

**POLITICAL CREATIVITY  
AND ITS DEMOCRATIC AND AUTOCRATIC OUTCOMES:  
THE CASE OF THE POST-SOVIET PERIOD, 1989–2022**

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**Abstract.** *This article is an attempt to assess and understand the democracy- and autocracy-building achievements of the peoples of Eastern Europe and Northern Eurasia in the post-Soviet interwar period (1989–2022). The concepts of political creativity and the post-Soviet interwar period, together with the V-Dem indices, guide this study of the post-Soviet political experience.*

*The first part of the article sets out the theoretical framework. The second part provides an analysis and assessment of the democratic and autocratic outcomes of post-Soviet societies in comparative perspective. The list of their democratic and autocratic achievements is supported by generalized assessments based on empirical data from the cases of four countries: Estonia (a stable democracy with strong Western influence), Russia (a short-lived democracy turned aggressive autocracy with competing external influences), Ukraine (an unstable democracy with competing external influences), and Uzbekistan (a stable autocracy with a minimum of diverse external influences).*

*The theoretical and empirical arguments of this study reveal the post-Soviet period as a dramatic time of high hopes and controversial achievements leading to the Russian invasion of Ukraine and growing regional chaos.*

**Keywords:** *freedom, subjection, political creativity, allegiance, citizenship, history, post-Soviet period, democratization, autocratization, Eastern Europe, Northern Eurasia*

As of the third decade of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, European nations have returned to life under the conditions that prevailed before the “long peace”.<sup>1</sup> The year 2022 saw the simultaneous beginning in Eastern and Western Europe of the Russian invasion of Ukraine, the fragmentation of the continent’s states into blocs, and the adaptation of societies, economies, and political systems to military goals. The speed of this transformation, which equally revives old political practices and policies (e.g., the “Iron Curtain”) and gives birth to new ones (e.g., the pro-Ukrainian alliance and the rejection of neutrality), demonstrates that most political, economic, and social actors were ready for a historic change of this nature. Military and political crises are being coped with, as so often in the past, by the application of human creativity—the existential and evolutionary force driving both our adaptation to a changing environment and the direction we give it.

For the societies living in the east of Europe, the current crisis has brought an end to what was long called “the post-Soviet period”.<sup>2</sup> Basically, from the perspective of early 2023, the post-Soviet period was an *interwar* age for the peoples of Eastern Europe and Northern Eurasia, a time clearly framed by the end of the Cold War and the start of the major Russian-Ukrainian war.

The end of this historical period, with the tremendous opportunities and challenges that it brought to the over 285 million humans inhabiting the republics of the late USSR in 1989 and participating in the creation of new nations in 1991, is a crucial event calling for self-analysis and introspection. These past three decades have been a unique time for free political creativity in a region that was long under the rule, by turns, of traditional imperial power, a Marxist revolutionary state, the totalitarian Stalinist system, and the oppressive late Soviet state—all equally hostile to political freedom and individual rights. The peoples of the region dedicated their lives to the reinvention of the state, political pluralism, citizenship, nationality, prosperity, and tolerance. Yet despite all the opportunities, the vast majority of communities and societies did not create a political and legal infrastructure able to ensure that the liberties gained in the early 1990s would prevail and that Europe would remain a region of peace and cooperation among nations.

This mismatch between opportunity and achievement is exactly why the post-Soviet experience calls for analysis. In this article I will attempt such an analysis from the perspective of a philosopher trying to make sense of a period that my generation and I lived through, together with generations of our parents and children, participating in major historical processes in which we simultaneously co-created conditions for freedom and for subjugation, for citizenship and for allegiance,<sup>3</sup> for peace and for war.

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<sup>1</sup> For discussion of the “long peace” and its end, see Cottey 2022; Duffield 1994; Inglehart et al. 2015.

<sup>2</sup> See the use of this term in Isaacs & Polese 2016; Kuzio 2002; Solonari 2003; Spivak et al. 2006; Tlostanova 2015.

<sup>3</sup> Following the advice of William Pomeranz, here I use the term “allegiance” with the meaning of “poddanichestvo”, an alternative condition to citizenship. In this context, allegiance refers to a form of

I will use the concept of political creativity to identify and assess the democratic and autocratic outcomes achieved in the post-Soviet interwar period.

Consequently, this article begins with a section dedicated to the concepts of political creativity and the post-Soviet period, along with their application to the analysis of the post-Soviet experience. The analysis and assessment of the democratic and autocratic outcomes of post-Soviet societies in comparative perspective occupies the second section. The article ends with conclusions attempting to summarize how the human essence manifested itself in the post-Soviet interwar period.

## **1. Theoretical framework**

For the purposes of this paper, it is important to clarify the meaning of (1) the concept of political creativity and (2) the historical period as a subject of study. The theoretical framework that results from this clarification offers a perspective on the post-Soviet period that combines approaches of the political ontology with the theory of social experience. The tensions between the empirical and ontological planes are sublated (in the Hegelian sense) in the notion of political creativity, whose material and ideational outcomes give meaning and significance to the lives of human actors and their non-human co-elements in the networks and continuities of history.

### **1.1. Political creativity**

From an ontological point of view, political creativity is the capacity of human existence to launch new beginnings in the political sphere, i.e., in a sphere where human and non-human actors cooperate and struggle to attain (what Aristotle would call) the “highest common good.” The novelty of such beginnings can be absolute or relative. Absolutely new beginnings involve the creation of some unprecedented political practice, institution, organization, or ideological construction.<sup>1</sup> Relatively new beginnings involve a political outcome that is new for some politically relevant group but has precedents in the history of other groups. Whether absolute or relative, political creativity is about the manifestation of human presence in the world through the creation of new beginnings that can be realized as things, ideas, processes, or situations.

The creativity of human existence is adjacent to other, equally authentic, human capacities: destructiveness, passivity, obstruction, participation-as-an-element-in-a-network, and the various blends thereof. Human existence is present in the world simultaneously in chaos and in a wide variety of orders, which can be described in terms of Latour’s networks and Luhmann’s systems (Latour 2007; Luhmann et al. 2013).

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active political participation based on accepting subjugation to undivided state power and hostile to the republican logic of citizenship.

<sup>1</sup> Hannah Arendt discusses this further in describing the specificity of “revolution” (Arendt 2006). See also the interpretation of human creativity in the political and ideological senses in Minakov 2022.

In these variously understood and existing orders, creativity and destructiveness, passivity and obstruction can be distinguished and expressed, while in the chaos of the world these capacities merge in transient changes and inexpressible impermanence.

Creativity is one of the capacities of human existence that specifically manifests itself in launching new beginnings through activity that can be described as “sketching a project”—an act comparable to hurling the lasso of a plan into Nothingness and filling that plan with the living human energy that turns Nothingness into Being-present-in-the-world. This understanding of existential creativity was well expressed, for example, in the existentialist phenomenology of Martin Heidegger and Jean-Paul Sartre (Heidegger 2010, 2014; Sartre 1960).

This understanding of creativity does not contradict, and indeed is also acceptable in, a posthuman ontology, such as an actor-network perspective. To be an element of an actor network means to be co-present and to interact in many different ways with non- and not-entirely-human elements (Jensen 2003; Latour 2007; Murdoch 2001). In actor networks, a human being manifests her/his specificity (but neither centrality nor dominant position) in initiating a series of new situations and processes whose realization is possible in interaction with other elements of the network. From such an open perspective—one that respects existentialist ontology and post-human philosophy—human creativity can be understood in terms of intersubjective and interobjective differences, connections, and productivity.

Human creativity is a capacity only recently appreciated in philosophy and the social sciences. In their short history of the concept of creativity, Vlad Glaveanu and James Kaufman were correct to stipulate that “creativity is a modern concept and a modern value” (Glaveanu & Kaufman 2019: 9). Although creativity was also known to philosophers before modern times or in other cultures with own temporalities, it was seen as a capacity with ambivalent or even transgressive significance: it was a divine rather than a human faculty. In the hands of non-Gods, creativity was a transgressive act of participation in the universe’s creation—and thus prohibited (for humans) and punishable. It was only the Enlightenment, with its focus on rationality and individualism, that legitimized human creativity and sparked interest in its two main characteristics: novelty and originality (ibid.: 14–17).

In the past three centuries, since the launch of the Enlightenment, philosophers, psychologists, and anthropologists have tried to describe human creativity in four ways: (1) as a productive force of intelligence; (2) as some kind of unconscious process; (3) as a pragmatic force of problem-solving; and (4) as a process of mental associations generating new contents (Brown 1989: 4). Much more recently, the same four interpretations of creativity can be seen in discussions among geneticists (Barbott & Eff 2019: 132) and evolutionary biologists (Feist 2007: 16ff.).

These four ways of understanding human creativity can be seen in long-term debates over its role in politics. For example, peace has been seen as a product of human creativity, achieved by the application of human reason and the construction of modern, rational political institutions (see, e.g., Kant [1795] 2008; Pinker 2011).

The political behavior of masses has often been interpreted through the lens of unconscious processes (see Adorno 1968; Freud [1927] 2007). Pragmatists have studied political judgment and action in terms of problem-solving and/or establishing the conditions that produce them (Dewey [1935] 1998; Honnet 1998; Rorty 1999). The fourth approach can be seen, for example, in research on social and ideological processes (Etkind & Minakov 2020; Freedman 1996; Oakshott 2011; Simmel 1949). The notion of creativity in the political sphere is firmly rooted and widely accepted in contemporary research.

Despite these differences, political creativity is commonly understood as a capacity that reveals the ontological and empirical nexus between individual human presence and intersubjective existence, between personal endeavor and collective action, and between an actor's free will and the conditionality imposed by the situation (or some sort of determination). This transgressive and synthetic role of political creativity was well expressed by Dennis Galvan, Victoria Hattam, and Gerald Berk:

[P]olitical creativity [is] a concept intended to capture both the pervasiveness of change as well as the deeply embedded nature of social action. Political creativity is at once not determined by background conditions and yet constituted through extant social relations... [P]olitical creativity jettisons the duality of free will and determinism (or necessity and contingency) for an investigation into the relationships and processes that situate creativity and are, in turn, reconstituted by it... Political creativity blurs the analytic boundaries intended to keep order, agency, and change from mingling. (Galvan et al. 2013: 3, 5)

In contemporary political philosophy and political theory, there is an ongoing debate as to which sociopolitical conditions are best for unlocking and supporting the human creative faculty.

The classical liberal democratic position was coined by John Dewey ([1939] 2021), who argued that the adaptability and survival of the human species relates to the intellectual faculty of solving problematic situations in social reality. Social realities—whether of democracy or of dictatorship—equally create problems for humans, but they offer radically different conditions for the solution of these problems. The political freedoms of democracy create the best conditions for seeking solutions through open discussion and experimentation, while the limited freedoms of a dictatorship constrain human creativity in problem-solving. Thus, for Dewey, even though human creativity can be seen in all forms of governance and types of political systems, the best options for the survival and evolution of humankind are provided by political institutions that support individual and collective creative problem-solving, i.e., by liberal democracies. Later, Popper's "open society" concept, Rawls' theory of justice, and Beck's model of an enlightened "risk society" enriched the liberal democratic perspective with understanding of how life, freedom, and rationality mutually support each other in individual and collective creative acts (Beck 1992; Popper 2012; Rawls 1971).

The socialist or social-democratic approach to political creativity tends to move the focus from its rational and normative foundations to social action.

For example, Karl Marx, Jurgen Habermas, and Hans Joas—despite serious differences in their positions—aim at discovering social structures that direct human creativity and alienate the results of this creativity (Habermas 1981; Joas 1996; Marx [1867] 2004). Their theories of capital, communicative action, and creativity of action create foundations for practices engaging individuals and groups in common action that fuels social progress and group emancipation.

Many theories and practices around conservative politics in general share a common perspective on political creativity, seeing it as a *longue durée* process whose historically rooted subject is a *tradition*, a collective transgenerational subject that supersedes the “imperfection” of an individual. Conservative optics in the West and East perceive creativity as a spatially widespread and temporally continuous process collecting the sociopolitical achievements of past generations into a single structure with one unchangeable identity stemming from some ideal past event, such as divine revelation or a sage’s inspired decision, leading to an ontologically embedded, authentic, just order that must either be restored or serve as an example for political action (see, e.g., Chateaubriand [1838] 2000; Dugin 2002; Huntington 2000; Khomeini [1940] 2001; Lübke 1981). The permanent dialogue between past and living generations of some religiously, ethnically, racially, or otherwise identified group occupies the center of attention for conservative thinkers, whichever position they take—reactionary or revolutionary—in this highly diverse “ideological camp.”

Political creativity is also an issue for theoreticians of revolution. The diversity of opinions within this perspective stretches from Vladimir Lenin’s understanding of revolution in terms of the “living creativity of masses” to Hannah Arendt’s interpretation of revolution as a coincidence of “freedom and the experience of a new beginning” (Arendt 1990: 29; Lenin 1974: 57). Despite obvious contradictions between their polar positions, both perceive revolution as a time and space where existing structural obstacles (social, economic, political, etc.) are destroyed and the creative human energy thereby released—whether that of human individuals, revolting groups, or mass movements—has a historic opportunity to launch a new, unprecedented beginning leading to a new expression of human existence in the sociopolitical sphere (Arendt) or a historic change in the direction of fuller emancipation of humanity (Marx, Engels, Lenin, etc.). So the revolution itself is seen as an event of great political creativity, which is ordinarily limited or blocked by political-economic and ideological structures.

Finally, political creativity is at the center of attention for thinkers who work on the idea of developmental states (Calder 1995; Gajdar 2022; Huntington 1965; Keynes [1926] 2010; Sen 2001). Unlike theoreticians of revolution, these thinkers attend to political creativity in times of social order rather than during moments of revolutionary chaos. As Pavlo Kutuev (2016: 61ff.) rightly mentioned, their theories look at the state as an agent of progress that would create conditions for and direct *modernization*, a transformative creative process uniting individual endeavors, small group projects, and national development programs and bringing change to all spheres, including the social, political, economic, and cultural.

The differences between and within these perspectives in terms of the understanding of political creativity are symptomatic. The transgressive and synthetic significance of this concept provokes debate, but the concept itself instantaneously offers a solution: this human faculty is able to reveal itself on different planes and under different conditions, in both theory and practice, in both universal value systems and particular ideologies. If one aims to study a given historical period from the point of view of human creativity in the political sphere, it is essential to look at creative outcomes simultaneously under democracy and autocracy, in connection with personal rights and with collective autonomy, in revolutionary moments and over the course of gradual development.

These outcomes can be measured and assessed using contemporary methods that aggregate experts' evaluations of key political processes at global, regional, and national levels. For the purposes of this article, I will use the empirical data and the high-level generalized assessments of these data offered by the Varieties of Democracy project (V-Dem 2023a). This project provides "a multidimensional and disaggregated dataset that reflects the complexity" of the different varieties of democratic processes at all three levels. In addition, the dataset offers data relevant to processes opposite to democratization: it includes "a research project that aims to contribute to a better understanding of (1) why and how political regimes move towards autocracy as well as (2) the institutions and stability of historical and contemporary autocracies" (V-Dem 2023b). The collected data and assessments go through a process of verification and aggregation that leads to the definition of generalized indicators that allow for the measurement of the state of institutions either at a given time, or continuously, or in comparison with the same institutions and processes in other countries. The generalized indicators and indices offered by V-Dem can serve as a reliable tool for measuring creative outcomes under democracy and autocracy in terms of institutions built in the post-Soviet period.

The review and assessment of creative outcomes in post-Soviet democracies and autocracies will occupy the second part of this article. First, it is necessary to clarify what a historical period is in general and what the post-Soviet period is in particular. How can a period be studied, understood, and assessed?

## **1.2. Understanding the post-Soviet period**

For the purposes of this study, it is important to conceptualize the post-Soviet period as a subject of scholarly study. The term "post-Soviet" still provokes a symptomatic aversion for many of us, now that the war in Ukraine and the preceding autocratic wave have revived some "Soviet practices" in many countries of our continent. The deeper the societies of our region fall back into a regime of ideological monopoly resembling the Soviet political culture, the harsher our reaction to the term "Soviet," even with the prefix "post-." This symptom is connected to the fact that some elements of the Soviet system survived the USSR's dissolution and the reforms of the 1990s. Taking into account the many social traumas and political engagements connected with the Soviet heritage in the region, around the globe, and in different schools of

social sciences, this turning of a divisive experience into a scholarly concept requires an effort to put our traumatic bias in brackets and look soberly at the events and processes—social, political, economic, cultural, etc.—that have constituted the post-Soviet period. One should stress the first, and not the second, part of the term “post-Soviet,” which means focusing on the practices and processes in Eastern European and Northern Eurasian societies in terms of the creative outcomes that were simultaneously directed by two interrelated tendencies:

- 1) shedding the USSR’s totalitarian and late Soviet authoritarian legacies, and
- 2) launching new beginnings in the form of new, post-Soviet nations, economies, and states.

