

# *The Impact Of Russia's War In Ukraine On Post-Soviet Space*

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**Abstract** – The research paper explores the impact of Russia's war in Ukraine on post-Soviet space. Since 2014 the Russian aggression on Ukraine's sovereignty and territorial integrity is considered as an act of obvious violation of international law as well as an attempt to change the current world order established after the Soviet Union collapse when former Soviet republics gained full independence. But the new situation emerged by Russia's invasion of Ukraine threatens not only the existence of Ukraine as an independent state but it also creates similar threats to other post-Soviet republics that are located in Russia's so called "near abroad".

The paper explores Russia's geopolitical interests in post-Soviet era and space towards the former Soviet republics. It emphasizes the peculiarities and impact of Russia's war in Ukraine on ongoing processes in Eastern Europe, South Caucasus, and Central Asia. The concept of "Russian world" and its geopolitical provisions are also observed and analyzed. It is argued that this concept has no more potential to be advanced with the use of "soft power" tools. The paper also forecasts a strategic retreat for Russia in post-Soviet space as a probable consequence of the Ukrainian war because of losing by Russia the global information warfare and the lack of international support. It is concluded that Russia's aggression has a real potential to be copied and reproduced by other authoritarian leaders which will aggravate the situation in other post-Soviet conflict zones. At the same time, this war is also considered a struggle between democracy and autocratic rule expansion when the latter has less chance to succeed.

**Keywords** – War in Ukraine, post-Soviet space, democracy, authoritarianism, Russia's invasion of Ukraine, strategic retreat, concept of "Russian world", post-Soviet conflict zones, "Wall of democracy".

## I. INTRODUCTION

The Russian invasion of Ukraine is a major escalation of the Russia's annexation of Ukraine's territories since 2014. It engenders colossal security, economic, energetic, humanitarian, logistic, and democratic issues in post-Soviet space.

The Russia's occupation of Crimea, Donetsk and Luhansk in 2014 raised fundamental questions about Ukraine's continuing existence as a unified state, its independence as a nation, and the democratic foundations of its political institutions (Plokhyy, 2015, p. 251). This created a new and dangerous situation not only in Ukraine but also in Europe as a whole. For the first time since the end of World War II, a major European power made war on a weaker neighbor and annexed part of the territory of a sovereign state. This unprovoked Russian aggression against Ukraine threatened the foundations of international order - a threat to which the EU and most part of the world weren't prepared to respond.

The war in Ukraine is also significantly changing the post-Soviet space.

In this regard, D. Trenin points out that the geopolitical retreat that Russia began three decades ago has ended, and a new policy of selective expansion based on Russia's national interests has commenced. Russia's approach to its geographical periphery, however, has recently undergone major changes. Almost simultaneous developments in several places - Ukraine and Belarus in Eastern Europe, the South Caucasus, and Central Asia - illustrate the nature and direction of these changes (Trenin, 2022, p. 2). The suspicion that Moscow is busy restoring the Soviet Union under a different name is not baseless; in fact, Russia is busy establishing itself as the principal and most consequential power along its new borders. The days of the empire will not return, but Russia is hard at work for promoting and protecting its interests. On the way of its new provisions Russia's policies contain some elements towards the former Soviet republics. And in this context, Russia's national interests suppose the following activities:

- *Strengthening of its geopolitical position;*
- *Use of military force to deter NATO in Eastern Europe;*
- *Economic, financial, and political support to promote integration of Belarus;*
- *Peacekeeping missions by managing control on conflicts in the South Caucasus;*
- *Taking measures to activate the CSTO as a military and political organization for involving it in its so called “special military operation”.*

Russia's own policies are heavily influenced by traditional notions of geopolitics, spheres of influence, and the balance of power. From the Kremlin's perspective, Russia is a great power only if it keeps its hegemony in the post-Soviet space. Putin's assertions that Ukraine has no right to be an independent state with its own society and that “Russians and Ukrainians [are] one people” form part of a Russian colonialist and imperialist tradition. This worldview is shared by a large part of Russian society (Meister, 2022, p. 6).

If these activities are combined, it can be assumed that Russia challenges the international order and international law by threatening post-Soviet sovereign republics and democratic values with the use of different tools of pressure such as military, political, economic, energetic, etc.

