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Year two of the invasion: Where do former Soviet countries stand?

Euro-Atlantic Security Policy Brief

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Executive summary

After Russia's invasion of Ukraine in February 2022, governments in the former Soviet Union were immediately forced to deal with difficult geopolitical realities and make quick decisions as to how the invasion affected foreign policy presentation. For some countries, such as Georgia, Moldova, and the Baltic States, the invasion largely served to solidify their pro-Western tilts. However, for many other governments, deciding how to adapt foreign policy was not so simple. This report uses quantitative and qualitative analysis to show increased heterogeneity in geopolitical positioning among post-Soviet states, with some countries moving closer to Russia, others moving further away, and some being forced to re-evaluate their relations with Moscow entirely. The case studies show the level of complexity and nuance present in the decision-making processes of all governments in the region and find that even the more "pro-Russian" states have shown openness to working more with the West, even after the beginning of the conflict.

In light of these realities, there are some key lessons that Western policymakers should take from this report:

- **Policymakers should understand that many countries traditionally seen as more "pro-Russian" have continued developing nuanced foreign policy profiles after the start of Russia's 2022 invasion of Ukraine**, many of which invite multi-vector approaches and greater attention from Western governments.
- Even if many countries in the former Soviet Union do not formally condemn the invasion, **Western policymakers should steer away from approaches centred around some form of "if you're not with us, you're against us"**, as such approaches are ultimately counterproductive and undercut Western influence in the region, both today and in the future.
- Instead, **Western governments should work to develop ties with countries in the region** while understanding that they will look to other, potentially less pro-Western, partners as well.

Using quantitative and qualitative analysis, this report shows there is increased heterogeneity in geopolitical positioning among post-Soviet states following Russia's invasion of Ukraine in February 2022.

Introduction

Following Russia's invasion of Ukraine in February 2022, countries all around the world were forced to react quickly amidst rapidly changing geopolitical circumstances. For countries in the former Soviet Union, these difficulties were felt especially acutely, given many countries' lasting ties to different great powers, including Russia and the European Union.

This report asks: How have former Soviet states formulated or re-formulated their foreign policy strategy vis-à-vis Russia in the initial stages of the Russia-Ukraine War? The paper takes a mixed quantitative and qualitative approach to this question and concludes that the crisis has correlated with an exacerbation of divergence and increased heterogeneity in geopolitical fault lines present among post-Soviet states, with some countries moving closer to Russia, some countries moving further away, and some being forced to re-evaluate their relations with Moscow. This report analyses eleven countries in the quantitative analysis section (Armenia, Azerbaijan, Belarus, Georgia, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Moldova, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan, and Uzbekistan)¹ and focusses on four case studies in the qualitative section (Armenia, Azerbaijan, Belarus, and Kazakhstan) that faced unique geopolitical decisions.

How have former Soviet states formulated or re-formulated their foreign policy strategy vis-à-vis Russia in the initial stages of the Russia-Ukraine War?

1. The Baltic States and Ukraine were not included in this study; the Baltic States were always somewhat of anomalies in the former Soviet Union due to the manner of their absorption, and Ukraine is a direct participant in the current conflict, making analysis of its voting patterns relatively unhelpful – Ukraine's position vis-à-vis the current conflict is obvious.

Quantitative analysis

Analysis of UN General Assembly voting scores shows that while all eleven countries in this study tended to maintain their respective levels of agreement with Russia from 2018-2021 vis-à-vis their fellow former Soviet states, 2022 bore witness to sharp divergence, with some states moving closer to Russia and some states moving further from Russia.

To measure countries' behaviour in comparison to that of Russia, we adapted a version of the model developed by Bailey, Strezhnev, and Voeten (2017) that measures a statistic known as "ideal point distance", a variable which shows discrepancies between two countries in United Nations General Assembly (UNGA) voting per year. Bailey et. al's data did not cover recent years, however, so we created an adapted version for the purposes of this report. We took every UNGA resolution that went to a vote² from 2018, 2019, 2020, 2021, and 2022 and recorded how each country voted on each resolution (as recorded by the UN's database). Russia was taken as the baseline, and other countries were given a score of "0", "0.5" or "1" based on how similar their vote was to Russia. This metric is by no means perfect; UNGA votes are by no means representative of a country's entire foreign policy trajectory. However, similar metrics are well-utilised in literature and can be used to supplement more substantive case studies.