The term “post-Soviet” refers both to a historical period and to a social experience based on the rejection of Soviet practices and values. The post-Soviet period was full of efforts at self-overcoming by individuals, small groups, and entire societies in Eastern Europe and Northern Eurasia in the three decades between 1989–91 and 1922–23. Simultaneously, the post-Soviet period was constituted by revolutionary attempts to create new social worlds in the region. Under such a definition of the post-Soviet period, one could discuss the balance between the destruction of the past and the innovations of political creativity. But this approach also opens the recently ended post-Soviet period to a less ideologically charged and more hermeneutically valid analysis: one can look at this 30-year timeframe as a context for understanding how Eastern European and Northern Eurasian societies lived and manifested their presence in the world with both their political destructiveness and their creativity, with both their power to imagine and their capacity to act, with both their commitment to and their fear of freedom and prosperity.

This conceptualization of the post-Soviet period is based on a philosophical approach that envisions history as a combination of continuities and caesuras. A set of continuities and interruptions refers—in the social reality and in our imagination—simultaneously to the past, the present, and the future, for humankind, for each community, and for each human person.<sup>1</sup> The continuities relate to collective human efforts to live through time periods in certain localities with traces of individual and collective co-presence together with other, non-human actors in the historical events of those periods. The caesuras are moments of rupture in various continuous processes or established networks, which are experienced by human actors as crises—social, political, or ecological. These are the moments that put an end to lasting events, large-scale actor networks, and their specific orders, opening a space for new ones to take their place. Continuity is the historical element supplying space and time for human creativity to be realized. Caesura is the historical element in which one continuity comes to a full or partial end and a new one has a chance to begin, thus opening new opportunities and challenges for human creativity.

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<sup>1</sup> For more on this approach, see Minakov 2022b: 68ff.

From an ontological point of view, during a caesura, human actors (individuals and some small or large groups organized around some historically significant identity) encounter the Nothingness that reigns around our lifeworlds and make a choice for new self-understanding, new self-definition, and their own new projects, sketched into the void of the future. The interruption of continuities also allows them to look at their past as one looks at definite periods, eras, or epochs—fragments of humanity's experience open for sense-making, interpretation, and narration. Consequently, history is a constellation of continuities (events, processes, networks, and related narrations) and their interruptions, wherein different historical actors constantly end and restart projects, in addition to telling and retelling their (hi)stories.

Caesuras occur as vital changes, like the ones that transformed one geological period into another, essentially changing the forms of life on Earth. Caesuras can also be seen in the moments when war or revolution leads to changes in the social order and what people are able to imagine. It is also important to remember that there can be *attempts* at caesuras—hybrid events, when the rupture of some historical process does not go deep enough for a complete break: the energy of continuity is stronger than the energy of caesura. In such cases, the continuity is reborn after the end of the attempted caesura.

An example of caesura is the disruption of the Soviet continuity in 1989–1991, when the Eastern Bloc and the USSR collapsed. For the societies living between the Adriatic and the White Sea, from the Alps to the Kamchatka, those few years were a time to re-evaluate their recent histories, to reject their political systems stemming from the Soviet communist imagination, and to launch their new collective sociopolitical projects, which shaped the new historical time and space.

Understanding history as a constellation of continuities and caesuras allows one to look at the post-Soviet period as a continuity between two caesuras. The post-Soviet period began with the caesura of 1989–1991, when the communist order's continuity was ruptured and a new period started. Spatially, the post-Soviet period encompasses societies and communities that were formed after the collapse of the Soviet Union. Temporally, this period stretches for approximately 30 years between the 1989–1991 caesura and the new caesura, which began with the event of the major Russian-Ukrainian war in 2022. In terms of historical meaning, the post-Soviet period can be narrated as a time that unleashed human creativity in terms of political, civil, religious, entrepreneurial, and ethnonational emancipation. This creativity also introduced the Western experience to the peoples of Eastern Europe and Northern Eurasia who partially changed their social realities in accord with imported Western models.

For the peoples living in the Eastern Bloc and the USSR, the caesura of 1989–1991 was a revolutionary and constitutive moment that produced opportunities to build functional democracies, open-market economies, new national states, and Europe-inspired societies. It is in view of these narratives that “post-Soviet” means “anti-Soviet.” In other words, the post-Soviet era started with two guiding ideas:

(1) overcoming the traumas incurred by the Soviet communist imagination and practices and (2) finding ways into the future based on political creativity and largely determined by the negation of the Soviet political and social experience. This is why historical events and (self-describing) narratives of that period were, despite their diversity, very much linked to a Soviet past that carried doom with it, inhibiting the social imagination and repressing the political creativity of post-Soviet societies. Thus, the four major tendencies of the post-Soviet transformation—democratization, marketization, nationalization, and Europeanization<sup>1</sup>—were practiced and understood by traumatized individuals and collectives, with their Soviet- and caesura-related distresses and sufferings.<sup>2</sup>

The post-Soviet era ended with an unprovoked attack on Ukraine by the Russian Federation. Although the military conflict in Ukraine began in 2014, it was in February 2022 that the forces of the historical caesura were visibly released. This event marked a rupture with the post-Soviet continuity and set in motion the catastrophic processes that changed the region, Europe at large, and the global rules-based order.

Taking into account the caesura of 2022 and the destructive regional processes that continued in 2023, it is reasonable to conclude that the post-Soviet period was a new, second “inter-war period.” The first inter-war period lasted between the two World Wars of the 20<sup>th</sup> century and was later narrated as a global period (Long & Wilson 1995; Overy 2014). The second, post-Soviet period so far—from the viewpoint of 2023—has a regional (Eastern European and Northern Eurasian) meaning of some continuity between the end of the Cold War (at the end of the 1980s) and the 2022 start of the major Russian-Ukrainian war of attrition.

From the point of view of political creativity, the post-Soviet inter-war period was constituted by the four tendencies mentioned above, which comprise the post-communist (or post-Soviet) tetrad: democratization, marketization, nationalization, and Europeanization. These four tendencies organized events connected with the relevant societies as well as with their (self-)description. They are further characterized below.

Democratization was a process directing the political creativity of post-Soviet societies towards the construction of new political cultures, systems, and regimes founded on (1) the division of power between autonomous branches, as well as among central and local governments; (2) the rule of law and human rights; (3) ideological pluralism; (4) the diversity of parties and competitive elections; (5) a strong role for independent mass media and civic organizations; and (6) the growing role of citizens’ deliberation in decision-making processes (Dryzek & Holmes 2002; Gel’man 2003; Gunitsky, S. 2018; V-Dem 2023).

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<sup>1</sup> On this “post-communist (or post-Soviet) tetrad,” please see Minakov 2021b: 25–6. From this perspective, we see no difference between post-communist and post-Soviet phenomena, although they can be seen in other perspectives.

<sup>2</sup> However, as the developments and narratives of the post-Soviet era demonstrated, the caesura of 1989–1991 had different depths and broke differently with the Soviet continuity in different post-Soviet societies.

Even though the post-Soviet spread of democracy was a part of a wider global process (the “third wave of democratization”),<sup>1</sup> it had its own specificity: post-Soviet nations reinvented political freedom and institutions in the early 1990s without firsthand experience of such liberties and under the strong influence of Western political models and social imagination.<sup>2</sup>

Marketization was a process directing the creativity of post-Soviet societies to establish new economies oriented to the neoliberal market model and participation in the global economy. The economic transformation was expected to be accomplished through the privatization of the huge socialist economic legacy, the creation of an entrepreneurial class, and the formation of a “middle class” of economically self-sustaining citizens who would not be willing to depend on the government and would demand respect for political liberties. Thus, the new social structure with its new classes would prevent the communists from returning to power and provide democratic politics with a suitable economic background and relevant class structure (Aslund 2013; Horvat & Evans 2011).

Nationalization was the process of the new post-Soviet states’ “nesting” in the new nations. In the 1990s it was commonly believed that some form of nationalism (be it civic or ethnic) would create a stable majority of the population whose identity would be supportive of—or at least not hostile towards—liberal democracy and a market economy (Brubaker 2011: 1786ff.; Tismaneanu 2009: 16ff., 107ff.). Usually, a nation is understood as a large, historically stable group that emerged on the basis of common social and cultural experience. But in the post-Soviet condition, state-building coincided with the processes of the destruction of Soviet society—which lasted much longer than the dissolution of the USSR—and the emergence of new national societies. The new nations did not have time to form in advance of state-building but emerged either hand in hand with it or, often, in competition with the institutionalization of the core state organizations. Hence, the complex, non-ethnonational states (like the USSR, the Yugoslav Federation, and Czechoslovakia) could neither exist any longer nor provide governance of a democratic nature.

Europeanization was a regional integration process that aimed to ensure that political, legal, and economic systems, as well as societies themselves, would be able to unify considerably around common norms and values, leading to long and peaceful coexistence and cooperation among Eastern and Western European nations. The project of a “Common European Home” was strongly influenced by the imagination of the Gorbachev-Kohl—or Habermas-Yakovlev—generation. According to this idea, the future Europe was to be a space of peace and cooperation between peoples from Dublin to Vladivostok (Avladiani 2019; Minakov 2017; Sakwa 2021).

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<sup>1</sup> On this, see the classic work by Samuel Huntington (1993) and its recent re-evaluation by Stephan Haggard and Robert Kaufman (2016).

<sup>2</sup> On this specific reinterpretation of democracy, see Gel'man 2003; Hale 2011. Also see the methodology of the Varieties of Democracy research team's approach to measuring democratization (V-Dem 2023a).

In the early 1990s, these four post-Soviet tendencies, along with ideas and models associated with them, were practiced and imagined as if they were mutually supportive.<sup>1</sup> However, as will be argued later in this article, quite often they contradicted or undermined each other. The post-Soviet nationalization of states, the privatization of economies, the equality of all citizens before the law, and the promotion of the special rights of national majorities were rarely in harmony with each other. These and many other contradictions, as well the weakening of these four post-communist tendencies in the second half of the post-Soviet period, sharpened when the post-Soviet nations entered the times of “the third wave of autocratization.” Autocratization is an overarching concept that includes gradual democratic recession, sudden breakdowns of democracy, and/or autocratic consolidation “resulting in less democratic, or more autocratic, situations” (Lührmann & Lindberg 2019: 1099). It is important to stress that autocratic tendency has its own existential value, and it is not just the lack of democracy: autocracies are same products of political creativity as democracies. The third wave of autocratization is an ongoing global political process (beginning approximately 2008–2012), during which “the number of countries undergoing democratization declines while... autocratization affects more and more countries” (Lührmann & Lindberg 2019: 1102).<sup>2</sup> Those internal and international conflicts that have been growing in the post-Soviet region since 2003–2008 have sharpened under the influence of wider autocratization, led to the start of massive military conflict in the east of Europe, and put an end to the post-Soviet period.

The post-Soviet period ended with an unprovoked attack on Ukraine by the Russian Federation. This event marked a rupture with post-Soviet continuity and set in motion the catastrophic processes that finally disaggregated the post-Soviet region and influenced the processes of the global rules-based order. The processes in the post-Soviet tetrad now influence neither the current political and economic situation nor the social imagination of power elites and populations in Europe. This means that the post-Soviet period has ended and become a whole and definite historical case for analysis and interpretation.

## **2. Outcomes of political creativity in post-Soviet societies**

On the conceptual and methodological basis offered in Section 1, the case of the post-Soviet period will be analyzed and interpreted in terms of political creativity leading to two resulting ideal types: democratic and autocratic outcomes of creativity. In other words, this paper will review the post-Soviet inter-war period through the lens of the results (outcomes or achievements) of democratic and autocratic creativity in Eastern European and Northern Eurasian societies.

In this section, I offer a sort of balance sheet of democratic and autocratic institutional achievements of political creativity in post-Soviet societies, using mostly V-Dem data. Here we will see how the communities of the region reinvented statehood,

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<sup>1</sup> For more on this interdependency of practice and imagination, see Minakov 2022a.

<sup>2</sup> Compare with the data in Ágh 2022: 74ff. and Sato et al. 2022: 3ff.

ideological pluralism, political struggle, citizenship, nationality, and many other political institutions and practices.

### **2.1. Democratic outcomes of post-Soviet political creativity**

Perhaps the most significant achievement of democratic creativity among post-Soviet peoples is the founding of new states. Since states had already existed in Eastern Europe and Northern Eurasia long before the post-Soviet period, state-building in the past 30 years or so should be seen as a re-foundation of statehood. This re-foundation was primarily related to overcoming the Soviet political experience: the new states had to ensure political freedom, the possibility of entrepreneurship, better social rights, and guarantees of non-return to the Soviet political reality.

New political institutions were rebuilt in the course of an adjustment of the specific public-private balance that had existed in the Soviet Union. The Bolshevik sociopolitical experiment, Stalinist totalitarianism, and post-Stalinist Soviet authoritarianism largely manifested themselves in the expansion of the public sphere and its absorption of most of the private sphere. Specifically, the Soviet system colonized the lifeworlds of Eastern European and Northern Eurasian communities with an alternative modernization program in which a scientific-secular industrial worldview and a Marxist universalist ethic coexisted with the subjected, unemancipated individual and a special collectivity distributed throughout the elements of the Soviet social structure (Minakov 2020a: 18ff). In this structural imbalance between the two spheres, the public sphere was losing its emancipatory power, and the private sphere was unable to protect the cultural rhizome responsible for giving meaning to the lives of individuals and communities. Party ideological divisions created ideological surrogates that supplanted the lost value and meaning structures of the previous lifeworld. This worked for some time, but by the end of the 1980s, these substitutes were no longer effective and led Soviet society into a profound existential crisis.

The sprawl of the public sphere stemmed from the fact that the super-organization of a single party, the Communist Party of the Soviet Union (CPSU), controlled all public, state, economic, financial, and cultural spheres and institutions, along with many others. The CPSU was a kind of reimagined and restructured “super-organization of civil society,” which established control over state and private institutions, including family, community, business, religion, and even intimacy. Under the conditions of a sprawling public sphere, the party merged with and absorbed the centers of power, becoming itself the new, sole center of power.

This is why the energy of post-Soviet political creativity in 1989–91 set out to destroy the party monopoly in the center and in the Soviet republics. As early as the electoral campaign of 1989, when the first almost-free elections were held in the USSR, the fight against the privileged position of the Communist Party, established by Article 6 of the USSR Constitution, became a priority for opposition deputies. This article of the Soviet constitution stated:

The leading and guiding force of Soviet society, the nucleus of its political system, state and public organizations is the Communist Party of the Soviet Union. The CPSU exists for the people and serves the people.  
(*Constitution of the USSR*, 1977)

With the beginning in 1991 of real de-Sovietization in all Soviet republics, the CPSU, its structures, and the security agency of the KGB came to be targeted by prohibitions. Thus, the Communist Party was banned by decisions made either by republican Supreme Soviets (in Ukraine on August 30 and in Latvia on September 10) or by republican presidents (for example, in Uzbekistan on August 29 and in Russia on November 6). As a rule, these decisions were later duplicated by republican court decisions. CPSU assets were transferred to republican governments. The enormous party superstructure was destroyed, and with it a kind of dam that had restrained the energy of political creativity in Eastern European and Northern Eurasian communities.<sup>1</sup>

Thus, post-Soviet state-building was based on multi-party systems in new societies, liberating political institutions from the super-party's control and, at the same time, placing the emerging institutions and distributed branches of power under democratic control.

Citizens of the late Soviet Union had two types of experience with politics, the state, economics, competition, and more: their experience of public participation in a late-Soviet authoritarian society and their experience of imagining "Western freedom." This imagination was shaped in the forms of resistance to Soviet propaganda, the perception of information about politics that came from "Western sources," and the political beliefs of the perestroika era. If the Soviet political experience was an experience to be overcome, political and economic freedom constituted an indefinite object of political imagination. In practice, few actors in the post-Soviet transformation knew from own personal experience what freedom is, what a political party is, how ideological diversity functions, how to structure a system of checks and balances, and where the borderline between the private and public spheres lies. The post-Soviet period began with the audacity to create new states, political regimes, and legal systems without the necessary experience or knowledge.

Post-Soviet states were built as if from scratch, within the caesura of 1989–91 and within the two simultaneous types of revolutions—public and private—connected with it. People with no personal experience of political, economic, social, or religious freedom seeded new beginnings of new societies and new states at their own risk. The wave of private revolutions led to the emergence of new enterprises, to the privatization of Soviet enterprises, and to the launching of new services and financial institutions previously unknown to "Soviet people." Family, sexuality, gender, and intimacy proved to be spaces for new experiences of self and of close associates. At the same time, a wave of public revolutions led to the seeding of new states, constitutions, political systems, competitive politics, ideological pluralism, legal systems, and space for civil movements and organizations.

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<sup>1</sup> For more on the de-Sovietization of the early 1990s, see Kasyanov 2008: 22ff.

