

**Johanna Holm**

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the Post-Soviet Region: A Comparative Analysis**



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# Authoritarian Regionalism and Democratic Development in the Post-Soviet Region: A Comparative Analysis

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## Förord

*“I don’t think there’s anything darker than doing a PhD”* (The Irish Times, 2017). Citatet har jag tänkt på otaliga gånger under avhandlingsarbetet, speciellt när jag befunnit mig mitt i ”The Valley of Shit” och känt att jag inte kommer framåt. Under åren som doktorand har det ofta upplevts som om själva avhandlingen, antalet färdigställda sidor och tabeller, är allt som räknas som slutprodukt från åren som doktorand. Men ju längre hunnen jag blivit desto mer har jag insett hur mycket jag har lärt mig: hur man skriver en avhandling, planera undervisning och handleda studerande, att ge och ta emot konstruktiv feedback, nya VaranTV-referenser och hur man byter en waste toner-box i printern. Även om arbetet emellanåt inte alltid har känts så givande så har det varvats med stunder av inspiration och arbetsglädje. De positiva känslorna får jag till stor del tacka mina fina kollegor för!

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Vasa 15.08.2025

*Johanna Holm*

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## List of Abbreviations

AA	Association Agreement
ACLP	Alvarez, Cheibub, Limongi, Przeworski democracy index
ACUM	Political bloc in Moldova
APF	National Popular Front of Azerbaijan
ARM	Armenia
ASSR	Autonomous Soviet Socialist Republic
AZE	Azerbaijan
BLR	Belarus
BNF	Belarusian Nationalist Front
BSF	Black Sea Fleet
BTI	Bertelsmann Stiftung's Transformation Index
BTC	Baku-Tbilisi-Ceyhan (pipeline)
CES/EES	Common/Eurasian Economic Space
CIS	Commonwealth of Independent States
CIS EMO	CIS Election Monitoring Organization
CIS FTA	CIS Free Trade Area
CSCT	Commission on Security and Cooperation in Europe
CSTO	The Collective Security Treaty Organization
CU	Customs Union
CUG	Citizen's Union of Georgia or Georgian Citizen's Union, Georgian party
DCFTA	Deep and Comprehensive Free Trade Area
DD	Democracy and dictatorship
DRO	Democratic regional organizations
EACU	Eurasian Customs Union
EAEU	Eurasian Economic Union
EaP	Eastern Partnership
EDB	Eurasian Development Bank
EDP	External democracy promotion
EEU	Eurasian Economic Union
EIDHR	European Instrument for Democracy and Human rights
EIU	The Economist Intelligence Unit
ENP	European Neighbourhood Policy
ENPI	European Neighbourhood and Partnership Instrument
EU	European Union
EurAsEC	Eurasian Economic Community
GEO	Georgia
GRLS	Gabala Radar Station
GUAM	Organization for Democracy and Economic Development (GEO, UKR, ARM, MDA)
GUUAM	Organization for Democracy and Economic Development (GEO, UKR, UZB, ARM, MDA)
HIPC	Highly Independent Poor Countries
IMF	International Monetary Fund
IMU	Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan
IO	International organization
KAZ	Kazakhstan

KGZ	Kyrgyzstan
KGB	The Committee for State Security of the USSR 1945–1991
MASSR	Moldovan Autonomous Soviet Socialist Republic
MASST	Moldovan Autonomous Soviet Socialist Republic/Transnistria
MDA	Moldova
MSSD	Most similar systems design
MSSD	Most different systems design
NATO	North Atlantic Treaty Organization
NDRO	Non-democratic regional organization
NGO	Non-governmental organization
OSCE	Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe
PANM	Pan-Armenian National Movement
PCA	Partnership and Cooperation Agreement
PDA	Agrarian Democratic Party of Moldova
PfP	NATO Partnership for Peace
PSRM	Party of Socialists of the Republic of Moldova
QCA	Qualitative comparative analysis
RO	Regional Organization
RSFSR	Russian Soviet Federalist Socialist Republic
SCO	Shanghai Cooperation Organisation
SEEPC	South-East European Cooperation Process
SFSR	Soviet Federalist Socialist Republic
SSR	Soviet Socialist Republic
TACIS	Technical Assistance for the Commonwealth of Independent States, EU program
TAGP	Trans-ASEAN Gas Pipeline
TDFR	Transcaucasian Democratic Federative Republic
TJK	Tajikistan
TKM	Turkmenistan
TSFSR	Transcaucasian Socialist Federalist Socialist Republic
UKR	Ukraine
UN	United Nations
US	The United States
USAID	The United States Agency for International Development
USSR	The Union of Soviet Socialist Republics
UZB	Uzbekistan
V-Dem	Varieties of Democracy

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## Abstract

The post-Soviet region has experienced varying democratic development since the fall of the Soviet Union in 1991. While some former Soviet states have become liberal democracies, others have developed into hybrid regimes or highly autocratic states. Theories regarding the factors that have enabled this development have evolved over time, covering both internal (domestic prerequisites) and external (external actors) sources of influence. However, much of the focus has been on a single factor at a time and has, to a large degree, concentrated on the influence of democratic external actors. This research addresses the question of the impact of external actors on democratic development in the post-Soviet region. The thesis examines the influence of non-democratic regional organizations (NDROs) aiming to provide new insights into research on democratization and regionalism. Drawing on theories of authoritarian regionalism, the main research problem focuses on whether membership in Russian-dominated NDROs has played a role in the varying democratic developments in the states of the post-Soviet region between 1991 and 2021.

Through the use of three different comparative analyses (a longitudinal descriptive study, a cross-case comparative analysis based on exploratory case studies, and a qualitative comparative analysis), this study has uncovered findings that show that the impact of several factors in combination with each other has been essential in constructing the puzzle of democratization in the post-Soviet region. The relationships between the post-Soviet states and Russia, their geographical locations, the strength of their presidential systems, and their contacts with other regional actors seem to have played important roles in the varying democratic developments. Most significantly, the research identifies the combinations of factors that have impacted the democratic outcomes of the region over the last three decades. For some states, at certain points in time, membership in NDROs has been found to have impacted the varying democratic development in the region, as either present or absent in conjunction with other variables.

The implications of this research extend to new insights into the role of external actors, NDROs, and theories of linkage and leverage. This thesis also offers valuable contributions to research on regionalism and democratization by concluding that certain combinations of variables did contribute to the democratic trajectory of the post-Soviet region between 1991 and 2021. The conclusions set the stage for future research on the impact regional cooperation and NDROs have on democratic development.

# I. INTRODUCTION

# Chapter 1. Introduction

*“The most effective context within which external actors can influence democratic processes at the national level is increasingly regional...”.*

*Schmitter (2001, p. 47)*

## 1.1. The puzzle of democratization and autocratization

Why do some countries democratize while others do not? The puzzle of successful and failed democratization processes has long intrigued scholars of political science. The field of democratization studies has produced many theories on which factors or prerequisites are needed for successful democratization. Traditionally, the focus has been on the impact that domestic factors—the specific conditions within a state—have on the prospects for democratization. According to Lipset (1959), states with a higher level of economic development were viewed as more likely to survive a democratic transition compared to less developed economies. The structure of the electoral system and constitutional design have also been believed to influence the success of democratizations (Ishiyama & Velten, 1998; Fink-Hafner & Hafner-Fink, 2009). In addition to *structural factors*, more *actor-centered explanations* have also been emphasized. Factors such as the strength of the political opposition (O'Donnell, 1993; Przeworski, 1991; Schmitter, 2002), the role of civil society (Linz & Stepan, 1996), the level of national identity (Rustow, 1991; Sahm, 1999), and overall belief or disbelief in democracy (Welzel & Inglehart, 2009) have been seen as important factors.

Global waves of regime change demonstrate that shifts in the international political landscape occur regularly. Waves of democratization and autocratization can be traced back to the first wave of democracy in the early 19th century. Huntington (1991, p. 15) defines a democratic wave as “a group of transitions from non-democratic to democratic regimes that occur within a specified period of time and that significantly outnumber transitions in the opposite direction during that period”. While liberal democracy is viewed by many as the political ideal, the percentage of people living in autocratizing states has increased from 5 percent in 2011 to 36 percent in 2021 (V-Dem, 2022). Key questions in political science are why these changes occur, and which factors are important for the success and failure of democratic transitions.

The factors that have been considered most important have evolved as new states have undergone democratic transitions. This suggests that the critical conditions and prerequisites for democracy vary across transitioning states. There are also regional differences since some regions stand out when analyzing patterns of democratization. The wave of autocratization in the 1990s, which followed the third wave of democratization, shifted scholarly views on the prerequisites for democracy. Geographical and historical factors, as well as external influences, began to receive more attention (Doorenspleet, 2004; Kopstein & Reilly, 2000; McFaul, 2002). According to Lankina and Getachew (2006), a state's *geographical position* can impact its level of democracy. The prospects for democratization are higher when surrounded by democracies than when situated in a non-democratic neighborhood. Whitehead (1996) identified clusters of democracies in specific geographical locations and termed this phenomenon "contagion through proximity". Przeworski et al. (2000) further noted that democracy was more likely to survive if the region was dominated by democratic regimes. Similarly, the *historical background* of a transitioning state may influence the prospects for democratization (Almond, 1968; Huntington, 1984). The *international dimension*—the influence of regional and global actors—has also been considered critical for regime transitions. External actors can include other states, NGOs, or regional or international organizations that influence the political development of an individual country (McCulloch & McEvoy, 2018). This effect was particularly evident in the transitions of Central and Eastern Europe in the 1990s (Burnell, 2006; Castaldo, 2022; Pevehouse, 2002; Tolstrup, 2014). The research found that external actors could significantly impact political development and shape the direction of regime transitions.

As a result, the scholarly focus shifted, and democratization was no longer seen as a one-size-fits-all theory (Carothers, 2004; Schmitter, 1996). Transitioning states became recognized as having unique starting points and diverse prerequisites for a successful transition to democracy, with both state-specific and regional aspects to consider. Today, regime transitions are viewed as a complex puzzle of many different factors and mechanisms, influenced by both domestic and regional circumstances as well as external actors.

## 1.2. The international dimension and the impact of external actors

Democratization studies have traditionally focused on the domestic dimension of regime transitions, while less emphasis has been put on the international dimension. Research has concluded that the proportion of democracies in an environment is associated with the survival of

transitioning states (see Gleditsch & Ward, 2006; Przeworski et al., 1996). Studies on the democratic impact of the European Union (EU) as an external actor have also concluded that regional organizations (ROs) can play an important role in the prospects of democratization in specific regions (see Kubicek, 2001; Pridham, 2005; Whitehead, 2001).

The impact of democratic external actors during the regime transitions of Eastern and Central Europe after the end of the Cold War has been of scholarly interest in terms of international and regional dimensions. Theories concerning the influence of external actors have generally focused on two different aspects: *structural* factors and *actor-centered* factors. Structural factors emphasize the importance of geographical proximity to external actors, levels of interdependence, and power asymmetries for the effectiveness of external influence. The actor-centered approach, in turn, highlights domestic political actors as crucial for the effectiveness of external influence, as they may either accept or reject the demands of external actors (Kheur & Demmelhuber, 2016; Tolstrup, 2013). The most dominant theory regarding the effectiveness of (democratic) external influence is one of linkage and leverage (Way & Levitsky, 2005, 2006, 2007, 2014). This theory presumes that high levels of linkage (the density of ties between an external actor and the target state) and high levels of leverage (the vulnerability of the target state) positively affect the effectiveness of external influence. Vulnerable states that are highly interconnected with an external actor are more receptive to influence (Way & Levitsky, 2005; 2007).

The vast literature on the positive impact of the EU as a democracy promoter—supporting the development and consolidation of democracy as a governmental system—in prospective member states has made significant contributions to the study of democratic external actors and Europeanization (see Ademner et al., 2016; Börzel et al., 2015; Fisher, 2012; Grimm, 2019; Holzhacker & Neuman, 2019; Morlino & Sadurski, 2010; Obydenkova, 2012). Over the past decade, scholars have also begun researching the possible impact of non-democratic external actors, as democratic backsliding has continued worldwide (see Obydenkova & Libman, 2012; Robert & Ziemer, 2018; Tolstrup, 2009; Vanderhill, 2014). However, not as many studies have focused on the impact of non-democratic external actors, and this remains a relatively new perspective within the research on regime transitions. The international dimension of authoritarianism explores how non-democratic powers such as Russia, China, Venezuela, and Saudi Arabia influence domestic developments in neighboring states. While external actors use many mechanisms to affect political development (for example, regime promotion, coercion, pressure, aid, and support), the role and effects of these mechanisms among non-democratic actors remain inconclusive. There is also scholarly disagreement (see Babayan, 2015; Burnell, 2010; Burnell & Schlumberger, 2010) regarding the level of intent behind the influence of non-democratic actors.

Some scholars claim that these actors deliberately spread authoritarianism, while others argue that their influence is unintentional and merely a byproduct of diffusion processes.

Due to the influence of the EU within the international sphere, regionalism and ROs have been highlighted as important vehicles for external influence (Börzel, 2016; Kim & Heo, 2018; Pevehouse, 2002; 2005). Studies suggest that membership in democratic regional organizations (DROs) increases the likelihood of successful transitions to democracy (see Pevehouse, 2002; Wright, 2009). However, ROs are not limited to democratic regions, non-democratic regional organizations (NDROs) have consistently outnumbered their democratic counterparts globally. During the late 1990s and early 2000s, a rise in the number of NDROs spurred scholarly interest in the impact of these organizations (see Kneuer et al., 2019; Libman & Obydenkova, 2018; Obydenkova & Libman, 2019; Obydenkova & Schmitter, 2020). Authoritarian regionalism, defined by Libman and Obydenkova (2018, p. 151) as “regional organizations founded and dominated by autocracies,” is a relatively new approach within the study of democratization and autocratization. Research shows that NDROs can provide political, economic, and security advantages, thereby prolonging the tenure of autocratic leaders (see Cottiero & Haggard, 2021; Libman, 2018; Libman & Obydenkova, 2019; Russo & Stoddard, 2018).

Over the last two decades, most of the research on the influence of external actors has focused on democratic actors, while non-democratic actors have been underrepresented in theories regarding external influence. The global rise of autocracies has prompted a shift in recent scholarships. Authoritarian regionalism and the effects of NDROs have begun to be recognized as tools of influence by external actors. Studies show that regional cooperation between non-democratic states can increase the level of autocracy in a region. In regions with a high density of autocracies, authoritarian regionalism can contribute to the survival of autocrats through processes of socialization, learning, and cooperation (see Kim & Heo, 2018; Libman, 2018; Schimmelfennig, 2016; Stoddard, 2017).

### 1.3. Aim and scope

The literature suggests that, within the regional context, external actors can effectively influence democratic or autocratic development processes if the right circumstances already exist (Kneuer & Demmelhuber, 2016). The assumption is that regional external actors, under the right conditions,

can affect the political developments of target states with which they have high levels of interconnection, or linkages. Membership in ROs is an important part of regional cooperation, serving as an effective tool for external influence, and linking member states together on different levels. The theory of authoritarian regionalism assumes that membership in non-democratic regional organizations is associated with the level of democracy among member states. However, the direction of the association is unclear. Non-democratic states might join NDROs because of their regime type, or membership in NDROs may contribute to a more non-democratic trajectory (Libman & Obydenkova, 2019).

To explore the presumed association between membership in NDROs and the level of democratic development, suitable cases are needed. As the focus of this thesis is the regional influence of Russia as an external actor, the post-Soviet states are of interest (see map on page 94). In this thesis, the term post-Soviet refers to the states that emerged following the dissolution of the Soviet Union in 1991. Although the term is contested, particularly for implying a homogeneity that does not reflect the diverse developments of these states, it remains appropriate for this study, as the analysis focuses on developments since 1991 and considers their shared Soviet legacy. The post-Soviet region is interesting from both democratization and regional cooperation perspectives. During the 1990s, the states of the region faced significant challenges in their democratic consolidation. Only a few managed to become stable liberal democracies, while the rest struggled with democratic development or became more autocratic. The region is also prolific in the number of NDROs, with numerous overlapping memberships. While Russia dominates the NDROs in the region, the EU also has an interest in some of the post-Soviet states, making the region a recipient of both non-democratic and democratic external influence. The variation among states in the post-Soviet region in their levels of NDRO membership as well as in levels of democracy allows for a comparative analysis of these factors. While the effects of the EU on democratization processes in prospective member states in the post-Soviet region have been researched, the non-democratic regional organizations dominated by Russia have received much less attention. As an increasing number of states undergo autocratization and democratic backsliding, a key question concerns the potential role played by non-democratic external actors as well as NDROs in facilitating this development.

Authoritarian regionalism is a relatively new research field and has mainly been analyzed as a tool for the erosion of democratic norms (Cooley, 2015; Kneuer, 2023) within the frameworks of regional economic integration and security cooperation among non-democratic states (Dragneva & Hartwell, 2022). Some of the literature has focused on mechanisms of influence used through regional organizations (Cottiero & Haggard, 2021; Debre, 2021; Gawrich & Libman, 2021;

Stoddard, 2015) and other publications have highlighted the regional impact of certain NDROs on a few target states (Gast, 2021; Libman & Vinokurov, 2018a). Some larger studies on the impact of NDROs have been conducted. Obydenkova and Libman (2019) analyzed the history and impact of various NDROs (political, economic, and security) as well as the impact of authoritarian regionalism in Eurasia. Libman and Obydenkova (2013) also researched a possible connection between regime transitions and participation in international organizations, using member states of the Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS) between 1991 and 2010 as an empirical case. While Eurasia and the post-Soviet region have previously been analyzed within the context of authoritarian regionalism, the focus has mostly been on a few NDROs (most commonly the CIS or the Eurasian Economic Union, EAEU) and a comparison of a small number of states over a limited period of time. A longitudinal study of a larger number of post-Soviet states is needed, as is research on the possible association between NDRO membership levels and democracy levels across a larger number of NDROs in various post-Soviet states.

Fifteen new independent states emerged after the dissolution of the Soviet Union, forming the post-Soviet region. The democracy levels among these states have varied since 1991. Only the three Baltic states have transitioned into liberal democracies over the last three decades, while the rest have experienced stalled democratic, or even highly autocratic, developments. Since the start of post-Soviet regionalism in 1991, all post-Soviet states except the Baltic states have held memberships in regional NDROs. Russia is the dominant force within post-Soviet regionalism, as a founding and driving state of all included NDROs and is therefore considered the external actor in this case. The eleven remaining states, which either hold or have held memberships in a regional NDRO, are included as target states. The aim of this thesis is to *develop a deeper understanding of the role Russia plays as an external actor in the post-Soviet region*. However, due to the research design, the thesis will not be able to provide an in-dept analysis of the mechanism employed by Russia as an external actor, nor the motivations behind its use of these mechanisms. The general research problem explores *whether memberships in Russian-dominated NDROs have played a role in the varying democratic development of the included post-Soviet states*. More specific research questions are outlined in the last chapter of the theoretical framework of the thesis.

To address the general research problem and achieve the aim of the thesis, two main areas need to be explored. The first is an examination of the association assumed between NDRO membership levels and democracy levels. The second is a consideration of other, complementary, factors that may affect democratic development and an analysis of the interplay between them. Three empirical studies are necessary to answer the general research problem. The first study assesses the assumed association between NDRO membership and democracy levels among the included states. The



second study investigates other possible factors influencing democracy levels in the region, based on previous literature on democratization. The third study focuses on the interplay between NDRO membership and other relevant factors to evaluate the role NDRO memberships have played in post-Soviet regime transitions.

## 1.4. Contributions

The contributions of this thesis are fourfold and include two theoretical and two empirical insights into the research field. The two theoretical contributions relate to the further development of the categorization of mechanisms and typologies of external influence, as well as to the effectiveness of non-democratic external influence. The two empirical contributions, or methodological advancements, concern the extended scope, compared to previous studies, on post-Soviet states, and the use of mixed methods to identify the interplay of factors affecting democracy levels in the region. Each contribution is discussed individually, starting with the theoretical contributions.

The literature on external actors suffers from an excess of definitions, mechanisms, and categorizations, which makes the analysis of the phenomenon complex. Often, a particular mechanism of external influence is labeled differently by various scholars, which complicates the categorization of the mechanisms. Hence, the first contribution of this thesis is a clarification of the terminology related to external actors and influence. The many different labels and definitions for the mechanisms used by external actors are discussed and categorized to present a more simplified typology of combined mechanisms of external influence, based on Burnell's (2011a) typology. As external actors seldom use only one mechanism at a time, this thesis adopts a typology of combined influences.

This research field tends to heavily focus on democratic external actors, and thereby limits the scope of understanding. Therefore, the second theoretical contribution of the thesis is the incorporation of research on non-democratic external actors. Most of the earlier research has focused on the impact that democratic external actors have on states that are transitioning to democracy. The concept of democracy promotion, defined as "...attempts to install or assist in the institution of democratic governance in states outside one's own" (Hobson & Kurki, 2011, p. 3), is widely used in studies on democratic external actors. Its proposed counterpart, autocracy promotion, is a more debated phenomenon. Definitions of autocracy promotion vary among scholars, but most include the use of methods that either strengthen autocracy or weaken democracy in target states (Tansey, 2016b). Given that research on the effects of non-democratic

external actors is relatively new, their motivations and mechanisms have often been viewed as the mirror image of democratic external actors. I argue that this is not the case. I have developed the theory of linkage and leverage to better fit non-democratic external influence. Democratic and non-democratic external actors are driven by different motivations, operate differently, and use distinct mechanisms. Moreover, the role of political actors in the theory of linkage and leverage has previously been downplayed. I argue that domestic political actors should not be seen as merely passive recipients of external influence but rather as active participants in either accepting or rejecting that influence.

The third contribution, an empirical one, is the relatively broad scope, compared to that of previous research, on NDROs in the post-Soviet region. Most studies on democratic development in the post-Soviet region have focused on a smaller number of states over shorter periods or have examined only a limited set of factors affecting democratic development, often focusing solely on either democratic or autocratic outcomes (see Cummings, 2001; Gel'man, 2008; Viera & Vasilyan, 2021). This study examines the political developments of eleven post-Soviet states over three decades, from their independence in 1991 to 2021. It includes several factors, both structural (more static) and actor-centered (more dynamic), that potentially influence democratic development. Given that the post-Soviet states are a mix of highly autocratic regimes and more democratic hybrid systems, this study analyzes both democratic and autocratic outcomes, unlike previous studies, which have tended to focus on only one. Earlier research on the impact of NDROs in the post-Soviet region has often concentrated on a single or a few NDROs (see Allison, 2004; Dragneva & Wolczek, 2017; Gast, 2021; Kirkman, 2016; Libman & Obydenkova, 2018; Libman & Vinokurov, 2012; Mayer, 2021; Saivetz, 2012; Vinokurov, 2017). This thesis includes a wider range of NDROs in the region, including political, economic, and security organizations dominated by Russia. While many NDROs are included, this thesis will not analyze how these organizations are structured, their similarities and differences, or how they operate as instruments of external influence.

The final contribution relates to the analysis of the interplay and combination of various factors involved in regime transition processes. In previous research on factors influencing democratization or autocratization, several methods of analysis have been employed, such as correlation (Laninka & Getachew, 2006), regression (Debre, 2021; Libman & Obydenkova, 2013), and case studies (Gast, 2021; Libman & Vinokurov, 2012; Saivetz, 2012). While correlation or regression analyses can highlight the importance of isolated factors, they do not combine the effects of multiple factors. In this study, a fuzzy-set qualitative comparative analysis (QCA) is used, which shows whether a single factor or a combination of factors contributes to the outcome of interest. A QCA analysis determines whether certain factors, or combinations of factors, are necessary or

sufficient for an outcome. This method allows for the analysis of multiple factors rather than isolating them. In line with best practices in QCA (Schneider & Wagemann, 2010), two outcomes, autocracy and non-autocracy, are analyzed separately. Democratization and autocratization are complex processes involving a range of mechanisms that develop and change over time. Different factors may influence transitioning states in different ways at different times. By analyzing combinations of multiple factors over time, this approach provides a more nuanced understanding than the examination of isolated factors at a fixed point in time.

## 1.5. Structure

The thesis consists of three parts, divided into ten chapters. Part I includes the introductory chapter. Following the Introduction, Part II includes two chapters that present the theoretical and conceptual frameworks used in this study. Chapter 2 provides an overview of the literature on democratization and previous research on prerequisites for successful democratic transitions. The chapter also includes an overview of definitions of regime types and different measurements of democracy, intending to identify the measurement used in this study. Chapter 3 presents existing literature on the international dimension and the influence of external actors. Mechanisms and typologies of external influence are discussed and adjusted to include both democratic and non-democratic influences. The chapter also covers theories on the regional context, the history and evolution of post-Soviet regionalism, as well as the effectiveness of linkage and leverage in external influence. The phenomenon of authoritarian regionalism is also discussed in this chapter.

Part III includes the empirical part of the thesis and consists of five chapters. The research design and methodology are presented in Chapter 4. The following four chapters are dedicated to the empirical analyses. Chapter 5 focuses on the first analysis, the possible association between NDRO membership and democracy levels in the eleven post-Soviet states included in the study. By comparing the number of NDRO memberships per year with the democracy scores for each state between 1991 and 2021, different patterns of association emerge, leading to the formation of five groups of states with similar trends. The second analysis is divided into two chapters. Chapter 6 includes exploratory case studies using process tracing to identify complementary variables that may have influenced the varying levels of democracy in the post-Soviet region. Chapter 7 focuses on a cross-case comparison of the identified complementary variables. Since several factors have

influenced political development in the region, a method that considers the interplay of different conditions is needed. The last chapter of Part III, Chapter 8, deals with the interplay of factors identified in the first two analyses to determine which condition or combination of conditions is important for the outcome of closed autocracy and non-closed autocracy (a more democratic outcome). A fuzzy-set qualitative comparative analysis (QCA) is used as the method, as it acknowledges both the conditions and the combinations necessary or sufficient for the two outcomes.

Part IV contains a summary of the findings from the empirical analyses and a concluding discussion. Chapter 9 provides a summary and triangulation of the empirical findings to interpret what the three results mean when explored together. Chapter 10 contains a discussion of the study's findings in relation to previous studies, the implications of the findings, and an outline for further research.

## II. FRAMEWORK

## Chapter 2. Democracy, autocracy and waves of regime change

According to the general research problem of the thesis, that is, if memberships in Russian-dominated NDROs have played a role in the varying democratic developments of the included post-Soviet states, one of the main focuses is democratic development. This chapter explores definitions and dimensions of democracy, theories of democratization (development towards democracy), the phenomenon of democratic backsliding and autocracy (development towards non-democracy), waves of regime change, as well as the post-communist transitions that affected the theories of democratization.

The chapter begins with the concept of democracy since the existence and absence of democracy is the essence of democratic development. However, the way democracy is defined does affect how one views or defines democratic development. Since the outcome variable of interest is the level of democratic development, definitions and measurements of democracy are of high importance for the analytical chapters of the thesis. Generally, democracy can be defined either by using a thin (highlighting the electoral regime) or a thick (adding civil and political rights and liberties, separation of powers, and independent media) definition, which in turn affects how one measures the level of democracy within states. The chapter continues with the evolution of theories regarding democratization as well as autocracy and autocratization, and the waves of regime change. The last part of the chapter is dedicated to the peculiarities of the post-communist transitions in the 1990s, where both democratization and autocratization occurred at the same time in different parts of the post-communist region.

### 2.1. Dimensions of democracy

This subchapter discusses the various dimensions, and definitions, of democracy. How one defines democracy can determine how one measures the level of democracy that a state has, how one sees the development of democracy around the world, and which factors are considered important prerequisites for the development of democracy. A clear and common definition of democracy does not exist (Bollen, 1990). As Buhlmann et al. (2008, p. 5) state: "There is an abundant literature relating to democracy theory, with countless definitions of what democracy should be and what democracy is". The lack of consensus when it comes to defining democracy can affect research on

democracy and democratization, according to Coppedge (2012). If scholars aim to study the same phenomenon but define it differently, it affects the way the phenomenon is studied and the conclusions that are drawn. In the end, they are not studying the same phenomenon, but different ones.

Different interpretations of democracy have resulted in tensions between democracy as a political idea and democracy as a set of political institutions (Terchek & Conte, 2001). The common view is that, in a democracy, citizens are equal and free and can participate in their governance, but even this can be interpreted in various ways. Some scholars view democracy as the protector of freedom, protecting citizens from exclusionary policies. Others argue that democracy should cater to both the interests of citizens and organized groups in society. Terms such as freedom, equality, citizenship, and participation also have different meanings to scholars, affecting how they view democracy (Coppedge, 2012). The existing definitions of democracy have changed and developed over the years. During the first wave of democratization, the criterion for a democratic regime was that 50 percent of males had the right to vote. During the Cold War period, many saw the world as consisting of only two different types of political regimes: the Western democracies and the totalitarian communist regimes (Campbell, 2008). Later, scholars began to distinguish between different qualities of democracy and argued that there was a continuum between the ideal types of political regimes: democracy and non-democracy. Today, there are hundreds of different definitions of democracy and non-democracy. The quality of a democracy is distinguished by adding adjectives to describe the specific notions of that type of democracy (illiberal, liberal, electoral, façade, hybrid, controlled, etc.) (Rupnik & Zielonka, 2013).

Despite the many different definitions of democracy, the literature usually divides the definitions into two subcategories: a minimalist, or *thin*, (electoral) definition of democracy and a maximalist, or *thick*, (for example, liberal or constitutional) definition of democracy (Coppedge, 2011). The thin definition is based on political elections being the essence of democracy, while the thick definition adds more criteria to the list. All definitions are different and include various dimensions, but generally, the thin concepts of democracy focus only on the electoral regime (which includes free, fair, and inclusive elections, suffrage, and the absence of fraud, etc.) (Diamond, 1991). The thicker concepts add several other dimensions to their definitions of democracy, such as political and civil rights and liberties, access to alternative information, and separation of powers (Greissel, 2016).

A concept on which many scholars have based their own definitions of democracy is *polyarchy*. The term polyarchy originated from Dahl and Lindblom (1953) but was fully developed by Dahl (1971) and has been further revised since then (1989, 1998). Dahl defined democracy as “a political system

one of the characteristics of which is the quality of being completely or almost completely responsive to all its citizens” (Dahl 1971, p. 2). Dahl argued that democracy was an ideal system and that polyarchy contained the empirical requirements of democracy (Coppedge & Reinicke, 1990).

To compare the thin definition of democracy with the thick definition and with polyarchy, the dimensions involving these concepts need to be established. As I have identified seven main dimensions of democracy as well as their subcategories in the existing literature, I have constructed a table comparing the three concepts with each other to discern similarities and differences between them. This comparison is built on the comparison between the minimalist and maximalist conception by Teorell et al. (2016, p. 5), which highlights five institutional guarantees for polyarchy. Based on the works of Bollen (1980), Coppedge (2011), Dahl (1971, 1989, 1998), Diamond (1999), Hadenius (1992), Huntington (1990), Lenski (1966), Merkel (2004), Przeworski (1995), Przeworski et al. (2000), Teorell et al. (2016), and Therborn (1977), among others, the dimensions of the three concepts of democracy are compared and presented in Table 1.



Table 1. Dimensions of thin and thick democracy, and polyarchy (self-compiled).

Dimensions of democracy	Thin definition	Thick definition	Polyarchy
<b>Electoral regime:</b>	x	x	x
Free and fair political elections			
Inclusive suffrage			
Right to candidacy			
Absence of election violence and fraud			
Multiple political parties; competitive elections			
<b>Functioning of government:</b>	x	x	x
Control of the state lies with elected officials			
Elected officials have the effective right to rule			
<b>Political rights and liberties:</b>		x	x
Freedom of association			
Freedom of organization			
Freedom of discrimination			
Press freedom			
<b>Civil rights and liberties:</b>		x	x
Freedom of expression			
Freedom of religion			
Freedom of movement			
Social equality			
Equality before the law			
<b>Independent media and access to alternative information:</b>		x	x
Independent media			
Access to alternative information			
<b>Separation of powers:</b>		x	
Power division			
Independent branches			
Existence of checks and balances			

As Table 1 shows, the thin definition of democracy only includes the dimensions of the electoral regime and the functioning of government. The thick definition and polyarchy have six dimensions in common. Polyarchy does not include the seventh dimension, the separation of powers. Hence, the thick definition involves all seven dimensions of democracy included in the comparison.

The classic theorists of regime transitions chose to define democracy according to the “Schumpeterian” version of competitive elitism or the polyarchy concept of Dahl. The model of polyarchy includes competitiveness and participation combined with indicators of civil and political rights and freedoms. Definitions of thin or electoral democracy have their roots in Schumpeter’s (1950) conception of democracy. Schumpeter defined democracy as a system “for arriving at

political decisions in which individuals acquire the power to decide by means of a competitive struggle for the people's vote" (p. 259). The works of Schumpeter (1942) and Downs (1957) contributed to a kind of consensus that elections, and the institutions involved in political elections, were the core of democracy. Scholars such as Huntington (1990) and Przeworski (1995) focused on political elections in their definitions of democracy, excluding other elements such as civil rights and liberties.

Many scholars have criticized the thin definitions of electoral democracy. Merkel (2004) argues that the term *electoral democracy* is theoretically incomplete and not very useful for analytic work. According to Diamond (1999), the electoral concept privileges political elections over other dimensions of democracy, thereby excluding a large part of the population from decision-making. The thin conception of democracy might acknowledge minimum levels of freedom for the meaningfulness of participation and competition, but it usually does not give them much weight or involve them in measurements of democracy. Scholars favoring the thin conception of democracy argue that having fewer dimensions involved makes it easier to empirically determine the relationship between democracy and its components. Przeworski et al. (2000) claim that excluding suffrage from their definition of democracy made it possible to analyze the effects of participation on the durability of democracy.

Thick definitions, often referred to as liberal democracy, include more concepts of democracy than the minimalist approach (Diamond, 1999). While political elections are still important, the thick approach also stresses the significance of political rights and civil liberties. An important aspect of liberal democracy is the component of democratic rule. Definitions of liberal democracy that include both democratic rule and political liberties are built on the works of Lenski (1966), Therborn (1977), and Dahl (1971). Diamond (1999) adds uncertain electoral outcomes, rights of minority groups, and equality under the law to his definition of liberal democracy. Merkel (2004) argues that embedded liberal democracy should encompass vertical legitimacy (electoral regime, political rights), liberal constitutionalism and rule of law (civil rights, horizontal accountability), and effective agenda control (the effective power to rule). Liberal democracy is the most widely used concept of democracy in research, even though many scholars use the electoral democracy definition when measuring the degree of democracy in different states. Some scholars claim, however, that the liberal notion of democracy is a Western invention and cannot be applied as easily in other parts of the world (Diamond, 1999).

The concept of polyarchy has sometimes been categorized under the thin definition of democracy, while others have defined polyarchy as belonging to the thicker definition. Compared to the

Schumpeterian definition, polyarchy is much thicker as it includes political and civil rights and liberties, among other aspects (Coppedge & Reinicke, 1990; Hadenius, 1992). Many scholars (see Bollen, 1980; Coppedge & Reinicke, 1990; Hadenius, 1992) have based their thicker definitions of democracy on polyarchy. Dahl's (1971) classic concept of polyarchy argues that political democracies must have eight constitutional guarantees. The guarantees are divided into two groups: political rights and political liberties. Political rights include the right to vote, eligibility for public office, the right of political leaders to compete for support and voters, free and fair elections, and institutions for making government policies depend on votes and other expressions of preference. Political liberties include freedom to join and form organizations, freedom of expression, and access to alternative sources of information. The two main definitions of democracy (thin and thick) are ideal types, which makes them difficult to use when measuring the level of democracy (Teorell et al., 2016). Schumpeter's definition of democracy is especially challenging in light of the growth of new regime types, such as electoral authoritarianism, where "free and inclusive" elections do not affect power shifts or governmental policies but can still be classified as fulfilling the definition of democracy to some degree (Bollen, 1980; Gel'man, 2001).

In sum, the way democracy is defined has implications for how to measure democracy and democratic development. While the thin concept of democracy stresses the importance of the electoral regime, the thick concept, as well as polyarchy, includes several other components of democracy. The definition used also determines when a democratization process is accomplished. Depending on how many democratic components must be fulfilled, democracy may be seen as achieved earlier with a thin definition than with a thick definition, which in turn affects how the global growth of democracy is perceived. Given the importance of the level of democratic development for the thesis, a continued discussion on democracy is included in the empirical part, where section 4.3.1 discusses and determines the appropriate democracy measurement for the analytical part of the thesis.

The next two subchapters focus on the evolution of the theories of democratization and autocratization, which are essential for democratic development. Democracy is one of the most studied subjects within comparative political science. The vast number of studies and research on democracy has, for the most part, revolved around questions of the requirements for its emergence and the conditions under which it survives (da Silva Nogueira, 2009). These questions have contributed to the growing research field of democratization, the process from a non-democratic regime to a democratic regime, and the prerequisites for the process. Growing scholarly interest also focuses on autocratization, and the factors influencing democratic states or hybrid regimes to shift in a non-democratic direction.

## 2.3. The evolving democratization theory

The theories of democratization have evolved and developed over the years, highlighting different prerequisites for democratic development. This subchapter presents the evolution of democratization theories, emphasizing scholarly disagreements regarding which factors matter most in the process of democratization.

Democratization is an ongoing process of regime change that has a specific goal, the establishment and stabilization of a democratic regime (Schmitz & Sell, 1999). Three overlapping stages can be identified within the democratization process: *liberalization*, *transition*, and *consolidation* (Karvonen, 1991). During the liberalization phase, fractions within the non-democratic regime create opportunities for individuals and groups to mobilize (O'Donnell & Schmitter, 1986). While the non-democratic system disintegrates, political and civic rights develop, and a general mobilization of society begins (Przeworski, 1991). The transition phase begins when the old regime breaks down and a new government is formally introduced, as new rules replace the old (O'Donnell & Schmitter, 1986). The consolidation of the regime occurs as the new democratic regime is institutionalized and legitimized (Morlino, 1995). The democratization process is, however, fragile, and not all democratization processes are successful (Schmitz & Sell, 1999). Within a democratization process, many conflicts may occur between the supporters of the old regime and the new regime, as well as among the supporters of the regime. After successful democratization, the united pro-democratic forces must be fragmented to develop the political plurality and competition that are the essence of democracy (Przeworski, 1991).

In 1989, Fukuyama argued that democracy had won and proclaimed the “end of history” (Fukuyama, 1989). The Cold War was over, the Soviet Union was dissolved, and many newly independent states across Europe were, as the West saw it, freed from the chains of communism and headed toward a democratic future. The positive attitudes among researchers of democratization, however, would not last long. During the early 1990s, scholars concluded that democratization theory had stalled (Carothers, 1997). New kinds of hybrid and non-democratic regimes developed across the world, and many regime transitions failed to develop into liberal democracies. Since the 1940s, the waves of regime transitions have gained scholarly attention regarding what factors enable the shift to democracy or autocracy. The views on these preconditions for democracy have changed over time, resulting in a vast collection of factors that may affect the growth of democracy (Huntington, 2016).

The post-war global environment and the rise in the number of democratic nations in the 1940s contributed to the theories about which factors might affect democracy levels. The theories among scholars regarding preconditions for democracy have differed and evolved over the last 80 years, moving from a focus on single factors to the interplay of several factors affected by domestic and regional contexts. The post-WWII (Second World War) environment and the decolonization process fostered theories regarding the importance of economic factors. Lipset (1959) found a correlation between high levels of economic development and democracy levels in Europe, Latin America, and the English-speaking world. States with high levels of economic development were more often democracies compared to states with a low level of economic development. However, globally, no correlation between the level of economic development and democracy has been found (Huntington, 2016). When this theory has been tested later, the results have been the same. Whyte (2009) argues that economic development does not play a significant role, or a role at all, in the development and consolidation of democracy. Along with Przeworski, Schmitter, and O'Donnell, Whyte describes a shift in emphasis, from structural factors to actor-centered explanations. The actor-centered view argues that democratization processes depend on what political actors do as well as how and when they act.

In the 1970s, social-oriented factors also received attention from scholars who claimed that social, psychological, and civil society factors were important for the democratization process. Rustow (1970) saw national unity as the most important factor, while Linz and Stepan (1996) argued that a strong civil society is essential for the development of democracy. Lipset (1960), Huntington (1991), and Linz and Stepan (1996) all claimed that the geographical position of states matters for democratization due to diffusion. Historical factors also matter according to some scholars (see Bunce, 2005; Kurtz & Barnes, 2002; McFaul, 2002); earlier long-term repression can have negative effects on the development of democracy. Institutional and constitutional factors received much attention during the regime transitions in Latin America during the 1970s and in the post-Soviet region in the early 1990s. In this view, a state's political system and its electoral system are linked to the success of the democratization processes. The regime transitions in the post-communist region during the 1990s added yet another theory to the existing literature: the influence of external factors. Unevenly distributed democratic Western aid and influence between the transitioning states of Eastern and Central Europe affected the levels of democracy among the states (Way & Levitsky, 2005). The external influence of the EU and prospective EU membership inspired some of the states to develop in a more democratic direction (Lavenex, 2011; Sasse, 2012).

Scholars of democratization have suggested many possible factors that affect the level of democracy within states as well as the different preconditions needed for successful

democratization (see Table 2). Today, democratization is not seen as a result of a single cause or a recipe for all transitioning states, but rather as a result of many factors working together and differing among and within states and regions.

Table 2. Factors influencing a democratization process (self-compiled).

Main factors	
Structural factors	Economic development Degree of modernization
Actor-centered factors	Interaction between the non-democratic regime and the political opposition
Social-oriented factors	Strong political opposition
	Homogeny ethnic structure
	National identity
	Strong civil society
Geographical and historical factors	The populations belief in democracy
	The populations disbelief in democracy
	Geographic position
	The regime type of neighboring states
Institutional and constitutional factors	Historical past
	The institutional political system
	Election system
External factors	Regional and international influence

The many theories regarding which factors or preconditions matter most for a successful democratic transition illustrate the complexity of the phenomenon (Bell & Staeheli, 2001). Rustow (1970) criticized the focus on preconditions for democratization due to the tendency to correlate one specific factor with the emergence of democracy while neglecting other factors that may also play a role (Huntington, 2016). As a result, an abundance of theories developed that concerned only one factor or precondition for democracy. The existing literature largely focused on domestic explanations, not considering external influences. The transitions during the 1990s led scholars to begin directing more attention toward external dynamics in the study of regime change. They argued that regime transitions should no longer be analyzed merely from a domestic perspective, but rather as an interaction between domestic (internal) and international (external) factors (see Carothers, 2004; Doorenspleet, 2004; Guo, 1999; Fink-Hafner & Hafner-Fink, 2009; Ishiyama & Velten, 1998; Kugler & Feng, 1999; Obydenkova & Libman, 2012; Schmitter, 1996; Whitehead, 1996; Whyte, 2009).

In summary, the concepts of democracy and democratization have evolved since the mid-1900s and are today viewed as rather complex concepts and processes. Democracy is now generally defined according to a thicker definition of the concept, including several components beyond just the electoral regime. The process of democratization is also seen as more complex than assumed in the early days of democratization studies, involving multiple factors or preconditions, both internal and external. However, democratization is a fragile process that can fail at any stage and can turn into a process of democratic backsliding or autocratization, which are discussed in the next subchapter.

## 2.4. Autocracy and autocratization

Over the past decade, the proportion of the global population living under autocratic rule has increased from 46% to 70% (Wiebrecht et al., 2023). This trend has heightened scholarly interests of the process of autocratization (Boese-Schlösser et al., 2024). However, the research field is lacking conceptual clarity regarding the definitions and measurements of autocracy and autocratization (Lührmann & Lindberg, 2019). Autocracy is generally understood as the opposite of democracy, and autocratization is understood as a move away from democracy towards autocracy. The definitions and labels of the concept of autocracy and the process of autocratization are, however, still rather fluid. According to Cassani and Tomini (2020, p. 276) this lack of conceptual clarity stems from “the prevailing practice of considering democracy the sole benchmark in the analysis of political change, be it either towards or away from it”. Generally, autocracy is defined in terms of the absence of democratic components rather than on the presence of autocratic characteristics.

Many concepts have emerged dealing with the issue of moving away from a democratic path, for example democratic backsliding, decay, breakdown, regression, demise, collapse, and rollback (Tomini, 2024). However, not all of these concepts can be applied to every transition toward autocracy. The labels which signal a sudden and rapid breakdown of democratic ideals are deemed to be problematic as such abrupt collapses are relatively rare and do not capture the more gradual nature of many autocratization processes. For example, democratic backsliding denotes a loss of democratic traits while the process is implied being unconscious (Lührmann & Lindberg, 2019, p. 5) as well as a return to a previous state, namely, democracy (Tomini, 2024, p. 45). Part of the

scholarly crowd do prefer the use of “autocratization” when conceptualizing the opposite process of democratization. The term is viewed to cover both rapid forms of democratic breakdowns and more gradual processes of democratic decline, which in turn result in less democratic regimes or more autocratic regimes (Lührmann & Lindberg, 2019; Tomini, 2024; von Soest, 2024).

Theories regarding autocratization are closely related to theories of the waves of democratization (Carothers & Press, 2022). Scholars have debated the existence of a new democratic rollback occurring around the world. While some argue that fluctuations in the number of democracies are a natural phenomenon, others view these developments as an intended attack against democracy by certain powerful non-democratic states (Cooley, 2015). Huntington’s wave theory suggests that global regime transitions seem to consist of a fluctuation pattern of ups and downs. Literature on democratic rollbacks and the promotion of non-democracy often focuses on how the level of democracy started to decrease in the 2000s as powerful non-democratic actors tried to advance non-democratic leaders and regimes by countering the spread and development of democracy (Brownlee, 2017). While some argue that the developments have been intentional, others argue that the non-democracies, seen as countering democracy, in fact have only been looking out for their own interests, not actively promoting a non-democratic political regime. According to Diamond (2015), there have been 25 democratic breakdowns between the years 2000 and 2015 (using Freedom House data). The breakdowns have often occurred in states that have re-established democracy after a short period. In addition, there have been democratic breakdowns in states in which one could expect there to be one (due to, for example, economic problems or military interventions) (Diamond, 2015).

Cooley (2015) identifies several developments since the early 2000s that might have influenced democratic decline. The spread of new norms, or counter norms, which have affected the view on liberal democracy has increased, for example, the principle of non-interference by democracy promoters (states or organizations encouraging democratic development), the defense of traditional values as a response to perceived Western individualism, and the dislike of the use of non-governmental organizations (NGOs) as political means. Powerful non-democratic states, such as Russia and China, have been viewed to use these new norms as political or economic weapons (Cooley, 2015). Carothers and Press (2022) divide the potential drivers of democratic backsliding and autocratization into two subgroups: external (powerful non-democratic states countering democratic influences, and technology via the use of social media, misinformation, fragmentation, electronic surveillance) and internal (populism, polarization, and low socioeconomic development within democracies leading to low trust in democracy) (Carothers & Press, 2022).



The regime transitions in favor of democracy during the third wave of democratization inspired research on the international dimension, especially on research on the spread of democracy and the concept of democracy promotion. With the rise of new non-democratic powers on the international scene, for example, China and Russia, scholars have also started to acknowledge the international influence of non-democratic regimes. As new world players have emerged, a potential reverse wave has occurred in newly transitioned states away from democracy and towards a more non-democratic rule, sometimes mixing democratic aspects of political rule with non-democratic ones. Scholars claiming a global democratic rollback (see Burnell, 2011b; Burnell & Schlumberger, 2010; Carothers, 2009; Merkel, 2010) have focused on how non-democratic states collaborate with each other, counter efforts of democracy promoters, and support each other in different ways. However, as Erdmann et al. (2013) point out, non-democracies do not only collaborate with like-minded regimes but also with hybrid regimes and democracies. These collaborations between different types of political regimes have contributed (intended or unintended) to supporting and securing the survival of non-democracies around the world, for example during the Cold War.

The following subchapter examines the evolution and the definitions of different types of autocratic regimes.

#### 2.4.1. Typologies of autocratic regimes

As with the dimensions of democracy (minimalist, maximalist, or polyarchy), scholars have over the years produced typologies of non-democratic regimes distinguished from each other based on different criteria or dimensions derived from definitions of democracy. The regime types, their definitions, how they are conceptualized and measured vary among scholars. The current subchapter will discuss the typologies of autocratic regimes.

Classifications of non-democratic regimes have historically undergone at least three waves (Gerschewski, 2013; Van den Bosch, 2024). During the first wave, starting in the 1930s and 1940s, focused heavily on totalitarianism and the role of ideology and terror among these non-democratic regimes. The main research focus was on case studies of existing non-democratic regimes such as Nazi-Germany, Fascist Italy and Maoist China (Gerschewski, 2013; Møller & Skaaning, 2023).

The second wave, between the 1960s and 1980s, introduced the regime type of authoritarianism in order to cover the grey zone between democracy and totalitarianism. Linz (1975/2000) added the authoritarian regime type which he separated into seven different subtypes: bureaucratic-military, organic states, mobilizing modern authoritarian regimes in post-democratic societies, postcolonial

mobilizing authoritarian regimes, racial or ethnic “democracies”, “imperfectly” totalitarian and pre-totalitarian regimes, and post-totalitarian. He also identified three subgroups of the totalitarian regime type: fascist, communist, and nationalist. During this period scholars also extended the research to include subtypes of regime types and regional differences, as military and party-rule emerged in different parts of the world. Regional small-N comparisons between relevant regions were the focus of the second wave (Gerschewski, 2013; Van den Bosch, 2024).

During the third wave, from the late 1990s forward, the focus shifted towards research on the importance of legislatures and elections when classifying non-democratic regimes (Gerschewski, 2013). During the third wave, continuous classifications emerged as a means to track regime changes. Linz and Stepan (1996) separated non-democratic regimes into four subgroups: totalitarian, post-totalitarian, sultanistic, and authoritarian. Geddes (1999) constructed a framework of authoritarian regimes consisting of three main types: military rule, single-party rule, and personalist rule, as well as hybrid versions of these types of regimes. Hadenius and Teorell (2007), building on the typology of Geddes, argued that one-party rule was a subtype of electoral autocracy which could be further divided into three subgroups: no-party regimes, one-party regimes, and limited multi-party regimes. Kailitz (2013) distinguished between electoral, one-party, military, and personalist autocracies as well as ruling monarchies and ideocracies. Møller and Skaaning (2023) separates between closed autocracy and multi-party autocracy which are separated by the absence of multi-party elections in closed autocracies. This period also saw the rise of “grey zone” regimes (or hybrid regimes) which combined aspects from both democracies and non-democracies (Diamond, 2002; Levitsky & Way, 2010; Van den Bosch, 2024; Wigell, 2008).

According to Lührmann and Lindberg (2019), a majority of the cases which have experienced an autocratization have been autocratic regimes. Therefore, a definition highlighting a move towards autocracy in any regime type is more applicable. The definition used in this thesis is a “process of change towards autocracy and away from democracy within a political regime or between political regimes” (Tomini, 2024 p. 42). This definition implies that autocratization can occur both in democratic and autocratic regimes, as well not only between these opposing types of regimes but also within regime types (von Soest, 2024). Autocratization within a democratic regime makes the regime less democratic, within an autocratic regime autocratization makes the regime more autocratic. Hence, the regime type does not necessarily need to change due to autocratization (Tomini, 2024).

The extensive literature on the typologies of non-democratic regimes implies that large variations exist between them, and that the basis for their categorization alters the way they are labelled and

measured (Kailitz, 2024). However, most of the typologies lack clear definitions of the different regime types, a discussion on how they can be measured, or set any criteria for determining when one regime type transitions into another. The next chapter will focus on the four-fold typology of regime types, which includes both democracies and autocracies.

## 2.5. The four-fold typology of regime types

Since both democratic and autocratic regimes can evolve and undergo changes over time, there is a need for a typology of political regimes in the form of a continuum with clear definitions of each category. More recent works regarding the categorization of political regimes use a simple four-type typology: two categories for autocratic regimes (separated by the level of autocracy) and two for democratic regimes (separated by the level of democracy) (see Alexander et al., 2012; Boeser-Schlosser et al, 2024; Brunkert et al., 2019; Cassani & Tomini, 2020; Kneuer et al., 2012; V-Dem Institute; Wilson et al., 2022). These types of typologies aim to capture both a simple typology of political regimes as well as the processes of democratization, democratic backsliding and breakdown, autocratization, and autocratic consolidation.

Figure 1 illustrates the four-type typology as well as the processes of democratization, autocratization, democratic backsliding, democratic breakdown, and autocratic consolidation.

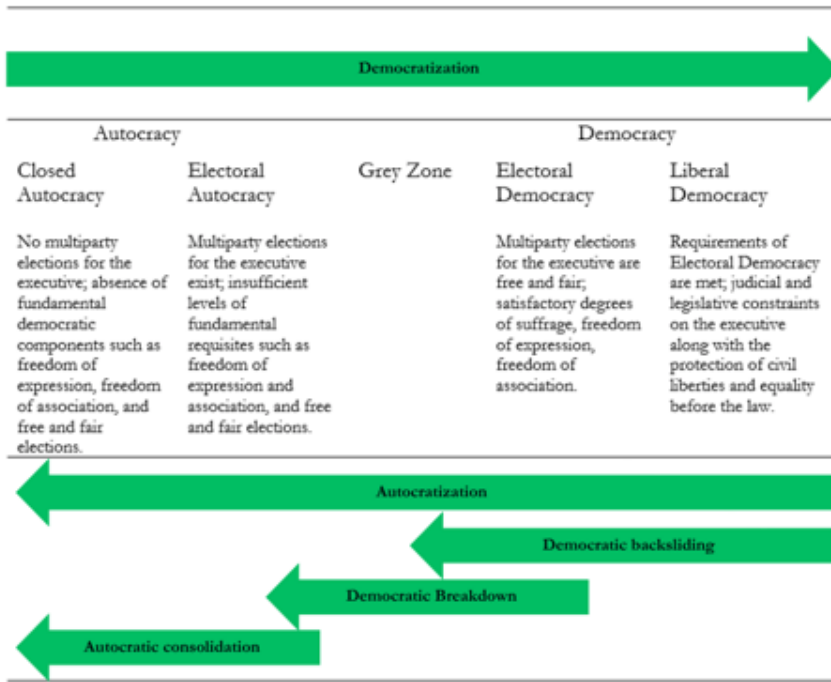


Figure 1. Regime transitions, democratization and autocratization (based on Nord et al. 2025, p. 13, and Lührmann & Lindberg, 2019, p. 6).

The two democratic regime types included in the typology are thin (electoral democracy) and thick (liberal democracy). The grey zone between democracy and autocracy represents “hybrid regimes”, not fully democratic nor fully autocratic. The two autocratic regime types include electoral and closed autocracy. Democratization is the transition from any form of autocracy to democracy, while autocratization is the opposite process (Tomini, 2024). These two processes can occur between any of the types of democracy and autocracy. Democratic backsliding is defined as “processes of political change in which countries that enjoyed a certain level of democracy become significantly less democratic” (Carothers & Press, 2022, p. 4). Democratic breakdown is defined as “a change *from* a democratic *to* an authoritarian regime” (Tomini & Wagermann, 2018, p. 693). Autocratic consolidation can be understood as the opposite of democratic backsliding, as autocratic backsliding, or episodes of autocratization within autocracies (Lott et al., 2023, p. 2).

In the next subchapter, waves of regime change as well as the global fluctuations of democratic and non-democratic patterns are discussed, as well as their possible explanations.

## 2.6. Waves of regime change

Shifts in regime change within states occur regularly. Fluctuations in the levels of democracy have, according to scholars (see Gates et al., 2007; Huntington, 1991), occurred with some regularity since the 1800s. During certain periods of time, the number of democracies has outnumbered non-democratic regimes, while so-called reverse waves of regime change have shifted the balance towards non-democracies. The explanations behind these waves vary among scholars, as does the definition of democracy used to define a wave and a reverse wave.

Huntington (1991) notes waves of regime change occurring since the beginning of the 19th century. When analyzing the level of democracy in single states and the percentage of democracies in the world, Huntington argues there have been three waves of democratization, followed by at least two reverse waves. When using the thin definition of democracy, the first wave of democratization occurred between 1828 and 1926, according to Huntington. The wave had its roots in the French and American Revolutions and was characterized by “male democracies” (universal male suffrage). The first reverse wave occurred from 1922 to 1942, consisting of often newly established democracies moving from democratic to authoritarian or totalitarian regimes. During the reverse wave, many political changes occurred, diminishing the number of democracies globally. The rise of Mussolini and Hitler, military coups in the Baltic states, and military takeovers in Southern Europe and South America paved the way for fascism, communism, and militaristic regimes (Huntington, 1991).

After the Second World War, the second wave of democratization took place between 1943 and 1962. Democracy returned to South America, Southern Europe, West Germany, Austria, Japan, and Korea. The decolonization of Africa contributed to the growth in the number of democracies in the world. The second reverse wave, from 1958 to 1975, followed the post-war period of democratization with military coups in Southern and Latin America, Asia, and Southern Europe. Many newly independent former colonies in Africa also strayed away from their democratic path. The third wave of democratization started in 1974. The non-democratic regimes in Portugal, Greece, Spain, and Latin America evolved into democracies, and with the fall of the Soviet Union, many newly independent states were aiming for a democratic future (Huntington, 1991).

Some scholars have criticized Huntington’s wave theory (see Doorenspleet, 2000; Przeworski et al., 2000) by arguing that his methodology has major flaws. Doorenspleet (2000) argues that there are two major problems with Huntington’s theory. One is conceptual, and the other is analytical. The conceptual problem concerns the fact that Huntington’s analysis fails to properly distinguish

between democratic and non-democratic systems. Using Dahl's definition of democracy as a foundation, Huntington favors political competition over universal suffrage in his measurements. According to Doorenspleet (2000), this produces misleading results. In the first wave of democratization, Huntington defines a state to be democratic if at least 50 percent of adult males are eligible to vote. Using another definition that includes universal suffrage, the results would look different, and the first wave of democratization would start later than Huntington argues. The empirical problem focuses on the fact that Huntington estimates the incidence of regime transitions using the percentage of states in the world as a value. Since the number of states in the world varies at different times, this measurement also produces misleading results (Gates et al., 2007; Przeworski et al., 2000).

Explanations for the democratic and reverse waves vary among scholars. Huntington (1991) argues that there can be many plausible explanations. A single cause might explain the trend of regime transitions; the trigger can, for example, be a major war, the rise of a new superpower, or other significant changes in the international system. Parallel developments can also explain these trends. Particular events or causes in separate states might produce similar results, leading to similar political developments without having the same origin. Snowballing can also contribute to similar regime changes in a compressed period of time. Significant political events can spread to other states, triggering similar outcomes in surrounding states. States can also experience regime transitions at the same time as other states due to completely different reasons, such as economic problems or foreign interventions (Huntington, 1991).

According to Gates et al. (2007), three reasons can be identified as triggers of the waves of democratization: shocks to the international system, new states with weak institutions (often established because of systematic international shocks), and political neighborhood effects. Shocks to the international system are often exemplified by global wars. War is, in the literature, associated with democratization (see Kadera et al., 2003; Mitchell et al., 1991; Reiter & Stam, 1998). These wars have also produced new independent states: many new European states were created after the First World War, decolonization processes occurred after the Second World War, and new states emerged after the Cold War and the fall of the Soviet Union. Newly independent states (especially those developed after international shocks) are linked to both the waves of democratization and the reverse waves. Some new states managed to develop and consolidate democracy, while others returned to their non-democratic past due to instability and fragility in political development following significant international changes. The regional context is also important, especially for new democracies that are more likely to experience a reverse transition if surrounded by non-

democratic states. Regional clusters regarding regime changes are evident when analyzing patterns of regime transitions during the last century (Gates et al., 2007).

In short, as with the factors possibly contributing to democratization, it is also difficult to pinpoint the factors behind autocratization. The debate over what causes these negative democratic developments prompts the question of the role that powerful (non-democratic) states play in the process of regime change, as well as the level of intent behind these possible influences from non-democratic actors. The role of powerful states within regime transitions received increased attention after the transitions following the dissolution of the Soviet Union. In the post-communist region during the 1990s and early 2000s, both democratization and autocratization occurred in different parts of the region. While parts of the post-communist states in Central and Eastern Europe successfully transitioned to democracy, most faced severe problems during their transitions. These differences made scholars aware of new aspects of democratization, which influenced the scholarly view on regime transitions. The specific circumstances behind the varying outcomes of the post-communist regime transitions are discussed in the next subchapter.

## 2.7. The peculiarities of the post-communist transitions

The post-communist regime transitions (transitions of the former communist countries including the post-Soviet states) came to have an impact on the theories of democratization since they did not fit the patterns from earlier transitions. This chapter focuses on the peculiarities of these transitions and the growing importance of the international dimension within democratization theories.

The theories on democratization before the 1990s were heavily influenced by the experiences from regime transitions in Southern Europe and Latin America. The regime transitions after the fall of the Soviet Union challenged democratization theory because the transitions were much more externally driven than existing theories had anticipated (McFaul, 2005). In 1984, Huntington argued that a democratic transition in Eastern Europe was less likely than in any other region of the world. Scholars had not been able to anticipate or predict the collapse of the Soviet Union, or the regime transitions occurring in the region during the early 1990s. Democratization theories predating 1989 had produced several generalizations of the prerequisites for and causes of regime transitions (Bunch, 2003).

After the fall of the Soviet Union, Western actors presumed that many of the post-communist states would evolve into liberal democracies. However, only some of the states succeeded in doing so. Many of the well-known theories in the literature did not apply to the post-communist transitions (Bunch, 2003). Pridham and Vanhanen (1994) list three assumptions that did not fit these regime transitions. Before the 1990s, the role of the political elites had been seen as an important prerequisite for the development of democracy. However, in the post-communist transitions, the masses had a crucial role, not the political elites. Earlier research had often only concentrated on domestic factors and forces in a transition, in the transitions after the fall of the Soviet Union external and international factors came to matter a great deal more than the literature expected. The same goes with the neglect in earlier literature of historical explanations in successful or unsuccessful regime transitions, the post-communist experience showed that historical legacies indeed played a role in the outcomes (Bunch, 2003; McFaul, 2005).

For example, the outcome of regime transitions was believed to be the result of variations in class structure over time. Communism, however, created a different class structure than scholars had anticipated. The same applies to the theories suggesting that high-income equality is necessary to start a democratic revolution, which was lacking in the post-communist states (Bunch, 2003). As a result, scholars needed to explain which domestic factors affected the post-communist states to develop onto such different pathways by identifying variations in the legacies of the pre-communist and communist period (McFaul, 2005). Political developments in the post-communist regions showed that the actions and assistance of external actors could contribute to domestic political change. The main finding from research on post-communist regime transitions was that external actors, under certain conditions, could tip the scale in favor of democracy by using certain tools such as rewards and conditionality (Way & Levitsky, 2007).

The main external actor studied during this period was the EU. The focus on the EU led to the emergence of Europeanization studies, and how European integration processes affect domestic political developments. The main tools for the EU have been its economic power and the prospect of EU membership for states outside of the union. The EU contributed to the development of the varying political landscape of the post-communist region (Cameron & Orenstein, 2012). Scholars often refer to a “post-communist divide” (Way & Levitsky, 2007): some states developed into liberal democracies (the Baltic states and parts of Eastern and Central Europe), while some experienced reverse regime transitions back to semi-authoritarian or authoritarian rule (the post-Soviet region) (Way & Levitsky, 2007). A significant contribution to this development was, according to the literature, the existence or lack of a pro-democratic pull. Strong ties to the West



existed in Central and Eastern Europe, and the prospect of EU membership strongly contributed to a democratic path for these states (Schweickert et al., 2012).

No such ties to the West existed in the post-Soviet states. Low linkage (ties) to the West combined with weaker social and economic development in the region made democratization processes less likely. This meant that the post-Soviet states experienced a unique form of post-communist transition that in many ways differed from the transitions experienced in Eastern and Central Europe and the Balkans (Way & Levitsky, 2007). The common traits of the post-Soviet states included the existence of weak statehood, poor political governance, underdeveloped economies, corruption, and a lack of linkage to the West (Lebanidze, 2014). Research on external influence shifted in the early 2000s as scholars began to acknowledge the existence of “negative” external actors that could pull states towards non-democracy, alongside “positive” external actors, such as the EU, which has a favorable effect on the development of democracy in Europe. This development was important for research on democratization in the post-Soviet region: had low levels of linkage to the West and high levels of linkage to Russia affected the region’s political development? (Bernhard, 2015; Vachudova, 2015).

Studies on post-communist transitions can be divided into two major fields. The first focuses on *regional comparison*, and specific circumstances within the post-communist region which differentiates them from other regions that were also part of the third wave of democratization. When analyzing the differences between the transitions of Central, Southern, and Eastern European states, scholars have found several factors that have affected the outcome of the transitions (Dauderstädt & Gerrits, 2000). The three regions have had different economic, social, and political developments, ethnic composition, governmental systems after independence, and different degrees of external influence from democratic actors. While the transitioning states within Southern and Central Europe have experienced more successful democratic transitions, the states of Eastern Europe have had more problematic transitions.

The second field focuses on the *intra-regional comparison* within the post-communist region and aims to explain why some states within the region have successfully transitioned to democracy while others have failed (Ferraro Jr., 2021). The Eastern European states can be further divided into two groups of states: the post-communist states and the post-Soviet states. The transition of the Eastern European region has, according to the literature, been affected by variations in several different factors. Scholars have identified several differences between the two groups that have affected their democratic outcomes. These include geographical location, the size of opposition movements in the late 1980s and early 1990s, party structures after independence, the length and type of

communist rule, and the nature of external influence, such as ambitions for integration into the EU or the CIS (Dauderstädt & Gerrits, 2000).

The post-Soviet states faced several different transitions at the same time: political and economic transitions and, in most of the post-Soviet states, a nation-building process. The communist legacy left most of the states with a reduced level of civic participation, a centralized economy, and the tradition of one-party rule (Ferraro Jr., 2021). The relation between political and economic liberalization, and the timing of these events, influenced the distribution of power within the states as well as how well they managed to build a stable economy. Other factors that presumably affected the success rate of the states were the level of anti-Soviet nationalism, Western influence, a positive or a negative view of the state's Soviet past, the institutional system, and the tradition of clan politics. According to research, states with weak political opposition, positive sentiment towards their Soviet past, a longer period as a Soviet republic, and a situation in which the communist elite remained in power after independence established strong presidential systems that later developed into non-democratic regimes (Di Quirico, 2011). Conversely, states with strong opposition, strong anti-Soviet feelings, a shorter time in the Soviet Union, and former communist elites that had been removed from power after independence more often established a parliamentary system that later on developed into a more democratic political system (Ferraro Jr., 2021).

In summary, the varying democratic developments within the post-communist region raised questions about whether new theories on democratization were needed to explain the political developments of the post-communist states. The traditional models and theories regarding what affect democratic transitions (the focus on single factors such as economic development, level of modernization, and national identity) were deemed to be insufficient or incomplete in terms of analyzing post-communist democratizations (see Gel'man, 2003; Ordukhanyan, 2019). The international dimension and the impact of external actors were, however, considered by scholars to be an important factor for democratization.

This chapter has addressed the concepts of democracy, waves of regime change, democratization, democratic backsliding, and the impact on the existing theories by the post-communist regime transitions. In conclusion, democracy can be defined in different ways (thick or thin), which has implications for how democracy is measured and, hence, how democratic development is defined. It also has implications for the formation of theories of democratization. The factors that influence the emergence and consolidation of democracy have evolved to include a diverse range of prerequisites for democratization. Another important phenomenon is democratic backsliding or autocratization, the opposite process of democratization. It is still unclear why and by what means

some states undergo autocratization instead of democratization. The post-communist regime transitions in the 1990s are an example of when both processes occurred at the same time in different parts of the region. The research concluded that the different states of the region had different starting hands, regional environments, and external influences that might have affected the varying outcome. These transitions increased the scholarly interest in how the international and regional environments and the powerful states within them can affect the outcomes of regime transitions. The following chapter deals with the impact of the international dimension and external actors on target states.

## Chapter 3. The international dimension and external actors

To achieve the aim of this thesis, that is, developing a deeper understanding of Russia's role as an external actor in the post-Soviet region, it is essential to define what an external actor is, their potential role in regional or international contexts, and the mechanisms they may use to influence a recipient (or target) state. The first three subchapters of Chapter 3 explore the role of external actors within the international dimension of transition studies, as well as the types of mechanisms used by these external actors. The mechanisms can vary in degree and impact; they may be specifically aimed at a target or not. Subchapter 3.4 examines the typology of external influences and mechanisms in the existing literature and ends in a simplified typology of combined influences, including mechanisms used by both democratic and non-democratic actors.

The latter parts of the chapter focus on which factors matter for the effectiveness of the external mechanisms of influence, both in democratic and non-democratic environments. How the mechanisms of external influence affect recipient states can be influenced by the level of linkages between the external actor and the recipient states, the level of the external actor's leverage, and the acceptance or rejection of the external influence by domestic political elites. According to the literature, the effectiveness of external influence mechanisms largely depends on the relationship between the supply state and the demand state. Vulnerable states with close cultural, political, and economic bonds to an external actor are more likely to be affected by the actor's influence. These bonds, or links, are especially evident through regional cooperation, such as ROs. The last part of the chapter concentrates on the phenomenon of authoritarian regionalism, non-democratic regional organizations (NDROs), and the impact they might have on member states or potential member states. Given that the scope of the thesis concerns the post-Soviet region, the evolution and specifics of post-Soviet regionalism are discussed. The final chapter of Part II summarizes the theoretical chapters and specifies the research questions.

### 3.1. The forgotten dimension of transition studies

This subchapter provides a brief overview of earlier research on the international dimension, while subsequent subchapters explore external actors, their influence, and the mechanisms they use in

this context. While research regarding conditions possibly affecting the emergence and consolidation of democracy began in the 1940s, the impact of the international dimension was not acknowledged by researchers until the late 1980s and early 1990s (Grugel, 2005). Earlier democratization studies focused on either structural or actor-centered domestic conditions (Obydenkova, 2007), while the international dimension has been called the “forgotten dimension in the study of democratic transition” (Pridham, 1991, p. 18).

The first two major transition studies, focusing on the transitions in Southern Europe in the 1970s and Latin America in the 1980s, concluded that the international dimension played a marginal role (Obydenkova, 2007). In the early 1990s, scholars (Huntington, 1991; Pridham et al., 1994; Schmitter, 1996) agreed that the international dimension had some effect on regime transitions, but not as a prime factor. The view of, and the importance of, the international dimension changed after the disintegration of the Soviet Union and the regime transitions in Central Europe and Eurasia. The transitions in this part of Europe differed (in social, cultural, and economic terms) from those in Latin America and Southern Europe, and the impact of the international dimension became more evident (see Kopecký & Mudde, 2000; Schmitz & Sell, 1999).

Two early strands of research emerged from studies on the international dimension. One focused on the international political climate and neighborhood factors (da Silva Nogueira, 2009). Przeworski et al. (1996; 2003) noted that the proportion of democracies globally was an important factor for a transitioning regime’s survival. Gleditsch and Ward (2006) also concluded that the proportion of nearby (within a 500 km radius) democratic states was associated with the likelihood of a successful democratic transition. Brinks and Coppedge (2006, p. 463) found that states alter their regimes “to approach the average level of democracy or non-democracy found among their contiguous neighbors” since similarity in regimes is rewarded through mutual security, peaceful cooperation, and trade. The other strand highlighted that international or regional policies in favor of democracy and democratic development are supported by powerful democratic states or organizations (Grugel, 2005). A clear example is the impact that the EU had on the democratization of Central Europe by supporting the establishment of democratic institutions and prospects of EU membership for transitioning states (see Kopecký & Mudde, 2000; Kubicek, 2001; Pridham, 2005; Whitehead, 2001).

The main conclusion from research on the international dimension was that international and regional norms, modes of cooperation, conditionality, and external actors can affect the domestic political course of recipient states (Schmitz & Sell, 1999; Tilly, 1995). The international dimension is, however, not one-sided; it is not focused solely on the supply side. International influence also

has a demand side, which entails domestic selection, adoption, or rejection of the influence (Schmitz & Sell, 1999). Different external actors have varying impacts on the states they wish to affect, depending on what the influences are, how they are received in the domestic context, and the recipient state's role in the regional or international system (Kopecký & Mudde, 2000).

While the international dimension received increased attention after the post-communist transitions, research was heavily tilted toward the impact of democratic external actors. As the research field grew, recipient states were no longer perceived as passive receivers of external influence but rather as active participants with choices regarding whether to accept the influence or not. The next subchapter deals with external influence and the actors that use it, defining what external influence is and discussing various types of external actors.

### 3.2. External influence and external actors

External actors and the influence they exert can be of diverse natures. As with the literature on democratization, the literature on the impact of external actors has produced a large collection of theories regarding how and by what means external influence functions. This subchapter discusses the development of theories concerning external influence and external actors.

External actors are non-domestic entities such as private individuals, NGOs, individual states, and regional and international organizations (McCulloch & McEvoy, 2018). These actors can exert external influence on recipient states to affect various developments, often economic and political, in a desired direction (see Schmitter, 1996; Vachodova, 2005). While the research field is relatively recent, the phenomenon of external influence is not. Tansey (2016a, p. 9) states that “few countries are immune to outside influences, and history is replete with examples of despotic leaders whose rule was inspired, sponsored, or protected by external actors”.

While external actors can vary in form, the impact of international and regional organizations is the most studied. This is largely due to the democratic influence the EU has had on neighboring states. Many scholars regard the transformative power of the EU through integration as the most influential example of the effect of an external actor (Sasse, 2012). The EU has served as a crucial tool for international democracy promotion in Europe, using its economic power and the prospects of EU membership as its main incentives. In 1993, the Copenhagen Criteria stated that the consolidation of liberal democracy was the main condition for commencing accession negotiations

with prospective member states. According to Europeanization studies, the prospects of EU membership have significantly shaped the political landscape in Central and Eastern Europe (Lavenex & Schimmelfennig, 2013).

After the Cold War, the promotion of democracy became a critical aspect of international policy for both the EU and the US, garnering much attention from scholars (see Schmitter, 1996; Vachodova, 2005; Whitehead, 1996). Since the 1990s, democracy promotion has been accepted as a normative practice. The underlying concept is the “right to democracy”, that is, the assumption that democracy is the only system that legitimizes a government and promotes peace, development, and human rights (Barry, 2012). This heavy focus on the EU and the US has tilted research significantly towards democratic external actors and their effects on recipient states. Most studies on external influence have concentrated on “positive” (democratic) external actors, such as states and international and regional organizations promoting democracy (Tolstrup, 2009).

In the last decade, the focus has shifted from how external actors can promote the growth and development of democracy to whether and how non-democratic actors can influence the spread of non-democracy (see Ambrosio, 2009; Bader et al., 2010; Cameron & Orenstein, 2012; Kuchina, 2006; Levitsky & Way, 2010; Vanderhill, 2013; Tolstrup, 2015; Von Soest, 2015). Some scholars argue that powerful non-democracies have responded to these democracy promoters by countering their efforts. Kagan (2009) posits that the world is divided between the axis of democracy (the West) and the association of autocrats (Russia, Iran, and China). This division stems from the argument that authoritarian regimes are intentionally challenging the liberal democratic order. Their response has included external support for non-democracy (see Ambrosio, 2009; Bader et al., 2010; Cameron & Orenstein, 2012; Kuchina, 2006; Levitsky & Way, 2010; Vanderhill, 2013; Tolstrup, 2009; 2015; Von Soest, 2015). The extent of this response is debated among scholars. Some argue that the actions of non-democratic powers are intentional and calculated, aimed at undermining democracy by promoting autocracy. Others contend that these developments are unintended consequences of political changes in states or effects of diffusion.

The binary view of external influence as either good (democratic) or bad (non-democratic) is, according to Tolstrup (2009) and Obydenkova and Libman (2012), inadequate. They argue that an external actor can have both positive and negative effects, depending on the time, place, and nature of the actor. In some cases, a democratic actor can negatively affect democracy in a state, and vice versa. For example, during the 1960s and 1970s, the US deliberately intervened in the internal affairs of Latin American states in a harmful manner. The most prominent examples are the military coup in Brazil in 1964 and the coup in Chile during 1973–1974, where US involvement resulted in

the reinstitution of authoritarianism and a rollback of democracy (Tolstrup, 2009; Vanderhill, 2014). In the Middle East, the EU and the US have faced conflicts of interest regarding the choice between democracy promotion and national and regional security. Their relationship with Saudi Arabia exemplifies this conflict. Both the EU and the US strive to promote democracy in the region, but non-democratic Saudi Arabia remains an important trading partner. Their response to the Arab Spring also reflected conflicting interests (Hassan, 2015; Nitiou, 2016). According to Börzel et al. (2015), the EU's response was inconsistent and incoherent. The US's actions were constrained by alliances with strong regional powers, and its response varied across the region depending on its specific interests in each state. Although the US and the EU aimed to support democracy in the region, they prioritized security and stability during the uprisings and the aftermath of the Arab Spring, resulting in the stabilization and re-stabilization of authoritarian regimes (Gershman & Allen, 2006; Lavenex & Schimmelfennig, 2011).

In sum, external influence was once considered to consist solely of democratic influence by democratic actors but, over the years, has come to encompass non-democratic influences and actors as well. However, all external actors can have either pro-democratic or non-democratic effects on recipient states. The next subchapter discusses the mechanisms used by external actors.

### 3.3. Mechanisms of external influences

External actors use influence on varying degrees to impact specific domestic aspects of recipient states. The initial focus solely on democratic external actors, particularly studies on the EU, has narrowed the literature on the mechanisms of external influence to primarily emphasize democracy promotion, overlooking other aspects of external influence. Democracy promotion can be viewed as an umbrella concept for different mechanisms used by external actors to advance the development of democracy in recipient states. After the Cold War, democracy became the world's most valued political system and was seen as the only legitimate political system. This led to the emergence of the concept of democracy promotion (Tansey, 2016a).

*Democracy promotion* aims to develop democratic practices in other states by supporting democratic culture, strengthening institutions, and fostering independent media and civil society. Some scholars (Gershman & Allen, 2006) view democracy promotion as a means to support existing democratic culture rather than to affect political development. In contrast, others (Burnell, 2006,



2011) see it as a tool to replace non-democratic regimes with democratic ones. Democracy promotion “done right” can encourage states to develop democracy, especially if there are positive incentives involved.

With the incentive of possible EU membership, the EU changed the political landscape of Central Europe during the 1990s (Delcour & Wolczuk, 2014). In the Treaty of Maastricht in 1992, the EU set the consolidation and development of democracy as a goal of its development cooperation as well as its foreign and security policy. The Copenhagen Criteria in 1993 stated that the consolidation of liberal democracy was the main condition for starting accession negotiations with prospective member states (Levernex & Schimmelfennig, 2011). Other democracy promotion initiatives are the Eastern Partnership (EaP) launched in 2009 aiming for further cooperation with the former Soviet states in Eastern Europe, the European Instrument for Democracy and Human Rights (EIDHR), and the European Endowment for Democracy (Delcour & Wolczuk, 2014). The focus of these instruments has shifted over time from democracy promotion to the promotion of “good governance”, which indirectly means the development of democratic institutions and structures. Using the United States Agency for International Development (USAID), the US has focused on more traditional democracy promotion using democracy assistance programs as a tool to support free and fair elections, the development of civil society, and independent media in target states (Burnell, 2006, 2011; Vanderhill, 2014).

Democracy promotion, transferring democratic components to democratizing countries, can be accomplished using several different mechanisms of external influence. With inspiration from the third wave of democratization and the influence of the EU, many scholars have developed theories about which external mechanisms influence the development of democracy. Whitehead (1996, 2001, 2004) argues that the main mechanisms external actors can use to influence the development of democracy are contagion (the spread of democracy within a specific time and a specific geographical area), control (the use of coercive methods as intervention and isolation), and conditionality (benefits given if specific conditions are met). Schmitter (2001) has added “consent” (mutual agreement on democracy adoption between promoter and target) as a mechanism of influence alongside the original “three Cs”. Kheuer and Demmelhuber (2016) use the same categorization of mechanisms as Whitehead and Schmitter. Meanwhile, Morlino and Magen (2008) identify control, conditionality, socialization (developing a belief in the virtues of democracy), and example (democratic actors as role models) as the main mechanisms. Burnell and Schlumberger (2010) argue that unintended contagion (or diffusion) and intended linkage and leverage by external actors can affect the level of democracy. Jacoby (1999) has, in turn, constructed a framework

consisting of inspiration, coalition, and coercion, while Ambrosio (2009) includes diffusion, conditionality, and integration.

While scholars generally agree on the existence of democracy promotion, the same consensus does not exist regarding *autocracy promotion* (or counter-promotion). Scholars do not agree on whether it exists or not, and if it does, what it involves. While some view active diffusion of autocratic values as autocracy promotion, others argue that the definition involves conducting autocratic behavior or assisting non-democratic regimes to counter the development of democracy. Autocracy promotion is defined by some scholars as the opposite of democracy promotion, actively promoting a non-democratic regime type (see Burnell 2010, Vanderhill 2013). Burnell's (2010, p. 5) definition of (inclusive) autocracy promotion is "all the international forces that move (a) political regime away from democracy and towards semi or fully authoritarian rule". Vanderhill's (2013, p. 9) definition of promoting of authoritarianism is when an external actor "is actively supporting illiberal elites, groups, or regimes through direct assistance". Babayan (2015) suggests that autocracy promotion may include the diminishment of civil and political rights, the abolition of political elections or political competition, or the promotion of one-party rule.

Scholars (see Kheur & Demmelhuber, 2016) consider powerful non-democratic powers to counter democracy and to promote a non-democratic regime type abroad. Common examples include Russia's influence in the former Soviet states of Eastern Europe and Central Asia, Saudi Arabia's involvement in Bahrain, China's role in Burma and North Korea, and Venezuela's influence in Bolivia and Nicaragua. However, modern examples of "autocracy promoters" do not act in the same way as traditional communist and fascist regimes did during the 20th century. While scholars disagree about the definition of autocracy promotion and its existence, many define the phenomenon by active means to counter the development of democracy (Weyland, 2014; Whitehead, 2014).

According to Tansey (2015, 2016) and Way (2015), the concept of "autocracy promotion" as a reverse form of democracy promotion has many flaws. The drivers behind the actions of non-democratic external actors are in most cases geopolitical, economic, and political interests, not the export of a non-democratic regime type. Babayan (2015) argues that some activities of autocracy promoters might also be ascribed to democracy promoters. For example, both the EU and the US have supported and done business with non-democratic regimes based on their economic and geostrategic interests. Scholars skeptical of the concept of autocracy promotion argue that the commitments of assumed autocracy promoters are seldom as driven by normative commitments to promoting autocracy as supporters of democracy are in the EU. The main objectives seem to

be more concentrated on economic and geopolitical objectives than on promoting autocracy as a political alternative to democracy (Burnell, 2010; Way, 2015).

The difficulties in defining the term autocracy promotion stem from the fact that research on the mechanisms of non-democratic rule is not as well established or as frequently studied as the democratic mechanisms of external influence. Some scholars (see Ambrosio, 2010; Vanderhill, 2012) have tried to use mirror-image theories and concepts of democratic and Europeanization studies within studies on non-democratic external influence. Others (Tolstrup, 2016) have identified various mechanisms of external influence when analyzing the main non-democratic external actors. Delcour and Wolchuz (2015) argue that non-democratic actors aiming to counter democratic developments in other states can use military interventions, trade embargoes, economic and energy pressure, and political pressure. Hedenskog et al. (2007) consider political diplomacy, media campaigns, boycotts, military violations, and hostilities to be mechanisms used by external actors. Ambrosio (2007) has constructed a framework of three mechanisms used by Russia to resist regional democratic trends: to insulate, bolster, and subvert. Political support, economic cooperation, asymmetric trade balances, pressure via soft power, military presence in the nearby region, regional integration, and negative conditionality are other non-democratic mechanisms identified by scholars.

In conclusion, the literature reveals a variety of mechanisms related to the international dimension and external actors. The abundance of mechanisms and varying definitions of them create an environment where it is difficult to properly understand how the mechanisms work and how to differentiate between them. To gain an understanding of the different mechanisms, how they are used, and the effect they might have on recipient states, they need to be categorized into a typology of external influence that acknowledges both democratic and non-democratic influences. The next subchapter deals with that.

### 3.4 Typologies of external influences

The development of the research field, along with a growing number of mechanisms of external influence, has added a new dimension of research on the external dimension. How to categorize external influences based on their nature and intent? What distinguishes intended influences from unintended ones, and is the primary goal of all non-democratic external actor the spread of non-democracy? These new dimensions have led to the further development of typologies of external

influences. However, the typologies of external influence suffer from the same problem as mechanisms of external influence, the abundance of labels and definitions as well as the high concentration on democratic mechanisms (Tolstrup, 2013). This subchapter begins with a review of some of the existing typologies of external influence and continues with an examination of the fourfold typology by Burnell along with the mechanisms of external influence that fit into that categorization.

The most common distinction divides mechanisms of external influence into two groups: intended and unintended (see Kheur & Demmelhuber, 2016; Obydenkova & Libman, 2015). Intended influence is meant to have a certain effect, while unintended influence is a by-product of events or actions of external actors. In their framework, Obydenkova and Libman (2015) distinguish between *intended* and *unintended* influence (the influence can be both democratic and non-democratic). Intended influence is defined as when the influence of an external actor is directed especially at affecting a particular outcome of regime transitions abroad. Unintended influence does not involve any conscious attempts to change a regime abroad. The influence can consist of trade ties, or cultural connections, not intending to influence regime change (Obydenkova & Libman, 2015). Kheur and Demmelhuber (2016) divide external influence into *intentional*, *unintentional*, *coercive* (backed by states), and *voluntary* (supported by private actors).

Tansey (2016b) has constructed a typology of international influences on autocracy by analyzing the role of agency, the role of the actor's intentions, and the role of the actor's motivations. The typology is separated into three ideal types of external influence: *passive influences*, *unintended active influences*, and *intentional active autocratic sponsorship*. Passive influences are defined as not involving any active actors or motives and can involve diffusion or cross-border linkage between states. According to Tansey, active influence can be both unintentional and sponsored. Unintended, but active, influence involves actors with no intentions to support the autocratic regime. Active and unintentional mechanisms can be developmental aid, economic sanctions, and international peacekeeping. Sponsored influences are divided into democracy resistance when political actors are trying to avoid regime change and actively counter democratic developments seen as harmful to the regime, and autocracy promotion, when there is an ideological commitment to autocracy (Tansey, 2016b).

Burnell (2006, 2010, 2011) has also constructed frameworks for external influences. The frameworks have evolved over time, becoming less complicated and inclusive. The earlier frameworks (Burnell, 2006) focused on democracy promotion and the promotion of non-democracy ("promoting democracy backward"). The framework for democracy promotion

differentiates between active and passive influence, direct and indirect influence, and democracy assistance. Another framework distinguishes between the reverse forms of democracy assistance: non-assistance and non-promotion (democratic states or organizations ignoring and isolating certain non-democracies), perverse assistance and promotion (democratic assistance and promotion having counteracting and negative effects on its target states), as well as anti-assistance and counter promotion (non-democratic regimes countering the efforts of democracy assistance and promotion). Anti-assistance and counter-promotion can be further divided into active, passive, and intermediate forms. Later, Burnell (2010) added autocracy promotion as a part of the framework, including an *inclusive* and *exclusive* form. The less complicated fourfold typology of external influences can be used for analyzing both democratic and non-democratic external influences. This framework separates types of influence into *active, passive, direct, or indirect*. The different types of influences can further be used combined or in parallel (active-direct, passive-direct, active-indirect, and passive-indirect) (Burnell 2006, 2010, 2011).

The complexity of the existing typologies reflects the disorder in both the field of research and the literature on external influences. The most common distinction is between the level of intent, categorizing the actions of external actors as either intentional (active) or unintentional (passive). A summary of the selection of existing typologies is presented in Table 3.

Table 3. Summary of typologies of external influences (self-compiled)

Author/s	Typology	Type of influence
Obydenkova & Libman, 2015	Intended Unintended	Democratic and non-democratic
Kheur & Demmelhuber, 2016	Intentional and coercive Unintentional and coercive Intentional and voluntary Unintentional and voluntary	Democratic and non-democratic
Tansey, 2016b	Passive Active: Unintentional Active: Sponsorship	Non-democratic
Burnell, 2006	Democracy promotion: - Active - Passive - Direct - Indirect Democracy assistance	Democratic
Burnell, 2006	Non-assistance Non-promotion Perverse assistance Perverse promotion Anti-assistance Counter-promotion: - Active - Passive - Intermediate	Non-democratic
Burnell, 2010	Autocracy promotion - Inclusive - Exclusive	Non-democratic
Burnell, 2011a	Active Passive Direct Indirect  Can further be used combined or parallel: active-direct, active-indirect, passive-direct, and passive-indirect	Democratic and non-democratic

According to Tolstrup (2009), a theoretical framework needs to account for the possibility that an external actor can serve as both a positive and a negative factor depending on the context and timeframe. Negative external actors do not necessarily have to be non-democratic, just as positive external actors do not necessarily have to be democratic. The actions of democratic actors have, at times, produced and sustained non-democracy, while non-democratic actors have, on occasion, facilitated democratic developments in regimes. The framework constructed by Tansey (2016) is only applicable in analyzing external influence from non-democratic actors. The framework of

Obydenkova and Libman (2015) can be used for all types of external influence but separates them only into intended and unintended influences, which is not specific enough to serve as an analytical tool. Kheur and Demmelhuber's (2016) framework can also be applied to both democratic and non-democratic influences but has limitations due to its focus on actor-centered mechanisms.

Burnell's typologies (2006, 2010, 2011) can be used to analyze both democratic and non-democratic external influences, considering structural as well as actor-centered factors. While the earlier typologies of Burnell (2006, 2010) distinguished between democratic and non-democratic external influences, the fourfold typology (Burnell, 2011a) combines them. By combining the influences in this way, it can be used for both democratic and non-democratic external influences, which makes it more useful as an analytic tool. The definition of the fourfold typology is presented in the following subchapter.

#### 3.4.1. The fourfold typology of external influences

As a starting point for bringing order to a complicated field, I use Burnell's typology of combined influences. By categorizing the mechanisms of external influences according to Burnell's (2010, 2011) definitions of the fourfold typology, one can get a clearer view of the aim of, and the level of intent behind, these mechanisms.