### II. THE IMPACT OF WAR IN UKRAINE ON EASTERN EUROPE

Russia's invasion of Ukraine in February 2022 has already become the worst international crisis since the end of the Cold War. This is a new and terrible stage in the shaping of European borders and populations was emerging. In this regard, all depends on the ability and readiness of the Russian elites to accept the post-Soviet political realities and adjust Russia's own identity to the demands of the post-imperial world. The alternative might be a new Cold War or even worse (Dibb, 2022, p. 6).

For example, Moldova and Belarus, located in the zone of open rivalry between Russia and Europe, have been under duress for a long time. While Ukraine is the focus of the current rivalry, the competition for Moldova and Belarus was high until the war on Ukraine overshadowed everything. Notably, in all three countries - Ukraine, Moldova, and Belarus - domestic political struggles always boil down to a competition between East and West. In the case of Ukraine, one can argue that its fate will largely depend on how the war ends (or doesn't), how Ukraine recovers, and what geographical configuration will result. The eventual stationing of Russian troops in the region is a crucial factor for Moldova. A scenario in which Russian troops reach Transnistria is radically different from one in which Moldova is separated from *de-facto* Russian-controlled regions by territory that is Ukrainian both *de jure* and *de facto* (Iskandaryan, 2022, p. 3.).

A. Iskandaryan rightly points out that contrastingly, Belarus has already joined all the possible unions and alliances with Russia. Its 2020 elections and their aftermath, including the cruel suppression of mass unrest, the forced exile of the opposition, and the non-recognition of election results by the EU, UK, United States, and Ukraine, have left Belarus no choice but to support the Kremlin. Belarusian president has so far been able to refrain from directly sending Belarusian troops into the war, but in every other format, Belarus has given Russia full support. It is an irony of history that although Lukashenko has been on extremely bad terms with Putin for a long time, Moscow has to help him stay in power because any change of leadership in Minsk is prone to a U-turn in Belarusian politics. Lukashenko has no geopolitical choices, whereas a different leader of Belarus theoretically might. Belarus and Russia are thus doomed to mutual support, at least until a regime change in one or the other occurs (Iskandaryan, 2022, p. 3).

As for the perspective of EU-Russia relations, with the current regime in Moscow, there will be no reset. Only deep regime change in Russia will create the opportunity for a fundamentally different EU policy towards the country. Russia itself has changed rapidly - and for the worse - since the war started. It is becoming more closed and more repressive on civil society and any kind of opposition. A key precondition for political change in Moscow - but no guarantee of it - is a Russian defeat in Ukraine, meaning the ouster of Russian forces from Ukrainian territory (Meister, 2022, p. 7).

It is important to state that as long as Ukraine remained an indispensable part of the CIS, the issue of its territorial integrity was not challenged and the Russian population in the east of the country did not even think about "Novorossia" and secession. For almost a quarter of a century, Crimea was believed to be part of the Ukrainian territory. From this perspective, it can be assumed

that Kiev's reinforced and explicit pro-European intention was the main geopolitical catalyst of the subsequent tragic course of events. However, Moscow's rhetoric on Ukraine and attempt at self-justification regarding its annexation of Crimea have experienced amazing metamorphoses: from the slogan "We never expose (or hand over) our people [Russians]" to the statement that gifting Crimea to Ukraine by Khrushchev in 1954 was a mistake, and from reference to the referendum and will of the Crimean people "democratically" expressed in March 2014 on rejoining Russia to mentioning the threat from NATO of entering the Black Sea and targeting Sevastopol, and finally to Russia's historical sacralization of Crimea. Such a mixture of tricky arguments cannot but display the degree of (geo)political confusion to which Russia's leadership is prone (Tolipov, 2015, p. 11).

It is important to notice that Russia has been unable to enlist definite and resolute support for its actions in Ukraine from the CIS states for at least three reasons:

- *Moscow could not properly justify the annexation of Crimea and provide persuasive claims on the basis of international law;*
- *Russia preferred to use "hard power" in dealing with the Ukrainian challenge instead of the widely-popularized "soft power" policy directed to its "near abroad" that Russia itself has recently announced;*
- *Russia demonstrated a Cold War, anti-Western pattern of international behavior and thereby increased the implicit pressure on other former Soviet republics cooperating with the West* (Tolipov, 2015, pp. 12-13).