The irony of history is that post-Soviet states grew out of the Soviets: it was the central and republican Supreme Soviets elected in 1989–90 that became the platforms for the creation of new political spaces. The USSR Supreme Soviet began to lose importance rapidly in August 1991 due to the attempted coup and the interruption of the process of preparing a new Union Treaty. Although Soviet citizens supported the idea of a “renewed Soviet Union” in a March 1991 referendum, neither President Gorbachev nor the USSR Supreme Soviet were able to implement the will of the citizens. With President Yeltsin’s victory over the putschists in Moscow, the Supreme Soviets of all republics were able to create independent states on the territories under their control. Within the framework of the Soviet political system, the institution of the Supreme Soviet was formally the highest body of state power, in the structure of which the executive and legislative branches were formally merged. Formally, the judicial branch in the USSR existed separately. Republican and union state structures also existed separately (except for Russia, which was mainly governed by the USSR’s official institutions). But all these formal differences had little real weight, thanks to the overarching control of the CPSU.

Elections to the republican Supreme Soviets in 1990 brought to power a new generation of politicians who had done away with communist control. Formally, many of them were still members of the Communist Party, although non-Communist candidates were allowed to run. Thus, in the Supreme Soviet of the RSFSR, 86% were communists, with 11% deputies from “Democratic Russia”; in the Supreme Soviet of the Lithuanian SSR, 32% were communists, with 68% representatives of the “Sayudis” movement; in the Supreme Soviet of the Ukrainian SSR, 53% were communists, while the rest were independents or representatives of four other blocs; in the Supreme Soviet of the Georgian SSR, communists held about 30% of the seats, the rest being held by representatives of ten blocs, with the Round Table-Free Georgia bloc having 54% of the mandates (Olson & Norton 2007; Turovsky 2011). Whether the CPSU members held a majority or not, it was these Supreme Councils that decided on the independence of their republics and the new distribution of power after the collapse of the USSR.<sup>1</sup>

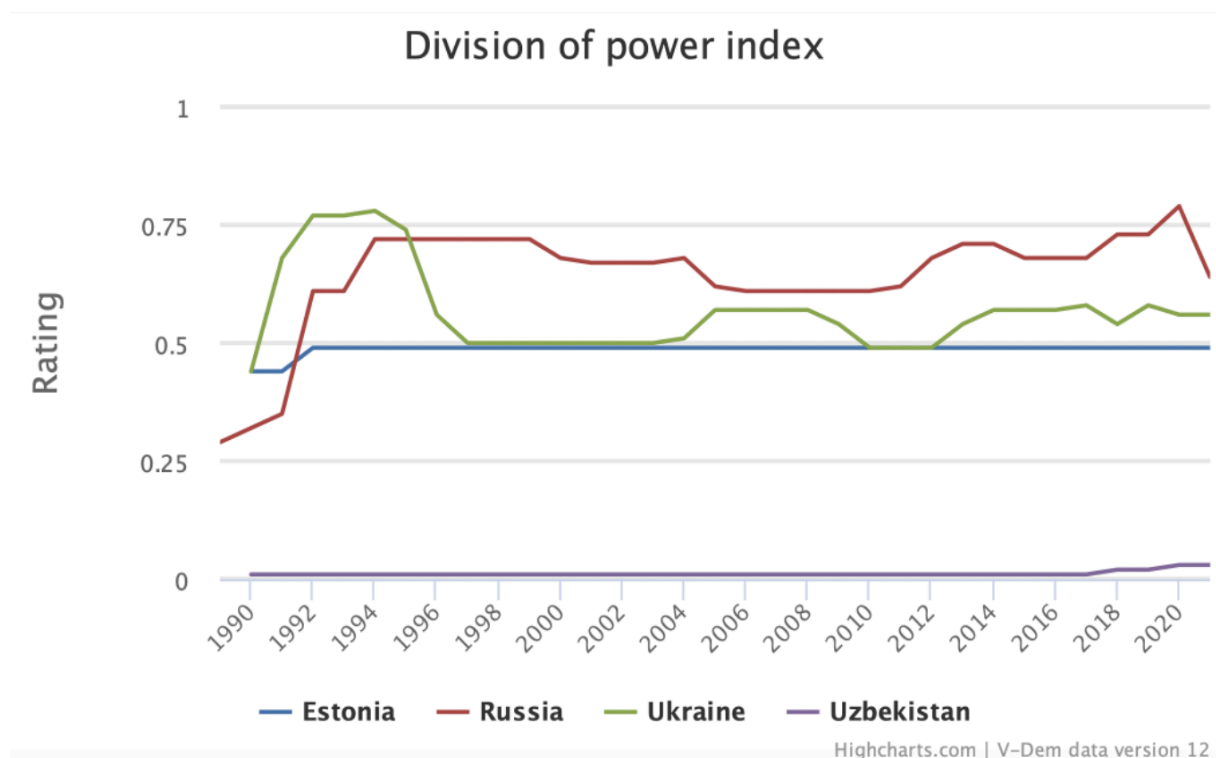
Since 1992, two branches of power can be said to have stood out from the Supreme Soviets: the executive branch and the legislature, which in the early 1990s were fighting for institutional supremacy within each political system. This struggle could take radical forms, such as the “shelling of the Duma” in Moscow in 1993 or the “shake-up of deputies” (President Lukashenka’s personal repression of independent MPs) in Minsk at the end of the 1990s. By the beginning of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, this struggle has led to the emergence of six parliamentary republics (Georgia, Armenia, Latvia, Lithuania, Moldova, and Estonia), two formally semi-presidential republics (Azerbaijan and Ukraine), and seven presidential republics (Belarus, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Russia, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan, and Uzbekistan).

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<sup>1</sup> This usually took the form of the creation of constitutional commissions and the adoption of new constitutions (Hale 2011: 600ff). In some cases, however, it may have taken place in the form of temporary “constitutional treaties” between the president and the parliament, as in Ukraine (Sharlet 2019).

Presidentialism had also been established in four unrecognized post-Soviet states, including Abkhazia (territory of Georgia), Nagorno-Karabakh (territory of Azerbaijan), Transnistria (territory of Moldova), and South Ossetia (territory of Georgia).<sup>1</sup> In the parliamentary republics, parliaments remained the leading political institution, approving laws, effectively controlling the cabinet of ministers, and limiting presidential power. In the presidential republics, presidents led the executive branch and controlled parliaments by formal and informal means. In the mixed case of Ukraine, presidents and parliaments fought for control of the cabinet of ministers from 1992 through 2019, when President Zelensky created a single-party ruling majority in the Verkhovna Rada. In all these cases, one way or another, the acceptance by elites and the population of the idea of the division of power into branches and between central and local governments, along with the implementation of this separation of powers in practice, was critical to the construction of a post-Soviet democratic state.

**Chart 1. Division of power index (Estonia, Russia, Ukraine, and Uzbekistan, 1989–2022)**



How this separation has become part of post-Soviet political practice can be seen through the Division of power index.<sup>2</sup> This index answers the question to what extent

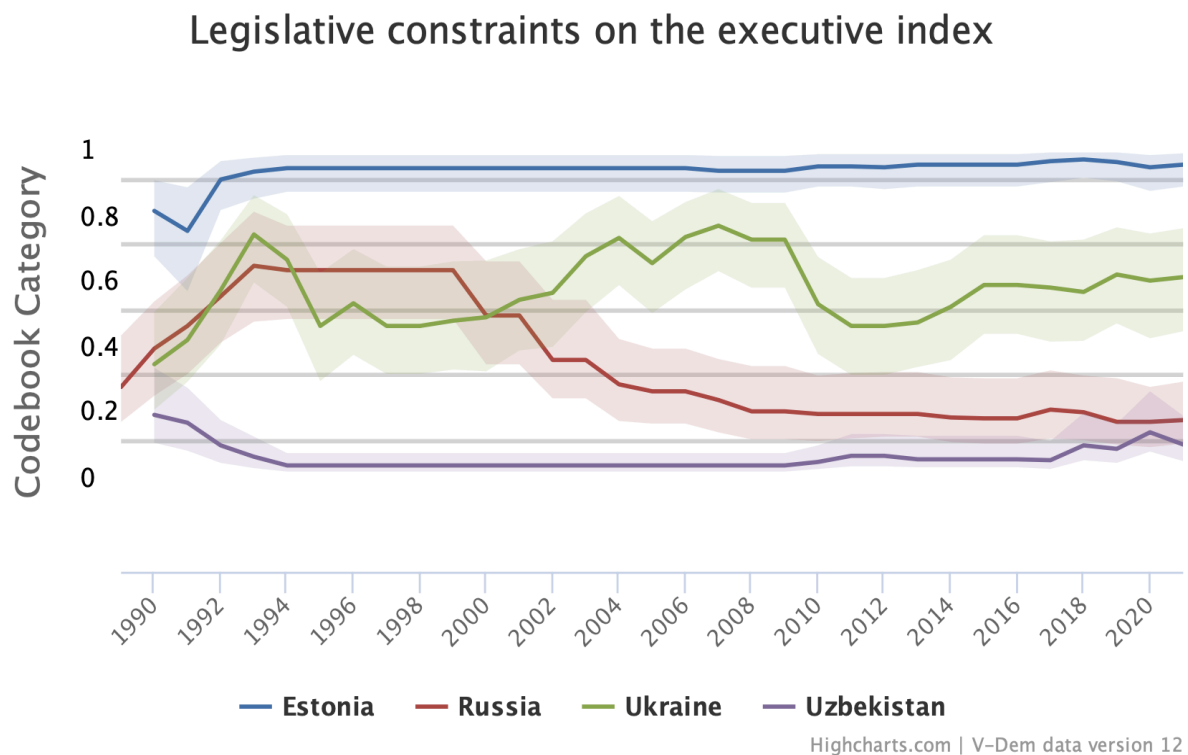
<sup>1</sup> The same form of government was formally established in the state formations of the “Donetsk and Luhansk People’s Republics” in 2014–22.

<sup>2</sup> Here and below, all values of indices and other indicators (if not otherwise noted) are taken from the V-Dem database ([https://v-dem.net/data\\_analysis/VariableGraph/](https://v-dem.net/data_analysis/VariableGraph/)). In all cases, the post-Soviet processes are compared across four countries: Estonia, Russia, Ukraine, and Uzbekistan. Estonia exemplifies a country with steadily high indicators of democratic development and strong influence from the Council of Europe (CoE), EU, and NATO institutions. Russia exemplifies a country with a high level of autocratization after a short period of democratization, with some influence from CoE institutions. Ukraine exemplifies a country that weathered several transitions from growing to declining democracy, with short periods of

the elected local and regional governments can operate without interference from unelected bodies (V-Dem 2023a). Accordingly, the lowest score is given to a country where elected offices are subordinate to non-elected offices, and the highest to a country where elected authorities can operate without interference from non-elected entities (ibid.).

As the Division of power index (Chart 1) shows, in three cases out of four, the separation of the local and central bodies clearly and unambiguously occurs between 1990 and 1992. In Estonia, this division had already taken hold before 1994 and has remained stable up to the time of this writing. In Ukraine, the separation of the two branches of government occurred at the same time but remained the subject of a struggle over the autonomy of local and regional administrations in a mixed semi-presidential republic (although, formally, in 2006–10 Ukraine established a parliamentary-presidential model of government, which resumed in 2014). The situation in Russia resembles that in Ukraine, despite Russia's formally being a federation. The case of Uzbekistan presents a model of those post-Soviet states that moved very quickly after the collapse of the USSR to a one-person executive branch.

**Chart 2. Legislative constraints on the executive branch index (Estonia, Russia, Ukraine, and Uzbekistan, 1989–2022)**



autocratization and with some influence from CoE and EU institutions on its political and legal systems. And Uzbekistan exemplifies a country with a long period of autocratization following a short and insignificant period of democratization, with minimal outside influence on its political structures.

This picture is complemented by data from the Legislative constraints on the executive [branch] index. The data in Chart 2 describe the ability of the legislature, together with the attorney general and/or ombudsman (institutions introduced from external democratic models but reinterpreted in post-Soviet states), to oversee the executive branch (V-Dem 2023a). In this chart, the Estonian and Uzbek cases illustrate opposite poles, with the dominance in Estonia of the legislature over the executive in a parliamentary republic contrasting with the dominance in Uzbekistan of the executive over the legislature in a presidential republic with a strong authoritarian regime. The cases of Russia and Ukraine show how the struggle between the two branches of power, conducted all through the 1990s, ended in the 21<sup>st</sup> century with the domination of the executive branch in the Russian Federation, while in Ukraine, confrontation between the two branches continued, at least up to 2019.

No less important was the idea of the source of the sovereignty and legitimacy of each reestablished state. For some post-Soviet states (Turkmenistan, Uzbekistan, and Ukraine), this source was found in the will of the citizens as expressed in a referendum. For other new states (Azerbaijan, Georgia, Latvia, Lithuania, Moldova, and Estonia), the source of sovereignty was located in the historical tradition of statehood, which had been suppressed by the USSR and was restored with the collapse of the Union. In still other cases, decisions were made by the Supreme Soviets as representative bodies of the republics and their populations. But in all cases, the common thread included not only the will of the population or historical precedent but also the values of democracy and the rule of law. If we consider the texts of post-Soviet declarations of sovereignty and independence, along with early post-Soviet constitutions, as documents that capture the political imagination of new political communities, we find them all linked to the notion of these communities as the founders of democratic political systems.

The Supreme Council of the Ukrainian SSR, expressing the will of the people of Ukraine, striving to create a democratic society, proceeding from the needs to ensure human rights and freedoms, respecting the rights of all ethnic groups, caring for the complete political, economic, social and spiritual development of the people of Ukraine, recognizing the need to build a state based on the rule of law, aiming to establish the sovereignty and self-government of the Ukrainian people, proclaims the State sovereignty of Ukraine. (*Declaration on the State Sovereignty of Ukraine*, July 16, 1990)

The Supreme Council of the Armenian SSR, expressing the united will of the people of Armenia, realizing its responsibility for the fate of the Armenian people in realization of the aspirations of all Armenians and restoration of historical justice, proceeding from the principles of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and generally recognized norms of international law, realizing the right of nations for free self-determination, based on the joint decision of the Supreme Council of the Armenian SSR and Nagorno-Karabakh National Council of December 1, 1989 “On reunification of the Armenian SSR and Nagorno-Karabakh Republic,” developing the democratic traditions of the independent Republic of Armenia established on May 28, 1918, with the purpose of creating a democratic society based on the rule of law,

proclaims the commencement of the process of establishment of independent statehood. (*Declaration of Independence of Armenia*, August 23, 1990)

As an expression of the will of the people, the Supreme Council of the Republic of Lithuania... solemnly declares that the exercise of the sovereign rights of the State of Lithuania, violated by alien force in 1940, is restored and that from now on Lithuania is once again an independent State. The Act of the Lithuanian Council on Independence of February 16, 1918, and the Resolution of the Constituent Seimas of May 15, 1920, on the Restoration of the Democratic State of Lithuania have never lost their legal force and constitute the constitutional basis of the Lithuanian State... The State of Lithuania emphasizes its commitment to the universally recognized principles of international law, recognizes the inviolability of borders as set forth in the Final Act of the Helsinki Conference on Security and Cooperation in Europe of 1975, and guarantees human, civil, and minority rights. (*Act on the Restoration of the Independence of the State of Lithuania*, March 11, 1990)

Together with their respective assertions of democratic legitimacy, these documents each contain a nationalist argument: emerging democracies were founded as states rooted in ethnonational communities. In the early 1990s, as republics were being founded, the democratization and nationalization of political systems went hand in hand. Throughout the post-Soviet period, these two trends both supported and undermined each other, creating a dynamic of political regimes that differentially exploited the possibilities of the newly emerged political systems and managed the diversity of populations in the territories under their control.

As conceived by the republican leaders who managed the collapse of the USSR, new states would emerge within the administrative boundaries of the Soviet republics. But democratization involved citizens in decision-making, which made them active participants in decision processes concerned with borders. Meanwhile, the nationalization of the political imagination linked borders to ethnic, linguistic, confessional, and other identity groups. This interconnection led to a “parade of sovereignties” not only within the former Union republics but also within the republics (that were the fifteen subjects of the Union) themselves. In Azerbaijan, Georgia, Kazakhstan, Moldova, the Russian Federation, Ukraine, and Uzbekistan, this led to irredentist, separatist, and often secessionist movements (Minakov et al. 2021). In this context, the bloody conflicts in the southern Caucasus led to ethnic cleansing and the formation of three unrecognized states, supported in two cases (Abkhazia and South Ossetia) by Moscow and in one case (Nagorno-Karabakh) by Yerevan in 1990–93. The Moldovan government lost control of Russia-backed Transnistria because of the war. Ukraine’s territorial integrity was also threatened by the separatist movement in Crimea in 1992–94. Indeed, the Russian Federation itself was in danger of disintegration, at risk of being overcome by either military force (in the North Caucasus) or political struggle (for example, in Tatarstan and Bashkortostan).

