Three decades of democratization in former soviet republics: Success or failure?

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Abstract

The research explores the issue of democratization in former Soviet republics. Over the past three decades, these countries have experienced a wide range of political transitions, from nascent democracies to enduring autocracies. The core purpose of the research is to analyze the main theories of political transition and examine the main factors that have influenced the political trajectories in former Soviet republics, including their economic development, regional geopolitics, the role of international organizations, and domestic societal pressures. The research is conducted using the methodology of comparative analysis of relevant theories and concepts on democratization, as well as empirical and statistical data that are largely used to define the peculiarities of political transition in former Soviet republics. The study finds that while some republics have made significant strides toward democratic governance, others have faced setbacks or retreated into authoritarianism. The autocratic political culture inherited from the Soviet Union was maintained by Russian and some other post-Soviet rulers to foster their centralized power. This circumstance played a crucial role in democratization in the entire former Soviet region. The economic, energy, and security dependencies on Russia hindered political reforms in some republics that prioritized a democratic path of development. In others, democratic transitions were recognized as "color revolutions" supported by the West, aiming to strategically weaken Russia. In turn, Russia played the role of a locomotive to deter democratization not only on its territory but also in its near and far abroad. It is also concluded that domestic political efforts, international assistance, and Russia's geopolitical deterrence can reload successful democratization in former Soviet republics with a democratic vision.

Keywords: Authoritarianism, Democratization, Foreign influence, Former Soviet republics, Political culture, Stability.

1. Introduction

The collapse of the Soviet Union in December 1991 marked a pivotal moment in world history, resulting in the creation of 15 new sovereign states that had to navigate the complex terrain of political transition.

The question of how these countries would transition from an entrenched, one-party system to democratic governance was central not only to their future but also to global geopolitical stability, particularly as the West, led by institutions such as the European Union (EU), OSCE, and NATO, sought to foster democratic reform in the region.

The process of democratization in the post-Soviet space, however, has been far from uniform [1]. While some countries made significant progress toward democratic governance, others have struggled, regressed, or even embraced more authoritarian political systems. The varying outcomes of this transition raise important questions about the factors that influence democratization: *is democratization a natural outcome of economic development and modernization* or *is it shaped more by external influences, such as foreign intervention, regional power dynamics, and the persistence of Soviet-era political structures?*

At the forefront of this transition stood Russia, the largest and most influential of the former Soviet states, where initial moves toward democracy under B. Yeltsin gave way to a more centralized, authoritarian regime under V. Putin. Meanwhile, smaller states like Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania quickly embraced democratic reforms and joined Western organizations, including NATO and the EU [2] by the early 2000s. These nations have come to be seen as models of successful post-Soviet democratization. In contrast, others like Belarus and Azerbaijan have seen little in the way of meaningful democratization, with autocratic leaders maintaining tight control over political systems.

The so-called "Color Revolutions" [3] in Georgia, Ukraine, and Kyrgyzstan in the mid-2000s were defining moments in the post-Soviet transition, as mass protests ousted unpopular authoritarian regimes in favor of more democratic governments. However, the aftermath of these uprisings has been mixed, with some of these countries experiencing periods of political instability, while others - such as Georgia under M. Saakashvili - succeeded in building stronger democratic institutions [4]. In Ukraine, the Orange Revolution in 2004 signaled widespread discontent with corruption and electoral fraud [5] but the country has continued to face divisions between pro-European and pro-Russian factions, culminating in the ongoing conflict in the Donbas and Luhansk regions.

The challenges to democratization in the post-Soviet region are manifold. Economic hardship, institutional weakness, the persistence of oligarchic structures, and the legacy of Soviet-era governance all play significant roles in shaping the political landscape. Furthermore, regional dynamics have exerted a powerful influence on these countries' political trajectories. Russia, in particular, seeks to maintain leadership and control over the post-Soviet states [6] to prevent them from aligning with Western institutions, employing a combination of political pressure, economic leverage, and military force. This has been particularly evident in countries like Ukraine, Moldova, and Georgia, which have pursued closer ties with the EU and NATO despite Russian opposition.

The international community, led by organizations such as the EU, NATO, and OSCE, has been actively engaged in promoting democratization in the post-Soviet space [7]. The EU's "Eastern Partnership" initiative, for example, sought to bring Ukraine, Moldova, Georgia, and recently Armenia closer to European standards of governance. However, the lack of a clear path to EU membership for other post-Soviet states like Belarus has left it vulnerable to backsliding and consolidated authoritarian reversion [8].

In light of these complexities, this research will focus on the roles of domestic conditions as well as external factors like Russian influence and Western involvement. By analyzing the successes and setbacks of democratization in this region, the paper seeks to offer a comprehensive understanding of why some post-Soviet countries have made lasting strides toward democracy, while others have faltered or regressed into autocracy.

Through this exploration, the paper will argue that while democratization in the post-Soviet space is undoubtedly shaped by a complex interplay of internal and external factors, the political legacies of Soviet rule, along with the strategies of elites and the impact of regional geopolitics, remain some of the most significant determinants of democratic success or failure. Ultimately, this analysis will contribute to a broader understanding of democratization in former Soviet states, offering insights into the broader global phenomenon of political transition in the post-Soviet world.

