

A New Race in the Post-Soviet Space

The collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991 created one of the most profound geopolitical transformations of the modern era, spanning two continents: Europe and Asia. The end of the Cold War had a profound effect on global politics, but the transformation within the former empire proved to be a more painful and open-ended endeavor. Moscow inherited the Soviet Union's seat on the United Nations Security Council, the bulk of its military power, its nuclear arsenal, and much of its economic infrastructure. For a time, it appeared that the newly independent republics would continue to orbit around Russia, bound by historical ties, economic dependence, and security arrangements.

Three decades later, however, the era in which Russia served as the uncontested center of gravity across Eurasia is coming to an end. The region is no longer defined solely by Russia's influence. Instead, it is becoming a more fragmented, dynamic, and competitive geopolitical landscape, marked by the rise

of new regional powers, the growing role of local actors, and the increasing involvement of China, Türkiye, the European Union, the United States, and the Gulf states.

The most important question is no longer whether Russia's dominance is declining. It is who is benefiting from that decline.

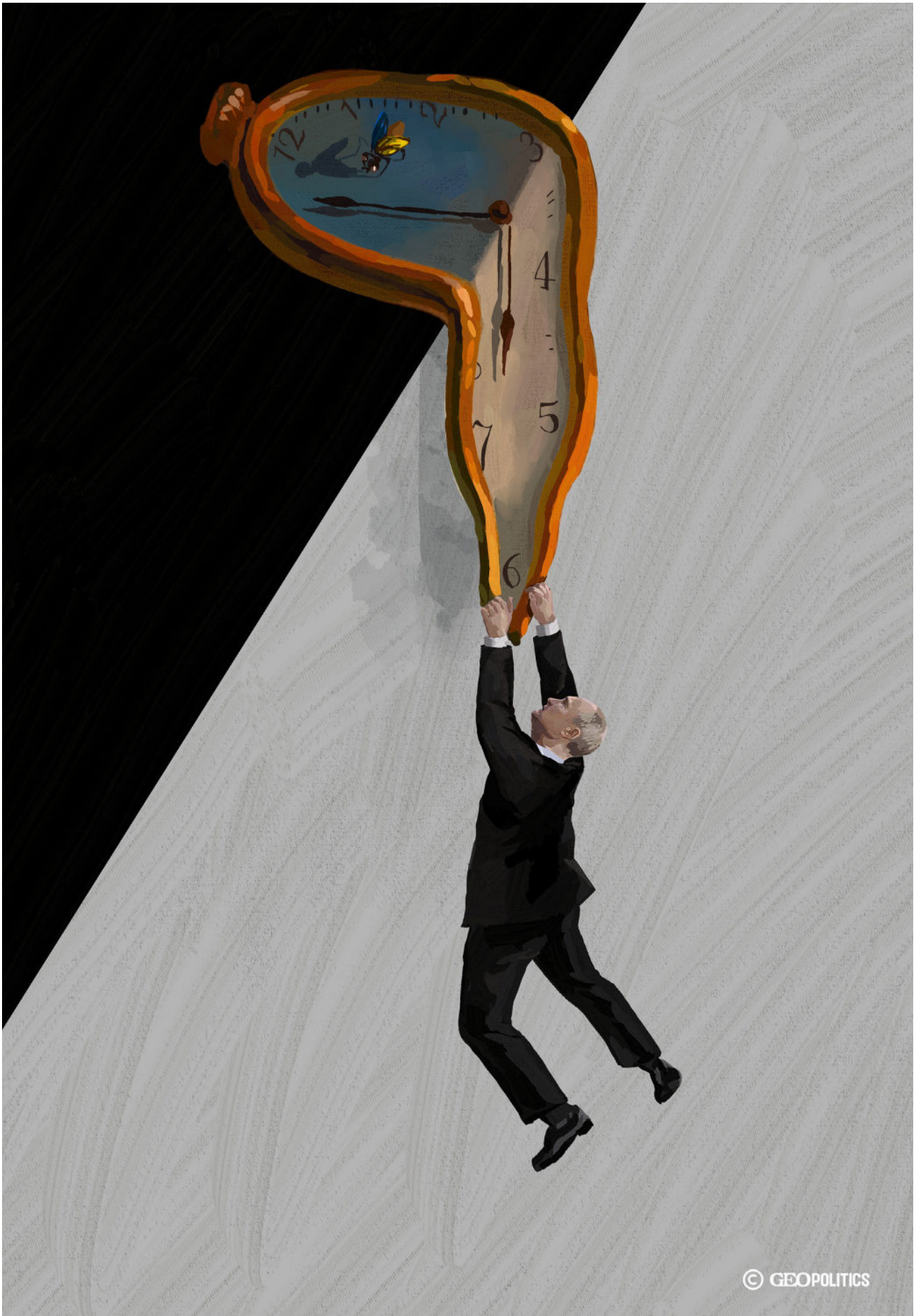
Yet the most important question is no longer whether Russia's dominance is declining. It is who is benefiting from that decline. Across the former Soviet space, a new geopolitical race is underway. States are competing to position themselves as indispensable actors in emerging transportation corridors, energy networks, security arrangements, and economic partnerships.