On the one hand, irredentism and secessionism were a continuation of the same processes of Soviet social fragmentation that had led to the emergence of new states from former Soviet republics. Post-Soviet political creativity and mass movements did not necessarily take place within Soviet administrative boundaries. On the other hand, the wars and ethnic conflicts that emerged in the process of this fragmentation had the most negative impact on the democratic quality of post-Soviet political creativity. Some of the problems associated with these processes were resolved by the signing of the Budapest Memorandum in 1994. Formally, the memorandum provided Belarus, Kazakhstan, and Ukraine with security guarantees within their administrative borders in exchange for a partial handover to Russia and the partial destruction of the Soviet nuclear arsenal on their territories (Grant 2014). Informally, however, the memorandum secured the borders of the newly formed states and stopped Russian support for secessionist and irredentist movements in the post-Soviet republics (Minakov 2020b). This informal influence was realized in the return of Crimea to Kyiv's full control with the support of the Kremlin as well as in the preparation of bilateral treaties of friendship and cooperation between Russia and the republics in 1994–97. The recognition of sovereignty and borders allowed relations to normalize between the emerging post-Soviet political entities and facilitated the entry of these entities into integration projects at various levels.

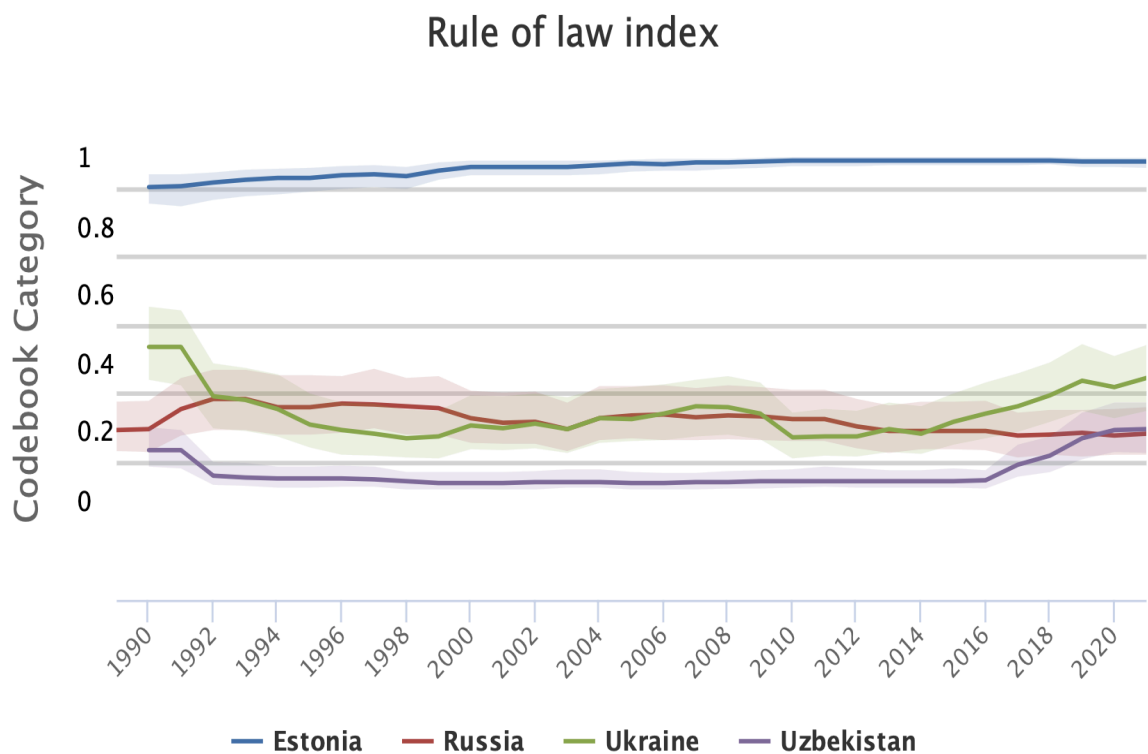
The most important integration project for the democratic creativity of the post-Soviet nations was the project of accession to the Council of Europe. The Council of Europe is a regional international organization, membership in which is possible after a country's adoption in its political and legal systems of norms and rules basic to a functional democracy and the rule of law. Lithuania and Estonia were accepted to the Council of Europe in 1993; Latvia, Moldova, and Ukraine joined it in 1995; Russia followed in 1996, Georgia in 1999, and Azerbaijan and Armenia in 2001. This type of European integration supported democratization and democratic harmonization of the political and legal systems of most post-Soviet countries. However, only in three cases (Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania) did this type of European integration actually intensify within the framework of the EU and NATO, providing these member states with more support for the institutionalization of democracy, rule of law, and security without threatening political freedoms. At the same time, European integration was only a supporting factor: it was the citizens and nations that took the creative initiative, although Western models of democratization allowed these impulses to translate into less fragile practices than in other post-Soviet states. From that perspective, the Council of Europe and the European Union can be seen as the model-promoting institutions.

The fusion of internal creativity and external factors is particularly noticeable in the formation of post-Soviet constitutional and legal systems, which developed under simultaneous internal and external demands for the rule of law. The first legal reforms in post-Soviet countries were connected with the introduction of normative approaches to the formation, approval, and execution of laws, based on a normative way of imagining

the rule of law, while the imagination and practice of positive law were marginalized, at least in the 1990s (Antonov 2021; Antonov & Vovk 2021; Rabinovich 2021; Varlamova 2021). The first wave of writing, discussing, and approving the constitutions of the new states in 1990–94 was a crucial part of state- and nation-building. The new legislation was an important component of post-Soviet democratization, supporting political and economic freedoms, incorporating human rights and Council of Europe norms into national legal systems, and supporting the autonomy of the judicial branch.

The general outcome of these political and legal processes can be assessed by the Rule of law index. This index is a generalized assessment of the extent to which laws are transparently, independently, and equally enforced and of the level of compliance they receive from government officials (V-Dem 2023a). In Chart 3, the Estonian case represents the greatest success on the part of a post-Soviet political system in applying norms of the rule of law, supported by local constituencies and by the country's membership in the Council of Europe, the EU, and NATO. The cases of Russia and Ukraine show how the impulse to establish the rule of law was an important moment for the emergence of new independent states in the 1990s and how this impulse later came under pressure from autocratic tendencies. The Uzbekistani case illustrates how, as early as the mid-1990s, early post-Soviet legal achievements were being defied during the concentration of power in a presidential institution.

**Chart 3. Rule of law index (Estonia, Russia, Ukraine, and Uzbekistan, 1989–2022)**

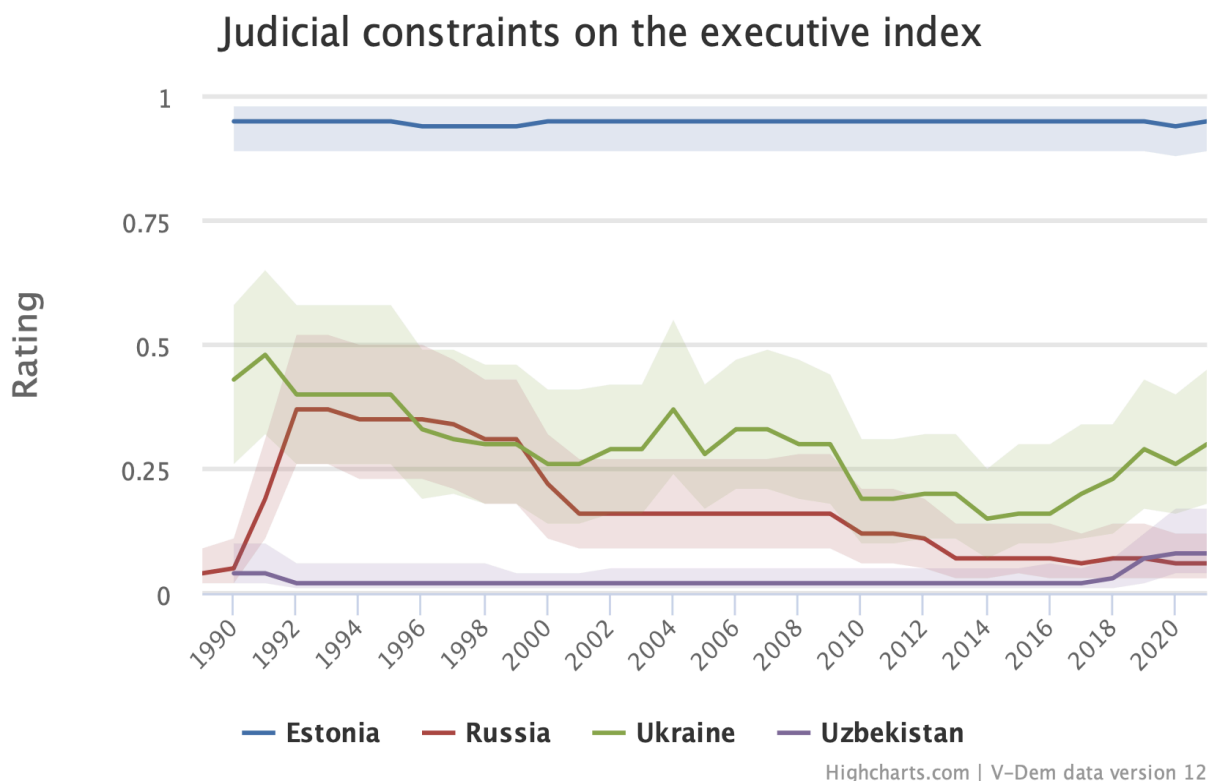


Highcharts.com | V-Dem data version 12

Another important achievement was the relegation of the judiciary to a separate, autonomous branch of government. While the executive and legislative branches came out of the Soviet Supreme Soviets, the judiciary was formed in the process of the Soviet judiciary's leaving party control and coming under the control of republican governments. Although all post-Soviet constitutions establish judicial autonomy and some empower Constitutional or Supreme Courts as "guarantors of constitutional rights and freedoms," in reality executive officials and legislators fought a long battle for the right to appoint judges and influence the judicial branch by other means (see Barrett 2021: 261).

The Judicial constraints on the executive index provides a comparative perspective on the extent to which the executive branch respected the constitution and complied with court decisions as well as the extent to which the judicial branch was able to act independently (V-Dem 2023a). As in the previous indices, the Estonian and Uzbek cases offer radically contrasting examples of, respectively, successful democratization and autocratization in the post-Soviet period. The cases of the Russian Federation and Ukraine show how the political and legal systems of the two countries gradually diverged: in the first case, the courts were increasingly influenced by the executive branch, while in the second case, the autonomy of the courts fluctuated, increasing during periods of democratization (in the early 1990s, between 2004 and 2010, and after 2019) and decreasing during periods of autocracy (from the late 1990s to 2004 and from 2010 to 2018).

**Chart 4. Judicial constraints on the executive index (Estonia, Russia, Ukraine, and Uzbekistan, 1989–2022)**

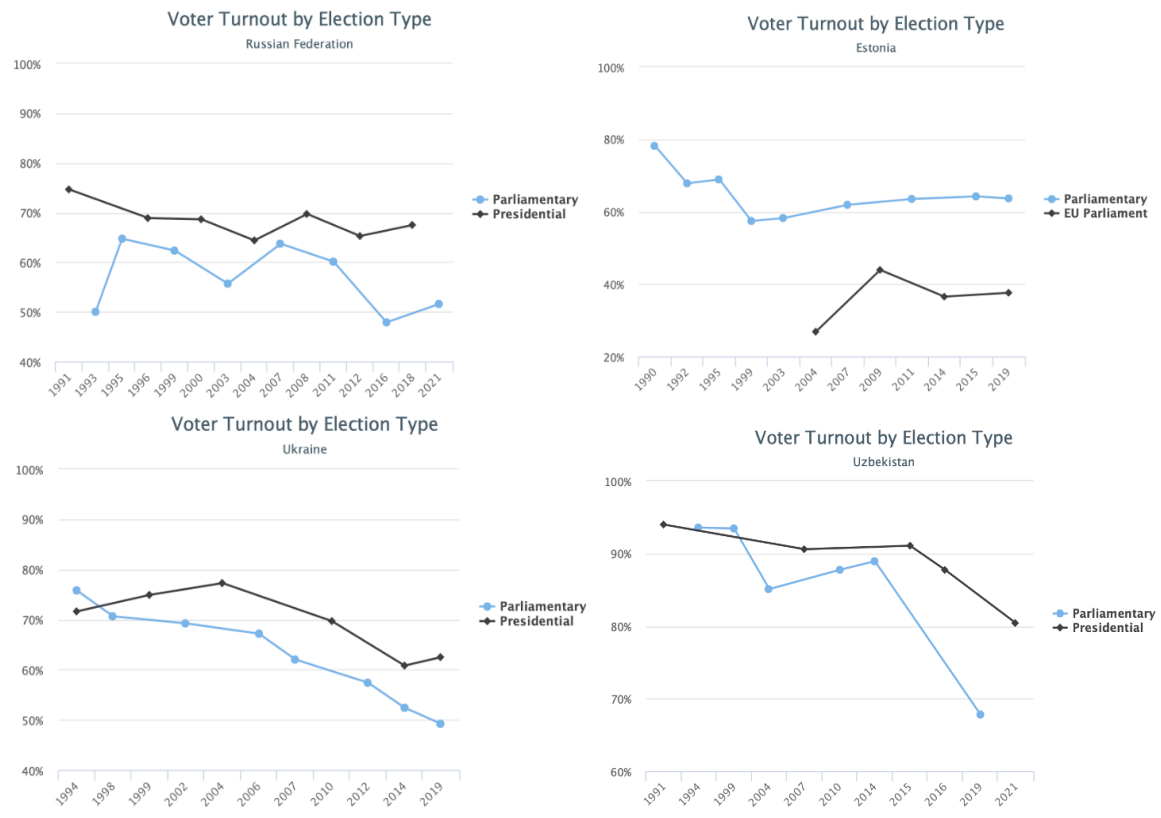


A further important product of post-Soviet democratic creativity was the institution of elections. Elections in the Soviet political system had an important ritual significance: the Soviet subjects demonstrated their loyalty and imitated participation in the change of elites by filling out non-alternative ballots. Participation in Soviet elections was an important disciplinary practice precisely because of their imitative nature. With the beginning of democratization, elections became perhaps the most important sign of political freedom. The first experience of free elections for people living in the Soviet Union came in 1989, when a new USSR Supreme Soviet was elected. Although 750 mandates were distributed by the leadership of the Communist Party and “civic organizations,” a much larger proportion of the Council—1,500 seats—went through open and competitive elections. The enthusiasm characteristic of revolutionary moments was such that 89.8% of the Soviet population participated in the elections. In these elections, the late-Soviet population learned how to elect their representatives and publicly debate with fellow citizens about the merits of this or that deputy. In fact, it was a matter of simultaneously reinventing elections to a representative parliament, active responsible citizenship, and open public debate leading to a redistribution of power. All this was new to the Soviet population.

The experience of free political participation was repeated—and crystallized—in 1990, when elections to the republican Supreme Councils were held. Despite the continuing legislative obstacles to pluripartyism in the USSR, parties, blocs, and movements participated in these elections, offering the population not only a diversity of opinions and candidates, as in 1989, but also party programs with different ideological orientations. Elections went from electing a representative to electing a political force with which a voter shared ideological positions. It was these Supreme Soviets that led to the establishment of the independence of their republics, the separation of the executive and legislative branches, and the beginning of transformation within the frameworks of the post-Soviet tetrad.

Subsequently, the electoral element of democracy became the strongest practice influencing the uncontrolled rotation of elites, even in countries governed by authoritarian regimes. As can be seen from Chart 5, in our sample of four post-Soviet country cases, the recognition of the importance of elections is demonstrated by the constantly significant (50% or more) participation of voters in the election of presidents and parliaments. It is worth noting that presidential elections tend to attract more voters than parliamentary elections, as evidenced by the turnout patterns in the Russian, Ukrainian, and Uzbek case studies. In the Estonian case, participation in national legislature elections is consistently higher than in European parliamentary elections.