Not once different political processes in post-Soviet era have showcased that when states on Russia's near abroad have been engaged in geopolitical shifting under the concept of bypassing Russia, the latter has traditionally been engaged in co-called "collection of lands" as an element of "Russian world" doctrine.

As the war grinds on and the Ukrainian resistance endures, the myth of Russian military power will decline. Yet countries in the region will come under growing pressure to choose a side. The EU should try to mitigate the impact of the conflict on these countries, especially its economic effects. If the EU intends to take a leading role in the region, it will need to maintain a dialogue and channels of cooperation with post-Soviet states. Otherwise, they will be forced into alignment with Russia by the lack of a real alternative (Dumoulin, 2022).

If the thought that Ukraine can do nothing vis-à-vis Russia is accepted, then the same thought should be relevant towards other former Soviet republics, which are perhaps as vulnerable to Russian pressure as Ukraine. It would be advisable to differentiate between the concept of leaving the Russian sphere of influence and that of going closer to Europe. It was not the West that wanted to pull Ukraine away from Russia, but Ukraine itself that wanted to move towards Europe - and that had been its long-lasting, permanent goal since 1991. Interestingly, Russia itself was moving, albeit with some reversals, towards Europe (Tolipov, 2015, p. 16).

Another big issue that challenges the security of Eastern Europe is the risk of nuclear war. The strategic order in Europe has collapsed and "post-Cold War Europe" has ceased to exist. Most European NATO countries now see Russia as a fundamental threat to their existence for a very long time. A period of prolonged hostility with Russia is therefore highly likely. There is also a real risk that Russia's invasion of Ukraine could escalate to a wider major war in Europe - and perhaps the use of nuclear weapons. The risk of nuclear war is now higher than at any time since the Cold War. At the height of that ideological stand-off, there were much more rigorous arms control agreements between the US and the USSR, as well as a web of other formal and informal modes of communication and signaling, which do not exist in the same way now as a deterrent to the threat of the use of nuclear weapons (Dibb, 2022, p. 21). The challenge of responding to Russia is unavoidable. As a revisionist declining power with nuclear weapons, Russia needs to be managed as a major global security risk (Meister, 2022, p. 6).

After the beginning of its aggression in Ukraine, Russia's high level officials not once have declared the probability of using a tactical nuclear weapon in case of a threat to Russia's national interests. This destructive discourse creates a real risk of a nuclear war in Europe. At the same time all parts, even Russia understands the consequences of such action for itself too. The use of nuclear weapon by Russia will endanger not only Ukraine and its western allies but also Belarus and Russian bordering territories with Ukraine. Even if Russia passes from a nuclear blackmail to real action, there is no doubt of an equal response from the West.

### III. THE IMPACT OF WAR IN UKRAINE ON SOUTH CAUCASUS

The war in Ukraine influences the volatile situation in South Caucasus. It accelerates the disintegration of the post-Soviet space. Consequently, Russia can no longer provide authoritarian stability as can be seen in South Caucasus since the 2020 Nagorno Karabakh war (Meister, 2022, p. 6). There, Azerbaijan used its military power, supported by Turkey and with the silence and inactivity of Russia and other regional states, to press Armenia into a so-called "authoritarian peace".

Another important factor is Russia's military presence with its peacekeeping units in South Caucasus: Abkhazia, South Ossetia, Armenia, and Nagorno Karabakh. This is a real and effective tool of continuous political and military pressure in this region.

It is also important to pay attention on a new 3+3 political platform initiated and supported by Turkey, Russia, Azerbaijan, and Iran. More likely this new format has a goal of forcing out the West from the region. And in this perspective only Armenia and Georgia oppose that platform to function. In its turn, the war in Ukraine temporary deters Russian and Turkish ambitions for undertaking more efforts to make the 3+3 highly productive.

There is a wrong understanding that after the Russia-Georgia War of 2008 and the Second Nagorno Karabakh War of 2020 the West has no significant interests in the South Caucasus. For now, the situation is transforming. Of course, the West at least is not directly supporting to one of the parties in these conflicts. And some regional experts<sup>1</sup> are arguing that the South Caucasus only remains at the mercy of regional players such as Russia, Turkey, and Iran. This approach needs more arguments because after the 44-days war in Nagorno Karabakh and the Azerbaijani continuous aggression on the Armenia's borders and sovereign territories as well as the blocking of Lachin Corridor radically change the situation on the ground. The involvement of the West in the regional political processes is obvious even under the suspicious eye of Russia.