2. Research Methodology

The current research is based on the comparative analysis of relevant theories and concepts on democratization, especially emphasizing their significance in transitional periods of social and political developments. The appropriate democratization experiences of given former Soviet republics as well as their practices of democratic mechanisms' implementation are discussed and assessed taking into consideration the international tools and indexes of democracy measurement like Freedom House [9] data. In this regard, some qualitative data (from 2001 to 2024) is comparatively analyzed for the purpose of revealing the peculiarities of political transition in the post-Soviet space and defining specific groups and trajectories of democratic transition for all 15 republics. The external and internal challenges in this process are also explored to provide more substantive information advancing or abstracting the political transition in this region.

3. Theoretical Framework

The post-Soviet transformation continues to be critically relevant both as a matter of scholarly analysis and interpretation, as well as a fundamental challenge facing former Soviet republics. Understanding democratization in post-Soviet countries requires a nuanced theoretical approach that accounts for both domestic and external factors. Initially, nations that gained independence as a result of the Soviet Union's dissolution proclaimed democratic principles as a priority, but some of them

followed a similar path, mostly towards authoritarianism. The methods were quite different, but the regimes were most likely similar: soft in some, harsh in others.

Over the past years, research on this matter has become increasingly difficult. How many concepts and theories have been applied to study and understand the post-Soviet transformation in these countries? Various models of democratization have been proposed in political science literature, each offering distinct perspectives on the conditions and mechanisms that drive political transitions. The framework employed in this paper draws from several key theories: S. Huntington's "third wave" concept of democratization, modernization theory, elite theory, the concept from post-Soviet studies to de-Sovietization, the theory of transit, the concepts of Europeanization or Westernization, as well as consolidology, but the main question still remains open because many of these countries continue to falter in their transition.

However, these theories provide valuable insights into the political trajectories of former Soviet states, offering explanations for both their successes and setbacks in the quest for democracy.

Democratization provides several models to explain political transitions. Theories like S. Huntington's "*third wave" of democratization* [10] suggest that global trends and regional pressures can accelerate the transition to democracy, but the success of democratization largely depends on the strength of civil society, a developed market economy, and strong state institutions [9]. In the post-Soviet context, the interaction between these factors is more complex due to the region's unique geopolitical situation.

Modernization theory has long been a cornerstone in the study of democratization. Rooted in the works of scholars like Lipset [11], it posits that economic development and modernization are key prerequisites for the establishment and consolidation of democracy. According to him, as societies industrialize and urbanize, they develop the economic and social structures necessary for democratic governance, including a vibrant middle class, the spread of education, and the growth of a pluralistic civil society. In this view, democracy emerges as a natural outcome of the development process [11].

In the context of former Soviet republics, the modernization theory suggests that countries with higher levels of economic development are more likely to experience successful democratization. The Baltic States serve as appropriate examples in this regard. These countries, which had relatively high levels of industrialization and a strong historical tradition of statehood before Soviet occupation, embraced democratic reforms early and successfully integrated into European political and economic institutions. According to R. Mole: "These countries benefited from a combination of economic growth and the influence of external democratic institutions, which supported their democratic consolidation"[12].

In this respect, R. Kollmorgen points out that "Ten years after the collapse of the Soviet empire, one thing is clear: The term "postcommunism" has lost its relevance" [13]. However, many other researchers' demands to abandon the idea of "remaining still post-Soviet" turned out to be not entirely justified. Many republics continue to bear the imprint of the "post-Sovietism". And of course, there are many objective reasons for this situation as well.

The project of state socialism once aimed at pervading and revolutionizing society in total; its goal was the formation of a new civilization. The outcomes of this project are deeply inscribed into the social structures, the tangible and intangible expressions of culture, and the everyday practices of those societies [14]. That is, to understand if or how democracy works, we must attend to what people make of it, and what they think they are doing as they engage politics, or politics engages them [15].

Although this has lost significance, it remains present in other theoretical currents in terms of the emphasis given to the socio-structural and, particularly, the cultural legacies of communism, ranging from the "atomization of the social," via "us versus them" dichotomies, to statist and wait-and-see attitudes [13].

In this case, the simultaneous negotiation of institutional, economic, and attitudinal transitions has often proven extraordinarily difficult, especially in the presence of ethnic conflicts and controversies over borders and boundaries. Institutional transition refers to legal, social, and educational institutions, as well as governmental ones. Attitudinal transition covers attitudes not only toward new institutions and laws but also toward changing class structures, identities, and international allegiances. Since 1989, the post-communist world has witnessed plenty in the way of economic catastrophe, ethnic warfare, civil conflict, political instability, and lingering and sometimes resurgent authoritarianism Dryzek and Holmes [15].

In 1989, as Dryzek and Holmes [15] rightly notice that the "Autumn of the People" ushered in high hopes concerning the possibilities for democratic transformation in the countries of the soon-to-be post-communist world, Dryzek and Holmes [15].

