A Roadmap*. Tbilisi.
- . 2024. *The Russian Occupied Regions of Georgia: Main Events and Trends of 2024*. Tbilisi.
- Krasner, Stephen D. 1999. *Sovereignty: Organized Hypocrisy*. Princeton: Princeton University Press.
- Kubicek, Paul. 2002. "Regionalism in Post-Soviet Ukraine." In *Unity or Separation*, edited by Daniel R. Kempton and Terry D. Clark, 239–262. Westport, CT: Praeger.
- Linz, Juan J., and Alfred Stepan. 1996. *Problems of Democratic Transition and Consolidation*. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press.
- Little, Andrew T., and Anne Meng. 2024. "Measuring Democratic Backsliding." *PS: Political Science & Politics* 57 (2): 149–161.
- Lavrov, Sergey. 2014. "Statement and Answers to Questions." Russian Ministry of Foreign Affairs, March 20, 2014.
- . 2023. "Interview with RIA Novosti and Rossiya 24." Russian Ministry of Foreign Affairs, December 28, 2023.
- Linz, Juan J., and Alfred Stepan. 1996. *Problems of Democratic Transition and Consolidation: Southern Europe, South America, and Post-Communist Europe*. Baltimore and London: Johns Hopkins University Press.

- Little, Andrew T., and Anne Meng. 2024. "Measuring Democratic Backsliding." *PS: Political Science & Politics* 57 (2): 149–161.
- Macari, Laura. 2024. "Saliile din Regiunea Transnistreană, de Două Ori Mai Mici." *Agora.md*, September 8, 2024.
- Mandeville, Laure. 1991. "Un Putsch Communiste Peut Réussir." *Le Figaro*, December 4, 1991.
- Mirtvmoldova. 2013. "Vystuplenie Dmitriya Rogozina vo Vremya Kruglogo Stola." YouTube video, September 3, 2013. <https://www.youtube.com>.
- Narodnoe Sobranie Gagauzii. 2014. Law No. 33, "On Deferred Status of the Gagauz People." February 2, 2014.
- Nistor, Măriuța. 2024. "Na Sluzhbe u Moskvu: Tri Mesyaca Sredi 'Rabov' Shora." *Ziarul de Gardă*, October 12, 2024.
- OECD. 2022. *Rebuilding Ukraine by Reinforcing Regional and Municipal Governance*. Paris: OECD Publishing.
- Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE). 2018. *OSCE Minsk Group Statements and Reports*. Vienna.
- OSCE. 2004. "Statement by Andrei Stratan at the 12th Ministerial Council." Sofia, December 2004.
- Parliament of the Republic of Moldova. 2005. Law No. 173 on the Special Legal Status of Transnistria. July 22, 2005.
- Peuch, Jean-Christophe. 2002. "Georgia/Russia: Naturalization Issue Further Strains Relations." *Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty*, June 13, 2002.
- Pomerantsev, Peter. 2019. *This Is Not Propaganda: Adventures in the War Against Reality*. New York: PublicAffairs.
- Popescu, Nicu. 2006. *Democracy in Secessionism: Transnistria and Abkhazia's Domestic Politics*. Report for the Venice Commission of the Council of Europe, CDL-JU (2006) 011. Strasbourg, September 12, 2006.
- Popescu, Nicu, and Leonid Litra. 2012. *Transnistria: A Bottom-Up Solution*. London: European Council on Foreign Relations.
- Presidential Decree. 1994. "On Strengthening the Fight against Crime and Enhancing Law and Order." August 9.
- Procopciuc, Maria. 2024. "Veniturile Reale ale Moldovenilor Vor Crește." *IDIS Viitorul*, April 12, 2024.
- Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty. 1997. "Georgia: Peace Talks Begin." August 14, 1997.
- Radio Svoboda. 2015. "Federalizatii v Ukraini ne Bude." February 11, 2015.
- Reporters Without Borders (RSF). 2024. *World Press Freedom Index 2024*. <https://rsf.org>.
- Roper, Steven D. 2004. "From Frozen Conflict to Frozen Agreement." In *De Facto States: The Quest for Sovereignty*, edited by Tozun Bahcheli, Barry Bartmann, and Henry Srebrnik, 102–117. London: Routledge.
- Rose-Ackerman, Susan. 2008. "Corruption and Post-Conflict Peacebuilding." Yale Law School.
- Rzeszutko, Mariusz. 2022. *The Borderization of Georgia's Breakaways*. Garmisch-Partenkirchen: George C. Marshall European Center for Security Studies.