On the regional and international levels the West is actively fostering the need for respect and protection of international law which is permanently violated by Azerbaijan - internationally considered as not free and consolidated authoritarian regime<sup>2</sup> (Freedom House) state in the South Caucasus. There are no doubts that in some cases the Azerbaijani aggression is latently provoked and supported by regional players such Russia and Turkey. That's why the "United West" is deeply concerned about the volatile situation in this region and generates active diplomacy to resist and to weaken the real threats to peace building as well as to unblocking of communications that will lead to regional stability.

The EU energetic agreement signed with Azerbaijan in 2022 can't be used as a "carte blanche" by the latter to step forward with its aggression towards the Armenian state borders or escalate the situation in Nagorno Karabakh. On the contrary, this can be considered as a deterrence tool in case of a new aggression. The EU is now a key player for stabilization with its civilian mission on Armenia's borders with Azerbaijan. The establishment of EU Mission in Armenia launches a new phase in the EU's engagement in the South Caucasus. The EU continues to support de-escalation efforts and is committed to work closely with both sides towards the ultimate goal of sustainable peace in the region (Borrell, 2023).

The participation of Armenia to the Summit for Democracy in 2021<sup>3</sup>-2023<sup>4</sup>, the visit of Nancy Pelosi - speaker of the US House of Representatives to Armenia<sup>5</sup> last year, the deployment of EU observer mission in late 2022 and a long term one in 2023

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<sup>1</sup> For example see: **Iskandaryan, A.,** *How the War in Ukraine is Reformatting the Post-Soviet Space*. PONARS Eurasia Policy Memo No. 800 October 2022. PONARS Eurasia, New approaches to research and security in Eurasia, p. 3.

<sup>2</sup> See more in detail in **"Freedom House - 2023 Azerbaijan Country Report"**. Retrieved April 24, 2023 from: <https://freedomhouse.org/country/azerbaijan>.

<sup>3</sup> See more in detail in **"Armenia is committed to contributing to the global mission of strengthening democracy" – PM Pashinyan delivers remarks at "Summit for Democracy"**. Retrieved 5 January 2023 from: <https://www.primeminister.am/en/statements-and-messages/item/2021/12/10/Nikol-Pashinyan-Speech/>

<sup>4</sup> See more in detail in **"PM Pashinyan participates in the opening of the second Summit for Democracy"**. Retrieved 8 May 2023 from: <https://www.primeminister.am/en/press-release/item/2023/03/29/Nikol-Pashinyan-Summit-for-Democracy/>

<sup>5</sup> See more in detail in **"Visit to Armenia by Congressional Delegation led by Speaker of the U.S. House of Representatives Nancy Pelosi"**. Retrieved 16 April 2023 from: <https://am.usembassy.gov/nancy-pelosi-visit/>

on the borders of Armenia with Azerbaijan as well as the decision of the International Court of Justice regarding Lachin Corridor<sup>6</sup> in February 2023 showcase that the West is already involved in the South Caucasus both diplomatically and on the ground. Thus, the West has its own interests in this region which are based on:

- *the maintenance of stability;*
- *the reopening and reoperation of communications;*
- *the peace-building with the respect of regional states' sovereignties and territorial integrities;*
- *the democratic values and aspirations.*

Recent developments in March 2023 in Georgia related to the probability of a new law adoption on "Foreign Agents"<sup>7</sup> threatened and challenged the democratic development path of Georgian society who expressed its disagreement and dissatisfaction by massive manifestations on the streets of Tbilisi. Georgian people observed a Russian sign in that law which was finally rejected by the parliament. If that law was adopted, it would push back Georgia to the authoritarian rule again. A rupture between the society and ruling party even today can lead the country to new crucial political developments.

#### IV. THE IMPACT OF WAR IN UKRAINE ON CENTRAL ASIA

The war in Ukraine exercises its effects also on Central Asia. In this regards, F. Tolipov rightly points out that the events in Ukraine can be interpreted as a "moment of truth." Astana, Bishkek, and Tashkent initially issued official statements on the events in Ukraine in March 2014, speaking out for the country's territorial integrity and sovereignty. For Central Asians, who just recently became independent actors in the international system, the observation of the Ukrainian crisis revealed a strong divergence in the interpretation and application of international law on the part of great powers, regarding their own behavior as well as their attitude towards smaller states. Russian representatives repeatedly mentioned the Kosovo precedent to justify the annexation of Crimea. At the same time they do not recognize the independence of Kosovo. Hence, in the course of events Moscow not only retaliated against Kiev but also made a point of legitimizing that retaliation in exchanges with Washington. This is a problematic precedent for smaller countries in the post-Soviet space because it demonstrates the vague and ad-hoc nature of the international order in this part of the world (Tolipov, 2015, p. 17).