A few examples:

- *All eleven countries vote no:* All ten non-Russia countries receive a score of 0, indicating 0 difference.
- *Russia and Armenia abstain, Belarus votes no, and the rest vote yes:* Armenia receives a score of 0 (voted the same way as Russia); the rest receive scores of 0.5, as an abstention is placed "in between" a yes and a no.
- *Russia, Armenia, and Belarus vote no, Azerbaijan does not vote and the rest vote yes:* Armenia and Belarus receive scores of 0 (voted the same way as Russia); Azerbaijan receives a score of 0.5 ("does not vote" is considered identical to an abstention in our system, thereby putting Azerbaijan's position in between a yes and a no); the rest receive a score of 1, considering that their votes were directly opposite Russia's.

After recording these data for all relevant resolutions, we added up the total numbers for each country and divided them by the number of resolutions. The resulting scores in the table below, thus, reflect this process. A higher score, naturally, means a position that is further away from Russia: a perfect "0" would mean that the given country voted the same as Russia on all issues; a "1" would indicate that the given country did not vote the same way as Russia ever.

Analysis of UN General Assembly voting scores shows that 2022 bore witness to sharp divergence in terms of former Soviet states levels of agreement with Russia.

2. Adding in resolutions that did not go to a vote would have simply added a lot of "0" data points to the data, which would not change the general pattern at all and would make just the data more cumbersome.

Table 1: Distance from Russia by country, 2018-2022

Country	2018	2019	2020	2021	2022	Chg. 18-19	Chg. 19-20	Chg. 20-21	Chg. 21-22
Armenia	.173	.200	.200	.221	.242	+ .027	0	+ .021	+ .021
Azerbaijan	.257	.250	.220	.302	.264	- .007	- .030	+ .082	- .038
Belarus	.150	.175	.145	.186	.129	+ .025	- .030	+ .041	- .057
Georgia	.322	.380	.350	.378	.444	+ .058	- .030	+ .028	+ .066
Kazakhstan	.229	.240	.220	.273	.281	+ .011	- .020	+ .053	+ .008
Kyrgyzstan	.234	.245	.220	.250	.264	+ .011	- .030	+ .035	+ .014
Moldova	.388	.395	.355	.448	.517	+ .007	- .040	+ .093	+ .069
Tajikistan	.234	.250	.225	.250	.225	+ .016	- .025	+ .025	- .025
Turkmenistan	.290	.300	.305	.273	.253	+ .010	+ .005	- .032	- .020
Uzbekistan	.210	.235	.200	.238	.242	+ .025	- .035	+ .038	+ .004
<i>n</i> (observations)	107	100	100	86	89				

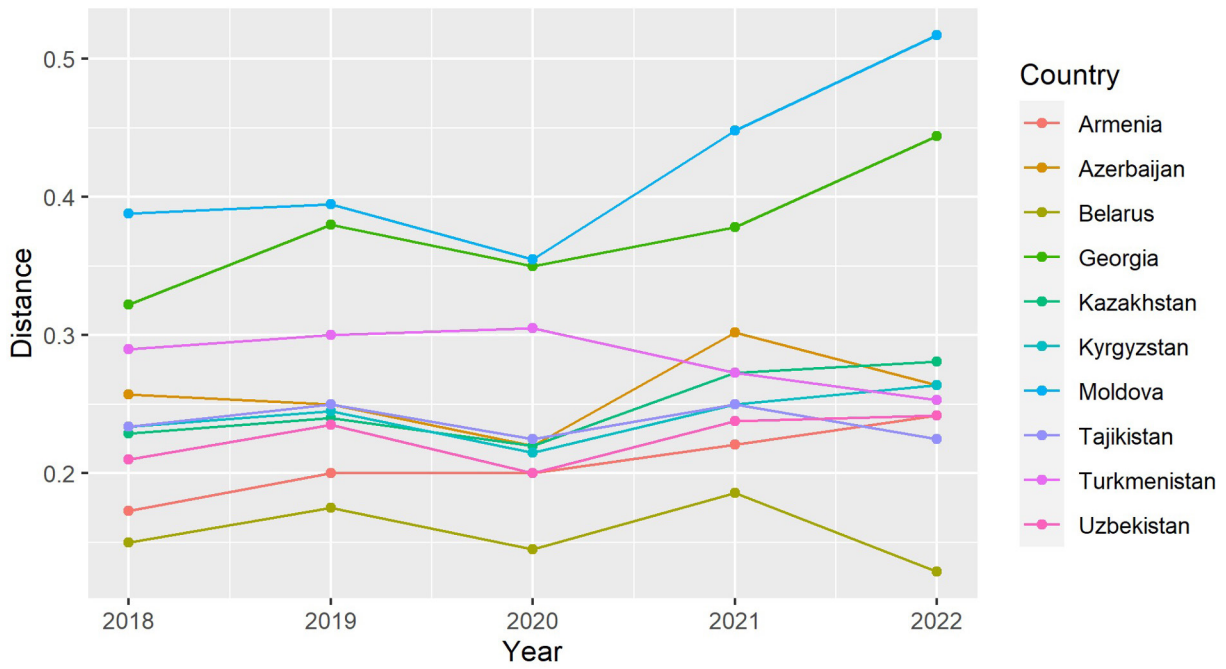
While it is difficult to show causation, it is clear that there is correlation between the Russian invasion of Ukraine and increased divergence and heterogeneity in FSU countries' voting practices in regard to Russia.

