

POST-SOVIET EASTERN EUROPE. ACHIEVEMENTS IN POST-SOVIET DEVELOPMENT IN SIX EASTERN EUROPEAN NATIONS, 1991–2020

Mikhail Minakov

Kennan Institute, Woodrow Wilson International Center for Scholars
ORCID: 0000-0002-0619-7321

Abstract: *This paper is dedicated to the assessment of the political development of six post-Soviet Eastern European nations and six de facto statelets that exist in the region. After almost thirty years of state-building, these polities have developed into a new European region. By using contemporary databases on the development of political systems and regimes, the author shows the diversity and common dynamics of the region. The author argues, in particular, that the hopes of the early 1990s for a democratic and prosperous future were not entirely achieved in the development of these post-Soviet Eastern European states. Instead, today this region is comprised of a set of semi-free and non-free countries—as well as non-free breakaway regions—with contradictions that will most likely lead to future conflicts.*

Keywords: *Soviet Union, nation-state, sovereign state, post-Soviet, political system, political regime, economy, human development, de facto state*

Introduction

The allure of upcoming anniversary dates will most likely attract the attention of scholars, experts, politicians and wider audiences to post-Soviet countries. In 2021 it will be thirty years since the dissolution of the Soviet Union and the beginning of the historical U-turn for post-Soviet peoples' development. It was believed then that this turning point would lead fifteen new independent nations towards political freedom as nation-states. There was also a widely shared vision of post-Soviet nations living in a peace provided by respect to international law, human rights, and other fundamental norms promoted by the Council of Europe. In 1991 the future of these new independent nations seemed bright and promising.

In anticipation of the anniversary discussions, I examine the data available and show the paths that new nations have taken since the fall of the Soviet Union. I specifically investigate the state of affairs amongst post-Soviet European states (Armenia, Azerbaijan, Belarus, Georgia, Moldova and Ukraine). This region emerged between two centers of influence: the West/European Union and Russia/Eurasian Union. Unlike the Baltic post-Soviet nations, these countries did not join the EU and NATO, nor do they have

a clear prospect of such membership (although some of them have an Association Agreement with the EU and they also are in different cooperation programs with NATO). Unlike nations of Central Asia, new post-Soviet European nations experienced more conflictual relations with Russia. This empowered late-Soviet and post-Soviet secessionist movements and turned into a growing network of de facto states (sponsored mainly by Russia) that limit opportunities for peace and democratic politics in the region.

While looking at post-Soviet Eastern Europe, it is important to keep in mind the fact that the dissolution of the Soviet Union in 1991 led to the creation of fifteen new states and four de facto statelets (Nagorno-Karabakh, South Ossetia, Abkhazia, and Transnistria). After 2014, the number of de facto polities grew up to six: Russian-backed 'republics' of Luhans'k and Donets'k joined the other four statelets. As a result, post-Soviet Eastern Europe is now home to six recognized and six unrecognized states.

Accordingly, in this paper I will address the following questions: How stable are the post-Soviet European states? How democratic are they? What did we achieve—in political and socioeconomic terms—in our region in the recent decades?

To respond to these questions in this paper, I will first define the methodology and sources for measuring the political achievements as such; then I will briefly describe major historical milestones in the political construction of post-Soviet Eastern Europe; and, finally, I will analyze the data showing political stability and quality of regimes, as well as how political factors correlate with human development in these nations.

1. Concepts and Methods

In spite of the ideal of political science's neutrality, scholars' optics can be blurred by emotions, ideologies, and methodological drawbacks. Political studies of post-Soviet societies are not an exclusion. With the fall of the Eastern Block and the Soviet Union (1989–1991), the eastern half of Europe turned into a place of dramatic developments. In the early 1990s, the dominant perception of this turn was colored in the optimistic tones of the theory of 'post-communist transition.' At the end of the communist experiment, populations and intellectuals of newly independent states had an equally shared and hopeful idea that predicted the growth in freedoms and emancipation in post-communist and post-Soviet countries (Carnaghan 1992; Finifter & Mickiewicz 1992; Mishler & Rose 2018: 8ff). The post-Soviet transition theory, in particular, stipulated that Eastern European societies were to return to the 'normal course of history,' with its liberal democracy and market capitalism (Papava 2005: 78; Mishler & Rose 2018: 4ff). These ideas equally inspired founders of newly independent states and scholars who studied and described the institutionalization of political liberties in Eastern Europe.

By the beginning of the twenty-first century, this optimism turned into a more realistic assessment of the deficiencies of post-Soviet democratization (Levitsky & Way 2002; Berglund et al. 2004; Hale 2005, 2014; Krastev 2007; Kuzio 2007). From a realist point of view, the state- and nation-building processes in post-communist/post-Soviet countries were taking place in the specific conditions of ruined power institutions, chaos in the economy, and destroyed social safety networks. Currently, scholars more often

believe that this transition has led to the creation of states where corruption, conservatism/nationalism, and patronal politics constitute deficient autocracies and democracies (Hale 2014; Way 2015; Minakov 2019a; Freedom House 2019b). Still, it is quite probable that this ‘realism,’ with its strong pessimist flavor, is also partially a product of extra-scholarly factors.

To limit the impact of extra-scholarly factors, in this study I will do my best to look at well-defined concepts and trusted databases that measure the stability of states, quality of regimes, and socioeconomic situations in post-Soviet countries as of 2020.

Sovereign states and non-recognized polities. In this paper we are interested in defining the stability of states in Eastern Europe. For this I apply the term of *sovereign state*. In his archaeology of the contemporary state, Charles Tilly offered the following set of criteria (or functions) of a sovereign state:

- (1) It eliminates external threats outside of its own territories (war-making);
- (2) It copes with internal rival forces (state-making);
- (3) It reduces most of potential threats to the controlled population (protection);
and
- (4) It collects taxes or revenues that allow a state to fulfilling the previous three functions (extraction) (Tilly 1992: 23).

If a number of political institutions fulfil the above functions, they are an authority of a state.

However, in contemporary context ‘stateness’ is measured not only by the fact that the above functions are being implemented, but also by the de jure recognition of one state by other states (Tilly 1992; Rokkan 1999; Block 2010). Thus, stateness is “formal autonomy, differentiation from non-governmental organizations, centralization, and internal coordination,” as well as the presence of “an organization employing specialized personnel which controls a consolidated territory and is recognized as autonomous and integral by the agents of other states” (Tilly 1992: 12). Thus, in addition to the above four functions, a state has a fifth functionality:

(5) participation in the international order as a recognized member in interstate relations.

Even though theories of state remain a field of debates and disagreements, the functionalist definition of the state as these five functions is generally accepted (Ghani & Lockhart 2008; Marshall & Gurr 2014). Thus, the stability of a state can be measured by the ability of a government to fulfil these four functions and achieve recognition from other recognized states.

In the context of our region, the centralized sets of political monopolies can be divided into those which fulfill all five criteria and those which only aspire to fulfilling it. Contemporary studies of the state offer certain ‘degrees of stateness,’ one of which can actually be applied to non-recognized states: the *almost-state*. Almost-states are state-like centralized organizations that have managed to gain de facto independence from the paternal state (i.e., they are more or less effective in fulfilling the four state functions)

and aspire to the status of a full-fledged state but are not recognized by the international community (Stanislawski 2008: 367; Pełczyńska-Nałęcz, Strachota, & Falkowski 2008: 371).