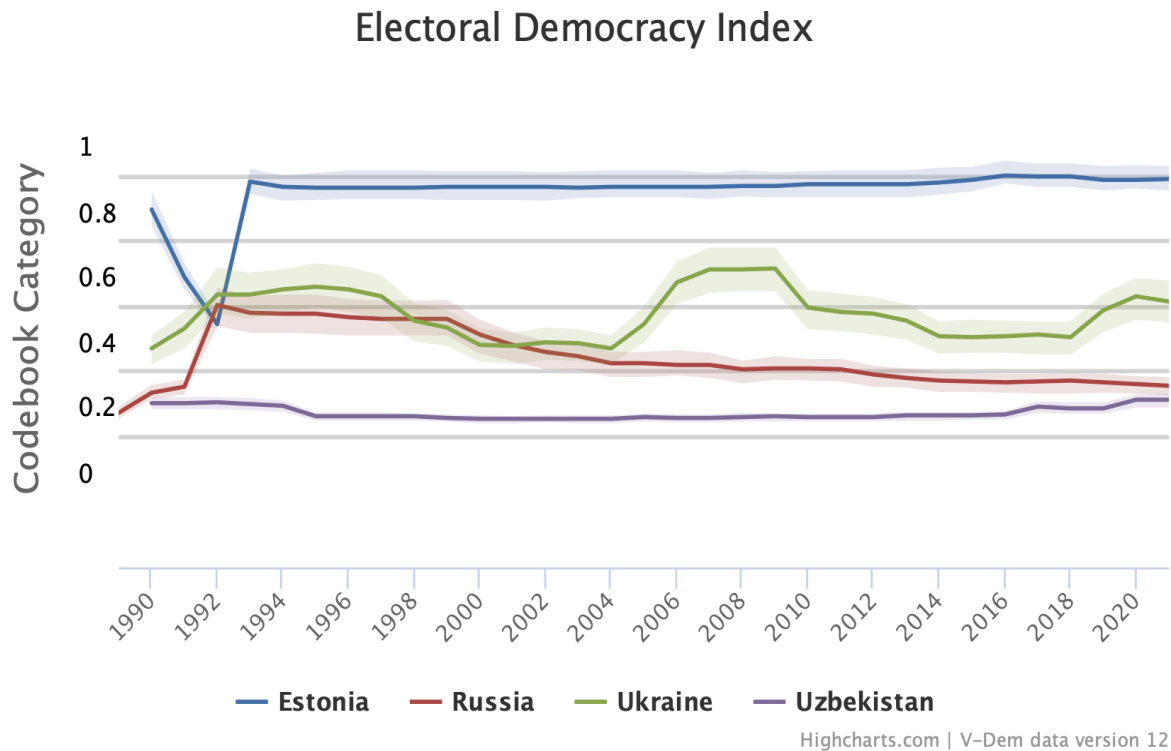
**Chart 5. Voter turnout (Estonia, Russia, Ukraine, and Uzbekistan, 1989–2022)**



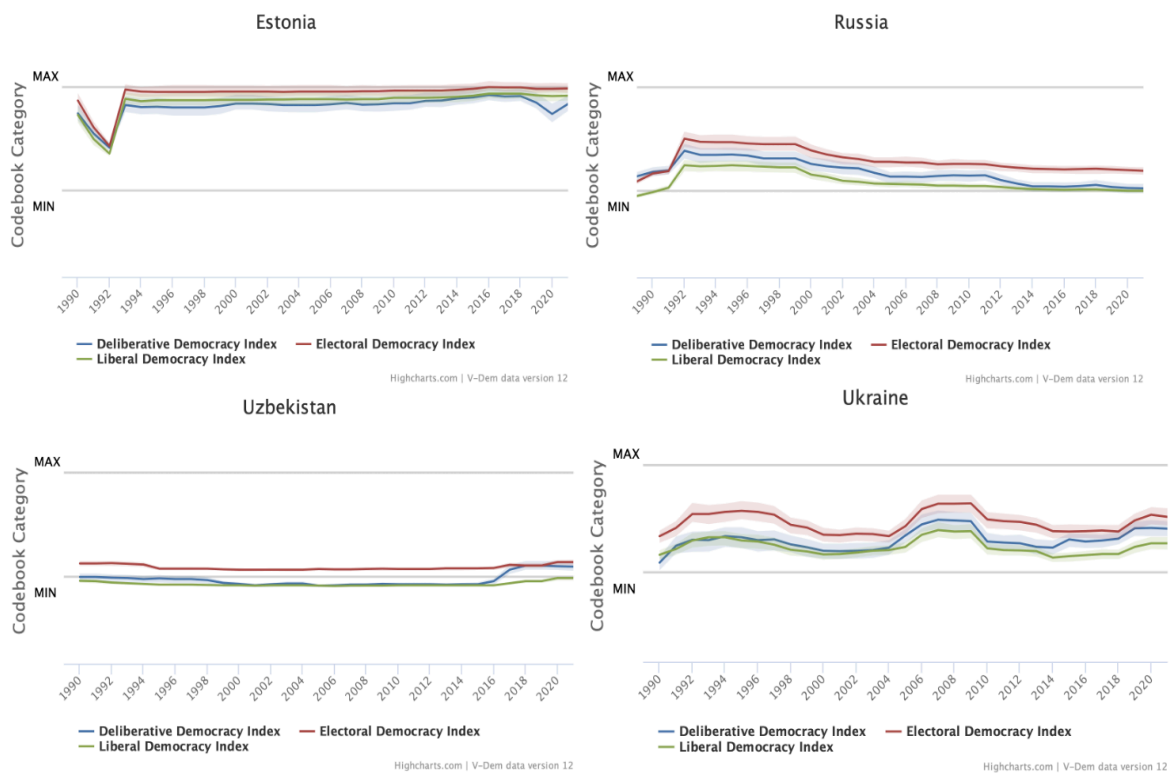
Source: IDEA 2023

Elections have become the most important democratic institution in post-Soviet political systems. Using summarized data from the Electoral democracy index, we can see the institutional development of elections in the post-Soviet period (Chart 6). The electoral principle of democracy aims at “making rulers responsive to citizens,” a goal achieved through (1) competition for the approval of the electorate; (2) the free operation of political and civil-society organizations; (3) elections free of fraud or systematic irregularities; (4) changing the elected chiefs of the executive; and (5) the freedom of independent media to present alternative views on matters of political relevance (V-Dem 2023a). As Chart 6 shows, since 1993–95, electoral democracy in Estonia has reached consistently maximum values, while in Uzbekistan its values are consistently at the minimum. In the case of Russia, before the beginning of Vladimir Putin’s rule, the level of electoral democracy was significant, but since the start of the 21<sup>st</sup> century the index has been steadily decreasing, approaching a minimum over the last nine years. In the Ukrainian case, electoral democracy experienced a heyday in the first half of the 1990s, from 2004 to 2010, and after 2019, with short scattered periods of decline in political freedom.

**Chart 6. Electoral democracy index (Estonia, Russia, Ukraine, and Uzbekistan, 1989–2022)**



**Chart 7. Comparison of Electoral, Liberal, and Deliberative democracy indices by country (Estonia, Russia, Ukraine, and Uzbekistan, 1989–2022)**



It is also possible to compare the electoral component with the other two components of democracy, the liberal<sup>1</sup> and the deliberative<sup>2</sup> components (see Chart 7). In all four country cases, whatever the level of freedom and however stable the form of government, the electoral component was more significant than the liberal and deliberative components.

It is worth noting that the significance of elections for citizens of post-Soviet countries extends beyond the politically pragmatic to the moral. That is, not only do elections carry out a rotation of elites in representative bodies of power and central and local councils in a way that is not controlled by the ruling groups; they are also imagined as a process of “moral renewal of power.” The entire electoral process, from the nomination of candidates to the counting of votes, has carried the meaning, often contrary to the experience of its participants, of a moral choice between good and evil—or more often, between a greater and a lesser evil. The undermining of trust in election results throughout the post-Soviet period has had the capacity to provoke mass protests and sometimes regime change. It is this moral-political aspect that can be found among the main factors leading to the “color revolutions” in Georgia (2003), Ukraine (2004), Kyrgyzstan (2005), and Armenia (2018). It is also noticeable in the protest movements of Moldova (2008), Russia (2011), and Belarus (2015, 2020).<sup>3</sup>

Post-Soviet democratic creativity linked elections, the rotation of elites, and the legitimacy of regimes to the possibility of free discussion of significant issues. The rejection of the Soviet experience was associated with the emergence of political debates “out of kitchens” into public space that was structured around free media and platforms for academic and cultural self-expression. A summary of the experience of creating such institutions and platforms is possible on the basis of the Freedom of expression and alternative sources of information index. This index assesses the extent to which a government respects press and media freedom, the freedom of individual citizens to discuss political issues in the public sphere, and freedom of academic and cultural expression (V-Dem 2023a). As shown in Chart 8, institutions and platforms in Estonia and Ukraine have provided significant levels of government respect for press freedom and debate throughout the post-Soviet period. In Russia, the Putin regime gradually curtailed opportunities for free and reasoned public dialogue. The same opportunities were curtailed in Uzbekistan in the early 1990s, but in 2016–17 the regime eased some of the political restrictions, though not to the point of meeting the basic requirements for democracy.

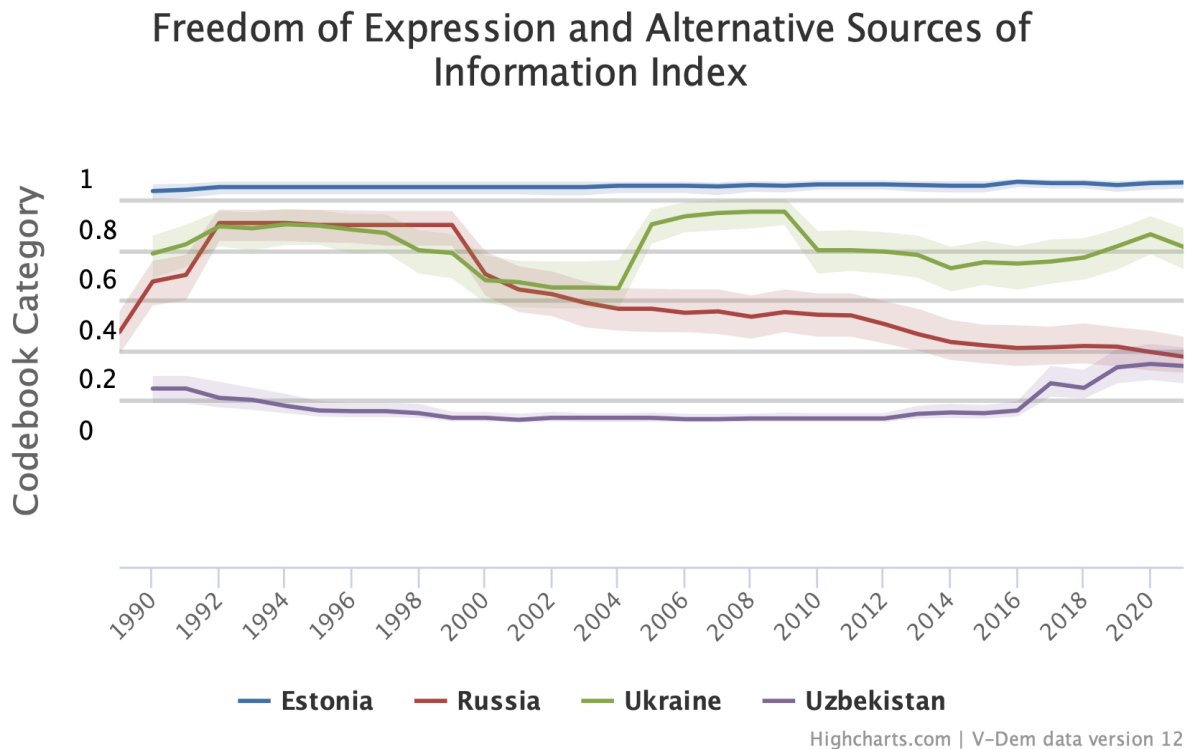
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<sup>1</sup> The liberal principle of democracy emphasizes the importance of protecting individual and minority rights from the tyrannies of the state and the majority. This principle judges the democratic quality of a government by the limitations imposed on it through constitutionally protected civil liberties, a strong rule of law, an independent judiciary, and effective mechanisms of checks and balances (V-Dem 2023a).

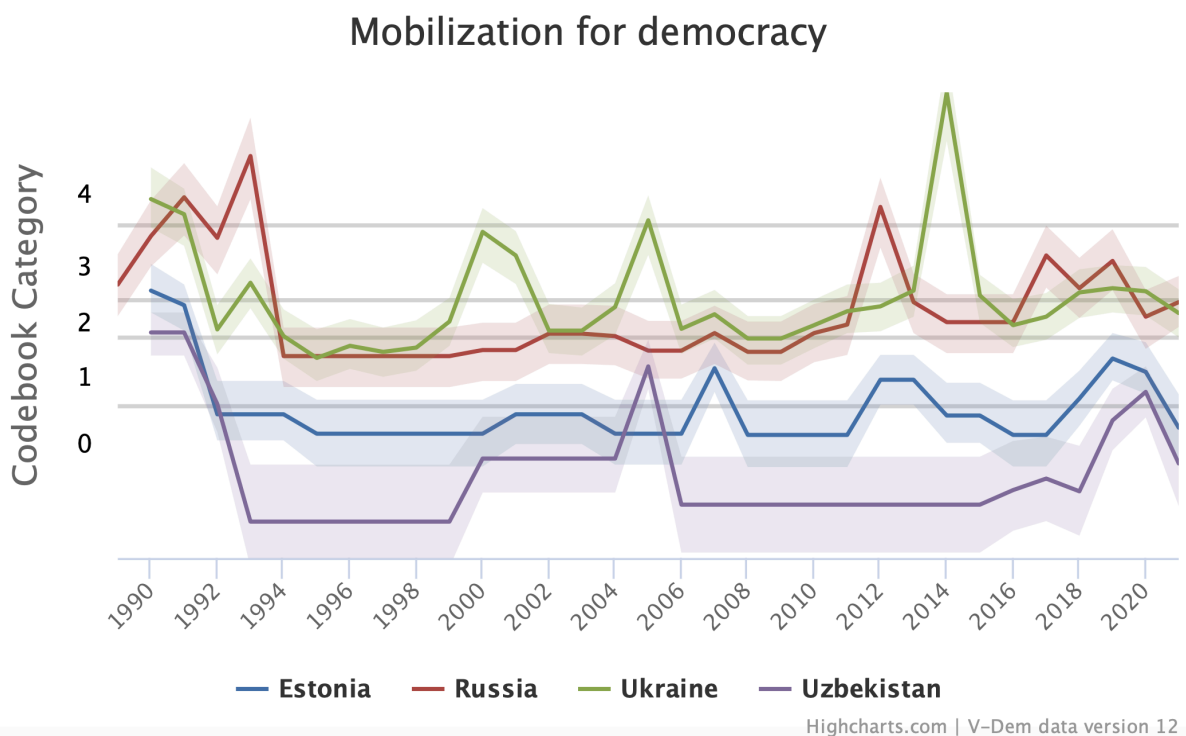
<sup>2</sup> The Deliberative democracy index focuses on the process by which decisions are made in a state. A deliberative process (deliberation) is one in which public debate about the common good motivates political decisions and is distinct from emotional appeals, identity-based solidarity, or other modes of coercion by citizens or minorities. According to this principle, democracy requires respectful dialogue between informed and competent participants who are open to each other’s arguments (V-Dem 2023a).

<sup>3</sup> On this, see Tucker 2007; Mitchell 2012; Minakov 2022c.

**Chart 8. Freedom of expression and alternative sources of information index (Estonia, Russia, Ukraine, and Uzbekistan, 1989–2022)**



**Chart 9. Mobilization for democracy index (Estonia, Russia, Ukraine, and Uzbekistan, 1989–2022)**



Once provided with the conditions of competitive elections, divided branches of government, and freedom of discussion, ideological diversity and citizenship developed through the involvement of citizens in decision-making. In the 1990s, one can even speak of a kind of excess of diversity, which at times provoked political escapism or support for reactionary measures by the authorities. However, throughout most of the post-Soviet period, political freedoms remained important for the populations of all the new states and led from time to time to mass movements in support of democracy. For example, the Mobilization for democracy index (Chart 9) demonstrates that mass movements in support of civil liberties occasionally emerged in all four country cases. Furthermore, pro-democracy mobilizations in support of free and fair elections, independent courts and parliaments, and freedom of association and speech had a common regional rhythm. Peaks of general regional pro-democratic mobilization are evident in the years 1989–93, 2004–8, 2011–5, and 2018–20.

Mobilization in support of political freedoms in countries with high levels of democracy (e.g., Estonia) has generally been moderate, as the energy of such movements has been channeled by political institutions into productive decision-making that does not threaten the political order. However, mass pro-democracy movements in the Russian and Uzbekistan autocracies posed a direct threat to their regimes and, to some extent, to their political systems. Ukraine is a case of a hybrid political system (like Georgia and Moldova, as well as Armenia since 2018) that has experienced periods of improving freedom and periods of democratic decline. Here, pro-democratic mobilizations have engaged citizens in creative political processes, leading to an increase in freedom and a return to the exercise of basic constitutional rights.