The strength of this typology lies in its non-ideological nature, allowing it to be applied to all regime types. The separation of external influences into four groups (active, passive, direct, and indirect) is based on the level of intent and how the influence effects target states, encompassing various types of influence. It can also be applied when analyzing both favorable and unfavorable influences, capturing controlled and random events that affect the political environment, as well as structural and policy-based influences. Another advantage of the framework is its ability to analyze cases where democracies have knowingly or unknowingly supported non-democratic tendencies in target regimes, as well as cases where the influence of non-democratic actors has supported or encouraged democratic development (Burnell, 2006, 2010, 2011). In summary, this typology can be used to analyze both democratic and non-democratic external influences, considering that the outcomes of intended or unintended influence can also be counterproductive. In section 3.5.2, I go into the definitions of the different mechanisms of external influence included in the typology.

In the fourfold typology, the types of influence are categorized into two groups. External influence can be classified as either active or passive, depending on the level of intent behind it. Based on how the influence can affect target states, it can be either direct or indirect. According to Burnell (2011), *active influence* has an immediate political effect. More specifically, deliberate actions are intended to influence a certain regime type and/or the political direction of the regime. For example, an external actor may deliberately take sides in a political struggle in another state or attempt to reshape the political structures in a target state. Active influence is defined by the presence of political intent behind external actions. According to this view, the main aim of an external actor's active influence should be to affect the political direction of the target states, either democratic or non-democratic, making the influence deliberate with the goal of regime change. In contrast, *passive influence* is not intended to affect any political development. According to Burnell, both democratic and non-democratic trends can be influenced by external factors, actors, forces, or international events. Passive influences are difficult to determine and analyze due to their inactive nature. Trends, ideas, and norms that move from one state to another are often perceived as innocent by-products, with no intention of having a political effect.

*Direct external* influence is defined as “political strategies, methods, or approaches aimed directly towards political objectives”. This type of influence is intentional and directly targets a specific objective. The difference between active and direct influence lies in the overall goal; direct influence is deliberate but not aimed at regime change. The intended impact is less dramatic and can be used, for example, as a penalty for certain actions by the target state. Direct influence is therefore deliberate and political but has a softer impact than active influence. Burnell defines *indirect external influence* as efforts to achieve a goal via the use of diplomatic or mediating methods. Examples of this type of influence include non-political preconditions or requirements that impact or encourage certain political developments. Indirect influences are also harder to identify and analyze than active and direct influences because they are non-political and rely on mediating channels (Burnell, 2011a). Table 4 summarizes Burnell's fourfold typology.



Table 4. The fourfold typology (Burnell, 2011a).

Type of influence	Definition
Active	Deliberate actions in order to achieve a democratic or undemocratic goal
Passive	Democratic or non-democratic trends that can be influenced by external factors, actors, forces, or international events
Direct	Political strategies, methods, or approaches that are aimed directly towards political objectives
Indirect	Attempts to reach a democratic or non- democratic goal by mediating, or diplomatic methods

When combining these four different types of external influences, four new groups emerge: *active-direct*, *active-indirect*, *passive-direct*, and *passive-indirect* influences. External actors often use a combination of many different types of influence to affect the development of other states. Seldom is only one type used at a time. The influence is not always consistent; it can vary in degree during different periods of time. Burnell has therefore proposed a combination of the different types, creating a more realistic picture of external influence. The impact of these types of influence can either have positive (more democratic) or negative (more non-democratic) effects on the political development in a target state or result in maintaining the status quo. Burnell's (2011) definitions for the fourfold typology are found in Table 5.

Table 5. The typology of combined influences (Burnell, 2011a).

Type of influence	Definition
Active-direct	Overt and covert political strategies of aggression aimed at bringing about regime change
Active-indirect	Attempting to subvert a regime by applying economic sanctions or more constructively contributing to internal conflict resolution
Passive-direct	Effects of undirected social learning and international demonstration effects
Passive- indirect	Market-based transactions in trade and finance, whose impact on modernization and development have consequences for the regime

Within the different typologies of external influence, researchers have categorized mechanisms used by external actors in accordance with the nature of the mechanisms. Burnell does not categorize which mechanisms of external influence belong to each group of the typology of combined influences but only defines the type itself. The problem therefore depends on how one defines the mechanisms of influence; different mechanisms can fit in different categories. The

following section presents the typology of combined influences as well as the categorization of mechanisms into the typology.

### 3.4.2. The typology and mechanisms of combined influences

The fourfold typology and its mechanisms are discussed in the following sections. To simplify a messy field, I use straightforward typology and use the most common mechanisms for categorization. Burnell’s typology of combined influences (2011) is chosen as the most fitting typology since it encompasses both democratic and non-democratic influences and combines different levels of intent to create a more realistic picture of external influence. Burnell only defined the different types of external influences within the combined typology, he did not categorize which mechanisms of external influence belong to each group. Based on the definitions, in Table 6, I have placed the mechanisms according to each of the combinations as I found suitable, creating a typology of combined influences.

Table 6. Typology of combined influences with mechanisms of external influence (self-compiled).

	Direct	Indirect
Active	Coercion <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Military intervention</li> <li>- Political control</li> </ul>	Economic sanctions <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Political pressure</li> <li>Diplomatic aid</li> <li>Mediating methods</li> <li>Assistance</li> <li>Support</li> <li>Cooperation</li> </ul>
Passive	Undirected effects of diffusion	Economic dependencies <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Asymmetrical trade balances</li> </ul>

The typology separates the level of intent behind the use of the external mechanisms (being either active or passive) and the directness of the aim of the mechanisms (direct or indirect aim). Since the mechanisms are missing from the original typology, I have categorized them according to the definitions by Burnell (2011). Table 6 and the mechanisms of the combined influences are discussed further in the following sections.

#### 3.4.2.1. Active-direct influence

Burnell (2011a, p. 91) defines active-direct external influence as “overt and covert political strategies of aggression aimed at bringing about regime change”. The definition entails both overt and covert political strategies, making the covert modes of influence more difficult to identify. According to my assessment of this definition, the main characteristics of active-direct influence are that the strategies are of an intentional and aggressive nature and that the main goal is for the influence to change the political direction of a target state. Mechanisms belonging to this category are different forms of coercion: aggressive threats, political pressure, and military intervention.

*Coercion* is separated into two subcategories in the typology: military intervention and political control. Coercion in the form of military intervention involves forcing a (weaker) target state to make certain decisions by using force, for example by using *military interventions, actions, violations*, and *military hostilities*. Coercion is often defined as “hard power” by scholars and can be both forceful or consist of threats of force or other hostilities to alter the relationship between the external actor and the target state.

Coercion can also involve direct *political control* of another state or political actor due to extensive connections between the states, which in turn produces increased influence. A more powerful state can exert control over a target state through various means. These include having access to vital resources, such as gas or oil; being a regional power that heavily influences regional political development; or maintaining military bases in other states. Additionally, it can affect international or regional security alliances (see Burnell, 2011b; Cameron & Orenstein, 2012; Jackson, 2010; Kramer, 2008; Simmons et al., 2006; Newham, 2011; Padro Sierra, 2011; Tolstrup, 2009).

#### 3.4.2.2. Active-indirect influence

Active-indirect influence is defined as “attempting to subvert a regime by applying economic sanctions or more constructively contributing to internal conflict resolution” (Burnell, 2011a, p. 91). This type of influence consists of applying economic sanctions and political pressure, offering diplomatic aid, and providing peacekeeping forces during a domestic crisis, as well as different types of assistance, support, and cooperation.

Examples of active-indirect influence are (democratic or non-democratic) *assistance, support, and cooperation*. These different types of influences are difficult to separate from each other since they

are often not defined properly and are often not clearly distinguishable from each other. The clearest example is democracy assistance programs, often created and coordinated by governments or international or regional organizations. The assistance programs provide new or transitioning democracies with technical and material support, and they work with pro-democratic NGOs. For example, they may support the development of alternative information sources, human rights, pro-democratic groups, or political opposition in non-democratic states. However, these well-intended actions can at times be counterproductive and even push some states further away from democratic development. In some cases, the intent may be to deliberately hinder the growth of democracy by actively preventing or opposing political development in target states. These actions are referred to by scholars as reverse assistance, or authoritarian collaboration (Gershman & Allen, 2006; Vanderhill, 2015; Von Soest, 2015)

Non-democratic regimes support, assist, and cooperate with each other in the same way as democratic regimes do, by offering technical and material support and protection on an international level via international or regional organizations. The US and the EU have actively supported the development of democracy in new democracies and non-democratic states with democracy assistance programs. With the Eastern Partnership (EaP) program, the EU has been trying to develop closer relations with Armenia, Azerbaijan, Belarus, Georgia, Moldova, and Ukraine in hopes of a more democratic development in these states. The drivers behind this kind of external influence might be the desire to promote a certain regime type, or simply just to serve the external actors' own geopolitical, economic, or political interests (see Burnell, 2006, 2011; Erdmann et al., 2013; Gershman & Allen, 2006; Hedenskog et al., 2007; Jackson, 2010; Kramer, 2008; Melnykovska et al., 2012; Vanderhill, 2015; Von Soest, 2015).

The use of *political pressure*, *sanctions*, and *trade embargoes* can also be examples of active-indirect influence. Pressure can be an effective tool of influence in cases where there are high degrees of interconnections, interdependencies, and power asymmetries between the external actor and the target state. Powerful states or organizations can also put pressure on target states to make certain political decisions with the use of conditionalities (carrots and sticks). Western pressure from the EU and the US influenced democratic development in Serbia, Croatia, and Albania during the 1990s and early 2000s. The EU and the US also used sanctions to punish Russia in 2014 in response to the annexation of Crimea (see Babayan, 2015; Delcour & Wolczuk, 2014; Kramer, 2008; Newham, 2011; Vanderhill, 2012; 2015).

*Diplomacy* and *mediating methods* are other examples of active-indirect external influence. In conflict zones, external actors can act as mediators or send peacekeeping forces to stabilize the situation in

the area. Both states and international or regional organizations (for example the UN, NATO, EU), as well as NGOs, can act as mediators and peacekeepers. Peacekeeping forces should have a neutral stance in conflict resolutions, and the actions should be non-political and aim to promote stability. China's diplomatic actions in Africa have been under scrutiny since China offered diplomatic support, and therefore boosted governments involved in human rights violations, resulting in non-political support affecting the political development and legitimacy of the states receiving support (Alden, 2005).

#### 3.4.2.3. Passive-direct influence

Passive-direct influence involves “undirected social learning and international demonstration effects” (Burnell, 2011a, p. 91). Many scholars view social learning and demonstration effects as mechanisms within the broader concept of *diffusion*. I therefore choose to view passive-direct influence as the effects of undirected diffusion with the aim of keeping the typology as simple as possible.

The research field on diffusion is extensive. In the literature, many mechanisms (for example, snowballing, contagion, inspiration, emulation, and demonstration) share characteristics with the concept of diffusion. Scholars usually define diffusion as an unintended passive mode of influence, as norms, ideas, and practices spread from one state to another. Scholars do, however, have different opinions on whether diffusion has an active mode (see Börzel & Risse, 2012; Elkins & Simmons, 2005; Vanderhill, 2013; Weyland, 2017) or a passive mode (see Brown, 1982; Hagerstrand, 1967; Strang & Soule, 1998), and whether it is an outcome or a process (Giraldi, 2012). Furthermore, Mohrenberg (2013) separates diffusion into a broad (any form of transfer) and a narrow (adding interdependence between states as an important part) definition, while Weyland (2017) separates the concept into interest-driven (focus on regime survival) and ideology-driven (for example, fascism). I use Weyland's (2017) definition of diffusion: “an uncoordinated, unilateral, predominantly horizontal process through which political, policy or institutional innovations spread from an innovator or precedent to learners, imitators, or emulators” (p. 1237). Diffusion can have both democratic and non-democratic effects, potentially leading a state in a new political direction as it learns from, imitates, or adopts the norms, policies, and ideas of another state.

Scholars include different mechanisms in the concept of diffusion, the most common being copying, learning, and emulation. Political elites in one state may copy different strategies that are successful in another state, or they may learn of a specific policy or practice that produces positive

effects somewhere else. Emulation usually refers to the spread of ideas and practices that are appealing to actors who perceive there to be strong similarities to their own situation (see Ambrosio, 2017; Börzel & Risse, 2012; D'Ánieri, 2014; Elkins & Simmons, 2005; Erdmann et al., 2013; Gilardi, 2012; Marsh & Sherman, 2009; Mohrenberg, 2013; Simmons et al., 2006; Vanderhill, 2017; Weyland, 2017).

Scholars (see Brinks & Coppedge, 2006; Burnell & Schlumberger, 2010) have found correlations between a state's regime type and the regime type most common in the nearby region, countries within the same region tend to become more politically similar over time. In other words, "a tendency for neighboring countries to converge toward a shared level of democracy or nondemocracy" (Brinks & Coppedge, 2006, p. 464). This development is, according to Lindborg (2003), also visible when analyzing the Freedom House ratings of individual countries; regime transitions are regularly followed by similar changes in the nearby region. These transitions are seen as the results of diffusion processes. The effects of diffusion processes are reinforced by factors such as geographical proximity (close proximity increases the likelihood of diffusion), links between states, and international and regional organizations as trendsetters and promoters of certain values among states in their nearby region (see Ambrosio, 2010; Burnell & Schlumberger, 2010; Brinks & Coppedge, 2006; Mohrenberg, 2013). The Arab Spring of 2010 and 2011 and the Color Revolutions in some former Soviet states in the early 2000s are examples of regime changes spreading via diffusion. These political changes spread from one state to another by taking inspiration and examples from other states.

#### 3.4.2.4. Passive-indirect influence

According to Burnell (2011a, p. 91), passive-indirect external influence is "market-based transactions in trade and finance, whose impact on modernization and development have consequences for the regime". In my opinion, this type refers to different economic mechanisms that have unintended effects on the political development in other states.

These mechanisms can range from *economic dependencies* to *power asymmetries* and can include, for example, the use of discriminating pricing policies, trade dependencies, credits and debts, economic investments, and asymmetrical trade balances. Economic links between states with highly dependent economies is, according to scholars, a very strong instrument for foreign policy (see Cameron & Orenstein, 2012; Newham, 2011; Tolstrup, 2009; Vanderhill, 2012). If a target state is economically dependent on an external actor, the external influence is likely to be stronger due to

economic pressure. This is especially evident if the external actor (a state or RO) has a larger economy than the target state and is the main export or import partner. In these cases, the external actor can use economic dependence and economic pressure to gain economic and political advantage over the target state. Having multiple trade partners can decrease the potential of external economic influence; a variety of trade partners often implies that a state has greater economic and political autonomy than states dependent on one external actor. States with substantial resources are also less likely to be vulnerable to external pressure compared to states with few domestic resources (see Aidoo & Hess, 2015; Alden, 2005; Cameron & Orenstein, 2012; Newham, 2011; Tolstrup, 2009; Tull, 2006; Vanderhill, 2012).

In sum, the typology of combined influences divides external influences into four groups depending on the level of intent behind the influence and in what ways the influence affects the recipient state. Active-direct influences involve intentional influence aiming to directly affect the recipient state, while active-indirect influences are intended to have a certain impact but are executed with more indirect methods. Passive-direct influences are defined as unintended effects of diffusion, a process that is difficult to control and steer. Passive-indirect influences are unintentional and have their background in various kinds of dependencies between the external actor and the recipient state. Returning to the general research problem of the thesis—the potential influence of Russian-dominated ROs on the post-Soviet states—the influence of ROs can predominantly be categorized as active-indirect (see Section 3.5.2.2). ROs are fundamentally a means for cooperation and can hence contain mechanisms such as support and assistance. However, as research on the impact on the EU has shown, they can also entail mechanisms in the form of carrots and sticks. Carrots can be the use of incentives for membership, for example in the form of economic gains. Sticks, on the other hand, can entail the use of different conditionalities, sanctions, or pressure.

An external actor can use these mechanisms to influence a recipient state, and the recipient state can choose to accept or reject the influence. However, the effectiveness of these mechanisms is also dependent on other factors such as the level of linkages between the two actors or the level of leverage on the recipient states by the external actor. The following subchapter focuses on these aspects, which impact the effectiveness of the mechanism of external influence.

### 3.5. The effectiveness of external influences

The theory of linkage and leverage by Way and Levitsky (2005, 2006, 2007, 2014) explores the effectiveness of external influence. The original theory was developed with democratic external influence in mind and was later further developed by other scholars to fit all types of external influence. The end of the subchapter focuses on authoritarian linkage and leverage due to the nature of the Russian regime.

The impact of external actors tends to affect target states differently depending on the state in question and on the relationship between the external actor and the target state. Some efforts by external actors to alter the political path of another state have had a profound effect on their political development, while others have failed or have had no significant effect. The effectiveness of the impact of external actors can be enhanced or decreased by various aspects of the relationship between the affected state (the target state) and the affecting party (the external actor). Scholars of democratization (see Brinks & Coppedge, 2015; Castaldo, 2020; Levitsky & Way, 2010; Risse & Babayan, 2015) have traditionally tried to explain the effectiveness of external influences by focusing on either structure (geographical proximity, power asymmetries, and the level of interdependencies between states) or actors (the reactions of domestic political elites to external demands or pressure). Most of these factors analyzed in previous research are, however, structure-related, and less emphasis has been put on agency-related factors. There are still some disagreements on which is the most important, or if a combination of structure-centered and actor-centered factors is preferred when analyzing what affects the impact of external influence (see Castaldo, 2020; Tansey, 2016a; Tolstrup, 2010).

Researchers have noted varying results of various regime transitions in different regions after the third wave of democratization. External actors in some regions have been able to impact political development to a larger degree than external actors in other regions. Research on the varying results draws from literature on external democracy promotion (EDP). EDP can be understood as Castaldo (2020, p. 98) writes: “Given the presence of an external actor officially committed to foster democratization, or prevent autocratization, in a target state, the efficacy of these processes is evaluated according to the variations in the level of democracy provided by internationally renowned democracy indexes”. The research field has hence focused on how democratic external actors have successfully affected political developments in semi- or non-democratic target states. Since this is the case, the majority of the literature on how the impact of external influences can be affected by different contexts is therefore focused on the positive (democratizing) effects of



powerful Western external actors. However, when only considering democratic successes and leaving out failures, the whole picture of how context can affect external influence is incomplete. Research on Western democratic successes has grown over the years, particularly concerning the positive developments resulting from EU conditionality. More recent research has, however, started to analyze how international linkage can contribute to reinforcing (rather than undermining) authoritarian rule (see Brownlee, 2012; Cameron & Orenstein, 2010; Sasse, 2012; Tansey, 2017; Tolstrup, 2013).

The next section examines the theory of linkage and leverage by Way and Levitsky (2005, 2006, 2007, 2014), the most dominant theory concerning the effectiveness of external democracy promotion. The theory is generally only used for democratic external influences, and “measures” the effectiveness of external influence along two different dimensions, linkage and leverage. Recently, scholars have altered the original theory to include non-democratic external influences while highlighting the importance of domestic political actors.

### 3.5.1. The Theory of linkage and leverage

The theory of linkage and leverage was developed as a plausible explanation for the varying political development in competitive authoritarian regimes globally during the 1990s. Way and Levitsky argued that these differences were largely influenced by the relationships that individual regimes had with the West. After the end of the Cold War, the democratic West invested considerable effort into EDP to influence undemocratic regimes. The efforts were, however, not evenly distributed. EDP was highly intense in Central Europe and the Americas, while not much effort was put into Sub-Saharan Africa and the states of the former Soviet Union. The difference in treatment towards certain undemocratic regions can, according to the linkage and leverage theory, explain why there is still a divide between these regions and others considering democratic development (Way & Levitsky, 2005, 2006, 2007, 2014).

The theory of linkage and leverage consists of two dimensions: *linkage* (the density of different ties between the target state and the external actor) and *leverage* (the target state’s vulnerability to pressure from the external actor) (Way & Levitsky 2005, p. 21). The core of the theory is that when both dimensions are high, democracy should be the certain outcome, regardless of favorable domestic conditions. Likewise, low levels of both dimensions will produce weak or no external

pressure. However, the impact of leverage is limited if there is no linkage between the external actor and the target state (Castaldo, 2020; Lebanidze, 2014; Tansey et al., 2017; Way & Levitsky; 2005, 2006, 2007, 2014).

(Western) Leverage is defined as an authoritarian government's "vulnerability to external pressure" (Way & Levitsky, 2005, p. 21). The pressure can be extorted by external actors through political conditionality, diplomatic pressure, punitive sanctions, and military force (Levitsky & Way, 2006, p.382). The conceptualization of leverage includes two components according to Way and Levitsky (2010). The first one is "regimes' bargaining power vis-à-vis the West, or their ability to avoid Western action aimed at punishing autocratic abuse or encouraging political liberalization" (p. 40–41). The second one is "the potential economic, security, or other impact of Western action on target states" (p. 40–41). If states lack bargaining power as well as risk being heavily affected by punitive action by the West, high levels of leverage exist. If states have extensive bargaining power and/or can endure, without much harm, Western punitive action, then leverage is at a low level (Way & Levitsky, 2007).

A state's vulnerability to external (democratic) pressure is determined by at least three factors, according to Way and Levitsky (2005, 2006): the size and strength of the target state, the existence of competing issues, and other sources of help (political, economic, or military). A state's size and strength, both military and economic, is seen as the most important factor. Strong states are less vulnerable to external pressures than weak states with limited military and/or economic power (Way & Levitsky, 2005, 2006). External pressure is more unlikely to be used, and the effects are more likely to be ineffective towards large and powerful states. Small and weak states lack the bargaining power of stronger states and are therefore more likely to be targets for external pressure (Castaldo, 2020).

The second factor, competing issues on the Western policy agenda, can affect the priorities of Western powers if they have other important dealings with the target states. For example, high-stakes economic and geopolitical interests can trump the more ideological mission of democracy promotion. If the external actor has competing interests in the target state, the willingness and effectiveness of exerting pressure will be lower compared to a target state with which the external actor has no other significant business (Way & Levitsky, 2005, 2006). Finally, the existence of other sources of help (via so-called Black Knights or countervailing external actors) can alter the effectiveness of external democratic pressure. A state can afford to dismiss the democratizing pressure from Western actors if countervailing sources of help exist (Way & Levitsky 2005, 2006).

The authors argue that Western leverage can be measured on a scale from low to high by evaluating whether a state meets certain criteria. For low levels of leverage (low dependency and vulnerability to the West), at least one of the following criteria should be met: a large economy, a role as a major oil producer, or the possession of, or capacity to use nuclear weapons. For medium leverage, at least one of these should be met: a medium-sized economy, a role as a secondary oil producer, the existence of competing security issues, or the benefit of black knight assistance. States that meet none of the criteria for low or medium leverage are considered to have high levels of leverage (Levitsky & Way, 2012, p. 372-373).

(Western) Linkage is defined as “the density of ties to the US, the EU, and Western-dominated multilateral institutions” (Levitsky & Way, 2006, p. 383). According to the theory, leverage is most effective when combined with extensive linkage to the West. Way and Levitsky (2005, 2006) argue there are five degrees of linkage: economic, geopolitical, social, communication, transnational, and civil society. If the density of the ties between the target state and the West is high, the effectiveness of external pressure is higher. Linkage has its roots in various background variables, such as colonial history, military occupation, geostrategic alliances, and economic development. However, the main source of linkage is geography. Scholars have noted that states geographically close to the West generally have a greater number of connections (for example, economic interaction, intergovernmental and inter-organizational connections, and cross-border flow of information and people), compared to more geographically distant states (Way & Levitsky, 2007). Geographic proximity is important since states closer to each other often experience more interdependence and interaction. Another important aspect is that geographical proximity increases the likelihood of interventions by external actors, as regime changes often disturb regional stability, potentially spreading instability within the region (Castaldo, 2020).

The theory of linkage and leverage by Way and Levitsky is one of the most important and influential theories used in the attempt to explain the success rate of external democracy promotion. When combining (Western) linkage and (Western) leverage, different scenarios for the target state occur (see Table 7).

Table 7. Possible outcomes of combinations of linkage and leverage (Way & Levitsky, 2005).

	High Linkage	Low Linkage
High Leverage	Consistent and intense democratizing pressure	Often strong, but intermittent and “electoralist” pressure
Low Leverage	Consistent but diffuse and indirect democratizing pressure	Weak external pressure

The combination of high leverage and high linkage should produce consistent and intense democratizing pressure, while low levels of both dimensions produce weak external pressure. In cases where one of the dimensions is high and the other is low; democracy might still be a possible outcome.

Even though the linkage and leverage theory has received much scholarly acclaim, some valid points regarding its weaknesses have been brought up in recent literature. While the theory considers domestic and international contexts, the international context is viewed as more important. The target states are seen as more or less passive receivers of influences from the external actor(s) (Tolstrup, 2013). Some researchers also argue that there is too much emphasis on structural factors (see Castaldo, 2020; Tansey et al., 2017; Tolstrup, 2013). Regarding the roots of linkage, when geographic proximity and historical past matter greatly in a particular target state, changing the state's political path is, in theory, extremely difficult. The biggest issue with the theory of linkage and leverage is the sole focus on the democratic West and pro-democratic external influences. Since the theory is based on external democracy promotion, it naturally needs to be adapted to account for all types of external influences, actors, and target states (Castaldo, 2020; Tansey et al., 2017).

Critics of the original linkage and leverage theory have further developed it to account for non-democratic external influence and have added the role of domestic political actors. The following section examines the broader theory of linkage and leverage.

### 3.5.2. A broader theory of linkage and leverage: adding domestic political actors

The critique of the theory has led scholars to reconstruct and adapt the theory of linkage and leverage to better fit different types of external actors and target states. Tolstrup (2013) broadened the definitions of linkage and leverage to make them more useful in the analysis of influence beyond pro-democratic external influence. Tolstrup (2013, p. 719) defines leverage as “a government's vulnerability to external pressure” and linkage as “the density of ties to the external actor and the multilateral institutions the external actor dominates”. The argument for a broader definition is that all types of external actors can have positive, negative, or counterproductive effects on a target state. Tolstrup also claims that linkage and leverage are equally important for the effectiveness of international influence, criticizing Way and Levitsky's argument that linkage is more important than

leverage. Furthermore, Tolstrup (2013) argues for the existence of six degrees of linkage instead of the five previously identified by Way and Levitsky (2005, 2006), adding technocratic linkage to the list.

In response to the existing theory's heavy focus on the external actor, Tolstrup (2014) and Castaldo (2020) have introduced the concept of *gatekeeper elites* to the theory of linkage and leverage. The main argument for this is that the theory lacks emphasis on how, and by whom, external influence is received in the target state. Tolstrup (2014) argues that domestic political elites can greatly affect the effectiveness of external influence by either accepting or rejecting foreign influence. Political elites have long been recognized as important in the literature on democratization. Scholars such as Rustow (1970), O'Donnell (1994), Linz and Stepan (1996), and Linz (2000) have argued that human choices, actions, and decisions are key factors in explaining transitions and non-transitions to democracy. By shifting the power dynamics of specific elite groups, external actors can influence domestic elites in receiving states, either by helping them gain power or maintain power, or by altering the power balance. Jackson (2010) suggests that the effectiveness of external actors is heavily dependent on the roles of domestic political elites. External influence often depends on how receptive a state's elites are to it. Domestic elites must not only accept and adopt the ideas and norms of external actors but these ideas and norms must also fit within the local political and cultural context.

According to Tolstrup (2013, 2014), linkage, as originally defined by Way and Levitsky, is primarily determined by geography and long-term historical relationships. This means that linkage cannot change or shift as quickly as the preferences of political actors might. A state is thus constrained by its background factors, even if the domestic political elite and their goals change. Tolstrup argues, however, that linkage can be influenced by policy choices. He views linkage as a political process in which political actors actively seek to build or sever ties with other states to gain or maintain economic or political power. These political actors, termed *gatekeeper elites*, can be part of the ruling elite, the opposition, or the economic elite. They have various motivations for keeping the doors to external powers either open or closed.

Castaldo (2020) follows Tolstrup regarding the importance of domestic elites in the process of external influence and further develops the theory of gatekeeper elites to also include leverage. According to Castaldo, Way and Levitsky emphasized that linkage is crucial in converting leverage into influence; they considered linkage more important than leverage. Their emphasis on linkage, a structural factor, undervalues the role of domestic agency. While Tolstrup (2014) attempted to link agency to the theory of linkage and leverage through the concept of gatekeeper elites, Castaldo

argues that Tolstrup only focused on how domestic elites can indirectly affect linkage by increasing or decreasing its intensity. What is missing, according to Castaldo, is how domestic elites can directly affect leverage, by using diversionary behaviors to distract the public from domestic issues or manipulate the external actor's interests and perceptions, thereby reducing democratizing pressure (Castaldo, 2020; Tolstrup, 2014).

The theory of linkage and leverage has been well-researched from a democratic perspective, particularly concerning the effectiveness of the EU as a regional organization and external actor. Membership in regional organizations is a type of international linkage, as it involves cooperation, close ties, and at times, interdependencies, which create international linkages. ROs can also extract other types of linkage due to political, economic, and security cooperation, as well as integration. Leverage can also be exerted within the scope of regional organizations. For example, the EU can use conditionality mechanisms to exert leverage on prospective member states. Domestic elites play a crucial role in regionalism, as they are involved in decision-making regarding memberships in international and regional organizations. Therefore, ROs are important when analyzing the effectiveness of linkage, leverage, and the role of political elites. While the effects of democratic regionalism and the EU as a regional actor have received much scholarly attention, authoritarian regionalism, and non-democratic regional organizations have only recently become a research focus. Thus, the next section focuses on authoritarian linkage, leverage, and the role of political elites.

### 3.5.3. Authoritarian linkage, leverage, and domestic political elites

Since the theory of linkage and leverage has been developed to analyze the impact of democratic external actors and the influence they exert on target states, the theory cannot be used in its original form regarding non-democratic external actors. This section presents and discusses the theories of authoritarian linkage and leverage, as well as a proposed framework for the effects of the components of authoritarian leverage.

Way and Levitsky's theory of linkage and leverage is one of the most acclaimed frameworks for understanding the conditions that affect the impact of external actors' influence. However, the theory of linkage and leverage, like much research on the international context, focuses on democratic external actors influencing non-democratic target states towards democratic outcomes.

Recent research has shown that non-democratic external actors can influence both democratic and non-democratic target states (see Ambrosio, 2009; Bader et al., 2010; Cameron & Orenstein, 2012; Kuchina, 2006; Levitsky & Way, 2010; Tolstrup, 2015; Vanderhill, 2013; Von Soest, 2015). Additionally, democratic external actors do not always have a positive impact on democracy in the states they target (see Ambrosio, 2009; Jackson, 2010; Levitsky & Way, 2010; Tolstrup, 2009, 2014; Vanderhill, 2013).

Regarding non-democratic external actors, the theory of linkage and leverage by Way and Levitsky cannot be used in its original form. Researchers have thus attempted to develop the theory of linkage and leverage to fit all kinds of political regimes and all kinds of political developments. Among others, Tolstrup (2013, 2014), Castaldo (2020), and Tansey (2016b) have developed the theory to fit a more nuanced reality. Tolstrup and Castaldo have highlighted the effects of political actors, as well as the need to add non-democratic external actors to the theories of linkage and leverage. As the concept of linkage and leverage has been broadened by different scholars, Levitsky and Way have responded to the criticism of the original theory regarding the impact of political elites on linkage. Way and Levitsky (2014, p. 152) state that “Governments can, of course, dramatically restrict linkage. But such measures come with enormous costs”. The theory of linkage and leverage is considered by Way and Levitsky as a “general one” (2014, p. 152), and regional alternations to the theory are deemed to be reasonable, especially in states bordering both Russia and the West.

Tansey (2016b) further developed the theory by flipping the existing framework of (Western/democratic) linkage and leverage into one applicable to autocratic linkage and leverage. The author argues that, by combining democratic pressure (Western linkage) with autocratic sponsorship (non-Western linkage), four possible outcomes will be available for the target state in question (see Table 8).

Table 8. Combination of democratic pressure and autocratic sponsorship (Tansey, 2016b).

Democratic pressure	Autocratic sponsorship	
	High	Low
High	Contested	Constraining
Low	Supportive	Permissive

According to Tansey (2016b), the international environment is dependent on the “linkage spectrum”. How linkage is distributed affects the international environment. A constraining environment (high democratic pressure combined with low autocratic sponsorship) is likely to lead to more democratic development in a target state. Autocratic political elites would probably

struggle under a high level of democratic pressure combined with the use of democratic conditionality from external actors. An example of this is the states of Central Europe during the 1990s when potential EU membership was used as a means of democratic conditionality.

In a permissive environment (both democratic pressure and autocratic sponsorship levels are low), regimes are likely to receive little or no international attention or criticism. This is most likely due to their geographical position, or because their strategic importance is somehow unattractive to external powers (for example, the autocratic regimes of Iran or Eritrea). When both democratic pressure and autocratic sponsorship levels are high, the international environment is contested. Under these circumstances, when both democratic and non-democratic external actors are involved, the environment becomes a battleground for competing interests. When the environment is supportive (low level of democratic support and high levels of autocratic sponsorship), the level and effect of the external support can vary from case to case (Tansey, 2016b).

According to Tansey (2016b), as well as Koehler and Schmotz (2017), autocratic linkage (external influences from a non-democratic external actor to a non-democratic target state) can be important for the survival of non-democratic regimes. According to research (see Brinks & Coppedge, 2006; Levitsky & Way, 2010; Tansey et al., 2017), linkages can increase the prospects for unintentional diffusion processes, and autocratic learning between non-democratic states. Linkages are particularly strong within regional contexts (von Soest, 2024). Tansey and Schmotz (2018) also argue that autocratic linkage can be more effective when supported by regional clusters and organizations in which both the external actor and the target states are members. Since much of the international influences are concentrated at the regional level, the political development of states is, in part, dependent on the characteristics of the regime in which the state is situated. Regional clusters can, according to scholars (see Gasiorowski, 1995; Pevehouse, 2005; Starr, 1991), shape the likelihood of regime change. This is due to the proportion of different types of regimes in the region, if regime transitions are occurring in the neighborhood, and the role of regional organizations.

Tansey and Schmotz (2018) argue that autocratic linkage can influence the stability of autocratic regimes in four main ways. If high levels of autocratic linkage exist, patronage-based benefits are also expected to exist. Various benefits from the external actor are likely dependent on the target state not transitioning to democracy, keeping their regime non-democratic. High levels of autocratic linkages are also expected to isolate the state in question from democratic enforcement measures, not risking any international sanctions for applying non-democratic survival strategies such as election fraud or repression of the political opposition. In addition, autocratic linkage might



help protect non-democracies in times of political crises, for the fear of contagion or diffusion of regime changes in the region. Finally, autocratic linkage can facilitate “authoritarian learning”. Autocratic regimes can, due to extensive linkage, learn from, and cooperate with, each other and hence be able to survive longer (Tansey & Schmotz, 2018).

Most of the research on external actors, and the effects of linkage and leverage, has been carried out from a democratic perspective, leaving research from a non-democratic perspective quite underdeveloped. Way and Levitsky (2005, 2006, 2007, 2014) have only addressed how Western democratic linkage and leverage affect non-democracies in their theory. While other scholars have further developed their theory to also include non-democratic actors as external actors, these theories are not completely as developed as the original theory. Some questions remain. For example, do linkage and leverage look the same in democracies as in non-democracies, and do they have the same effects?

As regional variations seem to be evident within the theory of linkage and leverage (see Levitsky & Way, 2014; Tansey & Schmotz 2018; Tolstrup, 2014) a general theory cannot be applied globally. As Russia is considered to be the external actor within the post-Soviet region within this thesis, a non-democratic view of linkage and leverage will be used. Building on the works of Levitsky and Way (2005, 2006, 2007, 2010, 2014), Tolstrup (2014), Castaldo (2020), and Tansey and Schmotz (2018), a framework of authoritarian linkage and leverage will be constructed next.

Linkage and leverage are interconnected, but the relationship between them is not established. While Levitsky and Way (2006, p. 386) argue that linkage is more important than leverage, as “Linkage enhances the effect of leverage”, Tolstrup (2013, p. 721) claims that the two are equally important. In my view, while both impact the degree of external influence extorted, the level of leverage is reduced if the level of linkage is low. Leverage is unlikely to exist in cases where linkage between two states is absent. As linkage consists of different ties between states, it is vital for producing leverage.

The main hypothesis of linkage is that greater linkage leads to a larger external impact from the external actor, while less linkage reduces the degree of impact. Linkages between states should not be affected by the type of political regime analyzed. If the ties between the external actor and target state are dense, the level of linkage is higher. If the ties between the two actors are thin, the level of linkage is lower. When considering the dimensions of leverage, regional circumstances need to be considered.

Three dimensions of authoritarian leverage will be discussed below, the first being power asymmetry. If there is (great) power symmetry between the external actor and the target state, the external actor, which is usually a more powerful state, has more leverage against the weaker target state. If there is no power asymmetry, the leverage of the external actor can be minimized. The size and power of the target states matter for the first dimension; powerful states are less vulnerable to external influences compared to weaker states. Another important aspect is asymmetric linkage, especially economic linkage, as asymmetric linkage should increase the level of leverage.

Concerning the second dimension, competing issues, the existence of such interests (economic, security, or geopolitical) can be a driver for non-democratic states to exert pressure on a target state. Since non-democracies are driven by different interests than democratic states, the more they risk losing, the greater their interest may be in influencing political developments within their spheres of influence. This can also be true for democratic states acting as black knights (Ambrosio, 2014; Tolstrup, 2015). During the last decades, some democratic states have altered their political aims of promoting democracy abroad due to economic or security interests in certain countries (for example the US in Latin America during the 1970s, and the US and the EU in the Middle East). If there are no competing issues, the leverage of non-democratic external actors is low since the states in question might be viewed as stable. Asymmetrical linkages also should matter for the second dimension as different dependencies and interests create competing issues.

The third dimension, geographical closeness to external actors, includes both the main external actor and a potential countervailing external actor. If a target state is geographically close to the main external actor as well as a countervailing external actor, the leverage of the main external actor may be increased. If there is a fight for influence, especially if the other regional actor represents another political view, there may be an increase in the will to influence. The third dimension is also connected to linkages, as geographical proximity enhances the probability of linkages. Geographical proximity might also create a greater security risk when considering the threat of military interventions.

Table 9 summarizes the dimensions of non-democratic leverage. For high levels of leverage the existence of the dimensions is implied while the absence of the dimensions implies low levels of leverage.

Table 9. Dimensions of non-democratic leverage (self-compiled).

Components of leverage	Non-democratic leverage	
	High	Low
Power asymmetry	+	-
Competing issues	+	-
Closeness	+	-

Note: + means existence of a dimension between an external actor and target state, - means absence of a dimension between the two actors.

In sum, linkage and leverage can have an impact on the effectiveness of the influence of external actors by adding linkages between the external actor and the recipient states and by increasing the vulnerability of the recipient states to the external actor. The level of linkage and leverage can further be enhanced by shared memberships in common regional organizations. The next natural step is to look further into the role of authoritarian regionalism and regional organizations. The following subchapter presents the theory of authoritarian regionalism (Libman, 2018), which focuses on the impact of authoritarian regional organizations dominated by autocratic states.

### 3.6. Authoritarian regionalism

According to Kneur and Demmelhuber (2016, p. 779), the regional context is essential for the impact of external actors: “basic knowledge from the Third Wave of Democratization; that the most effective context within which external actors can influence democratic processes at the national level is increasingly regional”. Regions and regionalism have been of scholarly interest for many decades. This subchapter explores the impact of regional organizations, the theory of authoritarian regionalism, and the tools used by non-democratic regional organizations (NDROs) to influence other states.

In the 1960s, Haas (1961) concluded that similar regime types produce more intense regional cooperation potential. Regionalism is often understood as an “effective form of mutual international cooperation under preferential conditions” (Konopelko, 2014, p. 215). Integration and cooperation are based on the common goals, interests, and problems that are shared due to various forms of interdependence, geographical proximity, economic complementarity, political similarity, and cultural and ideological correspondence. Most of the research on regionalism has focused on democratic actors and regions, for example, the positive impact the EU, as a regional organization, has had on the political development in Eastern and Central Europe (Allison, 2004).

Jetscheke and Lenz (2013, p. 626) define regional organizations as “institutionalized cooperation among three or more countries within a geographic space”. Since the Third Wave of democratization, there has been an increase in the establishment of new regional organizations (ROs). Between the 1970s and the early 1990s, most of these ROs had democratic memberships. During the late 1990s and early 2000s, with the rise of powerful non-democratic states such as China and Russia, new types of authoritarian ROs developed. Some of these authoritarian regional organizations have consisted of hardcore autocratic regimes, while others have included more competitive authoritarian regimes. When analyzing the number of DROs and NDROs worldwide, NDROs have consistently outnumbered DROs since the 1960s, making them significant regional and international actors. The literature on regionalism has found that there is a positive correlation between democracy and membership in international organizations (Cottiero & Haggard, 2021). As the number of memberships in DROs increases, so does the democracy levels. Could the opposite be plausible? As the number of memberships in NDROs increases, the democracy levels decrease. Some recent research has analyzed the association between NDROs and autocratization. Cottiero and Haggard (2023, p. 67) did find that “... membership in more deeply authoritarian international organizations is associated with autocratization”. Obydenkova and Libman (2019) have analyzed the effects of political regionalism of the CIS, economic regionalism of the EAEU, and security regionalism of the SCO. Within the CIS, the authors found that “the extent to which individual countries participate in the CIS is, indeed, positively correlated with the presence of authoritarian regimes” (Obydenkova & Libman, 2019, p. 177). The samples in the analyses were, however, small so the results are suggestive.

Scholars have noted that ROs have a capacity to “lock in” the political system dominating the region: a DRO can hence boost democracy and an NDRO can boost non-democracy (see Börzel, 2016; Kim & Heo, 2018; Pevehouse, 2002; 2005; Poast & Urpelainen, 2015; Stoddard, 2017). ROs with a high democratic density can have a positive effect on the development of democracy by adding pressure to democratize and the use of socialization. The effect of the EU on democracy in new and prospective members in Europe is an example of how DROs can use socialization and conditionality to boost democracy. Other ways in which DROs can support democratization processes are by offering aid and material support, threatening to expel non-democratic members, or launching military interventions. Research has also shown that regional cooperation between non-democratic states can boost the level of autocracy in the region. In regions with high autocratic density, regionalism can lead to the survival of autocrats due to socialization, learning, and various forms of cooperation. Economic cooperation and NDROs play a crucial role in cooperation

among non-democracies since non-democracies are usually more internationally isolated than democracies (Kim & Heo, 2018; Libman, 2018; Schimmelfennig, 2016; Stoddard, 2017).

Research suggests that regional organizations are attractive vehicles for external influence (see Ambrosio, 2009; Bader et al., 2018; Börzel et al., 2013; Libman, 2015; Tansey, 2018; von Soest, 2016). Studies in this area have generally focused on DROs, claiming that the absence of democracy limits cooperation, so NDROs should be ineffective (see Allison, 2008; Collins, 2009). The assumption that democratic regimes and DROs have a greater ability to cooperate with each other compared with non-democratic regimes originates from the democratic peace theory. Because democracies are thought to be less likely than non-democracies to cause conflicts, they are expected to exhibit greater trust and potential for cooperation with each other. Scholars (see Lai & Reiter, 2000) argue that similarity of political regimes would also be able to affect the level of possible cooperation between non-democracies (similarity should encourage cooperation). Democracies are, however, generally more homogenous compared to non-democracies, which can affect cooperation potential. Non-democracies also generally demonstrate a higher likelihood of breaking commitments; this would reduce the willingness of cooperation. More recent research has, however, shown that authoritarian regional cooperation is increasing in different parts of the world, especially in the post-Soviet region (Obydenkova & Libman, 2019; Roberts, 2017). These two strands of research give a complex picture of authoritarian regional cooperation projects: autocratic states are increasingly united and coordinated, while they are heavily restricted in their capacity for regional cooperation.

Authoritarian regionalism is often overlooked. Libman (2018) defines the phenomenon as “regional organizations founded and dominated by autocracies”. There are numerous ROs in the world dominated by autocracies, and their members are almost always non-democratic or hybrid regimes. NDROs have quite a long history and can be traced back to the establishment of the Arab League in 1945. The early NDROs modeled their structure and aims after European regionalism and the EU (Libman, 2018).

According to Libman (2018), there are two reasons that authoritarian regionalism has not received much scholarly attention. First, non-democratic regimes are not as successful at “traditional regionalism” as democratic regimes (see Table 10 for a comparison of democratic and autocratic regionalism). Non-democracies are often more internationally isolated, and therefore the aims of traditional regionalism (such as international trade and the movement of capital) are not as well suited for them. The other reason is that non-democratic regimes are not as committed to upholding long-time cooperation, the essence of traditional regionalism (Libman 2018).

Table 10. Democratic vs. Authoritarian regionalism (Libman & Obydenkova, 2019, p. 64).

Criteria of distinction between types	Differences between types of regionalism	
	Democratic regionalism	Authoritarian regionalism
Political regime of members	Homogenous (only democracies)	Heterogeneous (mixed political regimes)
Economic development of members	Homogenous	Heterogeneous
Religion of members	Homogenous	Heterogeneous
Power distribution	Leading state, but no clear hegemon	Hierarchical (with a hegemon)
Governance	Through a broad array of bodies (leaders, bureaucracies, and parliaments)	Through the direct interaction of leaders
Conditionality	Present	Absent
Size: Number of members	Less numerous	More numerous

Traditional regionalism and authoritarian regionalism have many differences: they have different goals and are structured differently from their democratic counterparts. Authoritarian regionalism, however, is concentrated on using tools such as legitimacy provision and resource redistribution to help insulate smaller and weaker states from domestic or international turmoil (Libman, 2018). The tools used by NDROs are discussed in the next subchapter.

3.6.1. The toolkit of NDROs

Authoritarian regionalism consists of non-democratic regional organizations (NDROs) created by strong autocracies, which can either act as leading states or form part of a core membership. Membership in NDROs can serve as a mechanism for consolidating autocratic power. According to Obydenkova and Libman (2019, p. 34), NDROs are defined as “organizations primarily comprised of authoritarian member states, or at least having an authoritarian core country”. Obydenkova and Libman (2019) identify three key benefits of NDROs: legitimating cooperation between autocracies, shaping how powerful authoritarian states perceive NDROs (either as a constraint on state autonomy or a tool to enhance global power), and facilitating authoritarian learning. The ways that NDROs use their tools of authoritarian regionalism vary depending on the level of cooperation within each specific organization. Regional integration projects and membership in ROs can enhance the legitimacy of non-democratic states on both domestic and international fronts. They can also be used as instruments for redistributing resources; for example, the leading state can grant economic advantages to “friendly” member states. Economic development is closely tied to public opinion on the regime’s performance, and financial help from

a NDRO can help to maintain the non-democratic leadership in member states. The establishment of customs unions and free trade areas can also be used as tools for preserving regime stability in member states (Obydenkova & Libman, 2019).

The success and global acceptance of the EU have inspired authoritarian leaders to imitate its structure and mission, using NDROs to give them international and regional prestige (Libman, 2018). NDROs are also used by autocratic regimes to signal that they are great global powers, surrounding themselves with regional member states. A third reason for the use of NDROs is to foster mutual support, providing both technical assistance and opportunities for learning. According to Libman (2018), autocratic states can also employ various strategies through NDROs, including economic benefits via redistribution, rhetorical support, and the conferral of legitimacy. Economic benefits involve direct redistribution of funds (loans), supply of cheap resources (oil or gas), and a liberal migration regime among member states. All NDROs, even weak or “ineffective” ones, increase the legitimacy of member states, which is especially significant for smaller states. While an NDRO might not accomplish anything as an entity, the membership itself comes with regional and international prestige. Additionally, political leaders of member states gain political and economic advantages from participating in regional integration projects (Libman & Obydenkova, 2018).

The potential link between NDRO membership and the tenure duration of autocratic leaders is highly relevant for studies on democracy and democratization. Obydenkova and Libman (2019) propose three mechanisms through which NDROs help autocratic leaders in member states maintain power: First, they provide access to resources that help gain the favor of the population and domestic elites. Second, they provide legitimacy to non-democratic regimes, which puts pressure on domestic political opposition. Third, they reduce the risk of domestic revolution or coup due to potential repercussions from the NDRO, such as sanctions or military intervention. One would therefore expect that the tenures for the autocratic leaders of member states of NDROs would be longer than for leaders of states that are not members of NDROs (Obydenkova & Libman, 2019). Debre (2021, p. 504) has found “that membership in more autocratic ROs is the most significant international-level predictor to explain regime survival” when analyzing 120 autocratic regimes and a sample of 70 ROs between 1946 and 2010. The way RO membership can prolong the tenure of a non-democratic leader is by the spread of norms shielding non-democracies from unwanted external interference as well as providing non-democratic leaders with necessary sources enabling them to survive (Debre, 2021).

Russo and Stoddard (2018) argue that NDROs are an important instrument used to enhance regime security in non-democratic states, boosting the level of autocracy among member states. NDROs can provide prestige and a sense of political and economic progress for their members. They can also be used to conceal illegitimate practices, such as regional election monitoring and offering members an alternative to Western organizations that demand a certain level of democracy and economic development for potential membership. Further, they can offer various forms of financial and material support. According to Cottiero and Haggard (2021), NDROs have three main functions: pooling of resources, solving coordination and collective action problems, and legitimization. These are the same for both democratic and non-democratic ROs, but for the non-democratic ones, these functions are used to boost authoritarian rule and undermine democracy. Through pooling resources and providing material resources, NDROs can support their member states financially through loans and grants, they can build mutual defense arrangements, and they can perform joint military exercises or even military interventions. Solving coordination problems involves police cooperation and anti-terrorism policies. ROs can legitimize authoritarian rule by claiming to promote political, economic, or security stability. They promote authoritarian learning and socialization skills and can function as validation for flawed political elections (Cottiero & Haggard, 2021; Russo & Stoddard, 2018).

Table 11 summarizes the tools (or mechanisms) found in the text above used by NDROs within authoritarian regionalism as well as the possible outcomes of their use.

Table 11. Tools of Authoritarian Regionalism and Their Possible Outcomes (self-compiled).

Tool	Possible outcome
Membership gives legitimacy	Regime boosting
Redistribution of resources	Regime boosting
	Economic dependencies
	Asymmetrical trade balances
	Band wagoning
Economic support, aid, favors	Regime boosting
	Economic dependencies
	Asymmetrical trade balances
	Band wagoning
Political support	Regime boosting
Election monitoring	Legitimacy to the regime
	Allowing the autocratic incumbent to remain in power
	Making it difficult for the domestic political opposition
Military interventions, defense arrangements	Coercion
	Pressure
Sanctions	Coercion
	Pressure
Learning, socialization (=diffusion)	Regime promotion

Note: Band wagoning is defined as “alignment with the source of danger” (Waltz, 1987, p. 17).



The toolkit of authoritarian regionalism can, according to research, consist of several tools used by NDROs. The membership itself may boost the regime since it gives the member state regional or international legitimacy. Membership in economic NDROs may be a vessel for the redistribution of resources between member states, but joining can also create economic dependencies and asymmetrical trade balances. The use of election monitoring within an NDRO can lead to prolonging the tenure of autocratic leaders or it could negatively affect the political opposition. Sanctions and military interventions can also be used as tools by NDROs to punish or pressure member states. Mechanisms of diffusion, such as socialization and learning between autocratic leaders, are more passive and indirect tools of influence, which can have a regime-boosting effect.

According to research, democratic and authoritarian regional organizations might, in different ways, impact member or prospective member states. The two kinds of regional organization types differ from each other, mostly highlighted by the division of power within the regional organizations. NDROs are more hierarchical in nature with a regional hegemon, and the heads of states generally exclusively interact within these regional organizations. The question of whether NDROs should be considered to be actors themselves, or agents of authoritarian leading states is according to Obydenkova & Libman (2019) empirically difficult to answer. However, there is a difference between NDROs as a tool of a certain leading state, and NDROs as a form of coalition of autocratic states where member states extract benefits from being members of the NDRO (Obydenkova & Libman, 2019). Since the aim of the thesis is to develop a deeper understanding of Russia's role in the post-Soviet region, the next subchapters continue with a look at Russia as a regional actor, and post-Soviet regionalism, its background, and its evolution, since 1991.

### 3.7. Russia and the post-Soviet region

The current subchapter includes a brief overview of Russia's role in the post-Soviet region. It briefly outlines Russia's evolving role within the region, legacies from the Soviet era, as well as different perspectives on the drivers behind the Russian neighborhood policy in its "near abroad". The discussion is deliberately kept short to provide only the essential context on Russia's role in the post-Soviet region as the foundation for the following chapter on post-Soviet regionalism.

Russia has historically been an important regional and international power. Since the time of Peter the Great, Russia was considered a European great power, and it has since then exerted its influence on its regional neighborhood. The national borders of the historical territory of Russia have undergone periods of change since the establishment of the Principality of Moscow in the 11<sup>th</sup>

century. Both the Russian Empire and the Soviet Union came to encompass great territories (Oliker et al., 2015). Within the Soviet Union, the Russian Soviet Federative Socialist Republic (RSFSR), was considered the core of the USSR. The Soviet Union, apart from the RSFSR, consisted of three main components: the inner empire (the borderland of Union republics), the external empire (the communist states of Eastern Europe), and the Third World client states (Smith, 2016).

The size of the Russian territory is one of the most unique features of Russia, as well as its geographical position being both a European and an Asian Power (Oliker et al., 2015). Its unique strategic location enables Russia to claim legitimate interests and actorness in both Europe and Asia, a perceived distinctive task of guaranteeing global stability (Morozova, 2009). While the large territory of Russia has been an opportunity, it has also been a constraint since its extensive national borders create a natural strategic challenge and hence a challenge for the national security (Oliker et al., 2015). After the fall of the Soviet Union, the national borders of Russia became challenging to the national security: large parts of its former territory were now outside of the Russian national borders and the level of international power had drastically decreased (Oliker et al., 2015). After 1991, the Russian territory was reduced to its 17<sup>th</sup> century borders due to the loss of the “inner empire”. Russia lost one third of its territory and 40 percent of its population, including 25 to 30 million ethnic Russians, vast natural resources, military infrastructure, and its global status as a great power (Gayoso, 2009).

The foreign policy of the independent Russia, and its relations with its immediate neighborhood, has been of scholarly interest since the 1990s due to the post-1991 changing international and regional dynamics. Post-1991, the CIS-states became the “near abroad”, independent neighborhood states in which Russia had special interests in (Page, 1994). According to Gayoso (2009) four important foreign policy traits from tsarist times have survived into the Soviet and independent Russian era: stabilizing regional borders, protection of ethnic Russians, linking economic interests to national security, and inconsistent regional allies. While the Russian foreign policies regarding the post-Soviet states have undergone change over time, these patterns can to some extent be observed in Russia’s relations with the post-Soviet region.

According to Götz (2022, p. 1531), three main perspectives on the drivers behind Russia’s neighborhood policy is evident in the literature. The first perspective argues that Russia’s actions in the post-Soviet region is driven by Kremlin’s efforts to gather domestic support. The claim is that Russia uses the post-Soviet region as a distraction from growing domestic problems, as a buffer for the spread of democracy, or to gain legitimacy (Götz, 2022; Götz & Merlen, 2018). The second concerns the aim of Russia’s status ambitions in the region rooted in old Russian traditions and

imperialist behavior (Götz, 2022). By challenging rules and norms in the post-Soviet space, interfering in the domestic political affairs of independent states, exerting economic pressure, and expanding military bases in the region, Russia aims to gain control over the post-Soviet region (Götz & Merlen, 2018). The third perspective focus on geopolitical factors and the use of its sphere of influence to secure the Russian national security. This perspective argues that the economic growth of Russia enabled the state to pursue a more self-assertive policy in the post-Soviet region, which is used to deal with the security concerns which the post-Soviet region and Western influence bring with them (Götz, 2022). Due to the eastward expansion of NATO, Russia's possession of a sphere of influence is essential for the Russian national security (Götz & Merlen, 2018).

### 3.8. Post-Soviet Regionalism

The term “post-Soviet” has been, in reference to the 15 independent states which emerged after the dissolution of the Soviet Union in 1991, widely used by scholars (see Ferraro, 2021; Libman & Vinokurov, 2012b; Russo & Gawrich, 2017; Spehr & Kassenova, 2012; Stevens, 2020; Tolstrup, 2015; Vanderhill, 2015). The term has been considered suitable since it reflects the supposed close links between the states included based on a common historical past within the Soviet Union. The use of the term has, however, been questioned by scholars claiming that the label is both time and legacy bound, not necessarily reflecting the nature of the states of the region today (Brusis, 2024; Vinokorov & Libman, 2012b). While all the states have being Soviet republics in common, variations exist regarding the length of their Soviet period, their experiences of independence as nation-states before becoming part of the Soviet Union, as well as the depth of links with other republic within the Soviet Union (Brusis, 2024). Hence, questions of whether one can label the whole region as post-Soviet arises, or whether several different post-Soviet regions are a more suitable label.

According to Vinokorov and Libman (2012b), “Eurasia” is a term better suited to label these states as several decades has gone by since the fall of the Soviet Union. Some scholars also use the term “post-Soviet Eurasia” (see Brusis, 2024; Obydenkova & Libman, 2016; Stykow, 2019) arguing that the variations regarding the prevalence of certain Communist legacies (for example longer pre-Communist statehood episodes) excludes the Baltic states from the rest of the states of the region (Brusis, 2024). The term “Eurasia” is also used by the regional organizations analyzed in this thesis (Eurasian Economic Community, the Eurasian Development Bank, the Eurasian Customs Union,

the Common/Eurasian Economic Space, and the Eurasian Economic Union). Over time, the most common term of the region has changed, reflecting both the time passed since their independence as well as the increasing heterogeneity between the states.

The post-Soviet region is highly interesting from the perspective of authoritarian regionalism, which this subchapter aims to illustrate. The region has a high density of regional organizations, a majority of which are founded and dominated by the largest state in the region, Russia. Many of the post-Soviet states have overlapping memberships in the Russian-dominated regional organizations, linking the states together through political, military, and economic organizations. Due to their Soviet legacies, the states have many other shared links and interconnections. Post-Soviet regionalism began with the dissolution of the Soviet Union and the establishment of the Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS). Over the last three decades, it has expanded with the creation of numerous regional organizations.

After the collapse of the Soviet Union, a new political, economic, and security landscape occurred in the post-Soviet region (Cooley, 2019). The once much-interconnected (economic, infrastructural, cultural) region now had to decide if they wanted to continue cooperation with each other or choose a different path forward. Hence, both disintegration and integration processes began simultaneously. Disintegration occurred as the newly independent states distanced themselves from the Soviet system and started to build their futures. Integration took place as these states sought new ways to cooperate in the emerging regional environment (Libman, 2007). After the Cold War, the Western powers extended their influence in the post-Communist space via transatlantic and regional organizations (including NATO, the EU, OSCE, and the Council of Europe). This became the start of the “battle” between the West and Russia to influence the newly independent post-Communist states. Generally, liberal democracy became the new political norm as a part of the liberal international order (Russo & Stoddard, 2018). The efforts by the West to promote liberal democracy were unevenly distributed in the post-Communist region. While much effort was put into the Baltic states and Eastern and Central Europe, other post-Soviet states did not receive as much attention. Many of these states were battling internal problems while they had few preconditions for the development of democracy and many inherited negative traits of the Soviet Union. The relatively quick fall of the Soviet Union did not prepare these states for nation-building, and they tended to easily fall back into familiar practices. In many of the post-Soviet states, authoritarian rulers consolidated political control within only a few years of independence (Hancock & Libman, 2016).

Regional organizations are found globally, but NDROs are more present in some regions than in others. In the post-Soviet region, there are many NDROs with various objectives and with different compilations of member states. The region is interesting for many reasons. It features many overlapping memberships in NDROs. Two major non-democratic powers are active: Russia, as the main actor, and China, which plays a significant role in some parts of the post-Soviet region. The foreign policy concepts of Russia highlight the importance of the post-Soviet states as well as the existing regional NDROs from the Russian viewpoint (see Appendix A). Additionally, major democratic actors, particularly the EU, are interested in the area. The region exemplifies how the initial prospect for democracy has largely turned into the consolidation of non-democracy in most post-Soviet states. When it comes to post-Soviet regionalism, Konopelko (2014) argues that one must consider the special circumstances surrounding the post-Soviet space, the historical, geopolitical, economic, cultural, and religious conditions.

Libman and Obydenkova (2017) also claim that post-Soviet regionalism is different from other parts of the world due to Soviet legacies. Post-Soviet regionalism is, as the name reveals, defined by the borders of the former Soviet Union, and is hence defined by its historical past. Since the states in this region share a long history, the region is unique due to its extreme heterogeneity (Hancock & Libman, 2016). The post-Soviet region is also unique for its high levels of interconnections. For a long time, the Russian language served as the *lingua franca*. Infrastructure such as railroads, oil and gas pipelines, and electricity grids were extensively linked. Additionally, there is a prevalent sense of Soviet nostalgia and a need for a regional hegemon to rely on. Post-Soviet regionalism is very much linked to its Soviet past, creating a “holding-together” regionalism: states once very closely intertwined starting to develop in different ways instead of the other way around (Obydenkova & Libman, 2017, 2019).

With the foundation of the Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS) in 1991, the regional organization aimed to manage the collapse of the Soviet Union and encourage political, economic, and security cooperation among the member states. Twelve post-Soviet states (all but the three Baltic states) joined the CIS, Turkmenistan and Ukraine did, however, not ratify the charter, and their membership status was contested. CIS is important since it was the start of the regional integration process in the post-Soviet space, and many of the former and still existing NDROs in the region have their background in the CIS. The Union State of Belarus and Russia, the Eurasian Economic Community (EurAsEC), the Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO), the Eurasian Customs Union (EACU), the Common Economic Space (CES), the CIS Free Trade Area, the CIS Election Monitoring Organization, and the Eurasian Economic Union (EAEU) all stem from the CIS.

During the 1990s, only two NDROs were active in the region: the CIS and the Union State of Belarus and Russia. During the next decade, many new NDROs were established. In 2000, the Eurasian Economic Community (EurAsEC) was created, aimed at deepening the economic integration between the member states. The Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO) founded in 2002 originates from the Collective Security Treaty (part of the CIS) from 1992; six of the member states formed the military alliance in 2002, while other states chose not to renew the treaty. The Eurasian Development Bank (EDB) was created in 2006 (developed as a part of EurAsEC) with its mission to facilitate economic growth and ties between member states. Out of the EurAsEC, the Eurasian Customs Union EACU was created in 2010, and the Eurasian Economic Space or the Common Economic Space (EES/CES, modeled after the EU and its four freedoms of movement) was created in 2012 (Gast, 2017).

The CIS Free Trade Area (CIS FTA) was established in 2011, providing the free movement of goods within CIS territory, a non-application of import customs duties, and a decrease of export customs duties between member states. In 2015, the Eurasian Economic Union (EAEU) was established, the main issues being the foundation of a single market, a monetary union, free movement, and energy and infrastructure (Gast, 2017). There is a large difference between the early forms of regionalism during the early 1990s, and the regionalism developed during the mid-2000s regarding the depth of regional integration. Hancock and Libman (2016) distinguish three eras of post-Soviet regionalism: between 1992 and 1994 (the startup phase of the CIS), between 1995 and 2006 (the expansion of post-Soviet regionalism with the Union State of Belarus and Russia, EurAsEC, CSTO), and after 2006 (NDROs with a much higher degree of regionalism, and implementation, were established).

The development of these Russian-dominated NDROs in the region led to a new geopolitical landscape in the post-Soviet space. In the 1990s and early 2000s, Western organizations such as the EU and NATO had been the power players in the post-Communist world. The Baltic states, as well as many of the Central and Eastern European states, applied for, or aimed for, membership in the EU and NATO and, in doing so, showed alignment with the West instead of Russia. Many of these states also managed to undergo severe political and economic changes and adapt to the new liberal agenda in the region (Obydenkova & Libman, 2019).

However, with the establishment of the NDROs founded, and dominated, by Russia in the post-Soviet space two important regional players occupied the post-Soviet space: the West (EU and NATO) and Russia, with its palette of regional organizations. Both sides wanted to expand their influence and offered the post-Soviet states cooperation to a varying degree (Libman, 2017). The

NATO Partnership for Peace Program (Pfp) was established in 1994 to promote dialogue between NATO and the partnership states. The EU started the European Neighbourhood Policy (ENP) in 2004 with the aim of establishing closer ties between the EU and partner states in Eastern and Southern Europe. In 2009, the Eastern Partnership (EaP) was established as a special dimension of the ENP, providing the foundation for new association agreements between the EU and partner states with positive democratic and economic development (Cooley, 2019). Having started with no regional hegemon in the early years of the 1990s, there was now competition between the West and Russia over the influence of the post-Soviet region. Since the early 1990s, Russia had contested the expansion of NATO and considered it a great threat to both Russia and its “sphere of influence”. Several factors have since contributed to the rift between the West and Russia, including the democratic Color Revolutions in the mid-2000s, the expansion of the EU and NATO in 2004, Russia’s involvement in frozen conflicts in Georgia, Armenia, Azerbaijan, and Ukraine, and the 2014 protests in Ukraine over the EU’s EaP Accession Agreement (Libman, 2017).

Most post-Soviet integration projects were constructed by Russia, with Russian-centric structures. Russia is often classified as a regional hegemon within the post-Soviet region (see Kirkham, 2016; Meister, 2024; Roberts & Ziemer, 2024; Zaporozhchenko, 2024). According to Gayoso (2009, p. 235) a hegemony indicates “a leader(s)-follower(s) structure, where a dominant state(s) is capable of influencing the structure and substance of other states’ interactions. In a hegemonic system, subordinate states’ external decisions are constrained, although their internal decision-making powers remain fully sovereign”. There are many NDROs in the region, with multiple overlapping memberships (Obydenkova & Libman, 2019). This is not unique to the post-Soviet space; many states are members of more than one RO at a time, but regional memberships in this region are especially dense. Russia, and other states in the region, are members of multiple overlapping ROs, creating a post-Soviet regime cluster. Van den Bosch (2020, p. 3) defines a regional cluster as “a non-random, spatial concentration of interdependent political regimes connected by a regional political system of linkages and interaction, sharing ideological and/or institutional characters”. A state can become a part of a regional cluster in different ways. In most cases, there must be a “critical mass” of regimes or one powerful regime to cluster around. Alternatively, the cluster can be shaped by a certain regional structure (such as a former empire or a colonial past). Hegemonic regime clusters are an ideal type of regional cluster. Hegemonic regime clusters are headed by one or more powerful states with a large economic and/or military power. These clusters are characterized by power asymmetry and use their leverage over weaker states to create a group of allied regimes (Van den Bosch, 2020).

Even though there are many NDROs and regional agreements in the post-Soviet region, there have been severe problems with implementing the aims of these regional integration projects. While there are active customs unions, economic integration projects, and security organizations, there are also trade wars, the use of economic tools and sanctions, and non-functioning security cooperation between the member states. Some scholars (see Libman, 2017; Libman & Obyndekova, 2017) argue that a large part of the post-Soviet regionalism is just “ink on paper”, just there for show and not meant to be implemented. The “spaghetti bowl” of non-functioning ROs and agreements can, according to Libman and Obydenkova (2017), be traced to the establishment and function of the CIS. The formation of the CIS started post-Soviet regionalism, and since its formation came as early as 1991, the Soviet legacies were still strong and affected how the post-Soviet states viewed the Russian integration projects.

Generally, post-Soviet regionalism has been associated with high levels of non-compliance regarding the implementation of the agreements signed. The phenomenon of “counterintuitive logic” of regionalism have also been found in Latin America (Libman, 2024). From a democratic point of view, “ink on paper” regionalism can be seen as unsuccessful, but Libman (2024) argue that non-democratic ROs and states function differently compared to democratic ones in terms of the willingness to constrain their sovereignty as well as compliance with models based on common goals, norms, and rules. While the member states of NDROs find it difficult to implement regional agreements, they are still allowed to implement their individual regime-enhancing functions as well as provide legitimation for the incumbent leaders. According to Libman (2024, p. 41), “non-performance in terms of the declared goals and mandates in this case not merely tolerated (because of other benefits ROs provide) but in fact preferred”. In the yearly years of post-Soviet regionalism, the focus was very heavily on economic performance and economic cooperation, partly due to the transitions to a new market following the collapse of the Soviet Union (Libman, 2024). In the 2000s, as the post-Soviet states economic dependence on Russia deepened, the interest for a new focus on regionalism evolved among the states while the level of incompliance decreased. The performance of the NDROs established after the 2000s was higher compared to the early post-Soviet regional projects, while the primary focus remained on economic cooperation (Libman, 2024).

Libman (2017) claims that there are many reasons for the failed regional integration projects. There are low levels of trust among the post-Soviet states, the existing NDROs have been unable to provide advantages appealing enough for member states, the fear of Russian regional dominance and hence interdependencies on Russia, and the ongoing competition between Russian and Western integration projects. Especially after 2014, the post-Soviet states became wary of increasing



their independence on Russia (Libman, 2024). The advantages that post-Soviet regionalism has created for its member states have been most useful to Russia: international prestige, a unifying effect among members, protective integration (support for autocratic leaders that are locked out from memberships in DROs), and survival integration (economic benefits, labor flows, and cheap Russian gas and oil). Russo and Gawrich (2017) argue that Russia has two different regional objectives in different groups of states in the region. When it comes to Armenia, Azerbaijan, Belarus, Kazakhstan, Turkmenistan, Tajikistan, and Uzbekistan, Russia aims to maintain autocratic stability in these states. In Georgia, Moldova, Ukraine, and Kyrgyzstan, the aim is regaining autocratic stability.

Scholarly literature often considered Russia to be a non-democratic external actor trying to undermine the development of democracy in its sphere of influence or even trying to promote autocracy. However, previous research has not given enough consideration to the use of NDROs as a tool of external influence on other states' internal political developments. It is still unclear which actors within the region are using authoritarian regionalism and NDROs as a tool for regime-boosting if that is even the case. Russia is often seen as the main regional power initiating and driving these regional integration projects (Cameron & Orenstein, 2012). Some scholars (Allison, 2008; Collins, 2009) argue that there might be a more complex picture of the leading forces behind post-Soviet regionalism: other autocratic leaders within the member states might be using NDROs for their gain to stay in power. There is also a debate over whether NDROs are used as regime-boosting mechanisms or if the regimes in the area are using them as geopolitical security mechanisms (Allison, 2008; Cameron & Orenstein, 2016; Collins, 2009; Hancock & Libman, 2016).

In sum, post-Soviet regionalism has evolved since its beginnings in both scope and level of cooperation. From a rather humble beginning with the CIS, post-Soviet regionalism has grown and evolved steadily since Putin became president in 2000. Due to the region's shared history, the assumption is that vast amounts of linkages have developed between the post-Soviet states and Russia. Russia, being the most powerful state in the region and the founding state of almost all NDROs in the region, is also assumed to have a vast amount of leverage on the post-Soviet states. However, Russia is not the only powerful regional player in the post-Soviet region; the EU has also acted as an important regional organization for some of the post-Soviet states.

The final subchapter of Part I of the thesis provides a brief summary of the two theoretical chapters, resulting in three specific research questions.

3.8. Summary and specified research questions

The international dimension of regime transition theories involves external actors that can influence a recipient state’s domestic political processes. The influence is apparent in both supply (mechanisms used by external actors) and demand (the acceptance or rejection by the recipient state). Mechanisms used by external actors have different levels of intent and can affect the recipient states differently due to the bonds between the actors. The effectiveness of these external mechanisms depends on linkages between the two actors, the external actor’s leverage on the recipient state, and the actions of domestic political elites in the recipient state. The level of effectiveness of the external influence is, according to research, further enhanced by regional clusters and regional organizations. Going back to the typologies of combined influences (3.5.2), the mechanisms within the active-indirect box are the most relevant since regional cooperation within regional organizations entails high levels of cooperation and assistance.

Figure 2 summarizes the flow of external influences.

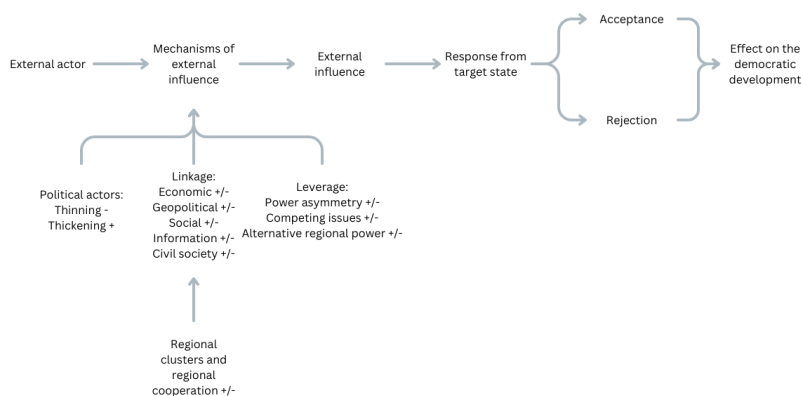


Figure 2. Summary of the flow of external influences (self-compiled).

The effectiveness of external influence has primarily been researched from a democratic point of view, with a focus on how democratic external actors can effectively influence other states. However, non-democratic actors can also extort external influence via authoritarian linkages and leverage. While the effects of democratic regionalism through the impact of the EU have been researched, the potential effects of authoritarian regionalism have not been studied to the same extent. Authoritarian regionalism entails organizations dominated by a non-democratic state or

with non-democratic states as members. Table 11 (p.80) summarizes the potential mechanisms that authoritarian regionalism uses and how those mechanisms can strengthen the regimes of member states by providing different forms of support, aid, and cooperation. The effect of authoritarian regionalism is not conclusive. Membership in these organizations can have a negative impact on the democratic performance of a member state due to the diffusion of non-democratic norms or the use of mechanisms of non-democratic external influence, or simply by attracting non-democracies as members with the lure of similar regimes.

The main conclusion, with relevance for the rest of the thesis, is that external actors can use mechanisms of influence via regional organizations, which in turn are affected (enhanced or diminished) by the level of linkages and leverage. Domestic political elites can either accept or reject external influence, which affects democratic development in the recipient state. As the aim of this thesis is to develop a deeper understanding of the role Russia plays as an external actor in the post-Soviet region, the general research problem serves as a guide: Has membership in Russian-dominated NDROs played a role in the democratic development of the included post-Soviet states? Post-Soviet regionalism is interesting regarding the possible impact of authoritarian regionalism since the region has a dense pattern of NDROs dominated by Russia, several overlapping memberships, and a variation of the number of memberships among the post-Soviet states. The region is also interesting due to the long common history among the states and the assumed high levels of linkages to Russia and Russian leverage on the post-Soviet states. Based on the theoretical background presented in the previous chapters, Part I of the thesis concludes with three specific research questions presented in the next section.

### 3.8.1. Specified research questions

The general research problem of the thesis (see Subchapter 1.3) is: *Has membership in Russian-dominated NDROs played a role in the varying democratic developments in the included post-Soviet states?* To be able to address this research problem, three specific research questions are needed. As the research problem highlights both NDRO membership and democratic development among the post-Soviet states, the first research question addresses the possible association between the two variables. The second research question, based on the answer to the first, addresses the potential impact of other variables on post-Soviet democratic development. In addition to the status of NDRO membership, other factors can impact the democratic development of the region, and the final research question addresses the interplay of these variables.

Regarding the first specified research question, Chapter 3 concludes that previous research on the international dimension has primarily focused on the effects of democratic external actors. Due to the high concentration of democratic actors, and especially the positive effects that the EU has had on transitioning states in different parts of Europe, the theories on mechanisms of external influence and the typologies of mechanisms have been based on democratic influences and actors. The effects of the EU as a democratic regional organization are well established in the literature (see Sasse 2012), as is the association between democratic regional organizations and democracy levels in member states. However, the effects of non-democratic regional organizations have not been researched to the same extent as their democratic counterparts (see Libman, 2017; Obydenkova & Libman, 2019).

Studies on regionalism and the EU as an external actor have shown that the EU, through mechanisms of external influence (diffusion, conditionality), has had a positive impact on the democracy levels among prospective member states since a certain democracy level is a demand for full membership (see Chapter 3). The association between DROs and democracy level is evident, and a similar association may also exist between NDROs and democracy levels. The first specified research question concerns the potential association between memberships in NDROs and democracy levels:

Research question 1 (RQ1): *Is there an association between membership in Russian-dominated NDROs and the level of democracy within the included post-Soviet states?*

If such an association exists, theories of authoritarian regionalism suggest it would be between high levels of NDRO memberships and lower levels of democracy as well as between low levels of NDRO memberships and higher levels of democracy.

Chapter 2 reveals that the literature on transition, regime change, and democratization has produced a variety of theories regarding important preconditions for democratic transitions as well as factors possibly affecting the success rate of such transitions. The literature has, however, also concluded that these general theories on regime change cannot be applied to all states or regions. The post-Communist and post-Soviet transitions have involved specific circumstances that have affected the democratic transitions (see Subchapter 2.5). Among other factors, communist political and economic cultures, long-term experience with non-democratic rule, low levels of national unity, low levels of political opposition, and clan structures, have made the states of the region “unique” and the democratic transitions more difficult. Subchapter 3.6 concludes that the relationship and power asymmetries between the external actor and the recipient states have an impact on the effectiveness of external influences. Bonds between the states (level of linkages), the degree of

vulnerability that recipient states towards the external actor (level of leverage), and the reception of external influence by domestic political actors all impact the outcome.

If the post-Soviet states belong to a group of states with “special preconditions” that have affected the success rate of a democratic transition, these factors need to be taken into consideration when analyzing the development of democracy levels in the region. This leads to the second specified research question, assuming that complementary factors also exist, possibly having an impact on democracy levels. If factors other than NDRO membership affect democratic development, these factors need to be identified and brought into the analysis.

Research question 2 (RQ2): *Apart from NDRO membership levels, which complementary factors related to the varying democratic development can be identified within the post-Soviet region?*

The third specified research question combines the potential impact of NDRO membership (RQ 1) and the potential impact of other factors (RQ 2). Previous research has shown that democratization does not depend on a single factor (see Subchapter 2.4), but rather a combination of factors during different points in time for different states and regions. By considering several different factors, the results should more precisely reflect the progress involved in a regime transition than when analyzing a single factor. The first research question examines the potential impact of NDRO membership on the democratic development of member states, while the second focuses on the impact of other factors. When considering all these factors together, will their combination be associated with a democratic or non-democratic outcome among post-Soviet states? The third research question addresses the interplay of these factors.

Research question 3 (RQ3): *In what combinations with other variables, and under which circumstances, can NDRO membership bring about democracy respectively autocracy?*

The three specified research questions build on each other as Figure 3 illustrates. The first research question explores the potential association between NDRO membership and the level of democratic development among the included post-Soviet states. The second research question explores variables other than NDRO membership that possibly impact democratic development among the states of the region. The third research question aims to investigate which variables (or conditions) and circumstances around NDRO membership can lead to a certain level of democratic development.

Figure 3. Summary of the specified research questions.

RQ1:

Is there an association between NDRO membership levels and the level of democratic development among the post-Soviet states?



RQ2:

Apart from NDRO membership levels, which complementary factors related to the varying democratic development can be identified within the post-Soviet region?



RQ3:

In which combinations with other conditions, and under which circumstances, can NDRO memberships bring about democracy respectively autocracy?

The thesis continues with Part III, which includes a chapter on research design and methodology (Chapter 4) and four chapters presenting the empirical analyses (Chapters 5 to 8).

### III. EMPIRICAL ANALYSES

## Chapter 4. Research design and methodology

This chapter presents the research design as a comparative approach to the empirical part of the thesis, which includes three different analyses. The nature of the general research problem and the research questions demands a comparative approach since several states are analyzed over several points in time. The first part of the chapter discusses comparative design, the reasons why the choice of research design is suitable for the thesis, and the strengths and weaknesses of the comparative approach. The next part focuses on the selection of cases and the time period chosen for the analyses. Since the choice of the number of cases and temporal design has implications for the research design, the second subchapter includes a discussion of the advantages and disadvantages of the choices made. The third subchapter discusses the included variables, how the variables are measured, and the data used. The fourth subchapter discusses the use of mixed methods within research, as well as the choice of analytic methods used for the three different analyses. The last part of the chapter is dedicated to a summary of the arguments and methods used within the empirical chapters that follow the current chapter.

### 4.1. Research design

This chapter focuses on the comparative research design as well as the design's suitability for the empirical parts of the thesis based on the general research problem and the specific research questions. Comparative politics "seeks to achieve the goal of inference about politics through comparing countries" (Landman, 2008, p. 13). Comparisons can be made in different ways: across countries, across sub-groups of the population of a certain country, or across time periods (Newton & Van Deth, 2004). While true experiments, with complete validity, are "impossible" within political science, comparative politics can be used to compare countries in search of discernible patterns and to make generalizations based on evidence in order to understand and explain a political phenomenon (Landman, 2008). The assumption within comparative research is that there are similarities and differences between countries that are important to understand the various aspects of politics (Denk, 2002).

The comparative approach has several different objectives. The approach can be used for contextual description and classifications, for hypothesis testing, or as a basis for predictions (Landman 2008, p. 4). Descriptive comparative studies can be used for contextual studies or the



construction of comparative typologies (Denk, 2002). Explanatory comparative studies aim to map and explain a phenomenon either by using existing theories or by formulating or developing theories, while predictive comparative studies aim to make predictions regarding future situations or developments using comparative studies as the basis (Denk, 2002). The comparative approach has several advantages, such as broadening understanding of the world and politics, improving classifications and typologies, testing hypotheses, and facilitating predictions via generalizations and adjusting theories regarding causal relationships (Hauge & Harrop, 2004; Marsh & Stoker, 2010).

Within comparative politics, there is a general distinction between the broad variable-oriented approach and the deep case-oriented one (Landman, 2008); this distinction is further discussed in the following subchapters. The variable-oriented approach, also called large-n studies, is more abstract and aims to identify general associations instead of complex entities or processes. The case-oriented approach, or small-n studies, is less abstract and aims to identify complex relationships and processes rather than general associations between variables. Within the case-oriented approach, the cases are central, and the choice of which case or cases to include is therefore of high importance (Landman, 2008). Between the variable-oriented and case-oriented approaches, a sort of combination of these two approaches can be found in qualitative comparative analysis (QCA), developed by Ragin in 1987. The QCA approach includes attributes from the variable- and case-oriented approaches. With QCA, the researcher can sort and structure cases and discover patterns in the data used. The included conditions (“independent variables”) can contribute to the analysis of both an outcome (“dependent variable”) and a non-outcome (the non-occurrence of the outcome of interest) (Mello, 2021).

Internal and external validity are central concepts within the comparative approach. These concepts are ideal types, but the aim of having high internal and external validity is essential (Pennings et al., 2011). Internal validity concerns the level of certainty regarding the effect of the independent variable(s) on the outcome/dependent variable (Gerring, 2017). The highest level of internal validity can be achieved through true experiments. Within comparative approaches, internal validity can be raised via temporal, or longitudinal, comparisons (Gerring, 2017). External validity concerns the ability to generalize, the extent to which the research findings can be applied to other settings, through space and time based on the research (Penning et al., 2011). External validity is related to the level of representativeness of the included cases in the comparison (Denk, 2002).

While there are many advantages to the use of the comparative approach, such as the ability to test and build theories and find patterns and structures in cross-national research, disadvantages are

also evident. If an association between the variables of interest is found, it can be difficult to determine whether it is real; such circumstances exemplify the issue of association versus causality. The direction of the association found is a related issue. A hypothesis might exist regarding the direction of the association between variables, but it might not be possible to conclude the direction. However, through temporal approaches, the direction of the association can become visible (Denk, 2002). A pooled time series can be used to test theories dealing with multiple time periods simultaneously, and it can assess the time dependency of causal relationships. Within this type of time series, variations in time and across countries can emerge (Penning et al., 2009). Problems regarding the existence of exogenous factors, factors that may affect the outcome but are excluded from the analysis, can occur. Galton's problem is another disadvantage of comparative politics. The problem highlights the possibility of the existence of interdependences between countries, which raises the question of whether the countries included are truly independent of each other (Denk, 2002).

The research design within the comparative method should be based on the research problem and the research questions. The term comparative politics only describes the methodological relationship but does not specify what is compared (Nissen 1998, p. 400). The stated problem and research questions determine which attribute (what?), object (who?), cases (where?), and time period (when?) is being studied as well as which data and method of analysis (how?) are used in the study (Denk, 2002). The following subchapters discuss the rationale behind the thesis's empirical parts and the advantages and disadvantages of these choices, starting with the selection of cases and time period.

## 4.2. Who, where, and when? Cases and time period

As already concluded, the research methods of comparative politics are not specific but depend on the research question(s), the nature of the analyzed case(s), the number of included cases, which type of data is used, which time period is analyzed, and the level of complexity of the analysis (Caramani, 2008; Lijphart, 1971). This subchapter focuses on the case selection and time period analyzed.

The post-Soviet states are the focus, and the analytical objects, of the thesis. Hence, the included cases are specifically drawn from the post-Soviet region. By the post-Soviet states or region, this thesis refers to the former states of the Soviet Union except for the three Baltic states. While the region today most often is referred to as Eurasia (see Dragneva & Hartwell, 2022; Hancock &

Libman, 2016; Libman & Vinokurov, 2018a; Russo & Stoddard, 2018), the term "post-Soviet" is chosen in this thesis in reference to the region, and the states of the region, of interest. This is since the thesis analyzes developments in the region starting from the year 1991, when a post-Soviet region was evident.

Within comparative politics, there are different strategies for the selection of the number of included cases. Newton and Van Deth (2010, p. 402) distinguish between the approach of comparing *many or few cases* while Landman (2008, p. 25) differentiates between comparing *many, few, and single countries*. The definition and the number of included cases within these groups vary among scholars. Landman (2008) categorizes the comparative approach into two groups: "many countries", defined as over fifty, and "few countries", defined as more than one but fewer than twenty. In contrast, Newton and Van Deth (2010) distinguish between two main groups: "many cases", involving more than twenty or thirty countries, and "few cases", involving five or six countries or fewer (Landman, 2008; Newton & Van Deth, 2010). The choice between the included number of cases focuses on the trade-off between the scope of analyzed countries and the level of abstraction. Single-country studies produce a low level of abstraction. Studies including a few countries (more than one but less than twenty) lead to a middle-level abstraction, while studies including many countries (more than fifty) produce a high level of abstraction (Landman, 2008).

Each strategy comes with its advantages and disadvantages. Quantitative analysis using statistical methods is well suited when comparing many countries ("large-n comparisons" or "variable-oriented approaches"). Using statistical (standardized or quantified) data, patterns, and tendencies can be effectively visible (Newton & Van Deth, 2010). The inclusion of many countries allows for broader generalizations and the identification of theory-deviant countries but may not provide an understanding of complex causal mechanisms. There may also be limitations of available or suitable data (Landman, 2008; Newton & Van Deth, 2010).

Comparing a few countries ("small-n comparison" or "case-oriented approaches") involves a careful and intentional selection of around 2 to more than 20 countries (Landman, 2008). The "comparable case strategy" achieves control due to the selection of cases and focuses more on the similarities and differences between the selected countries. The selection of the cases must involve rules of inquiry; otherwise, it can lead to "insecure inferences, limited findings, and in some cases, simply incorrect conclusions about a particular topic" (Landman 2008, p. 28). Comparisons of a few countries involve a more detailed understanding of complex processes and relationships within and between countries (Newton & Van Deth 2010). The advantages of comparing a few countries involve an in-depth analysis of the selected countries. A disadvantage is that no global

generalizations can be drawn or tested from the analysis. One way to overcome these limitations is to use qualitative comparative analysis (QCA), as the method is able to look into the causal relationship between factors using statistical association (Newton & Van Deth, 2010).

Single-country studies (or single case studies) are also considered a comparison if concepts that can be applied to other countries are used and developed (Landman, 2008; Hauge & Harrop, 2004). The advantages are largely similar to the comparison of a few countries: the possibility to make in-depth analyses and to develop a detailed understanding of processes and relationships. The implications of small-n comparisons, where large numbers of observations cannot be relied upon to reduce measurement errors, are related to measurement validity (increased importance) and the type of causal relationships analyzed (very weak and heterogeneous relationships should be avoided) (Toshkov, 2016). The problem of too many variables and too few countries is mostly associated with single-country comparisons and studies comparing a few countries. The problem occurs when there are more explanatory factors for the observed outcome than for the included observations or countries in the study (Hauge & Harrop, 2004). The solutions can include increasing the number of observations (adding more countries or including the element of time) or using the most similar systems design (MSSD) or the least similar system design (MDSO) to facilitate a focused comparison based on similarities or differences between countries (Landman, 2008). Selection bias is another problem associated with the intentional choice of countries, mostly affecting the comparison of one or a few countries. The problem occurs if the chosen cases only include countries that support the theory, examining only positive cases, or if the choice of the included countries is only based on the dependent, or outcome, variable (Hauge & Harrop, 2004; Landman, 2008).

There are disadvantages within comparative politics that can be applied to all three of the main approaches. First, establishing equivalence entails that the same understanding and measurement of the concept are used in different parts of the world, both within the theoretical concepts and the operational indicators of the concepts (Hauge & Harrop, 2004; Landman, 2008). Spuriousness, when certain factors are wrongly assumed to have led to a particular outcome, and the actual factors are overlooked due to the selection of cases, is another potential problem in comparative politics. Even if relevant variables that may affect the outcome are verified or countries are selected to fit a particular theory, too many variables or selection bias may be introduced (Landman, 2008). Ecological and individualist fallacies can also be potential obstacles. This may be the case when a study uses evidence from a certain level (for example, an aggregate level) to make inferences about another level (for example, an individual level), resulting in an incorrect analysis level (Landman, 2008). The last problem, value bias, occurs if the researcher is not “value-free” and is affected by

different predispositions (political or cultural) when conducting or concluding a study (Landman, 2008). Table 12 summarizes the comparative approaches as well as their advantages and disadvantages.

Table 12. Comparison of the general techniques, their advantages and disadvantages, in comparative politics (my own compilation based on Ankar et al., 2013, p. 300; Hauge and Harrod, 2004, p. 80; Landman, 2008, p. 47).

Number of cases	Case- or variable centered	Level of generalization	Level of complexity	Advantages	Disadvantages
One	Case	Low	High	Intensive and in-depth study of a case that has wider significance, the ability to understand complex processes and relationships.	The problem with too many variables and too few countries, selection bias possible as well as time consuming.
Few (2–20)	Case	Medium	Medium	Control by the selection of included countries, suitable for theory-building and area studies and allows for in-depth analyses.	Selection bias possible, no global generalizations can be drawn from the results, as well as time consuming.
Many (over 20)	Variable	High	Low	Statistical control, extensive scope, suitable for theory-building and broad generalizations	Possible measuring problems and data availability problems, high level of generality, loss of understanding of complex causal mechanisms, technical skills needed

As Table 12 shows, both the case-centered and the variable-centered approaches have advantages and disadvantages. The advantages of the variable-centered approach (the ability to make broad generalizations and have a higher level of control) are the disadvantages of the case-centered approach. In contrast, the advantages of the case-centered approach (the ability to conduct in-depth analyses to find complex relationships) are the disadvantages of the variable-centered approach.