If this degree is applied to the situation of contemporary Eastern Europe, it includes

- six sovereign states: Belarus, Moldova, and Ukraine (hereafter BMU subgroup) and Armenia, Azerbaijan and Georgia (hereafter Southern Caucasus subgroup);
- six para-states: Donetsk People's Republic (DPR, paternal state is Ukraine), Luhans'k People's Republic (LPR, paternal state is Ukraine) and Transnistria (paternal state is Moldova) in the BMU subgroup, and Abkhazia (paternal state is Georgia), Nagorno-Karabakh (paternal state is Azerbaijan) and South Ossetia (paternal state is Georgia) in the Southern Caucasus subgroup.

Authorities of the para-states/breakaway regions constantly make huge efforts to achieve recognition and lift the sanctions from their populations and economies. In order to survive, these authorities use extreme forms of international politics (subservience to the interests of sponsor states and frozen conflicts with their parent states) and trade (smuggling, participation in global networks of human, arms, and drug trafficking).¹ In this region only Abkhazian and South Ossetian authorities have succeeded in receiving partial recognition (from countries like Nicaragua, Russia and Syria).

Measuring the political achievements. To measure the political achievements of post-Soviet European sovereign and non-recognized states, I will use the following approaches:

To measure the stability of a political system and regime, I will use the *Polity IV* database. The *Polity IV* project collects firsthand data on and codes “the authority characteristics of states in the world system for purposes of comparative, quantitative analysis” (Marshall 2014; Marshall & Gurr 2014: 1). The coding focuses on the states' continuity, failure, and change, as well as regime persistence and change (Ibid.). The most relevant data in the database was gathered on 167 countries for the period covering 1946–2013. The *Polity IV Country Reports* demonstrate data as a referent grid denoting vertical thresholds for Democracy (+6 and above) and Autocracy (-6 and below) and a horizontal line indicating the end of the Cold War (1991). The trend graph includes information on periods of factionalism (6 or 7), interruption (-6), interregnum (-7), transition (-8), and special change events including autocratic backsliding, executive auto-coups, revolutionary change, state failure, and coup d'état (Ibid.).

To measure political and civic freedoms in Eastern European states, I will use the data from the *Freedom in the World* reports, which cover all the post-Soviet European nations for the entire period of their existence until 2019. *Freedom in the World* is a report on the political rights and civil liberties, and it is produced by the research team of the

¹ For more on this class of states see: Minakov 2019b.

Freedom House for each existing country and a select group of territories up until December 31, 2018 (Freedom House 2019b). The report assesses the political rights and civil liberties based on scores of 1 to 7, with 1 representing the greatest degree of freedom and 7 the smallest degree of freedom; based on these scores, the country status is assigned: Free (1.0 to 2.5), Partly Free (3.0 to 5.0), or Not Free (5.5 to 7.0) (Freedom House 2019a).

Since informal institutions² play crucial, sometimes dominant, roles in post-Soviet states, I will also use Henry Hale's assessments of post-Soviet political systems in terms of patronal politics. Henry Hale offered a distinction of single- or multi-pyramid political systems in post-Soviet states. Hale focuses on 'pyramids' as "the sinews of power... [that] tend to be roughly hierarchical *networks* through which resources are distributed and coercion applied" (Hale 2014: 10). And these networks prescribe how a political system will function. The single-pyramid system usually leads to the fast establishment of autocratic patronal politics, while multi-pyramid systems make the autocratic groups compete and leave some space for political pluralism, electoral unpredictability, and rotation of elites. However, in all cases a pyramid is a "political machine based on selectively applied coercion and reward, on individualized favor and punishment" (ibid.: 30, 32).

To see how political development affected the socioeconomic situation in the region, I will use (1) the measurements of GDP per capita in fixed prices to see the progress that new Eastern European economies made in comparison to 1991 (World Bank online database), and (2) the data of the Global Competitiveness Index (GCI) to look at how political influence matches the countries' economic development. It is important to note that GDP comparisons in current PPPs and GCI methods combined will help us understand how personal income and the institutions, policies, and other factors that drive the productivity of each national economy were changing in the region (World Economic Forum 2018b). These two measurements together are arguably the best tool to measure the economic position of a state in terms of being among the winners or losers of the global economic production and exchange, which is decisive for the core or periphery status definition.

Finally, I will use the Human Development Index, which shows how political influence and economic competitiveness are converted into human choice for the understanding of political legitimacy of each regime in the region (Anand & Sen 1994).

Thus, to measure the achievements of post-Soviet European states, I will use a comprehensive set of data that enables us to see the quality of the political process through the lenses of human rights, civil rights, and freedoms (the human dimension), as well as to observe the continuity of the state and the quality of the regime (the systemic dimension).

² Informal institutions include 'clans,' 'patronal networks,' 'mafias,' and/or 'financial political groups.' More on these institutions please see in: Minakov 2016.

2. The short history of post-Soviet Eastern Europe

The six sovereign Eastern European states—Armenia, Azerbaijan, Belarus, Georgia, Moldova, and Ukraine—left the Soviet Union and realized their declared independence by the end of 1991. The dissolution of the Soviet Union and the independent status of these states were officially documented by the Belovezha Accords (December 8, 1991) and the Alma-Ata Protocols (December 21, 1991).

However, the political process by which the Soviet republics gained political independence started much earlier. During Soviet *perestroika* (1986–1991), political liberalization provided opportunities for different groups of Soviet citizens to organize different social and political movements (Walker 2003). By 1990, the most influential movements were organized as ‘national liberation’ movements, with a strong presence in the supreme councils of the Soviet Union’s member-republics and smaller administrative units within these republics. By the beginning of 1991, the strength of these movements was made manifest in connection with the pan-Soviet referendum regarding the future of the Soviet Union. The supreme councils of Armenia, Estonia, Georgia, Latvia, Lithuania, and Moldova did not approve of conducting the referendum. Under pressure from their local movement, the Supreme Council of Kazakhstan changed the formulation of the referendum question. The Council of Abkhazian Autonomous SSR (part of the Georgian SSR) decided to conduct the referendum despite Tbilisi’s decision (White & Hill 1996: 154ff).

After the defeat of the attempted coup in Moscow in August 1991, with the Belovezha Accords and the Alma-Ata Protocols signed, the former republics of the Soviet Union entered a period of *post-Soviet revolution*. In a very short time, the power elites and populations of the newly independent states had to establish and clearly differentiate public and private spheres—thereby ending a Soviet totalitarian legacy—and establish all the key institutions for the functioning of a national sovereign state, pluralist democracy, and a free market.³ At this point in history, the space of the former Soviet Union was split into subregions with their own dynamics, although many political, cultural, and socioeconomic features remain shared throughout the entire region even today.

The post-Soviet region of Eastern Europe includes two geographic subregions: the Southern Caucasus with Armenia, Azerbaijan, and Georgia, and the subregion consisting of Belarus, Moldova, and Ukraine. Despite being divided by the southern Russian oblasts and by the Black Sea, post-Soviet Eastern Europe has actually shared common dynamics vis-à-vis relations with Russia, the EU, and the United States. This dynamic manifested in periods of state-building, conflict, and integration processes that post-Soviet European states experienced concurrently. Based on events in these three spheres, I offer the following periodization of the formation of the post-Soviet region of Eastern Europe:

The destructive-creative period (1991–1994). Newly independent states experienced a series of socioeconomic shocks that were critically changing the lifestyles of their populations. Soviet political and administrative institutions were either destroyed

³ More on the issue of “post-Soviet revolution” see in: Minakov 2018: 105ff.

(e.g. The Communist Party of the Soviet Union, the KGB, or Gosplan) or were changing to serve new needs and tasks (e.g. supreme councils, councils of ministers, republican parts of Centrobank, oblast councils, and army units).