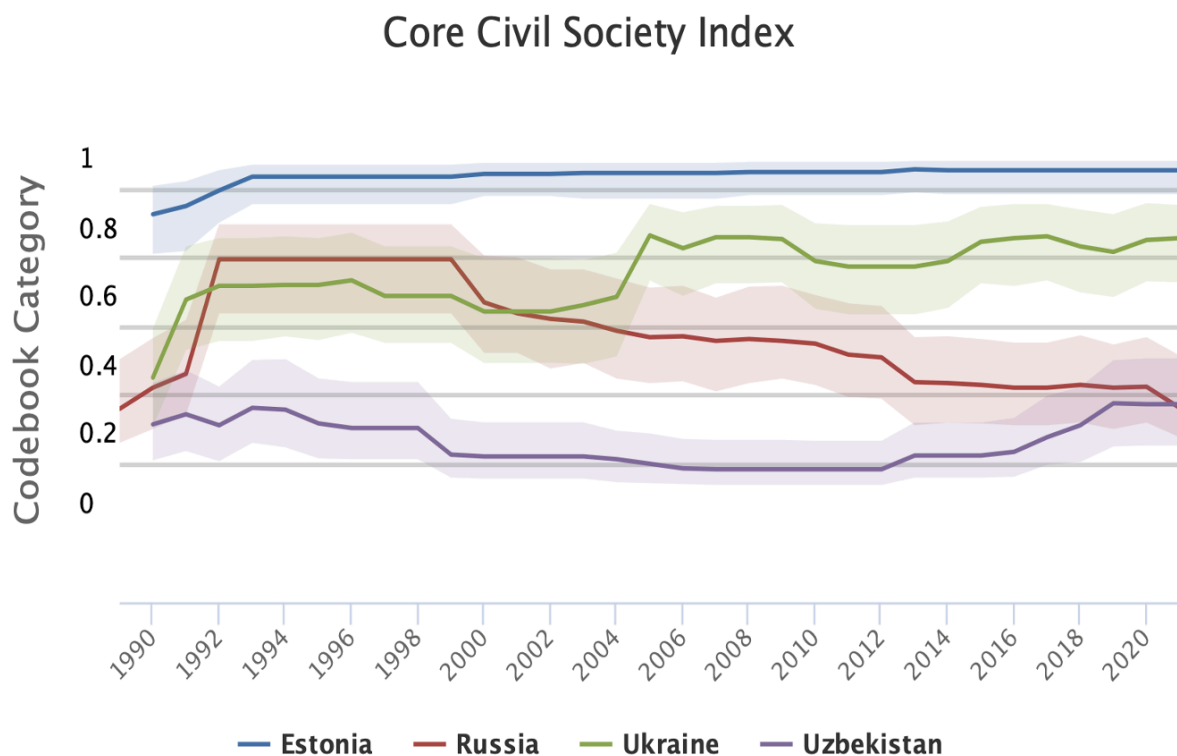
In many ways, post-Soviet democratic creativity has been linked to the gradual growth of the role of civil society. The sphere of civil society lies in the public space between the private and public spheres, or, as Cohen and Arato have conceptualized it, in cooperation and contradiction with both “political society,” driven by the struggle for power, and “economic society,” structured by competition for profit (Cohen & Arato 1994). In this framework, civil society is a set of associations of citizens (interest groups, activist groups, trade unions, religious organizations engaged in social or political activities, social movements, professional associations, charities, etc.) formed to pursue collective interests and ideals related to both power and economic goals.

Civil society organizations can be divided into two broad categories: traditional and modern. Traditional organizations include territorial and religious communities and small ethnic communities associated with sociopolitical interests, while modern organizations include non-governmental and non-profit organizations, trade unions, and charitable foundations. In the post-Soviet period, civil society organizations from both categories experienced a renaissance, contributing to the building of horizontal social structures and creating a public demand for freedom of conscience and religion as well as for the systemic participation of active citizens in control over state authorities.

Specifically, citizens sought oversight of the implementation of laws and procedures by parliaments and governments as well as oversight of electoral committees and bodies responsible for the use of budgetary funds, the penitentiary system, and media licensing committees. In most cases, it was non-governmental or non-profit organizations (NGOs or NPOs) that were engaged in such oversight. However, charitable foundations, trade unions, and informal activist groups also pursued many other socially relevant public interests, such as support for the poor, workers' rights, wildlife protection, and the fight against alcoholism and drug abuse.

The Core civil society index demonstrates the path of post-Soviet democratization through the lens of the sustainability of civil society and its influence on the public and private spheres (V-Dem 2023a).

**Chart 10. Core civil society index (Estonia, Russia, Ukraine, and Uzbekistan, 1989–2022)**



Highcharts.com | V-Dem data version 12

According to Chart 10, in all four country cases, the influence of civil society organizations has been growing since 1989, but as early as 1991–93 there was a differentiation among these societies. In the Estonian case of a stable democracy with strong influence from European structures, the influence of civil society has been stably high. In the Uzbekistani case of a stable autocracy, civil society has been under constant pressure from the government but found some openings for its influence at moments when one autocrat was replaced by another. The cases of the Russian Federation and Ukraine show democratization to be accompanied by an increase in the influence of civil society organizations, with these organizations losing their significance in periods of democratic decline.

The importance of civic organizations in post-Soviet societies is associated with a peculiar dialogue between the political creativity of local communities, the Soviet experience, and Western models. For example, local communities and trade unions in the post-Soviet period often tried to apply the Soviet experience to the new political and socio-economic realities and therefore remained only minor elements of post-Soviet democratization. At the same time, NGOs/NPOs as a specific organizational and cultural form were not connected with the Soviet experience: they were the result of applying a Western model of civic organizations that included a division between governing and administrative functions, a grant logic of funding, and public accountability. Successful NGOs/NPOs could develop their sources of funding, as well as the degree of their influence on governments, from either inside or outside their country of origin. In some cases, NGOs could develop to the point of becoming “NGO-crats,” exclusively influential groups able to operate beyond the boundary of their legitimate sphere in civil society (Lutsevych 2013: 3ff.). Oligarchic clans often used this device, actively developing groups that imitated organizations of civil society—charitable foundations, analytical centers, and other NPOs (Puglisi 2003; Minakov 2019b). In periods of democratic decline or autocratic turns, as in Uzbekistan since the mid-1990s or Russia since 2011, respectively, NGOs/NPOs have been systematically suppressed (Gilbert & Mohseni 2018; Heiss 2019).

Thus, in terms of democratic political creativity, the post-Soviet period should be acknowledged as a time of experiencing freedom for all the societies in the region, even though only for some of them was this a lasting experience. Several generations of people living in the Eastern European and Northern Eurasian countries were able to realize their potential for building institutions of political freedom. The outcomes of post-Soviet democratic creativity included (1) new states with separate branches of government, (2) political and legal systems based on or aiming at the rule of law, (3) strong parliaments elected in competitive elections with more than half of the voters permanently involved in voting, (4) courts much more autonomous than in the Soviet era, (5) multiparty systems with reasonably robust ideological pluralism, (6) free media, and (7) a powerful civil society.

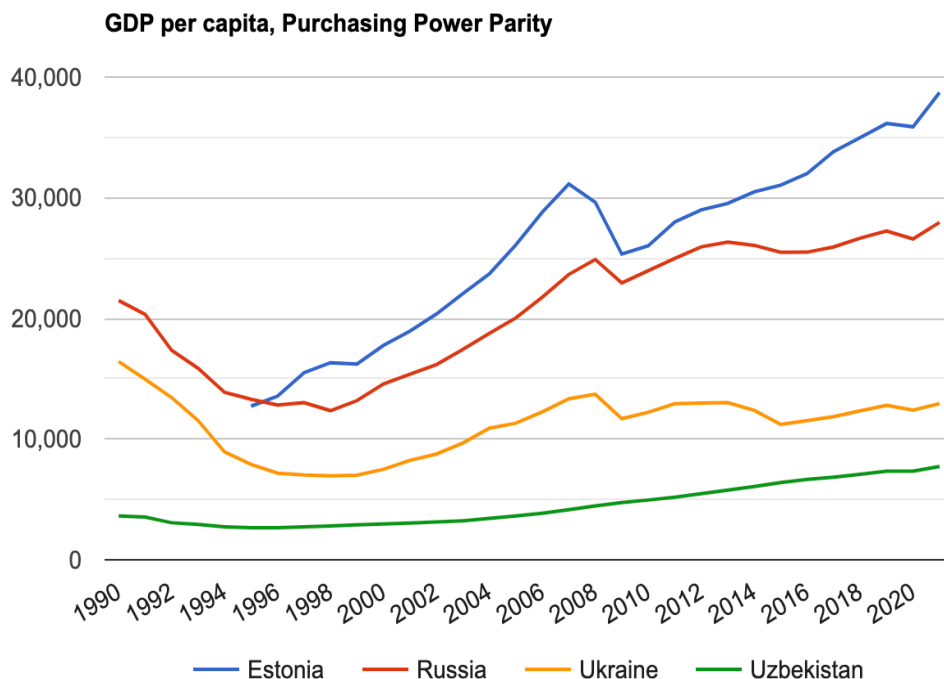
## **2.2. Autocratic outcomes of post-Soviet political creativity**

The post-Soviet period was a heyday of flourishing democratic creativity—and not only democratic. It was also a period when many individuals and communities directed their political creativity towards institutions and practices that were distant from or hostile to democracy.

Section 2.1 demonstrated the politically creative post-Soviet process of transforming the political structures of the late Soviet Union into democratic institutions. The task of this section, in contrast, is to demonstrate how that same political creativity was invested in outcomes of an autocratic nature. Achievements of this kind were linked to collective action shaped by priorities very distinct from political freedom, rule of law, or civic emancipation. As a rule, these priorities were related to the survival strategies of individuals, families, and communities

under the worst conditions of the deep socioeconomic crisis of the 1990s, which drove post-Soviet societies into a state of what Natalia Panina and Evgeniy Golovakha rightly called “social madness” (Golovakha & Panina 1994: 8). The founders of post-Soviet states were acting under conditions of complete unpredictability and institutional chaos in 1991–1994. Their political will and imagination, linked to the ideas, models and practices of the post-communist tetrad, led to democratic transformations, as has been shown above. However, the founders of today’s Estonia and Russia, Ukraine and Uzbekistan witnessed not only democratic enthusiasm in the capitals but also depression on the peripheries, the spread of ideas of national exclusivity and xenophobia among both elites and masses, the rapid and severe impoverishment of those who had but recently been called “Soviet middle class,” waves of criminal revolution, and the war of all against all in times of primary capital accumulation (Kupatadze 2012; Pain 2007; Round & Williams 2010; Shnirelman 2023).

**Chart 11. GDP per capita, Purchasing power parity (Estonia, Russia, Ukraine, and Uzbekistan, 1990–2022)**



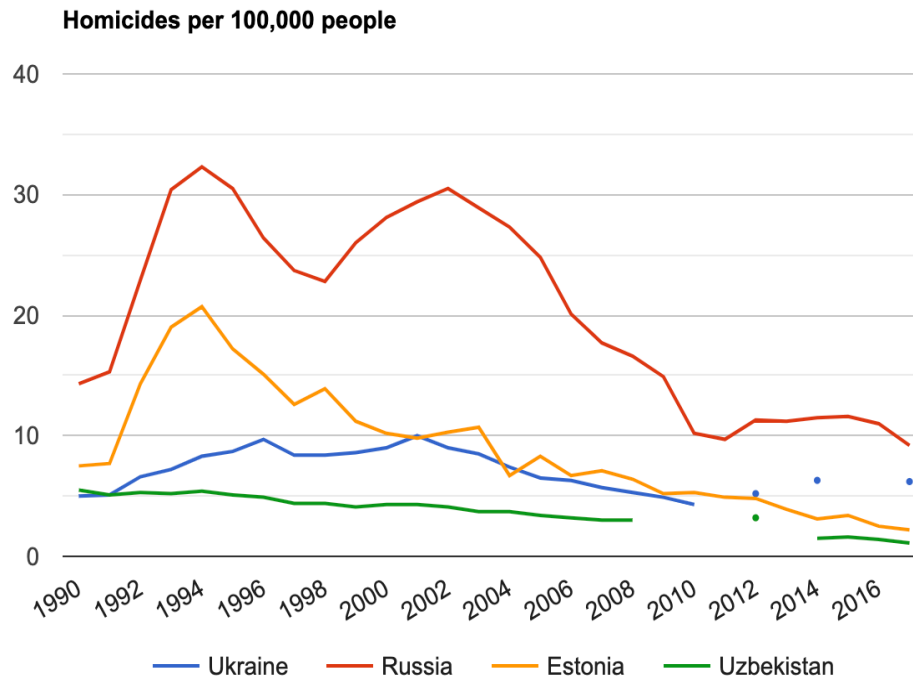
Measure: U.S. dollars  
Source: The World Bank

At the end of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, many regions of the world found themselves living under the conditions of “risk societies.” But the post-Soviet societies, whose economies had survived years of hyperinflation and annual degrowth up to 20 percent between 1990 and 1996,<sup>1</sup> experienced the trauma of living in “super-risk societies” (Adam, Van Loon, & Beck 2000; Beck 1992). A dramatic drop in the quality of life

<sup>1</sup> See Chart 11; compare with data on the socioeconomic crisis in Aslund 2013: 22ff.

and a lack of social and even existential security forced a huge portion of the new societies to invest their creative potential in survival and the quest for security at any price (see Charts 11 and 12 for 1990–2000).

**Chart 12. Homicides per 100,000 (Estonia, Russia, Ukraine, and Uzbekistan, 1990–2022)**



Measure: homicides per 100,000 people  
Source: The UN office on drugs and crime

The rapid transition from Soviet predictability to post-Soviet revolutionary chaos was both an opportunity and a challenge for the more than 285 million people whose destiny was defined by the post-Soviet transit. The 1989–91 caesura broke with Soviet continuity and opened up possibilities for seeding new social worlds. These opportunities and challenges allowed an exit from the traumatic Soviet state, but this exit was no less traumatic in itself. Post-Soviet political creativity was defined not only by the contradictory and painful set of Soviet ruptures that had been spelled out in the Perestroika discussions and found their way to realization in the national and democratic movements of that caesura but also by a new, post-Soviet trauma. The horror of the world that opened up after the end of the “Soviet eternity” (Yurchak 2013) created a peculiar demand not only for democracy but also for dictatorship. The anthropocultural type of the “Soviet man” was not ready for the test of freedom and risk, turning rather quickly into a sort of post-Soviet consumer of dictatorship services designed to protect people from their own sins and from crime, participation in ethnic conflicts, religious radicalism, and social atomization (Gudkov 2022; Levada 2000). Significant social groups demanded paternalistic tutelage and paternal care from post-Soviet governments and were willing to give up their unexpected freedom in exchange.

Perhaps the most notable act of authoritarian creativity was the invisible adjustment of state-building in those countries where democrats and nationalists were still powerful in the mid-1990s. The division of the branches of power, along with the gradual separation of authority between central and local governments, was an important element of democratic creativity. But it was complemented by autocratic creativity, which invested enormous social energy in informal institutions and practices. The nexus of democratization and marketization gave birth to so-called “small government.” This neoliberal model took on its own twist in the post-Soviet context. Indeed, post-Soviet states not only lost the unity of supreme statal power but also radically reduced their role in the economy, culture, society, and other spheres (Collier 2011). The state remained an important player in the public sphere, but even there it was not the only one. And in the private sphere, the state disappeared, which totally changed the familiar political and cultural landscape of Eastern Europe and Northern Eurasia in the 20<sup>th</sup> century.

The early post-Soviet “small government” resulted in a power vacuum, which was filled by informal structures, later called (in the academic literature) “oligarchic clans,” “neopatrimonial networks,” “patronal pyramids,” or “mafia state” organizations.<sup>1</sup> These structures returned some stability and efficiency to the post-Soviet political order amidst the social chaos—the byproducts of democratic creativity—of the time. The emerging post-Soviet governmental political institutions needed a social anchor, which often took the form of clan-like groups—adopted political families—whose solidarity was based on informal personal relationships, connections that had more power and weight than formal authority. Relationships between formal and informal institutions can be divided into two types: those that are, and those that are not, effective in fulfilling the formal institutions’ functions and goals. When formal and informal institutions interact, they can increase the effectiveness of the formal institutions—or they can oppose each other, undermining each other’s effectiveness and leading to mutual destruction. There is also a third possibility: if the informal institutions are more effective than the formal ones, the informal institutions can subordinate the formal structures to their interests.<sup>2</sup> Nations where this happens end up in a situation of “grand” or “systemic corruption”.<sup>3</sup>

Dominance of informal structures over formal public institutions undermines the effectiveness of democracy and the rule of law. In countries where informal structures have established such dominance, they have turned the state into a hybrid combining a “democratic façade” with a “deep” or “shadow” state. The institutions and organizations making up this “deep” or “shadow state” dimension have the nature of clans, with their personalistic logic of relationships and trust based on the experience of joint illegal actions. Clans are informal, stable organizations that cross the boundaries of the branches of power with respect to their responsibilities, creating parallel worlds of power, the so-called “power verticals,” that include representatives of

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<sup>1</sup> For more on this, see Ledeneva 1998; Fisun 2012; Magyar 2016; Hale 2015.

<sup>2</sup> For more on this matrix of interactions between formal and informal institutions, see Helmke & Levitsky 2004: 728–9.