In this context, one of the negative effects of Ukrainian crisis is related to *de facto* delegitimization of CIS when we consider the last statements made by Russian officials regarding the annexed Ukrainian territories. As the same time Russia restrains to fully recognize the Agreements Establishing the Commonwealth of Independent States<sup>8</sup> on December 8 and 21, 1991 which is the basic document to define the borders of post-Soviet republics. That's why not only Ukraine but also the countries of Central Asia region are confused by the age-old *modus operandi* dictating their balancing act and are in search for a new *modus vivendi*.

Today Central Asia faces a twofold challenge: *firstly, the challenge of continued partnership with NATO, resistance to which has become a key feature of Russia's global posture in general and its policies during the Ukrainian crisis in particular; secondly, the challenge of rebooting a regional cooperation format, given the fundamental crisis of the CIS.* Russia still has not formulated its clear-cut strategy with respect to Central Asia that its geopolitical competitors such as the United States, European Union, Japan, and China already have. The lack or absence of an adequate Russian strategy towards Central Asia is perhaps the main reason for the visible disharmony between its huge power assets and its limited power projection. The war in Ukraine will serve as a litmus test for unveiling the essence of the Russian post-Soviet posture (Tolipov, 2015, p. 19).

It is obvious that the Russia's war in Ukraine alters Russia's role and the whole situation in Eastern Europe, Central Asia and South Caucasus. But at the same time it has to be noticed that Russia still keeps its military presence and levers of political pressure in these regions.

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<sup>6</sup> See more in detail in "**World Court orders Azerbaijan to ensure free movement to Nagorno-Karabakh**". Retrieved 21 March 2023 from: <https://www.reuters.com/world/asia-pacific/world-court-orders-azerbaijan-ensure-free-passage-through-lachin-corridor-2023-02-22/>

<sup>7</sup> See more in detail in "**Georgia: 'Foreign Agents' Bill Tramples on Rights**". Retrieved 28 April 2023 from: <https://www.hrw.org/news/2023/03/07/georgia-foreign-agents-bill-tramples-rights>

<sup>8</sup> See more in detail in "**Agreements Establishing the Commonwealth of Independent States**". Council of Europe. Strasbourg, 8 September 1994, pp. 138-154.



## V. DESTROYING DEMOCRACY FOR ENHANCING AUTHORITARIANISM

Another huge impact that Russia's invasion of Ukraine engenders, is related to democratic rule destruction. Destroying democracy in its near abroad is another strategic goal of Russia. The democracy was always considered as a primary threat for irreplaceable leaders in the authoritarian rule.

The competition for the formation of new world order has dramatically increased the influence of the venal factor on social processes and particularly on the assessment and classification of the regimes created in the post-Soviet transformation countries (Ordukhanyan, 2019<sup>a</sup>, p. 38). The researcher continues that the vector of integration policies of post-Soviet republics also influenced the indicators of democracy. Democratization is more transparent in European integration countries. As for the Eurasian integration, many difficulties are still standing. Without taking into account the democratic indicators and political culture features of the Eurasian integration post-Soviet countries, these issues cannot be resolved effectively (Ordukhanyan, 2019<sup>b</sup>, p. 818).

In this regard, Moscow seeks to contain the spread of democracy in the post-Soviet space. The Kremlin, in this reading, is sensitive about the emergence of apparently successful democracies on its doorstep out of fear that they may serve as a role model for Russia, thus undermining the Putin regime's hold on power (Götz, 2022, p. 1532).

The war, is reconstructed, and, at the same time, is integrated into the EU, this will have a major impact on Russia. It would counter the Russian leadership's argument that there is no alternative to authoritarian rule and would confirm that democratization and successful reforms can take place in post-Soviet countries and would also be possible for Russia (Meister, 2022, p. 8).