The vacuum of power in Moscow as the center of the Soviet Union, the economic crisis, and the spread of ethnonationalist approaches to state-building created grounds for the interethnic conflicts that would constitute the political ecology of the new Eastern Europe. Ethnic clashes between the Armenians and Azerbaijanis led to the bloody conflict that changed the demography of the two neighboring republics and provided the impetus for the Nagorno-Karabakh secession and the ongoing military conflict (Cornell, 1999). The creation of independent Georgia coincided with internal civil conflicts and the Georgian-Ossetian and Georgia-Abkhaz inter-ethnic conflicts that led to the creation of two more de facto states: Abkhazia and South Ossetia (Potier 2001; Cornell 2005). Moldova also faced conflict between elite groups and populations identified by ethno-lingual and geopolitical preferences—i.e., those who supported a union with Romania and those who were pro-Russian (Kaufman & Bowers 1998). There was also the risk of secession in Ukraine's Crimea (Sasse 2002). By 1994, out of six governments, only the Belarusian and Ukrainian governments controlled their internationally recognized territories.

Each secession during this period was only partially caused by internal problems. Despite its own internal problems in political, social, economic, and security spheres, the Russian government was involved in the South Ossetian, Abkhazian, and Transnistrian crises. The Armenian government was critically involved in the Nagorno-Karabakh crisis. Finally, Western governments were involved in these crises every year since 1992. By 1994, this multiparty involvement created grounds for a specific distribution of roles in the region:

- parent states (Azerbaijan, Georgia, and Moldova) that did not control their recognized territories;
- de facto polities (Abkhazia, Nagorno-Karabakh, South Ossetia, and Transnistria) that seceded from their parent states and demanded recognition of their statehood;
- sponsor states (Armenia and Russia) that supported some of the claims of de facto states;
- and Western states, which supported the parent states and tried to enforce international norms and practices to decrease the security risks stemming from conflict in Eastern Europe and affecting wider Europe.

This period ends with the Budapest Memorandum, which was signed between Belarus, Kazakhstan, and Ukraine on one side, and between Russia, the United Kingdom, and the United States (as well as by France and China, with reservations) on the other side. Formally, the memorandum assured that the Soviet administrative borders of Belarus, Kazakhstan, and Ukraine were recognized and respected by all the other states while these three states rejected the Soviet nuclear weapon legacy (Budjeryn 2014; Yost 2015). However, informally, the memorandum was an unspoken consensus among the post-Soviet power elites that signified their commitment to respecting each other's

borders and independence and ceasing their support of new secession movements (Minakov 2017a: 47). As a result, Kyiv and Moscow resolved the Crimean issue, and Yurii Meshkov, leader of the Simferopol secessionists, left Ukraine for Russia. Moscow kept a sanctions regime against Abkhazia until end of 1998. Conflicts in South Ossetia and Transnistria were practically frozen. Basically, at this moment, the Russian government started focusing more on its own separatist movements and security issues than on those of other post-Soviet countries.

The stabilization period (1995–2000). Beginning in 1995, Eastern European states entered a phase of regime stabilization. From 1995 to 1999, the regimes of Azerbaijan and Belarus were stabilized as ‘single-pyramid authoritarianism’: Armenia, Georgia, Moldova, and Ukraine established political systems that were driven by competition among clans; the four de facto polities evolved into stable state-like organizations with their own authoritarian rule at the central level and considerably strong self-governance at the local level (Hale 2014; Way 2015; Minakov 2016).

This period ends with many relatively efficient governments in recognized and non-recognized Eastern European states, with the growth of their economies, and with recovery from military conflicts. Simultaneously, this was the period in which the Budapest consensus inspired stronger political and economic integration between Russia and post-Soviet countries. The Commonwealth of Independent States (1991) and the Economic Union (1993) started functioning as platforms for political and economic communication between elites. Russia and Belarus were integrated in the frameworks of the Customs Union (as well as Kazakhstan also in 1995) and the Union State (1997). Even more states were integrated by the Common Economic Space (1998) and the Eurasian Economic Union (2000) (Van der Loo & Van Elsuwege 2012).

Likewise, the role of Western states grew in post-Soviet Eastern Europe. All six sovereign states had a series of cooperation agreements signed between their governments and the United States. All six states entered the Council of Europe as members. A number of West-funded international public (e.g. USAID and German party foundations) and private (e.g. the Soros Network and the Eurasia Foundation) organizations opened their offices in all six countries, providing support to public sector reforms, civic organizations, and small and medium businesses (Dabrowski 1998; Reinalda 2009: 145ff). Conflict resolution mechanisms involved representatives from Western countries and Russia (Trenin 2005). By 2000, post-Soviet Eastern Europe definitely had been formed as a region, with growing interest towards it from the West and Russia.

The growth of contradictions period (2001–2008). The beginning of the 21st century in Eastern Europe was marked by growing competition between Western states, on the one hand, and Russia as re-emerging regional power, on the other hand. Russia’s Second Chechen War, economic growth, and the creation of Putin’s single-pyramid regime brought back the role of regional center to Moscow. In this period, post-Soviet Europe was turned into a region of contradictions between democratic and autocratic trends, between the building of formal state institutions and the growing significance of oligarchic clans, and between Russia-, US-, and Europe-led integration projects.

Already in 2001–2002, opposition parties of nationalist-democratic and liberal orientations were developing relatively strong connections with European and American elites. The color revolutions in Georgia (2003) and Ukraine (2004) showed the vulnerability of deficient post-Soviet democracies/autocracies. The creation of West-supported transnational networks promoting values and practices tested in these revolutions (e.g. GUAM and informal NGO networks) provoked reactions in Baku, Chisinau, Minsk, Yerevan, and Moscow, leading to the rapid consolidation of powerful elites around authoritarian figures within these countries and around Moscow (Hale 2014; Way 2015; Freedom House 2018). This consolidation also established informal institutions as the foundation for both single-pyramid (Azerbaijan, Belarus, and Russia) and multi-pyramid (Armenia, Georgia, Moldova, and Ukraine) political systems. The so-called systemic corruption and dominance of informal institutions was endemic to the countries that survived the color revolutions and to the states that opposed them (Hale 2014; Minakov 2019a).

The deepening of conflicts period (2008–ongoing). The tendencies of the previous period intensified in 2008 when the Russo-Georgian War took place. The war was short, but it had critical results for Eastern Europe's political ecology. First, political elites in the region learned that war was possible between their nations. This war also showed that the post-Soviet transition had created populations that would support their governments in wars with their neighbors. Second, the two de facto states (South Ossetia and Abkhazia) set a precedent by being partially recognized (by Russia and several other states). Finally, the dispute demonstrated that Western governments were not united and could not effectively counterbalance Russia in conflicts with its neighbors in Eastern Europe. These tendencies were not addressed properly by any of the parties, and conflict prevention mechanisms were not established in the region.

Contradictions between post-Soviet European states, Russia, United States and the EU grew considerably between 2008 and 2014. Integration projects in the West and East were becoming stronger. The EU's Eastern Partnership and association agreement frameworks, on one side, and the Russia-led Customs Union/Eurasian Union, on the other side, began to come into conflict in 2013. The Russian government failed to stop the sign-off on the association agreements between Georgia, Moldova, and the EU in November 2013. However, Moscow's pressure at the time postponed Ukraine's sign-off on the same agreement.

These external factors consolidated protests in Ukraine. The Euromaidan protests and the Ukrainian government's reactions launched a vicious cycle of violence that led to the change of government in Kyiv in a way that the Ukrainian constitution did not anticipate (February 22–26, 2019). This cycle was continued by Russia's annexation of Crimea, and pro-Russian irredentist and secessionist revolts in southeastern Ukrainian oblasts. From May through June of 2014, full-fledged military conflict started in Donbass with the participation of Ukrainian formal and informal military forces, Russia-backed secessionist combatants, and Russian military and the security services (especially in the campaigns of July–September 2014 and February–March 2015) (Kofman et al. 2017).