<sup>3</sup> For more on these terms, see ECA 2021; Lough 2021.

presidential administrations, cabinets, parliaments, courts, regional and local self-governments, media, criminal groups, and civil society organizations.<sup>1</sup> In the post-Soviet context, clans united strong, creative individuals who used the chaos of the 1990s not only for survival but also for personal enrichment, which stemmed from the subordination of “streams” from the state budget, privatization of the Soviet industrial heritage, and privatization of post-Soviet formal institutions.

In some cases, post-Soviet autocratization went the way of oligarchization. As Charts 6 and 7 show, in the Ukrainian and Russian cases, oligarchization, that is, the establishment of clan control over key public institutions for the benefit of several individuals (oligarchs), peaked in influence at the end of the 1990s and triggered the decline of democracy and the start of an autocratic trend. Once state structures had fallen under the influence of several clans, these groups, organized as patronal pyramids, began to struggle for dominance in the country, i.e., for the establishment of one-pyramid rule leading to full-fledged autocracy. For post-Soviet societies that made real progress toward democratization but did not receive the kind of strong external support from European and Euro-Atlantic structures that characterized the Estonian case, autocratization via oligarchization had become a common trend by the early 21<sup>st</sup> century.

However, the mass protests of the “color revolutions” brought a halt to some of the region’s autocratization. In 2003–5, differences crystallized in the region of Eastern Europe and Northern Eurasia between stable liberal democracies (Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania); unstable polyarchies, where periods of democratization were succeeded by periods of democratic decline and autocracy and vice versa (Ukraine, Georgia, and Moldova); and stable autocracies (Russia, Azerbaijan, Belarus, and four Central Asian countries).<sup>2</sup>

Azerbaijan and the Central Asian countries (except for Kyrgyzstan) had already established autocracies by 1995, instituting tight control over any political creativity in their populations. Here, the democratic, ethnonationalist, and Islamist impulses yielded to dictatorships of varying severity, from the enlightened authoritarianism of Nursultan Nazarbayev (who ruled from 1989 through 2019) and Heydar Aliyev (who ruled from 1993 through 2003) to the totalitarian rule of Saparmurat Niyazov (who ruled from 1990 through 2006). The personalist regimes of these countries invested the energies of the post-Soviet peoples in the rapid adaptation of Soviet authoritarian institutions into new national institutions. They used the logic of a “vertical social contract” that offered the population real stability in the political order in exchange for ephemeral rights and freedoms.

The authoritarian regimes of Alexander Lukashenko (who has ruled since 1994) and Vladimir Putin (who has ruled since 2000) were established somewhat later, when Belarusians and Russians had already had their experience of democracy and the market economy, at least in the form that those took in the 1990s.

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<sup>1</sup> For more on this, see Minakov 2019b.

<sup>2</sup> Armenia and Kyrgyzstan fall outside of this classification. Armenia moved from the camp of autocracies to that of unstable polyarchies in 2018. Kyrgyzstan is an unstable autocracy, where mass protests have led to several regime changes but have not affected the political system.

As early as 2001–2003, Lukashenko used the Belarussian population's reaction to democratization, marketization, and nationalization to reshape the democratized Belarus into an autocratic political system, preventing the emergence of oligarchic clans there. In Belarus, state-building proceeded quickly and efficiently within the framework of the personalistic authoritarian regime, significantly overtaking nation-building and preventing the formation of informal power structures—except for Lukashenko's own family clan.

At the same time, the Putin regime emerged as an authoritarian reaction to both democratization and oligarchization. Putin's social contract of the early 2000s offered Russians a socially conservative world based on significant restrictions on the political freedoms of citizens and oligarchs in exchange for significant household income and the physical protection of citizens from crime and war (see Charts 11 and 12 for Russia in 2000–2008). Putin's patronal pyramid either absorbed or destroyed the oligarchic clans. After the demonstrative anti-oligarchy crackdown of 2003–2006, the Russian oligarchs lost their political status.<sup>1</sup>

Autocratic creativity thus aimed at either preventing the division of supreme state power or undermining the institutions that provided the system of checks and balances for such a division. The ideal institution for the fulfillment of this trend was presidentialism. Post-Soviet presidency was invented by Mikhail Gorbachev in 1989–90 when he struggled to get out from under the control of the CPSU Central Committee. It was then perfected in 1990–92 by presidents of the Soviet republics and became a source of constant threats to political freedoms and of growing hope for a return to a state with a single supreme power (Minakov & Mylovanov 2016; Partlett 2018). In reinventing the effective state, the political creativity of the Eastern European and Northern Eurasian peoples often reproduced the old model of the “one and indivisible” power as the common political heritage of post-Soviet societies (Pomeranz 2016: 1ff).

The success of such authoritarian creativity can be measured, for example, by the way in which it developed neopatrimonial rule (Chart 13) and its influence on the autonomy of other branches of government, especially the judiciary (Charts 2 and 4).

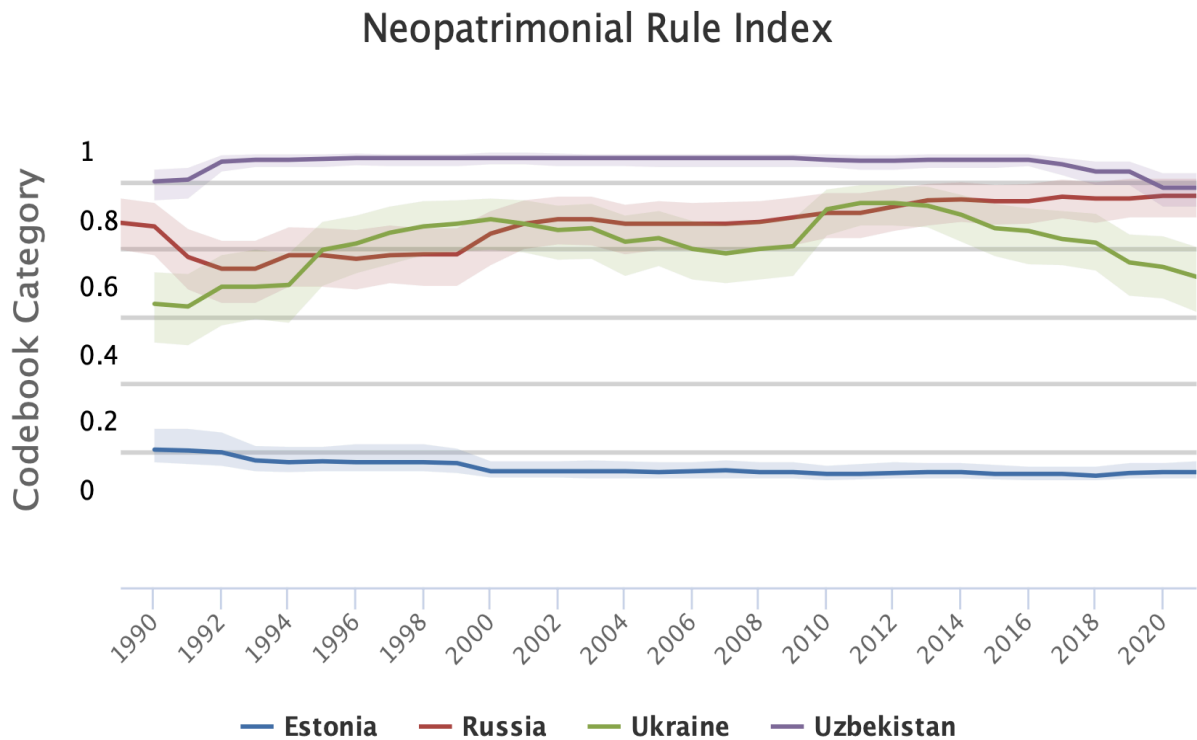
The Index of neopatrimonialism rule indicates the extent to which governance in a given country is based on the personal authority of the ruler. Neopatrimonialism rule reflects the idea that personalistic forms of authority pervade formal institutions in a regime that combines patronal political relations, unrestricted presidentialism, and the use of state resources for its political legitimation (V-Dem 2023a; compare Clapham 1985; Fisun 2012). The index is constructed by summarizing 16 indicators assessing patronalism/

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<sup>1</sup> With the outbreak of war against Ukraine, Putin's regime lost the ability to provide income and physical security for its citizens. The “Crimean syndrome” briefly legitimized Putin's regime in 2014, but economic hardships since 2015 and military failures in 2022 have dried up this source of legitimacy for the Russian government as well.

clientelism, presidentialism, and regime corruption. Low scores on Chart 13 indicate a more democratic situation, while higher scores indicate a less democratic one.

**Chart 13. Neopatrimonialism rule index (Estonia, Russia, Ukraine, and Uzbekistan, 1989–2022)**



Highcharts.com | V-Dem data version 12

Chart 13 demonstrates that neopatrimonialism rule caused rapid autocratization in the Uzbek case and gradual autocratization in Russia. The democratic outbursts in Ukraine in 2004 and 2014 coincide with the decline of neopatrimonialism, while in the Estonian case this factor is minimal.

Accordingly, Charts 2 and 4 show how the legislature and the judiciary maintained their independence from the executive branch. While during periods of democratization, these two branches of government limited the power of the executive branch and the opportunities for corruption of its chiefs and representatives, during periods of autocratization, the system of checks and balances disappeared or became systematically dysfunctional. Chart 4 shows in particular that the autonomy of the judiciary has been in crisis since 1992 in the Uzbek case and since the beginning of the 21<sup>st</sup> century in the Russian and Ukrainian cases. According to Chart 2, the subordination of parliament in Uzbekistan also occurred between 1991 and 1994; in Russia, it occurred partly in 1993 and then much more significantly from 2000 onward. In Ukraine, the Verkhovna Rada experienced a decline in its own autonomy between 1993 and 2002 and from 2010 to 2014. Only in the Estonian case did the independence of the legislature and the judiciary remain uninterrupted and unchallenged from 1992 onward.

In other words, after the first successes of democracy, the political creativity of many post-Soviet societies was redirected toward autocracy. Both representatives of the power elites and civic activists increasingly took non- or anti-democratic priorities as the basis for their actions. This is how a new generation of post-Soviet subjects grew up, sharing the ideals of nationalism, imperialism, and all sorts of conservative reactionary, revolutionary, and neo-Sovietist views. Similarly, new generations of bureaucrats, politicians, and judges grew up for whom serving the unlawful state was more important than serving the public interest, the electorate, or the law.

The legitimation of this type of political creativity was associated with the conservative turn in post-Soviet societies in the late 1990s. This turn was fueled by post-Soviet nationalization, which was no stranger to authoritarian experiments and the “Ostalgie” that was evident, for example, when candidates from the KGB participated in presidential elections.<sup>1</sup> Furthermore, even if the number of NGOs/NPOs was on the rise, these organizations were often driven by anti-democratic, militaristic, and authoritarian ideas. While religious freedoms were important for post-Soviet democratization, the development of faith-based organizations and communities gave rise to support for clericalism and the specific ethnonationalization of Christianity (or Islam and Buddhism). Taken together, these different trends have led to a sovereigntist turn that over the past decade has fused them into a single ideological system in a number of countries (Minakov 2021a). This kind of sovereigntism has become dominant, for example, in Azerbaijan, Russia, and Uzbekistan. Sovereigntism pitted citizenship and the rule of law against nationality and tradition, offering to overcome liberal-democratic individualism by means of collective allegiance to the state’s supreme power.

The influence of sovereigntism extends far beyond post-Soviet autocracies. Over the past ten years, even in the freest post-Soviet societies, there has been an increasing trend away from ideological pluralism and toward the restoration of an ideological monopoly.<sup>2</sup> Countries throughout the region seem to have succumbed to freedom and diversity fatigue, surrendering instead to the temptation of ideological and cultural homogeneity.

This can be seen, for example, in the Ideology index (Chart 14). This index answers the question of the extent to which the government of a given country promotes a certain ideology in order to justify the existing regime (V-Dem 2023a). The data in Chart 14 show that after the de-ideologization of post-Soviet nations, the resumption of ideological monopoly occurred as early as 1992 in the Uzbek case. In the Russian case, re-ideologization began with the rule of Vladimir Putin and had reached a significant level by 2012. In the Ukrainian case, attempts to establish an ideological monopoly coincided with the post-revolutionary rule of 2005–9 and 2014–18.

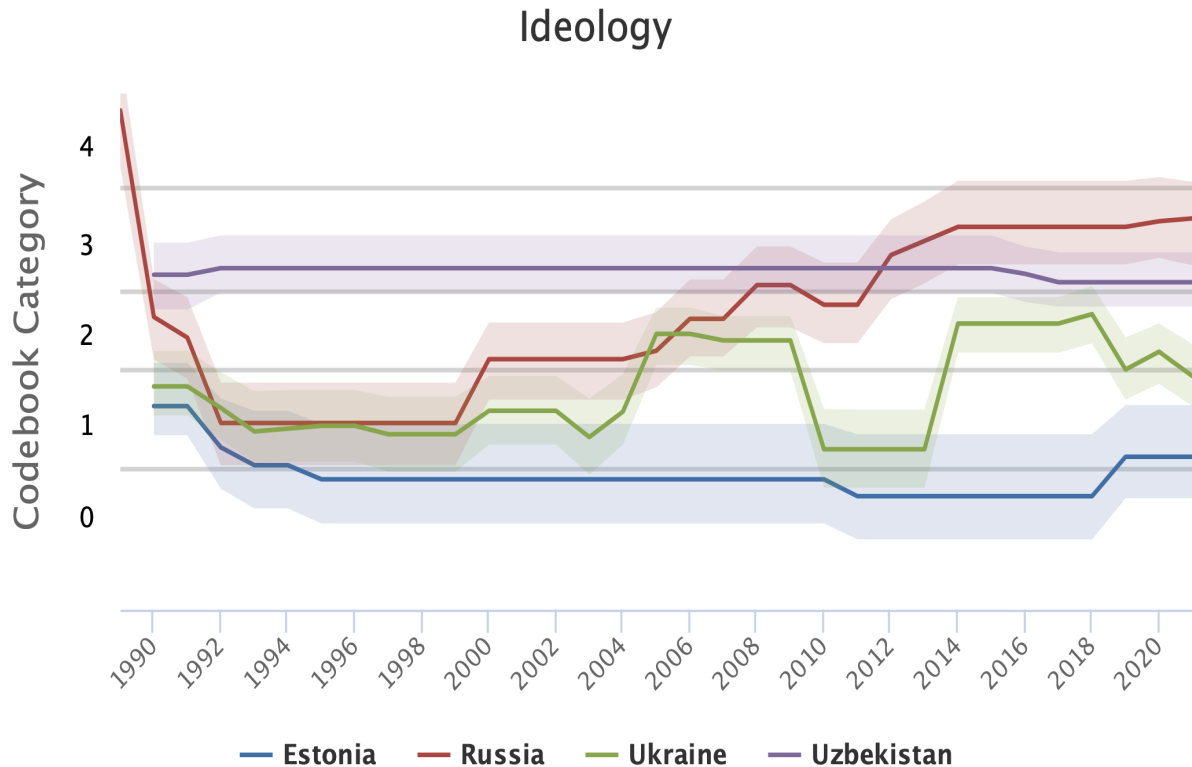
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<sup>1</sup> In 1993, 98% of Azerbaijani voters voted for Heydar Aliyev; in 1999, 8% of Ukrainian voters voted for Yevgeniy Marchuk; and in 2000, 53% of voters voted for Vladimir Putin in Russia. In all three cases, the electoral campaigners drew competitive advantage from their candidate’s history of service in the KGB.

<sup>2</sup> See the cases described in Minakov 2022c.

An ideological monopoly was absent in Estonia throughout the post-Soviet period but seems to have returned after 2014 as a reaction to the Russian invasion of Ukraine.

**Chart 14. Ideology index (Estonia, Russia, Ukraine, and Uzbekistan, 1989–2022)**



Highcharts.com | V-Dem data version 12

The emerging homogeneity was largely understood through the logic of historical tradition and rootedness. The ideological doctrines of Saparmurat Niyazov’s “Rukhnama,” Islam Karimov’s secular national conservatism, and Vladimir Putin’s recent constitutional reforms are examples of such neotraditionalism.<sup>1</sup> The less accessible a fair trial in a reasonable time became, the more societies focused on historical justice as its surrogate. The more depressed the prospects for socioeconomic development became, the more often there was talk of “national memory” (Kasianov & Minakov 2020). Within post-Soviet societies over the last decade, conflict between emerging majorities and internal and external Others matured more and more noticeably, seeded and managed by ruling groups through the media and mass education. External Others were presented as probable (and, with the outbreak of wars, real) enemies, while internal Others from the legitimate opposition became potential henchmen of external enemies. Hence the growth of systemic repressions of individuals and groups declared “foreign agents” and “national traitors.”

<sup>1</sup> See Abdullaev 2023; Kiryukhin & Shcherbak 2022; Zabortseva 2018. See also the article by Sergei Grigorishin in the same issue of the *Ideology and Politics Journal* (Grigorishin 2023).