Properly speaking, the revolutionary novelty and certain utopianism of the desired future constituted the legitimacy of post-Soviet political projects. New regimes emerged out of the dream and the promise to become modern societies, to rise above the ruins of the USSR. Nevertheless, 20 years later, the novelty has been substituted with the search for the old, the comeback of the past that had not been properly reflected upon. Consequently, Minakov [16] argues that historical rights became alternatives to human rights and that a power vertical serves as an alternative to the democratic division of branches of power. Some post-Soviet countries chose this path. The enthusiasm of the first years of independence was accompanied by a kind of "indigenization" of the public sphere. Among the conscious decisions of the new power elites was the transition from the Marxist worldview to ethnonationalist beliefs [16].

In this regard, Martin [17] uses the formulation "Modernization or Neo-Traditionalism [17]. As Minakov [16] stresses, the launch of cultural modernization programs bore one major risk: romantic nationalism could become a distraction from balanced changes in economy and politics. The countries where privatization outpaced the institutional development of democratic politics became the champions of de-modernization in the end [17]. In the 1990s, the post-Soviet countries split into different groups with opposite visions of development.

Here, archaism and retrogression were imposed under the name of traditionalism, which in turn hindered or made the process of modernization and democratization difficult. This was a backsliding transformation; it means that some former Soviet countries did not really modernize but rather modernized the old regimes. Backsliding modernization is the correct characterization of the transformational experience for some former Soviet republics.

Even though, as Martin [17] points out "Societies move from traditional type of existence to the new forms of collective life, in which human behavior is determined by the future rather than the past, and by individual interests rather than by collective goals" [17].

The main question for the transit in these republics remained the following: *transition to where?*

As Kollmorgen [13] points out: "The modernization theory and the transition approach were the two dominant lines of theory during the first decade of post-Soviet transformation which played a significant role after the turn of the millennium" [18].

From a meta-theoretical perspective, the problem of combining approaches to construct a complex theory of transformation remains an issue calling for attention [18]. Contemporary grand theories of modernization are good at showing global trends in long historical processes. But these theories are focused on humanity as such and miss disruptions in the local modernization projects. It is especially evident on the example of post-Soviet societies where attempt of radical modernization is currently being reversed [16].

It is well known that approaches drawing on modernization theory immediately came under attack upon entering the scene. The main objections were that they placed emphasis on systems while neglecting action and subscribed to evolutionism and Westernization in the sense of believing in the need for the transition societies to catch up with and model themselves after Western society and its basic institutions [13]. Although this fundamental critique of the modernization paradigm was mostly right on the mark, particularly as far as its neo-evolutionist variants were concerned, it often failed to recognize the explanatory power of those approaches relying on historical, cultural, or institutional perspectives [19]. Nevertheless, the early disputes had an influence on all versions thereafter [13]. The efforts at modernizing modernization theory during the second decade of post-Soviet transition can be summarized as attempts to reformulate its place in the debate on transformation theory [20].

For example, S. Eisenstadt identified an error in this general theory. It lies in the assumption that some kind of unified modern normativity exists, the normativity of the social experience of Europe and the West in general [16]. If we discard the prejudice of the normativity of the "Western way" of modernization, we will face the obvious fact that modernity has a multiple nature, that there are modernities and not modernity. One of the most important implications of the term "multiple modernities" is that modernity and Westernization are not identical; Western patterns of modernity are not the only "authentic" modernities [21], though they enjoy historical precedence and continue to be a basic reference point for others [22].

Of course, this viewpoint is not well substantiated and therefore, it can give rise to serious doubts. For example, Woojeong [23] emphasizes that studies of non-cooperative transitions find that domestic balances of power shaped post-communist regime trajectories in favor of the powerful. Then, what determined the balance of power during a transition? Drawing on relational-network analysis in international relations, he argues that the configuration of international ties determined the relative strength of democrats and Soviet-era elites. States with diversified ties between the US and the Soviet Union—that occupy a brokerage position—were more likely to democratize. Their ties with the US funneled material and non-material assistance into democrats in post-communist states. However, states deeply integrated into the Soviet order resisted democratization to a greater extent. Their extensive ties to the Soviet order resulted in stronger Sovietization and Soviet legacies impeding democratization. The interplay of states' ties with the US and the Soviet Union, as a function of brokerage and integration, shaped the domestic balance of power, conditioning post-communist political changes. Empirical analysis using medium-N analysis and case studies on the former Soviet Union republics lends support to the argument. The findings contribute to the literature on international determinants of regime changes by highlighting how underlying global power structures frame the domestic balance of power [23].

In this context, Etkind [24] states that we use the concept of demodernization to describe the new and under-theorized realities of the 21st century. For our purposes, we define demodernization as a reverse development in a modern society, which borrows from the previous stages of modernization and creates a new, mixed, and improvised order [24].