Some have adapted remarkably well. Ukraine has shattered the myth of Russian invincibility and emerged as a critical pillar of European security.



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This illustration is inspired by Salvador Dalí's The Persistence of Memory (1931).

Azerbaijan has leveraged its military success, strategic geography, partnership with Türkiye, and energy resources to become a key player in the South Caucasus and a critical link in emerging Eurasian connectivity projects. Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan are pursuing increasingly sophisticated multi-vector foreign policies, while Türkiye and China have expanded their influence across large parts of Eurasia.

Georgia occupies a unique place in this competition. Strategically located at the crossroads of Europe and Asia, with access to the Black Sea and a long-established role as a transit corridor, it should be among the principal beneficiaries of the new Eurasian order. Yet while its neighbors are successfully repositioning themselves in response to the changing geopolitical environment, Georgia is underperforming relative to its potential. Understanding why requires examining how Russia's dominance has eroded, who is emerging as the winner of the new Eurasian competition, and what this means for the future balance of power across the former Soviet space.

Russia's Post-Soviet Dominance and Its Limitations

Following the collapse of the Soviet Union, Russia sought to preserve its influence through a combination of military power, economic integration, energy dependency, and political leverage. It attempted to institutionalize its leadership through organizations such as the Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS), the Collective Security Treaty Organization, and later the Eurasian Economic Union (EAEU).

Russia maintained military bases across the region and positioned itself as the primary security guarantor for many former Soviet republics. It introduced the concept of the "Near Abroad," reflecting a view that the former Soviet space represented a privileged zone of Russian interests. Energy exports at discounted rates, trade relations, threats, and actual embargoes, as well as frozen conflicts, provided

Moscow with additional tools to influence neighboring states and shape political outcomes.

Yet Russia's influence was never as absolute as it appeared. The Baltic states rapidly integrated into NATO and the European Union. Georgia, Ukraine, and Moldova increasingly sought closer ties with Western institutions. Central Asian countries diversified their foreign and economic relations while carefully balancing their partnerships with Moscow.

The limitations of Russian power became increasingly visible throughout the 2000s and 2010s. Russia possessed substantial coercive capabilities but lacked an attractive political and economic model capable of inspiring neighboring societies. Unlike NATO, it could not offer a credible security framework. Unlike the European Union, it could not offer prosperity through integration. Unlike China, it could not provide large-scale investment and infrastructure financing. And it failed to recreate a "Russkii Mir" capable of superseding or even competing with local nationalist narratives. Instead, Moscow increasingly relied on pressure, coercion, and the preservation of unresolved conflicts to maintain its influence.