Such acts by autocratic—or autocratizing—authorities were in constant contradiction to norms that remained in constitutions and national legislations from the early 1990s. In 2012–22, seven of the 12 constitutions and national legislations of the recognized states of Eastern Europe and Northern Eurasia (the three Baltic countries excluded) underwent a series of amendments that either repealed the liberal-democratic norms of the early post-Soviet period or diluted them with neo-traditionalist and geopolitical language, introducing discord and contradictions into the norms of their legal systems.<sup>1</sup> Only a relatively small proportion of these amendments relied on referendums, while a larger proportion relied on the decisions of governments. However, even the referendum decisions demonstrate that post-Soviet autocracies have learned to use the will of the people and the instruments of direct democracy for their purposes (see, e.g., Blackburn & Petersson 2022; Schmäing 2021).

In addition, the political parties that had blossomed since 1990 around the Eastern European and Northern Eurasian countries were partially transforming from political organizations of active citizens formed around ideological programs, whose competition was important for democratic politics, the rotation of elites, and ideological diversity, into organizations assisting autocrats or oligarchs with managing their countries' counter-elites and general populations. By 2022, most post-Soviet societies had witnessed the rise of parties of power or one-leader parties. The parties of power were political organizations of bureaucrats created to ensure executives' control of central parliaments and local councils (Ambrosio 2015: 52; Gel'man 2006: 546; Way 2021: 485). Parties like Turkmenistan's Democratic party, Russia's "United Russia," and Ukraine's "Our Ukraine" and Party of Regions served as additional instruments representing the interests of presidents or small ruling groups in parliaments and local councils. They also provided a pool of cadres for autocratic or oligarchic governments, supplying potential functionaries whose loyalty was proved by allegiance to the party in power.

Another non- or anti-democratic transformation of post-Soviet parties was connected with the political organizations created around some popular politicians. These parties would create a team of people who served a popular front-person—Vladimir Zhirinovskiy in Russia, Yulia Tymoshenko or Arseniy Yatseniuk in Ukraine, Mikheil Saakashvili in Georgia—in the expectation of being granted high positions in the government upon achieving electoral victory. A party like this would specifically promote elections in order to leverage the leader's popularity for success while using oligarchic support to further increase the leader's popularity. In the post-electoral phase, such parties would serve their sponsors rather than their constituencies. Nevertheless, their constituencies could and did vote for these popular leaders many times over decades despite the usual non-fulfillment of promises. The long-term populist success of Tymoshenko or Zhirinovskiy exemplifies this pattern (Minakov 2019c: 92ff.; Reuter 2017: 33ff.).

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<sup>1</sup> In 2022, the constitution of Kazakhstan underwent the reverse process. But this process was already a sign of the politics characteristic of the caesura of 2022 rather than of post-Soviet period.

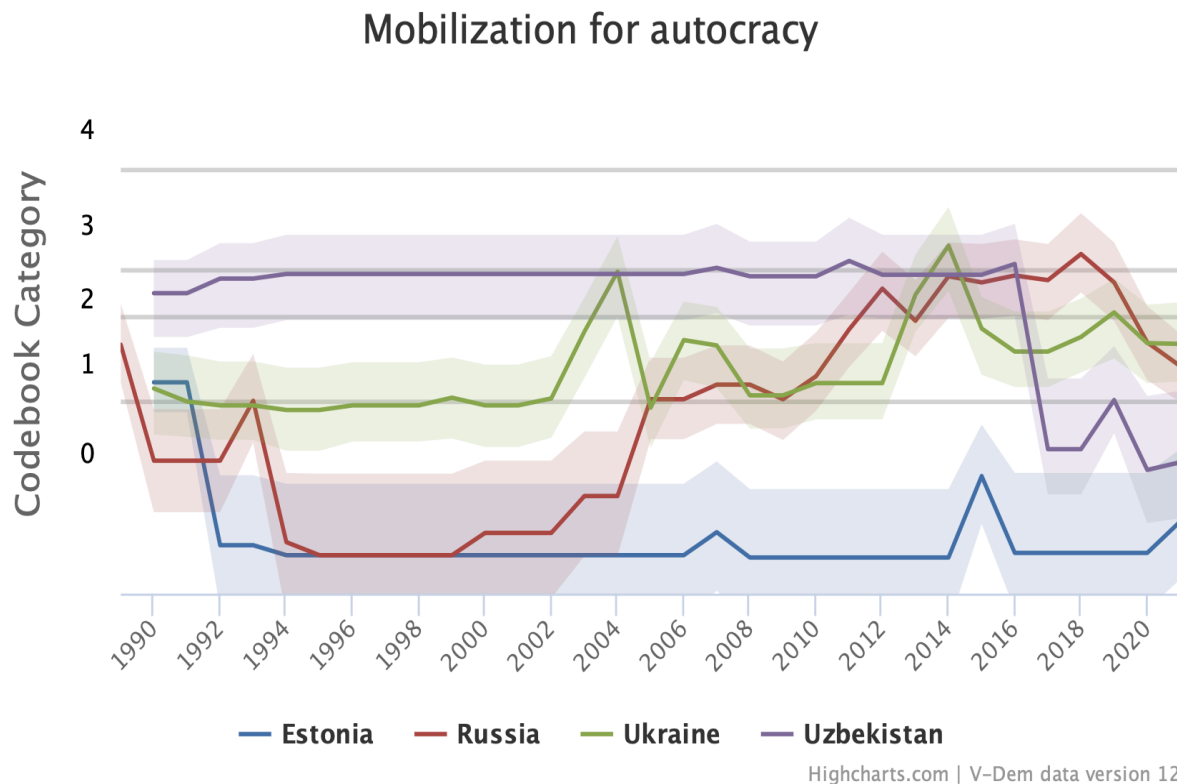
The non- or anti-democratic transformation of post-Soviet political regimes and systems abused the diversity of parties to bring politically active citizens under greater control and channel their creativity towards autocratic outcomes.

But the strongest influence on autocratic creativity stemmed from war—or the threat thereof. Civil wars (e.g., in Georgia and Azerbaijan from 1991–93, in Tajikistan from 1992–97, and in the north Caucasus from 1994–2002) channeled human creativity in an autocratic direction. As a result, the civil conflict in Azerbaijan led to the establishment of the dynastic rule of the Aliyevs (Sultanova 2014). The war between different groups of citizens in Georgia, with significant Russian intervention, led to a long delay in Georgia’s democratization and economic development, while the legitimate government lost control over part of the country to the Abkhaz and Ossetian separatists (Wheatley 2017). The Chechen wars halted the democratization of Russia as a whole, led to an accelerated demodernization of communities in the north Caucasus, and established some of the conditions for Putin’s rise to power (Tishkov 2004; Treisman 2011). Internal military conflicts have been highly influential factors limiting democratization and supporting autocratic creativity.

International warfare in the post-Soviet period, such as that between Georgia and Russia in 2008 or that between Russia and Ukraine beginning in 2014, was no less influential for the depth and speed of autocratization. Losing the war with Russia reinforced authoritarian tendencies in Georgia under the rule of Mikheil Saakashvili from 2003 to 2013 (Way 2016). Winning the war with minimal deterrence from the West led Moscow to believe that military operations in the post-Soviet space were quite legitimate, paving the way for the illegal annexation of Crimea, support in 2014 for pro-Russian secessionism and irredentism in Ukraine, and the start of a full-scale invasion in 2022 (Kuzio 2022). The post-Soviet region entered the stage of military conflict in 2008, after the Russian-Georgian war, which led to the creation of an entire “authoritarian belt” in the region (Minakov 2019a). The presence of hostile ethnic or ideological groups, peoples, and geopolitical blocs created the preconditions for the formation of stable enemy images that could be used to direct the political creativity of post-Soviet societies toward autocratic outcomes.

To summarize, the post-Soviet period can only partially be associated with democratic creativity; autocratic creativity was no less significant during this time. This is confirmed by the Mobilization for autocracy index (Chart 15). This index assesses the frequency and size at a given time of events of mass mobilization for pro-autocratic aims. Events are considered to be pro-autocracy if they are clearly organized in support of undemocratic forms of government or leaders who question the basic principles of democracy, or if they generally aim to undermine democratic ideas and institutions, such as the rule of law, free and fair elections, or freedom of the media (V-Dem 2023a).

**Chart 15. Mobilization for autocracy index (Estonia, Russia, Ukraine, and Uzbekistan, 1989–2022)**



Accordingly, the Uzbekistani case shows a longstanding high level of pro-autocratic mobilization, which decreased in 2016 with the change in regime and the growth of some civic freedoms. The Estonian case shows three sporadic bursts of pro-autocratic mobilization, linked to the socioeconomic crisis of 2007–8, the annexation of Crimea and the start of the Donbass war in 2014–16, and Russia’s attack on Ukraine in 2022. Even in a stable democracy, war provokes pro-autocratic mobilization. The Russian case shows a small surge in mobilization at the beginning of the First Chechen War, then again with the beginning of the Second Chechen War and Putin’s regime, and ultimately a significant, permanent increase in the index with the reaction to the “color revolutions,” peaking with the annexation of Crimea. Finally, in Ukraine, pro-autocratic mobilization was associated with the camp opposing the 2004 Orange Revolution, reactions to Euromaidan and the annexation of Crimea, and finally the 2017–18 shift of the Poroshenko regime into a national-conservative stage.

Thus, post-Soviet autocratic creativity and its outcomes were comparable to the region’s democratic creativity in the same period. The lives of several generations of people living in Eastern Europe and Northern Eurasia between 1989 and 2022 have been invested in autocratic outcomes as well as in democratic ones. These autocratic outcomes include (1) stable, informal groups (clans, neopatrimonial networks, patronage pyramids, and mafia state structures)

that subordinate formal state institutions to their interests; (2) post-Soviet presidentialism, with the ability to transform the civil liberties achieved in the early 1990s into structures of systemic subjection; (3) parliaments and courts able to combine formal autonomy with full or partial subordination of their decision-making processes to presidents or oligarchic clans; (4) ideological monopolies that ascribe a positive meaning to restricting civil liberties and involving citizens in military conflicts; and (5) the transformation of the post-Soviet region into a region of wars that supports the demand for military-style leadership and disciplined society.

### 3. Conclusions

This study has demonstrated that the fundamental trends and contradictions that constituted the post-Soviet period ceased to exist by 2022. The post-communist tetrad—democratization, marketization, nationalization, and Europeanization—determined the life of Eastern European and Northern Eurasian nations from the end of the Cold War and the dissolution of the USSR through the Russian invasion of Ukraine and connected geopolitical change. However, the history of Europe and Eurasia has moved on, with the post-Soviet period and related social reality becoming a thing of the past. The end of the post-Soviet period makes it possible to analyze that historical era as a whole, complete with start and finale, actors and events, logic and dialectics, processes and outcomes.

1. The study specifically offers a list of high-level institutional outcomes divided into two groups: those that support individual freedom and the rule of law, and those that instead promote subjection and allegiance to supreme power in exchange for social security. The first group of outcomes includes:

- 1) political systems based on the separation of supreme state power into branches and levels of government;
- 2) political and legal systems based (in whole or in part) on the rule of law;
- 3) strong representative parliaments, elected in competitive elections and able (fully or occasionally) to oversee the executive branch of government;
- 4) relatively autonomous courts able to provide citizens with some access to justice;
- 5) multiparty systems offering citizens a wide menu of ideologies and opportunities to participate in politics;
- 6) a competitive and relatively free mass-media environment; and
- 7) a diverse and relatively influential civil society.

All of these outcomes are of a democratic nature, proving the hypothesis that the post-Soviet period was a time of democratization that enriched the political experience of Eastern European and Northern Eurasian societies.

Still, the depth of this democratic experience has varied from nation to nation. In some cases (Azerbaijan, Armenia before 2018, the Central Asian states apart from Kyrgyzstan), democratization was a short-lived trend with minimal outcomes. Kyrgyzstan is a case of a country where democratic and autocratic elements are in constant conflict, not allowing the political system to institutionalize enough to produce a stable regime. In the cases of Belarus and Russia, democratization proved to be a somewhat longer-lived process, but it was still ultimately overcome by authoritarian leaders. Nevertheless, the democratic experience of these nations has left an important trace in their political cultures that may be used for new democracy-building in the future. Georgia, Moldova, and Ukraine are unstable polyarchies with rich experience of democratic and oligarchic events as well as some autocratic ones and with strong interest in European integration, which may ultimately improve the democratic quality of their political and legal systems. After a radical regime change in 2018, Armenia seems to have joined the group of unstable polyarchies. Finally, Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania are stable democracies whose membership in the EU and NATO adds to their internal and external stability.

The second group of outcomes listed includes:

- 1) stable informal institutions and organizations able to compete with and/or subordinate formal state institutions and thus undermine the rule of law and the efficiency of public institutions;
- 2) strong presidential institutions able to undermine civil liberties and/or oligarchic interests for the purposes of personal rule;
- 3) parliaments and courts able to adjust to existing oligarchic and autocratic tendencies while still preserving their role in semi- or unfree political systems;
- 4) ideological monopolies that restrict or subdue civil liberties and oligarchic interests to serve the purposes of rulers, even if they launch military conflicts;
- 5) mass media and civil societies that comply with the logic of allegiance to autocratic projects and, in some cases, their militarist initiatives.

From the autocratic perspective, post-Soviet nations can be divided into the following groups. Stable autocracies (Azerbaijan, Belarus, Kazakhstan, Russia, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan, and Uzbekistan) base their rule on all five of these autocratic outcomes, which have allowed them to more or less undermine the democratic achievements of the early 1990s. Polyarchies (Armenia, Georgia, Kyrgyzstan, Moldova, and Ukraine) might have gone through periods of autocratization or democratization but have been able to preserve a formal or informal system of checks and balances and to increase cooperation with the EU (except for Kyrgyzstan, whose geographic position does not allow for strong Western influence). The three Baltic countries have political and legal systems that do not allow strong pro-autocracy mobilization. However, ideological monopolies or war-related illiberal practices may yet come to influence their political and legal systems.

2. The argument of this study provided an opportunity to look at political action in terms of democratic and autocratic creativity. Democratic creativity organizes the life of communities around democracy as an inspiring idea and practice, drawing on the individual and collective quest for freedom as well as on indigenous and Western experiences. Autocratic creativity arranges the life of communities around stable order capable of decreasing conflicts between individual and collective aims as well as around the promise of protection from the challenges of a chaotic world. Both the democratic and the autocratic promises seem to have served as major motivations provoking creative responses from several generations that lived and acted in the post-Soviet interwar period.

3. This study supplies conceptual and empirical evidence for the hypothesis that the time between 1989 and 1991 was a historical caesura that terminated the Soviet continuity. Assessing the political processes of the early 1990s revealed a revolutionary period when the seeds of new beginnings were planted in the post-Soviet countries in the form of political institutions and practices. These formative processes were described in terms of the post-communist tetrad, although the focus of our attention was democratization and its opposite, autocratization.

This study has also demonstrated that the end of the post-Soviet period coincides with the caesura of 2022. This caesura began with the Russian invasion of Ukraine and has continued with multiple reactions to that act of aggression. Taken together, these actions have demonstrated that democratization, marketization, and Europeanization have lost or profoundly changed their significance for the re-ordering of the new historical chaos. Furthermore, in the current caesura, nationalization plays a new role. The end of the post-Soviet period was brought about by the growing contradictions among and within the processes of the tetrad, as well as by the inconsistency between democratization and autocratization. Hence, the year 2022 emerges as the end of post-Soviet history and the post-Soviet region as such.

The post-Soviet period is thus seen as a time between two political and social, but also existential, conditions that can be described as “wars”: the Cold War and a new military conflict with the potential to proliferate around Europe and Eurasia. The status of the post-Soviet period as an *interwar* period has certain pragmatic implications: it allows scholars to keep their attention simultaneously on historical developments at multiple levels, specifically the internal political, international political, social, transnational, and existential levels.

4. Applying the concept of political creativity to the chaos of events in the post-Soviet period allowed for their narration in an order based on the binary opposition of democratic and autocratic creativity. This approach enabled us to see the variety of processes and outcomes through the lens of a tragic struggle of individuals and collectives to re-order their social worlds with an orientation to either freedom/liberty or subjection/allegiance. The empirical data and high-level assessments used in this paper were supportive of this kind of narration.

In addition, the philosophical perspective that human existence reveals itself partly in creative acts of seeding new beginnings was critically important for the construction of this narrative.

Nonetheless, it is important to stress that the story about the post-Soviet period can be told in many other ways: through the lenses of human destruction, human passivity, non-human agency, the opposition of justice and injustice, etc. The present study is firmly focused on human agency and grounded in empathy for several generations of humans living through the post-Soviet interwar period who failed to use that time to construct political and legal systems capable of settling human conflict (what Kant called “unsocial sociability”) and sustaining peaceful coexistence.

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