The number of cases included can have different implications for the research design, the complexity of the analysis, and the ability to draw generalizations from the results. The focus of the thesis is the post-Soviet region; the fifteen independent post-Soviet states encompass the entire population of the region. The number of cases corresponds to the comparative approach of a few

cases, with a medium level of generalization and complexity. The few-cases approach is also suitable for area studies.

Choosing relevant cases is crucial to comparative methods. The selection of the states included in this analysis was determined via the rules of inclusion and exclusion. *Scope conditions* determine the conditions under which a theory is relevant, while *possibility conditions* determine the conditions under which an outcome is possible. If cases are considered irrelevant to a theory or a hypothesis, they should be excluded (Ragin & Robinson, 2004). According to Mahoney and Goertz (2004), the possibility scope includes the *rule of exclusion* and the *rule of inclusion*. The principle for the rule of exclusion is “cases are irrelevant if their value on any eliminatory independent variable predicts the nonoccurrence of the outcome of interest” (Mahoney & Goertz, 2004, p. 658). The principle for the rule of inclusion is “cases are relevant if their value on at least one independent variable is positively related to the outcome of interest” (Mahoney & Goertz, 2004, p. 657). The rule of exclusion takes priority over the rule of inclusion. If the scope and possibility conditions are applied properly, the sample of cases included in the analysis will be both theoretically and substantially relevant for both positive and negative cases (Ragin & Robinson, 2004).

Generally, comparativists start with a perception of which variables and cases fit the research questions asked and use a relevant theory. In some cases, competing theories aim to explain the same phenomenon (Ragin & Robinson, 2004). While there are many competing theories aiming to explain democratization and autocratization, this thesis focuses on the role of regional organizations. The general research problem, based on the theory of authoritarian regionalism, concerns whether membership in the Russian-dominated non-democratic regional organizations (NDROs) played a role in the varying democratic development among the included post-Soviet states. Theoretically, membership in NDROs should be associated with the level of democracy, higher NDRO membership levels with lower levels of democracy, and lower NDRO membership levels with higher levels of democracy. Regarding the included cases in the analysis of the thesis, eleven countries within the post-Soviet region are included (see Figure 4). Since Russia is the external actor whose external influence on the post-Soviet states is analyzed, Russia is excluded. The three Baltic states are excluded as they have not been members of any Russian-dominated NDROs. As the total population is included, the external validity of the study is high. The included eleven post-Soviet states (Armenia, Azerbaijan, Belarus, Georgia, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Moldova, Tajikistan, Ukraine, Uzbekistan, and Turkmenistan) all have varying levels of NDRO membership and varying levels of democratic development. Variation in the included variables is of high importance for the comparative approach since variation is necessary for explanation.

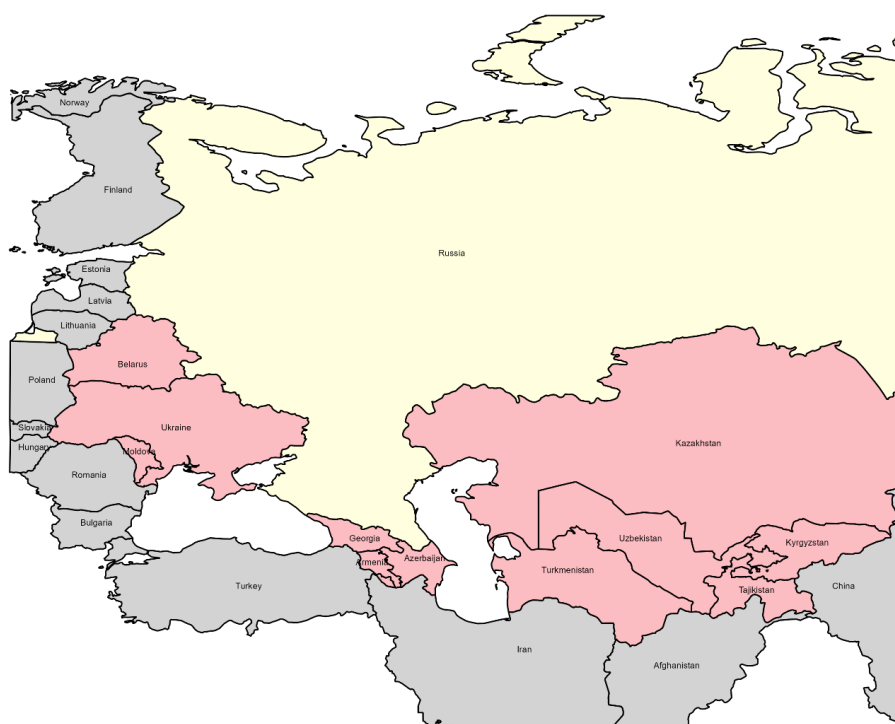


Figure 4. A map on the eleven included post-Soviet states (in pink).

Comparative analyses can involve the dimension of space (spatial), time (temporal), or a combination of the two dimensions (spatial-temporal). As stated in this chapter's introduction, the comparative approach with cross-national and longitudinal elements is used with the aim of comparing the included post-Soviet states over three decades, between the start of their respective independences in 1991 to 2021. The inclusion of the element of time within an analysis can, as with the increased number of cases, increase the level of generalization and enable the study of developments over time (Pennings et al., 2009). The combination of time and cases affects the studies' spatial-temporal validity, and the validity of the results through time and space (Anckar et al., 2013). The ambition is, however, not to generalize through space but to focus solely on the post-Soviet context.

The next subchapter deals with the included variables and the data used within the empirical analyses. The main variables, NDRO membership and level of democracy are discussed in more detail in the chapter, while the remaining variables (or "conditions") are presented in more detail in Chapters 6 and 7.

### 4.3. What and who? The variables and data

The theoretical foundations, aim and research questions determine the variables of interest in the analysis. As the interest of the thesis lies in a possible association between memberships in NDROs and the level of democratic development in the included post-Soviet states, the variables of interest are the level of NDRO membership and the level of democracy. This subchapter focuses on these variables and the data used as a basis for the variables.

#### 4.3.1. Democracy level

There are several indexes constructed for comparative measurements of the level of democracy, and subsequent autocracy, in states around the world. Lott and Croissant (2024, p. 51) state that “scholars who aim at measuring autocratization have to use indicators and measures of democratic quality”. In the literature, some democracy measurements are used more than others. This section discusses eight of the most frequently referenced democracy indexes in the literature, with the goal of selecting a suitable measurement for the empirical analyses (see Appendix B for further information on the measurements). The included indexes are Freedom House, Vanhanen, ACLP and DD, Polity IV, EIU, V-Dem, and BTI as well as Hadenius and Hadenius and Teorell.

The definitions of democracy, the conceptualized criteria for democracy, the methodology, the coding, as well as the indicators (for example political rights, civil liberties, or freedom of the press) differ between the indexes. All existing indexes have strengths and weaknesses as no index is perfect. However, choosing one index over another can affect the conclusions one can draw from the results, and the choice can determine how political regimes are classified and how the level of democracy is rated. Some indexes can also favor, or disfavor, some regions of the world due to the way the democracy rating system has been developed (see Aleksanyan, 2013; Hadenius & Teorell, 2005; Högström, 2013; Knutsen & Wig, 2014; Silander & Denk, 2009; Vanhanen, 2000).

Many scholars have constructed measurements or indexes of democracy over the years (see Bollen, 1979; 1990; Cutridge, 1963; Fitzgibbon, 1951; Lipset, 1959). The indexes have been used to measure the level of democracy within and between states and to categorize states as democratic, non-democratic, or something in between. The scales used, countries analyzed, definitions of democracy, and dimensions measured all vary among the different indexes. The main disagreements among scholars when it comes to the measurements of democracy concern what



definition of democracy to use; how to classify the level of democracy; which indicators/dimensions to use; which states to include, and the time period to focus on. Generally, democracy can be defined in different “thicknesses” (see Chapter 2). Thick concepts tend to be multidimensional, and thinner concepts can be unidimensional or contain no more than two dimensions. Using a thin, or minimalist, definition can include both positive and negative aspects. While some scholars argue that a thin definition is better suited for measuring democracy due to its simplicity, others argue that, in a minimalist view, theoretically important dimensions can be excluded. The opposite problem might be true for a thicker concept of democracy. The dimensions or indicators used in the measurement are determined by the definition and conceptualization of democracy in the indexes.

There are different ways to code and measure the dimensions used in the eight included indexes. Two main types of indicators are used: objective (usually statistical data) and subjective (presented by a scale with many alternatives). Freedom House and Polity IV use subjective indicators, while Vanhanen and V-Dem use a combination of subjective and objective indicators. Subjective indicators have often been viewed as less reliable than objective ones due to the possible unsystematic measurement errors that they can lead to. Objective indicators are also easier to control for external researchers.

The scales used in the measurements can vary as some use dichotomous (or trichotomous) scales, while others use a continuous scale. Coppedge (2012) prefers a dichotomous scale, arguing that it is easier to use a lower level of measurement. Hadenius and Teorell (2005) argue that a problem with dichotomous (and trichotomous) measurements is that much information about the existing differences is lost between countries if the classifications only include a scale of zero and one, or democracy and autocracy. Another problem is where to draw the line between the two. There are also different views among scholars on how to weigh the indicators: should they be weighed equally or differently? Should the sums of the indicators be added or multiplied? Further, the indexes vary in the terms by which the states are included in the measurements and the used time period. Some indexes exclude states with less than 500,000 citizens, while others include all states; some indexes continue to measure the level of democracy every year or every other year, while some only apply their measurement at a single point in time (see Cheibud et al., 2010; Coppedge, 2012; Hadenius & Teorell, 2005; Högstöm, 2013; Knutsen & Wig, 2014).

One of the best-known, and most used, indexes is *Freedom House's* index “Freedom in the World”. The index includes 195 states (2018) and 14 territories and has been conducted annually since 1972 (the methodology has, however, been altered through the years). Two dimensions are analyzed:

political rights (electoral process, political pluralism, and functioning of government) and civil liberties (freedom of expression and belief, associational and organizational rights, rule of law, and personal autonomy and individual rights). The dimensions are rated on a 1 (the greatest degree of freedom) to 7 (the smallest degree of freedom) scale, and scores are transformed into a “freedom rating” of free, partly free, or not free. The Freedom in the World index is based on subjective indicators and measures electoral democracy (should reach at least 50 percent of the scores for both dimensions). The methodology states that states regarded as partly free may qualify as electoral democracies but not as liberal democracies (Freedom House, 2018).

Vanhanen’s index includes 187 states from the year 1810, with states scored on a scale between 0 and 100 points (high values are democracies, and low are non-democracies). The dimensions used are competition (calculated by subtracting the percentage of votes won by the largest party from 100) and participation (calculated from the total population). They are weighed equally, and the combination becomes the index of democratization (ID). Vanhanen stressed the electoral dimensions of democracy in his index and used both objective and subjective indicators (Vanhanen, 2000).

The *ACLP Index* (constructed by Alvarez, Cheibud, Limongi, and Przeworski) is a dichotomous index analyzing 135 states between 1950 and 2000. The index has been extended to include more countries and regime classifications under the name *Democracy and Dictatorship* (Cheibud et al. 2010). The indexes use subjective indices measuring contestation with four aspects: the popular election of the chief executive as well as the legislature, a multiparty system, and power alternation. Based on the dimensions, states are categorized as either democracies or dictatorships. Democracies can be further divided into the subcategories of semi-presidential, parliamentary, or presidential democracies. Dictatorships can be divided into monarchy, military, and civilian dictatorships. The index uses the thin definition of democracy to define it as “a regime in which those who govern are selected through contested elections” (Cheibud et al., 2010, p. 69).

*Polity IV* (political regime characteristics and transitions) uses subjective indices, analyzing 167 states starting from the year 1800. The index measures both institutionalized democracy and autocracy using a scale of +10 to -10 (the regimes are grouped as full democracies, democracies, open anocracies, closed anocracies, and autocracies). The dimensions of the index are the competitiveness of the executive recruitment and of political participation, the openness of the executive recruitment, and the constraints on the chief executive. For autocracies, the dimension of regulation of participation is added. The definition of democracy used by the Polity IV index is

thicker than that for electoral democracy and includes the guarantee of civil liberties to all citizens (Knutson & Wig, 2014; Marshall et al., 2017).

The Economist Intelligence Unit's Democracy Index (*EIU*) includes data starting from 2006 in 165 states and 2 territories. The index uses a scale of 1 to 10, based on 60 indicators in five categories. Data sources include subjective indices and results from World Value Surveys. The measured dimensions are electoral process and pluralism, functioning of government, political participation, democratic political culture, and civil liberties. The dimensions reflect a thicker, more liberal concept of democracy used as the foundation of the index (Coppedge et al., 2015, 2019; Kekic, 2017).

*V-Dem* (Varieties of Democracy) uses both subjective and objective indices measuring democracy. The index includes 182 states (2018), and historical data (1789-1900), and it covers a period from the year 1900 to the present day. The V-Dem system of measurement includes over 400 different components of democracy used to measure indices for five varieties of democracy (electoral, liberal, participatory, egalitarian, and deliberative). The electoral democracy index (consisting of two sub-indexes) is used as the foundation of the other varieties of indexes since there can be no democracy without the electoral component. The score for the electoral index is combined with the scores for the components measuring deliberation, equalitarianism, participation, and liberal constitutionalism, respectively (Lindberg et al., 2014)

*Hadenius' index* (1992) involves 132 countries measured at one time point, in 1988. The index has been used as the foundation for a democracy index by *Teorell and Hadenius*; the later-developed index contains the same methodology and dimensions. Both measures use subjective indices and include more aspects in their definition of democracy than the definition of electoral democracy. The scale of the indexes is 0–10, combining two main dimensions: elections (universal suffrage, and meaningful elections; openness, correctness, and effectiveness) and political freedoms (organizational freedom, freedom of expression, and freedom from political violence and oppression) (Hadenius, 1992; Hadenius & Teorell, 2005).

Finally, the *BTI* (the Bertelsmann Stiftung's Transformation Index) has been analyzing 129 states every other year since 2003. The distinction between democracies and autocracies is made using five dimensions, combining their scores into a scale of 0–10. The index uses subjective indices and a constitutional definition of democracy as the foundation of its measurement. The dimensions are stateness, political participation, rule of law, stability of democratic institutions, and political and social integration (BTI, 2018).

Table 13 provides a summary of the democracy measurements discussed previously.

Table 13. Overview of eight democracy measurements (self-compiled).

Index	Scale	Countries analysed	Time period	Dimensions of democracy	Democracy definition
Freedom House	1–7	195 states and 14 territories	1972–	Political rights Civil liberties	Thin
Vanhanen	0–100	187 states	1810–	Competition Participation	Thin
ACLP/DD	0–1	135 states	1950–2000 (ACLP) 1946–2008 (DD)	Chief executive is popularly elected Legislature is popularly elected Multiparty system Power alternation	Thin
Polity IV	+10–10	167 states	1800–	Competitiveness of executive recruitment Openness of executive recruitment Constraints on chief executive Competitiveness of political participation	Thin
EIU	1–10	165 states and 2 territories	2006–	Electoral process & pluralism Functioning of government Political participation Democratic political culture Civil liberties	Thick
V-Dem	1–0	182 states	1900– + historical data (1789–1900)	Indicators and indexes for each of the varieties of democracy: Electoral Liberal participatory Deliberative Egalitarian	Thick
Hadenius/ Hadenius & Teorell	0–10	132 states	1988	Elections (universal suffrage & meaningful elections) Political freedoms (organizational freedom, freedom of expression, political violence and oppression)	Thin
BTI Index	1–10	129 states	2003	Stateness Political participation Rule of law Stability of democratic institutions Political and social integration	Thick

Table 13, as a foundation for comparing the number of dimensions of democracy that the various indexes include highlights the clear difference between the indexes (see Table 1 for the discussion on the dimensions of democracy). The ACLP and DD indexes, and Vanhanen’s index use and measure the “thinnest” and most minimal conceptions of democracy. Vanhanen uses two

dimensions in his index, both belonging to the electoral regime category. The same can be said about the ACLP and the DD indexes, four dimensions are used but all concern the electoral regime. Thicker, yet still thin, measurements are Polity IV and the Hadenius indexes. They incorporate two of the main dimensions of the definition of liberal democracy. Freedom House's measurement is defined as a thin concept of democracy, mainly focusing on electoral democracy, but still includes many aspects of the thick definition in its two dimensions. In the political rights dimension, the electoral process, political pluralism and participation, and the functioning of governments are included. The civil liberties dimension includes freedom of expression and belief, associational and organizational rights, rule of law, personal autonomy, and individual rights. The BTI index also includes many aspects of the thicker concept of democracy, including political and social integration in their measurements. The thickest and most "liberal" measurements of democracy are the EUI and V-Dem; both indexes include all the dimensions in Table 13.

For the thesis, a thicker definition of democracy is preferred since it includes many different dimensions of democracy and components for the measurements of democracy. Since the democracy indexes are used to measure autocratization and democratic backsliding as well, a thicker definition is preferred. The aspects of minimal, or electoral, democracy are according to existing research (Treisman, 2023) often more resilient against autocratization or democratic regression compared to liberal democracy. Within the aspects of liberal democracy, a development towards autocracy is more likely to be detected more clearly (Lott & Croissant, 2024). Table 13 shows that the V-Dem and the EUI indexes are the thickest. Regarding the time period of analysis for the empirical parts of the thesis, the V-Dem index is chosen due to data availability. While the EUI index provides data from the year 2006 onwards, V-Dem provides data from the year 1900 which is needed as the analytical time frame for the thesis is between 1991 and 2021. V-Dem separates between five variates, or indices, of democracy which include democracy components, subcomponents, and indicators. The coding is based on existing sources (datasets or secondary sources) and on multiple ratings by country experts (minimum of five for each country-year for all indicators) (V-Dem, 2023, p. 11–13). The V-Dem liberal democracy index is composed of the *electoral democracy index* (including indicators of freedom of expression and alternative sources of information, freedom of association, suffrage, clean elections, and elected officials), and the *liberal component index* (including indicators of equality before the law and individual liberty, judicial constraints on the executive, and legislative constraints of the executive). V-Dem is a continuous measurement of democracy, conceptualizing the processes of autocratization and democratization as a gradual process with de facto declines, or increases, of institutional requirements for democracy

(Lott & Croissant, 2024). The democracy scores range from 1 (most democratic) to 0 (least democratic).

The outcome variable of interest is the level of democratic development. The data used is derived from the V-Dem liberal democracy index, based on both existing sources and country expert coding. The next section deals with the variable that is assumed to have an impact on the level of democratic development, that is, the level of NDRO membership.

#### 4.3.2. Level of NDRO membership

The current subchapter discusses the definition of an NDRO, the inclusion criteria for an NDRO according to the definition used, and which NDROs are included in the study. The subchapter also presents how the level of NDRO membership is calculated.

Regional organizations exist in all parts of the world and can be dominated and membered either by democratic states (DROs) or by non-democratic states (NDROs). According to Libman and Obydenkova (2019, p. 35), NDROs are defined as “organizations primarily composed of authoritarian member states (or at least having an authoritarian core country)”. Besides using the democracy score to analyze if it is connected to the number of NDRO memberships for each of the post-Soviet states, the democracy score is also used to determine if the post-Soviet ROs can be defined as NDROs. As the definition of NDROs includes a categorization of the dominating state and/or member states as “non-democratic”, the democracy scores are used to determine if the ROs of the region are in fact NDROs. The V-Dem democracy scores can be used to categorize political regimes into four groups: liberal democracy (above 0.8), electoral democracy (between 0.5 and 0.8), electoral autocracy (between 0.2 and 0.5), and closed autocracy (below 0.2). Hence, all states with a democracy score below 0.5 are considered to be autocracies (Luhmann et al., 2017; V-Dem autocracy report, 2021). Only a few post-Soviet states have reached the threshold for electoral democracy (a score over 0.5 points): Armenia after 2019, Georgia after 2014, and Moldova 2011–2015 and after 2020). Since 1991, other states have been categorized as closed autocracies (a score under 0.2): Azerbaijan, Kazakhstan, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan, and Uzbekistan. Belarus, Kyrgyzstan, and Ukraine have had varying political developments and have been categorized as both electoral and closed autocracies over the last decades. Russia has been considered a closed autocracy since 2002; between 1992 and 2001, it was considered an electoral autocracy (see Table 14).

Regarding the rules of inclusion and exclusion, inclusion depends on the existence of an active or terminated NDRO membership. Only the post-Soviet states that have had one or several NDRO memberships are included, while the states that have never been a member in any of the regional Russian-dominated NDROs are excluded (see Table 14).

Table 14. Average democracy level in the post-Soviet region between 1991 and 2021 as well as the existence of NDRO memberships.

Post-Soviet state	Existence of NDRO memberships	Average democracy level 1991–2020
<b>External actor: Russia</b>		0.18
<b>Included cases:</b>		
Armenia	Yes	0.27
Azerbaijan	Yes	0.08
Belarus	Yes	0.16
Georgia	Yes	0.33
Kazakhstan	Yes	0.13
Kyrgyzstan	Yes	0.22
Moldova	Yes	0.44
Tajikistan	Yes	0.07
Turkmenistan	Yes	0.03
Ukraine	Yes	0.29
Uzbekistan	Yes	0.04
<b>Excluded cases:</b>		
Estonia	No	0.80
Latvia	No	0.77
Lithuania	No	0.70

Note: According to the V-Dem liberal democracy index. The index ranges from 100 (most democratic) to 0 (least democratic). The three Baltic states are excluded from the analyses because none of them have been members of any Russian-dominated NDRO.

Since autocracy (closed or electoral) is the predominant regime type in the region, and Russia has been an autocracy since 1991, all the ROs in the region can be considered NDROs. The average democracy score per member per year for each state has never exceeded 0.5 points (see Table 14).

The post-Soviet states have memberships in various regional organizations, both democratic and non-democratic ROs, and in regional organizations tied to a specific area (such as the Black Sea). However, this thesis focuses on the regional organizations within the post-Soviet region, all of which were founded by Russia. In the post-Soviet region, there are ten non-democratic regional organizations dominated by Russia. Here, I use the phrase “dominated by Russia” to mean that Russia is a founding member of an RO. Since Russia is the regional hegemon and the largest state

in the region, Russia can be assumed to be the dominating actor when it comes to regional integration in the post-Soviet space.

A majority of these NDROs focus on economic cooperation, but some of them also have political and/or security aims. The two exclusions are the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) and the Union State of Belarus and Russia. The SCO is excluded as both Russia and China are the main players in that RO. The member states are concentrated in Central Asia, Asia, and the Middle East, excluding the potential membership of the European post-Soviet states included in the study. The Union State is excluded since Belarus is the only member state; hence, the Union State does not qualify as an RO according to most definitions, which argue that three member states are the minimum number of members.

Eight NDROs are included in this study (see Table 15): the Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS), the Eurasian Economic Community (EurAsEC), the Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO)<sup>1</sup>, the Eurasian Development Bank (EDB), the CIS Free Trade Area (CIS FTA), the Eurasian Customs Union (EACU), the Common/Eurasian Economic Space (CES/EES), and the Eurasian Economic Union (EAEU). The data used for the construction of the NDRO membership variable is secondary data (the webpages of the regional organizations, research articles, and open-source statistics over RO memberships). Using the data, the condition of NDRO membership is based on the number of memberships per year divided by all potential memberships per year. A further discussion regarding the calculation can be found in Chapter 5.

Table 15. Number of active NDROs in the post-Soviet region between 1991 and 2021

Time period	Active post-Soviet NDROs	Number of NDROs
1991	CIS	1
2000–2001	CIS, EurAsEC	2
2002–2005	CIS, EurAsEC, CSTO	3
2006–2009	CIS, EurAsEC, CSTO, EDB	4
2010	CIS, EurAsEC, CSTO, EDB, EACU	5
2011	CIS, EurAsEC, CSTO, EDB, EACU, CIS FTA	6
2012–2014	CIS, EurAsEC, CSTO, EDB, EACU, CIS FTA, CES/EES	7
2015–2021	CIS, CSTO, EDB, EACU, CIS FTA, CES/EES, EAEU	7

<sup>1</sup> The former Tashkent treaty, or the Collective Security Treaty, within the CIS framework did in 2002 become an independent regional organization, namely the CSTO (Libman, 2024).



In sum, the aim of the study is to evaluate if membership in Russian-dominated NDROs has affected the post-Soviet state's democratic development. Two of the NDROs, the Union State between Belarus and Russia and the SCO, are excluded based on the criteria for inclusion and exclusion. The eight remaining NDROs are included in the empirical analyses. The following subchapter focuses on the research methods used within the empirical parts of the thesis.

#### 4.4. How? Research strategy and research methods

This subchapter discusses, on a general level, the methods used in the empirical parts of the thesis. Both qualitative and quantitative approaches are briefly discussed, as well as the use of mixed methods. Further specific discussions on the methods used and the calibration of conditions are featured in the three different analytical chapters.

The schism between quantitative and qualitative methods and data has a long tradition. Conventionally, the two approaches have been viewed as belonging to different cultures (Tatarczyk, 2018). Quantitative methods and data are generally defined as using statistical methods to seek general descriptions and to test hypotheses. In contrast, qualitative methods and data do not rely on numbers or numerical measurements but focus on intensive analysis of text-based materials (Tatarczyk, 2018). While data from both approaches can be quantified, quantitative data is generally in the form of numbers and statistics, while qualitative data is in the form of written documents, observations, or objects (Castellan, 2010, p.7). On a general notion, qualitative approaches focus on exploring and understanding a phenomenon while quantitative approaches focus on examining relationships among variables to test a theory. Although there are differences between the two approaches, it is more useful to view them on a continuum rather than as opposites (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). Qualitative research questions tend to answer questions focusing on “how” and “what”. Quantitative research questions instead focus on questions based on questions aiming at answering questions of “Is there?” and “To what extent?” (Hesse-Biber, 2010).

“Mixed methods” are in the middle of the continuum between quantitative and qualitative research methods. Bryman (2012) defines mixed methods as “research that integrates quantitative and qualitative research within a single project”. This approach has been increasingly used in empirical studies (Mello, 2021, p. 21). Done right, mixed-method designs can be stronger compared to designs relying on a single method. The validity of the study can be increased when several methods are used for the expansion of understanding via different perspectives of a phenomenon or a

research result (Morse & Niehaus, 2009). There are many advantages of mixed methods. At least two advantages are useful for cross-validation: triangulation and complementarity (Hesse-Biber, 2010). Triangulation is often associated with greater validity and credibility since mixed methods use several methods to examine the same dimensions and can bring about convergence and enhance the credibility of the findings. Complementarity is an advantage since the use of several methods can contribute to a fuller understanding of the research problem of interest and the results of the study (Hesse-Biber, 2010). Another advantage is the possibility of exploration; a different method can be used with the aim of answering a research question, being generated by another. Finally, with the use of mixed methods, different research questions can be answered by different research methods (Bryman, 2012).

Drawing on the advantages of using mixed methods, the three research questions in this thesis build on each other and are answered using different empirical methods. The data used within the empirical parts of the thesis are both qualitative and quantitative. The data used in the first empirical analysis are quantitative secondary data, drawn from the V-Dem database and statistics from indexes on regional organizations and their members. The second empirical analysis employs qualitative methods through exploratory case studies using process tracing. The final analysis combines results from the previous analyses within a fuzzy-set qualitative comparative analysis (fsQCA). QCA, using the qualitative study of cases and quantitative analytical procedures, is considered a mixed-method approach (Mello, 2021, p. 21). However, QCA is generally combined with statistical analyses or case studies within cross-case or within-case analyses using process tracing (Mello, 2021, p.22). In that sense, QCA is a mixed methods approach in several aspects.

The next part of the chapter presents the research methods used for each of the analyses. Each research method is discussed on a general level; further specific discussions regarding them are included within the separate analytical chapters.

#### 4.4.1. Analysis 1: Longitudinal descriptive statistics

The first research question, is there an association between membership in Russian-dominated NDROs and the level of democracy within the included post-Soviet states, is analyzed using descriptive statistics to test the theory of authoritarian regionalism. The assumption is that the level of NDRO membership is either positively or negatively associated with the level of democracy in the post-Soviet states. Descriptive analysis is a form of statistical analysis in which comprehension is aided by using graphical features to show features of particular interest in the data used (Coccia

& Benati, 2018). Descriptive statistics, by identifying possible explanatory ideas, can be used as a starting point for further analyses. These explanatory ideas can lead to observed associations between variables using statistical methods (Toschkov, 2016).

The level of NDRO membership (calculated by dividing the number of memberships with the possible number of memberships in NDROs) among the included post-Soviet states per year between 1991 and 2021 is analyzed together with the democracy level (using the V-Dem liberal democracy index) of the states during the same time period. Graphs are used to describe the development of the two variables over time to establish if any association between them exists, and if any patterns in the region emerge. The presumed association is that states with a higher level of NDRO membership have a lower democracy level and that states with a lower level of NDRO membership have a higher democracy level.

#### 4.4.2. Analysis 2: Exploratory case studies using process tracing and cross-case analysis

Assuming that an association between NDRO membership and democracy levels exists regarding the post-Soviet states, the second research question seeks to analyze if there are any complementary factors, besides NDRO membership levels, possibly impacting the democratic development in the included states. As previous research has concluded, a single isolated factor or variable is seldom deemed to be enough to create a democratization or autocratization process.

The second analysis consists of two parts. The first part uses exploratory case studies in order to explore the existence of any complementary factors for the varying democratic development in the post-Soviet region, drawing on mechanisms found in the literature on democratization. Eleven chronological case studies have been conducted on each of the included post-Soviet states from before and after their respective independences. Based on the case studies, state-specific characteristics, or factors, are identified and turned into corresponding variables. The search for complementary variables is mainly based on the theoretical framework of the thesis. Hence, the search focuses on factors related to linkage, and leverage, as well as on the influence of external and domestic actors, but other factors are also considered. The second part consists of a cross-case comparative analysis of the factors identified within the case studies during four different time periods. The methods of the case studies and cross-case comparative analysis are discussed below.

According to Gerring (2017, p. 20), a case study can be understood as “the intense study of a single case where the purpose of the study is – at least in part – to shed light on a larger class of cases (a

population)”. If many cases are included, the case study can be defined as cross-case. The level of intensity is related to the number of included cases, and fewer cases lead to a more intense analysis, while more cases result in a less intense study (Gerring, 2017). Cross-case studies, while being less intense, add other advantages. Cross-case studies are more representative of the population compared to a single case study, affecting the external validity (Gerring, 2017). Within the dimension of space, case studies can be used for cross-sectional analysis or for analyzing comparable cases. The time dimension can include the analysis of time series or repeated cross-sectional analyses either to analyze regular intervals or periods (for example, before and after a certain event). The spatial-temporal approach combines the dimensions of time (periods or intervals) and space (multiple case studies) in order to use pooled time series of qualitative comparative analysis (QCA) as an analysis method (Pennings et al., 2011). Depending on the number of cases included, the application of the temporal element will differ (see Table 16).

Table 16. The possibility for temporal elements according to comparative approaches of one, few, or many cases (based on Anckar et al., 2012, p. 301).

Number of cases	Number of time periods		
	One	Few	Many
One	Traditional case study		Traditional case study over time
Few	Focused study	Focused study over time (relevant time points)	
Many	Statistical study		Statistical study over time

As Table 16 shows, the traditional case study analyzes one case at one point in time, but it can also involve an analysis across multiple time periods. A traditional case study can create a deeper analysis at a certain point in time but lacks the ability to generalize. A case study over time can be used to understand how developments within a case have evolved, as well as their causes and effects. A focused study with a few included cases can also be conducted during a single period of time, or during a selected number of points in time. A focused study of a few cases can reveal associations between variables but does not give the ability to study processes or developments, which is a disadvantage within comparative studies. When performing focused studies over time, the level of generalization increases compared to studies during a single point in time. Within this kind of comparison, relevant cases and time periods are selected and can be used to study development and change within a selected number of cases during relevant periods of time (Anckar et al., 2013).

Statistical analyses including many cases can also be performed either at a single point in time or over time. Studies using statistical methods applied to one time period have the ability to produce high spatial generalization since many cases are analyzed, but development over time cannot be

observed and therefore not the causal direction either. Statistical analyses over time are the most demanding method but the advantage is that the results can be generalized over time and space. The disadvantages are that a model including few, but relevant variables, demands the use of advanced statistical methods of analysis as well as data availability for many cases and time periods (Anckar et al. 2013).

Cross-case comparative analysis builds on the state-specific characteristics discovered within case studies. These factors are turned into variables and compared between the included states as well as between the five different groups of states. While the exploratory case studies analyze the developments within the states over three decades, four points in time are selected within the cross-case analysis as highly relevant as the basis for the third analysis (1995, 2005, 2015, and 2021). The selection of these points in time is relevant to the development of post-Soviet regionalism and is further discussed in Chapter 7, in the subchapter on the cross-case analysis, as is the scoring system for the included variables.

The second analysis also includes elements of process tracing, analyzing the chronological development of each state. Process tracing combined with comparative case studies results in more powerful interferences compared to single case studies (Bennett & Checkel, 2015, p. 29). The definition of process tracing is according to Bennett and Checkel (2015, p. 7) “the analysis of evidence on processes, sequences, and conjunctures of events within a case for the purpose of either developing or testing hypotheses about causal mechanisms that might causally explain the case”. In short, process tracing is a key technique for capturing causal mechanisms in action. In process tracing, multiple types of evidence (or triggering events) are used for the verification of inference (for example  $X1 \rightarrow X2 \rightarrow X3 \rightarrow Y$ ) (Gerring 2017, p. 173). Used within comparative analyses, process tracing can consist of two steps: one “within-case” and one “between-case” (Bengtsson & Ruonavaara, 2017 p. 48). First, characteristics of each case as well as critical junctures which might have contributed to the outcome of interest are identified. Second, the results from each within-case analysis are compared with all of the included cases (Bengtsson & Ruonavaara, 2017).

Exploratory case studies using process tracing can be employed before a QCA to explore potential conditions and gain a better understanding of the included cases (Mello, 2021, p.22-23). The final analysis includes the condition of NDRO membership along with the variables found within the second analysis in a fuzzy-set QCA analysis.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> In the first and second analysis, the term “variable” is used, in the vocabulary of QCA the term “condition” is used (see Rutten & Robinson 2022).

#### 4.4.3. Analysis 3: Fuzzy-set QCA

The third analysis brings all the conditions from the two previous analyses together for the purpose of answering the third research question. To establish combinations with other conditions, and under which circumstances NDRO membership influences democratic development, a fuzzy-set QCA is used as the analytical tool.

Thomann and Maggetti (2020, p. 358) claim that QCA studies establish inference by “learning about facts we do not know by using the facts we do know”. QCA is a multimethod approach that can integrate both quantitative and qualitative components (Thomann & Maggetti 2020). The technique reduces complexity by reducing cases to combinations of factors that are affecting an outcome (Rihoux & Ragin, 2009). The method is rooted in Boolean algebra and allows for multiple conjunctural causation, suitable for testing hypotheses or theories (Ragin & Rubinson, 2009). QCA recognizes that an outcome often is affected by different factors in combination with each other and can reveal groups and similarities in cases that are not visible in the raw data (Mello, 2021). Hence, QCA is a suitable technique for the analysis of factors affecting democratic development since previous studies have concluded that a single cause cannot effectively explain the cases for democratization or autocratization. The output of the analysis also produces necessary or sufficient conditions for the outcome of interest, as well as several pathways for solutions based on the conditions and the outcome (Mello, 2021).

QCA allows for both the analysis of the outcome of interest (in this case a non-democratic development) and the reverse outcome (in this case a more democratic development). This fact allows for the analysis of conditions resulting in solutions and pathways for both a non-democratic and a democratic outcome, which is relevant for the thesis due to the varying democratic developments in the post-Soviet region. A discussion on the use of a fuzzy-set QCA, the calibration of sets, conditions, and outcomes, and the advantages and disadvantages of the method are included in Chapter 7.

### 4.5. Summary

The empirical part of the thesis aims to answer three research questions using three different comparative methods. The advantage of using the comparative approach is that through comparison, patterns, relationships, and inferences can become evident, which in turn increases

the existing knowledge of a specific phenomenon or helps test and develop theories. The main research problem and the research questions imply that both a cross-sectional (between countries) and longitudinal (developments over time) approach are needed, hence the use of a comparative research design. Since the research interest is focused on the post-Soviet region, as many post-Soviet states as possible are included. The inclusion criterion for case selection was membership in an NDRO between 1991 and 2021. Eleven states, all of which have, or have had, membership in a Russian-dominated NDRO, are included; this excludes the three Baltic states from the analyses. The included states have had both a varying degree of NDRO membership and a varying degree of democratic development, and the variation in both variables enables a comparison between the states. According to the number of the included states, the research design focuses on the comparison of “few countries”, which gives the results of a medium level of complexity and generalization.

The time period used within the analyses is as long as possible since part of the research interest focuses on the development and association between the level of NDRO membership and democratic development over time. The chosen time period spans from 1991, marking the end of the Soviet Union and the beginning of independence for the post-Soviet states, to 2021, covering three decades. The element of time (1991 to 2021) is used to study developments within the included states and increase the internal validity and generalization of the study. The external validity is strengthened by the inclusion of almost all of the post-Soviet states; hence, generalizations can, in theory, be made within that specific region across the included period of time. Table 17 summarizes the methods used per research question as well as the variables, or conditions, included in the analyses.

Table 17. Summary of the comparative methods used for the empirical analyses.

Research question	Time period	Comparative method
RQ1: Association between NDRO and democracy level?	1991–2021	Longitudinal descriptive analysis
RQ2: Apart from NDRO membership levels, which complementary factors related to the varying democratic development can be identified within the post-Soviet region?	1995, 2005, 2015, 2021	Exploratory case studies over time with process tracing and cross-case analysis
RQ3: In what combinations with other variables, and under which circumstances, can NDRO membership bring about democracy respectively autocracy?	1995, 2005, 2015, 2021	Longitudinal fuzzy-set QCA

The objective of the first research question is to assess the association between membership in Russian-dominated NDROs and democratic development over time. The method used is longitudinal descriptive analysis. The first analysis employs a deductive framework, assuming that there is a relationship between NDRO membership and democratic development within the included post-Soviet states. The objective of the second research question is to identify complementary factors related to the varying democratic development of the region. The assumption is that other factors have also had an effect on the varying democratic development in the region. This question is explored through both a deductive and inductive approach. First, by using exploratory case studies to identify state-specific and group-specific characteristics, within and between the groups of post-Soviet states. These factors are grouped and transformed into corresponding variables, based on the theoretical framework, then compared and scored. The objective of the third and final research question is to assess in what combinations with other variables and under which circumstances NDRO membership has mattered in the democratic development of the post-Soviet states. This question employs a deductive approach, using a longitudinal fuzzy-set qualitative comparative analysis (fsQCA), which includes five conditions at four points in time. The analysis determines which conditions, either present or absent, alone or in combination with other conditions, have influenced democratic development in the included post-Soviet states over time.

The next three chapters include three separate comparative analyses aiming to answer the three research questions, starting with the analysis of the association between the level of NDRO membership and the level of democratic development.



## Chapter 5. Longitudinal descriptive analysis

The first of the three analytic chapters deals with the first research question of the study, that is, is there an association between NDRO membership levels and democracy levels in the included post-Soviet states? The descriptive analysis results in different patterns of the development of NDRO membership levels and democracy levels in the post-Soviet region between 1991 and 2021 and functions as both a separate analysis and a basis for further empirical analyses. The chapter includes a short presentation of the included variables, the method used in the analysis, as well as graphs showing the relationship between the two variables over time in the eleven included post-Soviet states followed by a summary of the results.

### 5.1. Introduction

Based on the existing literature on the effects of external actors and their use of non-democratic regional organizations as tools of influence, two possible associations exist between the two variables (Libman & Obydenkova, 2019). The first possibility is that (many) membership(s) in these organizations do affect the democratic development in member states since they are exposed to non-democratic influence via regional cooperation. The external influence is also increased by a more extensive linkage and leverage between the external actor and the target states since a denser regional cooperation exists between the states. This, in turn, could lead to a more non-democratic development, or to continuing the autocratic status quo. Hence, a high NDRO membership level combined with a low democracy level should produce autocracy.

The other option is that having few, or no, membership(s) in NDROs does not lead to further autocratization in the target states. If no, or only a few, membership(s) exists, the states are not exposed to non-democratic influence, and the levels of linkage and leverage are expected to be lower since the level of regional cooperation is at a low level. This would possibly lead to no further autocratization and more democratic development (depending on the level of regional cooperation with democratic actors). Hence, low levels of NDRO membership combined with high levels of democracy should lead to more democratic development or at least prevent a shift towards autocracy. Table 18 summarizes the assumed association between the variables.

Table 18. The assumed association between NDRO membership level and democracy level, as well as the assumed outcome.

NDRO membership level		Democracy level	
	High		Low
High			Autocratic increase or Autocratic consolidation
Low	Democratic increase or No autocratic consolidation		

To answer the first research question, a descriptive analysis using graphs is employed, illustrating the development of NDRO membership levels and democracy levels over time within the post-Soviet region. The descriptive analysis examines the relationship between the two variables from 1991 to 2021. The analysis aims to reveal any visible pattern based on the assumptions of authoritarian regionalism. The scoring of the variables is presented in the following subchapter.

## 5.2. NDRO membership level and democracy level

For a description, and comparison, of the development of NDRO membership levels and democracy levels the variables need to be given numeric values or given scores according to the existing indexes. As the included variables are more thoroughly presented in Subchapter 4.3, a summary is presented next.

### 5.2.1. NDRO membership level

As already concluded in Section 4.3.2, the included eight (8) Russian-dominated regional organizations can all be labeled NDROs due to the Russian democracy score (between 1992 and 2001 an electoral autocracy and since then a closed autocracy). The NDRO membership level is calculated by counting the number of memberships each state holds per year and dividing that by the total number of potential memberships for each year. For example, in 2012 there were seven (7) active NDROs in the region, Armenia was a member of four (4) of those, giving Armenia in 2012 a score of 0.57 (4 divided by 7). The NDRO score ranges from 1 (full membership, member of all active ROs) to 0 (no membership, not member of any active NDROs).

The number of NDROs in the region has increased since the beginning of the 1990s, affecting the calculation of the NDRO membership level variable. Between 1991 and 2000, the CIS was the only

active NDRO in the post-Soviet region. This fact makes the graphs look a bit misleading since membership in the CIS during the 1990s gives a full NDRO score. The CIS was established in 1991 as an organization to manage the collapse of the Soviet Union, and most of the post-Soviet states were members from the start. It was with the establishment of EurAsEC in 2000 that post-Soviet regionalism began to develop further, and over the past two decades, NDROs have emerged in the region. The reason for including the 1990s in this study is to capture the regional developments in the states during the first decade following the fall of the Soviet Union.

For the analysis, the NDRO membership level is categorized as being either high or low. High NDRO membership levels are assigned to states with an average membership rate above 50 percent, meaning they are members of more than half of the active NDROs during that period. Low NDRO membership levels are assigned to states with less than 50 percent membership in the possible and active NDROs.

### 5.2.2. Democracy level

The democracy level is measured according to the V-Dem liberal democracy index. This index is composed of the *electoral democracy index* and the *liberal component index*. The democracy scores range from 1 (most democratic) to 0 (least democratic). The scores can also be used to categorize political regimes (see Figure 1): liberal democracy (above 0.8), electoral democracy (between 0.5 and 0.8), electoral autocracy (between 0.2 and 0.5), and closed autocracy (below 0.2). Hence, all states with a democracy score below 0.5 are considered autocracies (Luhmann et al., 2017; V-Dem autocracy report, 2021). For the descriptive analysis, the democracy scores for each state are categorized as either high or low. Since the general democracy level in the post-Soviet region is low, it affects the cut-off point for the category of high democracy.

According to the V-Dem categorization, a state is an electoral autocracy if its democracy score is between 0.2 and 0.5. Only a few post-Soviet states have reached the threshold for electoral democracy (a score of over 0.5 points): Armenia after 2019, Georgia after 2014, and Moldova between 2011 and 2015 and after 2020. Considering the relatively short period of independence of the post-Soviet states, as well as the large transitional problems within the area according to previous literature, I have chosen to lower the threshold for the category of high democracy to over 0.30. High democracy levels in the post-Soviet region are not necessarily considered high democracy levels elsewhere.

5.3. Longitudinal descriptive analysis: the development of NDRO membership levels and democracy levels over time

To analyze the NDRO membership level (NDRO) and the democratic level (DEM) between 1991 and 2021, I have used the V-Dem liberal democracy index and counted the number of memberships in Russian-dominated NDROs for each of the post-Soviet states per year to create country-specific graphs (for more details, see Appendix C). Both the NDRO membership score and the democracy score were then calculated using a moving average, with a three-year interval, to smooth out fluctuations and better see the trends in the developments over time. The aim of the first analysis is solely to describe, not to explain, trends and fluctuations of the two included variables.

Five different groups can be distinguished from the state-specific graphs. The first group includes Belarus and Kazakhstan, which have consistently maintained high NDRO membership levels and autocratic development or have stayed autocratic since independence. The second group includes states that have had low or declining NDRO membership levels along with democratic developments over time: Moldova, Georgia, and Ukraine. The third group includes Armenia and Kyrgyzstan, which have had fluctuating levels of both NDRO and democracy during the last three decades. The fourth group includes states with a low number of NDRO memberships or a decrease in them, and that have experienced autocratic development or remained stable autocracies since the early 1990s: Azerbaijan, Turkmenistan, and Uzbekistan. The last group includes Tajikistan which has had a medium NDRO membership level and a low democracy level over time. The five overall patterns revealed from analyzing these developments over a long period of time can be seen in Table 19.

Table 19. Groups of post-Soviet states regarding the overall development of NDRO and democracy levels between 1991 and 2021.

Group	States included
1: High NDRO and low DEM	Belarus, Kazakhstan
2: Low NDRO and high DEM	Moldova, Georgia, and Ukraine
3. Fluctuating levels of both variables	Armenia and Kyrgyzstan
4. Medium NDRO and low DEM	Tajikistan
5: Low NDRO and low DEM	Azerbaijan, Uzbekistan, and Turkmenistan

Two of the groups fit in the “ideal” types based on the existing theories on authoritarian regionalism: group one (Belarus and Kazakhstan = autocratic development and large number of NDRO memberships) and group two (Ukraine, Moldova, and Georgia = democratic development

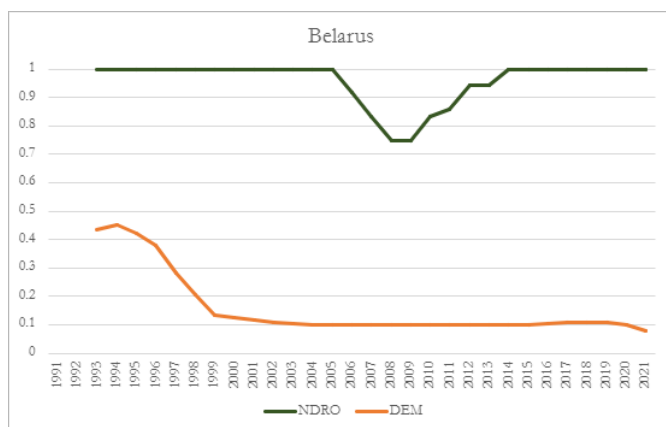
and low number of NDRO memberships). According to the theories in the existing literature, these two groups fit the theoretical framework. If the number of NDRO memberships is at a high level, then the level of autocracy also should be at a higher level as with Belarus and Kazakhstan. Conversely, if the level of autocracy is at a higher level, then the number of NDRO memberships also should be at a higher level. In the case of Georgia, Moldova, and Ukraine, if the number of NDRO memberships is at a low level, then the level of democracy should be at a higher level.

The fourth group, which includes Tajikistan, is similar to the first group but has experienced fluctuations and decreases in NDRO membership levels, resulting in an overall medium NDRO membership level. The fifth group (Azerbaijan, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan, and Uzbekistan) does not fit into this pattern when analyzing the development over time. They all have a (status quo) higher level of autocracy combined with a decreasing or low number of NDRO memberships. The third group, consisting of Armenia and Kyrgyzstan, does not fit the pattern either. These states have had both decreases and increases in both democracy levels and NDRO membership levels during the last three decades. They have at certain points in time, moved in the opposite direction of what theory predicts: during periods of higher democracy levels, they have also had higher levels of NDRO memberships.

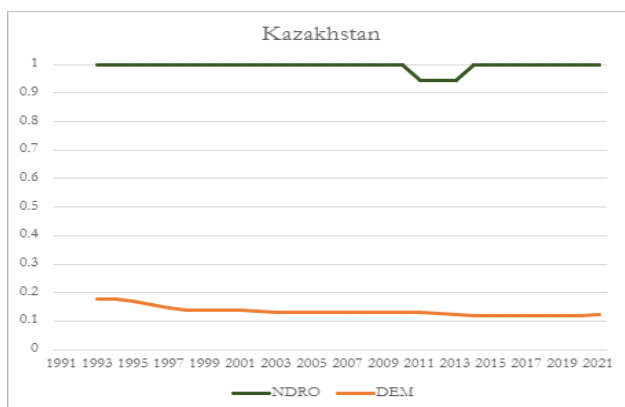
The next sections examine the graphs regarding the development of NDRO membership levels and democracy levels in the included post-Soviet states within their assigned groups according to Table 19.

#### 5.3.1. Belarus and Kazakhstan

According to the theories of authoritarian regionalism, there should exist an association between high NDRO membership levels and low democracy levels. Within the post-Soviet region, Belarus and Kazakhstan fit these assumptions regarding the direction of the association. The graphs for both states (Graphs 1 and 2) are presented below.



Graph 1. Country-specific graph of the development of NDRO membership and democracy level 1991–2021: Belarus



Graph 2. Country-specific graph of the development of NDRO membership and democracy level 1991–2021: Kazakhstan

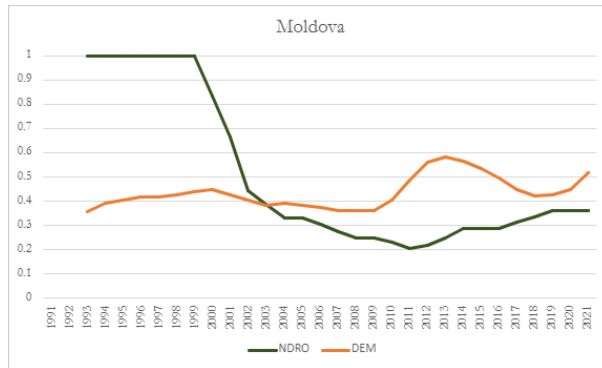
In the Belarusian case, an (almost) full NDRO membership score during the whole period has been combined with a declining democratic development with a long period of an autocratic status quo (see Graph 1). This corresponds to the theoretical claims that many memberships in NDROs are associated with more autocratic development. As one of the founding states of several of the Russian-dominated regional NDROs, Belarus has consistently had high NDRO membership levels since the beginning of the 1990s. Belarus has been a member of the CIS, EurAsEC, CSTO, EACU, CES, and EAEU since each of these regional organizations was established. The dip in the NDRO membership line in the graph represents the Belarusian later entry into the EDB and the CIS FTA. Out of 31 years, Belarus has been a member of all active NDROs for 26 years making Belarus one

of the most active states within the regional NDROs. Democratic development in Belarus has experienced a strong negative trend since the mid-1990s. During the first years of independence, the Belarusian democracy score was relatively high (between 0.34 and 0.46). Between 1996 and 1997, the democracy score dropped significantly from 0.34 to 0.14. Since 1997, the democracy score has been decreasing, reaching its lowest point of 0.04 in 2021.

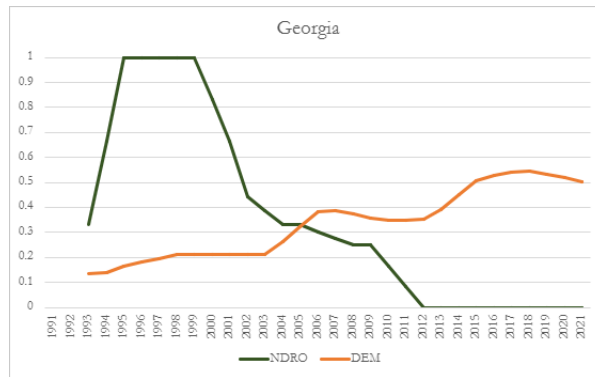
Like Belarus, Kazakhstan has a full NDRO membership score during the whole period combined with status quo autocracy (see Graph 2). This corresponds to the theoretical claims that many memberships in NDROs are associated with a more autocratic development. Alongside Russia and Belarus, Kazakhstan has been a founding member of a large part of the regional NDROs. The only dip in the graph represents when Kazakhstan did not join the CIS FTA in its first active year and joined the next year instead. In all other years, Kazakhstan has been a member from the start in all possible Russian-dominated NDROs in the post-Soviet region. The democratic development in Kazakhstan has maintained a consistently high level of autocracy since gaining independence. The highest democracy score of Kazakhstan was 0.18, reached in 1992 and 1993.

#### 5.3.2. Moldova, Georgia, and Ukraine

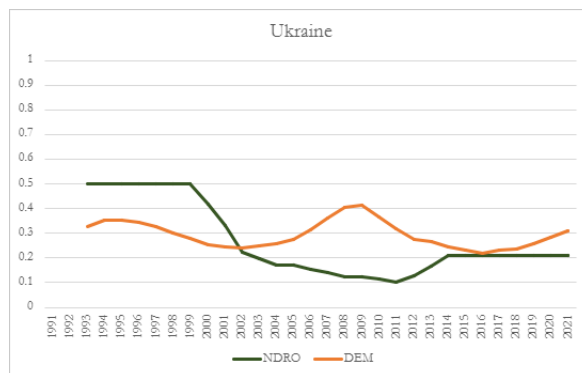
Low NDRO membership levels combined with high democracy scores should, on the other hand, be associated with a more democratic, or at least not more autocratic, development according to the literature on authoritarian regionalism. Three post-Soviet states can be categorized into this group: Georgia, Moldova, and Ukraine. The graphs for these states (Graphs 3, 4, and 5) are presented below.



Graph 3. Country-specific graph of the development of NDRO membership and democracy level 1991–2021: Moldova



Graph 4. Country-specific graph of the development of NDRO membership and democracy level 1991–2021: Georgia



Graph 5. Country-specific graph of the development NDRO membership and democracy level 1991–2021: Ukraine



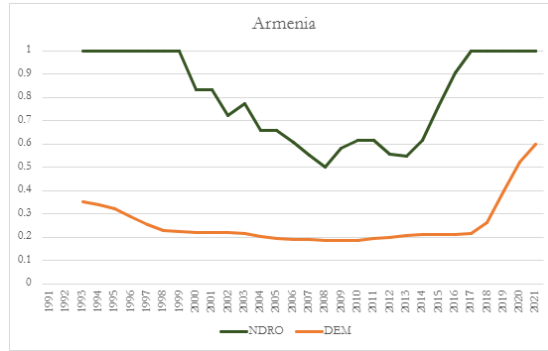
In Moldova, a low NDRO membership level combined with increasing democratic development has been the pattern since the 1990s (see Graph 3). This corresponds to the theoretical claims that having a few or no NDRO membership(s) should be associated with more democratic development. Similar to the large majority of the post-Soviet states, Moldova joined the CIS in 1991. Until 2012, when Moldova joined the CIS Free Trade Area (FTA), the CIS was the only NDRO in which Moldova had membership. However, in 2017, Moldova was granted observer status within the EAEU. The democratic development of Moldova has steadily increased since its independence, and the state's democracy score has never fallen below 0.31 (in 1991).

Also in Georgia, a low NDRO membership level combined with an increasing democratic development has been the developmental pattern (see Graph 4). Likewise, the Georgian case corresponds to the theoretical claims that having a few or no NDRO membership(s) should be associated with a more democratic development. Georgia joined the CIS in 1993 and held that membership until 2009 when the membership was terminated after the Russo-Georgian war of 2008. Since then, Georgia has not had a single membership in any of the Russian-dominated NDROs. Georgia has had slower democratic development than Moldova, not reaching a score of over 0.30 until 2004. Since the mid-2000s, the Georgian democracy score has been at a steady level between 0.34 and 0.55.

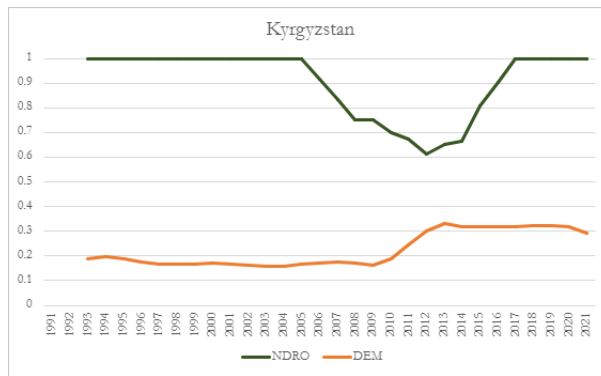
Similar to the other states of the second group of post-Soviet states, Ukraine has combined a low NDRO membership level with an increasing democratic development (see Graph 5). Ukraine did not ratify the CIS agreement in 1991 but had the status of an unassociated member between 1991 and 2019 when the membership was terminated by Ukraine. Although Ukraine was never a full member of the CIS, it joined the CIS Free Trade Area (FTA) in 2012 and has maintained that membership. Compared to Moldova and Georgia, the Ukrainian democratic development has been slower but remained at a score between 0.21 and 0.42.

### 5.3.3. Armenia and Kyrgyzstan

Armenia and Kyrgyzstan are part of the post-Soviet states that show no clear association between the level of NDRO membership and democracy level (see Graphs 6 and 7). They both experienced a long period of an autocratic status quo before a democratic increase during the last decade. They have also had periods of both high and medium levels of NDRO membership.



Graph 6. Country-specific graph of the development of NDRO membership and democracy level 1991–2021: Armenia



Graph 7. Country-specific graph of the development of NDRO membership and democracy level 1991–2021: Kyrgyzstan

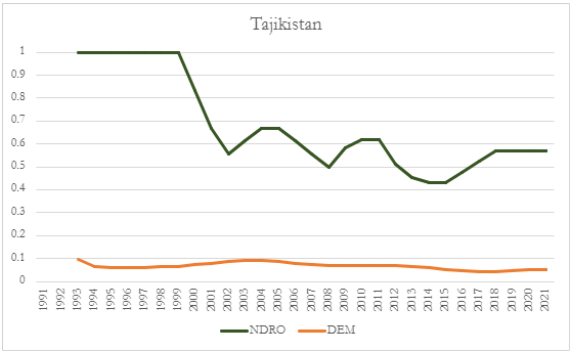
Generally, Armenia has had both decreasing and increasing NDRO membership levels combined with an autocratic status quo for a long period of time and some democratic developments (see Graph 6). Overall, Armenia has had many NDRO memberships since the 1990s. Armenia joined the CIS, CSTO, and the EAEU from the outset of these organizations. Armenia also joined the EDB, EACU, CIS FTA, and the CES a few years after their establishment. The only NDRO that Armenia never has been a member of is the EurAsEC. The democratic development in the early years after independence was rather high in Armenia with a score of 0.36 in 1991. After 1995, the scores steadily decreased until 2019 when the democracy score reached 0.63. Armenia has hence had a fluctuating democratic development combined with many NDRO memberships but with many late entries into these organizations.

Kyrgyzstan has followed a similar pattern with fluctuating levels of both variables (see Graph 7). The state has had full membership in the CIS, EurAsEC, CSTO, and the EAEU since the

beginning of these organizations. Kyrgyzstan later joined the EDB, EACU, CIS FTA, and the CES, affecting the NDRO membership trend on the graph. The democracy scores of Kyrgyzstan remained at a relatively steady level, just below a score of 0.20, until 2011 when the score increased and has remained at a higher level since then. Kyrgyz NDRO membership and democracy levels follow the same pattern as Armenia's, with a fluctuating democracy level combined with many memberships, but with late entries into these organizations.

5.3.4. Tajikistan

The Tajik case combines a medium level of NDRO membership with low democratic development (see Graph 8), which is not enough to place the state in group one (with Belarus and Kazakhstan) or group five (with Azerbaijan, Uzbekistan, and Turkmenistan).

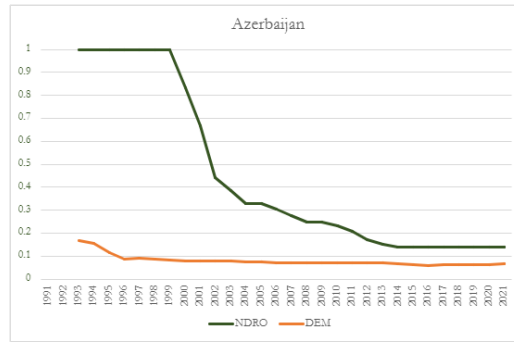


Graph 8. Country-specific graph of the development of NDRO membership and democracy level 1991–2021: Tajikistan

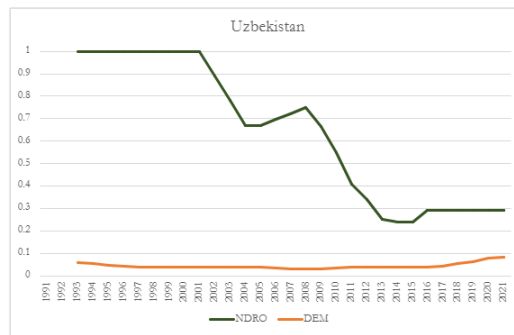
Tajikistan joined the CIS and the CSTO from the outset of these organizations and joined other NDROs (EDB, EACU, CIS FTA) later on. Tajikistan has not been a member of the EurAsEC, the EACU, the CES, or the EAEU. The democratic development of Tajikistan has maintained a high autocratic level since the independence of the state.

5.3.5. Azerbaijan, Uzbekistan, and Turkmenistan

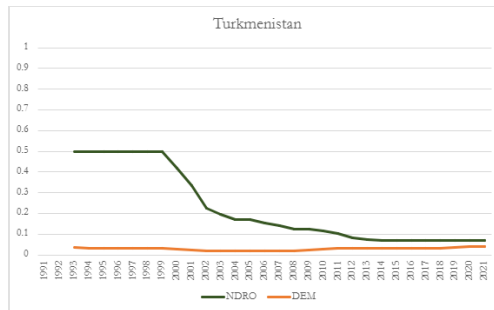
The last group of post-Soviet states are the states that have had low levels of both NDRO membership and democracy as their general pattern over the last three decades (see Graphs 9, 10, and 11). None of these states fit the theoretical assumptions of authoritarian regionalism.



Graph 9. Country-specific graph of the development of NDRO membership and democracy level 1991–2021: Azerbaijan



Graph 10. Country-specific graph of the development of NDRO membership and democracy level 1991–2021: Uzbekistan



Graph 11. Country-specific graph of the development of NDRO membership and democracy level 1991–2021: Turkmenistan

Azerbaijan has had low NDRO membership levels while continuing to be a highly autocratic state (see Graph 9). With only one NDRO membership, in the CIS since 1991, the state has been highly non-active within the post-Soviet regional organizations. As for democratic development,

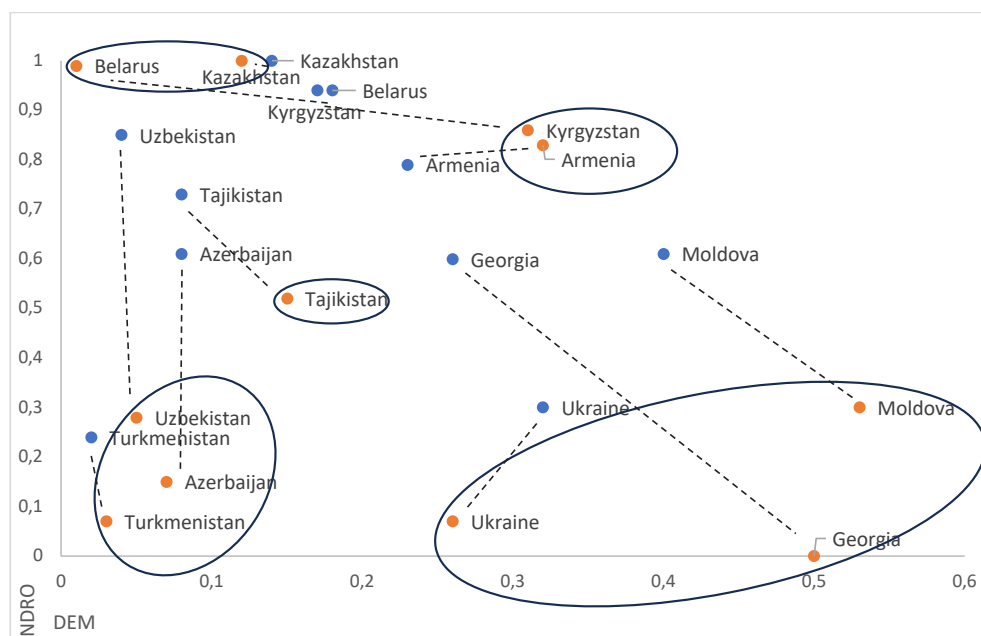
Azerbaijan has remained a highly autocratic state since independence with an average democracy score of below 0.10.

Uzbekistan has had a low NDRO membership level, which was further decreased by the termination of several memberships, combined with a highly autocratic development (see Graph 10). Uzbekistan joined the CIS in 1991 and still holds that membership. The state terminated its membership in EurAsEC in 2008 and in CSTO in 2012 while joining the CIS FTA later, in 2014. The democracy scores of Uzbekistan have never reached over 0.10, making Uzbekistan a highly autocratic state.

Of all the states in the fifth group, Turkmenistan has the lowest levels of both NDRO membership and democratic development (see Graph 11). Turkmenistan did not ratify the CIS charter but has remained an associate member of the organization since 1991. Turkmenistan's only NDRO membership is its associate membership in the CIS. Turkmenistan is also the most autocratic state in the post-Soviet region, as its highest democracy score over a three-decade period is 0.05 (1991).

## 5.4. Summary and conclusion

As illustrated in the longitudinal graphs for each state, the levels of NDRO membership levels and democracy levels have evolved over the time period under analysis. This development is depicted in Graph 12, which compares the mean values of both NDRO membership and democracy scores for each state across two distinct periods, 1993–2009 and 2010–2021. From 1993 to 2009, the regional environment was in a phase of exploration regarding its post-independence trajectories, while the concept of post-Soviet regionalism was still in the early stages of development. By 2010, after two decades of independence, the post-Soviet states began to see a more pronounced emergence and evolution of post-Soviet regionalism.



Graph 12. Development of the levels of NDRO memberships and democratic development over time in the post-Soviet states.

Note: Blue dots represent the mean value for the included variables between 1993 and 2009, orange dots represent the mean value for the included variables between 2010 and 2021.

Graph 12 shows the five groups of states and highlights the changes observed between the two periods. Specifically, the data reveal that Belarus and Kazakhstan exhibited minimal change between the two time periods. In contrast, Moldova and Georgia experienced a decline in NDRO membership accompanied by an increase in their democracy scores, while Ukraine witnessed decreases in both variables. Armenia and Kyrgyzstan saw improvements in their democratic levels; however, their NDRO membership levels developed in opposite directions. Tajikistan also had an increase in democratic levels, coupled with a reduction in NDRO membership. Notably, the last three states mentioned maintained significantly non-democratic levels while simultaneously decreasing their number of NDRO memberships.

The descriptive analysis aims to answer the first research question of the thesis, is there an association between NDRO membership levels and the level of democratic development among the included post-Soviet states? The analysis reveals patterns within the post-Soviet region, showing an association between NDRO membership level and democratic development in two of the five groups (see Table 20).

Table 20. Summary of the findings from the longitudinal descriptive analysis.

<b>RQ1: Is there an association between the level of NDRO memberships and the level of democratic development among the included post-Soviet states?</b>	
<b>Yes</b>	High NDRO + low DEM: Belarus and Kazakhstan
	Low NDRO + high DEM: Moldova, Georgia, and Ukraine
<b>No</b>	Fluctuating levels of NDRO and DEM: Armenia and Kyrgyzstan
	Medium NDRO + low DEM: Tadjikistan
	Low NDRO + low DEM: Azerbaijan, Uzbekistan, and Turkmenistan

According to existing literature on authoritarian regionalism, a high level of membership in NDROs is expected to be associated with lower levels of democratic development. Specifically, autocratic states tend to have more NDRO memberships than their democratic counterparts. This pattern is partly evident in the post-Soviet region. Both Belarus and Kazakhstan maintained consistently high NDRO membership levels coupled with a highly autocratic development. Conversely, a lower incidence of NDRO memberships is typically associated with higher democratic development, as demonstrated by Moldova, Georgia, and Ukraine. These three states generally maintained a low number of NDRO memberships while displaying comparatively positive democratic trajectories relative to the broader regional context.

In contrast, no clear association between NDRO membership and democratic development is observed in approximately half of the states analyzed. For instance, while the developmental trajectory of Tajikistan appears similar to that of Belarus and Kazakhstan, Tajikistan’s NDRO membership levels decreased over time. Similarly, both Armenia and Kyrgyzstan experienced fluctuating NDRO memberships and democratic development over the three decades. In contrast, Azerbaijan, Uzbekistan, and Turkmenistan exhibited declining NDRO membership levels, yet they continued to display a marked autocratic development.

While an association between NDRO memberships and democratic development is evident in certain post-Soviet states, this association is absent in others. These findings suggest that additional factors may influence the varying democratic developments within the region. This result implies a need for the second research question of the thesis: which complementary factors related to the varying democratic development can be found within the post-Soviet region? The next chapter focuses on identifying complementary factors that may be associated with the varying patterns of democratic development in the region by drawing on exploratory case studies based on process tracing. In Chapter 7, these factors are used in a cross-case comparative analysis over time within the included states.

## Chapter 6. Exploratory case studies

The previous chapter analyzes the association between NDRO membership levels and democracy levels among the included post-Soviet states between 1991 and 2021, making five groups of states visible. The analysis reveals that two groups of states fit the theoretical assumptions of authoritarian regionalism (Belarus and Kazakhstan, and Moldova, Georgia, and Ukraine) while three groups did not. Armenia and Kyrgyzstan had fluctuating levels of both variables over time. Tajikistan had medium levels of NDRO membership combined with low democratic development, while the last group of states had low levels of NDRO membership combined with low democratic development (Azerbaijan, Uzbekistan, and Turkmenistan). As the association between the variables varies across the groups, the findings suggest that complementary factors may influence the varying democratic developments among the post-Soviet states. With the aim of answering the second research question, *apart from NDRO membership levels, which complementary factors related to the varying democratic development can be identified within the post-Soviet region*, this chapter and the next are dedicated to the identification of relevant variables (Chapter 6) and a cross-case comparative analysis of the identifies variables (Chapter 7).

The second research question will be addressed in two steps. First, by conducting comparative case studies using process tracing, and second, by comparing the results from the individual case studies to identify key patterns that emerge over time across the cases. The theoretical framework of the thesis is used as the starting point for the search for relevant complementary factors. The theoretical parts of the thesis identify certain factors, the influence of external and domestic actors, as well as linkages and leverage between target states and external actors, as important regarding the impact of external influence. As these factors are deemed to be of importance, the current chapter focuses on the search for indications that these factors are present or absent in the included states presumably related to their varying democratic development. Comparative process tracing will be used to assess the presence or absence of variables identified in the theoretical section of the thesis. The second analysis will therefore include both deductive and inductive elements. While some variables are theoretically derived from existing research, the analysis will also remain open to emergent findings, allowing inductive insights to be integrated through process tracing. By combining both deductive and inductive approaches, the analysis will incorporate both theoretical grounded patterns and context-specific patterns.



Case-specific characteristics will be identified through within-case analysis using process tracing. This allows for the reconstruction of chronological developments and the identification of triggering events (or critical junctures) that are involved in shaping each case's political development. A critical juncture, defined as "a concentrated, macro episode of innovation that generates an enduring legacy" (Collier & Munck, 2022, p. 34), can trigger foreign policy changes as the assumption is that current patterns can be explained by past causes (Collier & Munck, 2022). These junctures can originate both from domestic and external developments. "External powers can, for example, constrain and pressure domestic actors during critical junctures, and political and military action taken by external powers can have both intended and unintended consequences for the development of the political arena in the target country" (Ekman, 2024, p. 233).

The case studies provide a descriptive historical overview and trace the domestic developments of the included states from pre-independence to 2021. The in-depth case studies of the eleven included post-Soviet states are provided in Appendix D due to their length while summaries will be included in the current chapter. The case study structure aims to cover the periods of pre-independence, the path to independence, and post-independence, as well as important state-specific subchapters (for example civil wars, domestic conflicts, and other significant political events). However, the structure of each case study varies due to the relevance of historical developments. The summaries in the main body of the thesis will highlight the most important and relevant events and aim to include events both pre- and post-independence. The characteristics from each case study will be summarized in state-specific tables and operationalized into at least three theory-based variables. Additional variables may emerge from patterns identified across individual case studies. Together, these variables will form the analytical foundation for the cross-case comparative analysis.

The materials used in the case studies must meet certain criteria: relevance, credibility, timeliness, and theoretical fit. Selected materials and keywords must relate to the political developments of the post-Soviet states in question. Credibility is linked to the academic databases and journals from which the material is sourced from. The materials will be evaluated according to relevance, content alignment, reliability, and objectivity. Multiple sources will be used within all case studies. Additionally, the selected materials must cover the whole time period analyzed, from 1991 to 2021.

The material used within the case studies will include research articles, papers, and academic books. The material will be sourced from academic databases and libraries. The selection will be based on the following criteria: scholarly quality, language, time frame, and thematic relevance. Keywords will include the names of the respective states in combination with terms as "foreign policy",

“political development”, “domestic development”, “post-independence development” and “internal domestic politics”. The academic research materials included will be chosen for their relevance, scholarly quality, as well as the number of citations and references. Due to necessity the material needs to be written in English or Swedish. The aim is to use neutral sources, though achieving complete neutrality in all cases may be difficult due to the limited availability of academic material for some states. The entire time frame (1991–2021) must be covered, although sourcing material from the later years may prove more challenging due to their recency. For each case, a minimum of 10 articles or chapters will be included, and each case study will be approximately the same length. However, variations may occur due to the differing geopolitical relevance and political development of the individual cases.

This chapter continues with a summary of the eleven case studies and a discussion on the state-specific characteristics, related to the theoretical factors, identified in the case studies. The case studies are structured according to the previously identified five groups of states. At the end of the chapter, a summary table will present common characteristics identified across all included cases, indicating their presence or absence in each state, along with unique characteristics found in specific groups (as identified in the first analysis). The variables chosen, and their corresponding characteristics, are discussed in the latter part of Chapter 6. As Chapter 6 identifies relevant complementary variables based on corresponding characteristics, Chapter 7 uses these variables for a cross-case comparative analysis with the aim of answering the second research question of the thesis.

## 6.1. Group 1: Belarus

The development of Belarus from pre-independence to post-independence reveals the complex historical, political, and economic development of the country. Historically, Belarus was controlled by various empires such as Poland, Lithuania, and Russia (Eke & Kuzio, 2010). Following a short-lived period of independence in 1918, Belarus was incorporated into the Soviet Union. After the Second World War, Belarus experienced intense Russification at the same time as over one million ethnical Russians were moved to Belarus after the war. Industrialization started to gain speed in the 1950s (Ioffe 2004). Compared to other parts of the Soviet Union, Belarus had rather high status with higher-than-average living standards and was a socially stable republic (Eke & Kuzio, 2010). Between 1970 and 1986, Belarus had the biggest growth in national income per capita of all Soviet republics. Within the Soviet Union, Belarus was a success story (Ioffe, 2004).

The path to independence was marked by Belarus's 1990 Declaration of Sovereignty and its full independence in December 1991 (Korosteleva et al., 2003). Following the dissolution of the Soviet Union, the newly independent Belarus was marked by its significant Soviet influences, reflecting its deep-rooted historical ties with Russia. The transition to independence was perceived as "forced," with the old regime retaining substantial control during the early stages of the new state. A survey in the spring of 1991 showed that nearly 83 percent of the Belarusian population supported the preservation of the USSR as a federation of sovereign states (Nordberg, 1997). Belarusian national identity remained weak, shaped by decades of Soviet rule that had fostered a high degree of Sovietization (Breichelt 2004). The Belarusian language was not widely spoken, and Russia was not seen as a hostile enemy but rather as an ally (Ioffe, 2003). The lack of a nationalist agenda made the notion of "returning to Russia" more appealing in Belarus. Despite a long history of being ruled by various powers, only the Russian and Soviet periods were emphasized, weakening Belarusian national identity to the point where separating from Russia seemed almost unnatural (Marples, 2005). The absence of a cohesive nationalist movement, combined with the Soviet-era political elite's continued influence, slowed down its transition towards full political and economic autonomy (Breichelt 2004).

Article 10 of the Belarusian declaration of independence stated that the main goal for a sovereign Belarus would be neutrality (Korosteleva et al., 2003). The initial period of independence saw, however, a stalled political reform process. Due to this reluctance towards political change, many key political elements from the Soviet era remained intact during independence, including powerful communist politicians, the political elite, and the KGB (Way, 2005). Prime Minister Kebich sought to economically integrate Belarus with Russia due to the pressing economic situation. Shushkevich, the president of the parliament, opposed economic integration with Russia and aimed to protect Belarusian sovereignty and its new neutrality towards Russian involvement (Nordberg, 1997). In the early years after independence, political power was concentrated within the post-communist majority in the Supreme Soviet (Dahl Martinsen, 2002). Due to polarization within the political landscape and the power of the communist party in parliament, political and economic reforms stalled (Krivosheev, 2003).

A new constitution was created between 1993 and 1994, establishing a presidential republic in place of the parliamentary system that had existed since independence (Silitski, 2005). Early on, power became heavily concentrated in the presidency, resulting in limited political pluralism. Post-independence, Belarus found itself isolated from Western institutions due to its reluctance to embrace democratic reforms (Ioffe, 2004; Marples 2005). The dominance of pro-Russian political factions led to the election of Alexander Lukashenka as president in 1994, marking a shift towards

authoritarianism. Despite Western criticism, Lukashenka maintained power through referendums that centralized authority under the presidency, and by fostering close ties with Russia (Eke & Kuzio 2010). While the political opposition in Belarus has been harshly repressed, protests against the regime has occurred. In 2006, after alleged electoral fraud during the presidential election, protests resulted in the Belarusian Jeans revolution. In 2020, mass protests against the Belarusian regime broke out after the presidential election in which Lukashenka received 81 percent of the vote. The protests continued into 2021. While repressed, the protests did strengthen the Belarusian political opposition against Lukashenka (Hall, 2025).

The geopolitical importance of Belarus, especially concerning NATO expansion, further entrenched its alignment with Russia, which supported the Belarusian regime both politically and economically (Hancock, 2006; Krivosherev 2003; Nordberg, 1997; Vanderhill, 2014; Way, 2015). Overall, Belarus’s post-independence development has been characterized by its dependence on Russia for economic aid, energy supplies, and political legitimacy (Dahl Martinsen, 2002). The strong relationship between Belarus and Russia has strengthened the political path of Belarus and affected its relationship with Western powers.

Based on the case study of Belarus, chronological state-specific characteristics for the Belarusian case are presented in Table 21. The backgrounds (pre- or post-independence, or constant) of the characteristics are also included in the table.

Table 21. Specific characteristics of Belarusian development

Belarus	Background
Highly Sovietized	Pre-independence
“Forced” independence	Pre-independence
Close bonds with Russia and the USSR	Pre- and post-independence
Weak national identity	Pre- and post-independence
Attempts made for a neutral stance	Post-independence
The old regime in control at independence	Post-independence
Stalled political reforms	Post-independence
Stalled economic reforms	Post-independence
Economic development a priority	Post-independence
Early power concentration	Post-independence
Strong presidential powers	Post-independence
High dependence on Russia	Post-independence
Geopolitical importance	Constant

The case study reveals that Belarus has been closely connected to both the Soviet Union and Russia. A history of being a highly Sovietized success story within the Soviet Union developed into a

positive relationship with Russia after Belarusian independence. Connections between Belarus and Russia are also implied in the heavy use of the Russian language in Belarus, a weak national identity due to Russification, and the state's "forced" independence. There are power asymmetries between the two states as Belarus is heavily politically, economically, and militarily dependent on Russia. Belarus is also of high geopolitical importance from the Russian perspective. Political development in Belarus has been nonexistent since the beginning of the 1990s. The election of President Lukashenka in 1994 was the starting point of increasing power concentration within the presidency, and worsening relations with Western powers due to the increasingly non-democratic developments of the Belarusian regime.

## 6.2. Group 1: Kazakhstan

Kazakhs, originally nomadic, were divided into three "hordes" that were integrated into the Russian Empire in the 18th century. During the Soviet era, Kazakhstan transitioned from a nomadic to an agricultural society (Stevens, 2020). The Kazakhs were incorporated into the Soviet Union as part of the Kirgiz Autonomous Soviet Socialist Republic (ASSR) in 1920 and received the status of a republic in 1936. Stalin's collectivization during the 1920s and 1930s had a devastating effect on the population of Kazakhstan. A large part of the population died of starvation and disease, after which a vast migration to Kazakhstan from other parts of the Soviet Union occurred, making ethnic Kazakhs a minority in their own republic (Spehr & Kassenova 2012). The Soviet Union improved living standards in the republic but suppressed the growth of a Kazakh national identity (Brletich, 2015).

In the late 1980s, anti-Russian sentiment grew, leading to the Alma-Ata riots in 1986 (Brletich, 2015). Still, Kazakhstan's independence was not the result of a strong nationalist movement but rather the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991. The population of Kazakhstan voted on the issue of sovereignty in October 1990, but the political elite did not support the notion of an independent state (Brletich, 2015). The political leader, Nazarbayev, supported Gorbachev's plan to try to save the Soviet Union by reforming it. An independent Kazakhstan emerged in December 1991, as the last USSR republic to declare independence (Brletich, 2015). The ethnic composition of Kazakhstan is diverse and has its roots in the migration patterns within the Soviet Union during the 1920s and 1930s when a large number of immigrants came to Kazakhstan to replace the ethnic Kazakhs lost to Stalin's collectivization (Spehr & Kassenova, 2012). Following independence, pro-

Kazakh policies emerged, including promoting the Kazakh language and revising historical narratives (Melvin, 1993). Politically, little changed after the transition from the Soviet Republic of Kazakhstan to the independent Republic of Kazakhstan. The political leader and the political elites remained the same, and democratic development was not a priority for the newly independent state (Sullivan, 2018). The country had a diverse ethnic population, with a significant Russian minority, leading to tensions regarding national identity and fears of Russian interference (Spehr & Kassenova, 2012).

Economically, Kazakhstan focused on rapid growth, with oil and gas playing a major role in its geopolitical and economic importance (Domjan & Stone, 2009). The country sought to reduce dependency on Russia by exploring alternative oil export routes and balancing relations with other powers, including China, the EU, and the US, through a multivector foreign policy (Vanderhill et al., 2020). This take on foreign policy has been a necessity due to Kazakhstan's geographical and geopolitical place in the Eurasian region, land-locked and located between Russia and China (Sullivan, 2018). The Kazakhstani multivector foreign policy emphasizes maintaining good relations with Russia while also having good relations with other great powers (Sullivan, 2018). To a large degree, the basis for the special relationship between Russia and Kazakhstan lies in their common past and Russia's historical influence over Kazakhstan. The Kazakhs had no previous experience of statehood before becoming a part of the Russian Empire and the Soviet Union (Stevens, 2020). They have also taken pride in being the most Sovietized of the Soviet republics, and the knowledge of the Russian language has generally been seen as a positive trait in Kazakhstan (Laurelle et al., 2019). However, the annexation of Crimea in 2014 strained relations with Russia, prompting Kazakhstan to reaffirm its sovereignty and further develop its national identity, including switching to the Latin alphabet (Sullivan, 2018; Vanderhill et al., 2020).

The relationship between Kazakhstan and Russia has been quite stable since the fall of the Soviet Union and has resulted in more than 400 bilateral agreements between the states on various issues (Domjan & Stone, 2009). President Nazarbayev ruled Kazakhstan for decades, concentrating power in the presidency. Although constitutional reforms in 2017 shifted some powers to parliament and the prime minister, Nazarbayev retained significant influence over security and foreign policy, even after stepping down in 2019 (Isaacs, 2020). Tokayev was elected the new president in 2019 with over 70 percent of the votes (Blackmon, 2021). President Tokayev has continued Nazarbayev's policies, focusing on economic growth and maintaining Kazakhstan's balanced foreign relations (Vanderhill et al., 2020). In 2021, Nazarbayev handed over the position

of chairman of the Assembly of the people of Kazakhstan as well as the leadership of the ruling party to Tokayev (Thibault & Insebayeva, 2024).

Kazakhstan remains an authoritarian state, but its geopolitical importance and resources have shielded it from Western sanctions. Kazakhstan’s foreign policy has generally followed a strategy of inclusion which has sought to attract different international actors to participate in the development of its oil and energy sector (Nyshanbayev et al., 2024). Its success is attributed to its strategic position, economic resources, and multivector foreign policy. However, Kazakhstan remains highly dependent on Russia for political and security reasons. Its strategic importance to Russia has reinforced close ties and ensured continued influence from its larger neighbor.

Based on the case study of Kazakhstan, chronological state-specific characteristics for the Kazakh case are presented in Table 22.

Table 22. Specific characteristics of Kazakh development

Kazakhstan	Background
Nomadic heritage	Pre-independence
Clan heritage	Pre-independence
Weak national identity	Pre-independence
Ethnically divided	Pre-independence
Highly Sovietized	Pre-independence
“Forced” independence	Pre-independence
Large Russian diaspora	Pre- and post-independence
Close bonds with Russia and the USSR	Pre- and post-independence
The old regime in control at independence	Post-independence
Stalled political reforms	Post-independence
Early power concentration	Post-independence
Strong presidential powers	Post-independence
Natural resources	Post-independence
Multivector foreign policy	Post-independence
High dependency on Russia	Post-independence
Geopolitical importance	Constant

Like Belarus, Kazakhstan shares historical ties with the USSR and Russia. Kazakhstan experienced high degrees of Sovietization and has housed a large Russian minority since the Soviet era. The Kazakh relationship with Russia has generally been positive. Due to access to natural resources and the geopolitical position of Kazakhstan, the state has managed to pursue a multivector foreign policy. While Kazakhstan has been politically and militarily dependent on Russia, the state has also cooperated with other regional actors. Democratic development in Kazakhstan has been low since

independence. As former Soviet leadership stayed in control after independence, political reforms stalled, and the power of the president increased over time.

### 6.3. Group 2: Moldova

The history of Moldova is marked by many territorial and political developments. Established in the 14th century, the Principality of Moldova, was initially located in what is now Romania and northwestern Moldova (Aklaev, 1996). The early 1800s saw the territory divided between Russia, which controlled Bessarabia (eastern Moldova), and the Ottomans, who held the western part (present-day Romania) (Vahl & Emerson, 2004). Bessarabia became an autonomous republic within the Russian Empire in 1818 but lost its autonomy in 1828, leading to Russification efforts that included the suppression of the Romanian language and culture (Aklaev, 1996). Following the Crimean War, southwestern Bessarabia was ceded to Romania, but the territory was returned to Russia in 1878 (Aklaev, 1996). The early 20th century witnessed brief nationalist movements and a short-lived Moldovan People's Republic, which declared independence in 1918 but soon unified with Romania (Way, 2003). The Moldovan Autonomous Soviet Socialist Republic (MASSR) was established within the Ukrainian Soviet Socialist Republic in 1924 (Aklaev, 1996). The Soviet Union's invasion and annexation of Bessarabia in 1940 led to the creation of the Moldovan Soviet Socialist Republic, incorporating parts of MASSR and Bessarabia (Way, 2003). The Soviet period saw significant development in agriculture and industry, with extensive immigration from other Soviet regions, altering the demographic composition of Moldova.

During the 1980s, Soviet reforms such as perestroika and glasnost influenced Moldova, leading to the rise of the Moldovan Popular Front, which promoted Moldovan as the official language (Roper, 2008; Vahl & Emerson, 2004). In 1990, Moldova declared state sovereignty, and by 1991, it gained independence from the Soviet Union (Akaleav, 1996). The post-independence period was characterized by ethnic conflicts and political factions. In the immediate aftermath of independence, the Communist Party faced temporary suspension, reflecting the broader struggle for political stability (Roper, 2008). The rapid events in the early 1990s created extreme ideological and ethnic crises that spilled over into the political institutions. The language laws, the introduction of Romanian symbols, and the anti-Soviet motives behind them resulted in clashes between large



parts of the Moldovan population (Akaleav, 1996). Tensions among minority groups rose, particularly in Transnistria and Gagauzia, which led to conflicts over cultural and national rights.

Armed conflict between Moldova and the Transnistria region began in 1990 and escalated between 1991 and 1992. A state of emergency was declared in March 1992. By the spring of 1992, several international mediation attempts had been made (Way, 2015). Several international mediation attempts failed, leading to Russian intervention, a ceasefire, and a demilitarized zone in Transnistria (Way, 2003). Though agreements were reached on troop withdrawal, negotiations on Transnistria's status stalled (Crandall, 2012; Popescu, 2006; Vahl & Emerson, 2004). Russia's influence remained, but relations worsened after Moldova rejected the Kozak Memorandum in 2003, which proposed a federation with Russian troops stationed in the region (Popescu, 2006).

Moldova faced political instability in the 1990s, with weak party systems and rivalries (Roper, 2008). Elections in 1994 and 2001 saw the rise of the Agrarian Democratic Party and the Communist Party, respectively (Vahl & Emerson, 2004). Vladimir Voronin, the Communist Party leader, strengthened ties with Russia. However, Moldova also prioritized relations with the European Union, signing various agreements and benefiting from EU assistance (Roper, 2008). Moldova's dual focus on the EU and Russia created tensions, particularly regarding the unresolved Transnistria conflict, where Russia continued to play a key role (Calus & Kosienkowski, 2018). Moldova initially pursued a multivector foreign policy, aiming to balance relations with Russia and the EU. Cooperation with the EU emerged as an early key foreign policy objective (Calus & Kosienkowski, 2018).