Some local modernities turn up in a situation where their modernization attempts are being developed in cycles. This cycle moves from profound sociopolitical crisis to an opportunity to establish an open access order to the period of "betrayal of the elites" who take back the monopoly on violence and the control over access to resources, and the destruction of the institutes and institutions that guarantee political and economic freedoms (demodernization stage). Demodernization, in turn, leads to the general acceptance of and even demand for authoritarian government and a closed society, which, in the medium term, builds up a critical mass of mistakes in political and socioeconomic sectors, ultimately resulting in a deep political and socioeconomic crisis and another start of a modernization project. This historical track has been repeated in Russia several times throughout the last three centuries. The political cultures sharing the Russian long modernization legacy have moved, though at a different pace, to the demodernization phase [16].

Today's post-Soviet region is full of reverse developments. Over a quarter-century after Perestroika, post-Soviet societies are delving deeper into military, economic, and cultural conflicts. Deindustrialization, desocialization, and deinstitutionalization are reversing development. At the moment, the post-Soviet region is a global history lab for testing alternative demodernization schemes, from their theoretical elaboration to the practical implementation of antimodern models of sociopolitical structure [16].

It is worth emphasizing that post-Soviet modernization or de-Sovietization did not occur under normal conditions and, in some cases, is not occurring to this day. In this process, the autonomy of nations is very weak: external negative, authoritarian impacts persist, especially in the case of Russian influence over other former Soviet republics.

However, some former Soviet republics democratize while others did not. The variation in post-communist regime transitions can be explained by domestic capacities and external positive factors that influence the successful democratization. Traditional approaches to regime changes postulate that "democratization is a domestic affair *par excellence* [25].

The common practice of former Soviet republics (besides the Baltic States) has shown that democratization does not occur through evolution. Democratization is/was "evolutionary" under Russia's suspicious eye and its geopolitical authoritarian pressure. This is also the reason why republics in this condition succeeded in their democratic journey only through revolutionary modernization. These republics had some success, but almost all of them pay the highest price: war against democracy. One of the reasons for the inhibition of transit in certain former Soviet republics is that the simulation of democratization remains a substitute for modernization.

However, the application of modernization theory to the broader post-Soviet space reveals its limitations. Many post-Soviet countries, particularly in Central Asia and the South Caucasus, face significant economic challenges that hinder the emergence of a strong middle class capable of demanding democratic reforms. As a result, these nations remain vulnerable to the persistence of authoritarian regimes. Countries like Kazakhstan, Azerbaijan, and Belarus have experienced economic growth; yet, the lack of significant democratic development highlights the limits of the modernization thesis. In these republics, autocratic traditions were more relevant than democratic visions. As pointed out by Dahl [26] the economic preconditions for democracy are necessary but not sufficient on their own; political culture, elite behavior, and institutional development play equally crucial roles [26].

While modernization theory emphasizes the importance of economic development, elite theory focuses on the role of political elites in shaping democratization. Elite theory suggests that the success or failure of democratization is largely determined by the behavior and preferences of political elites - the individuals or groups who control state power and resources. This theory is fundamentally explored by Sartori [27] who argues that the elites' willingness to share power and engage in democratic processes is the key to successful democratization [27]. The elite's behavior is strongly related to the nature of dominant political culture in given societies. Conventional models of "democracy transitions" are incomplete and insufficient to analyze regime changes in post-Soviet societies [28]. The distinction between the types of dominant political institutions (formal institutions versus informal ones, or the rule of law versus arbitrariness) marks a line between "transition to democracy" and post-Soviet transitions to several different regimes. The main sources of political competition in post-Soviet societies are intra-elite conflicts, not "pacts." In such societies, there is no solid basis to establish the dominance of formal institutions over informal ones. This situation can be explained by relying on the type and degree of political culture in post-Soviet societies, since the political behavior of elites and citizens is reflected in the very process of democratization. However, most post-Soviet societies have a low level of political culture, which is a reflection of the Soviet era, where a totalitarian political culture was prevalent, leaving its mark on the political consciousness of the post-Soviet individual [29].

In the post-Soviet context, the behavior of elites has been instrumental in either advancing or obstructing democratic transitions. In many former Soviet countries, political elites who were once part of the Soviet apparatus maintained significant control over the newly independent states, often consolidating power in the hands of a small group. The persistence of these elites, and their resistance to meaningful reform, explains why some countries have struggled to democratize. The case of Russia is particularly instructive. Under Boris Yeltsin's rule, Russia made significant steps toward democracy, but the political elites - many of whom were former Soviet officials - tended to view democracy as a threat to their power. As a result, Russia's transition to democracy was interrupted, and under V. Putin's rule, a new elite coalition emerged that has reinforced authoritarian rule [30]. The persistence of oligarchic structures and the lack of genuine competition for power have made democratization difficult and even impossible.