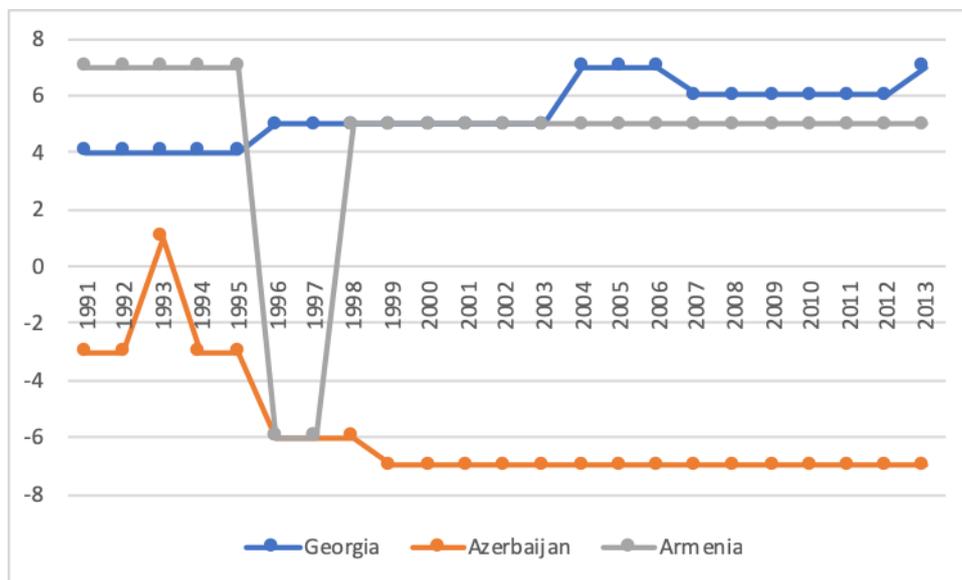
As a result of this nearly 30-year-long development, post-Soviet Eastern Europe is, today, a region where security, political, and socioeconomic stability significantly depend on the interests of external powers. However, this dependency varies from country to country to a very considerable degree.

3. Results of post-Soviet development

3.1. The development of post-Soviet states in the Southern Caucasus subregion

Armenia, following the crises of the early 1990s, has evolved into a stable state that successfully balances the integration projects initiated by Russia with those initiated by the EU (see Figure 1 and Table 1). Armenia is a member of the Eurasian Economic Union and, since 2017, is also a part of the Comprehensive and Enhanced Partnership with EU (a softer version of association with the EU). Armenia is a sponsor state for Nagorno-Karabakh, but it successfully avoids systemic international sanctions. Armenia, however, is in a permanent military conflict with Azerbaijan and in political disagreement with Turkey. These conflicts make Yerevan dependent in terms of security issues on Russia (whose military base is deployed in Armenia) and on the Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO). Moreover, these conflicts significantly limit trade and the economic growth of Armenia; its economy showed the worst results among post-Soviet nations in 1991-2018 (Figure 2).

Figure 1. States in the Southern Caucasus subregion (1991–2013)



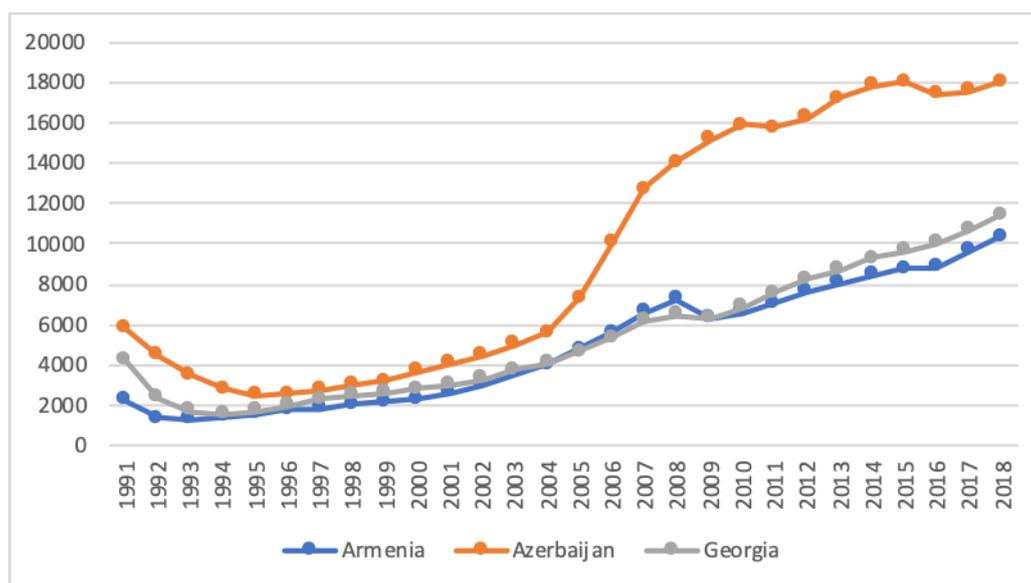
Source: *Polity IV* database.

Table 1. International Ties of NEE States (as of 2019)

	CIS	Union State with Russia	Eurasian Economic Union	Association agreement with EU	Council of Europe	Cooperation with NATO ⁴	Cooperation with CSTO ⁵
Armenia	+	-	+	+ (CEPA)	+	IPAP	+
Azerbaijan	+	-	-	-	+	IPAP	-
Belarus	+	+	+	-	-	IPCP	+
Georgia	-	-	-	+	+	SNGP, close allies, aspired membership	-
Moldova	+	-	-	+	+	A number of programs, participates in NATO	-
Ukraine	-	-	-	+	+	CAP, close allies, aspired membership	-

Sources: World Population Review; Eurasian Economic Commission, www.eurasiancommission.org; EU Neighbours, www.euneighbours.eu; CoE official website, www.coe.int/en/web/about-us/our-member-states; NATO official website, www.nato.int; CSTO official website, odkb.gov.ru.

Figure 2. Economies in the Southern Caucasus subregion (1991–2018)



Source: World Bank database on GDP per capita, PPP (current international \$, 2018), <https://data.worldbank.org/>

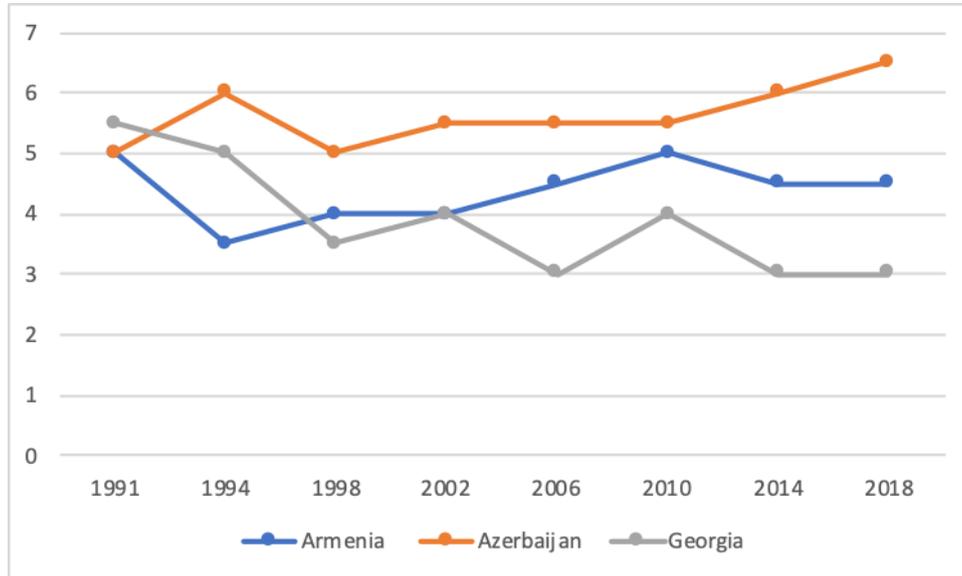
For most of the post-Soviet period, Armenia developed as a multi-pyramid political system with limited political and civic freedoms (Hale, 2014; Figure 3). The conflict with

⁴ The following abbreviations are used in the column: IPAP – Individual Partnership Action Plan; IPCP – Individual Partnership and Cooperation Programme; SNGP – Substantial NATO-Georgia Package; CAP – Comprehensive Assistance Package.