As the national movement gradually consolidated, it evolved into a single-party rule, with power becoming increasingly concentrated within the presidency during the 2000s despite the creation of a parliamentary system in 2000 (Roper, 2008). Even with these internal dynamics, the 2010s saw a renewed pro-European Union stance in Moldova, signaling a strategic shift towards deeper integration with Western institutions (Calus & Kosienkowski, 2018). By 2009, the ruling pro-European coalition put political focus on an Association Agreement with the EU (Tolstrup, 2015). The positive relationship between Moldova and the EU took a turn for the worse in 2013 due to the collapse of the Filat government. The political crisis of 2013 was a result of the revelation of the high levels of corruption among the political elite in Moldova that existed. While Moldova did sign an Association Agreement in 2014, the EU officials officially criticized Moldova for not implementing any of the needed reforms, the failure to form a government within the months following the government collapse, and several abuses within the election process (Calus &

Kosienkowski, 2018). As political crises and corruption increased, Moldovans became divided between support for EU integration and Russia's Eurasian Union. The Transnistria conflict and Russian influence in Moldova's economy, particularly regarding gas and trade, remained critical issues in Moldova's post-independence era.

Based on the case study of Moldova, chronological state-specific characteristics for the Moldovan case are presented in Table 23.

Table 23. Specific characteristics of Moldovan development

Moldova	Background
National movement	Pre-independence
Popular support for independence	Pre-independence
Ethnic conflicts	Post-independence
Communist party suspended	Post-independence
Multivector foreign policy	Post-independence
EU cooperation a foreign policy goal	Post-independence
Domestic conflict involving Russia	Post-independence
Russia involved as a peacekeeper/mediator	Post-independence
Weak/declining presidential powers	Post-independence
Non-democratic tendencies	Post-independence
Power concentration within the presidency	Post-independence
Frozen conflict	Post-independence

The beginning of independence for Moldova was marked by the Transnistria conflict, which came to involve Russia both as the mediator and one of the peacekeepers in the region. The Russian support for the Transnistrian region affected the relationship between Moldova and Russia negatively. The conflict remained frozen, creating vulnerability towards Russia. Due to the geographic position of Moldova, not directly bordering Russia, the levels of ties between the two states are mostly economically based. While the level of cooperation with Russia in Moldova is relatively low, cooperation with the EU has been a foreign policy goal of Moldova since its independence. The signing of an association agreement in 2014 strengthened the relationship between Moldova and the EU. Regarding the domestic political elites, Moldova has had relatively weak presidential powers according to its constitution, compared with most of the post-Soviet states. Nonetheless, power concentration within the presidency occurred in the mid-2000s as non-democratic tendencies grew in Moldova.

## 6.4. Group 2: Georgia

The Georgian territory was annexed by Russia in the early 19th century, and throughout the 1800s, there was increasing Russian influence and control, including the Russification of the Georgian population (Brisku, 2020). In the later parts of the 19th century, Russia increasingly incorporated the western parts of the former kingdom, including the regions of Adjara and Abkhazia (Broers, 2009). In 1918, Georgia briefly became part of the Transcaucasian Democratic Federative Republic but declared independence as the Democratic Republic of Georgia shortly afterward. This independence was short-lived, as Soviet forces invaded in 1921, incorporating Georgia into the Soviet Union (Broers, 2014). In 1922, the Transcaucasian Socialist Federative Soviet Republic (TSFSR) was established, once again uniting Georgia with Armenia and Azerbaijan. In 1936, the new Soviet constitution recognized Georgia as one of the Soviet republics. Within the Georgian constitutive Soviet Socialist Republic, the autonomous republics of Adjara and Abkhazia and the autonomous oblast of South Ossetia were included (Brisku, 2020). In the late 1980s, fueled by nationalist sentiments and opposition to Soviet rule, the Georgian independence movement grew (Devdariani, 2004). By 1991, Georgia declared its independence, but ethnic tensions within the country, especially in the regions of Abkhazia and South Ossetia, soon led to conflict. Both regions sought independence, leading to violent clashes, and by 1993, Abkhazia achieved *de facto* independence after a military victory (Aphrasidze & Siroky, 2010).

The post-independence period in Georgia was marked by instability, with a civil war breaking out, the overthrow of the first president, and ongoing conflicts with separatist regions (Spetschinsky & Bolgova, 2014). The attempts by national movement parties to dominate the newly independent Georgia led to a civil war in the early 1990s. Several ethnic groups demanded autonomy, while the central state structures were too underdeveloped and weak to manage the growing nationalist movements. Ethnic conflicts had intensified since the late 1980s when a state program began promoting Georgian as the official language (Spetschinsky & Bolgova, 2014). Russia facilitated a ceasefire between Georgia and South Ossetia in 1992, establishing a security zone controlled by peacekeeping forces from Georgia, Russia, North Ossetia, and South Ossetia. Russia also brokered a ceasefire between Georgia and Abkhazia in 1993. Since 1994, Russian troops within the CIS Peacekeeping Forces and military observers from the UN have acted as peacekeeping forces (Spetschinsky & Bolgova, 2014).

By the mid-1990s, Georgia had stabilized somewhat under Shevardnadze, but the state remained fragile. The population was dissatisfied with Shevardnadze after he attempted to block the opposition from gaining a majority in parliament amid accusations of electoral fraud (Broers 2005). In 2003, the Rose Revolution ousted Shevardnadze, and Saakashvili came to power with promises of reform, state-building, and economic recovery (Aphrasidze & Siroky, 2010; Broers, 2005). However, democratic development became less prioritized. In 2004, the constitution was reformed, which undermined the democratic process (Mitchell, 2009). Power became highly centralized and concentrated within the presidency, while the power of the parliament was reduced (Gallina, 2010). Tensions with Russia continued to simmer, particularly over the status of Abkhazia and South Ossetia (Mikhelidze, 2009). In 2008, these tensions escalated into a brief war with Russia, resulting in Russia's recognition of the two regions as independent states. Following the war, Georgia's relations with Russia worsened, though efforts to stabilize the situation continued under later governments (Spetschinsky & Bolgova, 2014). In 2012, Saakashvili stepped down after losing the election to the Georgian Dream coalition, which sought to balance pro-Western policies with efforts to maintain better relations with Russia (Delcour & Wolczuk, 2015).

Georgia has long envisioned a closer relationship with the EU and NATO and signed an Association Agreement with the EU in June 2014. While the EU supported the revolution, it has criticized Georgia and its post-revolutionary government for failing to improve in terms of good governance or democratic performance (Spetschinsky & Bolgova 2014). The Georgian 2019 Foreign Policy Strategy identifies Georgia as a European country (Cecire, 2025). However, the political polarization increased in Georgia after the 2019 parliamentary election which resulted in a political crisis. The opposition parties did not recognize the election results and became dissatisfied with the decision of Georgia's Dream not to comply with EU guidelines towards closer integration with the EU (Tsuladze et al, 2024).

Based on the case study of Georgia, chronological state-specific characteristics for the Georgian case are presented in Table 24.

Table 24. Specific characteristics of Georgian development

Georgia	Background
National movement	Pre-independence
Popular support for independence	Pre-independence
The old regime in control at independence	Post-independence
Ethnic conflicts	Post-independence
Civil war	Post-independence
Multivector foreign policy	Post-independence
Domestic conflict involving Russia	Post-independence
Russia involved as a peacekeeper/mediator	Post-independence
Power concentration in the presidency	Post-independence
Democratic revolution	Post-independence
Weak/declining presidential powers	Post-independence
War with Russia	Post-independence
Frozen conflict	Post-independence

The Georgian vulnerability towards Russia stems mostly from the frozen conflicts in Abkhazia and South Ossetia, which culminated in a war between Georgia and Russia in 2008. Russia managed the ceasefires in both Abkhazia and South Ossetia and kept peacekeeping forces on Georgian territory after the conflicts. Ties between Georgia and Russia have remained low, further decreasing in the aftermath of the 2008 war. The level of cooperation with the EU has increased since the 1990s as part of the Georgian multivector foreign policy and further increased after the signing of the association agreement in 2014. Non-democratic tendencies, which developed in the early 2000s, developed into power concentration within the presidency. However, constitutional changes weakened the presidential powers during the 2010s.

## 6.5. Group 2: Ukraine

Historically, Ukraine's borders have frequently shifted due to various external interests and conflicts (Birch, 2000). The historical origins of Ukraine can be traced back to Kievan Rus', a state from the 9th to mid-13th centuries with its capital in Kyiv, situated in modern Ukraine. By the 16th and 17th centuries, Ukraine was part of the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth but was later divided between the Commonwealth and Russia. In the late 1700s, following the partitions of Poland, Ukraine was divided between Austria-Hungary and the Russian Empire, with most of Ukraine eventually becoming part of the Russian Empire under Catherine the Great. Transcarpathian Ukraine, previously under Hungarian rule, was ceded to Soviet Ukraine after World War II, and

Northern Bukovina became part of Soviet Ukraine in 1940 (Rywkin, 2014). Crimea, historically not part of Ukraine, was annexed by Russia under Catherine the Great and was an autonomous republic within the Russian Soviet Federative Socialist Republic until Khrushchev transferred it to Ukraine in 1954. Following the October Revolution of 1917, Ukraine declared independence briefly before being occupied by Germany and Poland and eventually falling back under Russian control. German occupation reoccurred during World War II until Soviet forces reclaimed the territory (Solchanyk, 1992).

By the late 1980s, a strong anti-Soviet sentiment had developed in Ukraine, leading to rapid mobilization against Soviet rule as it weakened (Way, 2015). The Ukrainian parliament enacted a language law in 1989 mandating Ukrainian as the administrative language by the mid-1990s. The country was politically and ethnically divided, with the East favoring pro-Soviet policies and the West advocating nationalism (Nordberg, 1997). A 1991 referendum overwhelmingly supported independence, including a majority in Crimea (Solchanyk, 1996). The first presidential election, won by Kravchuk, faced challenges from internal divisions (Beichelt, 2004). Tensions between Ukraine and Russia were evident from the outset of Ukrainian independence. The 1990 treaty between Russia and Ukraine included principles of non-interference and recognized territorial integrity. However, conflicts emerged shortly after independence regarding Crimea and the Black Sea Fleet (BSF) (Larrabee, 2010).

Political and economic developments in the 1990s were heavily affected by the stance of the ruling elite. Kuchma contributed to a closer economic relationship with Russia, as economic integration with Russia was necessary due to the economic crisis (Solchanyk, 1996). However, Ukraine refused to ratify the CIS agreement (Nordberg, 1997). In 1994, Kuchma announced that Ukraine would be a denuclearized state, and the same year Ukraine became the first post-Soviet state to become a NATO Partnership for Peace-member. The “return to Europe” journey of Ukraine had begun and aimed for integration with the West while cooperation with Russia and the other CIS states continued (Ambrosio, 2007). In the early 1990s, Russia and Ukraine did not agree on several important issues that caused great tension between the two states: the role of the CIS, the Black Sea Fleet (BSF), and Crimea (Solchanyk, 1996). In his later years, Kuchma pushed Ukraine increasingly in a non-democratic direction (Ambrosio, 2007). The Ukrainian leadership pursued a mix of multivector foreign policy, a pro-Western stance, and a pro-Russian stance over the next three decades. The foreign policy choices of Kuchma aiming to please Russia in the late 1990s and early 2000s restrained the pro-Western movement (Shyrokykh, 2018). In the presidential election in 2004, Russia supported Russia-leaning Yanukovych, while the West supported pro-Western

Yushenko (Way, 2015). Yanukovych won the election, and accusations of election fraud and other irregularities resulted in the Orange Revolution (D'Anieri, 2006). The election results were canceled after the revolution, and a new runoff was held in December 2004 in which the pro-Western Yushenko was the election winner (Tolstrup, 2015). Internal conflicts among the collation, economic problems, and the failure to execute key political reforms led to major problems for the government (Obydenkova & Libman, 2014). In 2006 Ukraine's constitution was reformed to support a parliamentary-presidential system (Ambrosio, 2007).

In the beginning of the 2010s, Ukraine begun negotiations with the EU over an Association Agreement and a DCFTA which caused friction with Russia (Smith, 2015). In November 2013, Yanukovych did not sign the EU Association Agreement despite earlier promises to do so. Shortly after he accepted the Russian offer of a financial bailout of 15 billion dollars. The political developments led to mass protests, first regarding the Association Agreement and later on regarding the brutal treatment of students and journalists spending the night at Independence Square in Kyiv (Delcour & Wolczuk, 2015). The protest against the government led to Yanukovych fleeing Ukraine and an interim government took over. The interim government was supported by the EU and challenged by Russia (Delcour & Wolczuk, 2015).

The new transitional government faced major crises during the spring of 2014: increased Russian economic and energy pressure, the Russian annexation of Crimea, and the armed conflict in the Donbas region (Way 2015). In July 2014, the newly elected president Poroshenko signed the Association Agreement with the EU, and the national support for NATO membership grew to about 40 percent. Poroshenko stated that NATO membership would ruin Ukraine and favored closer integration with the EU instead. The Crimean conflict, however, made the Ukrainian population view the EU more negatively (Samokhvalov, 2015) because the EU refused to provide Ukraine with military support and was slow in its adoption of sanctions against Russia. After 2014 Ukraine made foreign policy decisions that would increase their defense capacities, while not provoking Russia further. Ukraine applied for the status of a non-NATO strategic ally of the US and developed closer military cooperation with the Baltic states, Albania, and Poland (Samokhvalov, 2015). From 2014, Ukraine pursued a firm pro-Western policy with the aim of membership in the EU and NATO (Ekman, 2023). The opposition bloc in Ukraine did not, however, prefer a pro-Western orientation claiming that neutrality would be the best option for a stable future for Ukraine (Ekman, 2023). While the pro-Western parties of Ukraine were united in their vision for a European Ukraine, the opposition parties became increasingly fragmented. The Communist Party of Ukraine was banned in 2015, and in 2018, the opposition bloc split in two parties (Ekman, 2023).

Based on the case study of Ukraine, chronological state-specific characteristics for the Ukrainian case are presented in Table 25.

Table 25. Specific characteristics of Ukrainian development

Ukraine	Background
National movement	Pre-independence
Popular support for independence	Pre- and post-independence
Large Russian minority	Pre- and post-independence
The old regime in control at independence	Post-independence
Ethnic conflicts	Post-independence
The EU a foreign policy goal	Post-independence
Multivector foreign policy	Post-independence
Domestic conflict involving Russia	Post-independence
Non-democratic tendencies	Post-independence
Power concentration within the presidency	Post-independence
Democratic revolution	Post-independence
Weak/declining presidential powers	Post-independence
Russian annexation of Crimea 2014	Post-independence
Frozen conflict	Post-independence
Geopolitical importance	Constant

The geopolitical position of Ukraine and the high level of dependence on Russia has made Ukraine highly vulnerable to Russian influence. The Crimean annexation and the placement of the Black Sea Fleet have also increased power asymmetries between Ukraine and Russia. Ukraine also shares many ties with Russia based on historical and cultural similarities, and there is a large Russian-speaking minority in Ukraine. As part of the Ukrainian multivector foreign policy, the state has cooperated with both Russia and the EU. The political orientation (pro-West or pro-Russia) of the state has, to a large extent, been affected by the domestic political elites. As in Moldova and Georgia, non-democratic tendencies developed in Ukraine in the mid-2000s, resulting in a democratic revolution and weakening of the presidential powers.

### 6.6. Group 3: Armenia

Throughout its history, Armenia has been under the rule of various empires and states, including Romans, Byzantines, Persians, and Ottomans. Following the Russo-Persian War of 1827–1828, Eastern Armenia fell under Russian control, while Western Armenia was governed by the Ottoman Empire. Russia was perceived as a protector against Ottoman influences (Keshishian &



Harutyunyan, 2013). After the 1917 Bolshevik Revolution, the withdrawal of Russian forces exposed Armenia to Turkish aggression. Despite a 1918 attack by Turkey, the First Republic of Armenia was established. Only two years later, Armenia was annexed by the Soviet Union. The Nagorno-Karabakh region, predominantly Armenian, was initially placed under Soviet Armenian control but was reassigned to Soviet Azerbaijani rule in 1921, creating a long-standing regional conflict (Fraser et al. 1990; Karakashian, 1998).

In the 1980s, the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict became central to Armenian nationalism and independence efforts. Protests in the late 1980s and early 1990s, alongside declarations of independence and secession from the Soviet Union, intensified the conflict (Fraser et al., 1990). Despite international mediation and a 1994 ceasefire, the conflict continued. The Armenian leadership, initially resistant to Russian involvement, sought Russian support due to regional hostilities and economic blockades imposed by Turkey and Azerbaijan (Mustafayeva, 2018). The subsequent political shifts saw a more pro-Russian stance under President Kocharyan. Kocharyan's presidency marked a strategic alignment with Russia and an emphasis on regional security (Kakachia & Markarov, 2016). Armenia was considered an "island of democratic reform" in the early 1990s (Defeis, 1995). While the early 1990s was a relatively democratic period in Armenia, the political system gradually became more authoritarian towards the early 2000s (Papazian, 2006). Economic development has been an important aim of Armenia due to the unresolved Nagorno-Karabakh conflict that demanded a large army and hence a stable economy. During the Kocharyan period, the political opposition and the independent media were harassed, and rigged political elections became more common (Aberg & Kerzyan, 2018). The presidential election in 2008 resulted in mass protests after the chosen successor of Kocharyan, Sargsyan, won the election (Roberts & Ziemer, 2018). With the consolidation of power within Kocharyan, Armenia also experienced a shift in foreign policy towards Russia (Ohanyan, 2022).

Armenia's membership in the CSTO in 2002 marked the beginning of a strategic alliance with Russia, driven by Armenia's heightened security concerns from regional threats and its economic dependencies (Minassian, 2008; Kakachia & Markarov, 2016). Economic ties between the two nations strengthened as Armenia became increasingly reliant on remittances from the Armenian diaspora in Russia as well as significant Russian investments. The military cooperation between Armenia and Russia also expanded, with Russian troops stationed at key borders sites and significant arms supplies provided to Armenia (Shirinyan, 2019). Armenia has become increasingly economically dependent on Russia since the early 2000s (Minassian, 2008). The Armenian diaspora, with its roots in the aftermath of the Persian-Russian war in the 1800s, is large (Heathershaw &

Schalz, 2017). Over 2.5 million Armenians live and work in Russia, and Armenia has become dependent on remittances from the diaspora in Russia (Terzyan, 2018). In 2015, 14 percent of the Armenian GDP came from remittances from the Armenian diaspora, and 70 percent of the total remittances stemmed from Russia. Between 1996 and 2006, Russia invested over \$465 million in Armenia, making Russia its main foreign investor. Armenia is also dependent on Russia as a trade partner, and 20 percent of the Armenian exports go to Russia (Minassian 2008).

Upon taking office in 2008, President Serzh Sargsyan sought to enhance Armenia's geopolitical position through closer ties with the EU. However, regional developments, including heightened Russian-Azerbaijani military cooperation and increased gas prices, pressured Armenia into aligning more closely with Russia (Shirinyan, 2019; Terzyan, 2018). Under Sargsyan, Armenia's internal politics became increasingly authoritarian, culminating in constitutional changes and a new electoral code designed to consolidate power. The Four-Day War broke out in 2016 between Armenia and Azerbaijan over the contested territory. Nagorno-Karabakh became the most militarized area in the whole post-Soviet region in 2016 (Mustafayeva, 2018).

The Velvet Revolution in 2018, led by Pashinyan, resulted in a peaceful transfer of power but did not significantly alter Armenia's foreign policy development. While more pro-European politicians came to power, the reliance on Russia endured (Amoris, 2025; Ohanyan, 2022; Vieira & Vasilyan, 2019). In 2017 Armenia signed a new cooperation agreement with the EU, the Comprehensive and Enhanced Partnership Agreement, which was the most important step for a renewed relationship between Armenia and the EU since the renewed action plan was signed in 2015 (Amoris, 2025; Roberts & Ziemer, 2018). Sarkissian was elected as president of Armenia in 2018. During his term as president, new escalations within the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict occurred. The armed conflict between Armenia and Azerbaijan in 2020 resulted in the Armenian loss of the territory that had been gained in the early 1990s as a result of a Russian-brokered ceasefire (Shirinyan, 2019). The Nagorno-Karabakh conflict significantly influenced Armenia's political development and foreign policy; the long-standing conflict drove Armenia into Russia's sphere of influence. Despite some engagement with European and NATO entities, Armenia's geopolitical significance to Russia has remained considerable, with ongoing reliance on Russian support and strategic interests in the region (Shirinyan, 2019).

Based on the case study of Armenia, chronological state-specific characteristics for the Armenian case are presented in Table 26.

Table 26. Specific characteristics of Armenian development

Armenia	Background
Popular support for independence	Pre-independence
Large minority in Russia	Pre- and post-independence
Popular support for independence	Pre-independence
The old regime in control at independence	Post-independence
Anti-Soviet feelings	Post-independence
“Democratic island” in the early 1990s	Post-independence
Domestic conflict involving Russia	Post-independence
Multivector foreign policy	Post-independence
High dependency on Russia	Post-independence
Russia viewed as a protector	Post-independence
Dependency on working migrants	Post-independence
Weak/declining presidential powers	Post-independence
Democratic revolution	Post-independence
Geopolitical importance	Constant

At independence, Armenia was considered an island of democracy. However, non-democratic tendencies developed over the years, influencing the democratic development of the state. In 2015, Armenia altered its semi-presidential system and adopted a parliamentary system. Indicators for the existence of ties between Armenia and Russia can be traced to economic cooperation and the Armenian dependence on working migrants in Russia. The Armenian vulnerability stems in part from the geopolitical position of Armenia but mostly from Russian involvement in the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict with Azerbaijan. While Armenia has employed a multivector foreign policy, an increasing dependence on Russia has affected the Armenian relationship with other regional actors.

## 6.7. Group 3: Kyrgyzstan

In the mid-1800s, the historically nomadic territory of Kyrgyzstan became part of the Russian Empire (Tchoroev, 2002). Following the Russian Revolution, the Kyrgyz national movement gained momentum in the early 20th century, leading to the establishment of the Kara-Kyrgyz Autonomous Oblast in 1924, which evolved into the Kyrgyz Socialist Soviet Republic in 1936 (Gleason et al., 2008). The Soviet period saw Kyrgyzstan transform into a specialized industrial region, although it remained predominantly agricultural. Within the Soviet Union, Kyrgyzstan was called the “agricultural basket” in the 1980s (Abazov, 1999). With industrialization, workers from other parts of the Soviet Union came to Kyrgyzstan. Kyrgyzstan experienced a large influx of Russians and Ukrainians in the 1920s and 1930s. After the Second World War, other ethnicities

arrived in Kyrgyzstan as working migrants (Germans, Turkish, Crimean Tatars, Greeks, and Koreans). Kyrgyzstan became one of the most diverse republics within the Soviet Union (Tchoroev, 2002). The influx of non-Kyrgyz ethnic groups during Soviet times led to a significant demographic shift, with ethnic Kyrgyz comprising only 52 percent of the population by 1989 (Abazov, 1999).

The path to independence was influenced by the broader post-Soviet nationalistic movements. Unlike many other Soviet republics, Kyrgyzstan's national identity was fluid, influenced by its nomadic history and fluctuating borders (Tchoroev, 2002). In 1991 Kyrgyzstan declared its independence and temporarily prohibited the activities of the Communist Party (Tchoroev, 2002). The first president, Akaev, faced numerous challenges, including economic instability and political unrest. Akaev's attempts to introduce market reforms and establish a pro-Western stance led to significant economic turmoil, including high inflation and poverty (Roget & Usmanlieva, 2010). His presidency, marked by increased authoritarianism and rigged elections, culminated in the Tulip Revolution of 2005, which forced him to resign (Huskey, 2008). In the early 1990s, Kyrgyzstan, like Armenia, was considered to be an "island of democracy" in the post-Soviet region. In the first years of Akaev's presidency, many democratic elements flourished: NGOs, social movements, independent media, and political parties (Pelkman, 2005). However, post-independence Kyrgyzstan struggled with poverty, ethnic tensions, and political instability. The interim government failed to introduce substantial reforms, leading to further unrest (Pétric, 2005). The non-democratic tendencies of Akaev grew during the mid-1990s. In 1994 Akaev dissolved the parliament and replaced its members with loyal supporters (Huskey, 2008). In 1995 he strengthened the powers of the president via a referendum. While his last presidential term was to end in 2000, he manipulated the constitutional court to allow him to run for president a third time (Spector, 2004).

The economic crisis after the fall of the Soviet Union hit Kyrgyzstan hard. The dependency on Russia and Uzbekistan regarding energy and transit routes continued in the early 1990s (Pétric, 2005). Russia was viewed as the Kyrgyz protector as the state was highly economically dependent on Russia and housed a quite large Russian population, and many Kyrgyz citizens worked in Russia (Gleason et al. 2008). The country's foreign policy shifted with its increased geopolitical importance following the 9/11 attacks, as it became a focal point in the US-led "War on Terror" (Namatbekova & Saliev, 2021). The US and Russia competed for influence, with Kyrgyzstan balancing its relations between these powers (Sart, 2012). Under President Bakiev, the country leaned more towards

Russia, although his tenure was marred by corruption and further economic difficulties, leading to another revolution in 2010 (Bohr, 2010).

Kyrgyzstan’s subsequent leadership continued to grapple with economic challenges and political instability. The balance between pro-Western and pro-Russian policies remained a key aspect of Kyrgyz foreign relations. Despite improvements in democratic practices, the country has faced recurring issues of authoritarianism, economic crises, and inter-ethnic conflicts. Non-democratic practices returned to the state with Jeenbekov. He was accused of election violations and vote buying in the 2020 parliamentary election. Large protests were organized, the election results were annulled, and Jeenbekov resigned in late 2020, marking the third revolution in Kyrgyz independent history (Namatbekova & Saliev, 2021). Kyrgyzstan’s reliance on Russia for economic and political support has been a consistent feature of its post-Soviet history, reflecting its complex geopolitical and domestic dynamics.

Based on the case study of Kyrgyzstan, chronological state-specific characteristics for the Kyrgyz case are presented in Table 27.

Table 27. Specific characteristics of Kyrgyz development	
Kyrgyzstan	Background
Nomadic heritage	Pre-independence
National movement	Pre-independence
Ethnically divided	Pre- and post-independence
The old regime in control at independence	Post-independence
“Democratic island” in the early 1990s	Post-independence
Communist party suspended	Post-independence
Ethnic conflicts	Post-independence
Weak national identity	Post-independence
Multivector foreign policy	Post-independence
Stalled political reforms	Post-independence
Economic reforms a priority	Post-independence
Non-democratic tendencies	Post-independence
High dependency on Russia	Post-independence
Russia viewed as a protector	Post-independence
Dependency on working migrants	Post-independence
Democratic revolutions	Post-independence
Geopolitical importance	Constant

Also considered a “democratic island”, Kyrgyzstan was rather Western-oriented at independence and pursued a multivector foreign policy. The international importance of Kyrgyzstan during the

War on Terror increased, and the state strengthened its cooperation with the US and other Western actors. Still, Kyrgyzstan became increasingly economically dependent on Russia and on the domestic working migrants working in Russia. Russia was also viewed as a protector against the IMU and the terrorist threat from Afghanistan. These dependencies imply the existence of ties between Russia and Kyrgyzstan as well as power asymmetries between Kyrgyzstan and Russia. Political development in Kyrgyzstan has been slow despite several democratic revolutions. The strength of the presidential powers has both decreased and increased over the last three decades.

## 6.8. Group 4: Tajikistan

The territory of Tajikistan has been important to various empires and was part of the Turkestan Autonomous Socialist Republic under Soviet rule (Gleason, 1999). Four socialist republics were created in 1924 in Central Asia after the Soviet land reform (Gleason, 1999). The Tajik Autonomous Oblast first belonged to the Uzbek Soviet Socialist Republic, but in 1929 it was given republic status as the Tajik Soviet Socialist Republic. Compared to other Soviet republics, Tajikistan had a lower level of social and economic development (Akbarzadeh, 1996). The state was a major cotton producer and predominantly an agricultural society. Clan structures were an important aspect of Soviet Tajikistan and have affected political development after independence (Akbarzadeh, 1996). The Soviet era saw Tajikistan remain relatively underdeveloped, with significant economic reliance on agriculture and a notable influence of clan structures (Akbarzadeh, 1996).

The late 1980s and early 1990s brought economic distress and rising nationalist sentiments amid the broader Soviet perestroika movement (Gleason, 1999). Tajikistan was the poorest of the Soviet republics, and under the leadership of Gorbachev economic development declined further. The level of unemployment was high, and the landlocked status of the state, as well as the lack of natural resources, contributed to negative economic development (Gleason, 1999). This period was marked by heightened political instability, ethnic tensions, and disputes over national identity, culminating in Tajikistan's declaration of independence in September 1991 (Akbarzadeh, 1996). In the spring of 1990, two important political parties emerged: the Democratic Party of Tajikistan and the Islamic Renaissance Party of Tajikistan. The Supreme Soviet prohibited political parties of a religious nature, which resulted in political chaos (Tadjabakhsh, 1994). Tajikistan had no previous experience of statehood, and even its borders within the Soviet Union had been altered several

times (Akbarzadeh, 1996). According to the last Soviet census in 1989, the ethnic composition of the state was 63 percent Tajik, 24 percent Uzbek, 14 percent Russian, and the rest were a combination of other ethnic minorities (Austen, 1996). A sizable Tajik minority also lived in Uzbekistan due to the changes in Soviet borders in the 1920s. While the other Central Asian states belonged to the Turkish sphere, the Tajik population had more in common with Iran, Pakistan, and the Middle East (Beeman, 1999).

The post-independence period was fraught with internal conflict, leading to a brutal civil war from 1992 to 1997. Russia became involved in the ceasefire in 1994, but the conflict remained unsettled. The conflict, driven by factional and ethnic divisions, ended with a peace accord in 1997, though it left Tajikistan in economic and political chaos (Austen, 1996; Olimov, 1999; Tadjabakhsh, 1994).

In the aftermath of the civil war, Tajikistan experienced severe economic difficulties, high poverty rates, and political instability. President Emomali Rahmon (formerly Rahmonov), who rose to power during the conflict, consolidated power and implemented policies that curtailed opposition and independent media (Abdullaev, 2018).

Despite reliance on Russian support, including military and economic aid, Rahmon sought to diversify Tajikistan's foreign relations, fostering closer ties with the United States, China, and regional partners (Engvall, 2014). The nation's dependence on remittances from Tajik migrant workers in Russia underscores its economic vulnerability. Tajikistan's relationship with Russia is also based on security and economic concerns (Abdullaev, 2018). The border with Afghanistan is a security threat to Tajikistan, the state has an unstable relationship with Uzbekistan, which goes back almost a century. Tajikistan has been highly dependent on remittances from Tajik workers in Russia (Olimov, 1999). In 2013, 48 percent of the Tajik GDP consisted of remittances from Russia, where over one million Tajiks worked (Shlapentokh, 2014). While highly dependent on Russia, Tajikistan has tried to increase its level of cooperation with other actors, for example with Iran, Turkey, and China (Shlapentokh, 2014). In 2020, Russia was the main trading partner of Tajikistan, followed by China and Kazakhstan (Abdullaev, 2018). No significant changes to the political and economic regime have been made since the independence of Tajikistan. A third constitutional amendment was approved in 2016, with 95 percent popular support, which enabled Rahmon to be re-elected an unlimited number of times. He was also given the title of "Leader of the Nation", and all religious political parties were banned (Abdullaev, 2018).

The complex relationship with Russia, marked by fluctuating cooperation and tensions, reflects Tajikistan's strategic importance and the ongoing struggle to balance external influences with

internal political stability. The persistence of authoritarian governance, coupled with economic dependence, continues to shape Tajikistan’s development trajectory and its regional positioning.

Based on the case study of Tajikistan, chronological state-specific characteristics for the Tajik case are presented in Table 28.

Table 28. Specific characteristics of Tajik development

Tajikistan	Background
National movement	Pre-independence
Popular support for independence	Pre-independence
Ethnically divided	Pre-independence
The old regime in control at independence	Post-independence
Civil war	Post-independence
Stalled political reforms	Post-independence
Early power concentration	Post-independence
Strong presidential powers	Post-independence
Russia involved as a peacekeeper/mediator	Post-independence
High Russian dependence	Post-independence
Dependency on working migrants	Post-independence

Tajikistan experienced a growing national and independence movement in the late 1980s and early 1990s. The state was, however, ethnically divided, and large-scale conflicts based on ethnic and regional heritage broke out and caused a civil war shortly after independence. Russia managed to accomplish a ceasefire and continued its military presence in Tajikistan after the civil war. The war left Tajikistan with severe economic problems, which Russia aided with economic and other forms of assistance. Tajikistan became heavily dependent on Russian economic and military support as a consequence of the war, implying the existence of economic and political ties as well as power asymmetries between the two states. The Tajik political reforms have stalled, and political power has been increasingly concentrated within the presidency.

6.9. Group 5: Azerbaijan

Initially part of the Persian Empire, Azerbaijan was significantly influenced by Persian culture and Islam. From the 15th to 19th centuries, Azerbaijan experienced relative coexistence with neighboring ethnic groups and resisted Ottoman invasions (Moreno, 2005). However, the 19th century saw a struggle between Russia and Persia over Caucasian dominance, culminating in the



1828 Treaty of Turkmenchay, which divided Azerbaijan between the two powers (Mehdiyeva, 2003). The northern region, now modern Azerbaijan, fell under Russian influence (Moreno, 2005). From 1918 to 1920, Azerbaijan briefly enjoyed independence as the Azerbaijan Democratic Republic, but it was subsequently incorporated into the Soviet Union (Sadri, 2003). The Azerbaijani SSR, later part of the Transcaucasian SFSR, was incorporated into the Soviet Union in 1936 (Brinegar, 2017). The diverse ethnic composition of Soviet Azerbaijan, which included Turks, Kurds, and others, resulted in a complex national identity, influenced by Persian, Turkish, and Russian cultures.

The Nagorno-Karabakh conflict significantly impacted the struggle for Azerbaijani independence. The conflict erupted in the late 1980s and intensified in 1990 with Soviet military intervention, which led to increased anti-Soviet sentiment and a drive for independence (Aslani, 2017). Following the dissolution of the Soviet Union, Azerbaijan declared its independence in August 1991 under President Mutalibov, who initially sought to balance relations with Russia and Turkey but faced significant internal and external challenges (Abilov & Isayev, 2015). The Nagorno-Karabakh conflict further strained Azerbaijani politics and foreign relations. Domestic strife, economic difficulties, and geopolitical tensions shaped Azerbaijan's foreign policy, including a contentious relationship with Russia. Azerbaijan's attempt to align more closely with Turkey and the West, coupled with disputes over Caspian Sea resources, exacerbated tensions with Russia (Abilov & Isayev, 2015; Cornell, 2006; Gul, 2008). The situation was further complicated by economic sanctions, military conflicts, and ongoing disputes with Armenia.

By the mid-1990s, Azerbaijan was near collapse but was stabilized under President Heydar Aliyev, who pursued pragmatic policies, including improved relations with Russia and efforts to attract foreign investment. Power became increasingly concentrated around Aliyev, whose presidential powers were further increased via constitutional referendums (Gul, 2008). Relations with Russia fluctuated, marked by conflicts over Chechen rebels and energy agreements (Aslani, 2017; Ipek, 2009). Domestically, Azerbaijan has prioritized economic development over political liberalization since the 1990s. Despite energy wealth, political conditions have remained non-democratic, with persistent corruption and poverty. International actors, including the US and the EU, have engaged with Azerbaijan primarily for its energy resources, often overlooking its democratic shortcomings (Swietochowska, 1999).

The year 2008 marked an important shift in Azerbaijani foreign policy due to two major events. First, Russia's invasion of Georgia (the Five-Day War) in August 2008 significantly altered the

geopolitical landscape in the South Caucasus and the post-Soviet space (Valiyev, 2017). The war led Azerbaijan to reassess its foreign policy, leading to a halt in its Western-oriented policies and heightened anti-Russian sentiments among its population. Azerbaijan maintained its support for Georgia, continuing trade and gas exports despite Russian sanctions. The threat of Russia recognizing Nagorno-Karabakh similar to South Ossetia and Abkhazia further strained relations, leading Azerbaijan to adopt a more independent foreign policy approach characterized by a process of “Finlandization” regarding its interactions with Russia (Abilov & Isayev, 2015; Valiyev, 2017). The second significant development in 2008 was the warming of relations between Turkey and Armenia, driven by EU and US pressure. Turkey’s lifting of its trade embargo and the subsequent agreements with Armenia led to increased anti-Western and anti-Turkish sentiments in Azerbaijan (Aslani, 2007).

In 2007 Azerbaijan established a national security policy prioritizing independence from military and economic dependencies. This led to Azerbaijan joining the Non-Alignment Movement in 2011 while continuing cooperation with NATO and the EU but avoiding Western membership (Abilov & Isayev, 2015). The Western interest in Azerbaijan has been mostly based on its vast oil resources and on seeing it as the key to regional stability in the South Caucasus. The EU and Azerbaijan have cooperated on transport and energy projects since the mid-2000s, and Azerbaijan became a member of the EaP in 2009. In 2017 Azerbaijan started negotiations for a new strategic partnership agreement with the EU, and a plan for a visa-free regime. Azerbaijan has also cooperated with NATO in its operations in Kosovo and Afghanistan.

Geopolitically, Azerbaijan’s position between Iran, Turkey, and Russia has significantly influenced its foreign policy and internal development. While the historical influence of Iran and Turkey remains, Azerbaijan’s relationship with Russia has been central in shaping its policies. The Nagorno-Karabakh conflict has been a major factor in its foreign policy, driving Azerbaijan to balance relations with major powers and maintain a strategic position in the South Caucasus. In 2020, following the 44-day war between Armenia and Azerbaijan, Azerbaijan claimed territorial control over Nagorno-Karabakh (Ibrahimov & Oztarsu, 2022). The country’s energy resources have also played a critical role in its economic and political development, with political liberalization taking a backseat to economic growth.

Based on the case study of Azerbaijan, chronological state-specific characteristics for the Azerbaijani case are presented in Table 29.

Table 29. Specific characteristics of Azerbaijani development

Azerbaijan	Background
Popular support for independence	Pre-independence
National movement	Pre-independence
Ethnic conflicts	Pre- and post-independence
Anti-Soviet feelings	Pre-and post-independence
The old regime in control at independence	Post-independence
Domestic conflict involving Russia	Post-independence
Stalled political reforms	Post-independence
Natural resources	Post-independence
Early power concentration	Post-independence
Strong presidential powers	Post-independence
Neutrality/non-alignment	Post-independence

The Soviet involvement in the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict contributed to the development of anti-Soviet feelings in Azerbaijan. After independence, relations with Russia became strained due to conflicts over natural resources and pipelines. No political reforms were performed in Azerbaijan due to early power concentration within the political elite and the presidential office. After the Russo-Georgian war in 2008 and the warmer relations between Armenia and Turkey, Azerbaijan became a neutral state and, since 2011, has belonged to the non-alignment movement. The policy of neutrality has decreased regional cooperation efforts between Azerbaijan and regional partners, implying decreasing cooperation with Russia.

## 6.10. Group 5: Uzbekistan

The historical territory of Uzbekistan, with its strategic location on the ancient spice route, saw various dominations, from Mongol invasions in the 13th century to the Russian annexation of the Emirate of Bukhara in the 19th century (Critchlow, 2018). The Soviet period saw Uzbekistan's territory divided into Soviet republics in 1924, with a focus on cotton production that led to severe environmental and social issues (Carlisle, 1991). In the late Soviet era, a growing nationalistic sentiment emerged, partly driven by dissatisfaction with the Soviet cotton policies and environmental destruction (Kurzman, 1999). The cotton disputes would continue up until the independence of Uzbekistan and taint its relations with both the Soviet Union and Russia (Carlisle, 1991). In 1990, almost 50 percent of the Uzbek population was living below the poverty line, almost 2 million were unemployed, almost half of the population had no access to clean drinking water, and a large part of the population had serious health problems due to the environmental

problems from the cotton production (Critchlow, 2018). This sentiment, combined with a push for the Uzbek language, set the stage for independence. Uzbekistan declared its sovereignty in 1990, with President Karimov navigating a complex political landscape that involved balancing their Soviet legacy with striving for economic and political stability (Critchlow, 2018).

After the declaration of independence, Karimov became the face of Uzbek nationalism: Uzbek values were promoted, and the Cyrillic alphabet was replaced with the Latin alphabet (Kurzman, 1999). While nationalism was weak in Uzbekistan before 1991, after 1991 it was developed by the state, not within the state. Karimov also began a shock-therapy transition from socialism to capitalism. Direct trade with other states was a priority, and economic development became far more important than political development (Kurzman, 1999). The 1992 constitution established separation of powers, but the president held almost absolute power (Sevim & Pozanov, 2014). Karimov controlled the foreign policy of Uzbekistan, the legislature, the economy, the registration of political parties, as well as all aspects of the election process. The political opposition was suppressed, and the practice of Islam within the population was controlled by the government. Domestic media was heavily controlled, internet sites blocked, religious political parties banned, and the Islamist movement outlawed (Kezami, 2003). While political reforms were stalled, economic reforms were a high priority. The high dependence on cotton during the Soviet period had left Uzbekistan in economic trouble (Carlisle, 1991). The cotton industry had become the sole industry of Uzbekistan, and this left the state with vast environmental problems and dependencies on other states. Uzbekistan is doubly landlocked and surrounded by five other states (Kezami, 2003). The geographical position of the state has made Uzbekistan dependent on other states for water resources, food, transportation, energy, and communications (Idan & Shaffer, 2013).

Post-independence, Uzbekistan's foreign policy swayed between Western and Russian alignment. Uzbekistan's relationship with Russia after its independence was complicated. While Uzbekistan highly valued its independence and sovereignty and strived for an independent foreign policy, it was also in need of Russian economic and security support (Pikalov, 2014). Initially pro-Western, particularly in the early 2000s, Uzbekistan's stance shifted after 2005 due to deteriorating relations with the US over human rights issues (Idan & Schaffer, 2013). The country then sought stronger ties with Russia, while maintaining a cautious and independent approach towards regional and global powers (Fazendeiro, 2017). In 2008, Uzbekistan published its new foreign policy concept (Fazendeiro, 2017). No foreign bases would be allowed to be stationed in Uzbekistan, there would be no memberships in any military blocs or participation in international peace-keeping operations, and no foreign mediations were allowed in regional conflicts in Central Asia. The new Uzbek policy

allowed Uzbekistan to conduct an autonomous foreign policy without Russian interference or dominance (Tolipov, 2013). Russia was still, however, considered Uzbekistan’s most important strategic partner (Idan & Shaffer, 2013).

This non-alignment approach included withdrawing from various Russian-led regional organizations and focusing on enhancing bilateral relations with both Russia and China. Under Karimov, Uzbekistan’s foreign policy was characterized by a non-aligned stance with strategic balancing (Tolipov, 2013). By 2012, it had fully embraced a non-alignment stance, seeking to maintain independence and stability in a complex geopolitical landscape. Following Karimov’s death in 2016, President Mirziyoyev emphasized economic development and regional cooperation, continuing the non-aligned foreign policy but with a greater focus on economic openness and improving relations with Central Asian neighbors, Russia, and China (Dadabaev, 2019a). As Russia is a priority of the new Uzbek foreign policy, there have been several new economic and military cooperation initiatives. In 2020, Russia was Uzbekistan’s second largest trading partner, after China (Dadabaev, 2019a). The most recent policy aims to boost exports, attract foreign investment, and enhance economic ties while maintaining strategic autonomy.

Based on the case study of Uzbekistan, chronological state-specific characteristics for the Uzbek case are presented in Table 30.

Table 30. Specific characteristics of Uzbek development

Uzbekistan	Background
Nomadic heritage	Pre-independence
Clan heritage	Pre-independence
Anti-Soviet feelings	Pre- and post-independence
National movement	Pre-independence
The old regime in control at independence	Post-independence
Stalled political reforms	Post-independence
Natural resources	Post-independence
Early power concentration	Post-independence
Strong presidential powers	Post-independence
Neutrality/non-alignment	Post-independence

Due to the environmental damages caused by the high concentration of the cotton industry in Uzbekistan during the USSR era, anti-Soviet feelings developed within the population and the political leadership. Soon after independence, the power concentration within the presidency began and the political reforms were not prioritized. The economic reforms due to the access to natural

resources were a priority of the Uzbek state. The Uzbek relationship with Russia was turbulent from the start and Uzbekistan was hesitant to get involved with cooperation projects with Russia, implying low levels of ties between the two states. Uzbek neutrality was formed in the late 2000s, and the state became a member of the non-alignment movement in 2012 further decreasing cooperation with regional actors.

## 6.11. Group 5: Turkmenistan

The traditional Turkmenistan consisted of highly hierarchical clans within different region (Al-Bassam, 2004; Horák, 2010). The late 19th-century Russian conquest introduced minimal integration efforts and faced persistent guerrilla resistance until the 1930s (Al-Bassam, 2004). Under Tsarist rule, the Ahalteke clan held significant power, which diminished following the 1917 revolution (Bohr, 2016). Soviet rule drastically transformed Turkmen society, unifying diverse clans and imposing new political structures (Horák, 2010). In 1924, the Turkmen Soviet Socialist Republic was established, initiating collectivization and industrialization efforts. Despite resistance and subsequent punitive measures from the Soviet center, significant aspects of Soviet control persisted into the 1930s (Horák, 2010). The 1969 appointment of Gapurov as First Secretary marked a shift towards pro-Russian policies and political consolidation, followed by Niyazov's rise to power in the 1980s (Horák, 2016; Stronski, 2017). Niyazov, while publicly endorsing Soviet reforms, effectively stifled any genuine reform movements and maintained an autocratic regime (Bohr, 2016). While the official message of Niyazov was of support for reforms and perestroika, within Turkmenistan the message was the opposite. While no great nationalist movement occurred in the 1980s, Niyazov put a stop to any attempt at reform (Bohr, 2016). Clan politics remained active in Turkmenistan and excluded any of the reform-minded politicians from gaining any important positions (Horák, 2016).

At the all-Union referendum in March 1991, with a voter turnout of almost 100 percent, 98 percent of the voters of Turkmenistan expressed their will to preserve the Soviet Union (Al-Bassam, 2004). However, in December 1991, Turkmenistan became independent (Polese et al., 2017). In December 1991, the Communist Party in Turkmenistan was dissolved, and the Democratic Party of Turkmenistan was born. Soon after, Niyazov was elected president with 99.5 percent of the votes (Polese et al., 2017). The goal of the newly independent Turkmenistan was, according to Niyazov, democracy and a market-based economy (Gleason, 2010). Niyazov's tenure post-

independence established a personalistic cult of leadership, characterized by centralization of power and a lack of meaningful political or economic reforms (Polese et al., 2017). A new constitution was approved in 1992 with extensive freedoms and rights for the population of Turkmenistan. Most of the sections of the constitution could, however, be subordinated by legislative law. Since the president was in control of all aspects of the political, legislative, and economic powers in Turkmenistan, the president had sole power to change the constitution (Nissman, 1994). The 1994 referendum extended his term, and in 1999 he was declared president for life (Polese et al., 2017).

The planned political and economic reforms in Turkmenistan did not become reality. At independence, Turkmenistan was one of the poorest states in the former Soviet Union (Bohr 2016). The agricultural industry had been underdeveloped during the last decade under Soviet rule due to a lack of water resources and environmental damage caused by the production of cotton. While Turkmenistan had vast resources of natural gas, the oil and gas industries had been controlled by the Central Soviet (Gleason, 2010). During the 1990s, Turkmenistan focused heavily on investments in infrastructure and the building of new pipelines and transportation routes to decrease its dependence on Russia (Pomfret, 2001). In 1992 Niyazov declared that Turkmenistan would adhere to the policy of multilateral disagreement. Since 1995, Turkmenistan has been a permanently neutral state, which has affected the state's foreign and economic policy greatly. The policy of neutrality has allowed Turkmenistan to largely isolate itself from the world (Sullivan, 2020).

Following Niyazov's death in 2006, his successor, Berdymukhamedov, maintained the autocratic system with only minimal changes to the constitution (Polese et al., 2017). In 2011, President Berdymukhamedov received the title of "Arkag" (protector), and "Hero of Turkmenistan" (Bohr, 2016). In 2016, the constitution and electoral code were amended as the 70-year age limit for presidential candidacy was removed and the presidential term extended to seven years. In 2017 Berdymukhamedov won the presidential election against his handpicked rivals with 98 percent of the vote (Polese et al., 2017). Turkmenistan continued to follow the policy of permanent neutrality under the new president, but Berdymukhamedov did make some changes in the Turkmen foreign and economic policy (Anschi, 2014). He increased the diplomatic activity with Russia, India, Turkey, Kazakhstan, Iran, and China (Anschi, 2014). The regime continued to prioritize isolationism and neutrality, focusing on maintaining relations with Russia, China, and other regional partners, while limiting engagement with broader international organizations (Stronski, 2017). Economic diversification efforts included increased energy exports to China and new pipeline projects (Sullivan, 2020).

Based on the case study of Turkmenistan, chronological state-specific characteristics for the Turkmen case are presented in Table 31.

Table 31. Specific characteristics of Turkmen development

Turkmenistan	Background
Clan heritage	Pre-independence
“Forced” independence	Pre-independence
The old regime in control at independence	Post-independence
Stalled political reforms	Post-independence
Early power concentration	Post-independence
Strong presidential powers	Post-independence
Natural resources	Post-independence
Neutrality/non-alignment	Post-independence

Turkmenistan is the most isolated of the post-Soviet states and has been a permanently neutral state since the early 1990s. The neutral stance of Turkmenistan implies little to no foreign regional influence. Stalled political development in Turkmenistan has resulted in early power concentration and strong presidential power.

### 6.12. Summary

When summarizing the state-specific characteristics of the eleven included post-Soviet states, different patterns emerge within, and across, the groups of states identified in the first analysis. Table 32 visualizes both the existence and absence of common characteristics between the included states, within and between the five groups of states. From the table, it is evident that some of the groups of states are vastly different in the characteristics they represent.

The existence, or absence, of characteristics varies within and across the groups of states. However, four of the five groups display unique characteristics, not identified within the other groups of post-Soviet states. Belarus and Kazakhstan share two unique characteristics in the post-Soviet region: being highly Sovietized and having close bonds with the USSR and Russia. Moldova, Georgia, and Ukraine share two unique characteristics. All three states did in the 1990s aim for cooperation with the EU as a foreign policy goal. While these states have had a more democratic development than the rest of the states included, they experienced power concentration within the



presidency during the beginning of the 2000s. The unique characteristic of Armenia and Kyrgyzstan is that they were considered democratic islands in the 1990s, followed by a non-democratic development. The fifth group (Azerbaijan, Uzbekistan, and Turkmenistan) has the unique characteristic of developing a stance of neutrality.

Apart from the group-specific unique characteristics, other characteristics vary among and between the five groups of states. Belarus and Kazakhstan have many characteristics in common with the third and fifth groups. Kyrgyzstan, Belarus, and Kazakhstan share the characteristic of having a weak national identity. Stalled political reforms, early power concentration, and strong presidential powers are shared with Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Azerbaijan, Uzbekistan, and Turkmenistan. The characteristic of being highly dependent on Russia is shared with Armenia, Kyrgyzstan, and Armenia. Every post-Soviet state, except for Moldova and Ukraine, did share the characteristic of having the old regime in control at independence.

The second group of states, Moldova, Georgia, and Ukraine, share most of their common characteristics with Armenia and to some degree Kyrgyzstan. The states of the third group experienced ethnic conflicts pre- and post-independence, as did Armenia, Kyrgyzstan, and Azerbaijan. Domestic conflicts involving Russia ties together the three states with Armenia, Azerbaijan, and Uzbekistan. The third and fourth groups of states all have a frozen conflict within their respective territories. Together with Armenia, Azerbaijan, and Kazakhstan, the states of the second group followed a multivector foreign policy. Moldova, Georgia, Ukraine, and Armenia share the development of non-democratic tendencies in the 2000s, as well as weakening presidential powers during the same time.

The third group, consisting of Armenia and Kyrgyzstan, has many characteristics in common with the three of the other groups. With the first group of states, Armenia and Kyrgyzstan share geopolitical importance and high levels of dependency on Russia. Moldova, Georgia, and Ukraine, the states share the existence of ethnic conflicts, with Georgia and Ukraine democratic revolutions. Armenia, Kyrgyzstan, and Tajikistan all share a dependency on working migrants living in Russia as well as the view of Russia as being a protector of their nations.

Tajikistan, the sole member of the fourth group of post-Soviet states has no unique characteristics but has common characteristics with all other groups. Stalled political reforms, early power concentration, and strong presidential powers are shared with the states of the first and fifth groups as well as Kyrgyzstan. High dependence on Russia is shared with the first and third groups and with Ukraine. Popular support for independence and a national movement is shared with the second group as well as parts of the third and fifth groups. The view that Russia is a protector and

the Russian involvement as a mediator or peacekeeper is shared with Armenia and Kyrgyzstan. With the fifth group of states, Tajikistan shares clan heritage.

The fifth group of states has few characteristics in common with the other groups. With Belarus and Kazakhstan, they share stalled political reforms, early power concentration, and strong presidential powers as well as prioritizing economic development. The access to natural resources the three states share with Kazakhstan.

Table 32. Common characteristics identified within the post-Soviet region (● indicates existence, ° indicates absence, yellow indicates unique characteristic per group).

Characteristic	BEL	KAZ	MDA	GEO	UKR	ARM	KGZ	TDZ	AZE	UZB	TKM
Nomadic heritage	°	●	°	°	°	°	●	°	°	●	●
Clan heritage	°	●	°	°	°	°	°	●	°	●	°
Highly Sovietized	●	●	°	°	°	°	°	°	°	°	°
Close bonds with Russia and the USSR	●	●	°	°	°	°	°	°	°	°	°
Anti-Soviet feelings	°	°	°	°	°	●	°	°	●	●	°
Ethnically divided	°	●	°	°	●	°	●	●	°	°	°
Weak national identity	●	°	°	°	°	°	°	●	°	°	°
Popular support for independence	°	°	●	●	●	●	°	●	●	°	°
National movement	°	°	●	●	●	°	°	●	°	°	°
Ethnic conflicts	°	°	●	●	●	●	°	°	●	°	°
“Forced” independence	●	●	°	°	°	°	°	°	°	°	●
The old regime in control at independence	●	°	°	●	°	●	°	°	°	°	●
Communist Party suspended	°	°	●	°	°	°	°	°	°	●	°
Democratic island in the 1990s	°	°	°	°	°	°	°	°	°	°	°
Geopolitical importance	●	°	°	°	°	●	●	°	°	°	°
Large Russian minority/minority in Russia	°	●	°	°	●	●	°	°	°	°	°
Natural resources	°	●	°	°	°	°	°	°	●	●	●
Stalled political reforms	●	°	°	°	°	°	●	●	°	°	°
Early power concentration	●	°	°	°	°	°	°	°	°	°	°
Strong presidential powers	●	°	°	°	°	°	°	°	°	°	°
High dependency on Russia	●	°	°	°	°	●	°	°	°	°	°
Dependency on working migrants	°	°	°	°	°	°	°	°	°	°	°
“Forced” independence	●	°	°	°	°	°	°	°	°	°	°
Economic development a priority	●	°	°	°	°	°	°	°	°	°	°
Civil war	°	●	°	°	°	°	°	°	°	°	°
Domestic conflicts involving Russia	°	°	●	●	°	°	°	°	°	°	°
Russia involved as a peacekeeper/mediator	°	°	●	°	°	°	°	°	°	°	°
Frozen conflict	°	°	°	°	°	°	°	°	°	°	°
Russia viewed as a protector	°	°	°	°	°	°	°	°	°	°	°
Multivector foreign policy	°	●	°	°	°	°	°	°	°	°	°
EU cooperation as a foreign policy goal	°	°	●	●	°	°	°	°	°	°	°
Non-democratic tendencies	°	°	●	●	°	°	°	°	°	°	°
Power concentration within the presidency	°	°	●	●	°	°	°	°	°	°	°
Weak/declining presidential powers	°	°	°	°	°	°	°	°	°	°	°
Democratic revolution	°	°	°	°	°	°	°	°	°	°	°
Neutrality/non-alignment	°	°	°	°	°	°	°	°	°	°	°

As characteristics of each state, and the groups of states, have now been presented, the following subchapter connects these to relevant variables for the comparative analysis.

### 6.13. Variables for comparative analysis

The aim of the exploratory case studies is to identify complementary factors for the varying democratic development in the included post-Soviet states. The theoretical framework highlights four relevant aspects regarding the possible impact of international factors for regime transitions: the influence of external actors, different ties to the external actor, the level of vulnerability to external pressure, and the role of domestic political actors in the thinning or thickening of external influence. The state-specific characteristics derived from the case studies are used to find indications of the existence of these aspects in the post-Soviet states. By using exploratory case studies combined with process tracing, one can gain a deeper understanding of the included cases and find relevant variables for further analyses. Tracing the developments of individual states, patterns, or particular events can deepen the understanding of processes and their results (Mahoney, 2001).

The current subchapter focuses on the discussion of relevant complementary variables. The results of the exploratory case studies show state-specific characteristics of each of the included post-Soviet states as well as common characteristics within and across the five groups of states. These characteristics are used to identify relevant variables that have possibly influenced the democratic development of the post-Soviet states. Since the thesis examines the influence of external actors, specifically Russia, and its use of non-democratic regional organizations as a tool for exerting influence, this focus must be considered when selecting relevant variables. The state-specific characteristics identified in the case studies correspond to variables identified in previous literature on democratization and regionalism. The subchapter continues with a discussion of the choice of complementary variables based on the exploratory case studies.

Using Table 32 as a basis, several characteristics of the post-Soviet region are of interest when identifying complementary variables for their varying democratic development. The characteristics indicate the existence of all four aspects of interest from the theoretical framework. As for leverage, the level of vulnerability for external Russian influence, several characteristics point to its presence, or absence, in the region. As power asymmetries and dependencies are evident in many of the case

studies, these aspects are regarded as important. Geopolitical importance to Russia is also evident in several cases, as are domestic conflicts involving Russia. Other important aspects found in the case studies include the level of ties (linkages) between some of the post-Soviet states and Russia in the form of common culture, language, and history. While some states have held on to these connections with Russia, others have actively tried to decrease the bonds with Russia, either by expressing negative feelings towards Russia or the USSR or by turning to neutrality. Another aspect, connected to regionalism and theories of democratization, is the level of cooperation with other regional actors. Within the post-Soviet region, both high and low levels of cooperation with other actors exist. While some states have concentrated their cooperation solely to working with Russia, others have prioritized a multivector foreign policy or extensive cooperation with the EU. Lastly, indications of influence of domestic political elites can be seen throughout the case studies, particularly regarding the role of the power of the president. In many of the post-Soviet states, stalled political reforms and power concentration within the presidency were visible. While other interesting characteristics also can be found in the case studies, the characteristics discussed above are the most relevant due to their connection to the aim of the thesis.

The main analytical variables within the case studies are hence drawn from the results of the exploratory case studies supported by previous research regarding post-Soviet transitions and the theory of linkage and leverage (see Chapter 3). The included variables are *Russian leverage, linkages to Russia*, the choice of *cooperation with other external regional actors*, as well as the *strength of the presidential powers*. While three of the included variables are connected to the influence of external actors (Russia or others), the final variable, the strength of the presidential powers, is inductively drawn from the results of the exploratory case studies. Research suggests that power concentration of the executive is one of the most important factors endangering democracy, both in established democracies as well as in non-democratic regimes (Lührmann et al., 2018; Wiebrecht et al., 2023).

Table 33 describes the state-specific characteristics found in the case studies and the corresponding variable from previous literature.

As relevant complementary variables have been identified from the exploratory case studies, a theoretical discussion regarding them is necessary within the current chapter. The included characteristics and their corresponding variables are discussed next.

Table 33. Characteristics within the region, their effects and the corresponding variables.

Characteristics and their effect	Corresponding variable	Based in:
High dependency on Russia + Geopolitically important to Russia + Economic dependence on Russia + Domestic conflict involving Russia + Russia viewed as a protector + Russia peacekeeper + Dependency on working migrants + Frozen conflict + Neutrality/non-alignment Natural resources -	Leverage	Historical and current power asymmetries and geopolitics
Highly Sovietized + Close bonds with Russia + Russian diaspora/minority in Russia + Economic dependence on Russia + Anti-Soviet feelings - Neutrality/non-alignment -	Linkage	Common background, history, language, culture
Multivector foreign policy + EU cooperation as a foreign policy goal + Neutrality/non-alignment -	Cooperation with other regional actors	Having additional regional cooperation partners
Strong presidential powers + Stalled political reforms + Early power concentration + Authoritarian tendencies + The old regime in control + Power concentration + Weak/declining presidential powers -	Strong presidential powers	The amount of power invested in the office by the constitution

Russian leverage can be seen in the form of power asymmetries and dependence on Russia (political, economic, or security/military), and the geopolitical importance of the target state from a Russian perspective. Having had a domestic conflict with Russia, a frozen conflict, Russia being involved in a ceasefire or as a peacekeeper, implies that Russia can have military or diplomatic leverage. Dependency on working migrants implies economic dependence while having large domestic natural resources can imply a lack of Russian economic leverage. Linkages between Russia and the post-Soviet states are also evident. High Sovietization and close bonds with Russia imply linkages between Russia and the post-Soviet states, as does having a Russian minority within another state's territory, a domestic minority in Russia, or being economically dependent on Russia. On the contrary, neutrality and anti-Soviet/Russian feelings imply low levels of linkage to Russia. A multivector foreign policy and having EU cooperation as a foreign policy goal implies that there is *cooperation with other regional allies*. Neutrality implies low levels of cooperation with other regional actors. As for the influence of the domestic political elite, the *strength of the presidential powers* is deemed to be a relevant variable in the post-Soviet region. This variable is important since stalled

political reforms, the old regime in control, early authoritarian tendencies, and power concentration are viewed to precede strong presidential powers.

These four variables are analyzed in Chapter 7 in order to identify common traits among the post-Soviet states as complementary variables for their democratic development. The logic behind the connection between the included variables, a state’s NDRO membership level, and the existence or non-existence of autocratic consolidation is summarized in Table 34.

Table 34. The connections between the variables, NDRO membership level, and autocratic consolidation (self-compiled)

High NDRO membership level	=	Autocratic consolidation
Which is in turn associated with:		Which in turn is associated with:
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• High leverage</li> <li>• High linkage</li> <li>• Low cooperation with others</li> </ul>		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Strong presidential powers</li> </ul>
Low NDRO membership level	=	No autocratic consolidation
Which is in turn associated with:		Which in turn is associated with:
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Low leverage</li> <li>• Low linkage</li> <li>• High cooperation with others</li> </ul>		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Weak presidential powers</li> </ul>

Regarding the association between high NDRO membership levels and autocratic consolidation, the connection between the included variables is shortly discussed next. High Russian leverage, high levels of linkages to Russia, as well as low levels of cooperation with other regional external actors, are associated with high NDRO membership levels. High levels of Russian leverage add vulnerability to target states and can increase exposure to Russian external influence. High levels of linkages to Russia add connectiveness and can increase the level of cooperation due to a higher level of similarity between the target states and Russia. Low levels of cooperation with other regional external actors reduce the possibility of other actors than Russia influencing the target state, possibly leading to either isolation or high dependency on Russia. These conditions are associated with high NDRO membership levels, which is associated with autocratic consolidation. Autocratic consolidation can be evident in the strength of the presidential powers. Strong, or super strong, presidential systems are associated with autocratic consolidation due to high levels of power concentration within the presidential office.

However, the association between low NDRO membership levels and non-autocratic consolidation involves the same conditions. Low Russian leverage reduces the vulnerability of the target states regarding the external influence of Russia. Low levels of linkages to Russia can reduce

the sense of similarity between Russia and the target state and, in turn, also the will to cooperate with each other. High levels of cooperation with other external actors might increase the possibility of other external influences reaching the target state, and either balancing or lessening the Russian external influence. These three conditions are associated with low NDRO membership levels and, in turn, no autocratic consolidation. No autocratic consolidation is again associated with weaker presidential powers and reduced abilities for power concentration within the presidency. Some assumptions can be made if the variables are evident or non-evident in the included cases. Table 35 summarizes the assumptions of whether the included variables are either high or low.

Table 35. Variables included within the cross-case analysis, and the assumptions of high or low.

<b>Variable:</b>	<b>Based in:</b>	<b>Assumption if high:</b>	<b>Assumption if low:</b>
Leverage	Historical and current power asymmetries and geopolitics	Increases vulnerability, more likely for a state to be affected by external influence	Decreases vulnerability, less likely for a state to be affected by external influence
Linkage	Common background, history, language, culture	Increases the sense of similarity, more likely to cooperate with the external actor	Decreases the sense of similarity, less likely to cooperate with the external actor
Cooperation with other regional actors	Having several regional cooperation partners	An alternative regional ally may balance and reduce the level of external influence, less likely to be highly dependent on any actor	No alternative regional ally may lead to isolation or high vulnerability, more likely to be highly dependent on any actor
Strong presidential power	The amount of power invested in the office by the constitution	Power concentration within the presidency, more likely to contribute to an autocratic development	A more balanced power distribution and less power concentration, less likely to contribute to an autocratic development

The assumption is that high levels of leverage increase the vulnerability of the target states, possibly increasing the effectiveness of external influence. If the levels of leverage are low, however, the vulnerability of, and the effectiveness of, the external influence is decreased. High levels of linkages presumably increase the feeling of similarity between target states and the external actor, which should increase the willingness for regional cooperation. Low levels of linkages reduce the sense of similarity affecting the will to cooperate on a regional level. High levels of cooperation with another regional actor are likely to reduce the dependence on one single external actor, while no regional allies leave the target state more vulnerable. Lastly, strong presidential powers are assumed to contribute to a more autocratic development due to power concentration. Weak presidential



powers are assumed to be less associated with autocratic consolidation due to a more balanced distribution of power.

Based on the case studies and the previous scholarly literature, four relevant complementary variables have been identified. The next chapter focuses on a cross-case comparative analysis of these variables within the five groups of post-Soviet states. The chapter begins with a discussion of the included variables and the scoring system and continues the analysis of the included states.

## Chapter 7. Cross-case comparative analysis

As the variables, and their theoretical background, have been identified, and the assumptions of high or low and as the connections between the variables and the outcome variable of the thesis are discussed above, the next subchapter discusses the variables and the scoring of them in more detail. The main part of this chapter is devoted to the cross-case analysis of the eleven states within the five groups. The chapter includes a discussion of the scoring of the variables (7.1), a cross-case analysis of the included states (subchapters 7.2 to 7.5), and a summary of the findings from the second analysis (7.6).

### 7.1. Scoring of the included variables

The logic behind the scoring of the included complementary variables is presented and discussed in the current subchapter.

The four points in time (1995, 2005, 2015, and 2021) used in the second and third analysis are based on two main criteria: first, an even temporal spacing of approximately ten years to enable structured comparison over time; and second, their alignment with the growth of the number of regional organizations in the post-Soviet region. In 1995, a few years after the dissolution of the Soviet Union, only one NDRO was active, the CIS. In 2005, the number of NDROs had increased with the addition of the CSTO and EurAsEC. Ten years on in 2015, the number of regional NDROs had risen to seven. The final year, 2021, was included to provide a contemporary reference point, as close to the present as possible.

Three dimensions related to leverage are included in the analysis: power asymmetry, competing issues, and geographical closeness to the main external actor as well as counterbalancing regional external actors. The transformation from democratic to non-democratic leverage is briefly summarized next and discussed further in Section 3.6.3. Asymmetry as a dimension of power concerns the relationship of strength between the external actor and the target state. Strong target states (military and economic powers) are less vulnerable to external pressure compared to weak states. High levels of leverage are thus associated with the existence of power asymmetry. Competing issues concern how the external actor views the economic or geopolitical importance

of the target states. If the target state is highly important due to economic or geopolitical reasons, leverage is increased. The closeness to both the main external actor and counterbalancing regional actors also affects the level of leverage. If the main external actor is geographically close to the target state, for example if they share a border, the security risk regarding military interventions increases. If a target state is geographically close to a strong counterbalancing regional external actor, the threat perception increases the level of leverage.

The *level of Russian leverage* (the level of vulnerability to external pressure from Russia) includes three dimensions: economic and military strength, competing issues, and geographical closeness to both Russia and counterbalancing regional actors. High levels of leverage are represented with a score of 1 for the four different periods of time (1995, 2005, 2015, and 2021). Medium (declining or increasing) levels of leverage are represented with a score of 0.5, while low levels of leverage are represented with a score of 0. High levels of power asymmetry are seen in cases where a large power symmetry existed based on military and/or economic strength, and low levels are seen in cases where the target state had a powerful position. High levels of competing issues are seen in cases with high economic or/and geopolitical importance to Russia, low levels in cases where no compromising issues existed. High levels of closeness to other external actors are seen in states geographically close to Russia and, from a Russian point of view, counterbalancing regional powers, and low levels to cases distant from counterbalancing regional external powers.

The condition of *linkages to Russia* is also evaluated and scored. There are five dimensions of linkage (Way & Levitsky 2006; Tolstrup 2014): economic, geopolitical, social, communication or information, and transnational civil social linkage. However, only three of them are included. Since geopolitical linkage is defined as ties to alliances and organizations, it is excluded due to the similarity of the NDRO condition. Transnational civil society linkage is also excluded since it is deemed irrelevant for the analysis by its definition of including religious networks, party organizations, and NGOs. Economic linkages are based on the levels of economic relationship between the external actor and target state regarding credit, investments, economic assistance, and patterns of import and export. Social linkage includes tourism, migration, diaspora communities, and education abroad. Informational linkage concerns cross-border telecommunication, internet connections, and foreign media penetration. Within the analysis of the level of linkages, certain aspects are highlighted within the three included dimensions. Within economic linkage, there are economic dependencies between the states regarding economic assistance and trade relations. Within social linkage, there is working migration to Russia from the target state as well as the

existence of diaspora communities. And within Informational linkage, there is the existence, and use, of Russian-owned media in the target state and the use of the Russian language.

The levels of linkages to Russia (the density of ties to Russia and Russian-dominated multilateral institutions) include three dimensions: economic, social, and information. High levels of linkages are represented with a score of 1 for the four different periods of time (1995, 2005, 2015, and 2021) regarding the three dimensions of linkages. Medium (declining or increasing) levels of linkages are represented with a score of 0.5, while low levels of linkages are represented with a score of 0. Cases where great economic dependence on Russia exists have high levels of economic linkage, and cases where low economic dependence exists have low levels. Cases with a high level of work migration to Russia and cases with a substantial diaspora from the target state living in Russia have high levels of social linkage. Cases with no work migration to Russia and with no substantial diaspora in Russia have low levels. Cases with Russian-owned media and cases where the Russian language has an important position have high levels of Informational linkage, and cases where the Russian language does not have a high status and where Russian-owned media does not have an important position have low levels.

*Cooperation with other regional external actors* is also included as a variable. If a target state has alternative regional external actors as a strategic partner, it can more likely afford to dismiss Russian external pressure. If no other regional allies exist, the target state cannot afford to dismiss Russian external pressure and is therefore more exposed to it. If the alternative regional external actor is democratic, democratic influence or pressure can be applied to the target state, possibly increasing the likelihood of democratic development. The level of cooperation with other regional external actors means that the post-Soviet state does have other regional allies and cooperation partners. If they do not have high levels of cooperation with other external actors, a score of 0 is given, if a medium level of cooperation exists a score of 1 is given, and a high level of cooperation with other external actors is given a score of 2.

As the theoretical foundations of the first three variables have been previously discussed in the theoretical framework, the last variable, and a brief theoretical discussion, are presented next. The last included condition is the *strength of the presidential powers* according to the constitutional design. The scholarly debate regarding the effect of the constitutional system on democratization and autocratization has long traditions and has been developed as new states have gained their independence. The constitutional choices of the new post-communist states received much attention from researchers interested in democratic consolidation (Kasapovic, 1996). According to

Lijphart (1991), the main choices of newly independent states included deciding on an electoral system and the relationship between the executive and the legislative branches. The literature on constitutional design concludes there are many different constitutional systems and differences in how to classify and interpret them. The variation between and among the groups of systems is vast which, in turn, makes the comparison and measurement of constitutional systems difficult (Frye, 1999; Doyle & Elgie, 2015).

The two main systems are the parliamentary and presidential systems. Scholars who have studied the possible association between constitutional design and democracy have found that the results depend on the regional context, which states are included in the comparison, and how the systems are defined (Frye, 1999). Stepan and Skach (1993), who studied a sample of states over a shorter time period, found that presidential systems were harmful to new democracies, while parliamentary systems correlated with democratic consolidation. However, Power and Gasiorowski (1997), when studying 56 developing states, found little or no support for the claim that parliamentarism leads to democracy and presidentialism to higher degrees of conflict (Ishiyama & Velten, 1998).

Regarding the post-communist region, Ferraro Jr. (2021) states, based on previous research, that the institutional choices of the newly independent states had implications for their democratic development. The general pattern in the region was that presidential systems developed in states with weak political opposition and where the communist elites remained consolidated. A parliamentary system developed in states where the political opposition was stronger and where the communist elites were weakened. The prospects of democratization were higher in the states developing a parliamentary system due to the association between weak presidential power, strong parliaments, and democracy (Ferraro Jr., 2021).

The literature has found advantages and disadvantages of both systems. The advantages of parliamentarism are considered to include more inclusiveness, greater flexibility (especially regarding the challenges for newly independent states), and being more suitable for democratic development (growth of political opposition, political coalitions, and the ability to compromise) (Kasapovic, 1996; Linz, 1985). Presidentialism has the advantage of providing a guarantee for the executive government in new states. The disadvantage of a presidential system is the concept of the “winner takes it all”, which can entail the exclusion of large groups of the society, the system is viewed to enhance political polarization and to weaken the compromise-oriented process of decision-making (Kasapovic, 1996; Linz, 1985).

Aside from the parliamentary and presidential systems, different systems of semi-presidentialism exist in the continuum between the two main systems. *Super-presidentialism*, a hardcore form of presidentialism in which the presidential powers are extensive, has developed in some post-Soviet states. The rapid dissolution of the Soviet Union is the background for the constitutional choices throughout the post-Soviet region. Generally, at the end of the Soviet era, the post-Soviet states had no opposition that could negotiate a new power distribution. The political debate often remained within the dominant communist party, affecting the development of the new institutionalized framework. In many cases within the post-Soviet region, the institution of the presidency became a successor to the Supreme Soviet (Frison-Roche, 2007; p. 57–58). All post-Soviet states except Moldova recycled elements from the Soviet era and chose a semi-presidential or presidential system with a powerful role of the presidency (Frison-Roche, 2007; Blondel, 2012). The specific nature of the constitutional choice for each state is closely related to the specific domestic circumstances after the dissolution of the USSR. At the beginning of the 1990s, constitutional amendments occurred in many of the states and, later on, a divide regarding the strength of the presidential powers emerged among the states (Blondel, 2012, p. 33).

While many measurements of presidential powers exist (see for example Frye, 1997; Ishiyama, 1995; Cheibub, 2007), for the aim of the thesis, I use a simple typology consisting of four constitutional types as the framework for scoring the presidential powers (parliamentary, semi-presidential, presidential, and super-presidential). Most measurements of presidential strength have weaknesses regarding the scale used, the validity of the measurement, and the basis for the scoring (using either only the constitution or behavioral powers as the source) (Doyle & Elgie, 2015). The typology used is based on the typology of Sedelius (2006), which is based on typologies by Hadenius (2001), Johannsen (2000), Sartori (1997), and Shugart and Carey (1992). Table 36 presents the main features of parliamentary, semi-presidential, and presidential systems.

Table 36. Main features of parliamentary, semi-presidential, and presidential systems (Sedelius, 2006, p. 32).

Main features	Parliamentarism	Semi-presidentialism	Presidentialism
Dependence	Mutual dependence between executive and legislature. Government accountable to parliament	Mutual independence (president-legislature) and mutual dependence (cabinet-legislature)	Mutual independence of executive and legislature. Government accountable to the president.
Executive	The prime minister (head of government) leads the executive. The head of state, president or monarch, upholds merely symbolic functions	The president (head of state) shares executive powers with the prime minister (head of government) and her cabinet.	The president is the chief executive (head of government and head of state)
Legislature, citizen accountability	The legislature is popularly elected. The executive is entitled to dissolve the legislature (usually in conjunction with the head of state or speaker of parliament). The executive is not popularly elected	The legislature is popularly elected. The president is popularly elected for a fixed term. The president may have power to dissolve parliament (which contradicts the mutual independence notion above)	The legislature is popularly elected for a fixed term. The president is popularly elected for a fixed term

Super-presidentialism is added to the framework as well since many of the post-Soviet states have a presidential system with strengthened presidential powers via constitutional changes. The additional type of super-presidentialism is based on Stykow (2019). To be defined as a super-presidential system, two dimensions are added to the presidential system: constitutional amendment increasing presidential powers, and amendments affecting the term limits for the presidential office or unlimited reelection for the president. The scoring of the condition of presidential power is based on the constitutional system of the included states for the years 1995, 2005, 2015, and 2021. A super-presidential system is given a score of 3, a presidential system is given a score of 2, a semi-presidential system (both premier-presidential and president-parliamentary systems are typed as semi-presidential) is given a score of 1, while a parliamentary system is given the score of 0.

The results of the scoring of the included variable per included year based on the exploratory case studies are summarized. The developments within the included states are analyzed, using the elements of process tracing, to find processes that played a part in the outcome in question. The variables scored according to the insights from the exploratory case studies, result in a score per state, per included year of analysis, and variable. The number of N is, as a result, increased from 11 (each n is a post-Soviet state) to 44 (each n is the score per included state per the four time periods included). These scores are used as the basis for the calibration of conditions in the following analysis, the fuzzy-set qualitative comparative analysis (QCA).

The next part of the chapter includes a cross-case comparative analysis of the five groups of states identified within the first analysis. The scores for each group are summarized, discussed, and compared at the end of the chapter.

## 7.2. Belarus and Kazakhstan

Table 37 outlines the development regarding the variables in Belarus and Kazakhstan between 1995 and 2021. Throughout this period, Belarus consistently exhibited high levels of leverage (3) and linkages (3), and strong presidential powers (3), and had little to no cooperation with other states (0). There were no significant changes in these variables from 1995 to 2021. Kazakhstan started with high leverage (3) and linkages (3), and strong presidential powers (3) in 1995, but by 2005, leverage had gradually decreased to 2, where it remained steady thereafter. Linkages had also slightly dropped to 2.5 by 2015, and they stayed at that level through 2021. Cooperation with others, while minimal in 1995 (0), had slightly increased to 1 by 2005, and it remained the same through 2021. Both states maintained strong presidential powers (3) over the years. Belarus remained more static across all variables, while Kazakhstan experienced slight decreases in leverage and linkages, and a minor increase in cooperation with others.

Table 37 presents the scores for the two states.

Table 37. Score for Belarus and Kazakhstan

State and year	Leverage	Linkages	Cooperation with others	Strength of the presidential powers
Belarus				
1995	3	3	0	3
2005	3	3	0	3
2015	3	3	0	3
2021	3	3	0	3
Kazakhstan				
1995	3	3	0	3
2005	2	3	1	3
2015	2	2.5	1	3
2021	2	2.5	1	3



In terms of leverage, Belarus consistently exhibited high levels across all dimensions during the four specified years. The power asymmetry between Belarus and Russia remains significant, as Belarus lacks substantial economic and military strength. However, Belarus holds considerable importance to Russia for both economic and geopolitical reasons. Economically, Belarus serves as a vital transit state for Russian oil exports and a major importer of Russian goods. Geopolitically, its location, surrounded by EU and NATO members, makes Belarus a crucial buffer state for Russia to the west. The fact that Belarus also shares a direct border with Russia further enhances its geopolitical significance. In contrast, Russian leverage over Kazakhstan has declined over time, though it remains relatively high. In the early 1990s, Kazakhstan was heavily dependent on Russia for its oil exports, particularly for pipelines and refining, which created a greater power asymmetry between the two states. As Kazakhstan developed alternative export routes and adopted a more multivector foreign policy, this asymmetry diminished. Nonetheless, Kazakhstan remains economically and geopolitically important to Russia. Russia maintains vested interests in Kazakhstan's oil industry, and Kazakhstan acts as a strategic buffer to China. Furthermore, Russia's reliance on military bases located in Kazakh territory underscores the continued significance of Kazakhstan to Russian strategic interests. Kazakhstan's landlocked geography, bordering both Russia and China, has also influenced Russian leverage, particularly as the relationship between these two major regional powers has evolved.

Belarus has maintained consistently high levels of linkages with Russia throughout the entire analyzed period. Economically, Belarus has been heavily dependent on Russia, benefiting from substantial economic aid, preferential pricing for Russian oil and gas, and relying on Russia as its primary trading partner since the 1990s. Socially, Belarus and Russia are interconnected through a significant flow of Belarusian migrant workers to Russia and the presence of a substantial ethnically Russian population within Belarus. Linguistically, Russian is widely spoken and holds official status alongside Belarusian, reflecting its prominence in Belarusian society. Since the early 1990s, Russian media has played a dominant role in Belarus, further reinforcing the strong cultural and informational ties between the two nations. Similarly, Kazakhstan has maintained significant linkages with Russia, though to a lesser degree than Belarus. Trade between the two countries has remained substantial, and the large ethnic Russian minority in Kazakhstan has contributed to enduring social connections. The Russian language and media have also held a prominent position in Kazakhstan. However, following Russia's annexation of Crimea in 2014, Kazakhstan has taken steps to strengthen its national identity. In 2012, a new media law aimed to increase domestic media production in the Kazakh language, thereby reducing its informational dependence on Russia. Belarus and Kazakhstan share many historical and cultural linkages with Russia, as two of the most

Sovietized states in the region. However, while Kazakhstan has worked to diminish some of these linkages by fostering its own cultural identity and language over the past decade, Belarus has remained closely tied to Russia across economic, social, and linguistic dimensions since gaining independence.

Belarus and Kazakhstan have exhibited differing levels of cooperation with external regional actors. Kazakhstan, through its multivector foreign policy, has effectively balanced Russian influence with that of other external powers, whereas Belarus has remained largely isolated from regional actors outside of Russia. In Belarus, cooperation with other regional external actors has consistently been minimal. The country's political, economic, and military dependence on Russia has deepened, leaving it isolated from broader regional engagement. Following the negative democratic developments in Belarus during the mid-1990s, the EU reduced its cooperation with the country, further isolating it and limiting its external partnerships with Russia and other CIS countries. In contrast, Kazakhstan has actively pursued a multivector foreign policy, which has facilitated a more balanced cooperation with various regional actors. As Kazakhstan's oil industry expanded, attracting foreign interest, the country has successfully navigated competing influences from Russia, China, and Western powers. This balancing act has been bolstered by Kazakhstan's economic development and its abundant natural resources, enabling the country to assert a degree of autonomy in its external relations.

The presidential powers in both Belarus and Kazakhstan have remained consistently strong, with elements of super-presidentialism evident throughout their political histories. In Belarus, presidential authority has been dominant since the introduction of the presidential office in the 1994 constitution. Alexander Lukashenko elected as the first (and only) president in 1994, further consolidated his powers through a series of constitutional amendments, often enacted via popular referendums. The first amendment in 1995 enhanced economic integration with Russia, granted equal status to the Russian language and allowed the president to dissolve parliament under specific circumstances. A subsequent amendment in 1996 transformed the Belarusian parliament from unicameral to bicameral and extended the presidential term, while a 2004 amendment abolished presidential term limits altogether. These changes significantly weakened other branches of government, establishing a super-presidential system that persisted throughout the period analyzed.

In Kazakhstan, the presidency has also held dominant power since the adoption of the 1995 constitution, which vested the president with authority over both domestic and foreign policy,

surpassing the powers of the other branches of government. A constitutional amendment in 2007 increased the president's term limits, though an additional attempt to further extend these limits was blocked by the Constitutional Court in 2011 following international pressure. In 2010, President Nursultan Nazarbayev was given the honorary title of "Leader of the Nation". After the 2014 annexation of Crimea, Nazarbayev initiated efforts to modernize Kazakhstan's national identity, leading to a 2017 constitutional reform that reduced presidential powers slightly by reallocating some duties to the parliament and prime minister. However, in 2018, Nazarbayev was appointed chair of the National Security Council for life, a decision that was elevated to constitutional status, allowing him to retain significant authority. Although he officially resigned as president in 2019, Nazarbayev maintained influence as the "Leader of the Nation", sharing power with his successor, President Tokayev. Despite the 2017 reforms, Kazakhstan continues to operate under a strong presidential system, with Nazarbayev retaining control over security and foreign policy.

Belarus and Kazakhstan exhibit several shared characteristics, particularly in their pro-Russian orientations. Both nations were highly industrialized during the Soviet era, and they were significantly shaped by processes of Russification. The Soviet period is generally perceived positively in both countries, with the Russian language maintaining a prominent status following their respective declarations of independence. Belarus, facing a scarcity of domestic resources, has cultivated a substantial dependence on Russia across political, economic, security, and energy domains. Conversely, while Kazakhstan possesses valuable natural resources, its geographic position necessitates reliance on Russia as a transit state for oil exports to Europe. Since the mid-1990s, both nations have had super-presidential systems. Notably, while Belarus maintains high levels of leverage and linkages with Russia, Kazakhstan has gradually diminished its reliance in these areas over the years. Kazakhstan's export of natural resources and its adoption of a multivector foreign policy have enabled it to engage with a broader range of external actors compared to Belarus. Despite these differences, both countries continue to uphold strong presidential systems characterized by elements of super-presidentialism, with extensions of presidential terms and increased powers via constitutional referendums.

### 7.3. Moldova, Georgia, and Ukraine

Table 38 presents the development of Moldova, Georgia, and Ukraine across four different years (1995, 2005, 2015, and 2021) in terms of leverage, linkages, cooperation with others, and the strength of presidential powers. Regarding Moldova, the levels of leverage (1.5–2) and linkages (1.5) were relatively constant during the whole period analyzed. The levels of cooperation with other actors were high (2) at three time points, except for in 2005, when the Communist Party held both the presidency and the majority in parliament. The strength of presidential powers consistently remained low at 1 across all years. The same development can be seen in Georgia regarding the levels of leverage and linkages; they were stable throughout the period analyzed. The Georgian levels of cooperation with other actors increased from low in 1995 (1) to high levels (2) at the later points in time. The strength of the presidential powers in Georgia was significantly reduced over time. They declined from 2 in 1995 to 1 in 2005, with a return to 2 in 2015, then dropping to 0 in 2021. In comparison to the previous two states, the levels of leverage and linkages in Ukraine remained high (2.5–3 and 3). The Ukrainian levels of cooperation with other actors were consistently high (2), and the strength of the presidential powers stayed at a low level (1). Overall, while Moldova and Georgia fluctuated in their external cooperation and leverage, Ukraine maintained consistently high levels of leverage and linkages, despite a stable but low strength of presidential powers across the board.

Table 38 presents the score for the three states.

Table 38. Score for Moldova, Georgia, and Ukraine

State and year	Leverage	Linkages	Cooperation with others	Strength of the presidential powers
Moldova				
1995	2	1.5	2	1
2005	1.5	1.5	0	0
2015	2	1.5	2	0
2021	2	1.5	2	0
Georgia				
1995	2	1	1	2
2005	1.5	1	2	1
2015	2	1	2	1
2021	2	1	2	0
Ukraine				
1995	3	3	2	1
2005	2.5	3	2	1
2015	2.5	3	2	1
2021	2.5	3	2	1

The extent of Russian leverage over Moldova predominantly stems from its dependence on Russian natural resources and the ongoing Transnistria conflict. Although Russia supported the separatist forces in Transnistria, it also facilitated the establishment of a ceasefire in 1992. Since the 1990s, Russian peacekeeping forces have maintained a presence in Transnistria, which, despite violating the Moldovan constitution, has contributed to preventing the escalation of the conflict. Moldova's geopolitical significance to Russia has grown, particularly since it has bordered the EU since 2004. The signing of the Association Agreement with the EU in 2014 further enhanced Moldova's importance to Russia. Located on the periphery of the post-Soviet region, Moldova does not share a border with Russia, yet its proximity to the EU increases Russian leverage.

In the case of Georgia, Russian leverage is rooted in conflicts over South Ossetia and Abkhazia, along with economic dependence. Energy imports from Russia are vital to Georgia, as is the income generated by the significant number of Georgians working in Russia. The trade disputes initiated by Russia have highlighted Georgia's vulnerability due to its economic reliance on Russian markets. Additionally, Russian military leverage remains significant; Russia brokered ceasefires between Georgia and South Ossetia in 1992, as well as between Georgia and Abkhazia in 1993, with Russian peacekeeping forces continuing to be stationed on Georgian territory. The frozen conflicts culminated in the 2008 war between Russia and Georgia, further increasing Russian leverage. Georgia's aspirations for EU and NATO membership prior to this conflict, combined with its strategic geopolitical position, have increased its importance in the region.

Russian leverage over Ukraine has consistently remained high, driven by Ukraine's economic dependence on Russia and its reliance on energy imports, as well as its role as a critical transit state for Russian oil and gas exports to Europe. Russia's involvement in Crimea and Sevastopol since 1991, particularly its escalation in 2014, has resulted in significant military leverage over Ukraine. The geopolitical and geographical positioning of Ukraine, bordering both the EU and Russia, along with its historical significance in Russian history and its role as an essential economic partner for Russian energy exports, further contribute to the high level of Russian leverage. Overall, Russian leverage over Moldova, Georgia, and Ukraine is primarily based on economic dependence and Russian involvement in the respective conflicts of Transnistria, South Ossetia, Abkhazia, and Crimea. The geographical locations of these states, particularly their borders with EU and NATO member countries, also enhance the degree of Russian leverage.

The linkages between Russia and Moldova have remained relatively low over the past three decades. Economic linkages are significant due to Moldova's dependence on the Russian economy. However, the levels of social and informational linkages are minimal. Moldova does not share a border with Russia, resulting in a lower proportion of its population working in Russia compared to many other post-Soviet states. Although Russian is spoken in the Gagauz and Transnistria regions, it is recognized as a minority language within Moldova, which diminishes the overall level of informational linkage. In contrast, the linkages between Georgia and Russia have consistently been low. Although economic relations persisted, both the trade war and the 2008 war between Georgia and Russia significantly altered their relationship. Georgia continued to import Russian energy; however, other forms of cooperation were largely disrupted post-2008. Social linkages are moderate, as many Georgians work in Russia and a substantial portion of the population in South Ossetia consists of ethnic Russians. Nevertheless, informational linkage remains low; aside from the South Ossetian population, only a small segment of the Georgian population speaks Russian as a native language. Consequently, Russian media and publications have not exerted the same influence in Georgia as they have in other post-Soviet states.