There are a number of different trends that these data show. For one, looking at recent trends, nine of the ten measured countries voted less similarly to Russia in 2021 than in 2020. This could be seen as potentially important, as West-Russia relations had worsened from the time the UNGA met in 2020 to the analogous time in 2021, and the regional situation had changed as well (increased Western sanctions on Russia following the poisoning of Alexey Navalny,¹ as well as an initial build-up of Russian troops on the Ukrainian border in April 2021,² the 2020 44-Day War in Nagorno-Karabakh, etc.).

However, in context, we can see that the relative uniformity of the trend observed from 2020 to 2021 can actually be seen in the two prior periods as well – 2018 to 2019 and 2019 to 2020. From 2018-2019, with the small exception of Azerbaijan, countries moved further from Russia; from 2019-2020, with the small exception of Turkmenistan (and potentially Armenia), countries moved closer to Russia; and from 2020-2021, with a decent-sized exception of Turkmenistan, countries moved further from Russia again. At least based on these data, in which states with vastly differing relationships with Russia trended in the same direction, it would seem that other factors may have been at work in these years.

The main takeaway from these data should be the fact that we see a unique form of heterogeneity in former Soviet states' voting patterns over the last year. While it is difficult to show causation, it is clear that there is correlation between the Russian invasion of Ukraine and increased divergence and heterogeneity in FSU countries' voting practices in regard to Russia. This is important – it shows that the situation is very much in flux, and countries' positions concerning Russia are changing in ways that they have not been in years before. Below, we can see this shown graphically:

Graph 1: Ideal point distance (from Russia) by country 2018-2022



To elucidate some of the details behind some of these shifts, we look at four case studies: Belarus, Kazakhstan, Armenia, and Azerbaijan. While countries such as Georgia and Moldova clearly have the largest shifts toward divergence, we chose the four aforementioned countries due to the nuanced set of decisions that they have had to make over the last months.

Case studies

While Lukashenka has at times tried to project at least a somewhat neutral profile in the Russo-Ukrainian War, he has ended up generally leaning toward Moscow.

Belarus: Initial signs of neutrality, but increasing support for Russia

"[Belarusian President Alexander] Lukashenka, frequently demonised in the West, has become a virtuoso at managing his country's reliance on Moscow while talking to the West when needed".³ This statement by Russia analyst Mitchell Orenstein may have rung true before the Russian invasion of Ukraine, but since then, it has become significantly harder for Lukashenka to play both sides. Relations between Russia and the West are now so toxic that any sign of sympathy one way could easily incur the other side's wrath. While Lukashenka has at times tried to project at least a somewhat neutral profile in the Russo-Ukrainian War, he has ended up generally leaning toward Moscow, to the point that some sources point to the potential deployment of Russian nuclear weapons in the country.