In contrast, the Baltic republics were able to avoid the trap of elite entrenchment and oligarchic dominance [29]. Their elites, though rooted in the pre-Soviet period, were able to forge a consensus on the importance of democratic norms and European integration. Similarly, the success of the revolutions in Georgia, Ukraine, Kyrgyzstan and Armenia can be attributed to elite factions splitting over issues of corruption and governance, which led to the mobilization of broader segments of society. These events were pivotal moments in post-Soviet democratization, symbolizing a popular demand for greater political freedoms and transparency [31]. However, as seen in Ukraine's post-revolutionary struggles, the challenge remains in forging a new political culture and a more inclusive elite network capable of sustaining democratic governance.

Finally, the concept of "hybrid regimes" has been instrumental in understanding the variety of political systems that have emerged in the post-Soviet space. Hybrid regimes are political systems that combine elements of both democracy and authoritarianism. These regimes often feature elections, political parties, and some democratic institutions, but they lack the full range of democratic freedoms, such as a free press, the rule of law, and the protection of human rights [32]. Many post-Soviet states, including Armenia, Georgia, Ukraine, Moldova, fit this description and are considered as "Transitional Governments or Hybrid Regimes".

The persistence of hybrid regimes in the post-Soviet region highlights the complexity of the democratization process. While some states have succeeded in transitioning to consolidated democracies, others have been unable or unwilling to make the leap from authoritarianism to genuine democracy. This uneven progression is indicative of the deep structural challenges facing post-Soviet societies, including the persistence of authoritarian legacies, the weakness of democratic institutions, and the continued dominance of political elites who resist change.

Choosing an appropriate model of democracy could be considered a contributing factor to successful democratization in former Soviet republics due to their social structure as well as cultural, religious, and linguistic diversities within the same

country. It is obvious that some former Soviet republics had a heterogeneous structure while others had a homogeneous one. The same majoritarian democracy couldn't be viable in the case of plural societies. That's why it is important to pay attention to the distinctive characteristics of democratization in former Soviet republics, emphasizing the integration of the consociational democracy model to address the pluralistic nature of these societies. The consociational approach, which advocates for power-sharing among diverse groups, could be effective in managing ethnic and political diversity in countries like Georgia or Azerbaijan [29]. Especially in the South Caucasus region, where Georgia and Azerbaijan are both characterized by multi-ethnic societies, the implementation of the consociational democracy model could enhance political stability and inclusion, and decrease deep-rooted ethnic tensions, lack of trust among communities, and the dominance of certain ethnic groups over others [33].

By summarizing the theoretical framework of democratization in the post-Soviet region, it is important to notice that each country has its peculiarities, own traditions, unique cultural identity, and specific perspectives on democratic vision and development. That's why one theory or concept can't be sufficient to explore and analyze the political transition in former Soviet republics as a general process. To perceive the political transition and democratization in former Soviet republics, a complex and combined approach is needed.

4. Assessing Democratization

The characterization of political transition in former Soviet republics needs more specific data analysis that can help to reveal the peculiarities as well as determine the individual path of democratic progress or setback for each country. In this respect, the assessment of political and social developments in the post-Soviet period and space can surely serve as strong factors to define the paths of democratization in former Soviet republics. To reach this goal, it is important to consider appropriate and unbiased data for measurement that can provide the quantitative analysis conducted by Freedom House for at least the last 25 years. The collected data is crucial for us to showcase the transformation and draw trajectories of political transition by comparing democracy scores of 15 former Soviet republics.

Table 1.
Democracy Score in former Soviet Republics in 2001-2004 NIT [34]
(The ratings are based on a scale of 1 to 7, with 1 representing the highest level of democratic progress and 7 the lowest)

Former Soviet Republics	2001	2002	2003	2004
Armenia	4.83	4.83	4.92	5.00
Azerbaijan	5.63	5.54	5.46	5.63
Belarus	6.38	6.38	6.46	5.54
Estonia	2.13	2.00	2.00	1.92
Georgia	4.33	4.58	4.83	4.83
Kazakhstan	5.71	5.96	6.17	6.25
Kyrgyzstan	5.29	5.46	5.67	5.67
Latvia	2.21	2.25	2.25	2.17
Lithuania	2.21	2.21	2.13	2.13
Moldova	4.29	4.50	4.71	4.88
Russia	4.88	5.00	4.96	5.25
Tajikistan	5.58	5.63	5.63	5.71
Turkmenistan	6.83	6.83	6.83	6.88
Ukraine	4.71	4.92	4.71	4.88
Uzbekistan	6.42	6.46	6.46	6.46