⁵ CSTO – Common Security Treaty Organization.

Azerbaijan and the ethnic clashes of early 1990s have provided far-right groups with very strong leverage in the ideological sphere and in the Armenian state’s inclusivity policies.

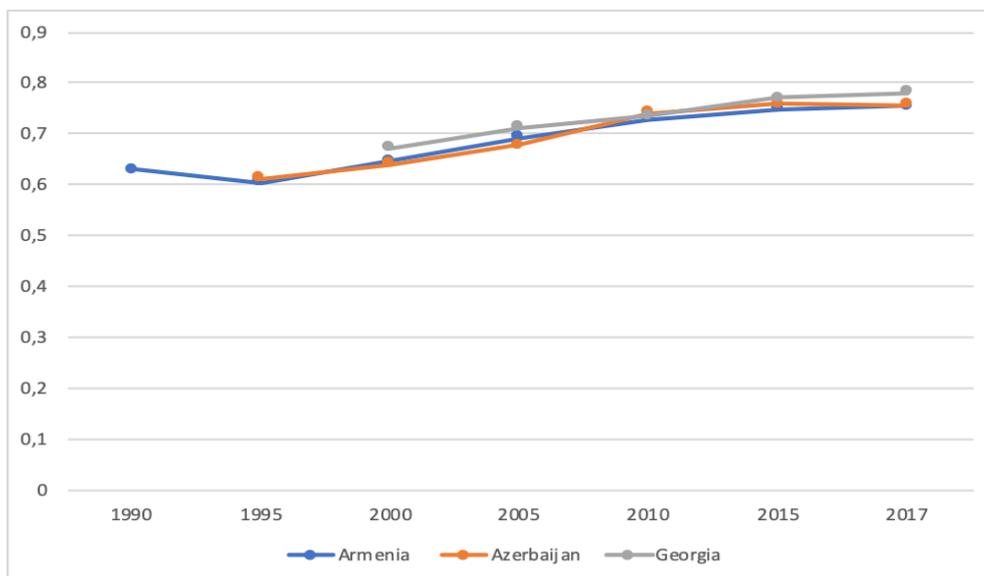
Figure 3. Freedom in Recognized States of the Southern Caucasus subregion (1991–2018)



Source: Freedom in the World Countries, freedomhouse.org

The specificity of political and economic development had a negative impact on the cultural sector. Even though the HDI shows that SC countries evolved in the same direction at approximately the same speed, Armenia still showed the worst results in the subregion (Fig. 4).

Figure 4. Human Development in the Southern Caucasus subregion (1990–2018)



Source: UNDP database, hdr.undp.org

After a short period of political crises in 1991–1995, Azerbaijan was stably evolving as an autocracy (Figures 1 and 3). Azerbaijan evolved as one of the most isolated Eastern European states, preserving its balance between Russian and Turkish influences

(Table 1). Having a vast oil and gas extraction industry and the biggest population in the South Caucasus (over 10 million people), this country almost tripled its GDP per capita (in fixed prices) by 2018 (Figure 2). Azerbaijan, however, did not become either a political, military, or cultural center in the region. Its oil richness provided Baku with an opportunity to cooperate with the United States and EU countries in the energy sector, which made its regime immune to strong international and regional pressures, including pressure from the Council of Europe, which still tolerates Azerbaijan's membership (Table 1). Azerbaijan did not manage to restore control over the breakaway region of Nagorno-Karabakh. Isolated in many ways from neighboring countries, and in an unresolved conflict with Armenia, the Aliyev family regime managed to grant the smooth and undisturbed transition of authority from father to son in 2003 and developed into a stable single-pyramid autocracy (Hale 2014; Figure 1).

In terms of human development, Azerbaijan lags, albeit minimally, behind Georgia, a country with far fewer human and economic resources (Figure 4).

After a stormy start to its political development in 1990–1994, Georgia was slowly developing as a stable state with a multi-pyramid system with the most democratic institutions in the Southern Caucasus (Figures 1 and 3). Georgia managed to overcome Ajaria secessionism but lost control over South Ossetia and Abkhazia. Even though the reforms of 2004–2006 boosted economic growth, the latter remained relatively humble: Georgia approximately doubled GDP per capita (in fixed prices) in comparison with 1991 (Figure 2).

After the color revolution in 2003, Georgia swiftly left the sphere of Russian influence. Today, Georgia is not a member of the Commonwealth of Independent States or the Eurasian Economic Union. Instead, Georgia has been developing its military, political, and economic ties with the United States and the EU (Table 1). However, Russia's impact on Georgia remains strong: Tbilisi does not control two regions of its internationally recognized territory. These regions have been sponsored by Russia since the late 1990s and have evolved into the partially recognized states of South Ossetia and Abkhazia.

In spite of economic and security hardships, Georgia has shown the best results in human development in the subregion (Figure 4).

Thus, three post-Soviet states in the Southern Caucasus subregion have shown how post-Soviet states can find a way to preserve their sovereignty and balance between the interests of Russia and the West. Armenia and Azerbaijan successfully balanced between the West and Russia, remaining flexible in their international ties and virtually isolated from foreign pressure at the same time. Nonetheless, the Georgia's geopolitical one-sidedness did not critically influence either the stability of its political system, the controllability of its remaining territory, or its economic and human development.

There were three breakaway territories in the Southern Caucasus in 1994: Abkhazia, Nagorno-Karabakh, and South Ossetia. Today, all three polities have evolved into de facto statelets with populations totaling up to half a million (Table 2). All three have gone through more than five changes of presidents/parliaments and over 20 public

budget plans and implementations, which shows their ability to implement at least three out of the five core sovereign state functions. However, the role of sponsor states was critical in deciding the choice of political leadership in all three cases.

Table 2. Post-Soviet Partially and Non-Recognized States (1990–2019)

	<i>Population</i>	<i>Territory (km²)</i>	<i>Period of existence</i>	<i>Internationally recognized territory of parent state</i>	<i>States that recognize this polity</i>
Abkhazia	240,750 ⁶	8,660	appx. over 25 years	Georgia	<i>recognized by states: Russia, Venezuela, Nicaragua, Nauru, and Syria</i> <i>recognized by non-recognized states: South Ossetia, Transnistria, Nagorno-Karabakh, and “DPR”</i>
“Donets’k People’s Republic”	2,299,120 ⁷	n/a	appx. over 4 years	Ukraine	No
“Luhans’k Peoples Republic”	1,475,841 ⁸	n/a	appx. over 4 years ⁹	Ukraine	No
Nagorno-Karabakh	150,932 ¹⁰	11,500	appx. over 25 years	Azerbaijan	no
South Ossetia	53,532 ¹¹	3,900	appx. over 25 years	Georgia	<i>recognized by states: Russia, Venezuela, Nicaragua, Nauru, and Syria</i> <i>recognized by non-recognized states: South Ossetia, Transnistria, Nagorno-Karabakh, and ‘DPR’</i>
Transnistria	475,665 ¹²	4,163	appx. over 25 years	Moldova	no

After the Russo–Georgian war of 2008, Abkhazia and South Ossetia have partial international recognition, as well as recognition from non-recognized states (Table 2). Nagorno-Karabakh still remains a non-recognized polity under strict sanctions.