A neutral profile would represent the continuation of a long-running policy in this conflict. Belarus was the agreed-upon site for peace negotiations in the first round of war between Russia and Ukraine and the location where the ensuing Minsk Agreements were signed, and Belarus has acted as an early meeting point for early negotiations in this iteration of the conflict as well.⁴ Additionally, scholars⁵ and early polls reported⁶ that most Belarusians are opposed to the war, and the Lukashenka administration has made it a policy to not involve Belarusian troops directly in the Russian war effort,⁷ even though Russia and Belarus are tightly intertwined militarily through the Collective Security Treaty Organisation (CSTO) and Belarus hosted Russian military drills on its soil.⁸

Despite some signs of neutrality, however, Belarus has remained tightly connected to Moscow. In a UN vote calling upon Russia to withdraw from Ukraine, Belarus was one of only four countries to support Russia in the vote.⁹ In mid-March of 2022, Lukashenka called on Ukraine to "not act as a jumping-off point for attacks on Russia" and to "not threaten Russia's security".¹⁰ Furthermore, at a CSTO summit in May 2022, Lukashenka called on alliance members to "unite against the West",¹¹ arguing that sanctions could have been avoided if CSTO members had stood up together against Western powers. Additionally, as shown in our quantitative analysis, Minsk has closed ranks with Moscow in its behaviour in UN voting as well. Thus, while Minsk in some senses maintained neutrality initially, it nonetheless has ended up tending to lean toward Russia more than just about any other country in the world, and both qualitative and quantitative studies show such trends.

This gradual move toward Russia has come to a head over the last couple of months. A number of sources reported worries that Belarus could become the next front in Russia's war against Ukraine,¹² and more recently, Russian ambassador Boris Gryzlov announced that Russian tactical nuclear weapons would be deployed along Belarus's western border.¹³ With this move, Lukashenka and Putin seem to have ended Belarus's initial attempts at neutrality and have moved toward much more outward Belarusian support for Russia.

How has this strategy paid off for Belarus so far? It is difficult to say. Although Lukashenka and Belarus have been subjected to heavy sanctions due to the conflict,¹⁴ Lukashenka himself has largely managed to avoid significant negative press – no small

feat for him – and there was talk at one point that sanctions on Belarus could be removed for concessions on grain production.¹⁵ The long-term perspectives for Belarus’s initial “hedging” strategy, however, are less optimistic. By not siding initially with either Ukraine or Russia fully, Belarus immediately opened itself up to criticism from both Kyiv and Moscow. While Kyiv was generally somewhat restrained in its rhetoric toward Belarus at the beginning, Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelenskyy near the beginning of the war voiced clear displeasure at the fact that rockets were flying from Belarusian territory,¹⁶ and Russian ground troops advanced on Kyiv from Belarus as well. Belarusian commentators, meanwhile, suspected from very early on that Belarus’s continuing refusal to involve its troops in the conflict could draw serious questions from the Kremlin.¹⁷ Now, we see that Belarus has largely abandoned its hedging strategy and moved decisively toward Moscow. How this step will play out for Minsk in the future remains to be seen.

Kazakhstan: Steps made toward the West

Kazakhstan, like Belarus, has been forced to balance between competing powers. Generally, however, in contrast to Belarus, Kazakhstan has made some tentative steps away from Russia in both rhetoric and in policy. Such steps agree somewhat with our quantitative work, which shows that Kazakhstan has now become the most divergent Central Asian country from Russia in the UN.

Kazakhstan’s attempt at neutrality is not entirely new. Kazakhstan is tightly tied to Russia in many ways, it is a founding member of the Eurasian Economic Union and has one of the largest land borders in the world with Russia. But Kazakhstan has historically not supported Russia in its geopolitical ventures to the same degree as Belarus. The Nazarbayev administration abstained, for example, in UN resolutions regarding the 2014 annexation of Crimea, and Kazakhstani experts held very mixed opinions¹⁸ on how Kazakhstan should deal with initial post-2014 sanctions imposed against Russia.¹⁹ While current Kazakhstani President Kassym-Jomart Tokayev did say in a 2019 interview that “‘annexation’ is too heavy of a word to apply to Crimea”,²⁰ his statement was heavily criticised both outside the country and, crucially, within Kazakhstan itself.