This approach generated growing resistance among neighboring states and accelerated efforts to reduce dependence on Russia. However, despite these limitations, Moscow remained the dominant geopolitical actor across much of the former Soviet space. The war against Ukraine has fundamentally altered that reality.

The Ukraine War as the Great Accelerator

The Russian invasion of Ukraine in February 2022 marked a watershed moment in the transformation of the post-Soviet space. More than any other event since the collapse of the Soviet Union, it challenged assumptions that had shaped the behavior of regional states for three decades.

The war exposed significant weaknesses in Russian military capabilities and challenged perceptions of Russian invincibility. States that had long viewed Russia as the region's dominant security provider began reassessing long-held assumptions. The image of Russia as the indispensable arbiter of political and security developments across Eurasia was weakened by its inability to achieve a decisive victory over a neighbor it had expected to defeat within weeks.

The war consumed enormous Russian military, economic, and political resources. Moscow increasingly found itself forced to prioritize Ukraine above all other foreign policy objectives. This reduced its capacity to project influence elsewhere and created new opportunities for regional actors to pursue more independent policies.

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Perhaps most importantly, the invasion accelerated a process of political emancipation across the former Soviet space. Governments throughout Eurasia intensified efforts to diversify their diplomatic, economic, and security partnerships. Armenia began questioning the value of its traditional security arrangements with Russia. Central Asian states pursued increasingly confident multi-vector foreign policies. Azerbaijan expanded its regional influence and further reduced Moscow's role in the South Caucasus.

Ukraine became the principal catalyst of this transformation. By resisting Russian aggression, it demonstrated that Russia's power had limits. For many countries across the former Soviet space, this realization proved as important as any battlefield development. The aura of inevitability that had surrounded Russian influence for decades began to erode.

Moreover, Russia's weakening created a vacuum, allowing regional middle powers capable of shaping events independently of Moscow to step in and fill it.

Türkiye has become one of the most significant beneficiaries of Russia's relative decline. Through a combination of economic engagement, cultural diplomacy, military cooperation, and strategic investments, Ankara has strengthened its position across the South Caucasus and Central Asia.

The Nagorno-Karabakh war demonstrated Türkiye's growing role. Its support for Azerbaijan significantly contributed to Baku's military success and altered the regional balance of power, further weakening Russia. Türkiye subsequently expanded its influence through transportation projects, energy corridors, and defense cooperation.

The Organization of Turkic States has emerged as an increasingly important platform linking Türkiye with Azerbaijan, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, and Uzbekistan. Although not a military alliance, it reflects a growing sense of political and cultural connectivity among Turkic-speaking nations and is increasingly serving as a rival geopolitical project in the post-Soviet space. Türkiye's influence is particularly significant because it offers regional states an alternative partnership model that does not require alignment with either Russia or the West.

China has also exploited Russia's weakness as it stepped up to capture the role of the most important economic actor in many parts of Central Asia. Through the Belt and Road Initiative, Beijing has invested heavily in transportation infrastructure, logistics networks, energy projects, and digital connectivity.

Unlike Russia, China approaches the region primarily through economics rather than ideology or military pressure. In return, Central Asian governments view Chinese investment as an opportunity to modernize infrastructure and diversify economic relationships.

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Ironically, due to the war in Ukraine, Russia itself became [heavily dependent](#) on the Chinese market and Chinese goods, including dual-use technologies, without which Russia's ability to continue the war would be significantly limited.

This trend is likely to continue, particularly as trade routes connecting Asia and Europe gain strategic importance.

Central Asian middle powers, such as Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan, are also increasingly acting as independent regional players rather than passive objects of great-power competition. Despite sharing a long border with Russia, Kazakhstan has resisted pressure to align fully with Moscow's geopolitical agenda. Uzbekistan, under a reform-oriented leadership, has emerged as an increasingly influential force in Central Asia. Its economic opening, diplomatic activism, and demographic weight position it as a future regional leader.