Numerous observers have attributed Russia's 2022 military attack on Ukraine to fears of a democracy spill over. Person and McFaul point out that Russian president is threatened by a successful democracy in Ukraine. He can't tolerate a successful, flourishing, and democratic Ukraine on his borders. That undermines the Kremlin's own regime stability and proposed rationale for autocratic state leadership (Person & McFaul, 2022, p. 5).

Is that occasional that another emerging democracy in the post-Soviet space such as Armenia after the Velvet revolution in 2018 is under military attack from 2020 by another authoritarian post-Soviet leader such as Azerbaijani president Aliyev who has signed an alliance agreement with Russia on February 2022? This fact also proves that there is no doubt that the spread of democracy is the biggest fear for authoritarian leadership in post-Soviet space.

Instead, what appears important for the Kremlin is to have pro-Russian governments in nearby countries, regardless of their domestic political systems (Götz, 2022, p. 1535). This viewpoint is shared by a number of experts. For example, Cameron and Orenstein who examine the negative influence of Russia on democratic transitions in the post-Soviet space, note that "... post-Soviet states may be subjected to Russian influence that undermines rights, liberties, and democracy - not necessarily because Russia wishes to undermine the rights and liberties that exist in these countries but, rather, because it wishes to limit their drift away from the emerging Russian dominated security and economic zone"(Cameron & Orenstein, 2012, p. 36).

This argument is absolutely weak because it is impossible for democratic states to keep their sovereignty, protect their own interests and define their foreign policies when being under the domination or in close relations with an authoritarian ruler. In this case, these democracies will become *quasi* and totally *fake*.

Other field specialists such as Charap and Colton notice that "The Russian objective is to have friendly neighbors, that is, states whose leaders are not hostile to Russia. How these leaders get to power and how their political institutions function is of little concern" (Charap & Colton, 2017, p. 77). Another researcher Casier points out that the determining factor for supporting or weakening a regime is likely to be loyal to Moscow, rather than the degree of democracy (Casier, 2012, p. 42).

In this respect, the mentioned experts emphasize the asymmetric relations when only the weak part has to be loyal and friendly to the strong one. In such kind of interrelations "the weak" without having a right to its own interests serves only "the strong". The existence of a democratic rule in equal rights and interests within an authoritarian one is impossible.

The ongoing war in Ukraine is shaking the foundation of the already fragile Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS) and the very formal Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO). After the separation of South Ossetia and Abkhazia from Georgia and the splitting of Transnistria from Moldova, Russia's annexation of Crimea and keeping Ukraine in a lasting crisis by tactics that "take on attrition," Russia not only has fallen under international economic sanctions but also aroused well based

suspicions about its neo-imperial syndrome among post-Soviet countries on Russia's perimeter (Tolipov, 2015, p. 11). Russia's unprovoked actions in the sovereign territories of Ukraine are not only condemned by the international community, especially by the "Collective West", but these actions have also deeply worried other post-Soviet states that have signed treaties or are in the same economic, political and defense alliances with Russia. Among these countries only the authorities of Belarus openly and widely support Russia's politics without having other choice.

All these facts and arguments prove that the authoritarianism is the biggest problem both for democracy, peace-building, stability and sovereignty in post-Soviet space.

### VI. THE DOCTRINE OF "RUSSIAN WORLD" AS CONCEPT FOR RUSSIA'S BIG COMEBACK?

Almost all conflicts provoked or supported by Russia in post-Soviet space were justified by evoking the concept of a "Russian World". This concept suggested the restoration of unity for historic Russian territories by stressing the existence of a "broad Russian civilization" which has to be protected from external forces (particularly from the West) and which is defined as the sphere of Russian influence and national interests (Jilge, 2023).

This concept was developed since the late 1990s mostly by a Russian ideologist A. Dugin, A. Prokhonov (Dugin & Prokhonov, 2016) and others who applied it to a range of dimensions: ideological, political, cultural, identity-based, and geopolitical.

This concept consciously relativizes the borders between nations and is used to justify the "protective" role of Russia towards Russian-speaking minorities abroad, especially in the states of the former Soviet Union. By setting itself off clearly from "the West" and cloaking its version of Russian nationalism in a "civilizing" form, "Russian World" claims to be based not primarily on ethnicity but rather on an essentialist, mythical ideal of Russian language and culture. According to Jilge, "speaking Russian" is thereby equated with "acting like a Russian" and "thinking like a Russian," which goes hand in hand with tendencies to exclude in nationalist terms. Geopolitically "Russian World" was conceived as a Russian "diaspora empire," with particular importance continually placed on the "Russian enclaves" in its "near abroad" – that is, on the European countries of the former Soviet Union, such as Ukraine and Moldova. Those areas, such as Crimea, Donbas, and Transnistria, have large Russian-speaking populations. (Jilge, 2023).