Following Russia’s February 2022 invasion of Ukraine, Kazakhstan found itself in a tricky position and leaned further away from Russia than usual. Given the rapid escalation of the conflict in Ukraine, the sanctions regime piled on Russia has become markedly heavier, and there is less space for tolerance of neutrality. As countries scrambled to define their foreign policy vis-à-vis the conflict, Tokayev wrote a telling op-ed in *The National Interest*, in which he announced that Kazakhstan would “respect [Ukraine’s] territorial integrity” and wished to strengthen its “three-decade strong friendship and cooperation with Europe and the United States”.²¹ Additionally, the presidential administration has called the conflict in Ukraine a “war” instead of a “special military operation”, an important rhetorical break with Moscow.²²

The Kazakhstani government’s words have been carried out by policy. Although Kazakhstan abstained on a UN resolution condemning the war,²³ in April 2022, Kazakhstan announced that it would not recognise the two separatist republics in Ukraine’s Donetsk and Luhansk Oblasts,²⁴ and the Kazakhstani government

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has sent humanitarian aid to Ukraine.²⁵ Furthermore, in a symbolic gesture, Kazakhstan cancelled its traditional 9 May Victory Day parade last year. The Kazakhstani government also announced that it would not allow Russia²⁶ (or Belarus)²⁷ to evade sanctions through Kazakhstan. For Kazakhstan, this statement holds special importance, given that Kazakhstan is part of a customs union with Russia and thus likely has a lot to lose from anti-Russian sanctions. And while Kazakhstani businesses are not forced to enforce sanctions on Russia, many have chosen to do so anyway, including, notably, a major Kazakhstani provider of raw materials to Russian steelwork.²⁸ Finally, Kazakhstan announced on 4 July, 2022 that it is “committed to the development of stable relations with the EU” and is “ready to help stabilise the energy security situation in Europe and the world”.²⁹

Such an announcement was not received well in Russia, as on 6 July, 2022, a Russian court ordered the Caspian Pipeline Consortium (CPC), the group that carries 80 percent of Kazakhstan’s oil exports via the Russian Black Sea port of Novorossiysk, to suspend its operations for 30 days, on the pretext of environmental violations.³⁰ This move, far from dragging Kazakhstan back toward Russia, served to push Astana further away, as President Tokayev began soliciting assistance from Western companies the day after the suspension order.³¹ Kazakhstan’s overtures were received well in the West, in November, the EU signed an agreement with Astana to develop production of green hydrogen and rare earth minerals,³² and Josep Borrell travelled to the region in that same month.³³ Additionally, in February 2023, US Secretary of State Antony Blinken made a visit to Kazakhstan as well, after which he and Kazakhstani Foreign Minister Mukhtar Tileuberdi discussed key questions related to the Russia-Ukraine conflict.³⁴

Finally, Kazakhstan has been heavily impacted by the Russian wave of mass mobilisation in Autumn 2022. As thousands of young Russian men swarmed across the Russia-Kazakhstan border, Kazakhstan and other Central Asian countries have had to decide what to do. In Kazakhstan, the issue has provoked mixed responses; while many were welcomed, migration has negatively impacted Kazakhstan’s economic situation, causing rampant inflation,³⁵ and authorities in Astana have recently enacted new laws making it harder for Russians to stay in Kazakhstan long-term.³⁶ Thus, while Kazakhstan has generally tended to embrace young men fleeing the Russian military machine, there are certainly limits to their generosity.

Kazakhstan cannot be called “pro-Western” by any means; Kazakhstani authorities do their best to hedge between many different powers, including Europe, but also China, Iran, and of course Russia. Additionally, Kazakhstan is still an authoritarian state, and despite President Tokayev announcing reforms,³⁷ protests are very carefully managed, including pro-Ukraine protests.³⁸ While most Kazakhstanis oppose the war, there are still significant societal cleavages in opinion regarding which side is in the right³⁹ – like in Belarus. Furthermore, the situation in Ukraine changes every day, and it is unclear exactly how Kazakhstan’s position will look in the weeks and months to come. Nonetheless, Kazakhstan has made some key moves to distance itself from Russia and the conflict, and these moves are certainly worth noting as the conflict continues to rage.