In contrast, linkages between Ukraine and Russia have remained high throughout the analyzed period. Ukraine's economic dependence on Russia results in significant economic linkages. The country serves as an important market for Russian goods, with substantial Russian investments in Ukrainian industries. Additionally, Ukraine benefits economically from its role as a key transit state for Russian energy exports. The Russian diaspora in Ukraine is relatively large, contributing to the strong presence of the Russian language. Although Ukrainian has been the official language since 1989, a considerable portion of the population continues to speak Russian, particularly in the

eastern regions and Crimea, where many individuals identify Russian as their native language. This extensive use of Russian further enhances the level of informational linkage, with Russian media and newspapers being prevalent in Ukraine. Overall, the high levels of linkages between Ukraine and Russia significantly intensify the relationship between the two states.

All three states have demonstrated high levels of cooperation with regional external actors, particularly the EU. Since the 1990s, integration and collaboration with the EU have been central foreign policy objectives for these nations, with levels of cooperation increasing over time through various EU programs and the signing of Association Agreements. Moldova has actively pursued cooperation with the EU since its independence. In 1995, the primary foreign policy goal for Moldova was EU integration. Throughout the early 2000s, the country became increasingly engaged with the EU through initiatives such as the European Neighbourhood Policy (ENP), the South-East European Cooperation Process (SEECP), the European Neighbourhood and Partnership Instrument (ENPI), and the Eastern Partnership (EaP). The signing of the Association Agreement with the EU in 2014 marked a significant milestone in this cooperation. Overall, Moldova's collaboration with the EU has remained robust since independence, with the notable exception of the presidency of Voronin, during which cooperation with Russia took precedence. Similarly, Georgia has prioritized its relationship with the EU and other Western actors since the 1990s. The country has maintained a high level of cooperation with the EU, engaging in initiatives such as the ENP and the EaP, and has further solidified this partnership through the signing of an Accession Agreement. Ukraine, like Moldova and Georgia, has identified EU cooperation as a key foreign policy goal since the 1990s. Ukrainian presidents have alternated between pro-Western and multivector foreign policies aimed at balancing Russian and Western influences. Ukraine's participation in the ENP and the EaP, as well as the signing of the Association Agreement in 2014, has enhanced its cooperation with the EU. Additionally, Ukraine's membership in the GUAM organization has facilitated engagement with actors beyond Russia.

The strength of presidential powers in Moldova and Georgia has diminished over time as both countries have transitioned from presidential or semi-presidential systems to parliamentary system. Although the reduction in presidential authority was intended, specific domestic circumstances have occasionally counteracted these changes. In Moldova, the political system established by the 1994 constitution was semi-presidential. The first presidential election occurred in 1996, with the victory of Lucinschi. A consultative referendum in 1998 proposed a shift to a presidential system, which was ultimately rejected. Instead, a parliamentary system was implemented in 2000 to mitigate power concentration in the presidency. However, following the election of Voronin in 2001, the

parliamentary system inadvertently increased presidential power, as Voronin's party held a majority in the parliament. Despite these temporary fluctuations, the overarching trend has been a deliberate weakening of presidential authority to prevent the concentration of power. In Georgia, the 1995 constitution established a strong presidential system. However, following the Rose Revolution, constitutional amendments in 2005 replaced this system with a semi-presidential framework. While this change supposedly reduced presidential power, it paradoxically led to an increase in authority for the president, negatively impacting democratic development. A further constitutional amendment in 2010 sought to diminish presidential powers, culminating in a shift to a parliamentary system in 2017. In Ukraine, the political structure has consistently operated as a semi-presidential system since independence. A constitutional amendment in 2004 aimed at reducing presidential powers was overturned in 2010, only to be reinstated in 2014, reflecting ongoing tensions regarding the balance of authority within the political system.

In these states, growing national movements emerged during the late 1980s and early 1990s, evolving into domestic and ethnic conflicts, including civil wars and issues with secessionist republics. Each of the three states has experienced varying levels of conflict with Russia, largely as a result of internal ethnic divisions. In Moldova, the presence of Russian forces on Moldovan territory following the Transnistria conflict heightened tensions between Moldova and Russia. In Georgia, Russian support for the independence of South Ossetia and Abkhazia led to large-scale conflicts and a subsequent war between Georgia and Russia. In Ukraine, the situation in Crimea and the substantial Russian-speaking population in the eastern regions have been sources of ongoing conflict with Russia since the early 1990s. Additionally, all three states have faced revolutions and mass protests against the ruling regimes and allegations of electoral fraud, particularly during the early 2000s, as they sought a pro-Western orientation through increased cooperation with the EU.

When comparing the three states, Ukraine is distinguished by its higher levels of Russian leverage and linkages. Moldova and Georgia exhibit lower levels of leverage and linkages, primarily due to Ukraine's geopolitical and economic significance from a Russian perspective, as well as the reduced use of the Russian language and media in the latter two states. Since the 1990s, Moldova, Georgia, and Ukraine have actively cooperated with the EU, aspiring to sign association agreements and potentially pursue EU membership. Notably, all three states have maintained weaker presidential powers according to their respective constitutions relative to other post-Soviet states. Georgia has transitioned from a presidential system to both a semi-presidential and a parliamentary system over time. Moldova similarly shifted from a semi-presidential to a parliamentary system in the early



2000s. These constitutional changes did not prevent attempts at power concentration in the mid-2000s, as their parliamentary frameworks allowed for one-party rule under specific domestic conditions. Meanwhile, Ukraine has gradually diminished its presidential powers while making adjustments within its semi-presidential system.

### 7.4. Armenia and Kyrgyzstan

Table 39 outlines the development regarding the variables in Armenia and Kyrgyzstan between 1995 and 2021. Armenia exhibited a consistent leverage level of 3 throughout the analyzed years (1995, 2005, 2015, 2021). The linkage levels remained stable throughout the time period (2–2.5). Cooperation with external actors fluctuated, reaching a peak of 2 in 1995 and decreasing significantly to 0 in 2005 and again in 2021. The strength of presidential powers in Armenia has been low, consistently rated at 1 from 1995 through 2005, and then declining to 0 in subsequent years, indicating a weakening in the powers of the presidency. Kyrgyzstan, in contrast, displays a more varied development. The levels of leverage (2.5–3) and linkages (3) remained relatively constant throughout the time period. The levels of cooperation with other regional actors decreased from 2 in 1995 to 0 in 2021. Unlike Armenia, the strength of presidential powers in Kyrgyzstan consistently remained at a high level (3) throughout the whole period analyzed. In summary, both Armenia and Kyrgyzstan had high levels of leverage and linkages throughout the analyzed years. Their levels of cooperation with other regional actors varied and fluctuated. While the presidential powers decreased in Armenia, they remained constantly strong in Kyrgyzstan.

Table 39 presents the score for the two states.

Table 39. Score for Armenia and Kyrgyzstan

State and year	Leverage	Linkages	Cooperation with others	Strength of the presidential powers
Armenia				
1995	3	2	2	1
2005	3	2.5	0	1
2015	3	2.5	1	0
2021	3	2.5	0	0
Kyrgyzstan				
1995	2.5	3	2	3
2005	3	3	0	3
2015	3	3	1	3
2021	3	3	0	3

Armenia has exhibited significant dependence on Russia in terms of economic relations, energy imports, and security guarantees. The level of economic leverage exerted by Russia in Armenia has been bolstered by substantial Russian investments across various sectors, often formalized through “assets for debts” agreements between the two states. Since the economic blockade imposed by Turkey and Azerbaijan in the early 1990s, Armenia has increasingly relied on Russia as a primary trade partner. Furthermore, in the context of the ongoing Nagorno-Karabakh conflict, Russia’s military leverage over Armenia has been notably high. Russian troops are stationed at various military bases throughout Armenia, patrol its borders with neighboring countries, and are recognized as Armenia’s main security provider. Geopolitically, Armenia has historically been significant, often referred to as the “gateway to the Middle East” due to its strategic location. The level of Russian leverage over Armenia has remained consistently high, primarily driven by Armenia’s military and economic dependency linked to the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict. Additionally, the linkages between Armenia and Russia are substantial, predominantly due to economic factors. Since the onset of the conflict with Azerbaijan, Armenia has received considerable Russian economic aid and relies on remittances from migrant workers in Russia. The Armenian diaspora in Russia further enhances social linkages between the two nations. Armenia’s cooperation with other regional external actors has fluctuated, influenced by the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict and its relationships with Azerbaijan, Russia, Turkey, and the European Union. Notably, the strength of presidential powers in Armenia diminished over the observed time period, culminating in the establishment of a parliamentary republic in 2015.

In Kyrgyzstan, Russian economic and military leverage has intensified since the late 1990s. Initially, the 1990s witnessed a more balanced foreign policy with a pro-Western orientation, as President Akaev prioritized Western states and institutions for political and economic reforms. Although

Russia was an important partner, Kyrgyzstan's foreign policy leaned towards the West in the immediate post-independence period. However, following the start of the War on Terror, Kyrgyzstan's geopolitical significance grew, positioning it as a strategic ally of the United States. Concurrently, under President Putin, Russia renewed its focus on cooperation with former Soviet republics, which heightened Russian interest in Kyrgyzstan. Under President Bakiev, the economic and military ties between Russia and Kyrgyzstan strengthened, leading to a foreign policy characterized by a "Russia first" approach. Despite efforts to balance Russian influence following Bakiev's ousting, Kyrgyzstan's geopolitical landscape has remained complex, with competing interests from the United States and China. While Kyrgyzstan has engaged with China and other regional actors, Russia continues to wield substantial leverage over Kyrgyzstan due to its significant economic and military capabilities.

Regarding linkages, since the early 1990s, Armenia has exhibited a significant degree of economic dependence on Russia. This dependence is evident in various dimensions, including trade partnerships, economic cooperation, and substantial Russian investments in Armenia. Russia serves as Armenia's primary trade partner, and the country also relies heavily on remittances from Armenians residing and working in Russia. In 2015, over 2.5 million Armenians were employed in Russia, and these remittances constitute a considerable portion of Armenia's economy. The Armenian diaspora further strengthens social linkages between the two nations. Although the Russian language is not an official language in Armenia, it is widely used for inter-ethnic communication, similar to its function in other post-Soviet states. During the late 2010s, under President Sargsyan, there were initiatives to promote the use of the Russian language in Armenia, with discussions about the possibility of making it a second official language. Furthermore, since the mid-2000s, Russia has played an influential role in the Armenian media sector and telecommunications, resulting in the prevalence of Russian media in Armenia and enhancing communication linkages.

In the case of Kyrgyzstan, the economic ties with Russia are similarly strong, characterized by significant economic dependence. Russia is Kyrgyzstan's principal trade partner, and the two nations share memberships in various regional economic organizations. Labor migration from Kyrgyzstan to Russia further cements these economic connections. Russia has extended substantial investments, loans, and financial assistance to Kyrgyzstan, including the forgiveness of a considerable portion of Kyrgyz debt in exchange for Kyrgyz assets and influence over domestic infrastructure. Remittances from Kyrgyz workers in Russia also form a significant part of Kyrgyzstan's GDP, and Russia remains the primary destination for Kyrgyz citizens seeking foreign

education. The Russian language is recognized as the second official language in Kyrgyzstan, and Russian mass media, including television and newspapers, are widely consumed and popular. The extensive use of the Russian language among both the general population and government officials significantly enhances the social and informational linkages between Kyrgyzstan and Russia.

The level of cooperation with other regional actors in Armenia and Kyrgyzstan has varied over time. Initially, in the early 1990s, both countries exhibited higher levels of cooperation with various external actors; however, these levels diminished significantly from the early 2000s onward. Following its independence, Armenia's foreign policy goal was oriented towards Western integration. Nevertheless, the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict has had substantial implications for its cooperation with both Russia and the EU. In light of the ongoing conflict with Azerbaijan and the disputes with Turkey, Armenia's cooperation with Russia has strengthened. Conversely, these conflicts have impeded EU engagement, a situation Armenia has criticized. Despite Armenia's aspirations to enhance cooperation with the EU and NATO, Western interest in the country has remained relatively low due to its sensitive geopolitical context. Nonetheless, a cooperation agreement between the EU and Armenia was signed in 2015. Historically, Armenia has prioritized its relationship with Russia, largely due to its significant security dependence on the country. In the early 1990s, Kyrgyzstan similarly enjoyed a high level of cooperation with regional actors, driven by the state's planned economic reforms and its designation as an "island of democracy". During this period, Kyrgyzstan engaged with Russia, Western nations, and China, seeking membership in various international organizations to pursue a multivector foreign policy. However, the regional security environment in the mid-2000s prompted a shift towards a more pro-Russian stance and a growing skepticism towards the United States. By the mid-2010s, Kyrgyzstan had once again increased its cooperation with China while reaffirming Russia as its primary ally.

The strength of the presidency has diminished in Armenia, whereas in Kyrgyzstan, the strength of presidential powers has remained consistently high, apart from a brief period during which a constitutional reform transitioned the country to a semi-presidential system. The constitution of Armenia, established in 1995, initially created a semi-presidential framework. However, in 2015, this was amended to introduce a parliamentary system. In contrast, the Kyrgyz constitution, adopted in 1993, initially established a strong presidential system. Following the revolution in 2010, a constitutional amendment transformed the governance structure into a semi-presidential system, reducing the president's powers. In 2021, the constitution was revised again, reinstating a strong presidential system.

Both Armenia and Kyrgyzstan share certain variables that have contributed to their significant dependence on Russia, thereby increasing Russian influence over their domestic affairs. These traits include economic and security dependencies, substantial labor migration to Russia, and a prevailing view of Russia as a protective ally. In the early 1990s, both states were perceived as “islands of democracy”, but their democratic trajectories have diverged since then. Although both nations experienced anti-Soviet sentiments prior to independence, they subsequently became heavily reliant on Russia for economic and security needs. Armenia underwent a democratic revolution in 2018, while Kyrgyzstan experienced three revolutions, in 2005, 2010, and 2020. Both countries exhibit considerable Russian leverage and linkages, primarily due to their economic and military dependencies. These dependencies consist of trade with Russia, Russian economic assistance, remittances from migrant workers, and security guarantees provided by Russia. While Armenia transitioned from a semi-presidential to a parliamentary system, Kyrgyzstan has maintained a consolidated presidential republic characterized by elements of super-presidentialism, despite undergoing three revolutions over a span of fifteen years.

## 7.5. Tajikistan

Table 40 presents an overview of Tajikistan’s developments concerning leverage, linkages, cooperation with other actors, and presidential power from 1995 to 2021. The leverage of Tajikistan significantly declined from a high of 3 in 1995 to 1.5 in 2005, where it remained throughout the rest of the observed time period. The linkage between Tajikistan and Russia has remained stable at a level of 3 throughout the period. This indicates a strong and consistent connection, reflecting deep economic and social ties. Cooperation with external actors has consistently been at a low (0) level, apart from in 2005 as Tajikistan increased its cooperation with the US. The strength of presidential power remained constant at each of the time points. While Tajikistan has maintained strong linkages and stable strong presidential power, it has experienced a notable decline in leverage and a decrease in cooperation with external actors since the early 2000s.

Table 40 presents the score for Tajikistan.

Table 40. Score for Tajikistan

Tajikistan	Leverage	Linkage	Cooperation with others	Presidential power
1995	3	3	0	3
2005	1.5	3	1	3
2015	1.5	3	0	3
2021	1.5	3	0	3

The Tajik civil war significantly influenced Russian leverage over Tajikistan, resulting in profound political and economic instability that shaped the country's future development. This conflict increased Tajikistan's economic reliance on Russia, alongside an increase in Russian military leverage due to the deployment of Russian military personnel and CIS. Russia's involvement in peace negotiations bolstered its reputation in Tajikistan during this tumultuous period. However, by the mid-2000s, Russian leverage diminished as Tajikistan began to form closer ties with the United States due to the War on Terror, even though the Russian military presence remained relatively strong. Despite enhancing cooperation with the US, China, Turkey, and Iran, Tajikistan's economic dependency on Russia has continued.

Upon gaining independence, Tajikistan was among the poorest nations in the post-Soviet region, heavily reliant on Russia and other CIS states. The civil war increased this dependency, as Russia provided economic assistance and maintained a military presence through peacekeeping forces and military bases on Tajik soil. Russia emerged as Tajikistan's primary trading partner, with remittances from Tajik migrant workers in Russia constituting nearly half of the country's GDP. Russian serves as the second official language, widely spoken among the population, thus functioning as a crucial medium for inter-ethnic communication. The status of the Russian language has strengthened the informational linkages between Tajikistan and Russia, with significant consumption of Russian-produced media contributing to their ties.

Following the events of 9/11, Tajikistan sought to enhance its cooperation with the US and NATO, while simultaneously maintaining ties with Russia, through the establishment of new Russian military bases. However, relations between Russia and Tajik President Rahmon became increasingly strained after 2012, marked by disputes over passports, economic and military collaboration, and Rahmon's discontent with the functioning of Russian-led regional organizations. Since its establishment in 1994, the presidential office in Tajikistan has wielded significant power, consistently exhibiting characteristics of a super-presidential system. The consolidation of presidential authority was further cemented by the 2016 removal of term limits for the presidency.

The ethnic divisions within Tajik society led to conflicts at the time of independence, culminating in a civil war in the early 1990s. The combination of low economic development and civil unrest intensified Tajikistan's dependence on Russia for both economic and security needs. While the country has expressed interest in participating in regional NDROs, its geographical position has hindered these aspirations. Like its Central Asian counterparts, Tajikistan maintains a strong presidential system with elements of super-presidentialism.

## 7.6. Azerbaijan, Uzbekistan, and Turkmenistan

Table 41 presents an overview of the leverage, linkages, cooperation with other actors, and strength of presidential powers in Azerbaijan, Uzbekistan, and Turkmenistan at four different points in time (1995, 2005, 2015, 2021). The leverage of Azerbaijan decreased from 2.5 in 1995 to 0 by 2015, indicating a significant reduction in influence. The linkage levels remained stable and low (1–1.5) during the period. Cooperation levels were low, consistently at 1 until 2015 when they fell to 0. The strength of presidential powers remained stable at 2 in 1995 and 2005 but was at 3 in 2015 and 2021. The levels of both leverage and linkages in Uzbekistan declined starting in 1995. Cooperation with external actors dropped significantly, from 1 in 1995 to 0 by 2015, while the strength of presidential powers remained consistently high at 3 across all years. For Turkmenistan, the levels of leverage (0.5-0), linkage (0.5-0), and cooperation with other regional actors (0) were at a constant low level throughout the whole period analyzed. The strength of presidential powers, however, remained stable at 3, indicating a strong concentration of power. In summary, Azerbaijan and Uzbekistan show declining leverage and linkages over time, with Uzbekistan maintaining strong presidential powers. Turkmenistan exhibits minimal leverage and linkages, as well as low cooperation with other actors, alongside consistently strong presidential powers.

Table 41 presents the score for the three states.

Table 41. Score for Azerbaijan, Uzbekistan, and Turkmenistan

State and year	Leverage	Linkages	Cooperation with others	Strength of the presidential powers
Azerbaijan				
1995	2.5	1.5	1	2
2005	1.5	1	1	2
2015	0	1	0	3
2021	0	1	0	3
Uzbekistan				
1995	2	1.5	1	3
2005	1.5	1	0	3
2015	1	1	0	3
2021	1	1	0	3
Turkmenistan				
1995	0.5	0.5	0	3
2005	0.5	0.5	0	3
2015	0	0	0	3
2021	0	0	0	3

Russian leverage over Azerbaijan has experienced a consistent decline since the 1990s. Initially, this leverage was significantly linked to the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict with Armenia, during which Russia provided support to Armenia while simultaneously selling arms to Azerbaijan. Russia also played a role in the ceasefire negotiations that concluded in 1994. However, following the Chechen War, Russia accused Azerbaijan of aiding Chechen rebels, imposing economic sanctions that adversely affected Azerbaijan's economic development. Disputes between Russia and Azerbaijan over Western involvement in Azerbaijan's energy sector and the distribution of resources in the Caspian Sea further complicated relations. While Azerbaijan initially relied heavily on Russia after independence, it has since taken steps to reduce this dependency, particularly in the energy sector, through the construction of pipelines that bypass Russian territory. Azerbaijan's strategic geographical position, and access to substantial natural resources, have also contributed to diminishing Russian leverage, as the country serves as a critical transit hub for oil and gas exports. Over the past three decades, Azerbaijan's deliberate efforts to decrease Russian influence, combined with a commitment to a neutral foreign policy, have significantly affected the level of Russian leverage.

Similarly, Russian leverage over Uzbekistan has also declined over the years. Following its independence, Uzbekistan faced economic challenges largely stemming from a reliance on the cotton industry of the Soviet era. In response, Uzbekistan has actively sought to decrease Russian



influence since the early 1990s. President Karimov emphasized self-sufficiency to avoid external pressures from Russia and other major powers. The rise of the Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan (IMU) in the 1990s posed significant threats to the regime, temporarily enhancing Russian military leverage. After 9/11, Uzbekistan began cooperating with the United States, receiving economic assistance from Western sources. Following criticisms of its human rights violations and the violent handling of the Andijan massacre in 2005, Uzbekistan realigned itself with Russia for economic and security collaboration while also increasing ties with China and other non-democratic regimes. By 2008, Uzbekistan reinforced its commitment to a policy of neutrality, further diminishing Russian leverage.

Among the post-Soviet states, Turkmenistan exhibits the least Russian leverage. While many Central Asian countries adopted policies of neutrality and non-alignment in the 2000s, Turkmenistan has maintained a stance of permanent neutrality since the early 1990s. This approach has resulted in a highly isolated state with minimal vulnerability to Russian influence. Turkmenistan declared its policy of permanent neutrality in 1992, which was formally recognized by the United Nations in 1995. Throughout the 1990s, Turkmenistan exported significant quantities of natural gas to Russia, which was then resold at higher prices in European markets. However, disputes over gas pricing and transportation routes have strained relations, leading to a reduction in cooperation, with China emerging as Turkmenistan's primary foreign partner. In 2016, Russia announced the termination of gas imports from Turkmenistan, with only a small-scale deal occurring in 2019.

The economic linkages between Azerbaijan and Russia have diminished since 1995. Following independence, Azerbaijan exhibited significant economic dependence on Russia. However, by the mid-1990s, Azerbaijan began to engage with Western oil companies, thereby reducing its reliance on Russia. While some economic ties persist, such as the substantial number of Azerbaijani migrant workers in Russia and their remittances, Azerbaijan is no longer as economically reliant on Russia as it is in many other post-Soviet states. The complex relationship between Azerbaijan and Russia has also influenced the levels of social and informational linkages between the two nations. Although the Russian language is not officially recognized in Azerbaijan, it continues to be used in education and communication, with a considerable portion of the Azerbaijani population remaining bilingual. The influence of Russian media in Azerbaijan is comparatively low, particularly following 2008, which has further diminished its impact.

Linkages between Russia and Uzbekistan are minimal and based solely on economic cooperation. These linkages have decreased and remained low since the 1990s. Although Uzbekistan has

experienced some economic dependence on Russia since independence, the main objective for the state has been to achieve self-sufficiency. US financial aid to Uzbekistan increased in the early 2000s but was reduced due to concerns over the country's democratic performance in 2004. While Uzbek is the official language in Uzbekistan, Russian continues to hold significance in education and among political elites. However, the state heavily controls the media sector, resulting in low levels of informational linkage with Russian media. Since the 1990s, Uzbekistan has actively sought to limit foreign media penetration into its society.

Linkages between Turkmenistan and Russia have been virtually non-existent since the 1990s. Turkmenistan is one of the most isolated states globally and has maintained a stance of permanent neutrality since 1995. The export of natural gas to Russia has constituted the primary linkage between the two countries. Turkmenistan's natural resource wealth, particularly its natural gas, has significantly influenced its economic performance and foreign policy relations. In the early 1990s, Turkmenistan relied on Russia as an importer and transit state for its gas due to the Soviet-era transportation infrastructure and its geographical location. In 1992, President Niyazov declared Turkmenistan a neutral state, a status ratified by the UN in 1995. The economic relationship between Turkmenistan and Russia continued until 2016 when Russia ceased all imports of Turkmen gas. Consequently, Turkmenistan shifted its focus to cooperation with China, becoming increasingly dependent on Chinese gas imports. During the early 1990s, Niyazov actively reduced Russian influence in Turkmenistan, even expelling Russian citizens. The media sector in Turkmenistan, like all aspects of society, is under strict state control, resulting in the absence of foreign influence in the media landscape.

In the early 1990s, Azerbaijan exhibited a moderate level of cooperation with regional actors, driven primarily by the growing oil industry, which attracted Western interest. However, following its declaration of neutrality in 2008, Azerbaijan has effectively ceased all cooperation with regional actors. This stance has diminished the influence of external actors, both Russian and Western. Additionally, Azerbaijan's complex relationship with Russia prior to its declaration of neutrality, alongside the ongoing Nagorno-Karabakh conflict, has significantly shaped its foreign policy decisions. In Uzbekistan, President Karimov, who held office until 2016, adopted an unpredictable foreign policy, resulting in fluctuating relations with Russia during the initial years of independence. In response to various domestic and regional developments, Uzbekistan under Karimov withdrew from several Russian-led regional organizations. Throughout the 1990s, Uzbekistan maintained a relatively balanced foreign policy, engaging with both Russia and other regional powers. Following 9/11, cooperation with the United States increased, although this partnership was short-lived due

to Uzbekistan's reluctance to implement political reforms. After the US retracted its support, Uzbekistan once again aligned itself with Russia. Since 2008, Uzbekistan has embraced a policy of neutrality. Following Karimov's death in 2016, President Mirziyoyev has continued to uphold this principle of neutrality. Turkmenistan, having adhered to a policy of permanent neutrality since 1992, maintains a low level of cooperation with regional actors.

Uzbekistan and Turkmenistan have maintained a super-presidential system since their independence. Azerbaijan established a strong presidential system at the time of independence, which was further solidified through constitutional amendments. After a constitutional amendment in 2009, the term limits for the office were abolished. Uzbekistan similarly established strong presidential authority in 1992, although term limits exist on paper, they are not effectively enforced. The Turkmen presidency has been strong since the 1990s, with alterations to presidential term limits occurring in 1999 and 2003.

All three states share a legacy of clan heritage, and political leaders from the Soviet era transitioned into the independent period, thereby hindering political reforms. The presidential systems adopted post-independence incorporated elements of super-presidentialism, further obstructing democratic development. The relationship with Soviet leadership and, subsequently, with Russia has been strained. Particularly for Azerbaijan due to the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict, and for Uzbekistan due to the environmental repercussions of cotton production during the Soviet era. These states have access to significant natural resources, such as oil and natural gas, which has reduced their reliance on Russia and other regional actors for energy and economic support. Turkmenistan proclaimed a policy of permanent neutrality in 1995, followed by Azerbaijan in 2008 and Uzbekistan in 2012, contributing to their isolation from both Russia and other external regional actors. Consequently, all three states exhibit low levels of Russian leverage and linkages, with their levels decreasing further following their declarations of neutrality. Their commitment to neutrality has also reduced cooperation with other regional external actors. Throughout this period, all three states have maintained strong, and in some cases superstrong, presidential systems, either since independence or strengthened via constitutional amendments.

As the cross-case comparative analysis has resulted in the scoring of the included variables for all eleven states within the five groups, the conclusions of the second analysis of the thesis will be discussed next.

# 7.7. Conclusions

The developments of the eleven post-Soviet states included have been analyzed using exploratory case studies. The states were after the first empirical analysis grouped according to the level of association between NDRO membership and democratic development between 1991 and 2021. The aim of the case studies was to answer the second research question: apart from NDRO membership levels, which complementary factors related to the varying democratic development can be identified within the post-Soviet region? The analytical variables included within the cross-case comparative analysis were the level of Russian leverage, the level of linkages to Russia, the level of cooperation with other regional external actors, and the strength of presidential powers in the post-Soviet states. These traits are also assumed to matter for the varying democratic development of the region. Table 42 summarizes the overall scores for all eleven included post-Soviet states as high, low, or neither.

Table 42. Overall patterns in the post-Soviet region regarding the levels of the four variables analyzed.

State	Leverage	Linkage	Other actors	Presidential power
Belarus	•	•	°	•
Kazakhstan	•	•	-	•
Moldova	°	°	•	°
Georgia	°	°	•	°
Ukraine	•	•	•	°
Armenia	•	•	°	°
Kyrgyzstan	•	•	°	•
Tajikistan	-	•	°	•
Azerbaijan	°	°	°	•
Uzbekistan	°	°	°	•
Turkmenistan	°	°	°	•

Note: • means high levels and ° means low levels of the variable, - means either low or high. Leverage: high (=2–3), low (=0–1). Linkage: high (=2–3), low (=0–1). Other actors: high (=2), low (=0). Presidential power: high (=2–3), low (=0–1).

The five states where an association can be observed between NDRO membership level and democratic development are Belarus, Kazakhstan, Moldova, Georgia, and Ukraine. While the first two states have a combination of high NDRO and low democratic development, the latter three states have a combination of low NDRO and high democratic development. Table 42 illustrates the common traits within and between the two groups. The common variables of Belarus and Kazakhstan are high levels of leverage, linkage, and strong presidential powers. The three states in the second group share two common variables, high level of cooperation with other regional actors and weaker presidential powers. While Moldova and Georgia also share low levels of leverage and

linkage, Ukraine stands out as the state is highly connected to Russia via high levels of leverage and linkages. As for the six states where no association between NDRO membership level and democratic development exists, their common variables are visible in Table 42. Armenia and Kyrgyzstan share high levels of leverage, linkage, and low levels of cooperation with other regional actors. The neutral states of Azerbaijan, Uzbekistan, and Turkmenistan share all four variables. Tajikistan with high levels of linkages, no cooperation with other regional actors, and strong presidential powers shares some aspects with the other two groups of states. When comparing the three groups of states, they all have low levels of cooperation with other regional actors. Besides Armenia, the rest of the states have strong presidential powers, while the levels of linkage and leverage vary among them.

The only variable that is exclusive to one single group of states is the variable of “other actors”, meaning high levels of cooperation with other regional actors. High levels of that variable are found within the second group of states in which an association between NDRO membership levels and democratic development is evident. Moldova, Georgia, and Ukraine are the only post-Soviet states that have high levels of cooperation with other regional actors during the analyzed period. High levels of leverage are found in both Belarus and Kazakhstan (group 1), in Ukraine (part of group 2), and in Armenia and Kyrgyzstan (group 3). The same states, along with Tajikistan, also have high levels of linkages to Russia. Strong presidential powers are found in seven of the post-Soviet states, all of them non-democratic. Only the presidencies in Moldova, Georgia, Ukraine, and Armenia have relatively weak powers.

When analyzing the developments of the included post-Soviet states over time, five different patterns became visible regarding the levels of the common variables within the groups (see Table 43). These patterns are *heavily pro-Russian* (Belarus and Kazakhstan), *pro-Western choice* (Moldova, Georgia, and Ukraine), *pro-Russia due to high levels of dependencies* (Armenia and Kyrgyzstan), *involuntarily an outsider* (Tajikistan), and *neutrality* (Azerbaijan, Uzbekistan, and Turkmenistan).

Table 43. Common variables and developmental processes among the post-Soviet states.

States	Common variables		Pattern of
	High	Low	
Belarus, Kazakhstan	Leverage, Linkage Presidential power		Heavily pro-Russia
Moldova, Georgia, Ukraine	Other actors	Presidential power	Pro-Western choice
Armenia, Kyrgyzstan	Leverage, Linkage	Other actors	Pro-Russia due to high dependency
Tajikistan	Linkage, Presidential power	Other actors	Involuntarily an outsider
Azerbaijan, Uzbekistan, Turkmenistan	Presidential power	Leverage, Linkage Other actors	Neutrality

Belarus and Kazakhstan have been heavily pro-Russian due to circumstances in the pre- and post-independence environments; this has further increased due to high levels of leverage and linkages. Moldova, Georgia, and Ukraine have on the other hand, prioritized the EU over Russia as a cooperation partner. Armenia and Kyrgyzstan, the former “democratic islands”, have, due to domestic circumstances, become very dependent on Russia, adding both linkage and leverage to their relationship with Russia. Azerbaijan, Uzbekistan, and Turkmenistan have decreased their ties to Russia over the years and adopted a neutral and non-aligned stance. Tajikistan, in contrast, has, due to economic dependency on Russia, sought integration into the Russian-dominated economic regional organizations with mixed results.

Based on the case studies on the included post-Soviet states, some common variables can be found in the different combinations of the levels of NDRO membership and levels of democratic development. The varying levels of the variables found in the exploratory case studies, and the variable of NDRO membership, are analyzed in the third analysis in conjunction with each other in a fuzzy-set QCA analysis.

## Chapter 8. Fuzzy-set QCA analysis

The post-Soviet states have many aspects in common, most prominently a common history within the Soviet Union and the Russian Empire. While the small group of states at first sight might seem to be relatively similar, much variation exists among them. The political development has gone differently for each state since the beginning of the 1990s, as have the relationships between the individual states and the regional hegemon Russia. According to democratization research, some of the post-Soviet states have had greater prerequisites for democracy than others (see Hale, 2005; Ioffe, 2023; Lebanidze, 2020).

Theories on democratization suggest that external actors can affect the prospects for democratization or autocratization in target states (Von Soest, 2015; Way & Levitsky, 2010). This influence is amplified if the external actor and target state are geographically close, have high levels of linkage, and if the external actor has significant leverage over the target state. Additionally, political actors can either enhance or reduce these levels of linkage and leverage. The focus of the thesis is the possible impact that an external actor can have on other states via the regional organizations it dominates. Many of the mechanisms of external influence (see Chapter 3.3) can be used via regional cooperation and shared memberships in regional organizations, making regional organizations important tools for external actors.

The previous part of the thesis identifies five different groups of post-Soviet states based on the existence of a possible association between the degree of memberships in Russian-dominated regional organizations (NDRO) and the level of democratic development. The theory of authoritarian regionalism links high degrees of NDRO membership with low levels of political development, and low levels of NDRO membership with higher levels of democratic development (Libman, 2018; Libman & Obyndenkova, 2019). While Belarus and Kazakhstan (the first group: high levels of NDRO membership and low levels of democratic development), as well as Moldova, Georgia, and Ukraine (the second group: low levels of NDRO membership and higher levels of democratic development) did fit the theoretical framework of authoritarian regionalism, the other states did not. Over the past decades, Armenia and Kyrgyzstan (the third group) have, contrary to the theory, experienced varying levels of both political development and NDRO membership. Tajikistan, with medium NDRO membership levels and low democracy levels, nor the fifth group with Azerbaijan, Uzbekistan, and Turkmenistan since they all had a combination of low levels of both political development and NDRO membership.

According to the previous part of the thesis, a possible association between NDRO membership and democratic development seems to be present in some parts of the post-Soviet region. The absence or presence of NDRO memberships may have some importance in explaining the varying political developments in the region, *in which combinations with other conditions, and under which circumstances, can NDRO memberships bring about democracy respectively autocracy?*

As the first analysis focuses on probability, as an association between the two variables was the main objective of the descriptive analysis, the current chapter moves the focus to if-then relationships between the included conditions. An analysis of the role of NDRO, alone or in combination with other conditions, is performed to establish its relevance when it comes to explaining the varying democratic development in the post-Soviet region. Besides the number of NDRO memberships, I include four other conditions in the analysis derived from Chapter 7: Russian leverage, linkage to Russia, cooperation with other states besides Russia, and the level of presidential power according to the constitutional systems of the post-Soviet states.

A qualitative comparative analysis (QCA) is applied to analyze the potential effects of various conditions, alone or in combination with each other. This method is suitable due to the level of variation among the states concerning the conditions, as well as the variation in democratic development in the region. The next subchapter (8.1) presents QCA as a method and is followed by a chapter (8.2) on the sets and calibrations of conditions included in the analysis. The results of the analysis are laid out (8.2.2), followed by a discussion regarding the results (Subchapter 8.3).

## 8.1. Qualitative Comparative Analysis (QCA)

Qualitative comparative analysis (QCA) is a case-oriented method used to analyze causal complexity and aims at explaining which conditions, or combinations of conditions, contribute to a certain outcome of interest. An outcome is often affected by several different factors in combination with each other, which the QCA method recognizes. The method allows for “systematic cross-over comparison, while at the same time giving justice to within-case complexity, particularly in small- and intermediate-N research designs” (Rihoux & Ragin, 2009, p. 18). QCA techniques have many uses. QCA can reveal different clusters of cases and similarities that are not visible in the raw data. It can also be used to test hypotheses or existing theories or to develop new theories (Rihoux & Ragin, 2009).



The method was developed in the late 1980s, combining the most positive features of case-oriented and variable-oriented approaches, and it therefore takes advantage of both qualitative and quantitative research techniques (Rihoux & Ragin, 2009). As a result of the combination of advantages from both techniques, QCA both reduces complexity by reducing cases into a combination of factors that can be used as a basis for an analysis of causal relationships and examines particular configurations of factors instead of separate variables (Ide & Mello, 2022).

Since the 1980s, the QCA method has developed from the original crisp-set QCA into “fuzzy-sets” and multi-value QCA. Its use within different fields of research has also grown over the years. The method is suitable within this field due to its handling of complex patterns and the interactions between different conditions. QCA has been used in studies regarding different paths to democracy (see Alijla & Aghdam, 2017; Hao & Gao, 2016). In comparative studies, QCA has also been used in combination with other methods, such as case studies, to explore different pathways to an outcome of interest (Ide & Mello, 2022).

QCA is a set-theoretical method. A set can be defined as “a group of elements that share certain characteristics” (Mello, 2021, p. 45). Set-theoretical methods have the advantage of being able to reveal and take into account that an outcome can be caused by different conditions and can therefore be used to show aspects of causal complexity. It deals with both equifinality (different causes can produce an outcome), conjunctural causality (the interaction of different factors can lead to a certain outcome), and asymmetric causality (both the presence and the absence, of conditions can produce an outcome) (Fiss, 2009).

Instead of independent and dependent variables, the terms *conditions* and *outcome* are used. A condition, different from a variable, implies the presence or absence of a factor. For example, if the factor is “strong economy”, the presence of the factor implies that the case meets the condition for a strong economy (Mello, 2021). In order to be able to systematically compare and analyze complex cases, the included cases need to be made into configurations. A specific combination of conditions that produce an outcome is the basis for the configuration. Theoretical knowledge of the field of interest, and in-depth knowledge of the cases, are necessary for a QCA analysis. Knowledge of the cases and the theoretical framework is needed for the case selection, and operationalization of conditions, as well as for interpreting the results of the analysis (Rihoux & Ragin, 2009).

A QCA analysis involves three main steps. The first is to select the cases and the conditions to include in the study. The second step is the data analysis, which involves the calibration of

conditions, the analysis of sufficient and necessary conditions, and the analysis procedure. The last step is to interpret the results as a means to draw (limited) generalizations (Saridakis et al., 2022).

Cases and conditions included in the analysis can be chosen according to different strategies. A clear definition of the outcome of interest should be established since it will affect the cases and conditions included in the analysis. The cases need to vary across the conditions, and they should have both a “positive” and a “negative” outcome. At the same time, the conditions must vary among the cases. When selecting conditions for the QCA analysis, one must be guided by the theoretical background of the research questions. The choice of the conditions should be carefully justified. The number of conditions per analysis is related to the number of cases included. With each condition added, the number of possible configurations will increase, adding more complexity to the result of the analysis as well as the size of the truth table. A smaller number of cases will demand a lower number of conditions, while the number of conditions for intermediate N-studies (10–40 cases) can be six or seven (Rihoux & Ragin, 2009).

When the sets are being calibrated, a predefined point of reference is needed. By utilizing substantive knowledge of the cases and understanding what the conditions refer to, it is possible to interpret each case’s membership in a set. Several different versions of QCA have been developed since the late 1980s. The original method involved crisp sets. A crisp set only distinguishes between the presence of a condition (1), and the absence of a condition (0). Fuzzy sets, which were developed further on, are able to grade set membership in the interval between 1 and 0, making further distinctions between the presence and absence of a condition (Mello 2021). Within fuzzy sets, 1 implies full membership of a condition, 0 implies full non-membership, while the values between 1 and 0 indicate different degrees of partial membership. Fuzzy sets are useful in cases where much variation occurs. For example, a wide range of in-between systems exists between democracy and autocracy. Without the use of fuzzy sets, this variation would be lost (Rihoux & Ragin, 2009).

Before conducting a fuzzy-set analysis, three empirical anchors must be established: full membership (1), full non-membership (0), and the crossover point where it is not possible to determine whether a case is in or out of a set (0.5) (Mello, 2021). Theoretical knowledge about the cases is needed to be able to assess the anchor points for the fuzzy set (Rihoux & Ragin, 2009). The calibration of fuzzy sets needs to make a distinction between relevant and less relevant variations in the raw data to set the anchor points and calibrate the data. The calibration can be done according to undisputed facts (for example, official data as economic indicators or demographic data), generally accepted statements in the research field in question (for example

widely used classification systems), or by individual expertise by the researcher. The calibration can be done by using one of three approaches. The manual approach includes scoring individual cases by hand, while the direct and indirect methods are more formalized, and the scoring is performed using QCA software. There are several scales for calibrations available. Different scales can be used for different conditions, and fuzzy sets and crisp sets can be combined in an analysis, depending on the condition in question. Different types of data can also be included, both quantitative and qualitative (Mello, 2021).

After the conditions per case have been scored (manually or via software), a truth table is produced. A truth table summarizes the data, and all logically possible combinations of conditions included in the analysis are shown. Specific combinations of conditions result in a row, and the number of rows shows the total amount of possible configurations (Mello, 2021). The cases that share several combinations with each other and the same outcome constitute a subset of instances of the outcome. The outcome is coded according to a threshold for consistency, determining which causal combinations are labeled as 1 (above the consistency threshold) or 0 (below the consistency threshold and hence not subsets) (Rihoux & Ragin, 2009). The recommended *minimum* threshold for inclusion is 0.75 (Mello, 2021).

A QCA analysis aims to find both the necessary and sufficient conditions for an outcome of interest. A sufficient condition means that “whenever the condition is present, the outcome occurs”. However, the outcome can still be the result of other conditions. A necessary condition is “always present when the outcome of interest occurs” (Mello, 2021, 55). The outcome is dependent on the necessary conditions to occur.

The QCA analysis results in one or several pathways for the solution based on the conditions and the outcome. The solutions can result in either a combination of causally relevant combinations of conditions that produce the outcome<sup>1</sup> ( $A*B \rightarrow Y$ ), several different combinations that produce the outcome ( $A*B + C*D \rightarrow Y$ ), or the presence or absence of the same conditions might produce the outcome ( $A*\sim B \rightarrow Y$ ) (Rihoux & Ragin, 2009).

The results also include different measures of fit (consistency, coverage, and proportional reduction in inconsistency). Consistency measures “the degree to which an empirical relationship between a condition or combination of conditions and the outcome comes close to set-theoretic necessity and/or sufficiency”. The interpretation of the consistency score can be made by regarding the score as the assessment of the degree to which the included cases that share a specific combination of conditions agree with the outcome. The consistency score ranges from 0 to 1, and for perfect subset relations, the consistency score is 1. Coverage measures “the empirical importance or

relevance of a condition or combination of conditions” and can be interpreted as how relevant a condition is in empirical terms. The measure of proportional reduction in inconsistency (PRI) concerns the simultaneous subset relations. If a condition, or a combination of conditions, is a subset of both the outcome and the non-outcome, it is a logical contradiction (Mello, 2021).

The analysis results in three different solution terms based on the concept of the Boolean minimization procedure. The difference between the solutions is based on how the solution deals with logical reminders. The conservative, or complex, solution only considers the rows in the truth table that are associated with a positive outcome (above the thresholds for consistency and frequency) and does not make assumptions regarding the empty rows. The parsimonious solution is a less complex solution that deals with all rows in the truth table that are logical reminders. The intermediate solution deals with logical reminders but not those that are deemed insensible. Based on theoretical knowledge, the researcher can determine which reminders to include. While all solutions have their advantages and should be examined, the intermediate solution is often used due to the choice of reminders based on theoretical knowledge (Mello, 2021).

While variants of the QCA analysis have strengths such as accounting for causal complexity, systematic comparison across cases, and being highly flexible when it comes to the choice of cases, conditions, and data there are also some downsides to the method. The method is sensitive to changes in the calibration of the outcome and the conditions included. Different calibrations of conditions, as well as different conditions chosen, can lead to different results. The conditions are also treated the same; no condition is placed above another even if it might be the case according to theory. The comparison of cases is static and is not designed to compare cases over more than one point in time (Mello, 2021). The temporal issue can, however, be solved by using other strategies such as splitting up the cases into different time periods within the same analysis or performing several QCA analyses with different time periods, to track developments over time. Another solution is to combine a QCA analysis with other methods that can handle temporality (Verweij & Vis, 2021; Finn, 2022; Hino 2009).

## 8.2. Fuzzy-set QCA analysis

The previous analysis highlights an association between the level of democracy and the level of NDRO membership in the post-Soviet region. Four different clusters were found, two that fit the theory of authoritarian regionalism and two that did not. To further analyze the association between the two variables, I conducted two separate fsQCA analyses that included the five conditions, one

with the outcome of closed autocracy and one with the reverse outcome. The analysis also concludes if NDRO as a sole condition can explain the different democratic developments in the region, or if it does so in combination with other conditions.

The five conditions chosen for the analysis have their base in theories on democratic performance and the role of external actors. Leverage, linkage, and the role of political actors make up the basis for the theory developed by Way and Levitsky (2010) on which aspects can increase or decrease the external influence of external actors. High levels of linkages and leverage to an external actor should make it easier for the external actor to be able to influence the target state. The theory was developed for democratic external actors, but among others, Tolstrup (2013) developed the theory further to also include non-democratic actors and the important role of political actors. According to Tolstrup (2013), domestic political actors have an important role to play in choosing to receive or reject the external influence of external actors. In a strong presidential or super-presidential system, the president enjoys vast amounts of power and is often responsible for foreign relations, making them important in the political development of the states. According to democracy theory, strong presidential systems also prohibit the development of democracy due to the increased risk of power concentration (Hale 2018). The fifth condition, the number of NDRO memberships in Russian-dominated regional organizations stems from the theory of authoritarian regionalism developed by Libman and Obyndenkova (2019). The theory suggests that states with high levels of NDRO membership are more likely to have a non-democratic political development compared to states with low levels of NDRO membership.

The previous analyses revealed a complex post-Soviet reality, not only in terms of democratic development but also in the states' relationships with Russia and other actors, and the individual states' domestic developments since independence. Over the past three decades, much development has occurred in the post-Soviet states, which can be seen from the scores on the different variables in the previous chapter (7); hence a fuzzy-set QCA was chosen. Another contributing factor for choosing fsQCA is the variation in the outcome variable of the level of democracy. A fuzzy set is more suitable for shedding light on the variation within and between the states.

Since four points in time are included in the previous analysis, the same years are included in the fsQCA. The four points in time per state make the temporal dimension, development over time, visible in the solutions. All eleven included states are coded for each of the chosen periods of time (1995, 2005, 2015, and 2021), making the total number of cases 44. Within the solutions, the state and year are visible.

In the next section, I begin with the calibration of the included conditions, followed by a section on the solutions and results of the analysis.

#### 8.2.1. Sets and calibrations

Five conditions are included in the fuzzy-set analysis to see if the NDRO membership condition alone, or in combination with other conditions, impacts the outcome, the level of democratic development. To be able to use a fuzzy-set analysis, the raw data needs to be transformed and calibrated into fuzzy scores, either manually or by using QCA software. The basis for the calibration of the raw data can be found in the previous subchapter (8.1).

The condition of *NDRO membership* has been calibrated manually since the number of NDROs has varied during the last three decades. In 1995, only one (1) NDRO, the CIS, was active. States with a CIS membership in 1995 are represented with a score of 1 (full membership), and states with no CIS membership have a score of 0 (full-non membership). States with a partial CIS membership have a score of 0.33 (more out than in) since a non-full membership in 1995 can be interpreted as a signal of reluctance for regional cooperation with Russia. In 2005, three (3) NDROs were active, the CIS, EurAsEC, and the CSTO. States with membership in all three organizations have a score of 1 (full membership); states with membership in 2 out of three organizations have a score of 0.67 (more in than out). States with one membership out of three have a score of 0.33 (more out than in), and states with no memberships have a score of 0 (full non-membership). In 2015 and 2021, seven (7) NDROs were active: the CIS, CSTO, EDB, CIS FTA, EACU, CES, and EAEU. States with seven (7) or six (6) memberships have a score of 1 (full membership); states with five (5) or four (4) memberships have a score of 0.67 (more in than out). The score of 0.33 (more out than in) was given to states with three (3) or (2) memberships and the score of 0 (full non-memberships) was given to states with one (0) or no (0) memberships.

Leverage consists of three dimensions: economic and military strength, competing issues, and the existence of alternative regional powers. Linkage also involves three dimensions: economic, social, and Informational linkages. All included states were evaluated and given scores between 0 (lowest value = no linkage or leverage) and 3 (highest value = extensive linkage or leverage) on the four different points in time in the previous part of the thesis. Due to the existing scoring system, the two conditions were calibrated manually.

The points given for the levels of leverage and linkage for each state for each of the included years have been calibrated for a fuzzy scale with five points ranging from 0 (full non-membership in the

conditions linkage or leverage) to 1 (full membership in the conditions of linkage or leverage). The full score of 1 (= full membership) is given to cases/states that have the highest possible score of linkage and leverage (3). A state with an extensive amount of Russian leverage, or linkage to Russia, is considered to be highly vulnerable to Russian external influence or highly interlinked with Russia, therefore having a higher risk/chance of receiving and implementing Russian external influence. Cases/states with a raw score of 2 or 2.5 are given 0.8 points (= almost fully in), considering that high levels of leverage and linkages make it easier for Russian external influence to spread to these states. Cases with a raw score of 1.5 are given 0.6 points (= more in than out). A score of 1.5 is the middle score within the range for linkage and leverage (which ranges from 0 to 3). The reasoning for giving the middle score a fuzzy score of 0.6 (more in than out) is that a medium amount of Russian leverage and linkage to Russia still implies that the two states are relatively connected to each other, which can affect how Russian influence is received. Cases/states with a raw score of 0.5 or 1 are given 0.2 points (= more out than in), meaning that the levels of linkages and leverage are relatively low and that the effects of Russian influence can be expected to be lower compared to states with higher levels. The lowest possible score of 0 (= full non-membership) is given to the raw score of 0, which is the absence of linkage to Russia or no Russian leverage.

The condition of *ActorOther* (high levels of cooperation with other actors) was calibrated manually, with scores reflecting the extent of cooperation: 1 for significant cooperation with states or organizations other than Russia, 0.5 for medium levels due to fluctuations, and 0 for no cooperation. The condition *ActorOther* is calibrated into a fuzzy scale with three points. The highest score of 1 (= full membership) is given to states/cases with the raw score of 1. These states have at different times had extensive cooperation with other states than Russia, for example with the EU, the US, China, or other regional states or bodies. A full membership within the condition means that cooperation with other states was prioritized over cooperation with Russia, which would lower the possibility for Russian external influence. The raw score of 0.5 corresponds to the fuzzy score of 0.67. The states with a medium amount of cooperation with other actors than Russia are states that have chosen a more balanced, multivector foreign policy, cooperation with both Russia and other actors. A fuzzy score of 0.67 was chosen since the states had a relatively high level of cooperation with Russia, even though they aimed to balance the Russian influence with other influences. No cooperation with other actors is given a score of 0 (= full non-membership). These states chose Russia as their main cooperation partner, excluding other cooperation possibilities.

The condition of *PresPow* (presidential power) was calibrated according to the scores given in the previous chapter, divided into four groups ranging from 0 to 1. Over the past three decades, post-Soviet states have experienced significant variations and many changes in their constitutional

systems. Full membership (1) is given to the post-Soviet states that have attributes of super-presidentialism either in their constitutions or in their power structures (extremely strong presidential powers, constitutional amendments increasing the power of the president, or unlimited reelection for presidents). A fuzzy score of 0.67 (more in than out) is given to states that have a presidential system, but that lack elements of super-presidentialism, since they have given the president a strong role on behalf of parliament and other branches of power. Semi-presidential systems are given a score of 0.33 (more out than in, showing a more balanced power divide between the president and parliament. The subgroups of semi-presidentialism (premier-presidentialism and presidential-parliamentarism) are both included in the same group. A fuzzy score of 0 (full non-membership) is given to the states that chose a parliamentary constitutional system since, according to democratization theories, this should prevent power concentration.

The condition of *closed autocracy* (the outcome) was calibrated via the fs/QCA software, setting up three thresholds according to the raw data. The V-Dem liberal democracy index was used for determining the level of political development for each state each year, ranging from 0 (no liberal democracy) to 1 (full liberal democracy). The political development in the post-Soviet region has been slow during the last three decades. Except for the three Baltic states, almost no other post-Soviet states have ever reached the threshold of liberal democracy. Only three of the included post-Soviet states have ever reached a liberal democracy score higher than 0.5 (usually considered the threshold for hybrid regimes): Moldova in 2021 (0.61), Georgia in 2015 (0.53), and Armenia in 2021 (0.56). “Democracy” in the post-Soviet region is therefore not equivalent to what is considered liberal democracy in Western European states. On the contrary, the post-Soviet region consists mostly of variations of non-democratic states. Some states are highly autocratic, while others have reached a middle ground between democracy and autocracy, that is, hybrid regimes.

Since the democracy scores of the region are so low, it affects the threshold given for autocracy. If a “normal” threshold for liberal democracy were used, almost all of the states would be considered autocratic. Still, there are variations in the liberal democracy score, or the level of autocracy, in the region. As the threshold for full membership (= 1) in autocracy is 0.15, all states with a democracy score below 0.15 are considered to be (highly) autocratic. As the threshold for full non-membership (= 0) in the outcome is 0.30, all states with a democracy score above 0.30 are considered to be “democratic” or at least having, in comparison, more democratic political development. The crossover point is 0.20; at that point, states are not considered to be in or out. The scores for the two software-calibrated variables hence range from 0 to 1, according to the set thresholds.



The five conditions included in the analysis, as well as the outcome, were calibrated either manually or via software (see Appendix E for raw data and fuzzy scores for all conditions). Table 44 summarizes the calibrations for each condition.

Table 44. Calibrating scheme for the fuzzy-set QCA analysis.

Condition	Definition	Range	Calibration
NDRO	Degree of memberships in Russian-dominated regional organizations	0–1	<p>1 = Full membership: 1995 1/1, 2005 3/3, 2015 and 2021 6–7/7 0.67 = more in than out: 2005 2/3, 2015 and 2021 4–5/7</p> <p>0.33 = more out than in: 1995 0.5/1, 2005 1/3, 2015 and 2021 2–3/7 0 = Full non-membership: 1995 0/1, 2005 0/3, 2015 and 2021 0–1/7</p>
Leverage	Degree of Russian leverage	0–3	<p>1 = Full membership = 3 points 0.8 = almost fully in = 2–2.5 points 0.6 = more in than out = 1.5 points 0.2 = almost fully out = 0.5–1 points 0 = Full non-membership = 0 points</p>
Linkage	Degree of Linkage to Russia	0–3	<p>1 = Full membership = 3 points 0.8 = almost fully in = 2–2.5 points 0.6 = more in than out = 1.5 points 0.2 = almost fully out = 0.5–1 points 0 = Full non-membership = 0 points</p>
ActorOther	Degree of cooperation with other actors	0–1	<p>1 = Full membership = 1 point 0.67 = more in than out = 0.5 points 0 = Full non-membership = 0 points</p>
PresPow	Degree of strength of presidential power	0–1	<p>1 = Full membership = super-presidential system 0.67 = more in than out = presidential system 0.33 = more out than in = semi-presidential system 0 = Full non-membership = parliamentary system</p>
Autocracy	Level of closed autocracy	0–1	<p>Full membership &lt; 0.15 Cross over point = 0.20 Full non-membership &gt; 0.30</p>

Note: the sources of the conditions of NDRO, leverage, linkage, Actor Other, and PresPow are based on the author's evaluations in the previous chapter, and the webpages of the regional organizations included. The condition of autocracy is based on the V-Dem liberal democracy index.

8.2.2. Analysis and solutions

The fsQCA analysis identifies both necessary and sufficient conditions for the outcome. If a condition is necessary (for example, NDRO membership), it means that the outcome of the analysis does not occur if the condition is absent. If a condition is sufficient, it implies that the outcome of the analysis occurs whenever the condition is present (Ide & Mello, 2022). A truth table for each outcome has been produced using the software, displaying all logically possible combinations leading to the outcome. The fuzzy-set QCA analysis results in three different types of solutions with different degrees of complexity. The coverage and consistency scores for each fsQCA analysis tell us the strength of the QCA results. Consistency measures, according to Ragin (2008), “... the degree to which solution terms and the solution as a whole are subsets of the outcome”. Coverage measures “how much of the outcome is covered (or explained) by each solution term and by the solution as a whole”.

8.2.3. Solutions for the outcome of closed autocracy

The analysis should begin with a check if any of the conditions included in the study are necessary conditions. The condition of PresPow (strong presidential power) is the only condition reaching over the threshold of 0.90 for being a necessary condition for the outcome of closed autocracy with a consistency of 0.939. The presence of a presidential system is hence necessary for the outcome of autocracy to occur.

The calibrated outcome and conditions result in a truth table, displaying all possible combinations of the included causal conditions. Different groups of states appear in the truth table. If states belong to the same group, they share the same combinations of conditions and the same outcome. Logical contradictions can, however, occur in the table. The truth table is reduced according to frequency and consistency level. The consistency level for the analysis is 0.75, and the rows with no observations in them have been excluded.

The truth table below (Table 45) for the model “closed autocracy” distinguishes five combinations that should lead to an outcome of closed autocracy (democracy score below 0.15).

Table 45. Truth table (solutions over 0.5 in consistency) for the outcome of closed autocracy.

NDRO	Leverage	Linkage	Actor Other	Pres Pow	Number	Closed autocracy	Cases	Raw cons.	PRI
0	0	0	0	1	8	1	AZE2015 AZE2021 UZB2015 UZB2021 TKM1995 TKM2005 TKM2015 TKM2021	1	1
1	1	0	0	1	1	1	MDA2005	1	1
0	1	1	0	1	1	1	UZB2005	0.897	0.884
1	1	1	0	1	9	1	BLR1995 BLR2005 BLR2015 BLR2021 KAZ1995 KGZ2005 KGZ2021 TJK1995 TJK2021	0.782	0.767
1	1	1	1	1	7	1	KAZ2005 KAZ2015 KAZ2021 KGZ1995 AZE1995 TJK2005 UZB1995	0.782	0.767
1	1	0	1	1	1	0	TJK2015	0.738	0.778
0	1	0	1	1	1	0	AZE2005	0.503	0.503

Note: in the truth table some true logical contradictions exist, Belarus 1995 (democracy score of 0.37), Kyrgyzstan (0.27), Moldova 2005 (0.49), and Azerbaijan 2005 (0.09).

After the truth table was reduced, simplified solutions were produced via the fs/QCA software. The intermediate solution for the fsQCA analysis for the model closed autocracy = Leverage,

Linkage, Actor Other, Prespow and NDRO produced two pathways to the outcome of autocracy. The results gave two different solutions, or pathways, for the outcome:

Pathway 1: Autocracy = ~ActorOther \* Prespow

Pathway 2: Autocracy = Leverage \* Linkage \* Prespow \* NDRO

Table 46 displays the two solutions for the outcome as well as consistency and coverage scores. The states included in the solution have been divided into the four periods of time included in the study in order to make the temporal dimension of the results more distinct.

Table 46. Intermediate solution of the fuzzy-set QCA analysis, outcome closed autocracy.

Solution	Raw coverage	Unique coverage	Consistency	1995	2005	2015	2021
~ActorOther*PresPow	0.718	0.346	0.873	BLR TJK KAZ TKM	BLR KGZ UZB TKM	BLR AZE TJK UZB TKM	BLR AZE KGZ TJK UZB TKM
Leverage*Linkage*PresPow*Ndoro	0.492	0.120	0.787	BLR AZE KAZ TJK KGZ UZB	BLR KAZ KGZ TJK	BLR KAZ	BLR KAZ TJK KGZ

Note: Solution coverage: 0.839, solution consistency: 0.863. The assumptions are that leverage, linkage, NDRO, and PresPow are present, and ActorOther is absent.

The complex solution resulted in the four solutions: Leverage \*Linkage\*~ActorOther\*PresPow, Leverage\*~ActorOther\*PresPow\*NDRO, Leverage\*Linkage\*PresPow\*NDRO, and ~Leverage\*~ActorOther\*PresPow\*~NDRO. The solution coverage is 0.736, and the consistency is 0.846.

The solution coverage for the solution is 0.839, stating the empirical relevance of the condition, in other words, the degree to which the empirical evidence is accounted for by the conditions. The consistency for the solution is 0.863, evaluating the fit of the empirical evidence with the set-theoretical relationship that is assumed.

8.2.3.1. Pathway 1

The first solution within the analysis for closed autocracy is the absence of cooperation with other actors combined with the presence of strong presidential power. The solution contains three contradictions, Belarus in 1995 as well as Kyrgyzstan in 2005 and 2021. In 1995, Belarus still had a relatively high democracy score of 0.37, which is far above the threshold value of 0.15 for closed autocracy. While the democracy scores of Kyrgyzstan in 2005 (0.18) were close to the threshold for autocracy, the democracy score in 2021 was 0.27, almost at the threshold for a more democratic outcome. Belarus in 1995 and Kyrgyzstan in 2005 and 2021, however, share the same combination of conditions as the other states in the result table with a presidential system and no cooperation with other international or regional actors.

The first pathway for the outcome of closed autocracy shows that six (6) states fit the solution once the logical contradictions have been removed (see Table 47).

Table 47. States included in the first pathway:  $\sim$ ActorOther\*PresPow

State	1995	2005	2015	2021
Belarus		●	●	●
Kazakhstan	●			
Tajikistan	●		●	●
Turkmenistan	●	●	●	●
Uzbekistan		●	●	●
Azerbaijan			●	●

Belarus adhered to the solution in 2005, 2015, and 2021 with the state’s low levels of cooperation with other actors combined with strong presidential powers. The democracy scores dropped significantly in Belarus in the mid-1990s when Lukashenka was elected as president. The 1994 constitution of Belarus established a presidential system of government, which has been strengthened further by constitutional amendments. In 1995, 1996, and 1997 amendments to the constitution increased the powers of the president and extended the presidential term limits. Since 2004, there have been no term limits for the Belarusian presidency. The increasing authoritarian behavior of Lukashenka had implications for Belarus’s cooperation with other actors. The EU and the US reduced their cooperation with Belarus due to the state’s non-democratic behavior in the late 1990s. The Belarusian memberships in the EU-sponsored EaP and ENP programs were also canceled in the 2000s for the same reason.

Kazakhstan also fit the solution in 1995, before the Kazakh multivector foreign policy was introduced. To balance Russian influence, especially within the oil industry, Kazakhstan sought other cooperation partners in the mid-1990s. The rapid economic growth of Kazakhstan also contributed to the expansion of its economic and foreign partners. Kazakhstan chose a presidential governmental system in 1995. The first president of Kazakhstan was inherited from the Soviet era. In 2007, constitutional amendments lifted the two-period time limit for the president. In 2017, constitutional amendments transferred some presidential powers to the parliament, thereby slightly decreasing the presidential powers in Kazakhstan, but generally, the Kazakh president enjoys strong powers.

Tajikistan in 1995, 2015, and 2021 is also a part of the first solution pathway. Compared to the other Central Asian states, Tajikistan has been relatively isolated since its independence. While the state has, at times, cooperated with Russia, other regional cooperation has been at a low level. An exception occurred in 2005 when Tajikistan, due to its geographical position, became an interest of the US in its War on Terror. At the beginning of the 2000s, Tajikistan cooperated with the US on a military basis but again turned to prioritize Russia as a foreign partner in the late 2000s. Tajikistan has, since its independence, had a highly autocratic development, and the president has enjoyed vast amounts of power. Since 2016, there have been no term limits for the presidency.

The remaining states in the first pathway are the now neutral states of Turkmenistan (1995 to 2021), Uzbekistan (2005, 2015, 2021), and Azerbaijan (2015, 2021). These states either abstained early on from cooperation with other actors or later moved towards a neutral foreign policy. Already in 1992, Turkmenistan was following the policy of multilateral disagreement, and in 1995 it became a permanently neutral state with very low levels of cooperation with other states and actors. The first president of Turkmenistan was the previous Soviet leader, Niyazov, who held the office until his death in 2006. The Turkmen constitution from 1992 opted for a strong presidency. In 1994, the presidential term was extended beyond the previous term limit, and in 1999, Niyazov became president for life. After his death, Berdymukhamedov, via constitutional amendments, extended his presidential terms to seven years.

Uzbekistan after 1995 also shares the combination of no cooperation with other actors and strong presidential powers. In the 1990s, Uzbekistan's foreign and economic policy was considered relatively non-aligned. In the early 2000s, with the War on Terror, Uzbekistan started to increase its cooperation with the US due to the geographical position of the state, which increased its geopolitical value. After Uzbekistan fell out with the US over the Uzbek handling of the Andijan massacre, Uzbekistan turned to Russia for cooperation. In 2013, Uzbekistan claimed to be a neutral

state, avoiding any allegiances to other states. As with the other Central Asian states, the first Uzbek president, Karimov, was inherited from the Soviet era. Uzbekistan also opted for a strong presidential form of government in its constitution in 1992. While the constitution does not state that the presidential term is unlimited, Karimov stayed in power until his death in 2016.

The last state belonging to the first pathway is Azerbaijan (2015, 2021). In the 1990s and 2000s, Azerbaijan cooperated to a large extent with foreign actors regarding oil production and transportation, excluding the first two points in time from the solution. In 2008, after the Georgian-Russian war, Azerbaijan claimed neutrality and withdrew its ambitions for memberships in any Western or Russian regional organizations. The 1995 Azerbaijan constitution created a strong presidential republic. The president enjoys huge amounts of power, and since 2009, there has been unlimited reelection for the Azerbaijani president. The presidency in Azerbaijan was inherited from father to son in 2003 when H. Elchibey died.

### 8.2.3.2. Pathway 2

The second solution shows that a combination of high levels of leverage and linkage, strong presidential powers, and high levels of NDRO membership are sufficient conditions for an autocratic outcome. There is an overlap of states in both solutions since most of the states that are included in the first solution are also included in the second solution. The second pathway shares the same contradictions as the first pathway. Belarus in 1995 (with a democracy score of 0.37), as well as Kyrgyzstan in 1995 (0.17), 2005 (0.18) and 2021 (0.27), are in contradiction to the solution due to their higher democracy scores.

The second pathway for the outcome of closed autocracy shows that five (5) states fit the solution once the logical contradictions have been removed (see Table 48).

Table 48. States included in the second pathway: Leverage\*Linkage\*PresPow\*NDRO

State	1995	2005	2015	2021
Belarus		●	●	●
Kazakhstan	●	●	●	●
Tajikistan	●	●		●
Uzbekistan	●			
Azerbaijan	●			

Belarus, Kazakhstan, and Tajikistan have the highest levels of cooperation with Russia in the post-Soviet region. Belarus and Tajikistan are highly dependent on Russia in different spheres, especially economically. Their dependency on Russia results in vulnerability to Russian influence and high levels of Russian leverage. All three states share many NDRO memberships with Russia, as well as high levels of linkages mostly due to the strength of the Russian language in the individual states.

Belarus fits the second solution with a combination of strong presidential powers, high NDRO levels, as well as high leverage and linkages in 2005, 2015, and 2021. Belarus is one of the most pro-Russian states in the post-Soviet region. Since its independence, Belarus has had high linkage and many NDRO memberships, and at the same time has been highly vulnerable to Russian external pressure via high levels of leverage. The levels of leverage have increased the geographical position of the state, which borders both the EU and NATO, and the state's high economic, political, and military dependency on Russia. Belarus is also linked to Russia via a common language, culture, and religion. Belarus under Lukashenka has also initiated further regional cooperation and integration projects with Russia and has had memberships in all Russian-dominated NDROs in the region since the beginning of the 1990s.

Kazakhstan shows the same combinations of conditions at each time period. Kazakhstan has, to some extent, decreased its level of Russian leverage by pursuing a multivector foreign policy since the late 1990s. Still, the state's geographical position, the Russian interest in Kazakh oil, and the Russian military bases on Kazakh soil have resulted in high levels of leverage. Kazakhstan also has one of the largest Russian diasporas in the region, which increases the linkage between the two states. Along with Belarus, Kazakhstan has been eager to pursue regional cooperation projects with Russia and has been a member in all NDROs available at each point in time.

As for Tajikistan, as a result of the civil war in the 1990s, the level of Russian leverage has remained at a high level. Tajikistan is heavily dependent on Russian economic support and the Russian military forces and peacekeeping forces have remained in the state since the civil war. The geographical location of Tajikistan is also important to Russia since it borders states perceived by Russia as security threats. Tajikistan is dependent on Russia in the form of remittances from working migrants as well as various forms of economic aid and assistance. The state also shares many NDRO memberships with Russia.

Uzbekistan and Azerbaijan fit the second solution in 1995. The levels of leverage in Azerbaijan were high in the 1990s as a result of the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict. The level of leverage was reduced later when the two states diminished their cooperation after conflicts over oil cooperation with the West and the building of alternative pipeline routes for Azerbaijani oil. Linkages between



Azerbaijan and Russia have also decreased due to reduced economic cooperation and migrant workers in Russia. Azerbaijan only has one NDRO membership (CIS), and it became a neutral state in 2008. During the 1990s, Uzbekistan also had high levels of Russian leverage due to the threat from the IMU and high levels of economic dependency on Russia. After the Uzbek economic growth started, the levels of leverage and linkage were reduced. In 1995, Uzbekistan was a member of the CIS and has since been a member of EurAsEC from 2000 to 2008, the CIS FTA from 2014, and a partial member of the EAEU since 2020. Both Uzbekistan and Azerbaijan have a presidential form of government and became neutral states in the 2000s.

#### 8.2.4. Solutions for the outcome of non-closed autocracy

Since the focus for the thesis is to analyze whether there is an association between NDRO memberships and political development, it is also important to consider the reverse outcome. Closed autocracy is only one outcome; the longitudinal descriptive analysis in Chapter 5 shows that some of the post-Soviet states have had a more “democratic” development over the last thirty years. By doing a QCA analysis of the reverse outcome, non-closed autocracy, combinations of conditions that are sufficient for a more democratic outcome can be found. The reverse outcome, absence or presence of the outcome, is not necessarily the mirror image of the first analysis since the conditions that explain the outcome might not be the same for the reverse outcome (Rubinson et al. 2019). The threshold for the reverse outcome when it comes to the level of closed autocracy is 0.30, which applies to states with a democracy score of over 0.30 according to the V-Dem democracy index.

The truth table below (Table 49) for the model “non-closed autocracy” distinguishes four combinations that should lead to an outcome of non-closed autocracy (democracy score above 0.30).

Table 49. Truth table (solutions over 0.5 in consistency) for the reverse outcome of non-closed autocracy.

NDRO	Leverage	Linkage	Actor Other	Pres Pow	Number	~Closed autocracy	Cases	Raw cons.	PRI
0	1	1	1	0	6	1	MDA2015 MDA2021 UKR1995 UKR2005 UKR2015 UKR2021	0.952	0.947
0	1	0	1	0	3	1	GEO2005 GEO2015 GEO2021	0.896	0.896
0	1	1	0	0	1	1	MDA2005	0.863	0.819
1	1	1	1	0	3	1	MDA1995 ARM1995 KGZ2015	0.847	0.837
1	1	1	0	0	3	0	ARM2005 ARM2015 ARM2021	0.715	0.623

Note: in the truth table some true logical contradictions exist, Ukraine 2005 (democracy score of 0.29), Ukraine 2015 (0.22), Armenia 1995 (0.29), Kyrgyzstan 2015 (0.27), and Armenia 2021 (0.56).

The reverse solution of the outcome shows how the same conditions affect the outcome if the outcome is democracy (according to the earlier calibration, states with a democracy score above 0.30). The solution for the model  $\sim$  Closed autocracy = Leverage, Linkage, ActorOther, PresPow, and NDRO shows two different pathways for the outcome of non-autocracy:

Pathway 1:  $\sim$ Autocracy =  $\sim$ NDRO\* $\sim$ PresPow

Pathway 2:  $\sim$ Autocracy = ActorOther \*  $\sim$ Prespow

Table 50 displays the two solutions for the outcome as well as consistency and coverage scores. The states included in the solution have been divided into the four periods of time included in the study with the aim of making the temporal dimension of the results more distinct. There is an

overlap of states in both solutions since most of the states from the first solution appear in the second solution.

Table 50. Intermediate solution of the fuzzy-set QCA analysis, outcome not closed autocracy.

Solution	Raw coverage	Unique coverage	Consistency	1995	2005	2015	2021
~NDRO*~PresPow	0.435	0.059	0.954	UKR	UKR ARM MDA	UKR GEO MDA	UKR MDA
ActorOther*~Prespow	0.542	0.154	0.913	MDA UKR ARM	UKR GEO	UKR GEO KGZ	MDA GEO UKR

Note: Solution coverage: 0.601 solution consistency: 0.921. The assumptions are that Leverage, Linkage, NDRO, and PresPow are absent, and ActorOther is present.

The complex solution resulted in the three solutions: ~NDRO\*Leverage\*Linkage\*~PresPow, ~NDRO\*Leverage\*ActorOther\*~PresPow, and Leverage\*Linkage\*ActorOther\*~PresPow. The solution coverage was 0.538, and a solution consistency of 0.924.

The solution coverage for the solution is 0.596, stating the empirical relevance of the condition, in other words, the degree to which the empirical evidence is accounted for by the conditions. The consistency for the solution is 0.924, evaluating the fit of the empirical evidence with the set-theoretical relationship that is assumed.

8.2.4.1. Pathway 1

The first pathway for the solution for the outcome of non-closed autocracy is the absence of NDRO memberships combined with the absence of strong presidential power. The solution contains three contradictions, Ukraine in 2005 and 2015 and Armenia in 2005. The democracy scores for Ukraine in 2005 (0.29) and 2015 (0.22) were below the threshold for non-closed democracy. The democracy score in Armenia in 1995, 0.29, was also below the threshold.

The first pathway for the outcome of non-closed autocracy shows that three (3) states fit the solution once the logical contradictions have been removed (see Table 51).

Table 51. States included in the first pathway:  $\sim\text{NDRO}^* \sim \text{PresPow}$

State	1995	2005	2015	2021
Ukraine	●			●
Moldova		●	●	●
Georgia			●	

The first pathway consists of states with a democracy score above the threshold of 0.30 which shares a combination of no, or low levels of, NDRO memberships and a parliamentary or a semi-presidential system of government. Ukraine fits the solution in 1995 and 2021. In the early 1990s, Ukraine did not ratify the CIS charter and was never a full member of the CIS. The state was a partial member of the CIS from 1991 to 2018 but terminated its membership in the organization. From 2012, Ukraine was also a member of the CIS FTA but has not sought membership in any other Russian-led regional organization. Ukraine established a semi-presidential (president-parliamentary) constitutional form in its first constitution in 1996. In 2004, a constitutional amendment reduced the power of the president and established a premier-presidential system. The constitutional amendment was overturned in 2010, returning Ukraine to a president-parliamentary semi-presidential system, and reinstated in 2014.

Moldova fits the solution in 2005, 2015, and 2021. Since 2005, Moldova has had a low level of NDRO membership, with memberships in only the CIS, and CIS FTA since 2012 and a partial membership in the EAEU since 2017. Since its first independent constitution in 1994, Moldova has had a political system with fewer presidential powers. The constitutional system was semi-presidential between 1994 and 2000 when Moldova became a parliamentary republic. In 2016, Moldova returned to a semi-presidential system. Georgia also adhered to the solution in 2015, with no NDRO memberships since 2008 combined with a low degree of presidential power. The constitutional system in Georgia was presidential between 1995 and 2004, semi-presidential between 2004 and 2017, and parliamentary since 2017.

#### 8.2.4.2. Pathway 2

The second pathway for the solution for the outcome of non-closed autocracy is the presence of cooperation with actors other than Russia combined with the absence of strong presidential power. The solution contains four contradictions, Ukraine in 2005 and 2015, Armenia in 2005, and Kyrgyzstan in 2015. All states are contradictory due to their democracy scores being below the threshold for non-closed autocracy.

The second pathway for the outcome of closed autocracy shows that three (3) states fit the solution once the logical contradictions have been removed (see Table 52).

Table 52. States included in the second pathway: ActorOther\*~Prespow

State	1995	2005	2015	2021
Ukraine	●			●
Moldova	●			●
Georgia		●	●	●

The second pathway consists of states with a democracy score above the threshold of 0.30, which indicates a combination of high levels of cooperation with other actors (besides Russia) and a parliamentary or a semi-presidential system of government. Ukraine fits the solution for 1995 and 2021. Ukraine has cooperated with the EU since the early 1990s and has been a member of the EU programs ENP and EaP, which aim to increase cooperation with the neighboring non-EU states. In 2014, Ukraine signed an association agreement with the EU, which serves as a basis for the accession process. Ukraine has been a member of the GUAM organization since 1999, which works for democracy, stability, and development alongside Georgia, Azerbaijan, and Moldova. Ukraine has also had a semi-presidential constitutional system since the early 1990s.

Moldova fits the solution in 1995 and 2021 with the combination of high levels of cooperation with Western actors and semi-presidential or parliamentary system. In 1995, Moldova cooperated at a high level with the EU and other Western actors as the state sought closer integration with the EU. In the late 1990s and early 2000s, the EU was not pleased with the political and economic stability in Moldova due to its cooperation with Russia and the Transnistria conflict. The EU increased its cooperation with Moldova after 2005 in the form of vast technical and economic assistance to Moldova. Moldova has also been a member of the EU programs ENP and EaP as well as a member of GUAM. In 2014, Moldova signed an association agreement with the EU in hopes of a future EU membership. In combination with a high degree of cooperation with actors other than Russia in 1995 and 2021, since the 1990s Moldova has had a semi-presidential (1994–2000, 2016–) constitutional system and a parliamentary system between 2000 and 2016.

Georgia fits the second pathway of the solution starting in the early 2000s. Georgia had a semi-presidential system of government until 2017 and, since then, a parliamentary system combined with a high level of cooperation with other actors. Georgia has had a high level of cooperation with the EU since the 2000s as part of ENP and EaP. In 2014, Georgia signed an association agreement with the EU, which entered into force in 2016.

### 8.3. Results

The previous analysis shows an association between the level of democracy and the level of NDRO membership in the post-Soviet region. Five different groups were identified, two that fit the theory of authoritarian regionalism and three that did not. To further analyze the association between the two variables, I have conducted two fsQCA analyses including the five conditions: the first with the outcome of closed autocracy (V-Dem score below 0.15) and another with the opposite outcome, not-closed autocracy (V-Dem score above 0.30).<sup>3</sup>

A significant portion of the states in the post-Soviet region can be classified as closed autocracies (democracy score below 0.15): Belarus (except in 1995), Kazakhstan, Azerbaijan, Tajikistan, Uzbekistan, and Turkmenistan. These states have been highly autocratic since their independence and no democratic development has occurred since the beginning of the 1990s. These six states fit the two solutions for the outcome of closed autocracy in the fsQCA. Azerbaijan, Uzbekistan, and Turkmenistan have, for different reasons, either followed a neutral policy since the 1990s or turned to neutrality later on. Belarus, Kazakhstan, and Tajikistan are the most pro-Russian states in the region, mostly due to high levels of political, economic, and military dependencies on Russia.

The solution for the outcome of closed autocracy shows two different pathways (see Figure 5). Strong presidential powers (the condition of PresPow) are part of both pathways, concluding that strong presidential powers are important for the explanation of the low democratic development within the autocratic parts of the post-Soviet region. The condition of PresPow was also the only condition that was a necessary condition for the outcome of closed autocracy according to the fsQCA.

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<sup>3</sup> A robustness test was, according to good QCA practice, performed regarding all solutions in the fsQCA analysis. The conditions were re-calibrated while the consistency level was not changed (at 0.75), as well as a test when the consistency level was increased from 0.75 to 0.80. The solutions for the re-calibrated conditions while keeping the consistency level at 0.75 showed the identical results. When the level was increased to 0.80, the solutions for the non-closed autocracy was identical while the solution for the non-closed autocracy solution some deviations from the original analysis results. See Appendix E for more detail.

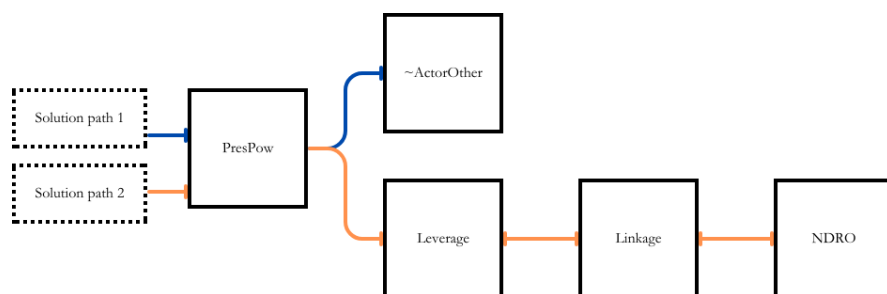


Figure 5. The two pathways for the solutions for the outcome of closed autocracy.

The first pathway includes no cooperation with actors other than Russia combined with strong presidential power. The included states are the highly autocratic states, which all share some elements of super-presidentialism and either being neutral or cooperating at a high level with Russia. The neutral states of Azerbaijan, Uzbekistan, and Turkmenistan have, due to their policy of neutrality, not sought cooperation with any other regional or international actors. Belarus and Tajikistan have, on the other hand, prioritized high-level cooperation with Russia due to high levels of dependencies. Since the 1990s, Kazakhstan has reduced its dependency levels on Russia and follows a multivector foreign policy but has still chosen Russia as its main partner.

The other solution was a high degree of Russian leverage, high levels of linkages to Russia combined with strong presidential powers, and high levels of NDRO membership. The included states are, for the most part, the same as in the first solution, states with strong presidential powers, highly vulnerable to Russian external pressure for different reasons, highly interlinked with Russia, and highly invested in the regional organizations that Russia dominates. The now neutral states of Uzbekistan and Azerbaijan only fit the second pathway in 1995, before they changed their view on economic and foreign policy. Belarus, Kazakhstan, and Tajikistan fit the solution for most of the years included in the study. The large majority of the states included in the two solutions are the states from the first and fourth groups from the previous section (Chapter 8).

Some post-Soviet states have had a more democratic development than others since the early 1990s. Moldova has had democracy scores above 0.30 at all of the four measured points. Georgia has had democracy scores of over 0.30 since 2005, and Ukraine had it in 1995 and 2021. Other states have had more democratic development at times, including Armenia in 1995 and 2021, and Kyrgyzstan in 2015. Ukraine, Moldova, and Georgia fit the two solutions for non-closed autocracy at some point in time.

The solution for the outcome of closed autocracy shows two different pathways (see Figure 6). The absence of strong presidential powers (the condition of  $\sim$ PresPow) is part of both pathways, concluding that the absence of strong presidential powers is important for the explanation of the more democratic development parts of the post-Soviet region.

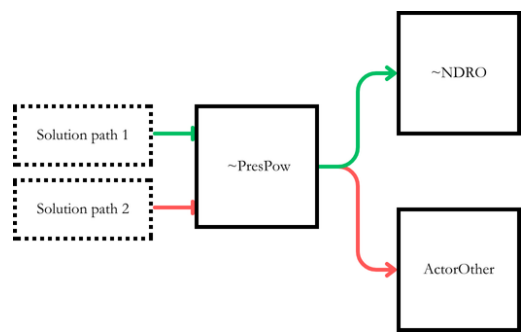


Figure 6. The two pathways for the solutions for the outcome of non-closed autocracy.

The first pathway shows that a combination of weak presidential powers combined with low or no NDRO membership was one pathway for more democratic development. The states belonging to this solution are states that have a parliamentary or semi-presidential system and are not involved in the regional organizations that Russia dominates. The second solution shows a high degree of cooperation with other actors combined with weak presidential powers. This solution includes some of the states from the first solution. These states prioritized cooperation with the EU and other Western states instead of Russia after the 1990s.

The condition of NDRO membership shows up in two of the solutions, both within the solution for closed autocracy and within the opposite outcome of a more democratic outcome. The presence of high levels of NDRO membership adheres to the second pathway in the solution for closed autocracy. Belarus, Kazakhstan, and Tajikistan all have high levels of NDRO membership along with high levels of linkage and leverage. The absence of NDRO membership is also a part of the first pathway of the reverse outcome and involves Ukraine (1995, and 2021), Moldova (2005, 2015, and 2021), and Georgia (2015). These states have been largely absent from Russian-dominated NDROs; Georgia, for instance, terminated its only membership after the 2008 war with Russia. These states have instead focused on cooperation with the EU in hopes of future EU membership. NDRO membership in a Russian-dominated regional organization is not a necessary condition for explaining the political development of the post-Soviet states during the chosen



periods of time. However, it is a sufficient condition in combination with other included conditions and can therefore be considered to influence the political development of the region.

High levels of Russian leverage and linkages to Russia are also a part of the second pathway for the solution of closed autocracy. The pro-Russian states of Belarus, Kazakhstan, and Tajikistan are all vulnerable to Russian external influence via high levels of leverage. Since its independence, Belarus has been highly dependent on Russia for political support, economic assistance, and cheap oil and gas. Tajikistan has remained highly dependent on Russian economic and military support due to the aftermath of its civil war. Kazakhstan has reduced its dependency on Russia over the years but is still highly interconnected due to the large Russian diaspora and the state's geographical position.

Cooperation with actors other than Russia (the condition of ActorOther) is also found in both the outcome of closed autocracy and non-closed autocracy. In the first outcome, the absence of cooperation with other actors is associated with the neutral autocratic states of Azerbaijan, Uzbekistan, and Turkmenistan. They have all, at different times, chosen to adhere to the policy of neutrality and hence not cooperated with any other actor at a high level. The presence of ActorOther is also a part of the first pathway of the reverse outcome of non-closed autocracy. The more democratic states of Ukraine, Moldova, and Georgia have prioritized cooperation with Western powers and the EU with the aim of integration with the EU.

The condition of PresPow (high level of presidential power) is a part of all solution pathways for the two solutions. Strong presidential powers, in the form of a presidential system with or without attributes of super-presidentialism, have a strong importance in explaining the different democratic developments in the post-Soviet region. The states belonging to the solutions for closed autocracy all chose to establish a presidential form of government in their first constitutions. In most of these states, presidential power has been further strengthened over time through constitutional amendments. In the more democratic states in the region, Moldova, Ukraine, and Armenia, the chosen constitutional system has instead been semi-presidential or parliamentary. Georgia moved away from a presidential system in the early 2000s to semi-presidentialism and later a parliamentary system.

The included eleven post-Soviet states vary greatly, as was made visible through the fsQCA. Several conditions in different combinations revealed several pathways to both an autocratic outcome and a more democratic one. Some of the patterns from the five groups of states from the previous part of the thesis recur in the fsQCA. Belarus and Kazakhstan, the autocratic states with the most NDRO memberships, are a part of both solutions for the outcome of closed autocracy. Azerbaijan, Uzbekistan, and Turkmenistan, the autocratic states with few NDRO memberships, are also, in

part, found in both solutions for closed autocracy. Ukraine, Moldova, and Georgia, the most democratic states with few NDRO memberships, are a part of both solutions for the reverse outcome of non-closed autocracy. However, Armenia, Kyrgyzstan, and Tajikistan do not fit any of the solutions once the logical contradictions are removed.

As three different analyses have been presented, the following chapter brings the results of the analyses together to explore what the results mean when considered together.

## IV. SUMMARY AND CONCLUSIONS

## Chapter 9. Which factors contribute to the varying democratic developments in the post-Soviet region?

### Results from the empirical analyses

To address the main research problem of this thesis, whether post-Soviet regionalism has an effect on the varying democratic developments in the post-Soviet region, three separate empirical analyses have been conducted. These analyses provide a comprehensive understanding of the puzzle of post-Soviet democratization, highlighting the intricacy of the research problem. In this chapter, the results of the analyses are presented (9.1, 9.2, 9.3) and compared, enabling a detailed interpretation of the findings from this three-part study (9.4).

#### 9.1. Longitudinal descriptive analysis

The first analysis sought to examine if an association exists between the number of NDRO membership and the democratic development in the included post-Soviet states from 1991 to 2021. According to the framework of authoritarian regionalism, there should be an inverse association between these two variables: a higher level of NDRO should be associated with a lower level of democratic development, and a lower level of NDRO should be associated with higher levels of democratic development.

The analysis of these variables revealed five distinct patterns among the post-Soviet states (see Table 53). Belarus and Kazakhstan, both stable autocratic regimes, have maintained a high number of NDRO memberships since the 1990s, aligning with the theory of authoritarian regionalism. Similarly, Ukraine, Moldova, and Georgia, which have experienced more democratic development, have consistently had few or no NDRO memberships, further supporting the theory. However, three patterns emerged that do not align with the theoretical framework. The stable autocratic regimes of Azerbaijan, Uzbekistan, and Turkmenistan have generally exhibited low or declining levels of NDRO membership. Armenia and Kyrgyzstan, in contrast, have displayed fluctuating NDRO membership levels over the past three decades, in combination with fluctuating degrees of democratic development. Tajikistan has, in turn, had medium levels of NDRO membership while experiencing non-democratic development. As a result, in line with the theories of authoritarian regionalism, an association between the level of NDRO membership and democratic development is only evident in two of the five identified patterns.

Table 53 summarizes the results related to the research questions of the first analysis.

Table 53. Summary of the first analysis

Study 1: General association between NDRO membership level and democracy level 1991–2021	RQ 1: <i>Is there an association between the number of memberships in Russian-dominated non-democratic regional organizations (NDROs) and the level of democracy in the post-Soviet region?</i>
<b>Association:</b>	<b>No Association:</b>
<i>High NDRO and low democracy:</i> Belarus Kazakhstan	<i>Fluctuating NDRO and fluctuating democracy:</i> Armenia Kyrgyzstan
<i>Low NDRO and high democracy:</i> Georgia Moldova Ukraine	<i>Medium NDRO and low democracy:</i> Tajikistan
	<i>Low NDRO and low democracy:</i> Azerbaijan Uzbekistan Turkmenistan

Since a general association seems to exist within two of the groups, while it does not exist in the remaining three groups, the consideration of other, complementary, variables impacting democratic developments arises. These other variables are the focus of the second analysis.

## 9.2. Exploratory case studies

The two chapters on the exploratory case studies have different focuses. The first objective of the second analysis was to provide a chronological overview of the development of post-Soviet states from 1991 to 2021, to identify suitable variables for the cross-case comparative analysis. The case studies uncovered variations regarding state-specific characteristics among the five groups of states, which were connected to corresponding variables. The second objective was to score and compare these variables among the included states.