The war in Ukraine is also considered by Russia as a legitimate right to restore its "Russian World". In this context, H. Kissinger points out that "At the end of war, a place has to be found for Ukraine and a place has to be found for Russia - if we don't want Russia to become an outpost of China". He says that the conflict in Ukraine can permanently restructure the global order and that Russia could alienate itself completely from Europe and seek a permanent alliance elsewhere" (Kissinger, 2022). In this regard P. Dibb rightly emphasizes that after the Ukraine war, Russia will have to reassess its relationship with Europe at a minimum, as well as its general attitude towards NATO. Kissinger proposes that ideally the dividing line in Europe should return to the *status quo ante* and that care has to be taken to not turn the war about the freedom of Ukraine into a war against Russia itself. The problem with that proposal is that it isn't clear whether Kissinger is proposing a *status quo ante* territorially in Ukraine before 2022 or before 2014. The former would reward Russian aggression permanently by acknowledging its illegal occupation of Crimea, Donetsk and Lugansk" (Dibb, 2022, p. 19) as a part of the "Russian World".

Here we can define a big threat to the sovereignty and territorial integrity both of Ukraine and other post-Soviet states neighboring with Russia. This logic raises the probability and the risk of Russia's further invasion in other post-Soviet states for reestablishing the "Russian World" as a zone of its political influence and authoritarian rule if it succeeds in Ukraine.

But recent developments in Russia's near abroad, especially in Ukraine, showcases that the "Russian World" has no potential to be spread with the use of "soft power" tools. The reactions in Ukraine and in other post-Soviet states, presumed in the doctrine of "Russian World" influence, prove the artificiality and illegitimacy of this concept to be implemented because in reality, it finds no support on cultural level. This concept is developed to justify only the geopolitical intentions of Russia. For now, the concept of "Russian World" is failing and losing its relevance by colliding with Ukrainian people's resistance because the post-Soviet Ukraine does not share the same values with Russia and the idea of a new common future under its control. That's why Russia opted for the use of "hard power" to promoting its geopolitical interests despite the aversion about this concept and the Russian propaganda and its expectations. There is no doubt that such a comeback of "Russian World" after the collapse of the Soviet Union will not find any support among the majority of post-Soviet states.

## VII. CAN THE UKRAINIAN WAR LEAD RUSSIA TO A STRATEGIC RETREAT IN POST-SOVIET SPACE?

The war in Ukraine raises the question of strategic reconstruction in post-Soviet space. In this context while the world is entering a major political and economic crisis as a result of the Russia-Ukraine war, it may put an end to the long-standing crisis of the post-Soviet condition. The war could end it either by finally dismantling the very post-Soviet space, or by ultimately determining the contours and directions of development towards more stable political, economic and ideological structures in this tumultuous part of the world (Ishchenko, 2022).

Can a strategic retreat for Russia in post-Soviet space aftermath the war be determined?

Today it is harder to precisely define the post-Soviet condition because there was a perpetual crisis of political representation that color or popular revolutions only reproduced and intensified. The post-Soviet elites, who amassed their fortunes in the process of rapid and arbitrary privatization of state property in the 1990s - actions that lacked any widely acceptable ideological, religious or traditional justification - have struggled to secure a broader legitimacy of their rule. Authoritarian leaders in post-Soviet space rose to power serving an important function for this elite. They ensured their assets and opportunities for rent-seeking, stopped the self-damaging centrifugal processes via coercion of some factions of the elite and balanced the interests of others, and provided some popular legitimacy by restoring stability amid post-Soviet chaotic collapse (Ishchenko, 2022).

The answer to above mentioned question demands a definition of the main consequences that occur now and can occur after the war.