Armenia: General pro-Russian stance unlikely to change significantly as a result of the war, but worries about Russian capacity lead to an intensification of pre-2022 policy shifts

With the onset of war, small, isolated Armenia has faced dilemmas, both economically and militarily. Traditionally heavily dependent on Russia and supportive of Moscow's annexation of Crimea,⁴⁰ the onset of war in Ukraine, the resulting flood of economic sanctions against Russia, and Russia's decreased attention and capacity for keeping the peace in the Caucasus has put Yerevan in a difficult situation. While many of the foundations of Armenia's relationship with Russia show little signs of breaking, the conflict has accelerated some general changes in Armenian foreign policy initiated after the Velvet Revolution in 2018.

Economically, Russia is by far and away Armenia's largest export and import partner,⁴¹ and thousands of Armenia labour migrants shuttle back and forth between Russia and Armenia every year,⁴² not to mention a flood of recent Russian expatriates fleeing to Armenia.⁴³ Additionally, there are many wealthy businesspeople with close ties to both Russia and Armenia, including men like Samvel Karapetyan, Ruben Vardanyan, Daniil Khachaturov, etc. Armenia's economic dependence on Russia is further deepened by the situation with its neighbours. Armenia keeps amicable ties with Georgia, but economic activity is minimal with Turkey and essentially non-existent with Azerbaijan. Armenia is friendly with Iran; however, Iran is under heavy sanctions as well, and attempts to reimplement the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action stalled.⁴⁴

Armenia's dependence on Russia is underscored by the region's tenuous military situation. In addition to being a CSTO member state, Armenia hosts the Russian 102nd military base in Gyumri and the 3624th air base in Yerevan, and Russian troops have helped secure Armenia's borders.⁴⁵ Most notably, Russian peacekeepers are in charge of ensuring the security of ethnic Armenians in Nagorno-Karabakh, arguably the most crucial piece of Armenia's foreign policy. Given this context, Armenia's options are limited, and while clinging to an increasingly embattled Russia is likely not Armenia's first choice, there appear to be few better options for the time being.

The onset of the war in Ukraine and the ineffectiveness of the Russian peacekeeping contingent has, however, accelerated other trends that are pushing Armenia to pursue new foreign policy directions. After the Velvet Revolution that propelled Nikol Pashinyan to power in 2018, Armenian foreign policy has generally become more multi-vectored than in under previous administrations. Armenia started exploring rapprochement with Turkey,⁴⁶ worked more closely with the European Union,⁴⁷ and became more sceptical of the CSTO.⁴⁸ Russia, in turn, also expanded ties with Azerbaijan, signing a declaration of allied relations with Baku two days before the invasion of Ukraine,⁴⁹ and with Turkey, with Presidents Putin and Erdoğan meeting frequently on important international issues. Both of these factors as well have acted as "push" mechanisms on Armenia's new, more multilateral, foreign policy outlook.

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These trends have continued after the Russian invasion of Ukraine in a few key areas. One is the disintegration of the OSCE Minsk Group in charge of Nagorno-Karabakh and questions regarding the effectiveness of the Russian peacekeeping contingent. The efficacy of the Minsk Group has long been in question; Azerbaijan has complained for years that the Minsk Group is biased towards Armenia,⁵⁰ as the three Minsk Group co-chairs (Russia, France, and the United States) have the three largest Armenian diaspora communities in the world. Additionally, the Minsk Group also played essentially no role in the regulation of the 2020 44-Day War in Nagorno-Karabakh. More recently, the very existence of the Minsk Group has come under question. On 24 June 2022, Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov stated in a press conference in Baku that the Minsk Group has suspended its activities “on the initiative of its American and French participants”.⁵¹ Three days later, however, the US State Department tweeted that the US Minsk Group co-chair had “spoken with her counterparts ... to discuss the future of Nagorno-Karabakh” but that Russia “did not accept the invitation”.⁵² Armenia, meanwhile, reiterated its ongoing support for the Minsk Group,⁵³ but with Russia and the United States still at loggerheads and heavy scepticism from Azerbaijan on the group’s impartiality, the group’s future is uncertain.