The Rise of Local Agency

Another important transformation is the rise of local agency. For much of the post-Soviet period, analysts viewed regional states primarily through the lens of great-power competition. The countries of the region were often portrayed as objects of Russian, Western, Chinese, or Turkish influence rather than as actors capable of shaping events themselves. This perspective reflected the realities of the 1990s and much of the 2000s, when Russia remained the dominant security actor, China was only beginning its economic expansion, and many newly independent states were still focused on state-building. Today, however, this approach is increasingly outdated. Local actors are no longer merely reacting to decisions taken in Moscow, Washington, Brussels,

Beijing, or Ankara. They are increasingly shaping events themselves, pursuing their own interests, creating new formats of cooperation, and using competition among larger powers to expand their room for maneuver.

This shift is evident in several areas.

First, national identities have strengthened considerably. New generations have grown up without direct experience of the Soviet Union. Their political outlooks are shaped more by national interests than by post-Soviet nostalgia. More than three decades after the collapse of the USSR, a growing share of the population across the region has no personal memory of Soviet life. In many countries, national identity has become the primary organizing principle of politics, foreign policy, and public discourse.

This trend is visible throughout Eurasia. Kazakhstan has accelerated its [transition](#) from Cyrillic to Latin script and is increasingly emphasizing a distinct Kazakh national narrative. Uzbekistan's reform agenda has been accompanied by a renewed emphasis on national development and regional leadership. Armenia's domestic debate increasingly revolves around how to secure the country's future as an independent European state (the [Real Armenia](#)) rather than as a traditional Russian ally. Azerbaijan's victory in Nagorno-Karabakh further strengthened confidence in an independent national course. Even in countries that remain closely connected to Russia, younger generations increasingly define their political and economic aspirations through national rather than post-Soviet frameworks.

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The war in Ukraine has reinforced these trends. Russia's invasion was intended, at least in part, to deny the legitimacy of a distinct Ukrainian national

identity. Instead, it produced the opposite effect. Ukraine emerged not only as a military actor but also as a powerful symbol of national self-determination. Across the post-Soviet space, governments and societies have drawn lessons from Ukraine's experience, recognizing both the importance of sovereignty and the risks associated with excessive dependence on larger powers. Even in occupied regions, like Abkhazia, pressure on national identity often causes a push back and proliferates irritation with Russian dominance.

Second, governments are pursuing independent foreign policies tailored to their specific circumstances. Rather than choosing between Russia and the West, many states seek flexible partnerships with multiple actors simultaneously. These new partnerships extend to India, Pakistan, the Gulf states, Israel, Japan, and South Korea.

This trend is particularly visible in Central Asia. Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan have expanded relations with virtually every major global and regional actor while carefully avoiding excessive dependence on any single partner. The growing number of "Central Asia Plus" formats illustrates this approach. Today, the region maintains institutionalized dialogue not only with Russia and China, but also with the European Union, the United States, Japan, South Korea, India, the Gulf Cooperation Council, and other partners.

The pace of this diversification has accelerated noticeably in recent years. The first European Union-Central Asia Summit in Samarkand in April 2025 marked an important milestone, demonstrating that the five Central Asian states increasingly engage external powers as a region rather than solely as individual countries. The summit [elevated](#) relations with the European Union to a strategic partnership and highlighted the growing geopolitical significance of Central Asia. The Gulf states have also expanded their presence through investment, infrastructure projects, and political engagement. India has intensified its Central Asia dialogue while

promoting alternative trade and transport routes through Iran and the International North-South Transport Corridor. Japan and South Korea have both strengthened their political, economic, and technological engagement with the region. The United States has also renewed its attention to Central Asia through the C5+1 framework, culminating in [high-level meetings](#) with the region's leaders and reinforcing the growing importance of Central Asia in Washington's Eurasian strategy.

What makes these developments particularly important is that they are being driven not by external actors but by regional governments themselves. Unlike in previous decades, when foreign policy often revolved around balancing relations with Moscow, many governments are now actively constructing diversified diplomatic portfolios designed to maximize economic opportunities, political flexibility, and strategic autonomy.