- Sasse, Gwendolyn. 2007. *The Crimea Question: Identity, Transition, and Conflict*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard Ukrainian Research Institute.
- Sasse, Gwendolyn, and Alice Lackner. 2019. *Attitudes and Identities across the Donbas Front Line: What Has Changed from 2016 to 2019?* Berlin: ZOiS.
- Shelley, Louise I. 1995. "Post-Soviet Organized Crime and the Rule of Law." *The John Marshall Law Review* 28 (4): 827–845.
- Sherr, James. 1999. "Ukraine's New Time of Troubles." *Journal of Slavic Military Studies* 12 (2): 48–88.
- . 2020. *Nothing New under the Sun? Russian Policy towards Ukraine*. Tallinn: International Centre for Defence and Security.
- Sidorenko, Sergey. 2014. "Federalization Debate." *Kommersant-Ukraina*.
- Smoliy, Valeriy, ed. 2016. *25 Rokiv Nezalezhnosti*. Kyiv: Nika-Tsentr.
- Social Justice Center. 2025. "Resettlement of IDPs in Georgia." April 24, 2025.
- Söderberg, Mimmi, and Thomas Ohlson. 2003. *Democratisation and Armed Conflicts in Weak States*. Stockholm: Swedish International Development Cooperation Agency (Sida).
- Solov'ev, Vladimir. 2019. "Zona Nashikh Privilegirovannykh Interesov." *Kommersant*, September 12, 2019.
- Solov'ev, Vladimir, and Elena Chernenko. 2019. "Vojnu My Ne Nachnem." *Kommersant*, September 25, 2019.
- Sovetskiy Karabakh. 1988. "Nagorno-Karabakh Developments." February 21, 1988. Stepanakert.
- State Security Service of Georgia. 2016. *Annual Report 2015*. Tbilisi.
- Stepan, Alfred. 1999. "Federalism and Democracy: Beyond the U.S. Model." *Journal of Democracy* 10 (4): 19–34.
- Szostek, Joanna, and Lisa Toremark. 2023. *Democracy in Ukraine*. London: Chatham House.
- Texty.org.ua. 2012. "Ukrainian Language in Education and Publishing." November 9, 2012.
- Topuria, Tea. 2023. "The May War in Gali." *Radio Liberty*, June 2, 2023.
- Transparency International. 2023. *Corruption Perceptions Index 2023*. <https://www.transparency.org>.
- Tsamalashvili, Eka. 2005. "The Gori Terrorist Attack." *Radio Liberty*, July 26, 2005.
- Turan News Agency. 1998. June 24.
- Verdenicci, Silvia, and Dan Hough. 2015. "People Power and Anti-Corruption: Demystifying Citizen-Centred Approaches." *Crime, Law and Social Change* 64 (1): 23–35.
- Viasna Human Rights Center. 2023. *Reports on the Human Rights Situation in Belarus*. <https://spring96.org/en/publications>.
- Voschanov, Pavel. 1991. "Statement of the Press Secretary." *Nezavisimaya Gazeta*, August 27, 1991.
- Voznyak, Taras. 2011. "Prizraki Galitskogo Separatizma." *Zerkalo Nedeli*, November 11, 2011.




- Wheatley, Jonathan. 2005. *Georgia from National Awakening to Rose Revolution: Delayed Transition in the Former Soviet Union*. Aldershot: Ashgate.
- White, Zuzana, et al. 2025. *Sabotaging Peace: Corruption as a Threat to International Security*. Berlin: Transparency International.
- World Bank. 1998. *Republic of Moldova: Economic Review of the Transnistria Region*.
- World Bank. 2021. *Azerbaijan Country Economic Update*. Washington, DC. Washington, DC: World Bank.
- . 2004. *Moldova Country Assistance Evaluation*. Washington, DC: World Bank.
- . 2021. *Azerbaijan Country Economic Update*. Washington, DC: World Bank.
- World Bank Group. 2016. *Poverty Reduction and Shared Prosperity in Moldova*. Washington, DC: World Bank Group.
- Yanukovich, Viktor. 2008. "Policy Statement." *Zerkalo Nedeli*, August 22, 2008.
- Young, Philip T. 2011. "The Determinants of State Capture in Eastern Europe." SSRN Working Paper. Rochester, NY: Social Science Research Network.
- Zatulin, Konstantin. 2005. "Bor'ba za Ukrainu." *Rossiia v Global'noy Politike*, no. 1.
- APRI (Applied Policy Research Institute). 2024. *Outlining Russia's Future in the South Caucasus: An Armenian Perspective*. <https://apri.institute/>
- Carnegie Endowment for International Peace. 2024. "Armenia Navigates a Path Away from Russia." <https://carnegieendowment.org/>
- Cornell, Svante E. 2011. *Azerbaijan Since Independence*. Armonk, NY: M.E. Sharpe.
- De Waal, Thomas. 2013. *Black Garden: Armenia and Azerbaijan through Peace and War*. Rev. ed. New York: New York University Press.
- International Crisis Group. 2020. *Nagorno-Karabakh: Getting to a Durable Ceasefire*. Brussels.
- The Diplomat. 2024. "Armenia Skips CSTO Military Exercises." <https://thediplomat.com/>
- Zolyan, Mikayel. 2026. "Russia Won't Give Up Its Influence in Armenia Without a Fight." Carnegie Endowment for International Peace.



**REDEMOS: REconfiguring EU DEMOcracy Support.  
Towards a sustained demos in the EU's Eastern Neighbourhood**

REDEMOS- 101061738  
HORIZON-CL2-2021-DEMOCRACY-01-04

**Dr Mădălina Dobrescu, NTNU**  
**info@redemos.eu**

 [redemos.eu](https://redemos.eu)     [@REDEMOS\\_eu](https://twitter.com/REDEMOS_eu)     [REDEMOS Horizon Europe Project](https://www.linkedin.com/company/redemos/)