Table 1 showcases the democracy score for 15 former Soviet republics covering the period from 2001 to 2004. Based on the provided data, only three former Soviet republics (Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania) are considered democratic in this short period of political transition. The others are considered "authoritarian regimes," which means that democratization has had no tangible success in those republics due to the persistence of Soviet political traditions.
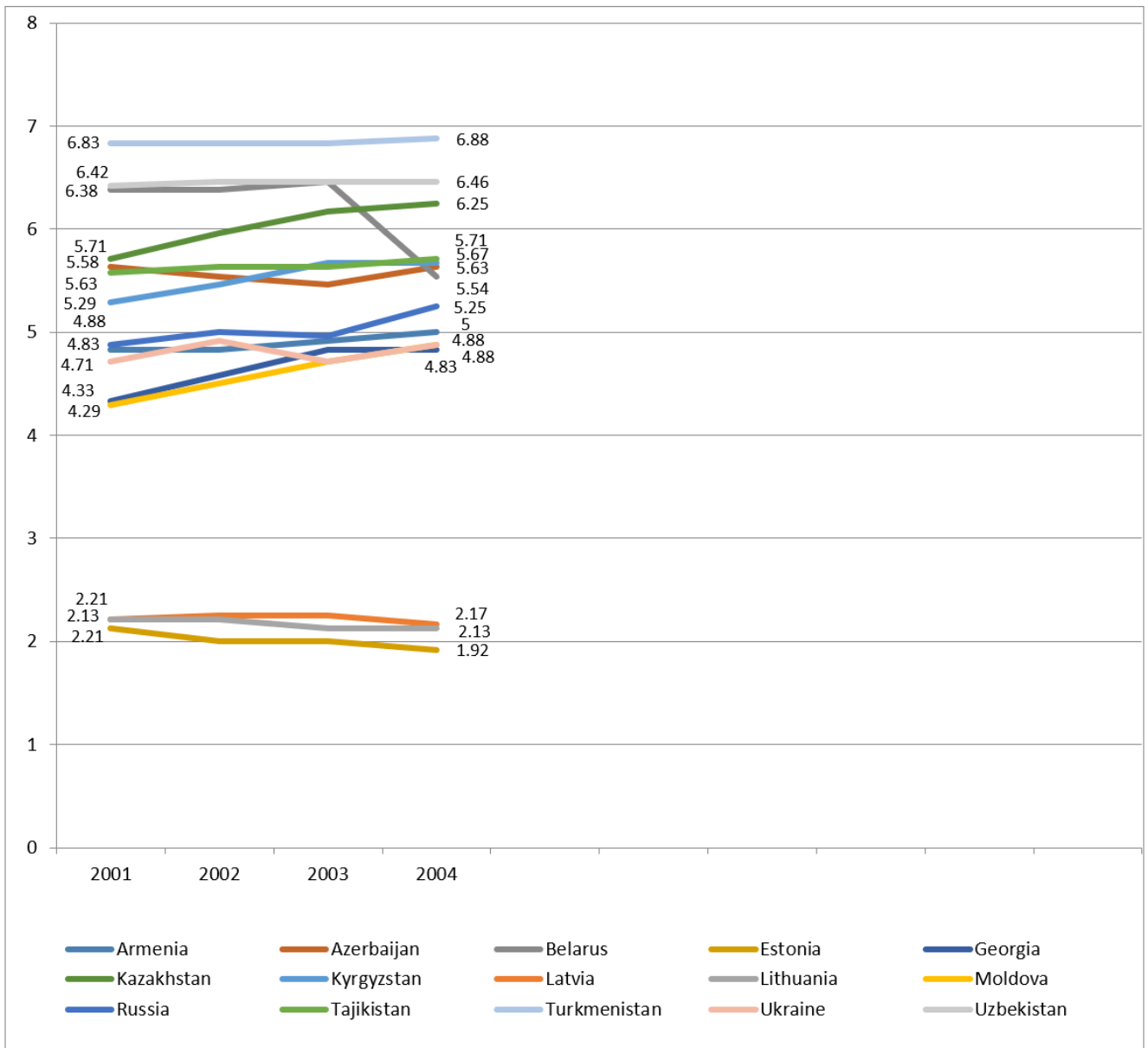
Figure 1.
Trajectories of democratization in former Soviet Republics in 2001-2004.

Figure 1 makes it obvious that in the given period of post-Soviet transition there is a huge gap between two groups of countries that can be determined as: *democratic and autocratic ones*. The Baltic States are included in the 1st group as democracies that had fast success and progress in their path of democratic development. The 2nd group includes 13 other republics that were unsuccessful in implementing democratic values and developing sustainable democratic institutions for their societies. Consequently, they were considered authoritarian regimes having traditionally strong mutual ties and interdependencies during that period of time.

It is important to notice that the 2nd group of countries was very sensitive to Russia's political, economic, military, and cultural influences in the given period. This is one of the factors that hindered democratic progress in those countries.

Table 2.
Democracy Score in former Soviet Republics in 2005-2014 Nations in Transit [9].
(Each country is ranked on a scale of 1-7, with 7 representing the highest and 1 the lowest level or democracy)