Two common variables emerged across all case studies: the varying strength of presidential power and the varying relationship with regional actors other than Russia. Both variables were included in the analysis due to their potential significance. Generally, strong presidential powers are associated with less democratic development, while parliamentary or semi-presidential systems are associated with more democratic outcomes. Similarly, cooperation with actors outside of Russia,

particularly Western actors such as the EU, can serve as a counterbalance to Russian influence. There were also differences within and between groups concerning their level of linkage to Russia and the extent of Russian leverage, both of which likely are associated with the effectiveness of Russian external influence. According to the theories of linkage and leverage, states with high levels of linkage to Russia and Russian leverage are more vulnerable to external Russian influence, while lower levels reduce vulnerability.

The cross-case comparative analysis reveals variations regarding the included variables (linkage to Russia, Russian leverage, the strength of post-Soviet presidential powers, and cooperation with other actors besides Russia) among the five groups (see Table 54). These variables provide additional insight into the varying democratic developments across the post-Soviet region.

Table 54. Pattern regarding group-specific levels of leverage, linkage, presidential power, and cooperation with other regional actors in the post-Soviet states 1995, 2005, 2015, and 2021.

	BEL, KAZ	GEO, MDA, UKR	ARM, KGZ	TJK	AZE, UZB, TKM
Leverage					
1995	•		•	•	
2005	•		•		
2015	•		•		◦
2021	•		•		◦
Linkage					
1995	•		•	•	
2005	•		•	•	◦
2015	•		•	•	◦
2021	•		•	•	◦
Another actor					
1995			•	◦	
2005			◦	•	
2015		•		◦	◦
2021		•		◦	◦
Presidential power					
1995	•			•	•
2005	•	◦		•	•
2015	•	◦		•	•
2021	•	◦		•	•

Note: black dot means high levels of a variable, white dot means low levels of a variable while no dot means neither high nor low levels. Leverage: high (= 2–3), low (= 0–1). Linkage: high (= 2–3), low (= 0–1). Other actors: high (= 2), low (= 0). Presidential power: high (= 2–3), low (= 0–1).

Belarus and Kazakhstan exhibit strong linkages to Russia, as well as high levels of Russian leverage and strong presidential powers. Since the early 1990s, both countries have maintained a more positive relationship with Russia and have been founding members of several Russian-dominated NDROs. Although Kazakhstan has decreased its dependency on Russia through a multivector foreign policy, Belarus remains heavily reliant on Russia across political, military, and economic domains. In contrast, Ukraine, Moldova, and Georgia demonstrate weaker presidential powers coupled with significant cooperation with other actors, particularly the EU. Armenia and Kyrgyzstan display varied traits while both having high levels of linkages to Russia and significant Russian leverage. Tajikistan has maintained a high dependency on Russia, increased further by the civil war of the 1990s, which left the state economically weakened. The fifth group shares the traits of strong presidential powers, with a low level of cooperation with other actors since 2015. While Turkmenistan has adhered to a policy of neutrality since the 1990s, Azerbaijan and Uzbekistan established neutral foreign policies in the 2000s, leading to limited cooperation with Russia or other regional and international actors.

The summary of the research question and the results of the second study can be found in Table 55.

Table 55. Summary of the second analysis.

Study 2: Exploratory case studies and cross-case comparative analysis of the four groups of states identified in the previous study		RQ 2: <i>Apart from NDRO membership levels, which complementary factors related to the varying democratic development can be identified within the post-Soviet region?</i>	
<i>Groups of states with an association:</i>		Complementary variables:	
		High levels of	Low levels of
High NDRO and low democracy:		Leverage	
Belarus		Linkage	
Kazakhstan		Presidential power	
Low NDRO and high democracy:		Another actor	Presidential powers
Georgia			
Moldova			
Ukraine			
<i>Groups of states without an association:</i>			
Fluctuating NDRO and fluctuating democracy:		Linkage	
Armenia		Leverage	
Kyrgyzstan			
Medium NDRO and low democracy:		Linkage	Another actor
Tajikistan		Presidential power	
Low democracy and low NDRO:		Presidential power	Leverage
Azerbaijan			Linkage
Uzbekistan			Another actor
Turkmenistan			
Note: “Another actor” refers to the variable/condition of cooperation with alternative regional actors.			

While an association between NDRO memberships and democracy level among some of the post-Soviet states was found in the first empirical study, the second study revealed a more complex pattern of other variables involved in the democratic developments of the states. The aim of the third analysis was to simplify the complex post-Soviet realities by using a fsQCA analysis to identify different pathways for the varying outcomes.

### 9.3. Fuzzy-set QCA analysis

The aim of the third study was to analyze the role of NDRO membership levels and the four variables identified in the second analysis, in explaining the varying democratic developments in the post-Soviet states. The results of the fuzzy-set QCA analysis showed that only the condition of



PresPow (the level of presidential powers) was a necessary condition for the two outcomes. NDRO membership levels were an INUS condition (an insufficient but necessary part of a condition that is itself unnecessary but sufficient for a result) within two of the four pathways in combination with other conditions (see Table 56).

Table 56. Results from the QCA analysis for both outcomes.

Solution	1995	2005	2015	2021
Closed autocracy:				
Absence of <i>ActorOther</i> with <i>PresPow</i>	TJK KAZ TKM (n)	BLR UZB TKM (n)	BLR AZE (n) TJK UZB (n) TKM (n)	BLR AZE (n) TJK UZB (n) TKM (n)
<i>Leverage</i> with <i>Linkage</i> with <i>PresPow</i> with <i>NDRO</i>	AZE KAZ TJK UZB	BLR KAZ TJK	BLR KAZ	BLR KAZ TJK
Non-closed autocracy:				
Absence of <i>NDRO</i> with absence of <i>PresPow</i>	UKR	MDA	GEO MDA	UKR MDA
<i>ActorOther</i> with absence of <i>PresPow</i>	MDA UKR	GEO	GEO	MDR GEO UKR

Note: (n) means a policy of neutrality.

The fsQCA analysis resulted in two paths for each outcome (closed autocracy and non-closed autocracy). For the outcome of closed autocracy, the absence of cooperation with other actors combined with strong presidential powers (pathway 1) and high levels of linkage and leverage, strong presidential powers combined with high levels of NDRO memberships (pathway 2) were needed for an autocratic outcome. The included states for the first pathway are Turkmenistan (for all included years), Tajikistan (1995, 2015, and 2021), Belarus and Uzbekistan (2005, 2015, and 2021), Azerbaijan (2015 and 2021), and Kazakhstan (1995). The other pathway includes Kazakhstan (2005, 2015, and 2021), Belarus (2005, 2015, and 2021), Tajikistan (1995, 2005, and 2021), Uzbekistan and Azerbaijan (1995). Belarus, Kazakhstan, and Tajikistan are also found in this solution, with high dependency on Russia, strong presidential powers, and high levels of NDRO memberships. Hence, the variables needed for an autocratic outcome among the included states are either a lack of cooperation with other actors (due to neutrality or by prioritizing Russia) combined with strong presidential powers, or high dependency on Russia, strong presidential powers combined with high levels of NDRO membership levels.

For the outcome of non-closed autocracy, two solution paths also appeared. The combination of low levels of NDRO membership levels combined with weak presidential powers (Moldova 2005, 2015, and 2021, Ukraine 1995 and 2021, and Georgia 2015), and high levels of cooperation with other regional actors combined with weak presidential powers (Georgia 2005, 2015, and 2021, Ukraine and Moldova 1995 and 2021), are needed for a non-autocratic outcome.

The summary of the research question and the results of the third study can be found in Table 57.

Table 57. Summary of the third analysis.

Study 3: Fuzzy-set QCA with five conditions	
RQ 3: <i>In which combinations with other conditions, and under which circumstances, can NDRO membership bring about democracy respectively autocracy?</i>	
In combination with other conditions, NDRO can, to some extent, explain the different political pathways of the states:	
<i>Closed autocracy:</i>	
Leverage with Linkage with PresPow with NDRO	Belarus 2005, 2015, 2021 Kazakhstan 1995, 2005, 2015, 2021
Under circumstances when states have been exposed to high levels of Russian leverage, highly connected to Russia via linkages, and when the presidential powers have been strong, NDRO membership has been able to bring about autocracy (or non-closed autocracy).	Tajikistan 1995, 2005 Uzbekistan 1995 Azerbaijan 1995
<i>Non-closed autocracy:</i>	
Absence of NDRO membership with absence of PresPow	Ukraine 1995, 2021
Under circumstances when states have had weak presidential powers, the absence of NDRO membership has been able to bring about democracy (or non-closed autocracy)	Moldova 2005, 2015, 2021 Georgia 2015

This analysis suggests that having many NDRO memberships, in combination with Russian leverage and linkage to Russia, as well as strong presidential powers, play a significant role in the development of non-democracy within the post-Soviet region. The absence of NDRO memberships, particularly in states with weaker presidential powers, plays a role in the development of democracy within the region.

### 9.4. The three analyses explored together

As the previous chapter summarizes the findings from the three analyses, the current subchapter explores what the individual results mean when put together. When evaluating the broader context,

integrating the findings from the three empirical analyses, and looking into their similarities and differences, a more simplified picture emerges regarding the democratic development in the post-Soviet region.

The key findings from the first analysis are that the presumed association between NDRO membership levels and democratic development was not evident in all the post-Soviet states. This analysis provides a preliminary understanding of the association between memberships in NDROs and democratic development, in part confirming the theories of authoritarian regionalism. States with higher NDRO membership levels, such as Belarus and Kazakhstan, experienced a non-democratic development, while those with lower NDRO membership levels, like Ukraine, Moldova, and Georgia, had more democratic development. However, six states did not fit the pattern built on the theory of authoritarian regionalism while suggesting other factors are also influential. Triangulation with the other analyses, particularly the fsQCA, increases the understanding of these deviations. While NDRO membership levels play a role in democratic development, other variables such as the strength of presidential powers and cooperation with alternative regional actors also contribute significantly to these outcomes.

The key findings of the second analysis are that there are differences between the five groups of post-Soviet states regarding the included variables. As for the two groups with an association between NDRO membership and democratic development, two patterns are visible. States with high levels of NDRO membership often display strong presidential powers and greater dependency on Russia. In contrast, states with lower levels of NDRO membership, weaker presidential powers, and higher cooperation with other actors, especially the EU, tend to be more democratic. However, the states with no association between the two main variables also shared common characteristics with each other as well as with the first two groups. The analysis shows a clear distinction between the states that are more closely tied to Russia (Armenia, Kyrgyzstan, and Tajikistan) and those that have pursued neutrality (Azerbaijan, Uzbekistan, and Turkmenistan).

The second analysis emphasizes the importance of dependency on Russia, revealing that countries with stronger linkages and leverage to Russia were more likely to be non-democratic. These states have consistently aligned with Russia, whether due to economic, political, or military dependency, and they often exhibit high levels of NDRO membership as part of Russian-dominated regional organizations. Meanwhile, states like Ukraine, Moldova, and Georgia, despite their dependency on Russia, have pursued alternative alliances, notably with the EU, and have developed in a more democratic way. The triangulation of these findings with the fsQCA analysis suggests that dependency on Russia is a critical factor in shaping the political landscape of post-Soviet states.

However, the extent of this dependency and cooperation with other regional actors (such as the EU) can either reinforce autocratic tendencies or allow for democratic development, particularly when combined with weaker presidential powers.

The third analysis used fuzzy-set QCA to identify multiple pathways to both autocratic (closed autocracy) and democratic (non-closed autocracy) outcomes. The interpretation of the results from the third analysis indicates that autocracy and democracy in the post-Soviet region result from the interplay of various conditions over time. Presidential power is identified as a necessary condition in the fsQCA analysis, while other variables are INUS conditions, indicating that they cannot solely account for the outcomes but contribute in conjunction with other factors. It also highlights that NDRO membership combined with other variables, such as high Russian leverage and linkage, matter for autocratic outcomes. On the democratic side, weak presidential powers combined with low NDRO membership levels and high cooperation with other regional actors contribute to more democratic developments. This analysis strengthens the findings of the second analysis, confirming the importance of presidential powers, NDRO memberships, linkages with Russia, Russian leverage, and the level of cooperation with other external actors. These variables do not work in isolation but in combination, and different combinations of variables lead to different political outcomes. No single variable drove the political development in the post-Soviet region. Autocracy was the outcome within the region during the analyzed periods of time when strong presidential power combined with high NDRO membership levels and high levels of Russian dependence were combined. Democracy was the outcome when weak presidential power, low NDRO membership levels, and cooperation with alternative regional actors were combined. The coverage for the solution of closed autocracy is 0.839, and for non-closed autocracy 0.596, indicating that additional variables or conditions, not included in the analysis, may also influence post-Soviet democratization.

When explored together, the results suggest that democratic development in the post-Soviet region is influenced by an interplay of many variables. The analyses underscore the importance of considering multiple variables in understanding the region's political development, as no single factor is determinative. The combination of all three analyses reveals that political developments in post-Soviet states are shaped by a combination of internal and external dynamics. NDRO membership, while important, is one part of a broader block of variables that, in combination with each other, determine whether a state moves towards autocracy or democracy. Although the included conditions do not provide a complete picture of post-Soviet democratization, they are important for the understanding of the diverse political landscape that has emerged following the dissolution of the Soviet Union.

The final chapter is devoted to the discussion of the conclusions of the thesis as well as suggestions for further research.

## Chapter 10. Discussion and conclusions

As the previous chapter discusses the empirical results from the analyses and answers the research questions of the thesis, the current chapter presents the conclusions of the study. The main function of this chapter is to analyze the conclusions drawn from the empirical results in relation to the thesis' aim and general research problem, as well as to put these findings within the context of previous research and theoretical foundations. Specifically, it addresses Russia's role as an external actor in the post-Soviet region and examines how NDRO membership contributes to understanding the varying democratic developments in the post-Soviet region. The chapter also includes suggestions regarding areas for further research.

When analyzing the past three decades of post-Soviet democratic development, the general pattern is increasingly autocratic. Of the eleven included states, only Moldova, Georgia, and Ukraine have developed in a more democratic way over a longer period of time. The rest of the states have either had autocratic development or fluctuating democratic development or have stayed on a highly autocratic path since independence. The region began to be acknowledged by scholars of democratization in the 1990s due to the slow and varying democratic development. As the pattern of global democratic backsliding becomes more visible, the factors enabling or disabling regime transitions are again of high interest. The general research problem of the thesis focuses on one of these factors, namely, the possible impact of membership in Russian-dominated NDROs on the level of democratic development within the post-Soviet region.

The thesis builds on the assumption, based on the results of previous studies on democratization, that one contributing factor is not enough to determine the direction of regime transitions. While the association between NDRO membership levels and democratic development has been the focus, the impact of other possible variables has also been analyzed. The use of three different empirical analyses, which build on each other, has allowed for a deeper understanding of the patterns and outcomes of regionalism and regional cooperation within NDROs for the varying democratic development in the post-Soviet space. The conclusions based on the empirical analyses in this dissertation are discussed next. The first part of the chapter (10.1.) discusses the conclusions in the view of regionalism and the theory of authoritarian regionalism. The following subchapter (10.2) continues with a discussion of other knowledge gained from the thesis, as well as implications for the main research problem. The two last subchapters include a summary, and the implications of the conclusions (10.3) as well as avenues for further research (10.4).

## 10.1. Post-Soviet regionalism, NDROs and democratic development

Previous studies on (democratic) regionalism have concluded that there is an association between membership in DROs and the level of democracy. According to Obydenkova and Libman (2019), authoritarian regionalism assumes an association between membership in NDROs and autocratic consolidation. As such, high NDRO membership levels are theorized to be associated with low democratic development, while low NDRO membership levels are expected to be associated with higher democratic development.

While the theories of authoritarian regionalism only highlight the impact of NDRO memberships for democratic development and autocratic consolidation, the reality in the post-Soviet region is much more complex. The conclusion from the three analyses is that NDRO membership alone cannot account for the varying democratic development within the region, rather, it is only part of the explanation for some of the post-Soviet states. NDRO membership is concluded to affect the democratic development within the region in combination with other conditions. These other conditions also need to be considered when analyzing the role of authoritarian regionalism and NDROs in the post-Soviet region. The condition of NDRO membership does matter for the democratic development *if* combined with other specific conditions.

In the cases of Belarus and Kazakhstan, high levels of NDRO membership have played a role, in combination with other conditions, in their non-democratic development. Low levels or absence of NDRO memberships have, in combination with other conditions, influenced the democratic developments in Moldova, Georgia, and Ukraine. These results correspond to the results of the first analysis. The association between NDRO membership levels and democratic development in either direction is hence concluded, but only as one of several conditions involved. NDRO membership levels are not the only important variable within these cases, a combination with other conditions is also needed to produce these results. Armenia and Kyrgyzstan have, at times, developed in a more democratic direction despite having high levels of NDRO membership levels. Tajikistan, with a medium level of NDRO membership, has had a consolidated autocratic regime since independence. In the cases of Azerbaijan, Turkmenistan, and Uzbekistan, NDRO membership has not played a part in the low democratic development or the autocratic consolidation within these states.

According to theories of authoritarian regionalism, NDRO memberships can facilitate autocratic survival through various mechanisms, including enhancing legitimacy, promoting authoritarian learning, redistributing resources, and providing political support (Cottiero & Haggard, 2021;

Libman, 2018; Obydenkova & Libman, 2019; Russo & Stoddard 2018). Certain mechanisms of authoritarian regionalism, particularly those related to authoritarian learning, are challenging to observe and analyze. While other mechanisms, such as economic cooperation, are more visible, it remains difficult to determine the precise impact of these mechanisms on autocratic consolidation. Economic cooperation is a prominent feature of post-Soviet regionalism, as most NDROs aside from the CSTO emphasize economic integration. Russia's use of economic leverage, such as fluctuating oil and gas prices, forgiving loans, and adopting moderate policies towards working migrants, serves as examples of the redistribution of economic resources. However, the effects of these economic mechanisms on autocratic consolidation remain uncertain. Scholars such as Obydenkova and Libman (2019), Russo and Stoddard (2018), and Cottiero and Haggard (2021) argue that the most concrete effect of authoritarian regionalism is the prolonged tenure of non-democratic political leaders. Although post-Soviet authoritarian leaders tend to have long tenures, the degree of involvement in NDROs among the states varies. Among the six most consolidated autocratic states (Azerbaijan, Belarus, Kazakhstan, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan, and Uzbekistan), only three have had high levels of NDRO membership, while the other three have adopted neutral foreign policies. It is, therefore, difficult to conclude if membership in NDROs is associated with the long term of post-Soviet leaders or if other variables contribute to the explanation.

The overall conclusion regarding the role NDRO memberships have played in the varying democratic development in the post-Soviet region is that they have influence in some of the cases at certain points of time, not as an isolated variable but in combination with other important conditions. In that regard, the theory of authoritarian regionalism offers a simplified explanation for the level of association and the impact memberships in NDROs have on democratic development, at least in the post-Soviet region. The reality is more complicated, with many conditions influencing political outcomes in different states at different times. The groups of states identified in the first analysis revealed an association between the level of NDRO membership and democratic development in half of the included post-Soviet states. This implies that the influence of NDROs is more evident in some states than in others, with the variations reflecting a complex interplay of historical, regional, and domestic processes, stemming from both pre- and post-independence eras. Common characteristics and differences between groups of states, such as their relationships with Russia, also affect their levels of NDRO membership and democratic development. As with theories on democratization and autocratization, there is no single factor that can fully explain these processes. NDROs should, therefore, be seen as one part of a broader explanation rather than the sole determinant. The following chapter discusses the impact of these other factors.



## 10.2. Impact and implications of other findings

One of the main contributions of this thesis is the identification of conditions, in combination with NDRO membership, that are associated with democratic development in the post-Soviet region. Although these conditions are multifaceted, understanding them provides valuable insights into regional dynamics and the interplay of various factors influencing democratic development. Rather than attributing changes in democracy level to the variation of a single variable, this study concludes that the patterns of post-Soviet regionalism and democratization are shaped by the interaction of multiple factors. So, considering the findings of this thesis, what additional variables have influenced the varying democratic outcomes in the region? The impacts of the variables of presidential power, linkage, leverage, and cooperation with alternative regional actors are discussed next.

The thesis finds that the *strength of presidential powers* is a significant factor in shaping democratic development in the region. Through the fuzzy-set QCA analysis, this thesis finds that the strength of presidential powers is the only necessary condition for both outcomes. For the outcome of closed autocracy, the existence of strong, or super strong, presidential powers was necessary, while the absence of strong presidential powers was necessary for a more democratic outcome. Regimes characterized by strong presidential systems, often without term limits and with presidential powers strengthened by constitutional amendments, are the most consolidated autocracies with leaders who remain in power for extended periods. The development of super-presidentialism in the post-Soviet space, therefore, is closely linked to autocratic consolidation. This result supports the results of Stepan and Skach (1993) regarding the impact of the different impacts of governmental systems on the democratic developments of (new) democracies. In the post-Soviet region, a strong presidential system is associated with non-democratic development, while weaker presidential powers are associated with a more democratic development. The evolution of super-presidentialism varies across states; in some, it evolved from existing presidential systems, while in others, it was established from the time of independence. This finding is in line with the arguments made by Frison-Roche (2007), that the presidency in many highly autocratic post-Soviet states was a continuation of the Supreme Soviet, with the first state president often being the former head of the Supreme Soviet, which made political reform challenging.

The role of post-Soviet presidents as political actors is viewed to be critical in shaping the foreign policy decisions that impact their states' democratic development. As Tolstrup (2013) and Jackson (2010) argue, political leaders play an important role in either embracing or resisting external

influence. This thesis confirms that decisions made by key political actors, for example, presidents, have had implications for the level of regional cooperation. In autocratic states, where presidential power is often concentrated, the president has a direct influence on foreign policy and regional cooperation within NDROs. Hence, the role of the president is linked to the formation of foreign policies and the activeness of regional cooperation in the region. In more democratic states, shifts in government leadership have led to visible changes in foreign policy, particularly in relation to Russia and the EU.

The thesis also highlights the role of Russian *linkages and leverage* in shaping the region's democratic development. In its traditional form, according to the theories of Way and Levitsky (2005, 2006, 2007, 2014), a combination of high democratic linkages and leverage should produce democracy regardless of domestic conditions. By extending this framework to non-democratic external actors, the assumption is that high levels of non-democratic linkages and leverage may impact the consolidation of non-democracy. However, when applying the theory of linkage and leverage to regionalism, there appears to be a difference between the impact of DROs and NDROs. While DROs exert external pressure through conditionality, requiring economic and political reforms as a precondition for membership, NDROs lack such mechanisms. Within the post-Soviet space, states' decisions to join NDROs are driven primarily by economic, political, security-related, or geopolitical national interests, and are concluded to be closely tied to the levels of linkage with Russia and Russian leverage.

The theory of linkage and leverage used in this thesis has proven useful in explaining the democratic variations among post-Soviet states, particularly in relation to Russia's role in regional cooperation. High levels of linkage to Russia are associated with closer relations and higher levels of cooperation, largely due to the historical and cultural bonds between these states and Russia, including the use of the Russian language and media. Russian leverage is expressed in power asymmetries and dependencies, which are particularly evident in states dealing with frozen or active conflicts. However, linkages with other regional powers, such as the EU, can be seen to mitigate Russian influence. For instance, states that balance their linkages with Russia and Western actors tended to experience more democratic outcomes, suggesting that alternative partnerships can reduce dependence on Russia.

In the case of Moldova, Georgia, and Ukraine, the possibility to *cooperate with the EU* has played a role in their more democratic development. Cooperation with the EU, and the potential for EU membership, has enhanced linkages and leverage, alongside the conditionality that accompanies these prospects. While NDROs may exert non-democratic influence, DROs provide democratic

incentives, potentially leading to political reforms and democratization. EU accession can hence serve as a “carrot” encouraging economic and political reforms. Some non-democratic post-Soviet states have sought alternative regional alliances, such as with China or Iran, to counterbalance Russian influence. While these alliances have not necessarily promoted democratic development, they have lessened the states’ dependence on Russia.

Geographical location is a crucial factor influencing the post-Soviet states’ ability to engage with democratic linkages. Geographically, the post-Soviet states can be divided into three groups (see map on page 94): the “European” (Belarus, Moldova, and Ukraine), the Caucasian (Georgia, Armenia, and Azerbaijan), and the Central Asian states (Kazakhstan, Uzbekistan, Turkmenistan, Kyrgyzstan, and Tajikistan). The geographical location creates both constraints and opportunities. For example, the European states’ proximity to the EU enhances their potential for cooperation with European actors and provides the possibility for potential EU membership. In contrast, the Caucasian states are located at a geopolitical crossroads between Russia, Turkey, and Iran, while the Central Asian states are geographically close to China, Afghanistan, and Iran, with corresponding security concerns and regional dynamics. These varying geographies also influence states’ access to natural resources, which affects their economic dependence on Russia. Economically weak states with limited natural resources tend to align more closely with Russia, whereas resource-rich states have the capacity to pursue more independent or neutral foreign policies. The thesis concludes that linkages and leverage have been important in the shaping of the regional trajectories in the post-Soviet region. The levels of linkages and leverage are connected to the states’ relationships with Russia, as well as their attitudes toward regional cooperation within NDROs. Similarities and dependencies are deemed to be of high importance within the study of post-Soviet regionalism.

The thesis concludes that geographical and historical factors rooted in Soviet legacy play a significant role in shaping post-Soviet democratic outcomes. The levels of linkages and leverages are deemed to be strengthened by the special geographical and historical factors based on historical legacies existing in the region. Globally, transitioning states within different regions are viewed to have varying starting positions due to the existence or absence of preconditions for democracy. The term *post-Soviet region* directly acknowledges the historical past within the region. All post-Soviet states share a historical past within the Soviet Union, and some of the states were also a part of the Russian empire, giving those states an even deeper historical bond. The (in some cases) long-standing historical connections, geographical proximity, and power structures that existed during the Soviet period have had profound implications for the development of these states. The shared history of Soviet rule has left many post-Soviet states with weaker statehood, economic

underdevelopment, and a tradition of non-democratic governance, making democratic transitions more challenging. Furthermore, the way in which states have managed the dissolution of Soviet-era bonds has influenced their democratic or autocratic paths, as well as their foreign policy alignments, whether pro-Russian, multivector, or neutral. However, the conclusions of the thesis do question if the term post-Soviet region is still applicable today. Over three decades after the fall of the Soviet Union the relevance of the term has rather faded. The term excludes the vastly different domestic trajectories of the states both before and after their Soviet era. This thesis has shown that while similarities between the states still exist, so do large differences between them (see Table 32). Referring to these diverse states as “post-Soviet” may no longer via a viable approach.

In this context, revisiting the typology of combined influences presented in Chapter 3.4.1 corresponds with the broader conclusions drawn throughout the study. The typology highlights the notion that external actors seldom use only one mechanism at a time and that the influence can vary in degree during different periods in time. The research identifies Russia, the Russian-dominated NDROs, and the EU as important external actors within the post-Soviet region. The different mechanisms of the combined typology were found to be used by these actors. Both active-direct mechanisms (such as Russian military intervention and political pressure, or leverage, via military bases and Russian access to vital resources in the target states) and passive-indirect mechanisms (such as economic dependencies and asymmetric trade dependencies) are evident in the interactions between post-Soviet states and Russia. Both the EU and the Russian-dominated NDROs extract active-indirect influences on the post-Soviet region via support, cooperation, and assistance. The EU can be considered to influence target states via democracy-assistance programs, and by using incentives and conditionalities in connection to prospective EU membership. Regional organizations can also be considered to influence target states via the diffusion (passive-direct) of norms, values, and ideas. The notion of the use of combined mechanisms of influence is hence supported by the results of the thesis. The use of these mechanisms is more evident in the cases with higher levels of linkage and leverage to Russia or the EU. These variables are deemed to influence the effectiveness of external influence as suggested by previous literature (see Way & Levitsky 2005, 2006, 2007, 2014; Tansey 2015; Tolstrup, 2013).

While the mechanisms of external influence are visible, the intentions behind their use remain unclear. Autocracy promotion refers to deliberate actions taken by an external actor to support or reinforce non-democratic governance structures in a target state, often with the intent to consolidate autocratic power or undermine democratic development. However, defining autocracy promotion solely in these terms risks excluding other motivations that might drive such actions.

For instance, geopolitical issues, economic development, and regional stability concerns might also influence an external actor's interventions in the political development of target states. These factors may align with autocracy promotion but do not necessarily indicate that it is the main intent behind the actions. The difficulty in concluding the intent behind these actions highlights the issue of multiple motives. Non-democratic regimes may benefit from extracting external influence, but these interventions may also be driven by broader geopolitical, political, and economic issues. This uncertainty highlights the need for a more nuanced understanding of external influence, moving beyond the binarity of democracy versus autocracy promotion to consider the broader strategic and political contexts in which these actions occur.

The toolkit of NDROs (see Table 11) also highlights the difficulty in determining the effect of the use of mechanisms via regional organizations. The literature identifies several mechanisms, as well as their potential outcomes, used by NDROs (see subchapter 3.6.1). The economic benefits that come with memberships in NDROs are evident in many of the included post-Soviet states (Belarus, Kyrgyzstan, Armenia, and Tajikistan), and so are political benefits in Belarus and Kazakhstan, for example. However, it is difficult to determine the intentions behind the mechanisms used by NDROs and to establish the outcomes of them. While the fsQCA analysis revealed that NDROs do contribute to the outcome of closed autocracy in combination with leverage, linkage, and strong presidential powers, the specific way an NDRO contributes is not established.

The following subchapter provides a summary of the main conclusions of this thesis, as well as suggestions for future research.

### 10.3. Summary of the main conclusions and their implications

Four main conclusions drawn from the empirical analyses of the thesis, and their implications, are discussed next.

The first main conclusion is that *domestic and regional circumstances are not static but change over time, affecting the domestic decisions of individual states*. Every state has an individual starting point, and factors involved in regime transitions influence states differently. As the “one size fits all” theories within democratization research have been largely abandoned, the empirical results of the thesis confirm that many variables and conditions matter. Many different variables matter for a democratic or autocratic outcome, and the variables vary over time. Despite belonging to the same region, the

post-Soviet states display significant differences regarding the included variables, and the outcome variable, in the analyses. They do not all fit under the same theoretical umbrella. The variables also tend to differ from state to state depending on the historical context, changing relationships to neighboring states and powerful external actors, and triggering domestic or regional events.

An implication of the first conclusion is that states within the same region do not necessarily have the same development or characteristics, and region-based assumptions are difficult to make. Another implication of the conclusion is that linkage and leverage are not as static as they are deemed to be in existing literature. The second analysis of the thesis shows that, in some cases, the levels of linkages and leverage did decrease or increase over time. The variations in the levels of linkage and leverage within the post-Soviet region are, in part, a result of the decisions of domestic political elites. These elites have altered the levels of linkages and leverage by stipulating language laws and media laws and by making changes in their economic cooperation with Russia. Hence, as Tolstrup (2015) and (Castaldo 2020) state, the role of domestic political elites is deemed to be important for the theory of linkage and leverage.

The second main conclusion is that *the level of NDRO membership can be seen as driven not only by the level of similarity but also by the level of dependency*. As Haas (1960) and Konopelko (2014) state, similarity breeds cooperation. Cooperation within NDROs, as well as all forms of regionalism, is based on similarity (culture, language, religion, and history) and common goals. However, in the post-Soviet region, as the results of this thesis show, the NDRO membership level can also be driven by different needs, or dependencies (political, economic, or security-based). In that way linkage and leverage can be viewed to be tied to memberships in NDROs in the post-Soviet region as similarities (linkages) and vulnerabilities (leverage) are associated with many NDRO memberships. Without either a will for regional cooperation, a feeling of similarity, or a need for certain advantages, NDRO membership is not attractive for target states. Moldova, Georgia, and Ukraine have not sought the advantages of the Russian-dominated NDROs. Azerbaijan, Uzbekistan, and Turkmenistan have not had the feeling of similarity with the rest of the post-Soviet region either, nor have they had the need for NDRO memberships. While Belarus and Kazakhstan have had both a sense of similarity and the need for NDRO memberships, Armenia, Kyrgyzstan, and Tajikistan have only had a need for NDRO memberships. An implication of this conclusion is that the level of similarity is not the only base for regional cooperation, and the level of dependence is paramount for membership in the post-Soviet NDROs due to the large power asymmetries in the region.

The third main conclusion is that *the strength of the presidential powers is heavily involved in the democratic development within the region*. The third analysis showed that strong presidential powers were a necessary condition for the outcome of closed autocracy. Strong presidential powers or super-presidentialism is present in all autocratic states within the post-Soviet region. Weaker presidential powers are associated with a more democratic development within the region. The strength of presidential powers is a key factor influencing democratic outcomes in the post-Soviet region.

The fourth main conclusion of the thesis is that *NDRO has played a role in some of the included cases, at certain points of time, not as an isolated variable, but in combination with other important variables*. While the findings, to some extent, confirm the assumptions of authoritarian regionalism regarding the association between NDRO membership and democratic development, new aspects regarding the complexity of the association were found. NDRO alone cannot explain the varying democratic development in the post-Soviet region, only in combination with other conditions. Several pathways were identified, resulting in two separate outcomes stating that combinations of different conditions can lead to the same outcome for different states. The solutions are not mirror images of each other in all cases; the absence and existence of a combination of conditions does not necessarily result in the opposite outcome. Hence, the absence of factors facilitating democratization will not necessarily facilitate autocratization. The pathways for a certain outcome do not necessarily need to be the same during a different period of time, highlighting that these processes are not static. The implication of this conclusion is that the role of NDROs within the theory of authoritarian regionalism should not be seen as *the* variable but *a* variable in combination with others.

As the main conclusions have been discussed, a return to the aim of this thesis, to develop a deeper understanding of Russia's role as an external actor within the post-Soviet region follows. In summary, Russia is deemed to be a key external actor in the post-Soviet region. The thesis emphasizes Russia's leverage and linkages with neighboring states, which are critical in determining political outcomes. Russia employs both active direct mechanisms (for example, military intervention and political pressure), passive indirect mechanisms (for example, economic dependencies), and active indirect mechanisms (for example, economic sanctions, mediation methods, and cooperation) to exert influence. However, the Russian involvement has produced varied results in the post-Soviet states. In some cases, Russian influence is associated with non-democratic developments, and in others, with a more democratic developments, or the decline of the target state's relationship with Russia.

The post-Soviet states have not only been passive receivers of the Russian external influence but have actively accepted or rejected it. Belarus and Kazakhstan have both been active in establishing and participating in the Russian-dominated NDROs while having relatively high levels of dependence on Russia. Moldova, Georgia, and Ukraine as well as the neutral Central Asian states have chosen not to participate in regional NDROs, while other states have stated that they have felt forced to become members of them. It is difficult to establish the level of intent behind the Russian external influence and among the recipient states, but the main factor behind these decisions appears to be national interest. Domestic interest might include political and economic advantages, isolation from other regional actors, or the choice to cooperate with Western powers to change the political development of the state. Perhaps national Russian interests are also the dominant factor for its actions. The actions taken, and mechanisms used, are often directly associated with certain issues such as security threats, geopolitical issues, and economic gains, and might not be intended to be used to spread non-democracy.

#### 10.4. Avenues for further research and concluding remarks

This study focuses on the association between NDRO memberships and the level of democratic development. The analyses found that NDRO membership does have a role to play in combination with other conditions. As the focus has been on all active NDROs of the region over the past three decades, there is no further analysis of the nature of cooperation within these organizations. Researchers and members of the organizations have been critical of the ability to coordinate and turn the decisions made within these regional cooperation projects into reality. The critique spurs the question of whether all of these NDROs can be classified as regional organizations, or if some of them are just ink-on-paper regional organizations. An avenue for future research would be to further investigate the level of cooperation within the regional NDROs. However, this would require developing measurements of quality for NDROs to evaluate the means of regional cooperation within them. A deeper understanding of how these NDROs work would perhaps reveal the level of “actorness” of them: are they themselves considered an external actor or are they used as a tool for external influence by the regional hegemon or by the member states? Further research on the international dimension and non-democratic external actors is also needed. While the international and regional environment is concluded to matter within processes of regime transitions, it is not yet established in what specific way they matter.



While the results of this study conclude that the interplay and combinations of many different conditions matter for democratic development within the post-Soviet region, the puzzle is not yet solved. There are still missing pieces for further research to explore. Due to the limitations of the maximum number of conditions within the fsQCA analysis, domestic conditions, for example, were not analyzed within this thesis. Table 32 identified many characteristics within the region which also might matter for the democratic development of the states. Another question left unanswered by the study is the causal direction between NDRO membership and democratic development. The theory of authoritarian regionalism assumes an association between the two variables, but the direction is not specified. Which precedes the other? Do different levels of membership precede a certain democratic development or does a certain democratic development precede different levels of membership? While the thesis established that NDRO membership mattered for the democratic development in the post-Soviet region, it is still not established *how* NDROs matter.

A final suggestion is to conduct a follow-up study using a similar approach or more advanced statistical methods. The longitudinal element of the current study allowed the observation of the effects of triggering events in some cases. The aftermath of democratic revolutions, the Russian war with Georgia in 2008, and the annexation of Crimea in 2014 affected some of the post-Soviet states in their relationships with Russia. With that in mind, the ongoing war in Ukraine may have long-term consequences for the view of, and relationship with, Russia within the post-Soviet region.

The thesis will end with some concluding remarks on the current developments in the post-Soviet region. The war between Russia and Ukraine has fundamentally shifted Russia's role both internationally and regionally. For some post-Soviet states, the war further solidified their pro-Western foreign policy stance. For the more Russia-dependent states, the view of Russia as a regional security guarantor and main economic assistance provider was altered while the support for Russia remained relatively coherent. As wars are costly, the development of the Russian economy will have consequences for the regional influence of Russia. The thesis concludes that Russia's main influence within the post-Soviet region lies within the economic sphere: how will a possible Russian economic decline affect the level of external influence towards the more Russia-dependent states in the region? The majority of the regional NDROs focus on economic cooperation and integration, these will also possibly be affected by the Russian economic development. Depending on how and when the war between Russia and Ukraine ends, the future of the regional influence of Russia and of the regional Russian-dominated NDROs is very likely to be affected. Another consequence of the ongoing war can be that other vital regional players,

besides Russia, (for example China, Iran, and Turkey) can increase their influence in the region, possibly leading to new alliance and regional political developments.

As the global democratic decline increases, further democratic backsliding is occurring in the post-Soviet region. The democratic developments in Moldova, Georgia, Ukraine, Armenia, and Kyrgyzstan have decreased, leaving Moldova as the only state with a democracy score just over 0.5 in 2024 (V-Dem, 2025). These developments show that democratization is a highly fragile process, and that the research on the factors enabling democratization and autocratization in different parts of the world is more relevant than ever.

## Svensk sammanfattning

Den demokratiska utvecklingen inom den post-sovjetiska regionen har sedan Sovjetunionens fall år 1991 gått åt vitt olika håll. Medan vissa länder idag kan kategoriseras som demokratier kan en del länder i stället klassas som hybridregimer (mellan demokrati och autokrati) eller som starkt autokratiska. Demokratiseringsforskningen har under flera decennier studerat olika faktorer som kan påverka staters benägenhet att demokratiseras. Dessa faktorer har ändrats över tid och har inkluderat strukturella, aktörscentrerade, sociala, geografiska, historiska, institutionella och externa faktorer. Den tidigare forskningen om dessa faktorer har till stor del analyserat en enda faktor åt gången samt antagit att faktorer som varit gynnsamma för demokratin i en del av världen också är det i andra delar. Externa faktors inverkan på demokratiseringsprocesser fick ökad uppmärksamhet under 1990-talet i och med den förändrade politiska miljön i Europa efter år 1991.

Den Europeiska unionen (EU) har inom tidigare forskning lyfts upp som en av de mest framgångsrika demokratiska externa aktörerna genom användningen av löften om potentiella medlemskap i unionen. Dock har EU:s framgång bidragit till att tyngdpunkten för den tidigare forskningen till stor del varit på att analysera demokratiska aktörers påverkan. Denna avhandling riktar uppmärksamhet mot externa aktörers inverkan på den demokratiska utvecklingen i den post-sovjetiska regionen, med fokus på icke-demokratiska externa aktörer. Avhandlingen fokuserar på den roll som icke-demokratiska regionala organisationer (NDROs) spelar för den demokratiska utvecklingen i området och stävar efter att fördjupa kunskapen om demokratisering och regionalism. Med utgångspunkt i teorier om auktoritär regionalism är det huvudsakliga forskningsproblemet om medlemskap i Rysslands-dominerade NDRO har spelat en roll i den varierande demokratiska utvecklingen i staterna inom den post-Sovjetiska regionen mellan åren 1991 och 2021.

Enligt teorier om auktoritär regionalism borde medlemskap inom NDRO ha en inverkan på den demokratiska utvecklingen i stater. Teorin grundar sig på att antalet medlemskap har en inverkan på den demokratiska utvecklingen: många medlemskap borde bidra till en mera icke-demokratisk utveckling medan få medlemskap borde bidra till en mera demokratisk utveckling. Den post-sovjetiska regionen är en av de mest täta regioner i världen när det gäller icke-demokratiska regionala organisationer, dessutom har många av staterna överlappande medlemskap i ett stort antal regionala NDRO. Alla av dessa NDRO är grundade av Ryssland, vilket gör Ryssland till en viktig extern aktör inom regionen och NDRO som ett viktigt verktyg för extern påverkan. Forskningsfrågorna är tre till antalet och besvaras av tre olika komparativa analyser. Den första

forskningsfrågan, finns det en association mellan medlemskap i Rysslands-dominerade NDRO och den varierande demokratinivån i den post-Sovjetiska regionen, besvaras med hjälp av en longitudinell deskriptiv analys. Den andra forskningsfrågan, fränsett nivån av medlemskap i NDROs vilka kompletterande faktorer kan identifieras gällande den varierande demokratiska utvecklingen i den post-sovjetiska regionen, besvaras dels med hjälp av explorativa fallstudier, dels av en mellanfalls komparativ analys. Den tredje och sista forskningsfrågan, i vilken kombination med andra variabler och under vilka omständigheter kan NDRO medlemskap bidra till utfallen demokrati eller autokrati, besvaras genom en kvalitativ komparativ analys (QCA). Genom användningen av tre olika komparativa analyser har denna avhandling att komma fram till att inverkan av flera olika faktorer i kombination med varandra har varit viktiga för att förstå utvecklingen av demokratisering i den post-sovjetiska regionen.

Sammanfattningsvis visade resultaten att förhållanden mellan de post-sovjetiska staterna och Ryssland, deras geografiska position, styrkan av makten hos presidenten, samt deras förhållande till andra regionala aktörer har varit av vikt i utvecklingen av de varierande demokratinivåerna inom regionen. Framför allt så identifierar avhandlingens resultat vilka kombinationen av olika faktorer och variabler som har haft inverkan på den demokratiska utvecklingen under de senaste tre decennierna. För vissa stater under vissa tidsperioder har medlemskap i NDRO haft en inverkan på den varierande demokratiska utvecklingen, antingen existensen av eller frånvaron av medlemskap i kombination med andra variabler.

Implikationerna av avhandlingens resultat ger nya insikter gällande vilken roll externa aktörer och NDRO spelar inom demokratiseringsprocesser samt för utvecklingen av teorier om kopplingar och inflytande (linkage and leverage). Dessutom ger avhandlingen värdefulla insikter för forskning om regionalism och demokratisering genom att konstatera att vissa kombinationer av variabler har spelat en roll i den varierande demokratiska utvecklingen i den post-sovjetiska regionen mellan 1991 och 2021. Dessa slutsatser kan användas för fortsatt forskning gällande det inflytande som regionalt samarbete och regionala organisationer har på den demokratiska utvecklingen i regionen.

## Appendix

### Appendix A. The outline of the Russian Foreign Policy concepts

Regional priorities of the Russian Federation in the order in which they are mentioned in the Foreign Policy concepts (2000, 2008, 2013, 2016, 2023) under the first headline “Near Abroad”.

2000:	2008:	2013:	2016:	2023:
CIS	CIS	CIS	CIS	CIS
Customs Union	The Union State	EAEU	The Union State between Russia	The Union State between
CSTO	between Russia and	CSTO	and Belarus	Russia and Belarus
The Union State	Belarus	CIS FTA	EAEU	CSTO
between Russia and	Belarus	The Union state between	Armenia	EAEU
Belarus	Kazakhstan	Russia and Belarus	Belarus	Central Asian states
	EurAsEC	EurAsEC	Kazakhstan	Eurasia
	CSTO	Customs Union	Kyrgyzstan	The Republic of Abkhazia
	SCO	CES	CSTO	The Republic of South
		Transnistria	CIS FTA	Ossetia
		Moldova	Ukraine	
		Nagorno-Karabakh	Abkhazia	
		Abkhazia	South Ossetia	
		South Ossetia	Transnistria	
		Georgia	Moldova	
			Nagorno-Karabakh	
			Georgia	

## Appendix B. Democracy measurements

Democracy Index	Countries and time period	Scoring process	Dimensions analyzed	Dimensions ratings	Definition of democracy used
Freedom House – Freedom in the World	195 countries and 14 territories (as of the 2019 edition)  1972–present	The average of a country or territory’s political rights and civil liberties ratings is called the Freedom Rating, and it is this figure that determines the status of Free (1.0 to 2.5), Partly Free (3.0 to 5.0), or Not Free (5.5 to 7.0)  A country or territory is assigned two ratings, (political rights and civil liberties). Each rating of 1 to 7, with 1 representing the greatest degree of freedom and 7 the smallest degree of freedom, corresponds to a specific range of scores.	1) Political rights (0–40 points): 2) Civil liberties (0–60 points):	<b>Political rights:</b> 1–2 High levels 3, 4, 5–Medium levels 6–7 Low levels  <b>Civil liberties:</b> 1–2 High levels 3, 4, 5 Medium levels 6–7 Low levels	<i>Freedom in the World</i> assigns the designation “electoral democracy” to countries that have met certain minimum standards for political rights and civil liberties. Freedom House’s “electoral democracy” designation should not be equated with “liberal democracy”, a term that implies a more robust observance of democratic ideals and a wider array of civil liberties.
Vanhanen – The Polyarchy Dataset	All independent contemporary countries of the world and their main predecessors since 1810, or from the year of independence, except for mini states (2000: 187 countries included)  1810–2002	0–100 points. Overall, countries with high index values are democracies and countries with low index values are non-democracies.  Threshold values of democracy: For competition 10–30%, and for participation 10–20%	1) Competition 2) Participation  A combination (weighed equally) of the two dimensions becomes the index of democratization (IID)	The value of the competition variable is calculated by subtracting the percentage of votes won by the largest party from 100 (parliamentary or presidential election). If data on the distribution of votes are not available, the value is calculated based on the distribution of seats in parliament.  The value of the participation variable is calculated from the total population, not	Vanhanen uses “democracy” to refer to a political system in which ideologically and socially different groups are legally entitled to compete for political power, and in which institutional powerholders are elected by people and are responsible to the people.

ACLP (Alvarez, Cheibub, Limongi & Przeworski) & DD: Democracy and Dictatorship (Cheibub, Gandhi & Vreeland)	135 countries between 1950 and 2000	Dichotomous index Yes/no answers to democratic or nondemocratic conditions establishes if a country is a democracy or a dictatorship. Democracies can be further distinguished into three subgroups: semi-presidential, parliamentary, and presidential democracies. Dictatorships can be further distinguished into three subgroups: monarchic, military, and civilian dictatorships.	Contestation with three aspects. A regime is classified as a democracy if it meets the requirements stipulated in ALL of the following rules: 1) The chief executive must be chosen by popular election or by a body that was itself popularly elected 2) The legislature must be popularly elected 3) There must be more than one party competing in the elections 4) An alteration in power under electoral rules identical to the ones that brought the incumbent to office must have taken place. A regime is classified as a dictatorship if at least one condition holds: 1) The chief executive is not elected 2) The legislature is not elected 3) There is no more than one party 4) The incumbent will	from the adult or enfranchised population. Yes/no answers to 3 (4) democratic or nondemocratic conditions	ACLP defines democracy as “a regime in which those who govern are selected through contested elections”. The definition is twofold and includes “government” and “contestation”.
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Polity IV - Political Regime Characteristics and Transitions	1800–present Includes all major independent states (states with a total population of 500,000 or more), currently 167 states	Measurements for both institutionalized democracy and autocracy, the polity scale is achieved by the autocracy value from the democracy value: Scale: +10 – -10 According to the points received, the regimes are divided into the following groups: Full democracy 10 points Democracy 6–9 Open anocracy 1–5 Closed anocracy 5–0 Autocracy -10 – -6 (Failed/Occupied)	have or already have held office continuously for more than two terms or will have held office without being elected for any duration of their current tenure in office, and will have never, to date, lost an election.	<p><b>Democracy scoring:</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1) Competitiveness of executive recruitment</li> <li>2) Openness of executive recruitment</li> <li>3) Constraints on chief executive</li> <li>4) Competitiveness of political participation</li> </ul> <p><b>Autocracy scoring:</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1) Competitiveness of executive recruitment</li> <li>2) Openness of executive recruitment</li> <li>3) Constraints on chief executive</li> <li>4) Regulation of participation</li> <li>5) Competitiveness of political participation</li> </ul>	The democracy indicator is an additive eleven-point scale (0–10) of the four dimensions (weighed differently). No necessary condition for characterizing a political system as democratic. A mature and internally coherent democracy, for example, might be operationally defined as one in which (a) political participation is unrestricted, open, and fully competitive; (b) executive recruitment is elective, and (c) constraints on the chief executive are substantial. The autocracy indicator is an additive eleven-point scale (0–10) of the five dimensions (weighed differently). In mature form, autocracies sharply restrict or suppress competitive political participation. Their chief	Democracy is conceived as three essential independent elements: 1) the presence of institutions and procedures through which citizens can express effective preferences about alternative policies and leaders 2) the existence of institutionalized constraints on the executive power by the executive 3) the guarantee of civil liberties to all citizens in their daily lives and in acts of political participation. Other aspects, such as the rule of law, systems of checks and balances, freedom of the press, etc. are means to these general principles.
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				executive is chosen in a regularized process of selection within the political elite, and once in office they exercise power few institutional constraints.	
EIU - Economist Intelligence Unit's Democracy Index	165 independent states, and two territories (27 micro-states are excluded) 2006, 2008, 2010, 2011 after which updates every year	1–10 scale, based on the ratings of 60 indicators in five categories. The overall score groups states into the following categories (thresholds dependent on overall scores): Full democracies 8–10 points Flawed democracies 6–7, Hybrid regimes 4–5 Authoritarian regimes below 4	1. Electoral process and pluralism (free and fair elections, universal suffrage, oppositional rights, organizational freedom etc.) 2. Functioning of government (effective system of checks and balances; transparency, corruption, public confidence in government etc.) 3. Political participation (suffrage for minorities, % women in parliament, political interest, adult literacy, promotion of political participation, etc.) 4. Democratic political culture (perception of the political leader, military rule, democracy, popular support of democracy, tradition of separation between state and church, etc.) 5. Civil liberties (free electronic/print media, etc.)	Combination of a dichotomous and a three-point scoring system for the 60 indicators. Each of the five categories has a rating of 0–10, the overall score is the simple average of the five category indexes.	Thicker version of democracy

V-Dem - Varieties of Democracy	182 countries (as of 2018) 1900–2019 + historical data for some countries (1789– 1900)	Scale 0–1	freedom of expression and protest, internet access, organizational freedom, torture, freedom of religion, basic securities of the people, personal freedoms, human protection, etc.)	The scheme recognizes several levels of aggregation: Core concept Democracy indices Democracy components Subcomponents, and related concepts Indicators The electoral democracy index: taking the average of, on the one hand, the weighted average of the indices, and, on the other hand, the five-way multiplicative interaction between those indices Other democracy indexes: the electoral index also serves as the foundation for the other four indices. The score for the electoral index is combined with the scores for the components measuring deliberation, equalitarianism, participation, and liberal constitutionalism, respectively.	The core values underlining the five principles: - Electoral principle - Liberal principle - Participatory principle - Deliberative principle - Egalitarian principle
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			2) Deliberative component index Egalitarian democracy index: 1) Electoral democracy index 2) Egalitarian component index	Elections: the combined score of universal suffrage and meaningful elections. The universal suffrage is calculated adding the percent of the population with the right to vote, and the percent of legislative seats filled by elections. Meaningful elections are given a score 0–4 per subcategory. Political freedom: the sum value of the subcategories. The subcategories of political freedom are given a score 0–8, the sum value is the overall score for the dimension.	More liberal definition and use of democracy
Hadenius - Democracy and Development	132 countries	A combination of the scores from the two dimensions, elections and political freedoms, results in the score for the democracy index. The scale is 0–10	1) Elections: 2) Political freedoms:		
Hadenius & Teorell		Scale 0–10 points	1) Elections: 2) Political freedoms:	Elections (0–24 points): - Legislative election = franchise * percentage elected in the lower house / openness (1–4 p.) + correctness (1–4 p.) + effectiveness (1–4 p.) / - Executive election = franchise * percentage elected of the executive	More liberal definition and use of democracy

BTI Index - The Bertelsmann Stiftung's Transformation Index	129 countries (countries have been added over time) 2006–present (every other year)	Scale 1–10 Distinction between democracies and autocracies	Five dimensions: 1) Stateness 2) Political Participation 3) Rule of law 4) Stability of democratic institutions 5) Political and social integration	<p>power / openness (1–4 p.) + correctness (1–4 p.) + effectiveness (1–4 p.)/ Election score: legislative election + executive election, or in parliamentary systems legislative election * 2</p> <p>Political freedom (0–24 points): Political freedoms = organizational freedom (1–8 p.) + freedom of opinion (1– 8 p.) + political violence and repression (1–8 p.)</p> <p>Total index score: elections + political freedoms (0–48 points), the scale is then transformed into a 0–10 scale</p>	<p>Every subquestion is rated by four response options: 10, 7, 4, or 1 point = the sum is the score for the main dimension. The scale is later transformed into a scale of 1–10</p>	Constitutional democracy: democracy includes the rule of law and the separation of legislative, executive, and judicial power with checks and balances.
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## Appendix C. NDRO scores and democracy scores, state-specific tables

Membership of the NDROs is in the tables marked as:

- Full membership
- ° Partial membership (dialogue partner, associated member, observer state)
- No membership during the NDROs active years

RO/max is the number of memberships for the state during a specific year of all potential memberships.

Democracy score per year from the V-Dem liberal democracy index (0–1)

ARM	CIS	EurAsEC	CSTO	EDB	EACU	CIS FTA	CES	EAEU	NDRO/max	Dem/ 1
1991	•								1/1	0.36
1992	•								1/1	0.35
1993	•								1/1	0.34
1994	•								1/1	0.33
1995	•								1/1	0.29
1996	•								1/1	0.24
1997	•								1/1	0.23
1998	•								1/1	0.22
1999	•								1/1	0.22
2000	•	-							1/2	0.22
2001	•	-	•						2/3	0.22
2002	•	-	•						2/3	0.22
2003	•	-	•						2/3	0.2
2004	•	-	•						2/3	0.19
2005	•	-	•						2/3	0.19
2006	•	-	•	-					2/4	0.19
2007	•	-	•	-					2/4	0.19
2008	•	-	•	-					2/4	0.18
2009	•	-	•	•					3/4	0.19
2010	•	-	•	•	-				3/5	0.19
2011	•	-	•	•	-	-			3/6	0.20
2012	•	-	•	•	-	•	-		4/7	0.21
2013	•	-	•	•	-	•	-		4/7	0.21
2014	•	-	•	•	•	•	-		5/7	0.21
2015	•		•	•	•	•	•	•	7/7	0.21
2016	•		•	•	•	•	•	•	7/7	0.21
2017	•		•	•	•	•	•	•	7/7	0.23
2018	•		•	•	•	•	•	•	7/7	0.34
2019	•		•	•	•	•	•	•	7/7	0.63
2020	•		•	•	•	•	•	•	7/7	0.60
2021	•		•	•	•	•	•	•	7/7	0.56

AZE	CIS	EurAsEC	CSTO	EDB	EACU	CIS FTA	CES	EAEU	NDRO/max	Dem/1
1991	•								1/1	0.11
1992	•								1/1	0.21
1993	•								1/1	0.18
1994	•								1/1	0.08
1995	•								1/1	0.09
1996	•								1/1	0.09
1997	•								1/1	0.09
1998	•								1/1	0.08
1999	•								1/1	0.08
2000	•	-							1/2	0.08
2001	•	-	-						1/3	0.08
2002	•	-	-						1/3	0.08
2003	•	-	-						1/3	0.08
2004	•	-	-						1/3	0.07
2005	•	-	-						1/3	0.07
2006	•	-	-	-					1/4	0.07
2007	•	-	-	-					1/4	0.07
2008	•	-	-	-					1/4	0.07
2009	•	-	-	-					1/4	0.07
2010	•	-	-	-	-				1/5	0.07
2011	•	-	-	-	-	-			1/6	0.07
2012	•	-	-	-	-	-	-		1/7	0.07
2013	•	-	-	-	-	-	-		1/7	0.07
2014	•	-	-	-	-	-	-		1/7	0.06
2015	•		-	-	-	-	-	-	1/7	0.06
2016	•		-	-	-	-	-	-	1/7	0.06
2017	•		-	-	-	-	-	-	1/7	0.07
2018	•		-	-	-	-	-	-	1/7	0.06
2019	•		-	-	-	-	-	-	1/7	0.06
2020	•		-	-	-	-	-	-	1/7	0.07
2021	•		-	-	-	-	-	-	1/7	0.07

BLR	CIS	EurAsEC	CSTO	EDB	EACU	CIS FTA	CES	EAEU	NDRO/max	Dem/1
1991	•								1/1	0.38
1992	•								1/1	0.46
1993	•								1/1	0.46
1994	•								1/1	0.43
1995	•								1/1	0.37
1996	•								1/1	0.34
1997	•								1/1	0.14
1998	•								1/1	0.14
1999	•								1/1	0.12
2000	•	•							2/2	0.12
2001	•	•	•						3/3	0.11
2002	•	•	•						3/3	0.10
2003	•	•	•						3/3	0.10
2004	•	•	•						3/3	0.10
2005	•	•	•						3/3	0.10
2006	•	•	•	-					3/4	0.10
2007	•	•	•	-					3/4	0.10
2008	•	•	•	-					3/4	0.10
2009	•	•	•	-					3/4	0.10
2010	•	•	•	•	•				5/5	0.10
2011	•	•	•	•	•	•			6/6	0.10
2012	•	•	•	•	•	•	•		7/7	0.10
2013	•	•	•	•	•	•	•		7/7	0.10
2014	•	•	•	•	•	•	•		7/7	0.10
2015	•		•	•	•	•	•	•	7/7	0.10
2016	•		•	•	•	•	•	•	7/7	0.11
2017	•		•	•	•	•	•	•	7/7	0.11
2018	•		•	•	•	•	•	•	7/7	0.11
2019	•		•	•	•	•	•	•	7/7	0.11
2020	•		•	•	•	•	•	•	7/7	0.08
2021	•		•	•	•	•	•	•	7/7	0.04

GEO	CIS	EurAsEC	CSTO	EDB	EACU	CIS FTA	CES	EAEU	NDRO/max	Dem/1
1991	-								0/1	0.14
1992	-								0/1	0.10
1993	•								1/1	0.16
1994	•								1/1	0.16
1995	•								1/1	0.17
1996	•								1/1	0.21
1997	•								1/1	0.21
1998	•								1/1	0.21
1999	•								1/1	0.22
2000	•	-							1/2	0.21
2001	•	-	-						1/3	0.21
2002	•	-	-						1/3	0.21
2003	•	-	-						1/3	0.21
2004	•	-	-						1/3	0.37
2005	•	-	-						1/3	0.39
2006	•	-	-	-					1/4	0.39
2007	•	-	-	-					1/4	0.38
2008	•	-	-	-					1/4	0.35
2009	•	-	-	-					1/4	0.34
2010	-	-	-	-	-				0/5	0.35
2011	-	-	-	-	-	-			0/6	0.35
2012	-	-	-	-	-	-	-		0/7	0.36
2013	-	-	-	-	-	-	-		0/7	0.47
2014	-	-	-	-	-	-	-		0/7	0.51
2015	-		-	-	-	-	-	-	0/7	0.53
2016	-		-	-	-	-	-	-	0/7	0.54
2017	-		-	-	-	-	-	-	0/7	0.55
2018	-		-	-	-	-	-	-	0/7	0.54
2019	-		-	-	-	-	-	-	0/7	0.51
2020	-		-	-	-	-	-	-	0/7	0.51
2021	-		-	-	-	-	-	-	0/7	0.49



KAZ	CIS	EurAsEC	CSTO	EDB	EACU	CIS FTA	CES	EAEU	NDRO/max	Dem/1
1991	•								1/1	0.17
1992	•								1/1	0.18
1993	•								1/1	0.18
1994	•								1/1	0.17
1995	•								1/1	0.16
1996	•								1/1	0.14
1997	•								1/1	0.14
1998	•								1/1	0.14
1999	•								1/1	0.14
2000	•	•							2/2	0.14
2001	•	•	•						3/3	0.13
2002	•	•	•						3/3	0.13
2003	•	•	•						3/3	0.13
2004	•	•	•						3/3	0.13
2005	•	•	•						3/3	0.13
2006	•	•	•	•					4/4	0.13
2007	•	•	•	•					4/4	0.13
2008	•	•	•	•					4/4	0.13
2009	•	•	•	•					4/4	0.13
2010	•	•	•	•	•				5/5	0.13
2011	•	•	•	•	•	•			6/6	0.13
2012	•	•	•	•	•	•	•		7/7	0.12
2013	•	•	•	•	•	•	•		7/7	0.12
2014	•	•	•	•	•	•	•		7/7	0.12
2015	•		•	•	•	•	•	•	7/7	0.12
2016	•		•	•	•	•	•	•	7/7	0.12
2017	•		•	•	•	•	•	•	7/7	0.12
2018	•		•	•	•	•	•	•	7/7	0.12
2019	•		•	•	•	•	•	•	7/7	0.12
2020	•		•	•	•	•	•	•	7/7	0.12
2021	•		•	•	•	•	•	•	7/7	0.13

KGZ	CIS	EurAsEC	CSTO	EDB	EACU	CIS FTA	CES	EAEU	NDRO/max	Dem/1
1991	•								1/1	0.16
1992	•								1/1	0.20
1993	•								1/1	0.20
1994	•								1/1	0.19
1995	•								1/1	0.17
1996	•								1/1	0.16
1997	•								1/1	0.17
1998	•								1/1	0.17
1999	•								1/1	0.17
2000	•	•							2/2	0.17
2001	•	•	•						3/3	0.16
2002	•	•	•						3/3	0.16
2003	•	•	•						3/3	0.16
2004	•	•	•						3/3	0.16
2005	•	•	•						3/3	0.18
2006	•	•	•	-					3/4	0.18
2007	•	•	•	-					3/4	0.17
2008	•	•	•	-					3/4	0.16
2009	•	•	•	-					3/4	0.16
2010	•	•	•	-	-				3/5	0.24
2011	•	•	•	•	-	-			4/6	0.34
2012	•	•	•	•	-	-	-		4/7	0.33
2013	•	•	•	•	-	•	-		5/7	0.32
2014	•	•	•	•	-	•	-		5/7	0.31
2015	•		•	•	•	•	•	•	7/7	0.32
2016	•		•	•	•	•	•	•	7/7	0.32
2017	•		•	•	•	•	•	•	7/7	0.31
2018	•		•	•	•	•	•	•	7/7	0.34
2019	•		•	•	•	•	•	•	7/7	0.32
2020	•		•	•	•	•	•	•	7/7	0.29
2021	•		•	•	•	•	•	•	7/7	0.27

MDA	CIS	EurAsEC	CSTO	EDB	EACU	CIS FTA	CES	EAEU	NDRO/max	Dem/1
1991	•								1/1	0.31
1992	•								1/1	0.38
1993	•								1/1	0.38
1994	•								1/1	0.42
1995	•								1/1	0.42
1996	•								1/1	0.42
1997	•								1/1	0.42
1998	•								1/1	0.44
1999	•								1/1	0.46
2000	•	-							1/2	0.45
2001	•	-	-						1/3	0.37
2002	•	-	-						1/3	0.39
2003	•	-	-						1/3	0.39
2004	•	-	-						1/3	0.40
2005	•	-	-						1/3	0.36
2006	•	-	-	-					1/4	0.36
2007	•	-	-	-					1/4	0.36
2008	•	-	-	-					1/4	0.36
2009	•	-	-	-					1/4	0.37
2010	•	-	-	-	-				1/5	0.49
2011	•	-	-	-	-	-			1/6	0.60
2012	•	-	-	-	-	•	-		2/7	0.59
2013	•	-	-	-	-	•	-		2/7	0.56
2014	•	-	-	-	-	•	-		2/7	0.55
2015	•		-	-	-	•	-	-	2/7	0.49
2016	•		-	-	-	•	-	-	2/7	0.45
2017	•		-	-	-	•	-	°	2.5/7	0.41
2018	•		-	-	-	•	-	°	2.5/7	0.41
2019	•		-	-	-	•	-	°	2.5/7	0.46
2020	•		-	-	-	•	-	°	2.5/7	0.78
2021	•		-	-	-	•	-	°	2.5/7	0.61

TJK	CIS	EurAsEC	CSTO	EDB	EACU	CIS FTA	CES	EAEU	NDRO/max	Dem/1
1991	•								1/1	0.06
1992	•								1/1	0.06
1993	•								1/1	0.06
1994	•								1/1	0.06
1995	•								1/1	0.06
1996	•								1/1	0.06
1997	•								1/1	0.07
1998	•								1/1	0.07
1999	•								1/1	0.08
2000	•	-							1/2	0.09
2001	•	-	•						2/3	0.09
2002	•	-	•						2/3	0.09
2003	•	-	•						2/3	0.09
2004	•	-	•						2/3	0.09
2005	•	-	•						2/3	0.08
2006	•	-	•	-					2/4	0.08
2007	•	-	•	-					2/4	0.08
2008	•	-	•	-					2/4	0.07
2009	•	-	•	•					3/4	0.07
2010	•	-	•	•	-				3/5	0.07
2011	•	-	•	•	-	-			3/6	0.07
2012	•	-	•	•	-	-	-		3/7	0.07
2013	•	-	•	•	-	-	-		3/7	0.06
2014	•	-	•	•	-	-	-		3/7	0.06
2015	•		•	•	-	-	-	-	3/7	0.05
2016	•		•	•	-	•	-	-	4/7	0.05
2017	•		•	•	-	•	-	-	4/7	0.04
2018	•		•	•	-	•	-	-	4/7	0.04
2019	•		•	•	-	•	-	-	4/7	0.05
2020	•		•	•	-	•	-	-	4/7	0.05
2021	•		•	•	-	•	-	-	4/7	0.05

UKR	CIS	EurAsEC	CSTO	EDB	EACU	CIS FTA	CES	EAEU	NDRO/max	Dem/1
1991	°								0.5/1	0.28
1992	°								0.5/1	0.34
1993	°								0.5/1	0.36
1994	°								0.5/1	0.36
1995	°								0.5/1	0.34
1996	°								0.5/1	0.33
1997	°								0.5/1	0.31
1998	°								0.5/1	0.27
1999	°								0.5/1	0.26
2000	°	-							0.5/2	0.23
2001	°	-	-						0.5/3	0.24
2002	°	-	-						0.5/3	0.25
2003	°	-	-						0.5/3	0.26
2004	°	-	-						0.5/3	0.27
2005	°	-	-						0.5/3	0.29
2006	°	-	-	-					0.5/4	0.39
2007	°	-	-	-					0.5/4	0.42
2008	°	-	-	-					0.5/4	0.41
2009	°	-	-	-					0.5/4	0.41
2010	°	-	-	-	-				0.5/5	0.28
2011	°	-	-	-	-	-			0.5/6	0.27
2012	°	-	-	-	-	•	-		1.5/7	0.27
2013	°	-	-	-	-	•	-		1.5/7	0.26
2014	°	-	-	-	-	•	-		1.5/7	0.21
2015	°		-	-	-	•	-	-	1.5/7	0.22
2016	°		-	-	-	•	-	-	1.5/7	0.23
2017	°		-	-	-	•	-	-	1.5/7	0.24
2018	°		-	-	-	•	-	-	1.5/7	0.24
2019	-		-	-	-	•	-	-	1/7	0.29
2020	-		-	-	-	•	-	-	1/7	0.32
2021	-		-	-	-	•	-	-	7/7	0.32

UZB	CIS	EurAsEC	CSTO	EDB	EACU	CIS FTA	CES	EAEU	NDRO/max	Dem/1
1991	•								1/1	0.07
1992	•								1/1	0.06
1993	•								1/1	0.05
1994	•								1/1	0.05
1995	•								1/1	0.04
1996	•								1/1	0.04
1997	•								1/1	0.04
1998	•								1/1	0.04
1999	•								1/1	0.04
2000	•	•							2/2	0.04
2001	•	•	-						2/3	0.03
2002	•	•	-						2/3	0.04
2003	•	•	-						2/3	0.04
2004	•	•	-						2/3	0.04
2005	•	•	-						2/3	0.03
2006	•	•	•	-					3/4	0.03
2007	•	•	•	-					3/4	0.03
2008	•	•	•	-					3/4	0.03
2009	•	-	•	-					2/4	0.03
2010	•	-	•	-	-				2/5	0.04
2011	•	-	•	-	-	-			2/6	0.04
2012	•	-	•	-	-	-	-		2/7	0.04
2013	•	-	-	-	-	-	-		1/7	0.04
2014	•	-	-	-	-	•	-		2/7	0.04
2015	•		-	-	-	•	-	-	2/7	0.04
2016	•		-	-	-	•	-	-	2/7	0.04
2017	•		-	-	-	•	-	-	2/7	0.05
2018	•		-	-	-	•	-	-	2/7	0.07
2019	•		-	-	-	•	-	-	2/7	0.07
2020	•		-	-	°	•	-	-	2.5/7	0.09
2021	•		-	-	°	•	-	-	2.5/7	0.09

TKM	CIS	EurAsEC	CSTO	EDB	EACU	CIS FTA	CES	EAEU	NDRO/max	Dem/1
1991	°								0.5/1	0.03
1992	°								0.5/1	0.03
1993	°								0.5/1	0.03
1994	°								0.5/1	0.03
1995	°								0.5/1	0.03
1996	°								0.5/1	0.03
1997	°								0.5/1	0.03
1998	°								0.5/1	0.03
1999	°								0.5/1	0.03
2000	°	-							0.5/2	0.02
2001	°	-	-						0.5/3	0.02
2002	°	-	-						0.5/3	0.02
2003	°	-	-						0.5/3	0.02
2004	°	-	-						0.5/3	0.02
2005	°	-	-						0.5/3	0.02
2006	°	-	-	-					0.5/4	0.02
2007	°	-	-	-					0.5/4	0.02
2008	°	-	-	-					0.5/4	0.02
2009	°	-	-	-					0.5/4	0.03
2010	°	-	-	-	-				0.5/5	0.03
2011	°	-	-	-	-	-			0.5/6	0.03
2012	°	-	-	-	-	-	-		0.5/7	0.03
2013	°	-	-	-	-	-	-		0.5/7	0.03
2014	°	-	-	-	-	-	-		0.5/7	0.03
2015	°		-	-	-	-	-	-	0.5/7	0.03
2016	°		-	-	-	-	-	-	0.5/7	0.03
2017	°		-	-	-	-	-	-	0.5/7	0.03
2018	°		-	-	-	-	-	-	0.5/7	0.04
2019	°		-	-	-	-	-	-	0.5/7	0.04
2020	°		-	-	-	-	-	-	0.5/7	0.04
2021	°		-	-	-	-	-	-	0.5/7	0.04

## **Appendix D. Case studies 1–11**

### **D.1 Belarus: Chronological development in the independent Belarus**

#### Pre-independence

For most of its history, the territory of today's Belarus has been occupied by great empires. Poland, the Grand Duchy of Lithuania, and Russia have all taken turns ruling Belarus over the last several hundred years. During the German occupation in 1918, Belarus briefly established an independent state, the Belarusian People's Republic, which can be considered a predecessor to the modern state (Eke & Kuzio, 2010). In 1922, Belarus became part of the Soviet Union, and the process of Russification across all Soviet republics began. After World War II, Belarus's territory was enlarged with Polish land, further solidifying its ties to the USSR (Eke & Kuzio, 2010). The population of Belarus suffered heavily during the war, with one-quarter perishing between 1941 and 1945. To repopulate the Soviet republic, over one million ethnic Russians were moved to Belarus after the war. Industrialization began to accelerate in the 1950s (Ioffe, 2004).

Within the Soviet Union, Belarus held a relatively high status, boasting higher-than-average living standards and social stability. This status was further enhanced when the USSR began selling oil and gas to Western Europe, using Belarus as a transit route (Ioffe, 2004). During the 1950s, Belarus became a key manufacturing region in the Soviet Union, hosting several large power stations, oil refineries, and major pipelines. From 1970 to 1986, Belarus experienced the highest per capita national income growth among all Soviet republics. Within the Soviet Union, Belarus was considered a success story (Ioffe, 2004).

#### The path to independence

In July 1990, the Supreme Soviet of Belarus adopted the Declaration of State Sovereignty, though Belarus was still part of the USSR at the time (Nordberg, 1997). Article 10 of the declaration stated that the main goal for a sovereign Belarus would be neutrality. The Act of Independence was passed in August 1991, two months after Russia declared its independence. Full independence was obtained in December 1991, when the USSR was formally dissolved (Korosteleva et al., 2003).

The early period of Belarusian independence, like that of other post-Soviet states, was tumultuous, exposing many of the problems created by the deeply intertwined Soviet system. The newly



independent states inherited traits such as economic stagnation, political alienation, social divisions, and international isolation (Korosteleva et al., 2003). Belarus had the closest ties to Russia among the post-Soviet states, making the split difficult for both the population and political elites to accept. The country was not fully prepared for independence. A survey in spring 1991 showed that nearly 83% of the Belarusian population supported the preservation of the USSR as a federation of sovereign states (Nordberg, 1997). Even ten years after the fall of the Soviet Union, almost 40% of Belarusians expressed a desire to see the USSR restored (Nordberg, 1997). Unlike some other post-Soviet states, Belarusian independence did not arise from pro-Western or anti-Soviet public demands. No referendum on independence was held, and the political leadership was not well-prepared for what lay ahead (Korosteleva et al., 2003). Even after the August 1991 coup in Moscow, Belarus hesitated to break away from the Soviet Union. Due to this reluctance for political change, many key political elements from the Soviet era remained intact during independence, including prominent communist-era politicians, the political elite, and the KGB (Way, 2005).

Nation-building became a priority for Belarus's political elites. Creating a national identity, crucial for state-building, requires a homeland with historical memories. In newly independent states, these features do not evolve automatically (Way, 2005). Without a unified national identity, it was up to the ruling elite to create political unity. Belarus lacked much of the foundation needed for this, having little experience of a homeland or a strong national identity (Ioffe, 2004). The Russification of Soviet republics during the Soviet era had a profound impact on the development of their national identities. In Belarus, the concept of a distinct national identity was especially challenging for the population, given the country's close ties to Russia and the Soviet Union (Nordberg, 1997). The Belarusian language was not widely spoken, and Russia was not seen as a hostile enemy but rather as an ally (Ioffe, 2003). The lack of a nationalist agenda made the notion of "returning to Russia" more appealing in Belarus. Despite a long history of being ruled by various powers, only the Russian and Soviet periods were emphasized, weakening Belarusian national identity to the point where separating from Russia seemed almost unnatural (Marples, 2005).

In the late 1980s, two major events did impact Belarusian national identity: the discovery of Stalin-era mass graves outside Minsk and the fallout from the Chernobyl disaster, in which over 70% of the radiation landed on Belarusian soil. These events led to protests and claims that the Belarusian regime prioritized Moscow's interests over national concerns (Ioffe, 2003). Although a brief attempt to foster national identity began in the early 1990s, it ultimately failed. Most of the population lacked knowledge of their history and cultural heritage, continuing to identify more with the Soviet Union (Hancock, 2006).

In 1990, a new language law was passed, declaring that Belarusian would become the main language of Belarus within ten years (Marples, 2005). At the time, over 90% of the population spoke Russian as their native language, and little effort was made to implement the law. Disputes over the use of the Belarusian language and the direction of political development among elites, coupled with the economic crisis following the dissolution of the Soviet Union, contributed to a political crisis (Breichelt, 2004). Prime Minister Kebich sought to economically integrate Belarus with Russia due to the dire economic situation, while Shushkevich, the chairman of the parliament, opposed this and aimed to protect Belarusian sovereignty and its new neutrality from Russian involvement (Nordberg, 1997).

### Post-independence

Since the independence of Belarus did not involve any demands for political development in any direction, either pro-Western or anti-Soviet, the political course was unclear. Other post-Soviet states strived for a path towards Europe and a democratic future soon after their independence, uniting around that development. In Belarus, however, the political situation was heavily polarized (Marples, 2005). The only political party with a clear vision for the future was the Belarusian Nationalist Front (BNF), which expressed concerns regarding Russia's heavy influence (political, military, economic, and cultural) on Belarus's domestic interests. The BNF feared that a strong economic and military dependence on Russia would lead to political dependency and wanted a different future for Belarus. The idea of a Western direction for Belarus did not gain much popular support (Krivosheev, 2003). Soviet nostalgia was widespread in Belarus, and there was a deep-rooted fear among the population that rejecting Russian support would result in economic decline and a drop in living standards (Sanford, 1997).

Shushkevich, who was the formal head of state in the early years, promoted a more moderate political vision for Belarus: a toned-down version of nationalism and democratic reforms alongside a close relationship with Russia. This approach was more appealing to the population, but Shushkevich lacked a broad power base (Sanford, 1997). In the early years after independence, political power was concentrated within the post-communist majority in the Supreme Soviet. Within the Supreme Soviet, Kebich controlled the economy and Belarus's trade relations with Russia. The communist legacy would have serious consequences for Belarusian democratic development (Dahl Martinsen, 2002). The BNF failed to force early parliamentary elections, which might have changed the power dynamics within the Supreme Soviet. While they raised enough

signatures to force a referendum, the Supreme Soviet refused (Eke & Kuzio, 2010). The first presidential election in Belarus was held in 1994, and the first parliamentary election followed in 1995. By stalling, the Supreme Soviet was able to control political developments in the early 1990s and deprive the opposition of more favorable political and economic conditions soon after independence (Eke & Kuzio, 2010).

Due to polarization within the political landscape and the power of the communist party in parliament, political and economic reforms stalled. This had severe consequences for the political direction and prospects for a democratic state (Krivosheev, 2003). Belarus was not especially interesting to Europe or the US. Belarus, however, cooperated to varying degrees with the EU's TACIS project, the European Bank of Reconstruction and Development, the IMF, the Council of Europe, the EU within a Partnership and Cooperation Agreement, and NATO's Partnership for Peace project. Through these associations, the West hoped for a political and economic transition in Belarus (Krivosheev, 2003). Nonetheless, the Western presence was not as profound as Russia's influence in Belarusian domestic affairs. Russia's interest in Belarus was largely rooted in its geopolitical importance. This became even more apparent after NATO expansion began in Central Europe. With NATO's enlargement in Eastern Europe and the Baltic states in 2004, Belarus became almost surrounded by NATO states (Krivosheev, 2003). This prompted further military cooperation with Russia. Although Russia and Belarus share membership in the military alliance CSTO, Belarus also relies heavily on bilateral military arrangements with Russia. Both Belarus and Russia opposed NATO's expansion (Allison et al., 2005). Both opposition to NATO's expansion and the authoritarian tendencies of the Belarusian regime in the early 1990s led to a marginalized Western interest in Belarus. A Belarus without political or economic reforms could not count on political or economic support from the West, leaving Russia as its only alternative. Thus, Belarus's foreign policy became pro-Russian (Allison et al., 2005).

Russia's desire for Belarus to join the CIS was initially refused due to Belarus's position of neutrality. However, the extent of the economic crisis led Belarus to agree to a compromise. Belarus's CIS membership was initially considered a temporary arrangement for 10 to 15 years until full independence was achieved (Nordberg, 1997). As part of the CIS and the predecessor to the CSTO, Belarus signed the CIS Collective Security Pact in 1993 with stipulations that Russia objected to. After Russia used its energy leverage and cut off fuel to Belarus, Belarus agreed to full membership in the security pact (Nordberg, 1997). These memberships in the first Russian-dominated regional organizations in the post-Soviet region brought Belarus back into the ruble zone, and further economic cooperation with Russia began (Nesvetailova, 2003). Further plans to unite the two states under a common economic area and introduce a single currency started as

regional cooperation agreements were signed. However, these plans were delayed and postponed several times during the 1990s (Nesvetailova, 2003).

A new constitution was created between 1993 and 1994, establishing a presidential republic in place of the parliamentary system that had existed since independence (Silitski, 2005). The political system, government, and political traditions in Belarus were underdeveloped and could not effectively prevent the concentration of power in the president's office. The three main candidates in the first round of the 1994 presidential election were Kebich, Shushkevich, and Lukashenka. Kebich's campaign focused on closer ties with Russia in the form of a monetary union (Silitski, 2005). However, plans for the monetary union were blocked by Russian liberals, and Kebich lost public support. Shushkevich, though well-known in Belarus, was blamed for the economic and political failures of the early 1990s (Dahl Martinsen, 2002). Lukashenka's campaign focused on fighting corruption and inflation and developing closer ties with Russia and other CIS states. Lukashenka was perceived as a "common man" and gained significant popular support. He won the second round of the election with about 80 percent of the vote. This marked a turning point in Belarus's political development towards an increasingly authoritarian regime (Ioffe, 2004).

Another significant moment was the 1995 parliamentary election, where only 140 of the 260 seats were filled due to low voter turnout (Breichelt, 2004). At the same time as the parliamentary election, four questions were added to the ballot regarding national symbols, the national language, further integration with Russia, and increasing presidential powers (Silitski, 2005). Voters approved the return of the hammer and sickle to the Belarusian flag, approved Russian as an official state language, supported further economic integration with Russia, and endorsed granting the president the power to dissolve parliament (Silitski, 2005).

Another referendum was held in 1996, which allowed Lukashenka to extend the presidential term by two years, further increase presidential power, and reduce the number of members of parliament from 260 to 110 (Marples, 2005). By 1997, Belarus had become a highly authoritarian regime, with a fully compliant media, judiciary, and legislative system under Lukashenka's control. The president either directly appointed or approved all members of the Cabinet of Ministers (Silitski, 2005). In 1998, Lukashenka became a *persona non grata* in the US and EU when he evicted several Western ambassadors from Minsk. In response to the 1997 referendum, the Council of Europe embargoed all high-level cooperation with Belarus. This strained relations with the EU, particularly affecting the Partnership and Cooperation Agreement signed in 1994 (Allison et al., 2005).

Belarus's relationship with the West has not improved in the last two decades. The EU has ended its cooperation with Belarus within the European Neighbourhood Policy (ENP) and the Eastern

Partnership Programme (EaP) due to the increasing autocratization of Belarus. Every presidential election since 1994 has been heavily criticized by Western observers, and Belarus continues to violate human rights, which has resulted in EU sanctions in an attempt to influence the country's political direction (Ioffe, 2004). These sanctions, including travel bans, freezing of assets, and arms embargoes, have been in place almost continuously since 1997, but without effect on the state's political development (Allison et al., 2005).

The strained relationship with the EU has pushed Belarus further towards Russia. Without any other regional ally, Belarus has become increasingly dependent on Russia. Lukashenka has received significant political support from Russia (Breichelt, 2004). Evidence exists of Russian support during and after Belarusian presidential elections (Tolstrup, 2015). Russian media and Belarusian media backed Lukashenka during his presidential campaigns, providing positive coverage and official endorsements from Russia (Dahl Martinsen, 2002). The election results in Belarus have been heavily criticized by Western election monitoring organizations and have not been declared free or fair since the mid-1990s. However, Russia's endorsement of the election results has provided legitimacy to Lukashenka and his regime, thereby extending its lifespan (Ioffe, 2004).

The relationship between Belarus and Russia has been driven largely by Russian interests (Allison et al., 2005). Belarus is important to Russia for several reasons: it borders the EU and NATO, giving it strategic geopolitical significance in Europe; it is the most pro-Russian of all the post-Soviet states; and it shares many cultural, linguistic, and religious ties with Russia (Hancock, 2006). Despite the friendly relationship between the two countries, however, Belarus's energy security has been used as leverage by Russia to push its own political interests in Belarus (Hancock, 2006). After the fall of the Soviet Union, all the post-Soviet states experienced a vast economic crisis. They were now left alone after several decades of intertwined economic and energy systems (Vanderhill, 2014). At the beginning of the 1990s, Belarus received almost 90 percent of its energy requirements from Russia, making Belarus vulnerable to Russian energy and economic pressure (Nordberg, 1997). Since Belarus could not pay the enormous debts for its energy dependence, Russia cut the energy to Belarus on several occasions during 1993 (Nordberg, 1997). This resulted in an agreement that Belarus would receive Russian gas until 2010 if they granted Russia 99 years of control over the two largest oil refineries in the country, free use of pipelines transiting Belarus, a large number of potatoes and dairy products as well as a lump sum of money. Russia now controls 50 percent of Beltransgaz, and Gazprom owns 50 percent of the largest Belarusian gas transit company. So, by trying to pay the energy debts to Russia, Belarus made itself even more dependent on Russia (Nordberg, 1997). In the 1990s, Belarus paid below market price for Russian oil and gas while other post-Soviet states paid a much higher price for the same products. This made Belarus even more

dependent on a good relationship with Russia since a rise in energy prices would have large effects on the economy. Russia is also the main trading partner of Belarus, adding further weight to its dependence on Russia (Vanderhill, 2014). Overall, Russia has been the main cooperation partner of Belarus, but dialogue with the EU have, to some extent, continued despite the declining democratic development of Belarus. While the relationship between Belarus and the EU has been strained, discussions and cooperation between them continued within the EaP from 2008, and the EU-Belarus Coordination Group formed in 2016 (Pierson-Lyzhina, 2021).

With the help of Russian economic assistance (keeping the energy prices low due to heavily subsidized levels, and Russian trade), and Russian political assistance (legitimizing the flawed elections and hence the regime), the Belarusian regime has been able to survive (Hancock, 2006). Lukashenka has been able to gain public legitimacy by avoiding an economic crisis and has been able to maintain good employment levels, free education, and health care for the population (Way, 2015). The relationship with Russia has also helped the Lukashenka regime to avoid any political and economic pressure from the EU. The economic aid that Russia offers Belarus has also compensated for the lack of Western aid received due to the level of autocracy in Belarus (Ambrosio, 2007). The relationship between Belarus and Russia is, to a large degree, controlled by Russia, which has immense leverage over Lukashenka and Belarus (Vanderhill, 2014). Lukashenka has, however, not always been pleased with the degree of Russian influence over domestic politics in Belarus (Tolstrup, 2015). In the late 2000s and early 2010s, Lukashenka grew tired of Russian dominance and made an effort to find other regional partners (Babayan, 2015). The answer from Russia was to impose sanctions on Belarus and ban imports of Belarusian foods, after which the cooperation between the two states returned to normal. Lukashenka has also criticized Russia for failing to make the Union State between the two states a top priority and has generally been a strong supporter of further regional integration projects in the post-Soviet region (Babayan, 2015). Following the presidential election in 2020, mass protests broke out as Lukashenka received 81 percent of the vote. The protests led to the political opposition gaining strength and unification, as well as sanctions from the EU (Hall, 2025). While the relationship between Belarus and the EU have been strained since the 1990s, Belarus has at times of disagreement with Russia expressed a more positive attitude towards the EU. However, since the aftermath of the 2020 protests against the Belarusian regime, the relations between Belarus and the EU has collapsed (Kluczevska & Silvan, 2025)

## **D.2 Kazakhstan: Chronological development in the independent Kazakhstan**

### **Pre-independence**

Before belonging to any empire, the Kazakhs lived a nomadic lifestyle based on the division of three Hordes (the Small Horde, the Middle Horde, and the Great Horde). In the mid-1700s, all the hordes were voluntarily incorporated into the Russian Empire (Stevens, 2020). The hordes controlled different parts of the Kazakh territory and had their own relationships with the Russian Empire. With no previous experience as a nation-state, prospects for an independent Kazakhstan emerged after the Bolshevik Revolution in 1917 (Melvin, 1993). A provisional autonomous government denouncing the Bolsheviks, Alash Orda, was created in December 1917. However, the government was short-lived. It was forced into hiding in early 1918 and dissolved in 1920 (Melvin, 1993). The Kazakhs were incorporated into the Soviet Union as part of the Kirgiz Autonomous Soviet Socialist Republic (ASSR) in 1920 and received the status of a republic in 1936.

During Soviet times, Kazakhstani territories were gradually transformed from nomadic communities into agricultural ones. Stalin's collectivization during the 1920s and 1930s had a devastating effect on the population of Kazakhstan. A relatively large portion of the population died from starvation and disease, after which a vast migration to Kazakhstan from other parts of the Soviet Union occurred, making ethnic Kazakhs a minority in their own republic (Spehr & Kassenova, 2012). While the Soviet era significantly raised the Kazakhs' living standards, education, and urbanization levels, it also deprived them of a national identity (Stevens, 2020). Russification was intense within Kazakhstan during the Soviet era, resulting in a weak national identity. During the late 1980s, at the time of perestroika, a rather small "Kazakhization" movement took place (Brletich, 2015). At that time, ethnic Russians were still a majority in Kazakhstan and made up the political, social, and cultural elite. In 1986, the Alma-Ata riots, anti-Russian student protests, occurred. In response, the political leader Nazarbayev passed the "Friendship of the Peoples" policy, which aimed to guarantee inter-ethnic equality in Kazakhstan (Brletich, 2015).

### **The path to independence**

Independence was technically forced upon Kazakhstan. The population of Kazakhstan voted on the issue of sovereignty in October 1990, but the political elite did not support the notion of an

independent state (Brletich, 2015). The political leader Nazarbayev supported Gorbachev's plan to try and save the Soviet Union by reforming it. An independent Kazakhstan emerged in December 1991, as the last USSR republic to declare independence (Brletich, 2015). The lack of a nationalist movement among the population during the Soviet era produced a Russified and Sovietized mentality among the masses. With independence, renewed efforts were made to create pro-Kazakh policies (Melvin, 1993). Key political positions were replaced by ethnic Kazakhs, the population was required to learn the Kazakh language, and the Soviet mythology taught in schools was replaced by new versions of history focusing on Kazakhstan's history independent of the Soviet era (Stevens, 2020).