All three polities are in systemic military, economic, and political conflict with their parent states of Azerbaijan and Georgia. To survive, these statelets entered into systemic security, political, and economic unity with sponsor states: Armenia and Russia. The sponsor states grant these contested territories security and economic cooperation, which provides additional resources for the survival of local populations and regimes. In return,

⁶ See: GIARA 2011.

⁷ See: GLAVSTAT DNR 2017.

⁸ See GLAVSTAT LNR 2017.

⁹ The Donets’k and Luhans’k ‘republics’ have signed an agreement on federation, which should be kept in mind. Also, in November 2017, there was a coup in LPR supported by DPR, which shows the inequality of relations in this ‘federation.’

¹⁰ See ARMSTAT 2016.

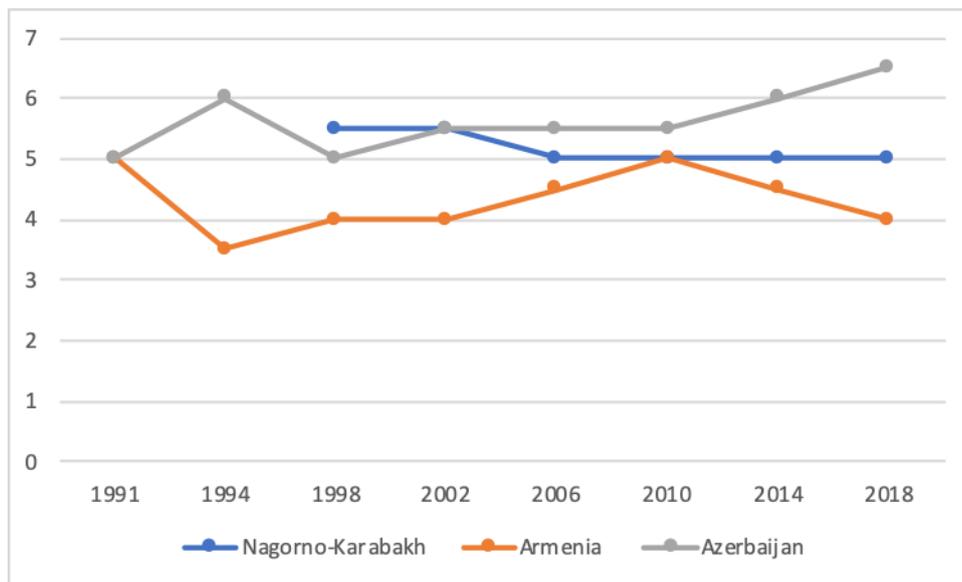
¹¹ Data from the 2015 census: Tibilov 2016.

¹² See PMR 2015.

the sponsor states establish their control over senior officials in these polities and use them for their own political purposes.

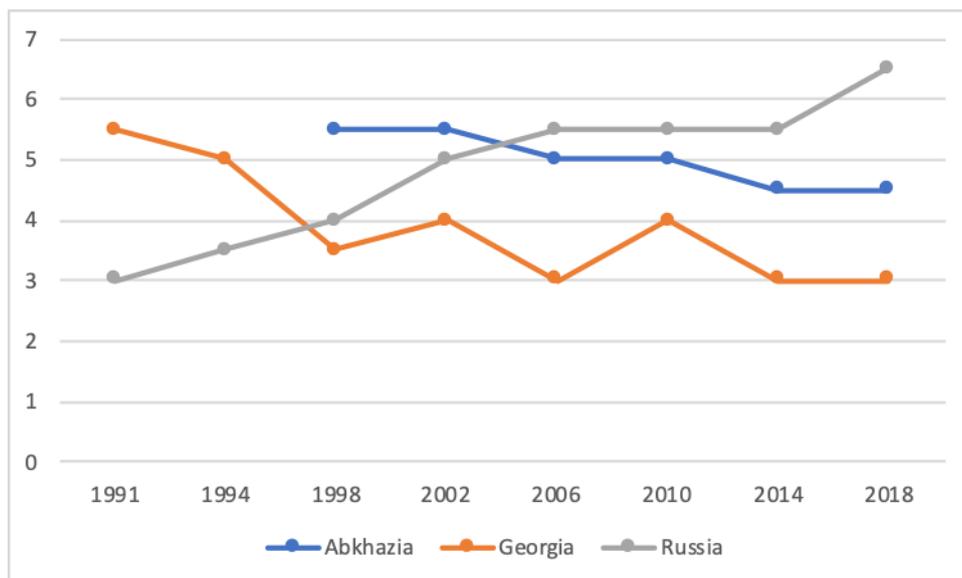
These de facto statelets are critically dependent on their sponsors. Also, the very fact of the existence of de facto states saddles their parent states with a legitimacy deficit, which, in turn, increases these states' dependency on the core states. Still, the dependency of de facto statelets on their sponsor states is limited. For example, the quality of regime differs in the cases of Nagorno-Karabakh and Abkhazia (Figures 5 and 6). These de facto statelets have a different freedom status than that of their parent and sponsor states.

Figure 5. Compared Freedom Statuses of Azerbaijan, Armenia, and Nagorno-Karabakh (1991–2018)



Source: Freedom in the World Countries, freedomhouse.org

Figure 6. Compared Freedom Statuses of Georgia, Russia, and Abkhazia (1991–2018)