Former Soviet Republics	2005	2006	2007	2008	2009	2010	2011	2012	2013	2014
Armenia	2.82	2.86	2.79	2.79	2.61	2.61	2.57	2.61	2.64	2.64
Azerbaijan	2.14	2.07	2.00	2.00	1.75	1.61	1.54	1.43	1.36	1.32
Belarus	1.36	1.29	1.32	1.29	1.43	1.50	1.43	1.32	1.29	1.29
Estonia	6.04	6.04	6.04	6.07	6.07	6.04	6.07	6.07	6.04	6.04
Georgia	3.04	3.14	3.32	3.21	3.07	3.07	3.14	3.18	3.25	3.32
Kazakhstan	1.71	1.61	1.61	1.61	1.68	1.57	1.57	1.46	1.43	1.39
Kyrgyzstan	2.36	2.32	2.32	2.07	1.96	1.79	1.89	2.00	2.04	2.11
Latvia	5.86	5.93	5.93	5.93	5.82	5.82	5.86	5.89	5.93	5.93
Lithuania	5.79	5.79	5.71	5.75	5.71	5.75	5.75	5.71	5.68	5.64
Moldova	2.93	3.04	3.04	3.00	2.93	2.86	3.04	3.11	3.18	3.14
Russia	2.39	2.25	2.14	2.04	1.89	1.86	1.82	1.82	1.79	1.71
Tajikistan	2.21	2.07	2.04	1.93	1.86	1.86	1.86	1.82	1.75	1.68
Turkmenistan	1.07	1.04	1.04	1.07	1.07	1.07	1.07	1.07	1.07	1.07
Ukraine	3.50	3.79	3.75	3.75	3.61	3.61	3.39	3.18	3.14	3.07
Uzbekistan	1.57	1.18	1.18	1.14	1.11	1.07	1.07	1.07	1.07	1.07

Table 2 showcases the democracy score for 15 former Soviet republics covering the period from 2005 to 2014. Based on the provided data, the political transition trends start to smoothly evolve in the given period. Some former Soviet republics, which were previously included in the 2nd group of consolidated authoritarian regimes, showcased a slow shift and progression to decrease the autocratic impetus and strive for democratic reforms, such as drastic changes in political elites that occurred in Georgia, Ukraine, and Moldova. On the list of Nations in Transit, some countries moved from consolidated autocracies to semi-consolidated authoritarian regimes or to hybrid and transitional governments. This process predefined a progressive tendency for democratic development in the post-Soviet space. But it has to be noticed that these progressive republics, unfortunately, faced militarily conflicts or domestic tensions mainly provoked from outside by Russia to hinder also the democratization like in case of Georgia (2008 war[35]) and Ukraine (2014 war and annexation of Crimea and some territories of Luhansk and Donetsk [36]).
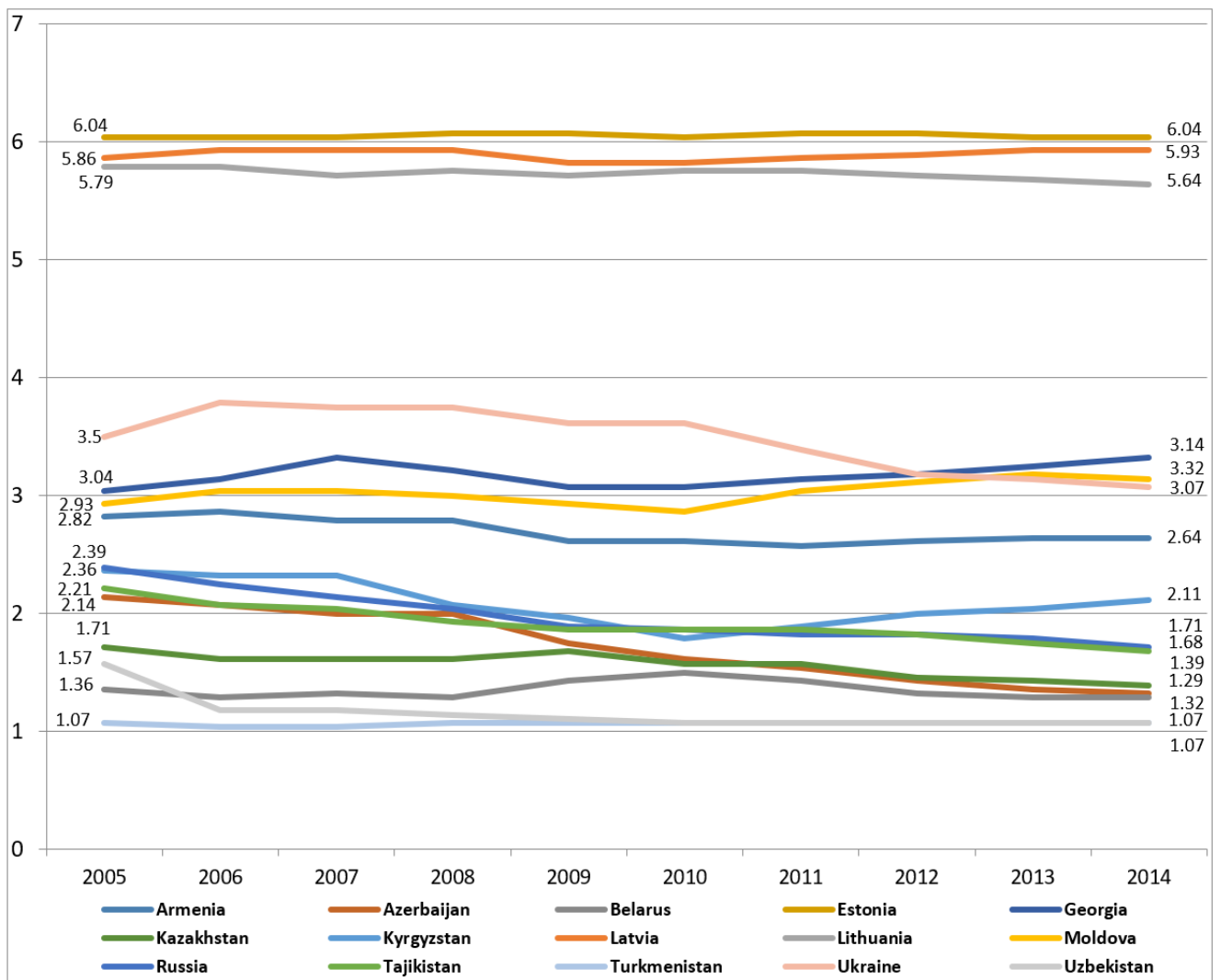
Figure 2.
Trajectories of democratization in former Soviet Republics in 2005-2014.