The ethnic composition of Kazakhstan is diverse and has its roots in the migration patterns within the Soviet Union during the 1920s and 1930s when a large number of immigrants came to Kazakhstan to replace the ethnic Kazakhs lost to Stalin's collectivization (Spehr & Kassenova, 2012). During much of the Soviet era, ethnic Kazakhs were a minority in Kazakhstan, while Russians were the majority. In 1989, the ethnic Russian population was about 38 percent but declined during the 1990s after the fall of the Soviet Union (Melvin, 1993). In 1993, soon after independence, about 36 percent of Kazakhstan's population identified as Russian, 43 percent as Kazakh, 5 percent as Ukrainian, 4 percent as German, and the remainder as Belarusian or Russified Korean (Laurelle et al., 2019). The large Russian minority became a political issue in both Kazakhstan and Russia in the early 1990s. For Kazakhstan, the large minority was seen as hindering the emergence of a unified national identity and as a potential threat to its independence, as the Russian minority lived geographically close to the Russian border in northern Kazakhstan (Stevens, 2020). The Russian diaspora, and the defense of Russian-speaking minorities in other states, has become important to Russia in its relations with former Soviet states. Russia used the protection of the diaspora as a potential justification for interference in the domestic affairs of former USSR states if it felt the Russian minorities were under threat (Laurelle et al., 2019). However, the Russian minority has diminished since the 1990s, and by 2015 only 20 percent of the population considered themselves ethnic Russians (Laurelle et al., 2019).

As with Belarus, Kazakhstan was reluctant to become an independent state and thus inherited many traits from the Soviet era. One of the most important Soviet relics was Nazarbayev, the former Soviet leader who continued as president of independent Kazakhstan (Sullivan, 2018). Politically, little changed from the Soviet Republic of Kazakhstan to the independent Republic of Kazakhstan. The political leader and the political elites remained the same, and democratic development was not a priority for the newly independent state (Sullivan, 2018). Power in



Kazakhstan is concentrated in the presidency and the permanent members of the National Security Council (Rywwin, 2005).

A new constitution was adopted in 1993, proclaiming that Kazakhstan was a democratic and secular state with a governance system based on the principle of separation of powers. However, the constitution did not last long. In 1995, a new constitution replaced the democratic constitution of 1993 (Sullivan, 2018). The 1995 constitution shifted the balance of power in favor of the president, placing the president above the other branches of state power (Sullivan, 2018). In 2007, another amendment was added to the constitution, lifting the two-term limit on the Kazakh presidency. In 2010, Nazarbayev received the status of “Leader of the Nation” (Brletich, 2015). A referendum was held in 2011 to extend Nazarbayev’s presidency without elections until 2020. The referendum was unanimously passed by the parliament but was later rejected by the Constitutional Court after intense international pressure. Instead, parliament held an early presidential election three months later, in which Nazarbayev won a fourth term with over 95 percent of the vote (Brletich, 2015).

### Post-independence

In contrast to political reforms, economic reforms, and economic liberalization were important to the Kazakh president in the early 1990s. The production of oil and gas significantly improved the country’s economic situation and increased its geopolitical importance (Domjan & Stone, 2009). Kazakhstan is one of the world’s largest oil and gas producers and, within the former Soviet Union, is the second largest after Russia. Nazarbayev promised the people of Kazakhstan prosperity and stability (Sullivan, 2018). The economic crisis following the fall of the Soviet Union led the Kazakh population to focus on economic growth and improving personal and domestic circumstances. Given the strong desire for economic growth among both political elites and the Kazakh population after independence, the concentration of power in the presidency was viewed as necessary for rapid development (Spehr & Kassenova, 2012).

According to Kalicki (2007), “Oil is a strategic commodity”. This is particularly true for Kazakhstan, where oil has been the primary determinant of its geoeconomic and geopolitical importance, both regionally and internationally (Zabortseva, 2014). Even though Kazakhstan is a major oil power, due to the construction of the Soviet system of oil production, Kazakhstan was heavily dependent on Russia after its independence regarding refineries and pipelines (Vanderhill et al. 2020). All pipelines from Kazakhstan to Europe passed through Russia, making Kazakhstan dependent on Russia for exporting oil to the West. Realizing this, Kazakhstan began discussing

alternative routes through other states (China, Turkey, Georgia) to reduce Russian leverage (Vanderhill et al., 2020). One example of an alternative pipeline is the Baku-Tbilisi-Ceyhan pipeline that does not transport oil through Russian territory (Rywkin, 2005). The dependency on Russia was even greater when it came to natural gas since Gazprom had a monopoly over all gas pipelines and Russia could use the monopoly to control prices and therefore reduce Kazakhstani incomes (Zabortseva, 2014).

In contrast to Belarusian leaders, Nazarbayev has been able to balance Russian influence by pursuing a so-called multivector foreign policy. This take on foreign policy has been a necessity due to Kazakhstan's geographical and geopolitical place in the Eurasian region, land-locked and situated between Russia and China (Sullivan, 2018). Kazakhstan's multivector foreign policy emphasizes maintaining good relations with Russia, while also fostering strong ties with other major powers, such as China, the EU, and the US. Although other great powers are important to Kazakhstan, Russia remains its most important partner (Sullivan, 2018). Kazakhstan, alongside Belarus, has been loyal to Russia since its independence. Kazakhstan has been the initiator or the founding state alongside Russia within many integration projects and regional organizations in the post-Soviet region (Vanderhill et al., 2020).

In 1994 Nazarbayev expressed his gratitude towards Russia: "Kazakhstan's attitude to Russia is exactly the same; Kazakhstan will in general always gratefully remember everything that Kazakhstan now has – its economic potential, its scientific and technologic basis, its culture, everything that we Kazakhs have become in these years – we owe all of it to Russia and the Russian people" (Stevens, 2020). The special relationship between Russia and Kazakhstan is largely based on the two states' common past and Russia's historical influence over Kazakhstan. The Kazakhs had no previous experience of statehood before becoming a part of the Russian Empire and the Soviet Union (Stevens, 2020). They have also taken pride in being the most Sovietized of the Soviet republics, and the knowledge of the Russian language is still seen as a positive trait in Kazakhstan. In 1989 63 percent of the Kazakh population were fluent in Russian, in 2015 75 percent were fluent in Russian. In 1999 only 25 percent of the population claimed that the only language they spoke was Kazakh, and most of the population are now bilingual (Laurelle et al., 2019). Russian is not, however, enduring or expanding at the expense of the Kazakh language, both languages are considered to be natural in Kazakhstan. The Russification of Kazakhstan during the Soviet era was sufficient enough and positive enough to create an overwhelmingly positive picture of Russia within the Kazakh population. Both Nazarbayev and a majority of the population view Russia as an ally and a friend, making cooperation with Russia seem natural (Laurelle et al., 2019).

The relationship between Kazakhstan and Russia has been quite stable since the fall of the Soviet Union and has resulted in more than 400 bilateral agreements between the states on different issues (Domjan & Stone, 2009). Diplomatic relations started in 1992 with the establishment of consulates in respective countries. Kazakhstan became a CIS member, as well as signed the Collective Security Treaty within the CIS in 1992. In 1992, the two states signed the Treaty of Friendship, Cooperation, and Mutual Assistance, envisioning a joint military and strategic space. Military and strategic cooperation were priorities in the early 1990s (Domjan & Stone, 2009). After the collapse of the USSR, Kazakhstan inherited the fourth largest nuclear arsenal in the world (after Russia, the US, and Ukraine). This led to negotiations over the return of soviet military and nuclear assets to Russia. In the early 1990s new threats were also facing the post-Soviet region from China, and Afghanistan, as well as civic wars and armed conflicts in several of the post-Soviet states (Zabortseva 2014). This led to further military and security cooperation between Kazakhstan and Russia. Nazarbayev promoted the creation of a Eurasian Union as an alternative to the CIS, to protect the states from external threats. The idea failed due to Russian hesitance to be a part of a regional organization in which all the states were considered to be equal (Zabortseva, 2014). In 1994 Kazakhstan agreed to rent the Baikonur Cosmodrome to Russia as a military base. Several other military facilities were also leased to Russia during the early 1990s. In 1995 Kazakhstan, Belarus, and Russia signed the agreement on the creation of a customs union between the three states, expanding the economic cooperation between the states (Zabortseva, 2014).

With the election of Putin as the new Russian president, more regional integration projects were started. With his foreign policy goals, Putin had clearly been prioritizing the CIS states, and with the economic growth in Russia since the early 2000s, heavy focus was on economic, strategic, and political cooperation between the former Soviet states. Several new regional organizations were established: EurAsEC in 2000, CSTO in 2002, and EDB in 2006 (Zabortseva, 2016). At the same time many new external threats in the international community, terrorist activity in Afghanistan, instability in several other Central Asian states, and 9/11, brought Kazakhstan and Russia closer together in military cooperation (Vanderhill et al., 2020). Nazarbayev faced some domestic and international criticism over corruption and the absence of democratic reforms at the time. Receiving strong political support from Putin and Russia helped to calm down the domestic protests. Kazakhstan was also cooperating with the US, the EU, NATO, and the China-led regional organization The Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) due to its geopolitical strategic position in Central Asia regarding terrorist threat (Vanderhill et al. 2020). Overall, Kazakhstan has been able to elegantly balance its relationship with Russia and other great powers over the years (Zabortseva, 2016). It regularly conducts military exercises with NATO, is a part of the NATO

Partnership for Peace program, started to import more weapons from Europe, and works with the EU within the Enhanced Partnership Cooperation Agreement. At the same time, more regional integration projects with Russia have been established: the CIS Free Trade Agreement in 2011, EUCU in 2010, and the CES in 2012 (Vanderhill et al., 2020).

With the Russian annexation of Crimea in 2014, the relationship between Russia and Kazakhstan changed. Kazakhstan became aware of its own quite extensive Russian minority in the northern parts of the country, on the border with Russia (Brletich, 2015). In 2014 new Russian legislation proposed granting Russian citizenship to anyone who speaks Russian, “and had once lived, or who had relatives who lived, on the territory of the Soviet Union”. Kazakhstan and Nazarbayev reacted negatively to Putin stating in 2014 that Kazakhstan had “never had any statehood” before being a part of the Soviet Union (Brletich, 2015). As a response, Nazarbayev publicly stated that if the Kazakhstani membership in the Eurasian Economic Union would have a threatening effect on the independence of Kazakhstan, Kazakhstan would leave the Russian-dominated regional organization. Kazakhstan also refused to support any increases in duties on Ukrainian exports within the EEU or any negative economic sanctions against Ukraine that were proposed by Russia. Kazakhstan refrained from joining Russia in imposing retaliatory economic sanctions on the EU after the annexation of Crimea (Brletich, 2015). Kazakhstan also recognized the Ukrainian government of Poroshenko. The Crimea crisis had a positive effect on the development of Kazakhstan’s national identity (Sullivan, 2018). In 2014 Kazakhstan established a national museum that showcased a distinct identity, separate from Russia and the Soviet Union. In 2015 a mass celebration of the 550-year history of Kazakhstan was celebrated. In 2017 Nazarbayev introduced a program on the “modernization of national identity” aimed at celebrating the Kazakhstani historical roots. In 2017 Kazakhstan also changed from using the Cyrillic alphabet to using the Latin alphabet (Vanderhill et al., 2020).

In 2017, president Nazarbayev announced a constitutional reform directing some presidential powers to the prime minister and the parliament. The powers that would still belong to Nazarbayev would be defense, security, and foreign policy (Isaacs, 2020). The constitutional amendment in 2017 also resulted in a ban from self-nominated presidential candidates, only registered political parties and public associations could nominate candidates (Thibault & Insebayeva, 2024). One year later, in 2018, the legislature was passed making Nazarbayev the chairman of the National Security Council for life. At the same time, the role of the council was elevated and received constitutional status (Vanderhill et al., 2020). These actions were preparations for the resignation of Nazarbayev as the president of Kazakhstan in 2019. The former prime minister and speaker of the Kazakh senate, Tokayev, took over the day after the resignation (Vanderhill et al., 2020). Tokayev, due to

the need to eliminate political uncertainty, signed a decree for a re-scheduling the upcoming presidential election. The election was held in June 2019 and Tokayev received 70,96 percent of the vote. The victory of Tokayev sparked protests due to claims of voting irregularities by the OSCE. However, the observers from the SCO and the CIS discredited such claims (Thibault & Insebayeva, 2024). As president, Tokayev oversees domestic economic and social policy while Nazarbayev still oversees the Kazakh foreign and security policy. Nazarbayev still holds the title of Leader of the Nation, is the lifelong head of the National Security Council, appoints government officials, and represents Kazakhstan internationally. Tokayev is viewed as a safe choice by both the Kazakh population and by Russia. He has continued to develop the multivector foreign policy that Nazarbayev developed (Isaacs, 2020). While Kazakhstan is a highly authoritarian state and constantly violates democratic principles, the state has continued its diplomatic and economic relationships with the EU and the US. No sanctions have been proposed by any Western power on Kazakhstan concerning the state's failure to meet democratic or human rights standards. This can be explained by the geopolitically important position that Kazakhstan has (Vanderhill et al., 2020). The EU has been trying to reduce its Russian energy dependence, and Kazakhstan is seen as a good alternative for the European markets. The key to the success of the multivector foreign policy of Kazakhstan is apparently its geopolitical position in the Eurasian region, its natural resources, and high level of economic development. These factors have made it possible for Kazakhstan to have a functioning relationship with Western powers, China, and Russia (Isaacs, 2020).

### **D.3 Moldova: Chronological developments in independent Moldova**

#### **Pre-independence**

Moldova's history traces back to the establishment of the Principality of Moldova in the 14th century (Way, 2003). The principality was centered in the territory of modern-day Romania and extended into the northwestern parts of present-day Moldova. In the early 16th century, Moldova became a vassal state of the Ottoman Empire (Aklaev, 1996). Following a Russian invasion in the early 1800s, the principality's territory was divided between Russia (the eastern part, known as Bessarabia) and the Ottomans (the western part, present-day Romania) (Vahl & Emerson, 2004). In 1818, Bessarabia became an autonomous republic within the Russian Empire and saw significant immigration of ethnic Russians and Ukrainians (Aklaev, 1996). In 1828, Bessarabia's autonomy was revoked, and the Russification of Moldova began: bilingualism was abolished, Russian became the official language after the Crimean War, and education in Romanian was prohibited after 1867. The Paris Peace Conference, held after the Crimean War, ceded southwestern Bessarabia to Moldova, leading to the creation of a Romanian state (Way, 2003).

However, the Berlin Congress of 1878, while acknowledging Romania's independence from the Ottoman Empire, returned southwestern Bessarabia to Russia. During the 1905 revolution, a brief Moldovan national movement emerged but was suppressed by the Russian Empire two years later (Aklaev, 1996). After the 1917 March Revolution in Petrograd, Moldova made another attempt to gain autonomy. The Moldovan National Party was formed, aiming to establish an autonomous Bessarabia within the planned Russian Federation. The movement, which gained popular support, soon established a local parliament (the Country Council) and called for Bessarabia's autonomy (Vahl & Emerson, 2004). In December 1917, the Moldovan People's Republic was established, declaring its independence in February 1918. The independence was, however, short-lived. Moldova's unification with Romania had been agreed on between Germany and Romania in their peace agreement in 1918 (Way, 2003). The Moldovan elite supported this idea and in April 1918 the Country Council voted for a unification with Romania. A special treaty was signed by Romania, France, Britain, Japan, and Italy in 1920, despite Soviet protests, arguing that the Moldovan region historically and ethnically belonged to Romania. The eastern parts of Moldova became in Ukrainian possession (Aklaev, 1996). The Ukrainian Civil War in 1920 led to the establishment of a Soviet regime in Ukraine. The Union of Soviet Socialist Republics was formed in 1922. The eastern parts of Moldova hence became an administrative region within the Ukrainian Soviet Socialist Republic (Vahl & Emerson, 2004).

In 1924, the Moldovan Autonomous Soviet Socialist Republic (MASSR) was established as part of the Ukrainian Soviet Republic, following demands for regional autonomy from Moldovan nationalists and Bessarabian communists (Aklaev, 1996). In 1939, the Molotov-Rippentrop pact was signed stating Soviet interests in Bessarabia (Vahl & Emerson, 2004). The Soviet Union invaded and occupied Bessarabia in 1940 and created a new Moldovan Union Republic, which consisted of half of the MASSR (Transnistria) and the central parts of Bessarabia. The rest of the territory was incorporated into the Ukrainian Union Republic (Way, 2003). In 1947 the Paris Peace Treaties recognized Soviet supremacy over Moldova and restored the Soviet Romanian border of 1941. During the Soviet period, Western Moldova was developed into an agricultural area while the industrial complex was developed in the eastern Transnistria area (Vahl & Emerson, 2004). Immigration from other parts of the Soviet Union was intense starting in the 1950s; mostly ethnic Russians and Ukrainians moved to Moldova. In 1989 ethnic Moldovans constituted only 65 percent of the total population; in Transnistria, Moldovans were only 39 percent, while the Russian population made up 26 percent (Vahl & Emerson, 2004).

### The path to independence

Perestroika and glasnost had a significant impact on Moldova in the mid-1980s, affecting both Moldovan society and politics. By the late 1980s, two movements emerged: the Moldovan reform movement, which focused on socio-political reforms, and the national movement, which emphasized cultural demands (Roper, 2008). The two movements united in 1989 and formed the Moldovan Popular Front. The main issue for the Popular Front was the question of the official language in Moldova (Vahl & Emerson, 2004). In 1989 the Supreme Soviet of Moldova adopted new language laws. These laws made Moldovan the official “state” language, the Gagauz language should be protected and be the official language in areas of the Gagauz population alongside Moldovan, the Latin script replaced the Cyrillic, and the unity of the Moldovan and Romanian languages was acknowledged (Aklaev, 1996). Furthermore, Russian would still be used but only for inter-ethnic relations, and minority languages such as Ukrainian and Bulgarian should be protected (Roper, 2008).

The language question led to massive protests from the non-Moldovan- and Romanian-speaking minorities. The Russian minorities in Transnistria, and the Turkish-speaking Gagauz in the southern parts of Moldova, also wanted cultural and national rights. The protests led to the

founding of the Gagauz Autonomous Republic in November 1989, which was declared invalid by the Moldovan parliament. In the elections to the Supreme Soviet in the spring of 1990, the Popular Front won, receiving about 40 percent of the mandates (Vahl & Emerson, 2004). In May 1990 Snegur was elected chairman of the Supreme Soviet, and in October he was elected president by the parliament (Akaleav, 1996). The fall of the Ceausescu regime in late 1989 had given more political and popular support for a possible unification with Romania. The Romanian tricolor with a Moldovan coat of arms became the national flag of Moldova, and the Romanian national anthem became the Moldovan national anthem in early 1990 (Roper, 2008).

In June 1990 Moldova declared state sovereignty, renounced the Communist Party, and gave priority to local legislation over all-union laws (Roper, 2008). In the fall of 1990, the Gagauz Union Republic and the Dnestr Moldovan Republic in Transnistria were proclaimed, and both actions were condemned by the Moldovan parliament (Vahl & Emerson, 2004). With state sovereignty achieved, support for unification with Romania attracted less and less support among the Moldovan population. The majority of the population supported the idea of an independent, or at least a sovereign, Moldova but with strong ties to Romania (Akaleav, 1996). In May 1991, the parliament voted to change the name of the state to the Republic of Moldova, and one month later Moldova declared itself a sovereign state within the future confederation of Soviet sovereign states (Akaleav, 1996). The official declaration of independence was made in late August 1991. After independence, almost all Soviet traits were abandoned, and the Communist Party as well as communist media were suspended (Vahl & Emerson, 2004).

The rapid events in the early 1990s created extreme ideological and ethnic crises that spilled over into the political institutions. The language laws, the introduction of Romanian symbols, and the anti-Soviet motives behind them resulted in clashes between large parts of the Moldovan population (Akaleav, 1996). The confrontations between different ethnic and ideological groups affected the popular support for the National Front in a negative way. Between 1991 and 1992 discussions regarding the new constitution were held in parliament. The National Front supported a parliamentary regime, while Snegur and his allies in parliament advocated for a presidential regime (Roper, 2008). Snegur, affiliated with the National Front, distanced himself from the Front and sought other allies in order to consolidate his power within the parliament. The National Front lost support, and between 1990 and 1991 they lost 110 parliamentary seats (Vahl & Emerson, 2004). In 1991 the parliament, with the help of Snegur's allies, authorized direct election of the president. Snegur won with 98 percent of the votes while the National Front and the authorities in Transnistria and Gagauzia boycotted the election (Vahl & Emerson, 2004).



## The unsolved Transnistria conflict

Armed conflict between Moldova and the Transnistria region began in 1990 and escalated between 1991 and 1992. A state of emergency was declared in March 1992. By the spring of 1992, several international mediation attempts had been made (Way, 2015). The Moldovan, Ukrainian, and Romanian foreign ministers met in Helsinki and adopted a declaration on peaceful settlement. When talks about a CIS peacekeeping force did not materialize, Moldova requested a Commission on Security and Cooperation in Europe (CSCE) peacekeeping mechanism to be considered in order to stop the conflict. When that solution also failed, due to the failure to establish a ceasefire, Moldova turned to Russia for help (Way, 2003). An agreement between presidents Snegur and Yeltsin was signed in July 1992, followed by an immediate ceasefire and a demilitarized zone within the Transnistrian region. The agreement also stipulated the withdrawal of Russian troops from the region, especially the 14th Soviet army, which had provided the separatists with weapons (Vahl & Emerson, 2004).

The withdrawal did however go slowly and new negotiations between Russia and Moldova on the question were held between 1992 and 1994. The 1994 agreement stipulated that the troops were to be withdrawn over a period of three years, within the same time frame the Transnistria conflict was planned to be concluded. In 1993 direct talks with the Moldovan and Transnistria leadership were held and the Transnistrian proposal was its virtual independence: both states would be independent but share the CIS membership (Way, 2003). Moldova refused and proposed that Transnistria would receive special status within the Republic of Moldova, a proposition which Transnistria in turn refused (Crandall, 2012). Yeltsin initiated new negotiations in 1994 but by 1995 they had stalled. New agreements on the future of Transnistria were made in 1997, 1998, and 2000 (Vahl & Emerson, 2004).

After the Communist party won the parliamentary election in 2001, Russia became more positive about the idea of withdrawing its troops from Transnistria (Popescu, 2006). Having politically supported the Transnistrian leadership before, Russia suddenly did not recognize the results of the presidential election in Transnistria in 2001 (Way, 2015). In 2003 Russia proposed a solution to the problem called the Kozak Memorandum. The content of the plan was to have Russian troops stationed in the region for an additional 20 years and the creation of an asymmetrical federation that would allow Transnistria to veto all federal laws until 2015 (Popescu 2006). While Moldova was interested in the Kozak Memorandum at first, Moldova rejected the Russian-sponsored plan

after it received much criticism from the West. With the rejection of the memorandum, the relationship between Russia and Moldova worsened (Crandall, 2012).

## Post-independence

While the Transnistrian conflict continued, Moldova also faced significant internal political challenges after gaining independence in the early 1990s. The early 1990s was a tumultuous period in Moldovan politics. Party foundations were weak, party membership fluctuated heavily, and the factions and rivalries that existed within the parliament made passing legislation on pressing matters (for example, the new Moldovan constitution and the status of Transnistria and Gagauzia) difficult. As a result, the parliament was dissolved in 1993, and new elections were to be held in 1994 (Roper, 2008). In the parliamentary elections in 1994, the number of members of parliament was reduced from 380 to 104. The Agrarian Democratic Party (PDA), dominated by former communist agricultural elites and President Snegur, received 43 percent of the votes and 54 percent of the seats. This led to a situation where the parliament was dominated by the PDA, whose chairman was the Moldovan president (Vahl & Emerson, 2004).

In 1996 the first multi-candidate presidential election was held (Vahl & Emerson, 2004). The main candidates were the incumbent Snegur, the speaker of the parliament Lucinschi, and the Prime Minister Sangheli. While Sangheli was affiliated with the PDA, Snegur had formed the Party of Rebirth and Conciliation of Moldova before the election and had once again adopted a pro-Romanian position, and Lusinchi ran as an independent candidate and advocated stronger ties to Russia (Roper 2008). In the second round between Snegur and Lusinchi, Lusinchi won with 54 percent of the vote (Way 2015). Since party membership was very fluid, over 25 percent of the MPs at the time were independent, Luchinschi was able to form a parliament with these independent MPs. The MPs formed a coalition named the Party of Democratic Forces; the coalition controlled 60 percent of the seats while the PDA controlled the rest (Roper, 2008). In 1998, Luchinschi proposed a move from the semi-parliamentary system to a presidential one by conducting a consultative referendum, in which over 50 percent of the voters agreed. The law draft, which included the sole authority of the president to appoint and approve cabinet ministers and reduced the size of the parliament to only 70 members, did not gain support among the Moldovan political elite (Roper, 2008). Instead, in 2000 the parliament approved constitutional amendments creating a parliamentary system in which the parliament had the power to appoint and dismiss the

president. The new law also required 15 MPs to approve a candidate's candidacy and two-thirds of the parliament majority to elect the president (Roper, 2008).

In the parliamentary election in February 2001, the Communist Party received over 50 percent of the votes and 71 percent of the parliamentary seats (Crandall, 2012). Voronin, the leader of the Communist Party, was elected president in April 2001. Voronin therefore had enormous power as both president and chairman of the majority party in parliament. By attempting to reduce the powers of the presidency by a parliamentary system, the system eventually made the Moldovan president even more powerful (Roper 2008). The foreign policy of Moldova underwent changes under the Voronin rule. In 2001 Voronin signed a friendship treaty with Russia stating that Russia was the "guarantor of Moldova's territorial integrity". The communist government also increased state control over courts and media and tried to expand the education of the Russian language in schools (Way, 2005).

Moldova has prioritized good relations with the EU since its independence, in 1995 EU cooperation was the main policy aim of the Moldovan Foreign Policy Concept. During the later parts of the 1990s, aspirations of integration were established (Vahl & Emerson, 2004). The relationship with the EU has, however, always been combined with cooperation with Russia. A Partnership and Cooperation Agreement (PCA) was signed between the EU and Moldova in 1994 as the first step towards a potential EU membership. The agreement did not, however, enter into force until 1998 (Vahl & Emerson, 2004). The Moldovan interest in closer cooperation was founded on wanting international recognition as a newly independent state, balancing Russian influence, in gaining European development assistance, and in expanding trade relations. During the 1990s the EU was not particularly interested in Moldova due to its politically and economically unstable developments as well as the unsolved Transnistria conflict (Vahl & Emerson, 2004). After the EU enlargement in 2004, Moldova became a bordering state to the EU. This increased the EU's interest in the state, and Moldova became a member of the Eastern Neighbourhood Policy, contributing to the declining Moldovan-Russian relations (Way, 2015).

The relationship between the EU and Moldova deepened during the early 2000s. The EU appointed a special representative to deal with the Transnistria conflict, in 2006 and 2008 Moldova granted general and autonomous trade preferences, and in 2006 Moldova joined the South-East European Cooperation Process (SEECp) (Calus & Kosienkowski, 2018). Between 2000 and 2006, the EU granted Moldova over 173 million euros in technical assistance, and the European Neighbourhood and Partnership Instrument (ENPI) was the main donor of economic assistance to further Moldovan democracy, development for good governance, reforms, and economic

growth (Vahl & Emerson, 2004). During the first part of the 2000s, Moldova became the second greatest recipient of EU assistance per capita. The communist elite in Moldova also supported the EU integration prospects since they fell out with Russia over the Koak memorandum in 2003 (Vahl & Emerson, 2004).

The Communist Party lost the election in 2009, and a pro-European democratic coalition formed a ruling coalition with the priority of a future Association Agreement with the EU. In 2009 the Eastern Partnership program, which included Moldova, was launched, and in 2010 the EU agreed to start negotiations for an Association Agreement (Tolstrup, 2015). Between 2010 and 2013, the EU supported Moldova with 550 million euro in order to implement key reforms. The EU refrained from openly criticizing the high corruption levels and unlawful and undemocratic practices of Moldovan officials due to the importance of keeping the pro-EU support high in Moldova (Calus & Kosienkowski, 2018). The positive relationship between the two took a turn for the worse in 2013 due to the collapse of the Filat government. The political crisis of 2013 was a result of the revelation of the high levels of corruption among the political elite in Moldova that existed. While Moldova did sign an Association Agreement in 2014, the EU officials officially criticized Moldova for not implementing any of the needed reforms, the failure to form a government within the months following the government collapse, and several abuses within the election process (Calus & Kosienkowski, 2018).

While the EU has been a priority for Moldova since the beginning of the 1990s, the relationship with Russia has also been important. The establishment of the ECU/EEU in 2010 gained successively more popular support in Moldova as an option for the EU (Calus & Kosienkowski, 2018). While the EU demanded severe and costly political and economic reforms, the Russian-dominated regional organization did not. It was also framed by Russia as being more modern, more resistant to economic disruptions, and more suited for the Moldavian people than the EU concerning culture, history and religion (Calus & Kosienkowski, 2018). The prospects for economic benefits were highlighted: access to Russian markets, long-term contracts for cheaper oil and gas, as well as migration opportunities for the many Moldovans working in Russia. A survey in 2015 showed that 58 percent of the population supported a Moldovan membership in ECU/EEU (Calus & Kosienkowski, 2018).

One of the main Russian involvements in Moldova has been Russia's role in Transnistria. Russian military forces played a significant role in the de facto independence of the region by actively supporting the separatists with weapons and providing other kinds of support (Way, 2003). Since the early 1990s, Russia has had peacekeeping forces and armed forces in the region. This is an

offense to the Moldovan constitution, which states that “The Republic of Moldova declares its permanent neutrality and does not admit the stationing of foreign military units on its territory”. The military doctrine of Moldova from 1995 also states that Moldova is a de-militarized state (Crandall, 2012). In return for a long-term lease on military bases in Transnistria, Russia has offered Moldova cheap gas and oil prices. Russia has also stated that it will not withdraw its troops until a solution to the conflict has been established. While the Russian forces stationed in the region is against the Moldovan constitution, at the same time they help Moldova keep the Transnistrian conflict from escalating further. The rejection of the Kozak memorandum caused the relationship between Russia and Moldova to worsen (Vahl & Emerson, 2004).

In 2005 Moldova expelled 11 Russian election observers for interfering in the parliamentary election and spreading misinformation. Russia responded with boycotts of Moldovan products, mostly wine, meat, and vegetables. The wine boycotts were particularly devastating for the Moldovan economy. Wine exports to Russia made up to 30 percent of the 2005 total export revenue, and 90 percent of the Moldovan wine exports went to Russia. The Moldovan GDP dropped significantly between 2006 and 2007 (Crandall, 2012). After Voronin became more friendly towards Russia, the boycotts ended, but the economy had been gravely affected, and Moldova had begun to increase its trade relations with Europe during the Russian boycott (Way 2015). While Russian energy cuts in Moldova had occurred during the 1990s, they increased after the failure of the Kozak memorandum. In 2005 Russia informed Moldova that Gazprom would be doubling the gas prices for Moldova and demanded shares of MoldovaGaz as part of the deal. In 2006 Moldova was paying the highest price for gas of all the CIS states (Way 2015).

The Transnistria conflict continued to cause trouble for Moldova. In 2005, Moldova requested international monitoring of the Transnistrian border. The same year, the US and the EU became observers in the Transnistrian negotiation process (Cantir & Kennedy, 2015). In 2018 Moldova submitted a resolution to the UN General Assembly regarding the immediate withdrawal of Russian troops from Transnistria without success (Jović-Lazić & Kuvekalović-Stamatović, 2020). Trade ties with the EU increased during the 2000s as the Moldovan trade dependency on Russia decreased (Cantir & Kennedy, 2015). The EU also increased its financial support to Moldova in the 2010s (Burkhardt, 2020). Military and security cooperation with the EU increased due to the frozen conflict in Transnistria (Jović-Lazić & Kuvekalović-Stamatović, 2020). At the same time, a political shift occurred as the coalition Alliance for European Integration rose to power. The coalition sought to fight corruption and to strengthen the independence of the judiciary (Burkhardt, 2020). However, since the 2010s Moldovan domestic politics have been characterized by power struggles within the political elites, increasing influence of oligarchs, as well as conflict between

pro-European and pro-Russia forces (Burkhardt, 2020). Between 2016 and 2019 the political power in Moldova was split between the pro-Russian president Dodon and the pro-European government formed by the PDM (Morar & Dembiniska, 2021). The ACUM bloc, formed in 2017, was a pro-European and anti-oligarchic electoral alliance consisting of parties envisioning a pro-European future for Moldova (Morar & Dembiniska, 2021). None of the parties won enough seats to form a majority after the parliamentary election in 2019. A coalition between the pro-European ACUM and the pro-Russian PSRM was formed but collapsed after five months (Morar & Dembiniska, 2021).

## **D.4 Georgia: Chronological developments in independent Georgia**

### **Pre-independence**

Georgia has its roots in the medieval kingdom of the Bagrationis. In 1848, two tsarist governorates, Tbilisi and Kutaisi, were established by the Russian Empire on Georgian territory. Russia had annexed the Kingdom of Kartli-Kakheti in 1801, turning it into a province after abolishing the Georgian royal dynasty of Bagrationis. The kingdom had been guaranteed territorial integrity and autonomy by Russia in the Treaty of Georgievsk in 1783 (Brisku, 2020). In the later parts of the 19th century, Russia increasingly incorporated the western parts of the former kingdom, including the regions of Adjara and Abkhazia (Broers, 2009). An intense Russification of the Georgian province occurred during the 19th century. The Russian language replaced Georgian in schools, and the use of the Russian word for Georgia (Gruzii) was forbidden in print (Brisku, 2020). This Russification led to an appeal by Georgians at the Hague Peace Conference in 1907, asking Russia to respect the 1783 treaty and restore Georgia's political autonomy. After World War I, further ambitions for political independence were expressed by the Georgians, especially as the Ottomans demanded the return of Georgian territories they had lost in the Russo-Turkish War of 1877–1878 (Brisku, 2020).

In 1918, Georgia, Armenia, and Azerbaijan declared independence as the Transcaucasian Democratic Federative Republic (TDFR). However, the political union was short-lived due to ethnic conflicts and the failure to negotiate a peace deal with the Ottomans. Georgia, backed by Germany, left the TDFR after a few months and declared its independence as the Democratic Republic of Georgia (Broers, 2014). The first few years of the new Georgian state were marked by ethnic conflicts between the ethnic Georgians, who did not want to acknowledge the minorities living within Georgian territories, and the ethnic minorities of South Ossetia and Abkhazia. Soviet Russia recognized the state of Georgia as independent after a deal with Lenin in 1920. However, this did not prevent the Red Army from invading Georgia in 1921 (Broers, 2009). In 1922, the Transcaucasian Socialist Federative Soviet Republic (TSFSR) was established, once again uniting Georgia with Armenia and Azerbaijan. In 1936, the new Soviet constitution recognized Georgia as one of the Soviet republics. Within the Georgian Soviet Socialist Republic, the autonomous republics of Adjara and Abkhazia, as well as the autonomous oblast of South Ossetia, were included (Brisku, 2020).

## The path to independence

A Georgian national movement grew in the mid-1980s, becoming increasingly nationalistic by 1988 and adopting a full sovereignty agenda. After Soviet troops disbanded a peaceful protest in Tbilisi in the spring of 1989, causing several casualties, the nationalist movement gained more popular legitimacy (Devdariani, 2004). Glasnost had opened the media in Georgia, allowing nationalist ideas to reach the Georgian population in new ways. Several new national movement parties were established in opposition to the Communist Party (Brisku, 2020). The opposition included both ideological groups working on a new constitution and revolutionary groups pushing for immediate independence before creating a new Georgian constitution. The radicals, who eventually took control in 1991, rejected any compromises with Soviet rule and viewed the Soviet Union as an occupying force. The ideological group, on the other hand, supported working with the Soviet leadership and the Communist Party to promote Georgian independence (Spetschinsky & Bolgova, 2014).

In late 1990, the first multiparty elections were held in Georgia (Spetschinsky & Bolgova, 2014). Election rules prohibited regionally based political parties from running in national elections, blocking candidates from the already mobilized ethnic minority regions of South Ossetia and Abkhazia from holding power in parliament (Devdariani, 2004). The nationalist opposition parties united to form the Round Table – Free Georgia bloc and defeated the Communist Party. This victory by the nationalist bloc deepened the divide between ethnic Georgians and other ethnic groups within the national movement. Several parties did not recognize the election results, as Georgia was still part of the Soviet Union, and declared their own institution, the National Congress (Belsku, 2020). In March 1991, a referendum was held on the restoration of Georgia's pre-Soviet independence, and 90 percent approved it. The Georgian parliament declared independence in April 1991. Gamsakhurdia, chairman of the Supreme Council, was elected president in May 1991. After the elections, an agreement was made between Georgia and Abkhazia guaranteeing the Abkhazian minorities' representation in the regional government (Aphrasidze & Siroky, 2010).



## The civil war and the unsolved conflicts in Abkhazia and South Ossetia

The attempts by national movement parties to dominate the newly independent Georgia led to a civil war in the early 1990s. Several ethnic groups demanded autonomy, while the central state structures were too underdeveloped and weak to manage the growing nationalist movements. Ethnic conflicts had intensified since the late 1980s when a state program began promoting Georgian as the official language (Spetschinsky & Bolgova, 2014). When this policy was enacted in 1989, it triggered strong reactions from non-Georgian minorities. The Georgian government viewed the newly independent Georgia as belonging to ethnic Georgians, while ethnic minorities were considered “guests”. This perception led minorities to feel that Georgians were a threat to their existence in the country (Aphrasidze & Siroky, 2010). In 1988, Abkhazian political elites expressed their fears of Georgian nationalism to Gorbachev. In 1989, Abkhazian leaders signed a declaration calling for the restoration of the Abkhazian Socialist Soviet Republic of 1921 and expressed their desire to remain within the Soviet Union (Devdariani, 2004). After years of provocations between Georgia and Abkhazia, Georgian troops were sent into Abkhazia in August 1992. The conflict ended with an Abkhazian victory, the ethnic cleansing of Georgians from the region, and de facto independence for Abkhazia (Spetschinsky & Bolgova, 2014).

Tensions between South Ossetia and Georgia had been high since the aftermath of World War I, when the Ossetians supported the Russian Bolsheviks against the Georgian Mensheviks. In November 1989, South Ossetia declared itself an autonomous republic in response to Georgia’s new language law (Spetschinsky & Bolgova, 2014). In December 1990, the Ossetian authorities proclaimed the creation of the South Ossetian Republic. As a reaction to South Ossetia’s demands for greater status within the state, the Georgian Supreme Soviet abolished the South Ossetia Autonomous Oblast in late 1990 (Spetschinsky & Bolgova, 2014). This sparked violent ethnic conflict between South Ossetia and Georgia, which lasted until 1992 (Devdariani, 2004).

The Georgian civil war stemmed from the successes of the nationalist movement and President Gamsakhurdia’s failure to create institutional mechanisms to manage political opposition (Spetschinsky & Bolgova, 2014). As a result, political groups found alternative ways to participate in Georgia’s political landscape, often by joining the National Congress or forming military wings. Gamsakhurdia used the police and army to suppress opposition in the early months of his presidency, but in late 1991, the National Guard joined the opposition and overthrew Gamsakhurdia (Aphrasidze & Siroky, 2010). The civil war continued even after Gamsakhurdia’s downfall, running parallel to the conflicts in Abkhazia. In 1992, Shevardnadze became chairman

of the Georgian parliament and succeeded Gamsakhurdia. To end the conflicts in Abkhazia and South Ossetia, Shevardnadze turned to Russia for help. Russia facilitated a ceasefire between Georgia and South Ossetia in 1992, establishing a security zone controlled by peacekeeping forces from Georgia, Russia, North Ossetia, and South Ossetia. Russia also brokered a ceasefire between Georgia and Abkhazia in 1993. Since 1994, Russian troops within the CIS Peacekeeping Forces and military observers from the UN have acted as peacekeeping forces (Spetschinsky & Bolgova, 2014).

### Post-independence

In the beginning of the 1990s, Georgia was considered a fragile state (Devdariani, 2004). Since its independence, it had endured political and ethnic conflicts that had resulted in the overthrow of the first president, secessionist regions, a civil war, as well as a worsened relationship with Russia. With the ousting of the Gamsakhurdia government, the party system collapsed (Spetschinsky & Bolgova, 2014). The main problems behind the party system created by the national movement parties were the single-party majority that hindered the development of political culture and the failure to turn the national movement into a functioning political force since they took the power in Georgia (Devdariani, 2004).

The military took control over Georgia soon after the Gamsakhurdia was overthrown. In the spring of 1992 Shevardnadze, the new chairman of the parliament, tried to get Georgia on the right track (Broers, 2005). Dealing with the aftermath of civil war and the secessionist republics on Georgian territory, it was not an easy task. The new constitution established a strong presidential republic in 1995. In the hands of Shevardnadze, the presidential regime of Georgia started to develop in a neo-patrimonial way. Shevardnadze, who had a history of being a prominent Soviet politician, reverted to the Soviet methods of handling politics and the political opposition in the late 1990s, making political tensions rise again (Spetschinsky & Bolgova, 2014). By the end of the 1990s, Georgia was one of the most corrupt states in the world. The government's failure to address the level of corruption and its inability to provide basic amenities to the population led to widespread discontent with the president and the ruling party (Broers, 2005). The democratic performance of Georgia declined during the 1990s, with systemic violations of electoral procedures, election fraud, and corruption being common practice. The political party system remained underdeveloped. While many political parties existed, they had a low and fluctuating membership pool. The ideological bases for the parties did not differ significantly, and they were mostly considered

vehicles for personal ambition (Spetschinsky & Bolgova, 2014). The presidential party, the CUG, became fragmented after losing the local elections of 2002, leading to two major splinter groups: the National Movement Party of Saakashvili and the United Democrats, headed by Zhvania (Broers, 2005).

A new wave of revolutionary nationalism emerged in Georgia in 2003. The population was dissatisfied with Shevardnadze, and after he attempted to block the opposition from gaining a majority in parliament amid accusations of electoral fraud, the Rose Revolution broke out (Broers 2005). This revolution was peaceful, in contrast to the first that ousted Gamsakhurdia and led to the resignation of the president (Aphrasidze & Siroky, 2010). The protesters included political opposition parties, NGOs, and leading figures within the independent media. Democracy became a significant symbol of the Rose Revolution. The protesters aimed to change Georgia's political trajectory towards a more democratic path. Following the Rose Revolution, Georgia was in a poor economic state, highly corrupt, and the government was weak, while Russia was again meddling in the territorial integrity of the Georgian state (Devdariani, 2004). Saakashvili became the new president in January 2004 and had extensive plans to rebuild Georgia into an effective state, boost the economy, introduce political and social reforms, and, most importantly, change the status quo of the frozen conflicts in South Ossetia and Abkhazia (Mitchell, 2009).

The new government prioritized state-building after the revolution, while democratic development was less emphasized (Devdariani, 2004). Economic development flourished in Georgia after the Saakashvili government took over. By 2006 and 2007, the Georgian economy was on the right track again due to increased foreign aid and a decrease in government corruption. However, the political and ethnic conflicts did not end with the new Georgian government (Mitchell, 2009). Tensions between Georgia and Adjara arose again, leading to a local revolution in 2004 and the dismissal of ruler Abashidze. This was a significant victory for Saakashvili, who attempted to replicate this success in Abkhazia and South Ossetia in the mid-2000s (Spetschinsky & Bolgova, 2014). The Autonomous Republic of Adjara was more integrated within Georgia and had not declared independence, and its population consisted of ethnic Georgians. South Ossetia and Abkhazia differed in many respects from Adjara: both regions had clearly expressed their desire to be independent states, and the Ossetians were not ethnic Georgians, but rather Russians with strong ties to the North Ossetians on the other side of the Russian border (Aphrasidze & Siroky, 2010).

While the slogan of the Rose Revolution had been democracy, democratic developments in Georgia were not prioritized during Saakashvili's presidency. The population had high expectations

for political change after the revolution, but the government focused on state-building instead. This led to political tensions between the government, the opposition, and the Georgian population (Broers, 2005). In 2004, the constitution was reformed, which undermined the democratic process (Mitchell, 2009). Power became highly centralized and concentrated within the presidency, while the power of the parliament was reduced. The president could dissolve parliament twice within one presidential term, dismiss ministers, and declare a state of emergency. Oppositional media were also targeted. Civil society, which had previously been strong in Georgia, suffered under the new government. Many of the most experienced activists held government office after the revolution, with the leaders of the revolution being the president (Saakashvili) and the prime minister (Zhvania) (Gallina, 2010). The lack of civil society groups acting as watchdogs during this crucial post-revolutionary period was thus constrained. Political pluralism also declined in the mid-2000s (Aphrasidze & Siroky, 2010). Before the 2004 presidential election, it was assumed that Saakashvili would win, which reduced the number of other candidates and their election campaigns. In the presidential election, Saakashvili received over 96 percent of the votes. The opposition parties boycotted the parliamentary elections later that year due to the hegemony of the National Movement-Democrat coalition (Spetschinsky & Bolgova, 2014). The coalition received almost 70 percent of the votes, and only one other party received support above the 7 percent threshold. The parliamentary majority held by the ruling coalition allowed for the passage of legislation and constitutional amendments favoring the president and his party (Broers, 2005). The Rose Revolution thus almost created a single-party rule (Spetschinsky & Bolgova, 2014).

By 2007, political and ethnic conflicts were escalating in Georgia. After the independence of Kosovo and Georgia's increasing interest in joining NATO, Russia intensified its involvement in Abkhazia and South Ossetia. Russia established direct links between Moscow and the leaders of these regions, increased its military presence, and began the process of recognizing the *de facto* independent states. The political elites in Georgia were divided on how to respond to Russia's actions (Mikhelidze, 2009). The opposition supported an aggressive approach towards Russia, forcing the government to act if it wanted to survive. This led to a five-day war between Georgia and Russia, which ended with Russia recognizing Abkhazia and South Ossetia. Georgia severed diplomatic relations with Russia and renounced its membership in the CIS (Spetschinsky & Bolgova, 2014). Following the Georgian-Russian war, the president of South Ossetia announced that the *de facto* state sought unification with North Ossetia within the Russian Federation. The Abkhazian president stated that independence, entry into the CIS, and the Russian Belarusian Union State were the main goals for the *de facto* state of Abkhazia (Aphrasidze & Siroky, 2010). Russia signed friendship, cooperation, and mutual assistance treaties with both Abkhazia and South

Ossetia, pledging to protect the borders of these regions in return for the right to establish military bases in their territories (Mikhelidze, 2009).

The build-up to the war and the worsening relations between Russia and Georgia can be traced back to the early 1990s (Mikhelidze, 2009). After the civil war and the de facto independence of South Ossetia and Abkhazia, Georgia became a significant recipient of foreign aid, both Western and Russian. While Georgia aimed to loosen Russia's grip on the state, Russian involvement in resolving the secessionist conflicts had the opposite effect (Spetschinsky & Bolgova, 2014). In 1993, Georgia became a member of the CIS despite the parliament not reaching a consensus on membership. Shevardnadze stated, "Georgia was faced with the prospect of catastrophe... The situation forced me to find a compromise: Georgia was compelled to become a member of the Russia-controlled Commonwealth of Independent States" (Spetschinsky & Bolgova, 2014).

Relations between the two states worsened further after the Rose Revolution and during Saakashvili's presidency. Saakashvili openly criticized Russia's influence on Georgia's domestic affairs and advocated for EU and NATO integration for Georgia. Russia grew discontent with the new Georgian president and increased its pressure on the state (Delcour & Wolczuk, 2015). In 2006, Russia banned Georgian agricultural products, as well as water and wine, and raised the price of energy deliveries. President Putin also invited the leaders of South Ossetia and Abkhazia to Moscow for informal talks. While Russia had previously assisted Georgia in restoring its sovereignty in Adjara, it was unwilling to repeat this with the other breakaway regions (Aphrasidze & Siroky, 2010). In 2004, when Georgian troops arrived in South Ossetia to end the smuggling of weapons and fuel in the region, Russia accused Georgia of violating the 1992 agreement. This conflict led to the retreat of Georgian troops from South Ossetia. In 2006, Saakashvili officially stated that Georgia was a European country and denounced Russia's involvement in the breakaway regions (Aphrasidze & Siroky, 2010).

In 2012, the opposition alliance won the election, and Saakashvili stepped down, resulting in Margvelashvili becoming the new Georgian president. Between 2013 and 2014, the new government of Georgia, the Georgian Dream coalition, attempted to re-stabilize relations between Georgia and Russia. While prioritizing its pro-Western orientation, Georgia also sought to consider Russian interests. For example, Georgia did not support Western sanctions against Russia after the annexation of Crimea in 2014, stating that sanctions would not resolve the conflict (Delcour & Wolczuk, 2015). However, the renewed relationship between the two states also revived the use of Russian leverage over Georgia. Russian trade embargoes were again employed as a political and economic tool after Georgia's relationship with the EU improved further in 2014 (Way, 2015).

Georgia has long envisioned a closer relationship with the EU and NATO and signed an Association Agreement with the EU in June 2014. While the EU supported the revolution, it has criticized Georgia and its post-revolutionary government for failing to improve in terms of good governance or democratic performance (Spetschinsky & Bolgova 2014). In 2017, the AA and the DCFTA took effects. The same year a constitutional amendment was initiated which stated that all constitutional bodies must work towards ensuring Georgia's full integration into the EU and NATO (Tabatadze & Gigauri, 2025). The result of the 2019 parliamentary election increased the growing party polarization in Georgia. The ruling party had promised to change the parliamentary electoral system from a mixed system to a proportional system, this promise was not fulfilled. The opposition parties did not recognize the results and claimed some voter irregularities were evident (Tabatadze & Gigauri, 2025). The election resulted in a political crisis. The "Michel's document", proposed by the European Council President Michel, aimed to address the issues of judicial and electoral reform, and power-sharing within the Georgian parliament in order to further Georgia's European aspirations (Tsuladze et al, 2024). The Georgia's Dream did however withdraw from the Michel's document in 2021, increasing the political turmoil of the state (Tsuladze et al, 2024).

## **D.5 Ukraine: Chronological developments in independent Ukraine**

### **Pre-independence**

Traditionally, Russia has considered the three Slavic nations of Russia, Belarus, and Ukraine to be part of the same nation (Russia was called Great Russia, Belarus White Russia, and Ukraine was called Little Russia) (Rywkin, 2014). Today's Ukrainian territory has seen many shifts in borders and has been subjected to many conflicting interests (Birch, 2000). The historical core of Ukraine goes back to Kyivan Rus', which existed from the 9th to the mid-13th century, with Kyiv as the capital, located in the center of present Ukraine. The Mongols invaded the state in the 13th century, and after wars between the Mongol invaders and Poland and Lithuania in the 14th century, the majority of the Ukrainian territory passed to the rule of Poland and Lithuania. Ukraine was a part of the Polish Lithuanian Commonwealth in the 16th and 17th centuries, to be divided between the Commonwealth and Russia in the mid-17th century (Rywkin, 2014).

During the late 1700s, after the partitions of Poland, the Ukrainian territory was again divided, this time between Austria-Hungary and the Russian Empire. Under the rule of Catherine the Great, a large majority of Ukraine was transferred to Russia (Solchanyk, 1992). The region of Eastern Galicia was transferred several times between Poland and Austria-Hungary and became a part of the Soviet Republic of Ukraine in 1939 in accordance with the Molotov-Ribbentrop pact (Birch, 2000). After a long Hungarian rule, Transcarpathian Ukraine, part of the ancient Kyivan Rus', was attributed to Czechoslovakia after the First World War, and later ceded to Soviet Ukraine after the Second World War. The region of Northern Bukovina became a part of Soviet Ukraine in 1940 (Rywkin, 2014).

Traditionally, Crimea has not been a part of Ukraine. It was concurred by Catharine the Great and became an autonomous republic within the Russian Federation. Crimea was a Russian province up to 1954 when Khrushchev gifted it to Ukraine on the 300th anniversary of the union of Ukraine and Russia (Solchanyk, 1992). After the 1917 October Revolution, Ukraine revolted against Russia and installed a Ukrainian council (Rada), which controlled Ukraine between November 1917 and January 1918. Germany occupied Ukraine, with Poland alternating in its occupation between 1918 and 1920, after which Ukraine fell back under Russian control. Between 1941 and 1943, Ukraine was again under German occupation, gradually being reclaimed by Soviet troops (Rywkin, 2014).

## The path to independence

Like Georgia, Ukraine included large territories where the population had developed a strong anti-Russia/Soviet national identity before they were incorporated into the Soviet Union (Way, 2015). This led to the rapid mobilization against Soviet rule when the Soviet Union started to weaken in the late 1980s. In 1989 the parliament passed a new language law stipulating that the administrative language in Ukraine would be Ukrainian by the mid-1990s (Nordberg, 1997). However, Ukraine also included eastern territories where Soviet identity was still prevalent at the time of the USSR's dissolution. Both pro-Soviet and anti-Soviet factions mobilized their national identities in opposition to the incumbent president in 1991 (Nordberg, 1997). Kravchuk, prior to being elected president, allied himself with the anti-Soviet nationalist movement, which made the population in the eastern, more pro-Soviet regions hostile towards him (Rumer, 1994).

In December 1991 Ukraine held a referendum on independence, which over 90 percent of the population supported (Solchanyk, 1996). The Crimean population also supported the break from the Soviet Union, about 54 percent voted for Ukrainian independence (Rumer, 1994). New national symbols were adopted, and the use of Ukrainian increased (Solchanyk, 1996). At the same time the first presidential election was held. Kravchuk became the first Ukrainian president and faced many challenges from the start (Beichelt, 2004). Ukraine was both politically and ethnically divided: in the eastern parts of the country, the pro-Russian political policies were favored by the large population of ethnic Russians with strong bonds to Russia. In the western parts, the majority were ethnical Ukrainians pursuing a more nationalistic agenda (Rumer, 1994). Some western regions of Ukraine had only been incorporated into the Soviet Union after World War II and resisted Soviet occupation until the 1950s. These divisions created significant challenges in the early years of independence (Solchanyk, 1996).

## Post-independence

The relations between Ukraine and Russia were tense from the start (Way, 2015). A significant portion of the Russian population viewed Russians and Ukrainians as “one people”. According to a nationwide poll in Russia conducted in 1997, 56 percent of respondents still held this belief (Solchanyk, 1996). The view that Russians, Ukrainians, and Belarusians are all components of a



greater Russian nation has contributed to the idea that without Ukraine there cannot be any (Great) Russia (Larrabee, 2010). In 1990 Russia and Ukraine signed the “Declaration of the Principles of Inter-State Relations between Ukraine and the RSFSR Based on the Declaration of State Sovereignty”, which included principles of noninterference in each other’s domestic affairs, and the involutivity of existing state borders between the two states (Solchanyk, 1996). These principles were included in a formal treaty between the states in November 1990, which recognized territorial integrity and their existing borders within the Soviet Union (Way, 2015).

The first conflict between Ukraine and Russia began only two days after the Ukrainian declaration of independence (Solchanyk, 1996). The Russian plan of renewing the Union received resistance from Ukraine, and a statement in August of 1991 expressed the Russian right to raise border issues with the republics that had declared independence and wanted to discontinue Union relations. This statement was specifically aimed at northern Kazakhstan, Crimea, and Donbas, all with a large ethnic Russian population. The mayors of St Petersburg and Moscow, Sobchak, and Popov, argued that the declarations of independence were illegal and that treaties with these states should be negotiated again. They also stated that the status of Crimea and the Odesa Oblast should be determined by local referendums. According to Yeltsin, no territorial claims would be made in states wanting to stay within the Union (Solchanyk, 1996). After negotiations between Ukraine and Russia, the treaties on territorial integrities were reaffirmed (Shyrokykh, 2018).

In August 1991 President Kravchuk remained solid in his view that Ukraine would not consider a new Union until after its referendum on independence (Way, 2015). He also stated that a confederation, not a Union, was the only alternative Ukraine would consider. The statements negatively affected the relationship with Russia; Russia had concerns over the large Russian minority in the eastern parts of Ukraine and the fate of the Ukrainian nuclear arsenal (Solchanyk, 1996). The results of the referendum resulted in Kravchuk refusing to sign the draft of a renewed Union. Instead, the Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS) was created by Russia, Belarus, and Ukraine. The Ukrainian opposition criticized the CIS membership that would, in their view, threaten Ukrainian independence. The parliament did, however, ratify the CIS agreement in December but did add 12 reservations, including the right for Ukraine to have its own armed forces and the inviolability of state borders (Nordberg, 1997). While Russia and Belarus viewed the CIS as an integration project, Ukraine saw it as a necessary means for the divorce process between itself and Russia. The CIS was by Ukraine considered a transitional body, and Ukraine refused to take part in any CIS agreements that would mean further political, economic, or military integration between the member states. Ukraine also refused to sign the Collective Security Treaty with the CIS in 1992 (Nordberg, 1997).

The relationship between Ukraine and Russia changed again in 1992 after Kuchma became prime minister at the same time as the economic crisis was hitting Ukraine hard. The only choice for Ukraine at that time was increased cooperation within economic and energy areas (Breichelt, 2004). Kuchma contributed to a closer economic relationship with Russia, as economic integration with Russia was necessary (Solchanyk, 1996). Kuchma refused to support the Economic Union proposed within the CIS and became a CIS associate member instead of a full member. As president in 1994, Kuchma promised economic change with the help of Russia. He also pledged to make Russian an official language of Ukraine (Nordberg, 1997). While Kuchma can be viewed as being a light pro-Russian president, during his first time in office he pursued a multivector foreign policy: a balance between East and West. In 1994, he announced that Ukraine would be a denuclearized state, and the same year Ukraine became the first post-Soviet state to become a NATO Partnership for Peace-member. The “return to Europe” journey of Ukraine had begun and aimed for integration with the West while cooperation with Russia and the other CIS states continued (Ambrosio, 2007).

In the early 1990s, Russia and Ukraine did not agree on several important issues that caused great tension between the two states: the role of the CIS, the Black Sea Fleet (BSF), and Crimea (Solchanyk, 1996). Crimea, formerly a Soviet Russian republic, had only been in Ukrainian “ownership” since 1954, and after the Ukrainian declaration of independence, strong voices in Russia argued against the legality of the Russian transfer of Crimea to Ukraine (Larrabee, 2010). Crimea was also populated by an ethnic Russian majority, and only administratively a region of Ukraine. Another conflict regarding Crimea was the base of the Black Sea Fleet in Sevastopol, situated in Crimea. The Black Sea Fleet is of high importance to Russia for military and geostrategic reasons and Russia had a hard time accepting that Sevastopol now belonged to Ukraine (Larrabee, 2010).

In January 1992, the first Russian claims to Crimea were made by Lukin, the chairman of the Russian Parliamentary Committee on Foreign Affairs and Foreign Economic Relations, drafting a resolution to the Crimea problem that was never acted upon due to the already strained relations between the two states (Larrabee, 2010). Russia urged Ukraine to recognize the BSF as a part of the CIS Strategic Armed Forces. Ukraine then had to choose between agreeing that the BSF and its bases were to be transferred to Russia or having Russia reconsider the status of Crimea as a part of Ukraine. After several negotiations, in 1995 the decision was to remove the BSF from CIS subordination and place it under direct command of both the Ukrainian and the Russian president. In 1993 the Russian parliament passed a resolution affirming Sevastopol’s “Russian federal status” (Larrabee, 2010). The international community stepped in, and the UN criticized Russia for

violating internationally accepted agreements. The Russian concern regarding Crimea and Sevastopol continued. Due to the Chechnya conflict, Russia was distracted, and Ukraine took advantage of the situation and, in 1995, abolished Crimea's constitution and president, placing it temporarily under the Ukrainian central government. The same year, a treaty was finalized after a compromise regarding Russia's demands for dual citizenship of the Crimean population and a clearer policy regarding what stipulates violations of state borders. In 1997 Russia was granted port facilities for the BSF for a limited time period (Larrabee, 2010).

In his later years, Kuchma pushed Ukraine increasingly in a non-democratic direction (Ambrosio, 2007). The foreign policy choices of Kuchma aiming to please Russia in the late 1990s and early 2000s restrained the pro-Western movement (Shyrokykh, 2018). In 2003 Ukraine, Russia, and Belarus signed a treaty on the Common Economic Space. In the presidential election in 2004, Russia supported Russia-leaning Yanukovich, while the West supported pro-Western Yushenko (Way, 2015). Yanukovich won the election, and accusations of election fraud and other irregularities resulted in the Orange Revolution (D'Anieri, 2006). The election results were canceled after the revolution, and a new runoff was held in December 2004 in which Yushenko was the election winner (Tolstrup, 2015).

The Yushenko presidency was a pro-Western one (Götz, 2015). During his years as president, Ukraine withdrew its interest in the Common Economic Space, re-introduced the goal of future NATO membership, and started the process of withdrawal of the BSF in Sevastopol (the existing treaty allowed for the fleet to be stationed there until 2017) (Ambrosio, 2007). In 2005, Ukraine, Georgia, Azerbaijan, and Moldova rekindled the GUAM organization and renewed its aims for democratic and economic development among the member states. Yushenko also strongly opposed the Russian war in Georgia and the use of the BSF in the war (Ambrosio, 2007). The Orange coalition, which held power after the Orange Revolution, did however fail to create political stability in Ukraine. Internal conflicts among the coalition, economic problems, and the failure to execute key political reforms led to major problems for the government. Tymoshenko was only prime minister for eight months before she was dismissed by Yushenko. A second attempt to form an Orange coalition was made after the parliamentary elections in 2006, but it collapsed only after a few weeks. Yanukovich, still close to Russia, became prime minister in 2006 (Obydenkova & Libman, 2014).

In 2006 Ukraine's constitution was reformed to support a parliamentary-presidential system. In the presidential election of 2010, Yushenko, Yanukovich, and Tymoshenko were the main candidates.

Yanukovych won the election and became president during a global economic crisis (Ambrosio, 2007). This put pressure on the new government to stimulate economic growth, and the government had to go against their election promises and raise the pension age and raise taxes (Obyndenkova & Libman, 2014). These developments, combined with the decline in democracy levels, inspired feelings of dissatisfaction with the Yanukovych government among the citizens. Under the first years of his presidency, Yanukovych extended the lease for the BSF for another 25 years, initiated a new legislature preventing Ukraine from joining any military alliances, increased the power concentration, and re-installed the censorship of Ukrainian media (Larrabee, 2010). At the same time, Yanukovych started negotiations with the EU on an Association Agreement. The Ukrainian population was divided regarding foreign policy orientation (Smith, 2015). A public opinion poll from 2013 showed that about 70 percent of those living in the western part of the country supported EU integration, while about 60 percent of those living in the eastern part supported integration with Russia (Samokhvalov, 2015).

#### The annexation of Crimea and its aftermath

After the prolonging of the lease in Sevastopol, Ukraine was promised a discount on Russian gas. The discount was smaller than expected, and Russia had just initiated the construction of new pipelines that would bypass Ukraine, leaving Ukraine out of any transfer fees (Larrabee 2010). The Yanukovych government took new measures to reduce Russian energy dependency by showing a preference for coal over gas, looking for alternative delivery routes via Turkey and Azerbaijan, and seeking cooperation opportunities with the EU. While Yanukovych rejected the Russian offer of a CIS FTA membership, the Ukrainian government instead became interested in a DCFTA agreement (Deep and Comprehensive Free Trade Area) with the EU. In order to reduce Russian anger over the DCFTA, Ukraine proposed a special agreement with both the EU and Russia (Samokhvalov, 2015). As the economic crisis was worsening, Russia banned imports of Ukrainian goods in 2013, which effected the economy of Ukraine heavily. The EU refused to negotiate with Russia over the Ukrainian entry into the DCFTA (Way, 2015). In November 2013, Yanukovych did not sign the EU Association Agreement despite earlier promises to do so. Shortly after he accepted the Russian offer of a financial bailout of 15 billion dollars. The political developments led to mass protests, first regarding the Association Agreement and later on regarding the brutal treatment of students and journalists spending the night at Independence Square in Kyiv (Delcour & Wolczuk, 2015).

The protest against the government led to Yanukovych fleeing Ukraine and an interim government took over. The interim government was supported by the EU and challenged by Russia (Delcour & Wolczuk, 2015). The new transitional government faced major crises during the spring of 2014: increased Russian economic and energy pressure, the Russian annexation of Crimea, and the armed conflict in the Donbas region (Way 2015). In July 2014, the newly elected president Poroshenko signed the Association Agreement with the EU, and the national support for NATO membership grew to about 40 percent. Poroshenko stated that NATO membership would ruin Ukraine and favored closer integration with the EU instead. The Crimean conflict, however, made the Ukrainian population view the EU more negatively (Samokhvalov, 2015) because the EU refused to provide Ukraine with military support and was slow in its adoption of sanctions against Russia. After 2014 Ukraine made foreign policy decisions that would increase their defense capacities, while not provoking Russia further. Ukraine applied for the status of a non-NATO strategic ally of the US and developed closer military cooperation with the Baltic states, Albania, and Poland (Samokhvalov, 2015).

The foreign policies in Ukraine have changed with every new president. The Kravchuk presidency (1991–1994) was pro-Western, while the Kuchma periods (1994–1999, 1999–2005) were dominated by a multivector foreign policy in trying to balance both Russia and the West. The presidency of Yushenko (2005–2010) was again pro-Western, Yanukovych prioritized a multivector policy, while the two last presidents, Poroshenko (2014–2018), and Zelensky (2018–) have taken a pro-Western stance (Shyrokykh, 2018). In the 1990s, the uncertainty of Russian ambitions regarding Crimea and Sevastopol made Ukraine look to the West for cooperation (Larrabee, 2010). The main foreign policy aims of the early period of independence became to avoid open confrontation with Russia. The Treaty of Friendship in 1997 between Ukraine and Russia, which officially recognized the sovereignty of Ukraine and its territorial integrity, made Ukraine calmer and more open for Western cooperation (Solchanyk, 1996). The issue of EU and NATO membership had been avoided by Kuchma before 1997 in order to have a relationship with Russia that was as stable as possible. In 1998 and 2000, Ukraine signed strategic papers on future integration with the EU. Starting in 2010, European integration was the main foreign policy objective, while Yanukovych withdrew any ambitions to join NATO. When Poroshenko became president in 2014, he signed the EU Association Agreement, and later the goal of joining NATO again became a Ukrainian objective. In 2021, Zelensky declared that an immediate goal for Ukraine was a NATO Membership Action Plan (Ekman, 2023).

## **D.6 Armenia: Chronological developments in independent Armenia**

### **Pre-independence**

The history of Armenia has an ancient background (Heathershaw & Schaltz, 2017). Situated on the spice and trade route, the strategic geographic, and geopolitical, position of the state has long been between East and West (Karakashian, 1998). The Armenian territory has been occupied and ruled over by Romans, Byzantines, Greeks, Persians, Arabs, Mongols, Turks, and Russians (Keshishian & Harutyunyan, 2013). After the war between Russia and Persia between 1827 and 1828, Eastern Armenia came under Russian control while western Armenia belonged to the Ottoman Empire. Russia was viewed by the Christian nation of Armenia as a protector from the influences from the Muslim Ottomans (Keshishian & Harutyunyan, 2013). In 1915, around 1.5 million Armenians died during the Armenian Genocide under Ottoman rule (Heathershaw & Schaltz, 2017). Following the 1917 Bolshevik revolution, Russia withdrew its troops from the South Caucasus, making the Armenians vulnerable to threats from Turkey (Fraser et al., 1990). In 1918 Turkey attacked Armenian territory but the attack did not result in any Turkish occupation. Instead, the First Republic of Armenia was proclaimed in 1918. The independent state of Armenia was, however, short lived (Keshishian & Harutyunyan, 2013). In 1920 Armenia was annexed by the Soviet Union and became part of the Transcaucasian Soviet Socialist Republic alongside Georgia and Azerbaijan. The TSFSR was dissolved in 1936, after which the Armenian SSR became a full union republic (Fraser et al., 1990).

The region of Nagorno-Karabakh, with a large majority of the population being Armenian, had opted for being under Soviet Armenian rule in 1920 (Karakashian, 1998). The Soviets had decided to place Nagorno-Karabakh and Nakhichevan within Armenian territory but reversed their decision in 1921, after which both regions were placed under Soviet Azerbaijani rule (Iskandaryan, 2012). In 1923 Nagorno-Karabakh became an autonomous oblast of the Azerbaijan SSR. The fate of Nagorno-Karabakh became a wound in Armenian history and has had vast implications for the political development of Armenia and its increasing cooperation with Russia (Fraser et al., 1990).

### **The path to independence and the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict**

The faith of the Nagorno-Karabakh region is highly connected with the Armenian strife for independence. Since Nagorno-Karabakh was, against its wishes, put under Azerbaijani rule,

Armenia made several attempts to reverse the decision from the 1930s onwards (Fraser et al., 1990). In the 1960s and 1970s, several appeals and petitions aimed at the highest Soviet authorities in Moscow were made without any developments in the matter (Heathershaw & Schaltz, 2017). During the late 1980s, mass protests started in Armenia demanding the return of the region. In February 1988, almost one million people demonstrated in different cities in Armenia, after which Gorbachev met with Armenian activists and promised a just solution to the problem (Fraser et al., 1990). The Soviet federal government announced an eight-year development program for Nagorno-Karabakh, but Armenia was not satisfied with the solution (Fraser et al., 1990).

In June 1988, the Armenian Supreme Soviet voted to incorporate Nagorno-Karabakh into Armenia, followed by a resolution from Azerbaijan forbidding such transfer (Papazian, 2006). In July of the same year, Nagorno-Karabakh decided to secede from Azerbaijan, but the decision was proclaimed to be null and void by the Azerbaijan Supreme Soviet (Fraser et al., 1990). The conflict started to escalate, and Moscow declared a state of emergency in September 1988 and stationed armed troops in the region. In June 1989, the USSR Supreme Soviet declared that Nagorno-Karabakh was to be held under a special administrative committee (Fraser et al., 1990). But in January 1990 the first armed conflict occurred in the region, Moscow again declared a state of emergency and decided to station more troops there. The conflict continued, between 1992 and 1993. Armenia had occupied a considerable amount of Azerbaijani territory including Nagorno-Karabakh and seven adjacent districts (Mustafayeva, 2018). The international community intervened and tried to mediate between Armenia and Azerbaijan. The use of military force was condemned, and in 1993 the UN Security Council demanded the withdrawal of occupying forces in Azerbaijani territory (Iskandaryan, 2012). Since 1992 the Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe has been engaged in trying to settle the conflict with support from the Minsk Group (co-chaired by Russia, France, and the US). In 1994, a Russian-brokered ceasefire agreement was reached, putting a (frozen) end to the first Nagorno-Karabakh war (Mustafayeva, 2018).

In the spring of 1991, the leaders of the Armenian Karabakh movement understood that unification was not possible within the framework of the Soviet Union and began to fight for independence in order to acquire Karabakh (Iskandaryan, 2012). The conflict of Nagorno-Karabakh provided an ideology of national independence for Armenia. The struggle for reunification between Armenia and Karabakh came before the movement for independence, making Armenia quite unique regarding post-Soviet independence movements. The Nagorno-Karabakh movement became a national liberation movement in Armenia, able to produce mass mobilization among the population for independence from the Soviet Union (Papazian, 2006). The Pan-Armenian National Movement (PANM) led the struggle for self-determination for Nagorno-

Karabakh and Armenian independence (Kakachia & Markarov, 2016). The policies of the movement became increasingly nationalistic and anti-Soviet. After independence it developed into a rejection of Russia and the Russian policies in the post-Soviet states (Defeis, 1995). The first non-communist government was established in 1990, in which the Armenian National Party won an overwhelming victory (Papazian, 2006). Armenia did not participate in the referendum on preserving the Soviet Union in the spring of 1991. A referendum on secession from the Soviet Union was held in 1991, and 99 percent of the population voted for independence after which Armenia initiated the legal procedure of seceding from the USSR. In September 1991, Armenia declared independence (Defeis, 1995).

### Post-independence

The PANM leader Ter-Petrosyan became the first president of Armenia in 1991 (Kakachia & Markarov, 2016). The PANM movement condemned the traditional Armenian pro-Russian orientation and proclaimed that the Armenian domestic national identity should be developed. Russia was portrayed as a chauvinistic empire challenging Armenian independence and democratic development (Kakachia & Markarov, 2016). Once the members of the PANM movement became the ruling party in Armenia, the nationalistic rhetoric was toned down (Defeis, 1995). Other issues demanded the attention of the political elite: the ongoing war in Nagorno-Karabakh, economic and political reforms, the question of Armenian Genocide recognition, the foundations of the relationship with Russia, and the deterioration of relations between Armenia and its neighbors Azerbaijan and Turkey (Kakachia & Markarov, 2016).

The early stages of the presidency of Ter-Petrosyan (1991-1998) are characterized by a willingness to solve the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict, improving relations with Azerbaijan and Turkey, and avoiding Russian involvement in Armenian domestic affairs (Terzyan, 2018). The Nagorno-Karabakh conflict had made both Azerbaijan and its close ally, Turkey, Armenia's enemies. Ter-Petrosyan wanted to normalize relations between the three states, without involving Nagorno-Karabakh in the discussions. But Azerbaijan and Turkey did not reciprocate the Armenian will for better relations (Papazian, 2006). In 1992, Turkey placed armed forces along the Armenian-Turkish border. Azerbaijan introduced an economic blockade against Armenia in 1991, and Turkey joined the blockade in 1993, aiming to pressure Armenia into withdrawing its forces from Nagorno-Karabakh (Aberg & Kerzyan, 2018). Following the blockade and the increasingly hostile relations with Turkey and Azerbaijan, Armenia needed a powerful protector (Minassian 2008).



Ter-Petrosyan was hesitant to seek Russian help. According to his view, the conflict in Nagorno-Karabakh was self-destructive and would eventually lead to Russian interference and increased leverage over Armenia (Terzyan, 2018). But the significance of the Armenian-Russian relationship had deep historical roots. Russia has been viewed by Armenians as a protector since the mid-1800s when the Christian Armenian population was surrounded and occupied by the Ottomans and the Persians (Vieira & Vasilyan, 2018). At the same time, the Armenians remembered the Soviet attitude against the Nagorno-Karabakh issue and the non-interference from the Soviet army against Azerbaijani aggression in the 1980s (Papazian, 2006). The need for security was most important for Armenia and, despite the desire to lessen ties with Russia, Armenia sought Russia's protection (Shirinyan 2019). Armenia became a member of the CIS, alongside most of the post-Soviet states, in 1991. The same year, Armenia and Russia signed the Treaty of Friendship. In 1992, Armenia signed the Collective Security Treaty within the CIS framework (Minassian, 2008).

Russia became involved in the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict after its relationship with Azerbaijan had worsened. Azerbaijan had refused to join the CIS, developed a close relationship with the Russian enemy Turkey, and with the US planned new pipelines that would bypass Russia (Papazian, 2006). Hence, Russia supported Armenia in the Nagorno-Karabakh war. A joint Armenian and Russian border control was installed along the Turkish border to protect Armenia from Turkish hostilities. In 1995, an agreement allowed for the establishment of a Russian military base on Armenian soil near the border with Turkey and for the base to exist for another 25 years (Shirinyan, 2019).

Ter-Petrosyan received strong political opposition due to his view on the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict resolution and his willingness to work with both Turkey and Azerbaijan to solve the conflict. He sought to look beyond the historical difficulties with both neighboring states to gain economic and political developments to create a balanced foreign policy (Heathershaw & Schalz, 2017). Ter-Petrosyan did not prioritize international recognition of the Armenian Genocide, which was of enormous importance to the Armenian population and its vast diaspora (Kakachia & Markarov, 2016). His administration viewed Armenia as a European country and hoped that integration into European institutions would solve the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict and increase regional stability in the South Caucasus. By choosing to highlight Western integration, the relationship with Russia was not a priority under Ter-Petrosyan (Aberg & Kerzyan, 2018). While he acknowledged the positive Russian impact on Armenian security and regional stability, he was also wary of involving Russia too much in Armenian domestic affairs. Ter-Petrosyan was forced to resign in 1998 due to strong opposition against his domestic and foreign policy agendas (Iskandaryan, 2012).

After the resignation of Ter-Petrosyan, the prime minister Kocharyan took over as president. He was a war hero from the war in Nagorno-Karabakh and had a somewhat different foreign policy agenda compared to the previous president (Kakachia & Markarov, 2016). In the beginning of his presidency in the late 1990s, he stressed international Armenian Genocide recognition, a multivector foreign policy involving both Russia and Western actors, but also strived for full-scale European integration. Armenia became a member of the Council of Europe in 2001 and of the ENP in 2004. EU enlargement had made the EU more interested in the South Caucasus, and Armenia sought to gain European support from the ENP membership. European integration was seen by Kocharyan as vital to the Armenian political, economic, and legal reforms (Kakachia & Markarov, 2016). Kocharyan also saw Russia as Armenia's strategic partner. EU orientation and a strong relationship with Russia were not a problem for Kocharyan since he thought that Russia also had chosen the European path in the late 1990s (Terzyan, 2018).

Kocharyan's political priorities changed later in his first presidential term, and he is known as the main architect of the pro-Russian path of Armenian political development (Aberg & Kerzyan, 2018). During the start of his first presidential term, Kocharyan signed a Treaty on Friendship, Cooperation, and Mutual Assistance in 1997. In 2000 Armenia allowed for the stationing of Russian troops on Armenian territory until the year 2025. The change of the political path of Armenia occurred after Putin became the Russian president (Terzyan, 2018). While Ter-Petrosyan had a more toned-down view of the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict, the war hero Kocharyan had stronger views on conflict resolution and Armenia's relationship with both Azerbaijan and Turkey. The strong position against the neighboring states demanded protection from Russia in case of an escalation of the conflict (Aberg & Kerzyan, 2018). Armenia also felt the need to increase the pace of integration into Russian regional integration projects in the early 2000s since Russian and Azerbaijani relations had improved. Wanting Russia to stay on the Armenian side in the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict, the relationship with Russia deepened (Aberg & Kerzyan, 2018).

During the two Kocharyan presidential terms Armenia and Russia grew much closer (Terzyan, 2018). The relationship between the two states is most prominent within the economic and military spheres. In 2002 Armenia became a member of the CSTO and became a strategic ally of Russia (Minassian 2008). The CSTO membership came with high Armenian expectations of a security guarantee for its borders to Azerbaijan, Iran, and Turkey (Kakachia & Markarov, 2016). From Armenia's perspective, there were many security threats in the 2000s: the relationship between Russia and Azerbaijan had normalized and Russia had formed a strategic partnership with Armenia's enemy, the US and Russia were cooperating over a radar station in Azerbaijan, Russia and Turkey had also increased their economic cooperation within the Blue Stream pipeline project,

and the Russo-Georgian war in 2008 had compromised the Georgian corridor Armenia desperately needed due to the double blockade by Azerbaijan and Turkey (Kakachia & Markarov, 2016). Despite Russia being involved in all these security threats to Armenia, Russia was also seen by Armenia as their greatest security guarantor (Minassian, 2008).

Armenia has become increasingly economically dependent on Russia since the early 2000s (Minassian, 2008). The Armenian diaspora, with its roots in the aftermath of the Persian-Russian war in the 1800s, is large (Heathershaw & Schalz, 2017). Over 2.5 million Armenians live and work in Russia, and Armenia has become dependent on remittances from the diaspora in Russia (Terzyan, 2018). In 2015, 14 percent of the Armenian GDP came from remittances from the Armenian diaspora, and 70 percent of the total remittances stemmed from Russia. Between 1996 and 2006, Russia invested over \$465 million in Armenia, making Russia its main foreign investor. Armenia is also dependent on Russia as a trade partner, and 20 percent of the Armenian exports go to Russia (Minassian 2008). Since 1991, Armenia has acquired a large debt to Russia, which Russia has used to gain access to vital Armenian resources (Aberg & Kerzyan, 2018). In 2002 Armenia signed an “assets for debt” agreement with Russia stating that for a \$100 million debt reduction Armenia would give up important resources including several hydroelectrical power plants and the financial control over the Medzamor nuclear power plant (Vieira & Vasiyan, 2018). In 2006 Russia, via Gazprom, received near full control over the Armenian energy system. Since then, Russia has controlled several reinvigorated industries (such as aluminum, diamond, uranium, and electricity) in Armenia, as well as important sectors such as banking, telecommunication, air travel, and Armenian railroad sectors (Terzyan, 2019).

The security cooperation with, and dependence on, Russia was also further developed under Kocharyan. Armenia became a CSTO member in 2002, and in 2003 the military cooperation between Russia and Armenia grew with further security agreements (Aberg & Kerzyan, 2018). Russian troops were patrolling the Armenian-Turkish, the Armenian-Iranian, and the Nagorno-Karabakh borders. Russia has several military and air bases in Armenia. Russia is also the main weapons supplier to both Armenia and Azerbaijan. By 2015, Russia was providing Armenia with 90 percent of its arms imports and over 85 percent of Azerbaijan’s arms imports (Shirinyan, 2019). The most important military leverage Russia has over Armenia is the ongoing Nagorno-Karabakh conflict and Armenia’s need for a security provider (Aberg & Kerzyan, 2018).

In 2008, Sargsyan became the president of Armenia after the two terms of Kocharyan ended (Terzyan, 2018). His main aim for his presidential term was to improve the Armenian geopolitical position by bringing Armenia closer to the EU (Kakachia & Markarov, 2016). However, changes

in the regional environment during the late 2000s pushed the development of the Armenian foreign policy in a pro-Russian direction instead. The launch of the ENP improved the relations between Armenia and the EU (Terzyan, 2018). The war between Georgia and Russia also had consequences for the Armenian and Russian relationship. The Georgian strife for EU and NATO membership was seen as being the cause of Russian aggression towards Georgia in 2008. The Armenian memberships in the CIS and the CSTO did not cause any concerns about EU integration from the Armenian perspective (Kakachia & Markarov, 2016). The Russian view was different, and Russia became dissatisfied with the foreign policy choices of Armenia. Sargsyan also tried to normalize the relations between Turkey and Armenia, also seen as a threat to Russian regional interests (Shirinyan, 2019).

Armenia and Sargsyan were hoping for an Association Agreement with the EU and started negotiations with the AA being the goal, despite the ongoing Armenian critique of the EU for its lack of support for Armenia against the economic blockade. Armenia did, however, long for Western integration (Aberg & Kerzyan, 2018). In 2013 as Armenia got closer to signing the EU agreement, Russia stepped up its military cooperation with Azerbaijan by providing the state with \$4 billion worth of military equipment. The same year, Russia also increased Armenian gas prices by 50 percent (Shirinyan, 2019). With the Russian-Azerbaijani military cooperation, the higher gas prices, as well as the situation that occurred in both Georgia and Ukraine after the two states sought closer relations with the EU in memory, Sargsyan decided not to sign the EU AA but instead became a member of the Russian-led EEU. Protests followed the decision but most of the Armenian society supported the idea of “Russia first” due to the vast security concerns facing Armenia at the time (Terzyan, 2018). The gas prices were reduced as soon as Armenia agreed to enter the EEU. Sargsyan later stated that, in his view, Armenia was forced to join the EEU instead of signing the AA with the EU: “Our choice is not civilizational. It corresponds to the economic interests of our nation. We cannot sign the Association Agreement and increase our gas price and electricity fee three times” (Terzyan, 2019).

In 2013, Gazprom gained complete control over the gas distribution networks in Armenia via debt payments (Vieira & Vasilyan, 2018). This further increased Russia’s hold over Armenia at a time when the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict continued to escalate. The Four-Day War broke out in 2016 between Armenia and Azerbaijan over the contested territory. Nagorno-Karabakh became the most militarized area in the whole post-Soviet region in 2016 (Mustafayeva, 2018). A ceasefire was established after international mediation attempts. Armenia considered its CSTO membership to be a trump card in the war and expected the other members to militarily support Armenia in the

conflict, but the help was not received. This made Sargsyan doubt the strength of the Armenian-Russian military cooperation as well as the whole structure of the CSTO (Shirinyan 2019).

Armenia had been considered an “island of democratic reform” in the early 1990s. The constitution from 1995 had created a strong presidency and a relatively weak parliament. The power of the president also included great autonomy over the foreign policy of Armenia (Defeis, 1995). While the beginning of the 1990s in Armenia was relatively democratic, the political system gradually became more authoritarian towards the early 2000s. The role of the political parties also changed in the late 1990s. The PANM had a great impact on the developments in the first years of independence but later split into smaller parties (Papazian, 2006). The party system shifted from working for political and social aims to prioritizing economic elite groups and oligarchs. Economic development has been important to Armenia due to the unresolved Nagorno-Karabakh conflict that demanded a large army and hence a stable economy to accommodate the security sphere. During the Kocharyan period, the political opposition and the independent media were harassed, and rigged political elections became more common (Aberg & Kerzyan, 2018). The presidential election in 2008 resulted in mass protests after the chosen successor of Kocharyan, Sargsyan, won the election (Roberts & Ziemer, 2018). With the consolidation of power within Kocharyan, Armenia also experienced a shift in foreign policy towards Russia (Ohanyan, 2022).

The road to authoritarianism continued with Sargsyan. Two days after the decision to not sign the AA, President Sargsyan announced that a referendum would be held on a constitutional change. Armenia became a parliamentary republic instead of a presidential one in 2015 (Roberts & Ziemer, 2018). While the change was initially approved by the West, it soon revealed itself as a plan for Sargsyan to acquire the role of prime minister after his second presidential term ended, allowing him to stay in power (Terzyan, 2019). A new electoral code was established in 2016, containing restrictions on election observers. The NGO legislature was also amended in 2017, allowing the government to rescind registrations of NGOs and supervise meetings. These political changes caused the population to mass mobilize against the government for the first time in Armenian history (Ohanyan, 2022).

The Velvet Revolution started in 2018 in response to the rule of Sargsyan. The parliamentary opposition member Pashinyan instigated the protest, and soon a large part of the population supported him and demanded the resignation of Sargsyan (Ohanyan, 2022). The revolution was peaceful. Driven by social factors, the protesters managed to reach their goal of replacing the political leadership. Due to immense pressure, the parliament, led by the pro-Sargsyan coalition, voted for Pashinyan to be the new prime minister (Shirinyan, 2019). Armenia was disappointed by

the cold reactions from the West regarding the revolution. Compared to the Color Revolutions in Ukraine and Georgia in the mid-2000s, the West did not find the Armenian democratic progress as important due to the EU and the US prioritizing regional stability in the South Caucasus over democratic progress (Shirinyan, 2019). Initially, the expectations were for a change in foreign policy towards Russia with the new leadership in Armenia. As an opposition member, Pashinyan had been critical of the state's over-reliance on Russia (Ohanyan, 2022). In 2017 he submitted a bill proposing Armenia's withdrawal from the EEU. However, he announced that Armenia would continue its membership within the Russian-led regional organization and continue to meet all of its obligations to Russia (Vieira & Vasilyan, 2019). In 2017 Armenia signed a new cooperation agreement with the EU, the CEPA, which was the most important step for a renewed relationship between Armenia and the EU since the renewed action plan was signed in 2015 (Roberts & Ziemer, 2018). Sarkissian was elected as president of Armenia in 2018. During his term as president, new escalations within the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict occurred. The armed conflict between Armenia and Azerbaijan in 2020 resulted in the Armenian loss of the territory that had been gained in the early 1990s as a result of a Russian-brokered ceasefire (Shirinyan, 2019). In 2020 a ceasefire was established in Nagorno-Karabakh after Armenia lost the 44-day war. Russian peacekeepers were positioned in the region with the purpose of protecting the Armenian civilians of Karabakh (Atenesyan et al. 2024). When Azerbaijan launched new attacks on Armenian territories in 2021, Armenia sought help from Russia and the CSTO. The appeals for assistance from CSTO was declined, causing tensions between Armenia and Russia (Amoris, 2025).

The Armenian struggle for independence from the Soviet Union and its political development since its independence has, to a large extent, been affected by the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict. The issue of reunification with the region and Armenia was the root of the Armenian independence movement. The conflict itself, with several armed escalations, has severely affected both the domestic development as well as the foundations for the Armenian foreign policy. The conflict with Azerbaijan and Turkey since the early 1990s has pushed Armenia into Russia's sphere, and the need for security in a chaotic regional environment has been the main priority for an independent Armenia. During the last three decades, the relationship with Russia has developed into a more asymmetrical one. More integration into Russian-dominated regional organizations and more cooperation with, and dependence on, Russia have led to the international isolation of Armenia. While Armenia has cooperated with European states, the EU, and NATO, only Russia has been considered to be Armenia's strategic ally. And the price for Russia as its security guarantor has been high: Armenia is largely trapped in the Russian sphere of influence.

## **D.7 Kyrgyzstan: Chronological developments in independent Kyrgyzstan**

### **Pre-independence**

The first recorded mention of ancient Kyrgyzstan dates back to 201 BC. The Kyrgyz state became the Kyrgyz Great Empire, a nomadic empire, in the 9th century but was split up into smaller parts in the 10th century. In 1206 Genghis Khan conquered parts of the Kyrgyz territory. In the mid-1800s, Kyrgyzstan was incorporated into the Russian Empire (Tchoroev, 2002). As in many other post-Soviet states, a Kyrgyz national movement occurred at the beginning of the 20th century (Gleason et al., 2008).

The Kara-Kyrgyz Autonomous Oblast was established in 1924, renamed the Kyrgyz Autonomous Oblast in 1925. One year later, in 1926, the republic became the Kyrgyz Autonomous Socialist Soviet Republic. After appeals to the Soviet center, the Kyrgyz Socialist Soviet Republic was established in 1936 (Tchoroev, 2002). The Kyrgyz Socialist Soviet Republic, with its nomadic heritage, was a predominantly agricultural Soviet republic. However, during three waves of industrialization, the republic became a highly specialized industrial area (Gleason et al., 2008). The republic produced heavy agricultural machinery, electric motors, lighting, and specialized in the hydroelectric power generation sector and mining. The living standards of the Kyrgyz population increased significantly after the third wave of industrialization in the 1960s. Within the Soviet Union, Kyrgyzstan was called the “agricultural basket” of the union in the 1980s (Abazov, 1999). With the level of industrialization there, workers from other parts of the Soviet Union came to Kyrgyzstan for jobs. Kyrgyzstan experienced a large influx of Russians and Ukrainians in the 1920s and 1930s. After the Second World War, other ethnicities arrived in Kyrgyzstan as working migrants (Germans, Turkish, Crimean Tatars, Greeks, and Koreans). Kyrgyzstan became one of the most diverse republics within the Soviet Union, and this led to a decline in the ethnic Kyrgyz population (Tchoroev, 2002). By 1989, only 52 percent of the population in Kyrgyzstan were ethnically Kyrgyz, 20 percent were Russian, and the rest were mostly made up of Germans and citizens of other Soviet republics (Abazov, 1999).