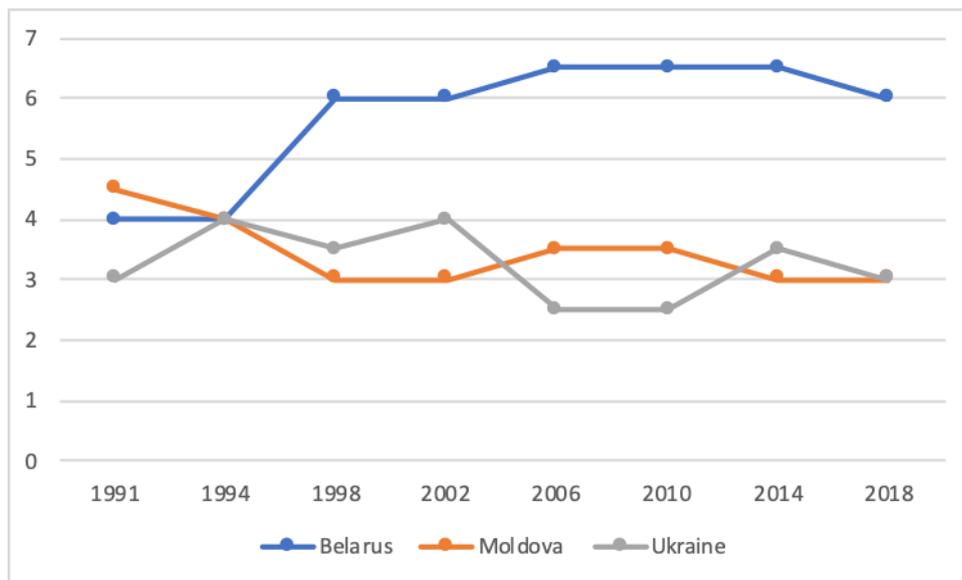


Source: Freedom in the World Countries, freedomhouse.org

3.2. Development of states in the Belarus/Moldova/Ukraine subregion

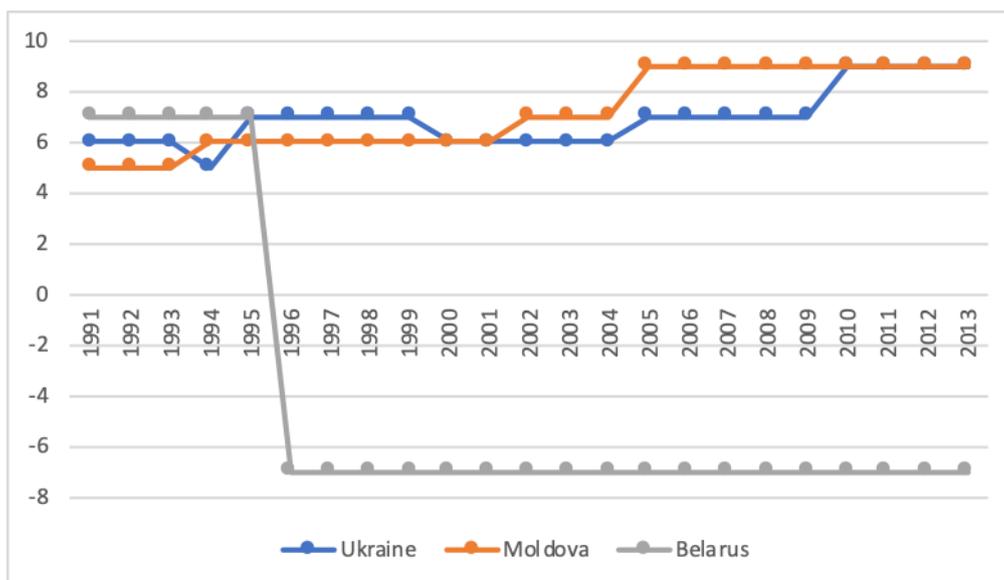
Belarus is a striking case of a post-Soviet European country that has been successful in its socioeconomic development while supporting a stable yet non-free political regime (Figure 7). After Lukashenko’s electoral victory in 1994, Belarus began developing as a single-pyramid system with an unchangeable leader (Hale, 2014; Way, 2015; Figure 8). Despite the absence of oil and gas, Belarus is definitely the winner in economic development in the subregion: its GDP per capita (in fixed prices) indicator almost tripled in comparison to 1991 (Figure 9).

Figure 7. Freedom in Belarus, Moldova, and Ukraine (1991–2018)



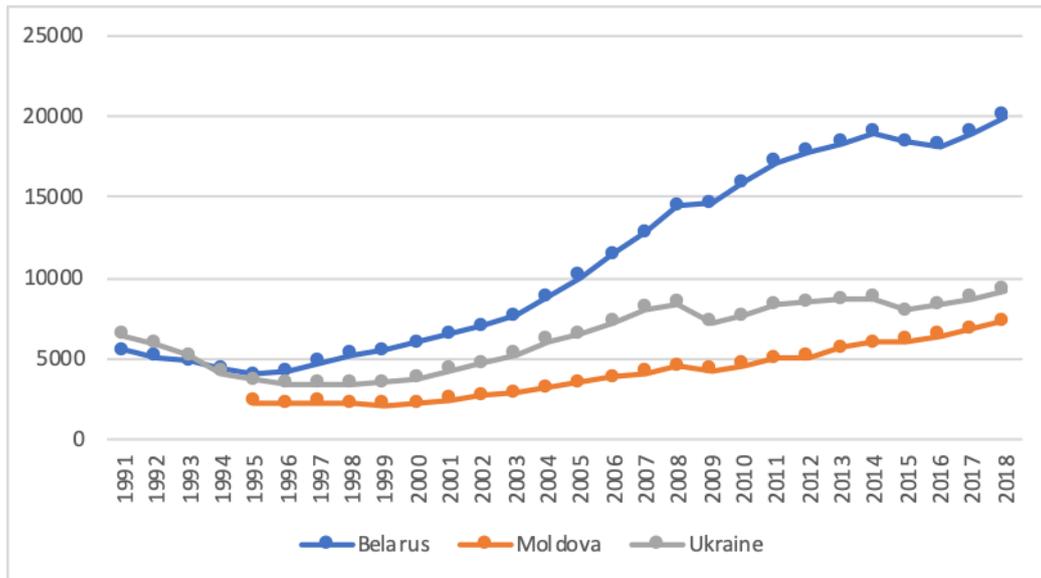
Source: Freedom in the World Countries, freedomhouse.org

Figure 8. States of Belarus, Moldova, and Ukraine (1991–2013)



Source: Polity IV database.

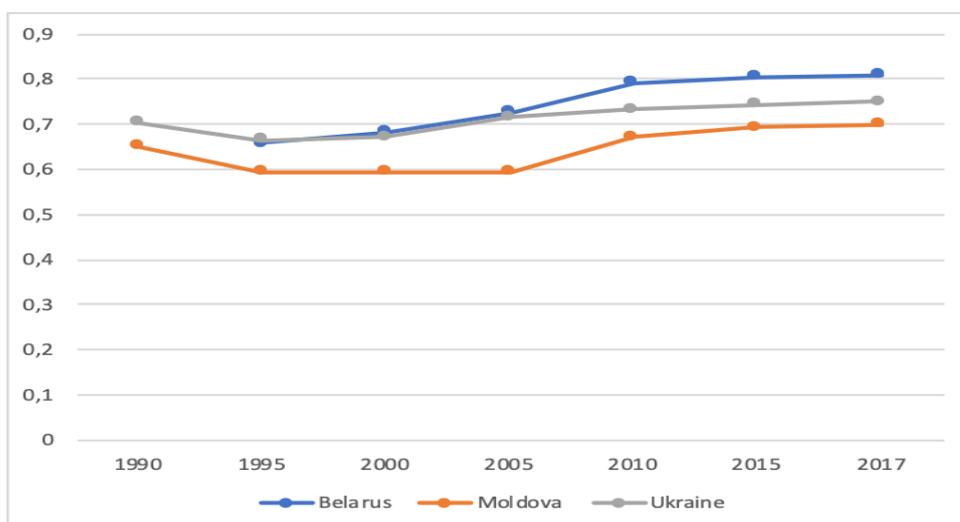
Figure 9. Economies of Belarus, Moldova, and Ukraine (1991–2018)



Source: World Bank database on GDP per capita, PPP (current international \$, 2018), <https://data.worldbank.org/>

Unlike the other neighboring states, Belarus does not have a sovereignty deficit, nor does it provide sponsorship to any other de facto state. Due to its early turn to autocracy and its lack of economic value for the West, Belarus was isolated from the Western core. It is not a member of the Council of Europe, it has a minimal program of cooperation with NATO, and it only recently opened up for some cooperation with Western governments (Table 1). Instead, Belarus is closely associated with Russia: it is formally united with Russia in their Union State, and it is a member of the Commonwealth of Independent States, the Eurasian Economic Union, and the Common Security Treaty Organization (Ibid.). Nonetheless, the Belarusian regime has been able to keep some distance from Russia and to preserve its sovereignty. In terms of human development, Belarus is also the leader in the subregion (Figure 10).

Figure 10. Human Development in Belarus, Moldova, and Ukraine (1990–2018)



Source: UNDP HDR site, hdr.undp.org

After a shock connected to the military conflict and secession of Transnistria, and despite the constant presence of unionist political forces, Moldova has been developing steadily as an independent state with a multi-pyramid system and mixed status in terms of freedoms (Hale, 2014; Figures 7 and 8). For the entire post-Soviet period, Moldova has been the worst economy in the subregion, only recently being able to return to the levels of 1991 (Figure 9).

Moldovan power elites have managed balancing between the interests of Russia, the EU, Romania, and Ukraine while maintaining their security. The conflict with Transnistria froze nearly 25 years ago. By using a soft power approach, Chisinau has been slowly integrating Transnistrians into Moldova's society and economy. Even though Transnistria continues to exist as a de facto state and enjoys constant Russian support, Chisinau does not need to spend much on its security sector.