Additional questions emerged surrounding the Russian peacekeeping contingent in Nagorno-Karabakh. When Russia’s performance in Ukraine fell short of expectations, many in Armenia began to worry that the peacekeeping contingent in Nagorno-Karabakh would lose its legitimacy,⁵⁴ thereby leaving the area open for Azerbaijan to make gains at the expense of Russian peacekeepers and ethnic Armenians. These fears have been borne out by reality. In March 2022, Azerbaijan seemed to test the waters, breaking the line of contact and temporarily capturing the village of Parukh (Az. Fərrux)⁵⁵ before reportedly being forced back by Russia – although Azerbaijan denied its withdrawal.⁵⁶ Additionally, the main manifestation of these fears has been the ongoing blockade of the Lachin Corridor (the road connecting Armenia with Nagorno-Karabakh) by Azerbaijani “eco-activists,”⁵⁷ which began on 12 December, 2022 and continues to this day, culminating in Azerbaijan erecting a checkpoint on the new Lachin Corridor road in April 2023,⁵⁸ and, potentially directly as a result of this issue, Armenia’s statement that it will recognize the territorial integrity of Azerbaijan – including the Nagorno-Karabakh region.⁵⁹ Armenia has voiced its anger at Russia for its unwillingness or inability to solve this issue, but other options for regulation remain limited.

In this context, Armenia has continued building on two other related foreign policy vectors that are somewhat more West-focused:

1. *Armenian-Turkish normalisation.* Official documents show that Armenia’s normalisation of relations with Turkey, a key NATO member state, has been a Western priority for years.⁶⁰ Shortly after the end of the 44-Day War, Armenia and Turkey began negotiating to normalise relations, a process which has continued after Russia’s invasion of Ukraine. Concrete steps have been made; direct flights resumed between Yerevan and Istanbul⁶¹ (although Turkey recently suspended overflight permissions for Armenian airlines),⁶² preparations are underway to open land borders, including the start of border demining operations,⁶³ and Armenian Prime Minister Nikol Pashinyan held a call with Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan in July

2022.⁶⁴ Armenia even sent aid to Turkey after a devastating earthquake in February 2023.⁶⁵ While Turkey and Armenia are unlikely to be “friends” in the near future, rapprochement would be a clear sign that Armenia is at least taking some steps in diversifying its relationships away from total dependence on Russia.

2. *Western mediation in Armenia-Azerbaijan Dialogue.* In December 2021, Pashinyan met with Azerbaijani President Ilham Aliyev in Brussels,⁶⁶ setting off a recurring series of meetings between the two countries on issues such as the demarcation and delimitation of the border between the two countries, the demining of the Nagorno-Karabakh region, and the return of prisoners of war. While progress has been slow, the choice of mediator – Charles Michel of the European Council – has led some analysts to argue that the European Union is “stepping into Russia’s shoes” in Nagorno-Karabakh.⁶⁷ Other Western countries have gotten involved in mediation efforts as well; the United States sponsored talks in April and May 2023 between the two countries which, while “difficult,” did represent renewed American involvement in the conflict.⁶⁸

Azerbaijan: An odd assortment of stances

In recent years, Azerbaijan has tended toward a pro-Ukraine stance while simultaneously attempting to maintain cordial relations with Moscow. This policy position has in some senses remained constant following Russia’s February 2022 invasion of Ukraine, but some decisive steps toward Moscow as well have shown that the war has forced Baku to think on its feet more than in past years.

Like many other former Soviet republics, Azerbaijan trades heavily with Russia, with bilateral trade turnover reaching \$3 billion in 2021. Many Azerbaijanis live in Russia as well. But Azerbaijan is nowhere near as close to Russia as its neighbour Armenia. While Azerbaijani-Russian relations have generally been decent under the Aliyev family (in power since 1993), tensions have been omnipresent as well, mainly due to dynamics related to Russia’s military alliance with rival Armenia and Russia’s outsized presence in the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict.⁶⁹ Russia’s annexation of Crimea and support for rebels in the Donbas in 2014 put Azerbaijan in a difficult position. On the one hand, Azerbaijan fully supported the territorial integrity of Ukraine,⁷⁰ seeing itself in a similar situation as Kyiv, with neighbouring countries controlling significant parts of both countries’ territory. On the other hand, Baku could also hardly afford to anger Moscow too much, as Russia could retaliate by supporting Armenia more actively in Nagorno-Karabakh. Thus, in the words of one Azerbaijani analyst, Baku could “only attempt to not annoy Moscow, while at the same time staying on the side of those who stand against Russian interference in Ukraine”.⁷¹ Azerbaijan has generally maintained this strategy in recent years, reiterating its support for Ukraine, but choosing not to vote in UN General Assembly resolutions related to Crimea over the past few years.