Armenia offers another example of this transformation. Following growing disappointment with Russia's security guarantees, Yerevan has expanded relations with the European Union, France, India, and the United States. Prime Minister Nikol Pashinyan [campaigned](#) and [won](#) on a nationalist narrative built around the notion of resisting Moscow. Azerbaijan has simultaneously deepened ties with Türkiye, Europe, Central Asia, Israel, and the Gulf states while maintaining pragmatic relations with Russia and China. These policies reflect not geopolitical indecision but increasingly sophisticated efforts to avoid overdependence on any single external actor.

Third, regional cooperation is becoming more important. Central Asian countries have expanded dialogue and coordination among themselves, and the region is experiencing what may be described as a strategic renaissance. For much of the post-Soviet era, Central Asia was often viewed as peripheral. Today, it occupies a central place in emerging Eurasian connectivity networks.

One of the most remarkable developments of recent years has been the growing willingness of Central Asian governments to engage directly with one another. Since 2018, the leaders of Kazakhstan, Uzbekistan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, and Turkmenistan have established regular consultative meetings without external sponsorship.

One of the most remarkable developments of recent years has been the growing willingness of Central Asian governments to engage directly with one another. Since 2018, the leaders of Kazakhstan, Uzbekistan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, and Turkmenistan have established regular consultative meetings without external sponsorship. The [adoption](#) of the Central Asia-2040 vision in 2024 reflected a shared recognition that the region's future prosperity depends increasingly on regional cooperation rather than external patronage.

This shift has practical consequences. Cooperation on trade, transport, border management, energy, and water resources has expanded. Long-standing disputes that once hindered regional integration have become more manageable. The region increasingly presents itself as a coherent economic and geopolitical space capable of attracting investment and engaging major powers collectively.

A similar logic is emerging in the South Caucasus. Armenia and Azerbaijan increasingly recognize the economic benefits of connectivity and regional trade despite many remaining obstacles. The prospect of new transport corridors linking Central Asia, the South Caucasus, Türkiye, and Europe has significantly increased the strategic importance of regional cooperation. The American-inspired TRIPP initiative adds another dimension to this process by strengthening links between Central Asia, the Caucasus, and European markets while further reducing dependence on traditional Russian-controlled routes.

The broader significance of these developments extends beyond economics. Transport corridors, energy infrastructure, logistics hubs, and digital connectivity projects have become instruments of geopolitical influence. Countries are increasingly competing not only for military power or diplomatic influence but also for their place within emerging Eurasian networks. This competition rewards initiative, flexibility, and strategic vision rather than simple geographic location.

This growing local agency reduces external powers' ability to dictate outcomes unilaterally. Russia, China, the United States, the European Union, and Türkiye all remain influential actors. Yet none of them can exercise the degree of dominance that Moscow once sought to maintain across the former Soviet space. Regional governments have become more confident, more diversified in their partnerships, and more capable of advancing their own interests.

The post-Soviet space is therefore increasingly shaped not only by competition among great powers but also by the ambitions, choices, and initiatives of the states within it. This may prove to be one of the most important consequences of Russia's declining dominance. The region is no longer simply a chessboard upon which larger powers move pieces. Increasingly, the pieces move themselves.

The Emerging Eurasian Order

The future of the post-Soviet space will likely be shaped by several interconnected trends.

First, multipolarity will inevitably deepen. No single power is likely to replace Russia as the dominant regional actor. Instead, multiple centers of influence, including the U.S., China, Türkiye, the European Union, and regional states themselves, will coexist and compete.

Second, connectivity will become increasingly important. Transportation corridors, digital

infrastructure, energy routes, and trade networks will shape geopolitical influence as much as military power.

Third, regional states will continue pursuing strategic autonomy. Most governments prefer diversified partnerships rather than exclusive alignments.

Fourth, the local agency will remain a defining feature. Domestic politics, national identities, and regional initiatives will increasingly determine outcomes.