### **The path to independence**

The nationalistic movement reached Kyrgyzstan after the 1986 Kazakhstani uprisings against the Kremlin. Since Kyrgyzstan was an ethnically diverse state, the movement was not as strong as in

the European parts of the former Soviet Union (Tchoroev, 2002). A united national identity was not established prior to the Kyrgyz incorporation into the USSR due to the state's nomadic history, the fluctuating borders of the Kyrgyz territory, and the lack of previous statehood (Spector, 2004). The national identity of Kyrgyzstan became an ill-defined compromise of the cultural heritages from pre-Soviet and Soviet times (Roget & Usmanlieva, 2010).

The architect for the Kyrgyz national identity was Akaev, the first president of Kyrgyzstan. Akaev was a scientist by profession, with a background in the Communist Party, and agreed with Gorbachev's policies of liberation and reform in the 1980s (Roget & Usmanlieva, 2010). Akaev envisioned a renewed Soviet Union, and a sovereign Kyrgyzstan as a part of it. The party leader in Kyrgyzstan, Masaliev, did not share Akaev's views on economic and political progress (Spector, 2004). As Moscow's hold on the Soviet republics loosened, economic chaos and poverty hit Kyrgyzstan, which led to political riots. In the late 1990s, Akaev was elected as the first Kyrgyz president after a messy presidential election in which Masaliev failed to win a majority (Sart, 2012). Akaev had no significant previous political experience and no solid political backing while faced with finding the solution to vast problems: dealing with the disintegration of the Soviet Union, political instability, and economic chaos (Huskey, 2008). To address these problems, he created the new Kyrgyz national identity around the ideas of free market liberalism and Western-style democracy (Pétric, 2005).

The independence of Kyrgyzstan was given more than it was fought for. The republic had had a close relationship with Russia during the Soviet era and did not consider the Soviet Union or the Russian state as an enemy (Pétric, 2005). In August 1991 the Kyrgyz military and Communist officers organized a coup against Akaev. The organizers of the coup wanted to preserve the Soviet republic and the leading status of the Communist Party. The official reason for the coup was a statement from Akaev that he would defend the laws of Kyrgyzstan over those of the USSR. The coup created a split between Akaev and the Communist Party (Spector, 2004). While Akaev had previously had close ties to the Communist Party, he was determined to implement his policies to make Kyrgyzstan a more Western-leaning independent state (Sart, 2012). In November 1990, Kyrgyzstan was the first Central Asian republic to remove the words "Socialist" and "Soviet" from its name. In 1991 Kyrgyzstan declared its independence and temporarily prohibited the activities of the Communist Party (Tchoroev, 2002).



## Post-independence

The newly independent Kyrgyzstan faced many challenges: poverty, economic chaos, and ethnic and political tensions. Kyrgyzstan had no previous experience of being an independent state, the Kyrgyz collective memory was based on nomadic culture (Tchoroev, 2002). The ethnic diversity of the state meant that Akaev's policies had to be accepted by all ethnic groups, including a large number of Russian citizens. A sizable Uzbek population was concentrated in the southern parts of the state and they had problems with poverty and underrepresentation in local government bodies (Gleason et al., 2008). In 1992 Akaev formed the "Assembly of the Republic of Kyrgyzstan" consisting of leaders from 27 ethnic communities, which allowed ethnic minorities to have a political voice. Akaev restored indigenous holidays and attempted to implement language laws that would not alienate the ethnic minorities in the state. After these measures, Akaev faced opposition from nationalist groups wanting to favor the ethnic Kyrgyz part of the population (Spector, 2004). The political struggle between Akaev and the nationalists had severe consequences for the state. Hundreds of thousands of highly skilled Russians and Germans fled Kyrgyzstan, causing a vast brain drain. Within the USSR, the Russians in Kyrgyzstan had dominated the technical and engineering professions, and with a large part of them fleeing Kyrgyzstan much desperately needed economic and technical skills were lost (Abazov, 1999). To appeal to the Russians left in the state, Akaev opened a Slavic University for Russian studies and the study of the Russian language (Spector, 2004).

While stability and ethnic relations had been the main priority of Akaev, his second priority was economic development. Kyrgyzstan had been one of the smallest and poorest republics in the Soviet Union (Gleason et al., 2008). While the other Central Asian states had a wealth of natural resources in their territories, Kyrgyzstan had almost nothing except for water. While largely underdeveloped, Kyrgyzstan had great potential for developing hydroelectric generators due to its water resources (Huskey 2008). The economic crisis after the fall of the Soviet Union hit the already poor Kyrgyzstan hard. Dependency on Russia and Uzbekistan regarding energy and transit routes continued in the early 1990s (Pétrie, 2005). Akaev promoted large economic reforms in the form of price liberalization and started the process of privatization (Pelkman, 2005). The rapid economic reforms attracted Western states and organizations, which enabled Kyrgyzstan to receive large loans. By the end of 1993, Western donors had pledged almost half a billion dollars in financial assistance to Kyrgyzstan (Spector, 2004).

Privatization resulted in high levels of inflation, a decline in agricultural and industrial production, and corruption (Spector, 2004). Akaev continued with his reforms despite opposition. Russia had also experienced inflation and economic turmoil since 1991. Akaev intended to avoid any further economic decline by leaving the ruble zone, and in 1993 Kyrgyzstan introduced its national currency, the *som* (Spector, 2004). Akarev had, however, not discussed the currency change with the state's CIS partners, which led to a diplomatic crisis. Trade with neighboring states declined rapidly and Uzbekistan and Kazakhstan closed their borders to Kyrgyzstan. The introduction of a national currency had a devastating effect on the Kyrgyz economy (Pelkman, 2005). In 1991, 98 percent of Kyrgyz's trade was with the former Soviet republics, and over 40 percent of its imports came from Russia (Gleason et al., 2008). After the "shock therapy" economic reforms in the 1990s, Kyrgyzstan had built up a massive debt to other actors. A large part of the borrowed money had been used to handle the fledgling currency and to cover budgetary shortfalls instead of investing the money in capital projects (Pétric, 2005). By 1996, over 70 percent of the Kyrgyz population lived in poverty (Abazov, 1999).

In the early 1990s, Kyrgyzstan was considered to be an "island of democracy" in the post-Soviet region. In the first years of Akaev's presidency, many democratic elements flourished: NGOs, social movements, independent media, and political parties (Pelkman, 2005). Akaev constructed his view of the new national identity of the state with the phrase "Switzerland of Central Asia" and rejected the communist and authoritarian past. He saw Kyrgyzstan as being a bridge connecting the East with the West, which also was reflected in his foreign policy. Akaev forged strong ties with Western and international political and financial institutions (Spector, 2004). In 1992 Kyrgyzstan became a World Bank member, a member of NATO Pfp in 1994, and in 1998 a WTO member. Kyrgyzstan also cooperated at a high level with China, its largest non-CIS trade partner, the OSEC, IMF, and the US. Kyrgyzstan, despite its pro-Western choice, also considered Russia to be of large importance (Spector, 2004).

Kyrgyzstan was highly economically dependent on Russia, it housed a quite large Russian population, many Kyrgyz citizens worked in Russia, and the Kyrgyz Western orientation was a sensitive matter for Russia (Gleason et al., 2008). The two states signed a treaty on Friendship and Cooperation in 1991, the same year Kyrgyzstan became a CIS member. Akarev stated in the 1990s "I would like to firmly stress that no matter what new ties we establish in the West and East, no matter how great our urge to merge into the eastern, western, or worldwide economic community, our ties with Russia and our friendship with the Russian people will always be special and we will give them priority" (Spector, 2004). While Akaev developed a balanced multivector foreign policy, balancing the West, China, and Russia, it became more difficult to maintain a position of non-

alignment while being heavily engaged with powerful actors competing with each other (Sart, 2012).

The many rapid reforms during the first years of independence resulted in great political opposition to Akaev's rule. While the level of poverty and the national debt were increasing, the Kyrgyz population started to feel more nostalgic about its Soviet years when the economic situation was better (Rogert & Usmanalieva, 2010). The non-democratic tendencies of Akaev also grew during the mid-1990s. Independent media and political opposition were attacked, and the political elections became rigged and unfair. In 1994 Akaev dissolved the parliament and replaced its members with loyal supporters (Huskey, 2008). In 1995 he strengthened the powers of the president via a referendum. While his last presidential term was to end in 2000, he manipulated the constitutional court to allow him to run for president a third time (Spector, 2004). The 2000 presidential election was an easy win for Akaev. Before the election the most prominent opposition candidates had been faced with criminal prosecution, and eight other candidates had been ruled out due to the new language law, initiated by Akaev, requiring that the presidential candidates need to speak Kyrgyz (Spector, 2004).

The political opposition against Akaev grew, and at the same time Kyrgyzstan was faced with external security challenges. There was political instability in Afghanistan, a bordering state to Kyrgyzstan, a civil war had broken out in Tajikistan, and in 1999 the Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan (IMU) entered Kyrgyz territory and terrorized parts of the population, causing a rise of diplomatic tensions between Kyrgyzstan and Uzbekistan (Sart, 2012). Demonstrators had been killed by the police in southern parts of the state, and Akaev's handling of the situation led to the resignation of the whole parliament followed by mass protests. Protests also followed Akaev's decision to make the bicameral parliament a unicameral one, again changing the constitution of Kyrgyzstan (Spector, 2004). Along with the growing criticism of Akaev, the increasing poverty levels, and the allegations of fraud regarding the parliamentary election in 2005, the Tulip Revolution erupted in Kyrgyzstan (Spector, 2004). Around 10,000 protesters demanded the resignation of Akaev in a rather peaceful revolution. The military and the police did nothing when the protestors occupied the government's headquarters. After the very fast-paced revolution, Akaev resigned (Huskey, 2008).

The new Kyrgyz leadership consisted mostly of government officials who had fallen out with the Akaev government, and the new leadership produced little or no change in the political path of the state. Instead of a new domestic and geopolitical direction, they only provided Kyrgyzstan with a different leadership (Sart, 2012). The new government continued to favor those in high positions,

and personal relations with those in power became critical for survival (Huskey, 2008). Akaev had become the face of the democratic movement, but the visions of political change were highly connected with the economic crisis and poverty levels, and democracy had become a negative word in Kyrgyzstan (Pelkman, 2005). Soviet nostalgia increased, and the Kyrgyz population became more in favor of strong leaders. At the same time Kyrgyzstan experienced a tilt towards Russia due to increasing criticism over power concentration from Western powers and the more authoritarian nature of the Kyrgyz regime (Rogert & Usmanalieva, 2010). Kyrgyzstan increased its cooperation with Russia within several spheres and became a member of both CSTO and EurAsEC in the early 2000s (Sart, 2012).

#### The War on Terror: The importance of Kyrgyzstan increases

The multivector foreign policy, with a pro-Russian tilt, in the Kyrgyz foreign policy changed in 2001. After 9/11 the US began its “War on Terror”, and Kyrgyzstan found itself to be of high geopolitical importance to the West (Namatbekova & Saliev, 2021). The fight for influence over Kyrgyzstan began between the US and Russia. The US established an air base outside of Bishkek as a part of its military campaign in Afghanistan. The air base was of great importance for Kyrgyzstan, it enhanced the Kyrgyz's geopolitical and international status, the rent for the airbase brought in a long-awaited increased income for the state, and it was thought to allow Kyrgyzstan to continue its balancing foreign policy (Sart, 2012). Russia was, however, not content with the American base on Kyrgyz territory. In 2002, Russia and Kyrgyzstan agreed to establish a Russian military base only 50 km from the American air base. Kyrgyzstan had both a NATO military base and a CSTO military base within a small distance from each other, a clear picture of its balancing act between the East and the West (Huskey, 2008).

The new Kyrgyz president, Bakiev, was a more authoritarian leader than Akaev and favored cooperation with Russia, China, and other Central Asian states over pro-Western policies (Sart, 2012). According to the 2005 foreign policy concept, the main threats to Kyrgyzstan were religious extremism and terrorism. Kyrgyzstan felt the need to delegate more authority to regional organizations to maintain its economic and physical security (Sart, 2012). Bakiev granted Russia priority in Kyrgyz foreign policy. In 2006 he stated that, while the US was just a partner, Russia was the eternal friend of Kyrgyzstan (Namatbekova & Saliev, 2021). The Russian-led regional organizations became more important to Kyrgyzstan, as was the SCO, of which both China and Russia are members (Sart, 2012).

Kyrgyzstan was in desperate need of money. By 2008 Kyrgyzstan had a general government debt of 2 billion dollars and a total national debt of 3.5 billion dollars. In 2006, Bakiev demanded an increase in rent for the US air base from 2 million dollars to 200 million dollars (Namatbekova & Saliev, 2021). After negotiations, the rent was increased to 17 million dollars. Bakiev refused to sign the highly anticipated HIPC program (Highly Indebted Poor Countries) by the World Bank and turned to Russia for help instead. The HIPC would have eliminated almost one billion dollars in Kyrgyz debt (Sart, 2012). In 2009 Kyrgyzstan agreed to a Russian financial assistance package. The package included Russian debt forgiveness, 300 million dollars in low-interest credit loans, and 1.7 billion dollars for completing a hydroelectric power station in Kyrgyzstan (Sart, 2012).

In 2009, Kyrgyzstan's relationship with the US as well as with Russia worsened. In the spring, Kyrgyzstan stated that the US military base was to be closed and that all military personnel was to leave the state by July 2009 (Namatbekova & Saliev, 2021). After the presidential election, the Kyrgyz approach to the air base changed. Bakiev consolidated his power by winning the presidential election and Kyrgyzstan was again in need of income (Engvall, 2014). The US was allowed to keep the base with a change in the status of the base, the leasing time was extended, and the rent was increased. Russia opposed Bakiev's change of mind and grew tired of him. Russian mass media started to openly criticize Bakiev and his family, who held high positions of power in Kyrgyzstan. The Kyrgyz opposition leaders were invited to Moscow, and in 2010 Russia terminated the low customs taxes that Kyrgyzstan had previously enjoyed and increased the price of oil and oil products (Trotskiy, 2011). The Russian pressure caused protests in Kyrgyzstan due to their negative effects on the economic performance of the state. Bakiev also received criticism for his efforts to further concentrate power within the presidency (Engvall, 2014). While there was no united political opposition in Kyrgyzstan, clan-based tribalism was still strong, and almost every clan had its own political party; they united in the protests for Bakiev's resignation in 2010. After the second revolution in Kyrgyzstan in five years, Bakiev resigned, and an interim government took over. After the ousting of Bakiev, Kyrgyzstan became a parliamentary republic through a popular referendum (Bohr, 2010).

After the revolution, inter-ethnic conflicts started to develop in Kyrgyzstan (Bohr, 2010). Bakiev had been from the south of the country, while the interim government was controlled by people from the northern parts of the state. Both tensions between the south and north flared up as well as conflicts between Kyrgyz and Uzbek communities in Osh. The conflict in Osh escalated, and the violence spread to other parts of the state. Kyrgyzstan called for Russian assistance, but Russia refused to get involved since Uzbekistan was involved in the conflict (Trotskiy, 2011). Kyrgyzstan also called upon the CSTO to help, but the military intervention was not granted. Russia's

reputation, and the reputation of the CSTO, as a regional stabilizer was damaged. The interim government wanted Russia's support in order to gain stability in Kyrgyzstan. In return for lower energy prices and taxes, Kyrgyzstan promised to become a member of the Customs Union. Membership in the CU would have several advantages for Kyrgyzstan, but mostly it concerned the large part of the Kyrgyz population that worked in Russia (Kudaibergenova, 2016). Kyrgyzstan is one of the most remittance-dependent states in the post-Soviet region; in 2013 one-third of the state's GDP consisted of remittances, mostly from workers in Russia. In 2012 Russia supported Kyrgyzstan with 1.5 billion dollars in military assistance (Engvall, 2014). As financial support from Russia increased, so did the Russian involvement in the domestic economy of Kyrgyzstan. Russia ensured control over important assets within energy, transport, and infrastructure. In 2013, Kyrgyzstan sold its bankrupt gas company, Kyrgogaz, to Gazprom for one dollar. The same year a Russian holding company bought Zalkar Bank, the successor to the former largest bank in Kyrgyzstan (Engvall, 2014).

Atambayev became president in 2011, and with him came more toned-down Kyrgyz-Russian relations in his later presidential years (Engvall, 2014). Atambayev continued with the Kyrgyz tradition of maintaining a multivector foreign policy and increased its cooperation with Western states and with Turkey (Namatbekova & Saliev, 2021). Russia was still important but did not enjoy the same position as it had under Bakiev's presidency. Russia limited its financial investments in Kyrgyzstan, pushing Kyrgyzstan to apply for credit from EurAsEC, which was not granted. Atambayev then turned his attention to China. With Chinese financial loans, Kyrgyzstan built motorways, thermal plants, and other vital infrastructure. Soon, however, Kyrgyzstan had also accumulated a large debt to China and was again in financial trouble (Namatbekova & Saliev, 2021). Jeenbekov was elected president in 2017, and with him, Kyrgyzstan again prioritized Russia in its foreign policy and as a strategic partner. In 2018 the trade volume between Kyrgyzstan and Russia increased by 17 percent. Jeenbekov also wanted to continue its cooperation with the US due to its security problems with drug smuggling from Afghanistan, terrorism, and organized crime (Namatbekova & Saliev, 2021). While the democratic performance of Kyrgyzstan had improved since Bakiev's resignation in 2010, the Kyrgyz non-democratic practices returned with Jeenbekov. He was accused of election violations and vote buying in the parliamentary election in 2020. Large protests against the president were organized, the election results annulled, and Jeenbekov resigned in late 2020, marking the third revolution in Kyrgyz independent history. Japarov, who became the next president in 2021, has also taken a pro-Russian stance (Namatbekova & Saliev, 2021). The new constitution of Kyrgyzstan was adopted in 2021 strengthened the presidential powers and reduced the size of the parliament by 25 percent (Lempp et al, 2024).

In only a few years, Kyrgyzstan went from being an “island of democracy” to an authoritarian state in the beginning of the 1990s. While Akaev’s policies of political and economic liberalization were implemented at a fast pace, they did not give the results the population desired. Instead of positive economic development, poverty increased. The economic situation in Kyrgyzstan has been its Achilles heel since its independence and has had an enormous effect on its domestic development and the handling of its foreign policy. The economic situation, not the will for democratic reforms, has been the background for at least two of the Kyrgyz revolutions. The will for economic improvement has also been the foundation of Kyrgyzstan’s foreign policy aims of balancing powerful actors, and at times playing them against each other. Cooperation with the US gave Kyrgyzstan international prestige and financial gains, but Russia has been the economic backbone of Kyrgyzstan since the 1990s. The economic situation in Kyrgyzstan and its security problems associated with its geopolitical position have steered increasing integration with, and dependence on, Russia.

## **D.8 Tajikistan: Chronological developments in independent Tajikistan**

### **Pre-independence**

Tajikistan has a long history. Situated along the Silk Route, it has an important position between East and West in Central Asia (Gleason, 2001). The territory of Tajikistan was part of the Samanid Empire between 819 and 992, as well as part of the historical region of Khorasan. Khorasan included the territories of modern Tajikistan, Turkmenistan, northern Afghanistan, and southern Uzbekistan together with Persia (Beeman, 1999). Between the 16th century and the 19th century, the region was part of the larger Persian Empire. In 1759 the eastern parts of Tajikistan (then Eastern Turkestan) came under Chinese control. During the 19th century both the British and Russian influence over Central Asia grew (Beeman, 1999). In 1855 Russia invaded the Kazakh territory and fought with China over influence on Eastern Turkestan. Great Britain supported Chinese rule over the territory, and in 1891 Britain and Russia established a new buffer state, Afghanistan while dividing parts of Asia between them, and hence Central Asia came under Russian control (Gleason, 2001).

After the collapse of the Tsarist Empire communist rule was implemented in the Central Asian states (Austen, 1996). In 1918, the northern parts of Central Asia were included in the Russian Soviet Federalist Socialist Republic (RSFSR). In 1920 after the Union Treaty, Tajikistan became a part of the Turkestan Autonomous Socialist Republic within the RSFSR. Four socialist republics were created in 1924 in Central Asia after the Soviet land reform (Gleason, 1999). The Tajik Autonomous Oblast first belonged to the Uzbek Soviet Socialist Republic, but in 1929 it was given republic status as the Tajik Soviet Socialist Republic. Compared to other Soviet republics, Tajikistan had a lower level of social and economic development (Akbarzadeh, 1996). The state was a major cotton producer and predominantly an agricultural society. Clan structures were an important aspect of Soviet Tajikistan and have affected political development after independence (Akbarzadeh, 1996).

### **The path to independence**

During the late 1980s, when perestroika impacted society in all of the Soviet republics, economic and political problems stirred in Tajikistan (Akbarzadeh, 1996). Tajikistan was the poorest of the Soviet republics, and under the leadership of Gorbachev economic development declined further.



The level of unemployment was high, and the landlocked status of the state, as well as the lack of natural resources, contributed to negative economic development (Gleason, 1999).

The political opposition in Tajikistan in the late 1980s and early 1990s prioritized a national awakening even though the state was divided on the question of national identity. They prioritized making the Tajik language the state language (Akbarzadeh, 1996). In 1988 Communist Party leader Mahkamov, due to oppositional pressure, made a resolution to improve the teaching of Tajik at all educational levels (Gleason, 1999). After increasing pressure from the opposition, Tajik declared the state language in 1989 (Akbarzadeh, 1996). The question of the Tajik minority in Uzbekistan also started discussions on the dissolution of Soviet borders in Tajikistan to unite the minority in Uzbekistan with Tajikistan (Gleason, 2001). In the spring of 1990, two important political parties emerged: the Democratic Party of Tajikistan and the Islamic Renaissance Party of Tajikistan. The Supreme Soviet prohibited political parties of a religious nature, which resulted in political chaos (Tadjabakhsh, 1994). In the all-Union referendum in 1991, 97 percent of Tajik voters supported the idea of a renewed Soviet Union. But after the August putsch in 1991, the Tajik regime stated its support for the coup against Gorbachev, causing public demonstrations against the Tajik leadership. Mahkamov was forced to resign in late August 1991 (Akbarzadeh, 1996). In September 1991, Tajikistan declared its independence. The Supreme Soviet chose Nabiev, the former Communist Party leader, as acting president (Gleason, 2001).

As with most of the Soviet republics, the borders of the states were drawn by Stalin and other Soviet leaders according to the “divide and conquer” mindset (Austen, 1996). Tajikistan had no previous experience of statehood, and even its borders within the Soviet Union had been altered several times (Akbarzadeh, 1996). According to the last Soviet census in 1989, the ethnic composition of the state was 63 percent Tajik, 24 percent Uzbek, 14 percent Russian, and the rest were a combination of other ethnic minorities (Austen, 1996). A sizable Tajik minority also lived in Uzbekistan due to the changes in Soviet borders in the 1920s. While the other Central Asian states belonged to the Turkish sphere, the Tajik population had more in common with Iran, Pakistan, and the Middle East (Beeman, 1999). The Tajik language is a variation of Farsi, and the majority of the population are Sunni Muslims, while a minority of them are Shia Muslims. A part of the population was secular, further complicating the Tajik national identity (Akbarzadeh, 1996). The lack of a unifying national identity was one of the main reasons for the civil war that would color the first independent years of Tajikistan (Tadjabakhsh, 1994).

The civil war followed the independence movement and escalated during the first years of independence. The final peace treaty would not be signed until 1997, and the lengthy war brought with it vast Russian influence over Tajikistan (Austen, 1996). After the resignation of Mahkamov in the fall of 1991, the Supreme Soviet chose Nabiev, the former Communist Party leader, as acting president. Nabiev was a strong Soviet supporter and was not interested in reforming Tajikistan. In the presidential election in November 1991, Nabiev received almost 60 percent of the votes (Austen, 1996). The anti-government and pro-government forces continued to demonstrate on the streets in the capital. The February 1990 attack on pro-independence demonstrators by government forces caused a large division in the Tajik population (Akbarzadeh, 1996). In May 1992 Nabiev and the opposition agreed on a power-sharing agreement, the Government for National Reconciliation, but the regions with large Uzbek minorities did not recognize the authority of the new government. This led to violent fights in the southwestern regions of the state (Austen, 1996). The political chaos spread, and Nabiev was forced, at gunpoint, to resign in September 1991. Ishkandarov became acting president soon after the resignation of Nabiev (Gleason, 2001).

The opposition in Tajikistan received financial and technical support from Afghanistan, which was not well-received by Russia and Uzbekistan. At the start of the war, Russia remained neutral but got involved in the conflict in 1992 (Olimov, 1999). Russia sent guards to patrol the Tajik-Afghani border, and Uzbekistani troops aided the pro-government forces in Tajikistan. Ishkandarov's presidency was terminated in the fall of 1992, and the Islamic Renaissance Party gained control over the capital and formed a government (Gleason 2001). Opposition to the takeover attacked the capital in October 1992, and pen violence continued until December. In 1993, 25 Russians were killed in border fights, and Russia accused the Afghanistan government of the deaths. The incident led to efforts by Russia and Uzbekistan to mediate a political resolution to the Tajik conflict (Tadjabakhsh, 1994).

The most violent phase of the war ended in favor of the political coalition of which Rahmonov (since 2007 known as Rahmon) was the leading figure. Rahmonov was a part of the Popular Front that later turned into the People's Democratic Party of Tajikistan, the party that still controls domestic politics in Tajikistan (Tadjabakhsh, 1994). Rahmonov became the Chairman of the Supreme Assembly in 1992 and at the same time the de facto leader of Tajikistan (Austen, 1996). In the presidential election in 1994, Rahmanov won against the opposition candidate Abdulajahov

who, after the election, faced criminal charges and was banned from participating as a candidate in future elections (Akbarzadeh, 1996).

Both UN and CIS peacekeeping missions were established in Tajikistan in 1993 and 1994 (Olimov, 1999). A ceasefire was accomplished in 1994, and political talks between the opposition and the government continued between 1994 and 1996 without any peace deal (Gleason, 2001). Russia had a vital role in negotiating between the two opposing forces; the first and the last turns of negotiations were held in Moscow. In June 1997 a peace accord was signed, and the civil war finally ended (Olimov, 1999). UN peacekeepers were stationed in Tajikistan until 2000, and according to the ceasefire agreement from 1994, CIS and Russian forces were allowed to stay in Tajikistan during a transition period. The civil war resulted in somewhere between 20,000 and 100,000 casualties, and the displacement of between 10 and 20 percent of the Tajik population (Austen, 1996).

### Post-war independence

The civil war left Tajikistan in economic and political chaos. Economic development was low, and poverty and unemployment high. Tajikistan had been acquiring a significant amount of debt since the early 1990s, mostly from Russia. The political landscape was still divided along ethnic, religious, and clan-based lines (Austen, 1996). Rahmanov consolidated his power after becoming president in 1994 and continued to do so in the post-war period (Akbarzadeh, 1996). Opposition parties and parties with a religious basis were forbidden, independent media attacked, NGOs were nonexistent, and the few democratic elements still alive in Tajikistan crumbled (Austen, 1996). The peace treaty from 1997 included that 40 percent of the posts at all government levels should belong to the political opposition after 1997 but this was never implemented. In 1999, a national referendum approved that the presidential terms would be extended to seven years, and that Rahmanov would be awarded the title “Hero of Tajikistan” (Abdullaev, 2018). The presidential election was held at this time. While four oppositional candidates were nominated, only Rahmanov was allowed to collect the signatures needed to formalize his candidacy. Rahmanov won the election with 97 percent of the vote (Abdullaev, 2018).

Just after gaining nominal independence, Tajikistan was very dependent on Russia due to Tajikistan’s low economic performance (Engvall 2014). During the civil war, Tajikistan relied heavily on Russian support in different areas, adding to its external dependence (Shlapentokh, 2014). In 1992 Tajikistan became a member of the CIS and approved the establishment of the customs union within the CIS in 1997. A Cooperation and Mutual Assistance Agreement was

signed between Tajikistan and Russia in 1995, and a trilateral agreement between Russia, Tajikistan, and Uzbekistan on border control, and political and economic cooperation (Engvall, 2014). Due to the heavy migrant flows from Tajikistan to Russia (in 1997 90 percent of the migrants lived in Russia), the two states signed an agreement on dual citizenship for working migrants in 1997 (Olimov, 1999). During the civil war, Tajikistan also signed an agreement on the stationing of Russian troops on Tajik soil, making Tajikistan the only Central Asian state to station Russian military troops. An agreement on a Russian military base was signed in 1999 for 25 years (Olimov, 1999).

The geographic position of Tajikistan, and of Kyrgyzstan, made these states important to the US after 9/11 (Abdullaev, 2018). The sudden rise in geopolitical importance changed the relationship between Tajikistan and Russia. Tajikistan began to conduct a more balanced foreign policy and started to prioritize cooperation with the US, granting the US access to its airspace and airfields (Akbarzadeh 1996). Due to increased cooperation and the strategic position of Tajikistan, the US agreed to grant Tajikistan financial aid. Tajikistan also joined the NATO PfP in 2002, as well as the Russian-led CSTO. In 2001 Tajikistan received \$3 million and in 2003 more financial aid in order to promote human rights, market reform, and independent media (Engvall, 2014). However, in 2004 Tajikistan closed its only remaining independent printing house and has not spent the financial aid on improving any aspects of its political or economic sphere. In 2003, another amendment to the constitution was made, allowing Rahmanov to run for president for two more consecutive seven-year terms after the end of his term in 2006 (Abdullaev, 2018).

While Tajikistan needed Russian support, mostly in economic and security terms, Rahmonov started to look for other allies in the early 2000s. The relationship between the two states has varied since then and has been less stable than in the 1990s. The relationship between Tajikistan and Russia grew tenser despite the opening of the Russian military base on Tajik soil in 2004 (Abdullaev, 2018). In 2005 the Russian military presence in Tajikistan was reduced, and the border guards protecting the Afghani border were replaced by Tajik forces. A part of the Russian forces did, however, remain in Tajikistan, the Russian 201st military base with around 7,000 men. Russian military presence was extended in 2013 to stretch until 2042 (Engvall, 2014). In 2007 president Rahmonov changed his name to Rahmon, by dropping the Russian “-ov” from his name, making it more “Tajik”, and less Russian, sounding (Abdullaev, 2018).

The Russian interest in Tajikistan is based on strategic reasons due to its location and its border with Afghanistan. Via Afghanistan, large amounts of weapons, drugs, and other illegal goods are smuggled into the CIS region, making it a threat to Russian national security (Engvall, 2014).

Radical Islamic groupings in Afghanistan and Iran are also perceived as a threat. Russia has therefore been interested in supporting and stabilizing Tajikistan with loans and other financial aid, military aid, and political support for the Rahmon government (Shlapentokh, 2014). Tajikistan's relationship with Russia is based on security and economic concerns (Abdullaev, 2018). The border with Afghanistan is a security threat to Tajikistan, the state has an unstable relationship with Uzbekistan that goes back almost a century, and Tajikistan is very dependent on remittances from Tajik workers in Russia (Olimov, 1999). In 2013, 48 percent of the Tajik GDP consisted of remittances from Russia where over one million Tajiks work (Shlapentokh, 2014).

Due to the dependence on Russia as a trade market and the large number of migrant workers in Russia, Rahmon expressed interest in joining the Eurasian Customs Union in 2012 (Engvall, 2014). A membership can, however, only be acquired if a state borders another member of the customs union, so Tajikistan was forced to wait until Kyrgyzstan became a member in 2015 to make a decision on an eventual membership. This requirement was ignored in the case of Armenia, which shares no border with any member of the Eurasian Customs Union (Abdullaev, 2018). Tensions between Russia and Tajikistan rose again in 2012 when Russia stated that its troops would not be involved in any internal conflict in Tajikistan, after which Rahmon argued that the Russian-led military organization CSTO was useless (Shlapentokh, 2014). Russia answered by claiming that Tajikistan was a hotbed of terrorism and a threat to Russian national security. In 2013, Russia and Tajikistan were involved in a passport conflict where Russia made it more difficult for Tajik migrant workers to enter Russia with their international passports (Shlapentokh, 2014).

The memory of the Russian dissatisfaction with the Kyrgyz president Bakiyev, and the Russian involvement in his ousting, left Rahmon wanting a stable relationship with Russia. However, the many tensions in the relationship with Russia made Tajikistan look for cooperation possibilities with other regional states (Shlapentokh, 2014). Tajikistan started to increase its cooperation with both Iran and Turkey both within the economic sector and with hydroelectrical stations (Engvall, 2014). Traditionally, Tajikistan has due to cultural and social similarities had a close relationship with Iran (Lemon, 2024). In 2013, Tajikistan also started to cooperate with China, and that same year China invested over \$300 million in Tajikistan within the framework of their strategic cooperation (Shlapentokh, 2014). Overall, the economic dependency on Russia has been stable in Kyrgyzstan since the 1990s. In 2020, Russia was the main trading partner of Tajikistan, followed by China and Kazakhstan (Abdullaev, 2018). No significant changes to the political and economic regime have been made since the independence of Tajikistan. A third constitutional amendment was approved in 2016, with 95 percent popular support, which enabled Rahmon to be re-elected

an unlimited number of times. He was also given the title of “Leader of the Nation”, and all religious political parties were banned (Abdullaev, 2018).

The civil war in Tajikistan in the first years of independence came to have vast implications for the state’s political and economic development. The political chaos in the early 1990s enabled the rise of Rahmonov, who still rules Tajikistan. Russia’s involvement in the war and its resolution led to a more pro-Russian government in Tajikistan, increased economic dependency, and a Russian military presence on Tajik soil. Due to the low economic development in Tajikistan, the state is highly dependent on remittances from Tajik migrant workers in Russia. While Tajikistan has been reluctant to get involved in the Russian-dominated regional organizations, its security, and economic dependency have forced the state into a strong relationship with Russia.

## **D.9 Azerbaijan: Chronological developments in independent Azerbaijan**

### **Pre-independence**

Azerbaijan has an ancient history with multiple foreign influences forming its independent identity (Brinegar, 2017). As part of the Persian Empire, the Azerbaijani population was heavily influenced by Persian culture and the Muslim religion. The Safavid Empire in today's Iran established its capital in Tabriz, the traditional capital of Azerbaijan, in 1501. Between the 15th and 19th centuries, the Azerbaijani people peacefully coexisted with Kurds, Armenians, and Persians, surviving several attacks from the Ottoman Empire (Moreno, 2005). During the 19th century, Russia and Persia fought over the hegemony of the Caucasus, making the Azerbaijani population more prone to Turkish influence to balance the Russian influence. In 1825, Iran was again defeated by Russia, and in the Treaty of Turkmenchay in 1828, the traditional Azerbaijani territory was divided between Russia and Iran (Mehdiyeva, 2003). The northern part of Azerbaijan, which today comprises the state of Azerbaijan, came under Russian influence. After the Winter Revolution in 1905, a left-wing movement was formed in northern Azerbaijan which would later assist in the establishment of a communist regime in the state (Moreno, 2005).

As the Russian Empire fell apart, Azerbaijan declared its independence. Azerbaijan enjoyed a short period as an independent state between 1918 and 1920 as the Azerbaijan Democratic Republic. The republic survived several foreign occupations, that of the Ottoman Empire in 1918 followed by the British army (Moreno, 2005). However, Azerbaijan did not survive the invasion of the Soviet Red Army and was incorporated into the Soviet Union in the spring of 1920 (Sadri, 2003). The Azerbaijani SSR was independent until it became a part of the Transcaucasian SFSR alongside Georgia and Armenia in 1922, the TFSR was dissolved in 1936, and Azerbaijan gained republic status within the Soviet Union (Brinegar, 2017). The population of the Soviet Azerbaijani republic was mixed with Turks, Kurds, nomadic tribes and ethnic Azerbaijani, resulting in a weak national identity and a lack of national cohesion (Mehdiyeva, 2003). Azerbaijan had a history of mixed identity markers. Its religious and cultural heritage stems from its history within the Persian Empire, the Azerbaijani language belongs to the Turkish language family and is the result of Turkish influence, and the state has a relatively long common history with Russia with Russian and European influences (Moreno, 2005).

## The path to independence

As with Armenia, the Azerbaijani independence movement started with the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict. The autonomous region of Nagorno-Karabakh, situated on Azerbaijani soil, was mostly inhabited by ethnic Armenians due to borders redrawn by the Soviet Union in the 1920s (Abilov & Isayev, 2015). While the citizens of Nagorno-Karabakh wanted to be reintegrated with Armenia, Moscow opposed the demands (Ipek, 2009). Fights between Armenians and Azerbaijanis broke out in 1988, and several anti-Armenian riots were arranged in Azerbaijan in the late 1980s (Swietochowska, 1999). Violent clashes escalated in 1990, after which Soviet troops intervened, causing several Azerbaijani civilian fatalities, in what became known as Black January. More than 26,000 Soviet troops entered Baku without any official declaration (Abilov & Isayev, 2015). The troops intended to restore stability and Soviet rule in Azerbaijan, but it instead became a turning point in Azerbaijani history and in its relationship with the Soviet Union. Anti-Soviet feelings and demands for independence grew (Abilov & Isayev, 2015).

After the military intervention, in January 1990 the Azerbaijani First Secretary of the Communist Party, Vezirov, was replaced by the pro-Soviet Mutalibov. With the rapid growth of the nationalist movement, Mutalibov combined communist ideology with Azerbaijani nationalism in order to save his political position. He was a supporter of Gorbachev and the idea of a renewed Soviet Union (Abilov & Isayev, 2015). In the all-union referendum, Azerbaijan voted to stay in the Soviet Union. Mutalibov argued that the decision was made due to the security risks involved in the ongoing Nagorno-Karabakh conflict; Armenia would not try to claim Azerbaijani territory if Azerbaijan remained part of the Soviet Union (Aslani, 2017). In March 1991, Azerbaijan voted in favor of the new Union Treaty while Armenia boycotted the referendum. As a result of the Azerbaijani support for the referendum, Moscow gave Azerbaijan military and political support in the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict in 1991 (Abilov & Isayev, 2015). After the August 1991 putsch in Moscow, with the intent of removing Gorbachev from power, Mutalibov changed his political views and supported the coup while condemning Gorbachev (Sadri, 2012). On August 31, the Supreme Soviet of Azerbaijan declared its independence. Mutalibov was elected the first president of Azerbaijan in September 1991, and in December Azerbaijan formally declared its independence from the Soviet Union (Abilov & Isayev, 2015).



## The Nagorno-Karabakh conflict and war

The ongoing Nagorno-Karabakh conflict had vast implications for the nationalist movement in Azerbaijan and its struggle for independence, and in many ways affected the domestic political landscape in the early 1990s (Swietochowska, 1999). Nagorno-Karabakh became very important for Azerbaijan due to other ethno-linguistic struggles in other regions of Azerbaijan in the pre- and post-independence years (Gul, 2008). The Lezgin minority in the northern parts of the state sought unification with Dagestan across the Russian border. The Talyshis, an ethnic minority close to the Iranian border, demanded autonomy. If Nagorno-Karabakh was given autonomy or reunification with Armenia, the other two regions would be next, and Azerbaijan would lose a large amount of its territory (Swietochowska, 1999). The foreign relations of Azerbaijan were also affected by the conflict with Armenia. Russia was viewed as a proxy for Armenia in the conflict, the US was financially aiding Armenia with significant amounts of money. Iran held a large Armenian diaspora and held a hostile view on Azerbaijan in the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict. Turkey remained the only ally of Azerbaijan (Gul, 2008).

After the independence of Azerbaijan, the political leadership had to deal with both domestic problems of an economic and political nature and formulate a foreign policy suited for the independent state (Abilov & Isayev, 2015). Due to the different historical and cultural heritages, the mixed ethnic composition of the population, and the geostrategic position of the state, a sensitive foreign policy was necessary. Generally, the views on Russia were negative in Azerbaijan (Gul, 2008). Russia was described as an imperialistic empire, an invader, and an advocate for Armenia due to the Russian involvement in the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict (Abilov & Isayev, 2015). In 1991, Russia refused to establish any diplomatic contacts with Azerbaijan or sign the Friendship and Cooperation Treaty proposed by Azerbaijan. Turns in the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict as along with proposed cooperation within the energy sector made the relationship between the two states warmer (Aslani, 2017).

President Mutalibov signed the Alma-Ata treaty to join the CIS in December 1991 without popular or political support (Abilov & Isayev, 2015). The political tensions grew since the opposition demanded full independence from any Russian-led regional organization and claimed that a CIS membership would compromise the independence of Azerbaijan (Gul, 2008). The parliament rejected CIS membership, and the CIS treaty was not ratified (Cornell, 2006). In February 1992 the Khojaly occupation and massacre occurred. Armenian forces attacked Khojaly and the civilians not able to flee were killed or taken hostage. Soviet troops withdrew from the Nagorno-Karabakh

region after the massacre, and the conflict became a full-scale war between Azerbaijan and Armenia (Abilov & Isayev, 2015). Mütəllibov resigned in March 1992 after public protest regarding his handling of the escalation of the conflict. Məmmədov became acting president in March and during his short time as president, Russia finally recognized the independence of Azerbaijan (İpek, 2009).

Elçibey took power as the second acting president in June 1992. Elçibey was the leader of the National Popular Front of Azerbaijan (APF), founded as a result of the Armenian claims to Nagorno-Karabakh (Aslani 2017). The conflict and war on Azerbaijani soil was critical for the national movement and the unification of smaller political fractions into the Popular Front. The APF had gained popular support in the late 1980s with organizations of mass demonstrations against Armenia and the violations of territorial integrity. The APF was also a crucial force behind the demands for independence in 1991 (Gul, 2008). Relations between Azerbaijan and Russia were tense under Elçibey. The new president prioritized developing good relations with Turkey and decreasing Azerbaijani relations with Russia. In Azerbaijan, Russia was considered an occupying force that was a threat to independence. The Russian tilt towards Armenia in the Nagorno-Karabakh war also angered Azerbaijan (İpek, 2009). In 1992, however, Elçibey did sign the Treaty on Friendship, Cooperation, and Mutual Security with Russia, but the relations grew worse in 1993 (Cornell, 2006).

The pro-Turkish policy of Azerbaijan angered both Russia and Iran, all three states claimed historical and strategic interest in the Azerbaijani state (Gul, 2008). Azerbaijan rejected the OSCE plan of deploying Russian peacekeeping forces under the CIS framework in the Nagorno-Karabakh region and insisted on the withdrawal of Russian troops from Azerbaijani territory (Swietochowska, 1999). Azerbaijan had also invited several Western oil companies to extract oil from the Caspian Sea while disregarding the Russian interest in Azerbaijani oil (Abilov & Isayev, 2015). The strong anti-Russian reactions caused Russia once again to increase its military and economic support to Armenia (Aslani, 2017). The political chaos during the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict, the economic chaos after independence, and the geopolitical tensions in the region resulted in an anti-governmental coup arranged by General Hüseynov, which removed Elçibey from power in June 1993. Heydər Aliyev, with deep roots in the KGB and the Communist Party, took over as president (İpek, 2009). With a communist past, Aliyev was a pragmatic leader who aimed for a balanced foreign policy and decreased tensions between Russia and Azerbaijan. In September 1993 he signed the CIS treaty hoping for Russian help in solving the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict. Russia was pleased and contributed to the ceasefire in May 1994 (İpek, 2009).

## Post-independence

In the summer of 1993, Azerbaijan was near a total state collapse (Sadri, 2003). The economy was failing, political chaos grew, Armenia had occupied almost 20 percent of Azerbaijani territory, and large numbers of refugees fled the occupied regions. Two more Azerbaijani regions were also involved in fighting for independence: the Talish and the Lezgin minority. Aliyev managed to calm the situation with the separatist regions and started to increase the level of cooperation with Russia (Ipek, 2009). The economic potential of Azerbaijan was large due to its energy resources, but the trade was almost entirely dependent on Russia and the other CIS states (Cornell, 2006).

Economic troubles worsened with the introduction of a new national currency, the manat, in 1992, and a shift to a market economy. To address these issues, Aliyev sought foreign investments, particularly in the oil and gas sectors. In the early 1990s, several multinational Western oil companies were invited by Azerbaijan to join the consortium for oil extraction in the Caspian Sea. However, the need for better relations with Russia as a means to stabilize its foreign policy was prioritized above foreign investments. The invitations to Western multinational oil companies were suspended, and Lukoil received 10 percent of the share in the Azerbaijani oil consortium (Gul, 2008). After the Russian-aided ceasefire in Nagorno-Karabakh, Azerbaijan again started negotiating with Western oil companies for exploring rights in the Caspian Sea (Aslani, 2017). The first oil contracts between Azerbaijan and the West were signed in September 1994. Russia, viewing the pro-Western choice as a threat to its interests, condemned the political shift of Azerbaijan, sparking the Caspian Sea dispute, which would be resolved in 2003 (Sadri, 2003).

While Azerbaijan argued that the Caspian Sea was a sea and should be divided into national sectors, Russia and Iran argued that it was an inland lake and therefore subject to control by all the littoral states. Turkmenistan and Kazakhstan supported Azerbaijan in the dispute (Abilov & Isayev, 2015). Russia referred to treaties between the USSR and Iran from 1921 and 1940, which implied that seas could not be divided. The CIS treaty included a specific provision that still recognized and validated all treaties signed by the USSR. Russia used this to argue the legal status of the Caspian Sea (Ipek, 2009). The US supported the sectoral division in 1996, trying to avoid any political argument with Russia, which in turn was not appreciated by Azerbaijan (Swietochowska, 1999). The conflict was resolved in 2003 when Russia, Azerbaijan, and Kazakhstan agreed to divide the Caspian Sea according to the Russian idea of a “modified median line”, giving Kazakhstan the largest part and Azerbaijan the smallest (Ipek, 2009).

Another crisis between Azerbaijan and Russia in the early 1990s was the Russian accusations of Azerbaijan supporting Chechen rebels during the Chechen war in 1994 (Aslani, 2017). Russia imposed an economic embargo against Azerbaijan, which was lifted in 1996 after the Hasavyurt Treaty was signed between Russia and Chechnya (Abilov & Isayev, 2015). The embargo hit the Azerbaijani economy hard since over 70 percent of its trade was with Russia at the time (Aslani, 2017). The latter part of the 1990s saw no increase in relations between Russia and Azerbaijan. Azerbaijan was involved in discussions with NATO over a possible NATO military base in Azerbaijan, and in response, Russia gifted Armenia with weapons and arms worth \$1 billion (Abilov & Isayev, 2015).

After the Russian military supplied aid to Armenia, Azerbaijan withdrew its CSTO membership in the CIS. Between 1991 and 2000, no Russian presidential state visit was made to Azerbaijan (Cornell, 2006). This changed when Putin became the Russian president in 2000 and visited Azerbaijan in 2001. In 2002 Putin announced that the two states would increase their military and economic cooperation (Abilov & Isayev, 2015). In 2003 when the president, Heydar Aliyev, died, his son Ilham Aliyev replaced him as the new president of Azerbaijan (Gul, 2008). However, tensions rose again in 2002 and 2003 due to disagreements over energy agreements, espionage accusations, aggressive actions by Russians towards Azerbaijani citizens living in Russia, and new claims of Azerbaijani aid to Chechnya (Aslani, 2017). Discussions of a possible Azerbaijani NATO membership started in the early 2000s as well as the discussions on a Baku-Tbilisi-Ceyhan (BTC) pipeline, to avoid Russia as a transit state, which had a negative impact on the relationship between the two states (Cornell, 2006).

### The path to Azerbaijani neutrality

The year 2008 marked an important shift in Azerbaijani foreign policy mainly due to two reasons. First, the Russian invasion of Georgia and the Five-Day War in August 2008 changed the political landscape both in the South Caucasus and in the entire post-Soviet region (Valiyev, 2017). Azerbaijan's foreign policy and relations needed to be reevaluated as a result of the Russian attack on Georgia. Its Western policy orientation was put on hold, and strong anti-Russian feelings among the population grew (Cornell, 2006). Azerbaijan also held a grudge against the West for not responding enough to Russia's military invasion of Georgia. Georgia had been a long-term partner of Azerbaijan, and after the war, Azerbaijan continued to support Georgia (Abilov & Isayev, 2015). Azerbaijan continued to purchase Georgian goods despite Russian sanctions and increased its

exports of natural gas to Georgia. The fear of Russia recognizing Nagorno-Karabakh, as it had done with South Ossetia and Abkhazia, became stronger in Azerbaijan after the Russo-Georgian war, and policy was oriented towards Russia yet again. Azerbaijan managed to continue with its independent foreign policy, and a process of “Finlandization” of its relations with Russia started (Valiyev, 2017).

The second big event in 2008 affecting Azerbaijani foreign policy was warmer relations between Turkey and Armenia (Aslani, 2017). After receiving pressure from the EU and the US, Turkey made an effort to improve its relationship with Armenia by lifting its trade embargo and opening its borders with Armenia in 2008. Several agreements between Turkey and Armenia were signed in 2009. Closer relations between the two countries raised anti-Western and anti-Turkish sentiments in Azerbaijan (Abilov & Isayev, 2015). In response, Azerbaijan and Russia signed a new gas deal, and Russia became more involved in the conflict resolution within the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict. The Azerbaijani military doctrine also stated that NATO membership was not a foreign policy priority for the state (Valiyev, 2017).

Tensions between Azerbaijan and Russia rose again in 2010 and 2011 due to the construction of a new pipeline between Azerbaijan and the EU that would bypass Russia, plus a disagreement over the Gabala Radar Station (GRLS) (Aslani, 2017). Russia had been granted a 10-year lease of the GRLS in 2002, its only remaining military outpost in Azerbaijan. Russia wanted to extend the lease for another 25 years and replace the old station with a new one. However, Azerbaijan’s military doctrine prohibits hosting foreign military bases on its territory. After a suggested increase in rent for the station from 7 million dollars to 300 million dollars per year, Russia refused the offer (Abilov & Isayev, 2015).

In 2007 Azerbaijan developed an independent foreign policy for national security that indicated that any form of military or economic dependency is a threat to the Azerbaijani security. It was an important step towards the status of a neutral state Azerbaijan had hoped to accomplish in order to maintain a good relationship with its neighbors, and it was a step towards preventing any external involvements in its foreign or domestic relations (Abilov & Isayev, 2015). In 2011, Azerbaijan officially joined the Non-Alignment Movement. Azerbaijan continues to cooperate with NATO and the EU but does not seek membership in any Western organization. Cooperation with Russia was also a priority, but Turkey and Pakistan became the main partners of Azerbaijan in terms of security relations (Valiyev, 2017). Relations between Russia and Azerbaijan were rather stable as a part of the Azerbaijani strategy of non-alignment. Azerbaijani refused to join any Russian-led regional organizations even though Russia was pushing for it. In 2011, alongside Turkmenistan and

Uzbekistan, Azerbaijan refused to sign the CIS FTA. In 2015 the relationship took a turn for the worse with a Turkish-Russian crisis due to the shootdown of a Russian military aircraft by Turkey. Aliyev stated in 2015 that “we stand by Turkey on every issue” (Aslani, 2017).

The domestic political development in Azerbaijan has been stagnant since the early 1990s. Economic development has been prioritized at the expense of the political liberalization. The US and the EU have, however, prioritized cooperation with Azerbaijan due to its energy resources while turning a blind eye to its flawed democratic performance. No political election during its period as an independent state has been democratic. While the political climate for the opposition improved before the 1998 presidential election with the abolishment of censorship and punishments for criticizing Aliyev, the political situation in Azerbaijan has been highly non-democratic (Aslani, 2017). Since 1994, Azerbaijani politics have been formed around the personalities of the political leaders rather than around ideologies or social or political programs. The ruling party of H. Aliyev, the Yeni Azerbaijan Party, has held power since 1993, and the state is highly centralized. The level of corruption is high and despite the energy wealth of Azerbaijan, almost 40 percent of the population live below the poverty line (Abilov & Isayev, 2015). Many international organizations (Council of Europe, UN, IMF, USAID, the World Bank) have started programs for reducing poverty and improving the conditions for the political opposition. But the opposition has constantly accused foreign states and multinational oil companies for ignoring the political state of the country and prioritizing stability and economic gain in the name of stability and security (Aslani, 2017).

The geographic position of Azerbaijan has largely shaped its foreign relations with its neighbors and internationally powerful states and organizations. The history of Azerbaijan has been characterized by several foreign influences: Iranian, Turkish, and Russian. Iran is the historic homeland of Azerbaijan, and where many Azeri-speaking people still live. Azerbaijan and Iran share a long border and a long common history. The relationship has been affected by Iranian support for Armenia in the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict, and its support for Russia in the Caspian Sea dispute. Turkey has also been an important influence on Azerbaijan. The two states are ethnically and linguistically close, and Turkey was the only state supporting Azerbaijan in the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict. The relationship with Armenia has also been tainted with the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict. By pressuring Armenia and isolating it from regional projects (mainly pipeline projects) and by strengthening its military power and relations with other regional states (Russia, Turkey, Israel, Belarus), Azerbaijan aims for reintegration of Nagorno-Karabakh into Azerbaijan. In 2020, as a result of the 44-day war between Armenia and Azerbaijan, Azerbaijan again received territorial control over Nagorno-Karabakh (Ibrahimov & Oztarsu, 2022).

The Western interest in Azerbaijan has been mostly based on its vast oil resources and on seeing it as the key to regional stability in the South Caucasus. The EU and Azerbaijan have cooperated on transport and energy projects since the mid-2000s, and Azerbaijan became a member of the EaP in 2009. In 2017 Azerbaijan started negotiations for a new strategic partnership agreement with the EU, and a plan for a visa-free regime. Azerbaijan has also cooperated with NATO in its operations in Kosovo and Afghanistan. The relationship with Russia has been the most important in shaping the foreign policy of Azerbaijan. Russia's interests in Azerbaijan are mainly based in strategic (big power-politics in the South Caucasus, hostile relations with Turkey, and avoiding Western influences taking a foothold) and economic (Azerbaijani oil and transit route from the Caspian Sea) interests. Among the Azerbaijani people, Russia is predominantly viewed as a threat to Azerbaijani independence, mostly due to the Russian support to Armenia in the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict. But Russia is also important due to the geographical, landlocked, location of Azerbaijan, as well as the great source of revenue from Azerbaijani citizens working in Russia. In the 1990s the foreign priorities of Azerbaijan were to avoid re-domination by Russia, to regain its lost territories, and to develop a strong economy based on its natural energy resources. During the 1990s, the relationship between the two states nearly became hostile due to the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict, the Azerbaijani choice not to ratify the CSTO charter, and the close cooperation with Western oil companies. After Putin became president, Russian interests in Azerbaijan grew and the relationship stabilized. Russia and Azerbaijan started military and economic cooperation, and Russia was perceived in a more positive light by the Azerbaijani leadership and population. The geopolitical changes in 2008 again changed the relationship. A more negative view of Russia grew, and Azerbaijan avoided the geopolitical struggle over the region by adopting an independent foreign policy.

The Nagorno-Karabakh conflict and war has had a deep impact on the Azerbaijani desire for independence and has formed its foreign relations since independence. Russia's involvement in the conflict has made Azerbaijan wary of the Russian external influence on its domestic and foreign politics and has affected both the anti-Russian stance of Elchibey in the early 1990s as well as the more balanced foreign policy of H. Aliyev, and the independent foreign policy formulated by I. Aliyev. The geographical position of Azerbaijan has also had implications for its political development. Placed in the center between Russia, Turkey, and Iran, Azerbaijan has had to tread lightly not to upset the geopolitical balance in the South Caucasus. Its vast energy resources have also affected its domestic political development, making political liberalization less important than economic development.

## **D.10 Uzbekistan: Chronological developments in independent Uzbekistan**

### **Pre-independence**

With its geographical location along the spice route, Uzbekistan has an ancient history. The territory of Uzbekistan has traditionally been populated by nomadic tribes, with clan-like structures, of Turkic, Persian, and Iranian heritage. The territory of Uzbekistan has been invaded by foreign powers on several occasions. In the 13th century, the Mongols invaded, and in the 17th century, Islam was introduced to the region with Arabic invaders (Critchlow, 2018). Russian influence over the Central Asian region has gradually increased since the 16th century. In the mid-19th century, parts of Central Asia became the Turkestan Government General as part of the Russian Empire, while parts of the Central Asian territory became the Bukharan People's Soviet Republic in 1920. The Emirate of Bukhara, established in the late 18th century, was annexed by Russia in the mid-19th century (Carlisle, 1991).

By 1924 the republic ceased to exist, and its territories were divided among the newly founded Central Asian SSRs (Carlisle, 1991). In 1924 the Central Asian territory was divided by Soviet leadership into five republics based on the most prominent nationality in its population. A multi-ethnic population would, according to the Soviet leaders, prevent Pan-Turkic revolts and the growth of nationalism (Kurzman, 1999). During Soviet times, the dominant industry of Uzbekistan was cotton production. The domination of only one crop and one industry had vast implications for the economic and political development in Uzbekistan, as well for its relations with the Soviet leadership and, after independence, with Russia (Critchlow, 2018).

### **The path to independence**

A small nationalistic opposition to Soviet rule occurred in Uzbekistan in the 1960s alongside a de-Russification of language and history (Critchlow, 2018). A Soviet version of Uzbek and Central Asian history was promoted, and the use of the Uzbek language became a political topic (Kurzman, 1999). The Soviet leadership had also taken actions against Muslim and other religious activities in Uzbekistan, which angered the Uzbek population. But the main source of dissatisfaction with the Soviet leadership concerned the Uzbek cotton production (Critchlow, 2018). Due to the heavy concentration of a single industry, Uzbekistan under Soviet rule had become a massive cotton plantation. The Soviet leaders wanted Uzbekistan to further develop its cotton industry and produce more cotton but did not take the negative effects of the production in consideration



(Carlisle, 1991). Water resources were scarce in Uzbekistan and water reserves could not provide what the massive cotton industry demanded. Large amounts of chemicals were used on the cotton plantations, and the work was hard for the women and children, who were mostly involved in picking the cotton, while the prices for cotton were low. This led to environmental damage and very low living standards combined with health issues for the workers. As the Aral Sea began to shrink due to environmental damages and massive water consumption, the Uzbek population started to use its cotton industry as a political weapon against the Soviet leadership (Critchlow, 2018). The cotton disputes would continue up until the independence of Uzbekistan and taint its relations with both the Soviet Union and Russia (Carlisle, 1991).

In 1989 a language bill was put forward in Uzbekistan, prioritizing the Uzbek language over the use of Russian. The bill became law later in 1989, thereby making Uzbek the official language (Critchlow, 2018). In June 1990, Uzbekistan declared its political independence from the Soviet Union (Kurzman, 1999). At first, the leader of the Communist Party, Karimov, refused to sign the Union Treaty with Moscow due to the political independence of Uzbekistan. Karimov stated that equality between Uzbekistan and Russia would need to be guaranteed for Uzbekistan to sign the treaty. After assurance from Gorbachev, Karimov signed the Union Treaty in 1991 (Critchlow, 2018). The population approved the decision of Karimov; 94 percent of the Uzbek population supported the idea of remaining in the USSR in 1991. While quality of life and political independence were important for Uzbekistan, so was the Soviet Union and the potential economic help Uzbekistan could receive from the Union to correct its failing economic situation (Kurzman, 1999).

In 1990, almost 50 percent of the Uzbek population was living below the poverty line, almost 2 million were unemployed, almost half of the population had no access to clean drinking water, and a large part of the population had serious health problems due to the environmental problems from the cotton production (Critchlow, 2018). The mixed ethnic composition of the population also caused problems: 2 million people were not ethnic Uzbeks. Uzbekistan was in serious need of external help. While Karimov supported the idea of full independence, the many problems facing Uzbekistan suggested that it would not survive as an independent state (Kezami, 2003). Karimov supported the 1991 August coup, but after it failed, he changed his mind on the matter. Within two weeks after the coup, the Uzbek parliament voted for independence. After the declaration of independence, Karimov became the face of Uzbek nationalism: Uzbek values were promoted, and the Cyrillic alphabet was replaced with the Latin alphabet (Kurzman, 1999). While nationalism was weak in Uzbekistan before 1991, after 1991 it was developed by the state, not within the state. Karimov also began a shock-therapy transition from socialism to capitalism. Direct trade with other

states was a priority, and economic development became far more important than political development (Kurzman, 1999).

## Post-independence

Uzbekistan's relationship with Russia after its independence was complicated. While Uzbekistan highly valued its independence and sovereignty and strived for an independent foreign policy, it was also in need of Russian economic and security support (Pikalov, 2014). The Russian economy was failing in the beginning of the 1990s, and it could not contribute with much economic assistance to the other post-Soviet states. This led to the decision of Karimov to distance Uzbekistan from Russian dominance (Sevim & Pozanov, 2014). The most important aspects of Karimov's political policies in the first years of independence were to protect the sovereignty of Uzbekistan, to create domestic political stability, and to begin economic reforms (Kezami, 2003).

The 1992 constitution had established separation of powers, but in reality, the president held almost absolute power (Sevim & Pozanov, 2014). Karimov controlled the foreign policy of Uzbekistan, the legislature, the economy, the registration of political parties, as well as all aspects of the election process. The political opposition was suppressed, and the practice of Islam within the population was controlled by the government. The domestic media was heavily controlled, internet sites were blocked, religious political parties were banned, and the Islamist movement was outlawed (Kezami, 2003). While the majority of the population was Muslim, the Uzbek government tried to control the religious factor due to the fear of religious extremism spreading within the Central Asian region from Afghanistan. This has affected the Uzbek foreign policy choices since the 1990s (Sevim & Pozanov, 2014).

The high dependence on cotton during the Soviet period had left Uzbekistan in economic trouble (Carlisle, 1991). The cotton industry had become the sole industry of Uzbekistan, and the price of this dependence has been vast environmental problems and dependencies on other states. Uzbekistan is doubly landlocked and surrounded by five other states (Kezami, 2003). The geographical position of the state makes Uzbekistan dependent on other states for water resources, food, transportation, energy, and communications (Idan & Shaffer, 2013). One of the main goals of the Karimov government was to make Uzbekistan self-sufficient by switching from producing cotton to grains and by starting to extract oil and gas for domestic use (Fazendeiro, 2017). Uzbekistan was, however, still dependent on water from Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan. This has contributed to tensions between Uzbekistan and the other Central Asian states at times. While no

foreign investments in Uzbek business have been made due to the restrictive economic policies of Karimov, Uzbekistan has received economic assistance and aid from both the US and Russia since its independence (Kezami, 2003).

The foreign policy of Uzbekistan was unpredictable during Karimov's presidency (Pikalov, 2014). While Uzbekistan was a CIS member, Karimov refused to participate in any integration projects within the regional organization. Instead, Uzbekistan joined the Central Asian Union, the Central Asian Economic Community, the NATO PfP program, GUUAM, and the Economic Cooperation Council to counterweight the Russian influence (Kezami, 2003). Within the CIS, Uzbekistan conducted its own trade policy and left the ruble zone in 1993. In 1999, Uzbekistan refused to prolong the CST treaty within the CIS even though regional stability in Central Asia was declining (Spechler & Spechler, 2010). The fear of the growing "Islamic threat" in Central Asia and the nearby regions made Uzbekistan further its cooperation with Turkey, Pakistan, and Iran. Instabilities in Afghanistan and Tajikistan had led to increased military spendings and capacities in Uzbekistan, and Karimov had begun to view Uzbekistan as a vital regional security player in Central Asia (Sevim & Pozzanov, 2014). In the late 1990s, the IMU made moves to overthrow the Karimov government and to establish a pan-Turkic Islamic caliphate in the region. In 1999, the IMU was responsible for large expositions in the Uzbek capital and had crossed the Kyrgyz border (Dadabaev, 2019a). The threat of the IMU and the continuing instability in neighboring Tajikistan made Uzbekistan turn to Russia for help. Karimov stated that "No one besides the Russians (could) guarantee security and stability in the region". The newly elected Russian president, Putin, answered "The threat to Uzbekistan means a threat to Russia", and the two states signed several bilateral security treaties in 1999 and 2000 (Kezami, 2003).

As for the other Central Asian states, the "War on Terror" changed their foreign policies. Uzbekistan started to cooperate with the US, hosted an airbase for US military use, received hundreds of millions in grants from the US, and the two states signed a "Strategic Partnership and Cooperation Framework Agreement" (Dadabaev, 2019a). The US also viewed the IMU as a terrorist organization, which increased the pro-Western view of the Karimov government. Between 2001 and 2003, Uzbekistan prioritized the US over Russia as a cooperation partner (Pikalov, 2014). However, in 2003 the relationship between Uzbekistan and the US worsened when the US demanded political reform in the form of democratization and respect for human rights in return for their economic assistance. Karimov was opposed to any political change, and these limited Western investments being made in Uzbekistan (Spechler & Spechler, 2010). In 2004 the US cut its civilian aid to Uzbekistan, and in 2005 Uzbekistan left GUUAM, to which the US had been a large donor (Idan & Schaffer, 2013). In 2005, Uzbekistan also faced significant Western criticism

for the handling of the Andijan protests (the Andijan massacre) when several hundred civilians were killed by the Uzbek national security service. After the incident, Uzbekistan demanded US troops to leave the airbase they had been using since 2001 (Pikalov, 2014).

After the loss of US support in 2005, Uzbekistan again turned to Russia. The two states increased their energy cooperation, and Russian investments in Uzbekistan grew (Fazendeiro, 2017). At the same time, Uzbekistan used an energy deal with China as leverage to get Russia to pay a higher price for Uzbek gas. Russia and Uzbekistan signed a Treaty of Allied Relations, which opened the door for Russian military settlement in Uzbekistan, something that Uzbekistan later refused to allow (Kelkitli, 2022). In May 2005, a revolution attempt was made by an Islamic organization in Uzbekistan, which made Karimov more interested in Russian security assistance. Further energy treaties were signed between Russia and Uzbekistan, and Uzbekistan joined the Russian-dominated CSTO and the Eurasian Economic Community (EurAsEC) (Tolipov, 2013). However, Uzbekistan never fully aligned itself with Russia and continued to refuse to participate in integration projects within the Russian-dominated regional organizations. Within the CSTO, Uzbekistan has not ratified any agreements, attended any joint military exercises, or engaged in any other non-military spheres of cooperation with the other members of the CSTO (Fazendeiro, 2017).

#### The new foreign policy concepts of Uzbekistan

In 2008, Uzbekistan withdrew from EurAsEC, claiming that the organization duplicated the missions of the CIS and CSTO. In 2012 Uzbekistan also withdrew from CSTO due to disagreements on the Afghanistan issue (Sevim & Pozanov, 2014). The same year, Uzbekistan published its new foreign policy concept (Fazendeiro, 2017). No foreign bases would be allowed to be stationed in Uzbekistan, there would be no memberships in any military blocs or participation in international peace-keeping operations, and no foreign mediations were allowed in regional conflicts in Central Asia. The new Uzbek policy allowed Uzbekistan to conduct an autonomous foreign policy without Russian interference or dominance (Tolipov, 2013). Russia was still, however, considered Uzbekistan's most important strategic partner. Uzbekistan remains dependent on Russia and Kazakhstan due to its double landlocked location. A remnant from the Soviet era is the transportation networks in the former Soviet states, which all connected to Russia. Kazakhstan is located between Uzbekistan and Russia and the European markets, making Kazakhstan and Russia important transit states for Uzbek trade products (Idan & Shaffer, 2013).

The foreign policy of Karimov in the 1990s, was quite independent and tilted towards a pro-Western and pro-Central Asian choice of cooperation partners while still allowing for cooperation with Russia. In the early 2000s, Uzbekistan made foreign policy decisions that favored Western partners, especially the US, and disfavored Russia (Kelkitli, 2022). After the 2005 Andijon massacre and the Western criticism of Uzbekistan's lack of democratic progress and disregard for human rights, Uzbekistan became more pro-Russian (Dadabaev, 2019b). In 2012, Uzbekistan made a policy decision to become more non-aligned in the foreign policy sphere, and it withdrew from the CSTO (Tolipov, 2013). Between 2012 and 2014 Uzbekistan improved its relations with China within the economic sphere and within the Belt and Road Initiative (Kelkitli, 2022). During the last years of Karimov's presidency, the relations between Uzbekistan and the other Central Asian states got worse due to conflict over energy supplies, state borders, and water resources. The relationship between Uzbekistan and Russia changed, for the better, yet again after the Crimea conflict. In 2018, for example, Uzbekistan voted against the UN resolution that called the seizure of Crimea an illegal act (Kelkitli, 2022).

After Karimov died in 2016, Prime Minister Mirziyoyev became the interim president and was elected president in December 2016. While Karimov had prioritized geopolitics and political issues as president, Mirziyoyev prioritized regional and economic issues (Dadabaev, 2019a). Karimov had not wanted to give in to the chess game of the world's dominating powers, and he viewed Uzbekistan as being an important regional player in Central Asia. The shifts in the Karimov foreign policy between Russia, China, and Western powers can be viewed as both reactionary and opportunistic (Kelkitli, 2022). Since 2016, the foreign policy of Mirziyoyev has focused on rebuilding both the economy and relations with the other Central Asian states and has followed the non-aligned foreign policy approach of Karimov. The main goal of the new Uzbek foreign policy has been "export, export, and once again export". Mirziyoyev wants to open up Uzbekistan and attract tourists by abolishing the strict visa regime and renewing the role of ambassadors and diplomats (Dadabaev, 2019b). President Mirziyoyev did initiate social and economic reforms, but they have not yet led to any political changes in Uzbekistan (Burnashev & Chernykh, 2024). The level of cooperation has, however, increased among the post-Soviet Central Asian states (Kobilov, 2025).

Within the domestic sphere, a new domestic developmental strategy was developed to improve the judiciary system and the social sphere, develop the economy, and promote inter-ethnic and inter-religious harmony (Dadabaev, 2019b). The new foreign policy of Uzbekistan aims to improve relations with Central Asian states, make Russia and China the most important partners of Uzbekistan, and develop closer economic ties with China, Japan, and South Korea. As Russia is a

priority of the new Uzbek foreign policy, there have been several new economic and military cooperation initiatives. In 2016 a Treaty on Military-Technical Cooperation was signed, and in 2017 Russian and Uzbek troops conducted a joint military maneuver due to the growing threat along the Afghanistan border (Dadabaev, 2019a). Gazprom received a contract in 2018 for the annual purchase of 4 billion cubic meters of Uzbek gas, and Uzbekistan and Russia cooperate within gas and oil extraction corporations. In 2020, Russia was Uzbekistan's second largest trading partner, after China (Dadabaev, 2019a). Uzbekistan also received observer status in the EAEU in December 2020. While having avoided economic integration with Russia previously, a potential EAEU membership could have a positive effect on the Uzbek economy and for the one million Uzbek working migrants in Russia (Kelkitli, 2022).

Since the 1990s, Uzbekistan has pursued an independent, non-aligned, foreign policy. During the presidency of Karimov (1991-2016), foreign policy choices have at times been characterized by policy changes due to international or regional events. While looking to the West during the 1990s and early 2000s for support and cooperation, at other times Uzbekistan has turned to Russia and China for economic and security assistance. The erratic foreign policy behavior of Karimov is highly visible in Uzbekistan's memberships in regional organizations in the post-Soviet world. The only organization Uzbekistan has continued to be a member of is the CIS, while withdrawing from all other regional memberships within the Russian-led organizations. The foreign policy of Mirziyoyev has continued on the path of non-alignment. Mirziyoyev has, however, made efforts to open Uzbekistan to foreign investments and tourists in order to develop the economy.

## **D.11 Turkmenistan: Chronological developments in independent Turkmenistan**

### **Pre-independence**

Throughout history, the territory of Turkmenistan has been invaded by many empires including the Oghuz Turks, the empires of Persia, and Genghis Khan (Al-Bassam, 2004). Lacking any history of statehood, the traditional Turkmenistan consisted of highly hierarchical clans within different regions (Horák 2010). Competition for power between Turkmen clans continued until the Russian conquest in the late 19th century. Little effort was made to integrate the Turkmen into the Russian Empire, and small-scale guerilla resistance to the Russian and Soviet rule continued into the 1930s (Al-Bassam, 2004). Under Tsarist Russia, the Ahalteke clan had a prominent position, which they lost after the 1917 revolution (Bohr, 2016). The new Soviet rule changed society fundamentally. The fragmented, and often very diverse, tribes and clans now belonged to a single unit that eliminated the traditional clan structures, and cadre politics were introduced (Horák, 2010).

In 1924 the Turkmen Soviet Socialist Republic was established. During the late 1920s both collectivization and industrialization within Turkmenistan began (Horák, 2010). Due to resistance to collectivization, the Soviet center harshly punished the Turkmen population, resulting in large parts of the population fleeing to other Central Asian states. The main industries in Soviet Turkmenistan were cotton and energy, but as with the other states in Central Asia, Turkmenistan had the role of a raw material provider and the industry sector was largely underdeveloped (Al-Bassam, 2004). During the 1930s, riots occurred demanding political autonomy and a new language policy, resulting in an even tighter grip on Turkmenistan from Moscow (Horák, 2010).

### **The path to independence**

In 1969, Gapurov replaced Ovezov as the new First Secretary of the Turkmen SSR due to Brezhnev's attempt to increase stability in Central Asia by rearranging the inner circle of power. Gapurov did not belong to the Ashgabat elite group and thereby felt threatened by the political elites of Ashgabat. To secure his political position, Gapurov removed members of the Ashgabat and other influential groups from important positions, while improving the positions of his friends (Horák, 2016). In the 1970s, during Gapurov's time as First Secretary of the Turkmen SSR, the Russian language was promoted, and society was moving in a pro-Russian direction. The political

changes within the Soviet Union in the 1980s led to the rise of Niyazov, renewing the dominance of the Ahalteke tribe (Horák, 2010). In 1980 he became the First Secretary of the Communist Party of Ashgabat. Being officially pro-perestroika and the reforms of Gorbachov, Niyazov became the First Secretary of Turkmenistan SSR in 1986 (Stronski, 2017).

While the official message of Niyazov was of support for reforms and perestroika, within Turkmenistan the message was the opposite. While no great nationalist movement occurred in the 1980s, Niyazov put a stop to any attempt at reform (Bohr, 2016). Clan politics were still active in Turkmenistan and prevented any of the reform-minded politicians from gaining any important positions (Horák, 2016). The question of the Turkmen language and the official statement that Turkmenistan voluntarily became a part of the Russian Empire became important matters for the small political opposition in the late 1980s (Stronski, 2017). The opposition movement of *Agzybirlik* in 1989 was the most intensive attempt to oppose Niyazov, but it failed to get popular support. The movement was labeled by the government as nationalistic and was banned. In 1989, Niyazov announced the proposal of a language law in order to calm the reformists, but the law was never adopted (Horák, 2016).

At the all-Union referendum in March 1991, with a voter turnout of almost 100 percent, 98 percent of the voters wanted to preserve the Soviet Union (Al-Bassam, 2004). However, after the August putsch, Turkmenistan arranged a new referendum on the same matter, and 94 percent of the population voted for independence in October 1991. In December 1991, the Communist Party in Turkmenistan was dissolved, and the Democratic Party of Turkmenistan was born. Soon after, Niyazov was elected president with 99.5 percent of the votes (Polese et al., 2017). The goal of the newly independent Turkmenistan was, according to Niyazov, democracy and a market-based economy (Gleason, 2010). A new constitution was approved in 1992 with extensive freedoms and rights for the population of Turkmenistan. Most of the sections of the constitution could, however, be subordinated by legislative law. Since the president was in control of all aspects of the political, legislative, and economic powers in Turkmenistan, the president had sole power to change the constitution (Nissman, 1994).

## Post-independence

After independence, Soviet ideology was replaced with the personalistic cult of Niyazov (Polese et al. 2017). The Turkmen political system involved a very strong presidency, highly centralized decision-making, and security services (Horák, 2016). The president in Turkmenistan served as



prime minister as well, chaired the only political party, controlled the People's Council, had the sole power to change the constitution, and had absolute control over the judiciary and the economic system. The attempts by the opposition and the reform-minded politicians were stopped, and all political parties except for the party of the president were banned (Pomfret, 2001). The last open protests against the regime were held between 1994 and 1995, after which the last opposition leaders fled the country (Al-Bassam, 2004). A popular referendum in 1994 extended Niyazov's presidential term until 2002, with 99.9 percent in favor, due to the implementation of his plan for "Ten Years of Prosperity". In 1999, officially due to pressure from the population, Niyazov was appointed president for life (Polese et al., 2017).

However, the planned political and economic reforms in Turkmenistan did not become reality. At independence, Turkmenistan was one of the poorest states in the former Soviet Union (Bohr 2016). The agricultural industry had been underdeveloped during the last decade under Soviet rule due to a lack of water resources and environmental damage caused by the production of cotton. While Turkmenistan had vast resources of natural gas, the oil and gas industries had been controlled by the Central Soviet. Niyazov blamed the Soviet Union for the high concentration of cotton production in Soviet Turkmenistan and for not investing enough in the production of natural resources (Gleason, 2010). The pipelines of Turkmenistan were an inheritance from the Soviet period and only connected to the post-Soviet markets. While Turkmenistan did export large amounts of natural gas to the post-Soviet states in the early 1990s, many of the states could not make payments on their energy imports due to economic difficulties (Pomfret, 2001). In 1993, Turkmenistan introduced its own national currency and started the privatization process, but economic development has been slow. Turkmenistan has focused heavily on investments in infrastructure and the building of new pipelines and transportation routes to decrease its dependence on Russia (Pomfret, 2001).

Turkmenistan is the most isolated state in the post-Soviet region and has refused to join almost every international and regional organization available (Stronski, 2017). While the state became a member in the CIS in the early 1990s, Turkmenistan has viewed the organization as a purely consultive group and has stayed out of further integration projects within the CIS. In 2006, Turkmenistan changed its CIS status from full member to associate member (Bohr, 2016). Turkmenistan is also a member of the World Bank and the IMF, but interactions with the organizations have been minimal (Pomfret, 2001). In 1992 Niyazov declared that Turkmenistan would adhere to the policy of multilateral disagreement. Since 1995, Turkmenistan has been a permanently neutral state, which has affected the state's foreign and economic policy greatly. The

policy of neutrality has allowed Turkmenistan to largely isolate itself from the world (Sullivan, 2020).

Under Niyazov, the foreign relations of Turkmenistan were concentrated on Russia and its immediate regional neighbors. While Turkmenistan has had security problems with instability along the border to Afghanistan, the state has maintained a working relationship with the Taliban in Afghanistan since the 1990s, allowing them to cross the Turkmen border (Bohr, 2016). Relations with Western powers have been very limited, and since the early 2000s Turkmenistan's foremost partners have been Russia, China, Turkey, and Iran (Baev, 2006). Russia has been economically important due to its purchase of cheap Turkmen gas for export to the European markets. The relationship between Turkmenistan and Russia has been negatively affected by issues of pricing and the accusations of mistreatment of ethnic Russians in Turkmenistan (Bohr, 2016). Starting in 1993, Russians in Turkmenistan could hold dual citizenship, but the agreement was suspended by Niyazov in 2003. Despite protests in Moscow, Putin accepted the new situation since several gas deals between the states just had been signed (Baev, 2006).

In late December 2006 President Niyazov died of a heart attack (Anschi, 2014). The person who was in line to succeed him, the speaker of the parliament, was imprisoned, and the deputy prime minister, Berdymukhamedov, became the interim leader based on a decision of the security council. The Turkmenistan constitution was changed to enable the shift in power. The age limit for presidency was lowered from 50 to 40 years, the deputy chair of the cabinet of ministers (Berdymukhamedov's new position) was to be the next in line as president and replaced the position of the speaker of the parliament (Polese et al., 2017). The former foreign minister of Niyazov tried to start a peaceful demonstration, but the attempt failed since the opposition leaders in exile were prohibited from entering the country. In February 2007, five opposition members and Berdymukhamedov competed in the presidential election, which Berdymukhamedov won with 90 percent of the vote (Stronski, 2017).

The new president did not conduct any large changes to the economic, domestic, or foreign policy of Turkmenistan. Turkmenistan remained a highly isolated, corrupt, and undemocratic system, and a new personalistic cult replaced the old one. While Berdymukhamedov did accomplish cosmetic changes to the constitution, such as removing some ideological elements from the Niyazov period, officially allowing multiple political parties, and increasing the number of members of parliament from 50 to 125, Turkmenistan was still an autocratic state with a democratic façade (Polese et al., 2017). Under Niyazov, both the educational system and health care had been dismantled. Children did not have access to adequate levels of education, and rural hospitals were closed in 2006 (Bohr

2016). All media in Turkmenistan remained controlled by the state, and the internet penetration rate was very low (12 percent in 2014). In 2011, President Berdymukhamedov received the title of “Arkag” (protector), and “Hero of Turkmenistan” (Bohr, 2016). In 2016, the constitution and electoral code were amended as the 70-year age limit for presidential candidacy was removed and the presidential term extended to seven years. In 2017 Berdymukhamedov won the presidential election against his handpicked rivals with 98 percent of the vote (Polese et al., 2017).

Turkmenistan continued to follow the policy of permanent neutrality under the new president, but Berdymukhamedov did make some changes in the Turkmen foreign and economic policy (Anschi, 2014). He increased the diplomatic activity with Russia, India, Turkey, Kazakhstan, Iran, and China. Energy exports to China also increased after 2006, as well as the amount of Chinese loans to, and investments in, Turkmenistan (Anschi, 2014). New pipelines, such as the the TAGP, were built, circumventing Russia, while the prices for Turkmen natural gas exported to Russia were increased. As dependence on Russia decreased, dependence on China increased (Bohr, 2016). In 2013, 44 percent of total Turkmen trade was with China, while its trade with Russia diminished. In 2016, Russia announced that the import of energy from Turkmenistan would stop. The building of new pipeline infrastructure with neighboring states countries, the TADI pipeline connecting Turkmenistan with Afghanistan, India, and Pakistan, continued in 2017 (Sullivan, 2020). In 2019 Gazprom signed a small-scale gas deal with Turkmenistan, but overall, China has been the most important partner in the economic and energy sphere since the mid-2000s. The over-reliance on the Chinese market did, however, cause economic problems for Turkmenistan since the COVID-19 pandemic haltered the Chinese demands for gas in 2020 (Sullivan, 2020).

Turkmenistan is one of the most isolated and autocratic states in the world. The rise of Niyazov in the late 1980s paved the way for authoritarian development in Turkmenistan, with no political progress being made since then. With the heritage of a clan society and major regional disputes, combined with no nationalistic movement or political opposition in the last years as a Soviet state, Niyazov managed to consolidate his power as the First Secretary in the absence of external control from Moscow. The status of permanent neutrality has enabled the Turkmen regime to continue the autocratic path even under the change in power after Niyazov’s death in 2006. The policy of neutrality has been an important tool for the Turkmen presidents, in controlling both the domestic and the regional landscape.



### Appendix E. Fuzzy-set QCA analysis, raw data and fuzzy-set scores and robustness test

(r) = raw data, (f) = fuzzy scores after calibration

State	Ndro r	Ndro f	Lev r	Lev f	Link r	Link f	ActorO r	ActorO f	PresPow r	PresPow f	Autoc r	Autoc f
BEL1995	1	1	3	1	3	1	0	0	3	1	0.37	Non
BEL2005	1	1	3	1	3	1	0	0	3	1	0.1	Full
BEL2015	1	1	3	1	3	1	0	0	3	1	0.1	Full
BEL2021	1	1	3	1	3	1	0	0	3	1	0.04	Full
KAZ1995	1	1	3	1	3	1	0	0	3	1	0.16	
KAZ2005	1	1	2	0.8	3	1	1	0.67	3	1	0.13	Full
KAZ2015	1	1	2	0.8	2.5	0.8	1	0.67	3	1	0.12	Full
KAZ2021	1	1	2	0.8	2.5	0.8	1	0.67	3	1	0.13	Full
MOL1995	1	1	2	0.8	1.5	0.6	2	1	1	0.33	0.42	Non
MOL2005	0.33	0.33	1.5	0.6	1.5	0.6	0	0	0	0	0.36	Non
MOL2015	0.28	0.33	2	0.8	1.5	0.6	2	1	0	0	0.49	Non
MOL2021	0.36	0.33	2	0.8	1.5	0.6	2	1	0	0	0.61	Non
GEO1995	1	1	2	0.8	1	0.2	2	1	2	0.67	0.17	
GEO2005	0.33	0.33	1.5	0.6	1	0.2	2	1	1	0.33	0.39	Non
GEO2015	0	0	2	0.8	1	0.2	2	1	1	0.33	0.53	Non
GEO2021	0	0	2	0.8	1	0.2	2	1	0	0	0.49	Non
UKR1995	0.5	0.33	3	1	3	1	1	0.67	1	0.33	0.34	Non
UKR2005	0.16	0.33	3	0.8	3	1	2	1	1	0.33	0.29	
UKR2015	0.21	0	3	0.8	3	1	2	1	1	0.33	0.22	
UKR2021	0.21	0	3	0.8	3	1	2	1	1	0.33	0.32	Non
ARM1995	1	1	3	1	3	0.8	2	1	1	0.33	0.29	
ARM2005	0.66	0.67	3	1	2.5	0.8	0	0	1	0.33	0.19	
ARM2015	1	1	3	1	2.5	0.8	0	0	0	0	0.21	
ARM2021	1	1	3	1	2.5	0.8	0	0	0	0	0.56	Non

KGZ1995	1	1	2.5	0.8	3	1	1	0.67	3	1	0.17
KGZ2005	1	1	3	1	3	1	0	0	3	1	0.18
KGZ2015	1	1	3	1	3	1	1	0.67	1	0.33	0.32
KGZ2021	1	1	3	1	3	1	0	0	3	1	0.27
AZE1995	1	1	2.5	1	1.5	0.6	1	0.67	2	0.67	0.09
AZE2005	0.33	0.33	1.5	0.8	1	0.2	1	0.67	2	0.67	0.07
AZE2015	0.14	0	0	0	1	0.2	0	0	3	1	0.06
AZE2021	0.14	0	0	0	1	0.2	0	0	3	1	0.07
TJK1995	1	1	3	1	3	1	0	0	3	1	0.06
TJK2005	0.66	0.67	1.5	0.6	3	1	1	0.67	3	1	0.08
TJK2015	0.43	0.33	1.5	0.6	3	1	0	0	3	1	0.05
TJK2021	0.57	0.67	1.5	0.6	3	1	0	0	3	1	0.05
UZB1995	1	1	2	0.8	1.5	0.6	1	0.67	3	1	0.04
UZB2005	0.66	0.67	1.5	0.6	1	0.2	0	0	3	1	0.03
UZB2015	0.28	0.33	1	0.2	1	0.2	0	0	3	1	0.04
UZB2021	0.28	0.33	1	0.2	1	0.2	0	0	3	1	0.09
TKM1995	0.5	0	0.5	0.2	0.5	0.2	0	0	3	1	0.03
TKM2005	0.16	0	0.5	0.2	0.5	0.2	0	0	3	1	0.02
TKM2015	0.07	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	3	1	0.03
TKM2021	0.07	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	3	1	0.04

Non

Full

Full

Full

Full

Full

Full

Full

Full

Full

Full

Full

Full

Full

Full

Full

### **Fuzzy-set QCA robustness test:**

In order to test the reliability of the fsQCA results, robustness tests were performed via re-calibration of part of the included conditions.

The condition of NDRO was automatically re-calibrated via the QCA software (fsqca) as no thresholds were set beforehand. The same condition was also manually re-calibrated according to thresholds of full memberships above 0.65 (a membership rate over 65% of all possible membership), full-non membership below 0.24, and the cross-over point of 0.49.

The conditions of leverage and linkage were also re-calibrated according to the following scheme: full membership (1) = 2.5–3, almost fully in (0.8) = 2, more in than out (0.6) = 1.5, almost fully out (0.2) = 1, and full non-membership (0) = 0–0.5

As three of the conditions were re-calibrated, two analyses were performed to test the robustness of the previous analyses. The first with the re-calibrated conditions while keeping the consistency level at 0.75. The intermediate results from the first test showed the same results as the analyses included in Chapter 8. The pathways for the two outcomes were the same, as were the cases included in each of the pathways for the two outcomes.

The second test was performed by using the same re-calibrated conditions but increasing the consistency level from 0.75 to 0.80. The intermediate result from the outcome of non-closed autocracy corresponded perfectly to the results of the same analysis in Chapter 8. The two pathways were the same as were the cases included in the pathways. The results from the analysis of the outcome of closed autocracy with a consistency level of 0.80 showed different results compared to the results included in Chapter 8. The two pathways were  $\sim\text{linkage} * \sim\text{ActorOther} * \text{PresPow}$  (TKM 1995: 2005: 2015: 2021, AZE 2015: 2021, UZB 2005: 2015: 2021) and  $\sim\text{NDRO} * \sim\text{ActorOther} * \text{Prespow}$  (AZE 2015: 2021, TKM 1995: 2005: 2015: 2021, TJK 2015, UZB 2015: 2021).

Regarding the consistency level used in the thesis (0.75), Mello (2021, p.110) argues that one should consider the number of cases when choosing a consistency level. A low number of cases (for example, 12) requires a higher consistency level, while with a high number of cases (50 or 80), a lower (but above the minimum requirement of 0.75) consistency level can be used. The current study includes 44 cases; hence, I argue that a consistency level of 0.75 is suitable.

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**W**hy do some countries democratize while others do not? The issue of successful and failed democratization processes has long intrigued scholars of political science. Previous research has generated numerous theories about the factors necessary for a successful transition to democracy. This dissertation focuses on the democratic development of the post-Soviet region. When analyzing the past three decades of post-Soviet democratic development, the general pattern is increasingly autocratic. This dissertation examines the association between non-democratic regional organizations (NDROs) and democratic development, aiming to provide new insights into research on democratization, autocratization, and regionalism. Drawing on theories of authoritarian regionalism, the main research problem focuses on if memberships in Russian-dominated NDROs has played a role in the varying democratic developments in the post-Soviet region between 1991 and 2021.

Using three different comparative analyses, this dissertation has uncovered findings that show that the impact of several factors in combination with each other has been essential in constructing the puzzle of democratization and autocratization in the post-Soviet region. The dynamics of the post-Soviet states' relations with Russia, their geographical locations, the strength of their presidential systems, their memberships in NDROs, and their interactions with other regional actors have been important components in the democratic development of the post-Soviet region. For some states, at certain points in time, membership in NDROs has had an impact on the varying democratic development in the region, as either present or absent in conjunction with other variables. The dissertation argues that general, or region-based, assumptions on factors enabling regime transitions are difficult to make. Each state has a unique starting point shaped by its historical legacy, domestic circumstances, as well as regional dynamics.