In terms of human development, Moldova has not shown much progress. Its HDI is the worst in the subregion; however, the country has reached a better situation than it had in 1991 (Figure 10).

A slow reformer and an economic underperformer in early 1990s, Ukraine has since managed to evolve into a relatively stable state with a multi-pyramid system and oscillations between more and less free status (Figures 7 and 8). In 1994–1995, Kyiv overcame Crimean separatism and unified the country. In 2004–2005, during its color revolution and pro-Western change in government, the Ukrainian government found a compromise with southeastern clans and prevented Donbass from seceding. Later, in 2005–2007, these clans were integrated back into the political class. In 2014, the Euromaidan protests caused a change of government and provided the Kremlin with an opportunity to illegally annex Crimea and support secessionist and irredentist movements in Ukraine's southeastern regions. Nonetheless, the War in Donbass has had an impact on Ukraine's development: Ukrainian armed forces and security services became much more effective instruments for the defense of the state's sovereignty (Robinson, 2019).

For 23 years, Ukraine balanced the influences of Russia, the United States, and the EU. However, in 2013, the traditional multilateral foreign policy of Kyiv met obstacles, as Russia and the EU's integration policies became much more demanding and incompatible (Wolczuk & Wolczuk 2013). Yanukovich's choice to strengthen the integration with Russia and the EEU and to postpone association with the EU was based on the needs of an economy that had been severely damaged in the early 1990s, in 1998, and in 2008-- and economy that was entering troubled waters yet again in 2013 (Figure 9). After the victory of the pro-Maidan parties, an association agreement with the EU was signed, while the political, cultural, and economic ties with Russia were severed. As a result of these developments, Ukraine currently is isolated from Russia, is no longer a CIS monitoring member anymore, has increased political and economic cooperation with EU member-states, and is comprehensively deepening its collaboration on security issues with NATO (Table 1). Even the Ukrainian constitution now includes the statement that Euro-Atlantic integration is a priority for the state.

Prior to 2013, Russian and Western cultural influences were very strong in Ukraine. After Euromaidan, Western cultural hegemony emerged while Russia's cultural influence decreased (probably to a historical minimum). At the same time, Ukraine's human development was unpretentiously keeping between the Belarusian and Moldovan results (Figure 10).

In this subregion there are also three non-recognized states. In all three cases Russia is the sponsor state. The oldest non-recognized state is Transnistria, which was formed between 1990 and 1994 as a Russian-backed enclave between Moldova and Ukraine with a population of about 500,000 (Table 2). Even though the non-free status of the Transnistrian regime has not changed, due to the worsening of the situation in Russia, the population of this territory now is in a comparatively freer situation than the citizens of the sponsor state are (Figure 5).

Between 1994 and 2014, Ukraine and Moldova were successfully dealing with secessionist and separatist movements in Crimea and Gagauzia, respectively. However, as a result of the Euromaidan protests, the change of the Ukrainian government, the irredentist and secessionist movements in southeastern oblasts, and Russia's aggression, the so-called Luhans'k and Donets'k 'People's Republics' were established in 2014. The territories controlled by these two 'republics' are populated by over 3 million people (Table 2).

The spread of secessionism in this subregion is undeniable. Here, the number of de facto states has increased from one to three, and the population of these territories is now seven times larger than in 1994. By the end of 2019, there were five cases of a smooth transition of power in Transnistria (with over 25 budget-planning cycles) and two changes of 'parliaments' and 'heads of state' (with four budget-planning cycles) in Luhans'k and Donets'k.¹³ The latter polities are being developed with the use of lessons learned in Transnistria and Abkhazia, and these lessons have sped up the formation of state institutions in these territories (Minakov, 2019b). All three de facto states fulfil three out of five core functions of the state, but they need constant political, financial, and economic support from Russia, and they cannot resist their parent and core states without Russian military and security support.

The secessionist movements in all three cases were heavily connected with Russian cultural and ideological processes. The 'Russian spring' ideology based on neo-Soviet conservatism, Slavic racism/nationalism, anti-westernism, and Russian neo-imperialism has bloomed both in the sponsor state and in the universities and cultural centers of Luhans'k and Donets'k (Shekhovtsov 2017; Minakov 2019b). Here, the impact on legitimacy discourses was mutual, but the biggest influence definitely came from Russia-based centers.

¹³ The change of the "heads of state" in Donets'k (2018) and Luhans'k (2017) "republics" was forceful though.

4. Conclusions

Thus, by 2020, post-Soviet Eastern Europe has evolved into a region of six recognized sovereign states and six non- or partially recognized states. In a nutshell, this region is characterized by the following:

- Socioeconomic success of non-free autocratic states, Belarus and Azerbaijan. Belarus is relatively well off in economic terms, has been ruled by the same leader for over 25 years and is the only state that fully controls its territory. However, it is limited in its international relations due to the quality of its regime and Russia's influence. Azerbaijan has been ruled by the same family for most of its post-Soviet history and its population has been provided with relatively high income levels. It is a rather isolated, non-free state that has developed under the conditions of an oil curse and an inability to control part of its internationally recognized territory.
- Georgia, Moldova, and Ukraine oscillate between semi-free and non-free regimes and do not control parts of their internationally recognized territory. Furthermore, Georgia and Ukraine are in an institutionalized conflict with Russia, which decreases their political stability. Moldova's power elites are split between pro-Romania/EU and pro-Russian geopolitical orientations, which, however, does not help this state reintegrate Transnistria. In socioeconomic terms, these nations have demonstrated rather humble success in post-Soviet development.
- Armenia also oscillates between a more or less free regime, but, due to the Karabakh conflict, it is isolated in its subregion, faces permanent socioeconomic hardships, and depends on Russia's military support.

These states have been developing in human and economic terms in relatively humble ways. Their Central European neighbors show much better results. Only Azerbaijan and Belarus show considerable economic growth after 1991; the other states have not moved far ahead compared to when they started.

The Eastern European de facto states vary as much as their parent states.

- Abkhazia and South Ossetia developed into a group of partially recognized states, while Nagorno-Karabakh and Transnistria remain as non-recognized states. Even though these four de facto states vary in terms of recognition, after over 25 years of de facto existence they have evolved into stable political systems with non-free status. Due to their length of existence, they also have developed strong political identities shared by their populations. These states depend politically, militarily, and economically on their sponsor states (in five cases on Russia and in one case on Armenia).
- The 'Donets'k and Luhans'k republics' are new statelets that have only begun their state-building processes. They both depend on the political, military, and economic support of Russia. So far, their state identities and political systems are very fragile, which provides Ukraine with an

opportunity for the reintegration of these breakaway communities/territories.

Post-Soviet Eastern Europe is a region of growing contradictions between local polities. The parent states (Azerbaijan, Georgia, Moldova, and Ukraine) seek external support in limiting the development of their breakaway communities/territories. Russia and, to a lesser extent, Armenia are sponsor states of the six de facto statelets in the region. Finally, the post-Soviet de facto states show a tendency for growth:

- their number increased from four (1994) to six (after 2014) statelets;
- their population expanded from a million (1994) to over four million (after 2014) people.

Post-Soviet Eastern Europe is a region where contradictions between local nations, the United States, the EU, and Russia grow, and where 'successful' models of development are provided by autocracies like Belarus and Azerbaijan. Currently, this region lives between the 'authoritarian belt' (from Turkey to Azerbaijan, to Russia and to Belarus) and the 'illiberal belt' (from Estonia to Latvia, to Lithuania, to Poland, to Hungary etc.) (Freedom in the World 2019). Thus, the relations between post-Soviet Eastern European states and their neighboring countries do not provide us with any hope for near-future progress, either in terms of freedom within these countries, or in terms of peace among these nations.

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