This transformation marks the end of one historical chapter and the beginning of another. The region that once existed on the periphery of global affairs is increasingly becoming a central arena where the future balance of power across Eurasia will be determined.

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Great powers, like the United States, should take this into account when formulating their strategies for the region or for individual states within it. The weakening of Russia is a good thing for the region, and it should be exploited to ensure that Moscow's destabilizing influence is checked and contained. A stronger U.S. presence in the region will only make the region more stable, prosperous, and peaceful.

The Ukraine-Azerbaijan Nexus and a New Race for Eurasia

Among the many actors benefiting from the transformation of the post-Soviet space, Ukraine and

Azerbaijan stand out as particularly influential: Different in geography, size, political systems, and immediate priorities, they nevertheless share one important characteristic. Both have fundamentally altered regional dynamics and challenged assumptions that the post-Soviet space must revolve around Moscow. Through military success, strategic resilience, energy diplomacy, connectivity projects, technological innovation, and geopolitical initiative, both countries have acquired influence that extends far beyond their borders.

No country has had a greater impact on the transformation of the post-Soviet space than Ukraine. Since Russia's full-scale invasion in 2022, Ukraine has become far more than a state defending its sovereignty. It has evolved into a symbol of resistance against imperial revisionism and a catalyst for geopolitical change throughout Eurasia.

The ability of Ukrainian forces to halt and reverse Russian advances demonstrated that Russia's power was not insurmountable. This realization resonated across the post-Soviet space. Countries that had long adjusted their policies to accommodate Russian preferences began reassessing their strategic assumptions. The aura of Russian invincibility was replaced by a more sober assessment of Moscow's capabilities.

Ukraine's contribution to this transformation is indispensable. The country has become a center of military innovation, technological adaptation, and institutional resilience. It is redefining modern warfare in real time. Ukrainian experience with drone warfare, distributed command structures, battlefield adaptation, and the integration of civilian and military technologies is being studied not only in Europe but across Eurasia.

Ukraine has also become an important political and moral force. It has successfully framed its struggle as a defense of sovereignty, independence, and national self-determination. This message resonates

strongly among post-Soviet states that have historically faced pressure from larger neighbors. For many governments across Eurasia, Ukraine's resistance has become proof that geopolitical realities are not immutable and that smaller states possess greater agency than previously assumed.

If Ukraine has transformed the security landscape of Eurasia, Azerbaijan has emerged as one of the principal architects of its new connectivity architecture.

Over the past two decades, Baku has systematically translated energy wealth into military modernization, diplomatic influence, and regional connectivity. The turning point came with Azerbaijan's victory in the Second Nagorno-Karabakh War in 2020 and the subsequent restoration of sovereignty over its internationally recognized territories. This achievement dramatically altered regional power balances and challenged long-standing assumptions regarding Russia's role as the ultimate arbiter of regional conflicts.

The significance of Azerbaijan's rise extends beyond military success. At a moment when Europe was seeking alternatives to Russian energy supplies, Azerbaijan offers a reliable energy partnership. Through the Southern Gas Corridor and related infrastructure projects, Baku [strengthened](#) its economic and political ties with European partners while reinforcing its own strategic importance.

Even more significant is Azerbaijan's role as a transportation and logistics hub. The country occupies a unique geographic position connecting Central Asia, the South Caucasus, Türkiye, and Europe. As the geopolitical importance of East-West connectivity continues to grow, Azerbaijan has become an indispensable link in emerging Eurasian trade networks.

The Middle Corridor, together with newer connectivity initiatives linking Central Asia and Europe, represents far more than a transportation route. It is a testament to a broader shift away from traditional Russian-controlled transit networks. Azerbaijan has

positioned itself at the center of this transformation through investments in ports, railways, logistics centers, and regional infrastructure.

Although Ukraine and Azerbaijan operate in different regions and face different challenges, their combined impact is reshaping the post-Soviet landscape in several important ways.