After the onset of war in February 2022, Baku has largely followed a similar strategy. Baku has reiterated its support for Ukraine and has offered support to Europe. In April, Azerbaijani President Ilham Aliyev stated in no uncertain terms that “we support the

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territorial integrity of Ukraine and of all other countries. ... Yes, we have good relations with Russia, but with Ukraine we also have good relations, and the principles of international law should not be interpreted based on political preferences".⁷² Additionally, Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky listed Baku as a potential venue for negotiations, emblemising Kyiv's appreciation of Baku's foreign policy stance vis-à-vis the conflict.⁷³ Expanding the scope beyond just the Ukraine issue, energy-rich Azerbaijan has used the conflict to sell itself as a reliable energy supplier to European markets; in July, the EU signed a deal that would double EU imports of Azerbaijani gas and eventually utilise Azerbaijan's offshore wind and hydrogen power as well,⁷⁴ leading European Commission President Ursula von der Leyen to tweet that "the EU is turning to trustworthy energy suppliers. Azerbaijan is one of them".⁷⁵

Despite these steps toward Ukraine and Europe, Azerbaijan has by no means completely moved away from Russia. Quantitatively, we can see that Azerbaijan voted closer to Russia in 2022 than in 2021. This finding has manifested itself in concrete policy as well. On 22 February – two days before the outbreak of war in Ukraine – Azerbaijan and Russia signed a comprehensive declaration that would take their relations to a "new level" of "allied cooperation".⁷⁶ While officials say that the date for this declaration's signing was agreed upon a long time in advance, others are sceptical. For example, in an interview with Eurasianet, Fuad Shakhbaz, an Azerbaijani analyst based in the UK, opined that "the fact that the signing took place on the eve of the invasion was not just a coincidence ... it was probably meant to guarantee that Azerbaijan could not enter into some sort of Western anti-Russian campaign."⁷⁷ Furthermore, Point 25 of the declaration stipulates that "the Russian Federation and the Republic of Azerbaijan will abstain from carrying out any economic activity that either directly or indirectly damages the interests of the other Party". How will this point weather the July EU-Azerbaijan gas agreement? The answer remains to be seen, but Baku could be put into a tricky position.

In total, Azerbaijan's broader stance has been one of general support for Ukraine, a position which is nothing new for them. But Baku's signing of a declaration with Moscow that would "raise the bilateral relationship to a qualitatively new, allied level" on the eve of battle and its clear shift toward Moscow in its UN voting patterns raises some interesting questions. Likely, the Azerbaijani leadership wishes to hedge its bets and not lean too far one way or another. How this strategy ends up working for Baku remains to be seen.

Despite these steps toward Ukraine and Europe, Azerbaijan has by no means completely moved away from Russia.

Conclusion

A year after Russia's invasion of Ukraine, the post-Soviet space remains in flux. While some countries have doubled down on their pre-conflict positions vis-à-vis Russia, others have followed more nuanced paths. Our quantitative analysis shows that unlike some previous years, in which countries' relative positions vis-à-vis Russia have not changed significantly, in 2022, a good amount of reshuffling could be observed, with some countries voting more in line with Russia and others voting less in line.

Our qualitative section, meanwhile, focused on four countries that were forced to make difficult decisions during the war: Belarus, Kazakhstan, Armenia, and Azerbaijan. Belarus, despite some initial attempts at a form of neutrality, ended up moving back toward Russia as pressure from Moscow grew and no olive branch was offered from the West. Kazakhstan, meanwhile, pursued tentative growth in ties with the West. In the South Caucasus, Armenia and Azerbaijan worked to determine what Russia's invasion of Ukraine would mean for the conflict in and around the Nagorno-Karabakh region, while also balancing their individual relationships with Russia and other involved parties.

While the long-term effects of the conflict on these countries' foreign policy profiles remain to be seen, these early findings certainly deserve our attention as the conflict moves through its second year. The conflict itself may be playing out in Ukraine, but other countries in the region have been, and will continue to be, forced to adapt, hedge and balance as the world rapidly changes around them and the war continues to rage.

The conflict itself may be playing out in Ukraine, but other countries in the region have been, and will continue to be, forced to adapt, hedge, and balance as the world rapidly changes around them.

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