- In case the military resistance in Ukraine and the crippling sanctions lead to Russia's defeat, it would mean the ultimate dissolution of the post-Soviet space. The abundant problems the Russian army encounters in the war reveal the weakness of "authoritarian modernization" even having huge reserves of natural and energetic resources.
- The defeat in Ukraine would accelerate the collapse of Russia's governing elite. More probably, there can be organized a palace coup by a faction of Russian elites. This would likely be paralleled with significant violence.
- Ideologically, Russia loses its war against Ukraine because even if it succeeds on the battlefield, the war has already consolidated the Ukrainians as a political nation. Regardless of when and how the war ends, no one can imagine a pro-Russian Ukraine again.
- Russia loses the information war and has no international support. After atrocities in Bucha and other cities, Russia's image suffered a catastrophic decline and will stay that way for decades. The negative perception of Russia in Western public opinion likely will not change for many years.
- It is hard to imagine the West lifting its sanctions against Russia, regardless of future developments, except for the unlikely scenario of a regime change in Moscow and the return of all Ukrainian territories seized, including Crimea. In all other case scenarios, the sanctions will remain in place and will continue crippling Russia from inside (Ishchenko, 2022).
- The war in Ukraine consolidated Europe and the West as a whole. Despite some European states' disagreement about many things as well as some economic difficulties and energetic challenges, geographical situation, e.g., however, on the institutional level, Russia's invasion of Ukraine has made Europe more consolidated and united. This situation also gives a chance to other post-Soviet state to move out of Russia's influence zone in the near future.
- Russia's aggression and threats to the democratic world and state sovereignties forged the will of other post-Soviet states to assess the independence as a basic value in state-building. Even being dependent on Russia's economic, energetic and other resources, some of post-Soviet states understand the importance of diversifying their foreign policies and looking for alternatives that will balance the forces and lead to the sustainability. The image of Russia has been transformed from a potential "savior" to a potential "threat". Russia loses its attractiveness and can't no more use "soft power" tools to promote its interests in post-Soviet space. Russia couldn't find new allies to join its Ukrainian journey, even worse; Russia's (sometimes violent) actions are distancing its official allies and partners among post-Soviet states. For example,



after Russia's invasion of Ukraine, Armenia as a member of CSTO has declined for the first time the demand to organizing *military drills* on its territory in 2023.

The above mentioned factors determine a strategic retreat for Russia in Post-Soviet Space as a result of its aggression in Ukraine.

### VIII. CONCLUSION

- Russia's war in Ukraine is the biggest military conflict since the World War II on the European soil. This war has a huge economic, energetic, humanitarian, logistic, geopolitical, and values impact not only on the European space, but also on post-Soviet one. Besides geopolitical interests and aggressive intentions, the Russian ambitions in its near abroad are considered as a realistic threat to the sovereignty and territorial integrity of other post-Soviet countries by hitting the political transition in those countries that have opted for a democratic future. In this regard, the alleged military success of an autocratic country can really smash the hope for democracy building in post-Soviet space and can demolish the efforts of some post-Soviet countries to maintain their sovereignties. In general, the upcoming situation in post-Soviet countries that are aspiring for democratic values and transition as well as make efforts to become a part of the democratic world, mostly depends on the outcomes of the war in Ukraine. In other words, the future of post-Soviet space will be determined by the outcome of this war which is not only a war for territorial domination and promotion of geopolitical interests, but also a war between political values of autocratic and democratic rules. The recent developments in the battlefield showcase positive steps forward for the democracy to win.
- Ukraine is the frontline of democracy in Eastern Europe bordering with Russia and threatened by the latter. If Russia succeeds with its aggressive politics in Ukraine, other post-Soviet states will fail in their democratic provisions even without Russian invasion because of 5th columns' political activation as well as internal political units financed and supported by Russia in these countries. They will organize coups with violent overthrow of existing governments with a democratic path. That is why the victory of Ukraine is both of geopolitical and axiological significance.
- Russia's aggression threatens not only the European security which is a key part of the Western security architecture but also it threatens the attractiveness of democracy as a secure way to live in peace, sustainability and prosperity.
- The Russia's aggression has a real potential to be copied and reproduced by other authoritarian leaders which will aggravate the situation in other post-Soviet conflict zones. The recent Azerbaijani attacks on the Armenia's sovereign territories on September 2022 are an obvious example of the imitation by Aliyev of Russia's unprovoked aggression in Ukraine.
- Taking into consideration the negative trends, the West has to put more cement into the "Wall of Democracy" by underlining the economic, security, energetic and other needs of those post-Soviet countries that are on the frontline of the biggest threat of authoritarian rule expansion since the end of Cold War.

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