First, both countries have demonstrated the growing importance of national agency. Rather than accepting externally imposed realities, they have actively pursued strategies designed to reshape their environments. Their success illustrates a broader maturation of post-Soviet states as independent geopolitical actors.

Second, both have contributed directly to the erosion of Russia's monopoly on regional influence. Ukraine has weakened Russia's military and political standing. Azerbaijan has reduced Moscow's ability to dominate developments in the South Caucasus. Together, they have accelerated the transition toward a more multipolar Eurasian order.

Ukraine is increasingly becoming a pillar of European security. Azerbaijan is increasingly becoming a pillar of Eurasian connectivity. One shapes the strategic balance of power. The other shapes the continent's economic geography.

Third, both countries have become central to the two most important dimensions of the emerging regional architecture: security and connectivity. Ukraine is increasingly becoming a pillar of European security. Azerbaijan is increasingly becoming a pillar of Eurasian connectivity. One shapes the strategic balance of power. The other shapes the continent's economic geography.

Together, they constitute the two most consequential success stories of the post-Russian Eurasia now beginning to emerge.

Georgia at Risk of Falling Behind

Both Azerbaijan and Ukraine belong to a regional grouping that was once intellectually and politically led by Georgia. GUAM (Georgia, Ukraine, Azerbaijan, Moldova) was established to advance precisely the kind of strategic autonomy, connectivity, and diversification that now define the region. Ironically, as these ideas finally gain traction, Georgia increasingly finds itself on the margins of the process.

Georgia is no longer keeping pace with the very transformation it once helped champion. This is particularly striking because Georgia should be among the principal beneficiaries of the emerging regional order. No other country in the South Caucasus has access to the Black Sea and borders Türkiye, Armenia, Azerbaijan, and Russia. The Baku-Tbilisi-Ceyhan pipeline, the South Caucasus Gas Corridor, the Baku-Tbilisi-Kars railway, and the growing importance of East-West connectivity all reinforce Georgia's natural role as a bridge between Europe and Asia.

Yet while its neighbors are expanding their strategic relevance, Georgia increasingly risks becoming a spectator rather than a driver of regional developments. The problem is not a lack of opportunities but rather a failure to capitalize on them.

Georgia's most significant shortcoming is the absence of a coherent long-term strategic vision. At a time when regional states are repositioning themselves in response to shifting realities, Georgia's political leadership appears increasingly preoccupied with consolidating domestic power, further polarizing society, and alienating traditional friends. [State capture](#) and oligarchic governance weaken institutions, destroy national unity, and divert attention away from strategic planning and national development.

The consequences are increasingly visible. For nearly two decades, Georgia's greatest geopolitical asset was its reputation. The country was widely viewed as a reform-oriented democracy firmly committed to Euro-Atlantic integration, but also enjoying good relations with the regional actors. Today, that reputation is being eroded. Growing tensions and daily feuds with the European Union, alienation of the United States, increasing influence of Iran, dramatic democratic backsliding, and uncertainty surrounding Georgia's foreign policy direction have weakened one of the country's most important competitive advantages.

The contrast with other regional actors is increasingly difficult to ignore. While Kazakhstan is expanding its diplomacy, Azerbaijan is positioning itself as a critical energy and connectivity hub, Armenia is attracting European and American political and economic attention, and Ukraine is becoming a central pillar of European security, Georgia is increasingly consumed by internal political struggles and strategic ambiguity, showcasing that it is unstable, turning into a one-party dictatorship, which is impossible to rely on in terms of stability, commitments and values.

This is ironic, because Georgia's shortcomings are not rooted in geography, resources, or human capital. The country remains one of the most strategically located states in Eurasia, but the geography alone does not generate influence. Political vision, institutional resilience, strategic leadership, and trusted partnerships matter just as much, if not more.

The emerging Eurasian order will create winners and losers. Geography suggests that Georgia should be among the winners. Politics increasingly suggests otherwise ■