Compared to Figure 1, the Figure 2 clarifies the trends of political transition as we can observe a new group of former Soviet republics (Georgia, Moldova, Ukraine (more than 3 points); Armenia and Kyrgyzstan (more than 2 points)) which tend to separate themselves from deeply autocratic ones and make efforts to overcome the traditional authoritarianism for building a progressive democratic future. This situation gave ground to preview the formation of a new group (called "waiting group" [37]) of countries between the previous ones. At this point, the future transitional developments were considerably dependent on the domestic and external factors related to the evolution or remaking of the world order in successive years. In order to foster democracy in the post-Soviet space, it was necessary to intensify the political, economic, and financial support from Western countries, which played a significant role in the positive change of democratic trajectories in some former Soviet republics. There is no doubt that without Western partners' sustainable assistance and their commitment to promoting democratic values in this region, democratic reforms would be impossible in the given period.

Table 3.
Democracy Score in former Soviet Republics in 2015-2024 Democracy Score in 2015-2024 [38].
(The ratings are based on a scale of 1 to 7, with 7 representing the highest level of democratic progress and 1 the lowest)

Former Soviet Republics	2015	2016	2017	2018	2019	2020	2021	2022	2023	2024
Armenia	2.64	2.64	2.61	2.57	2.93	2.64	3.00	2.96	3.11	3.07
Azerbaijan	1.25	1.14	1.07	1.07	1.07	1.14	1.07	1.07	1.07	1.07
Belarus	1.29	1.36	1.39	1.39	1.39	1.39	1.29	1.18	1.11	1.11
Estonia	6.04	6.07	6.07	6.18	6.11	6.07	6.04	6.00	6.00	6.00
Georgia	3.36	3.39	3.39	3.32	3.29	3.25	3.18	3.07	3.04	3.04
Kazakhstan	1.39	1.39	1.36	1.29	1.29	1.32	1.32	1.36	1.32	1.29
Kyrgyzstan	2.07	2.11	2.00	1.93	2.00	1.96	1.86	1.75	1.68	1.64
Latvia	5.93	5.93	5.96	5.93	5.86	5.79	5.82	5.79	5.79	5.79
Lithuania	5.64	5.68	5.68	5.64	5.61	5.64	5.68	5.64	5.68	5.71
Moldova	3.14	3.11	3.07	3.07	3.04	3.11	3.11	3.11	3.14	3.14
Russia	1.54	1.50	1.43	1.39	1.43	1.39	1.39	1.32	1.11	1.07
Tajikistan	1.61	1.46	1.36	1.21	1.21	1.18	1.11	1.11	1.04	1.04
Turkmenistan	1.07	1.07	1.04	1.04	1.04	1.00	1.00	1.00	1.00	1.00
Ukraine	3.25	3.32	3.39	3.36	3.36	3.39	3.36	3.36	3.36	3.43
Uzbekistan	1.07	1.07	1.04	1.11	1.11	1.14	1.25	1.25	1.21	1.18

Table 3 showcases the democracy score for 15 former Soviet republics covering the period from 2015 to 2024 that is crucial for the final institutionalization of post-Soviet political transition because it reveals the core trends of democratization that we have observed since 2001. The last 10 years of this process have determined that internal factors which impact democratization in former Soviet republics are more important than external ones because even the authoritarian pressure, economic and energy dependencies, as well as unprovoked wars from former Soviet 1st group countries over their neighbors couldn't demolish the political will in some republics and among their societies to continue the struggle for a democratic future. The political transition in this period showed that authoritarian republics have started to use more violent tools to inhibit democratization in neighboring countries, like Russia's actions toward Ukraine, Moldova, and Georgia, or Azerbaijan's actions toward Armenia. Despite the autocratic threats, the previously called "waiting group" countries have now become more resolute in protecting their right to democratic development. Therefore, these republics (especially Armenia, Moldova, Ukraine, and Georgia) have strengthened their efforts to step forward in building democratic societies. All these 4 republics have progressed to transitional governments or hybrid regimes over the last 10 years.
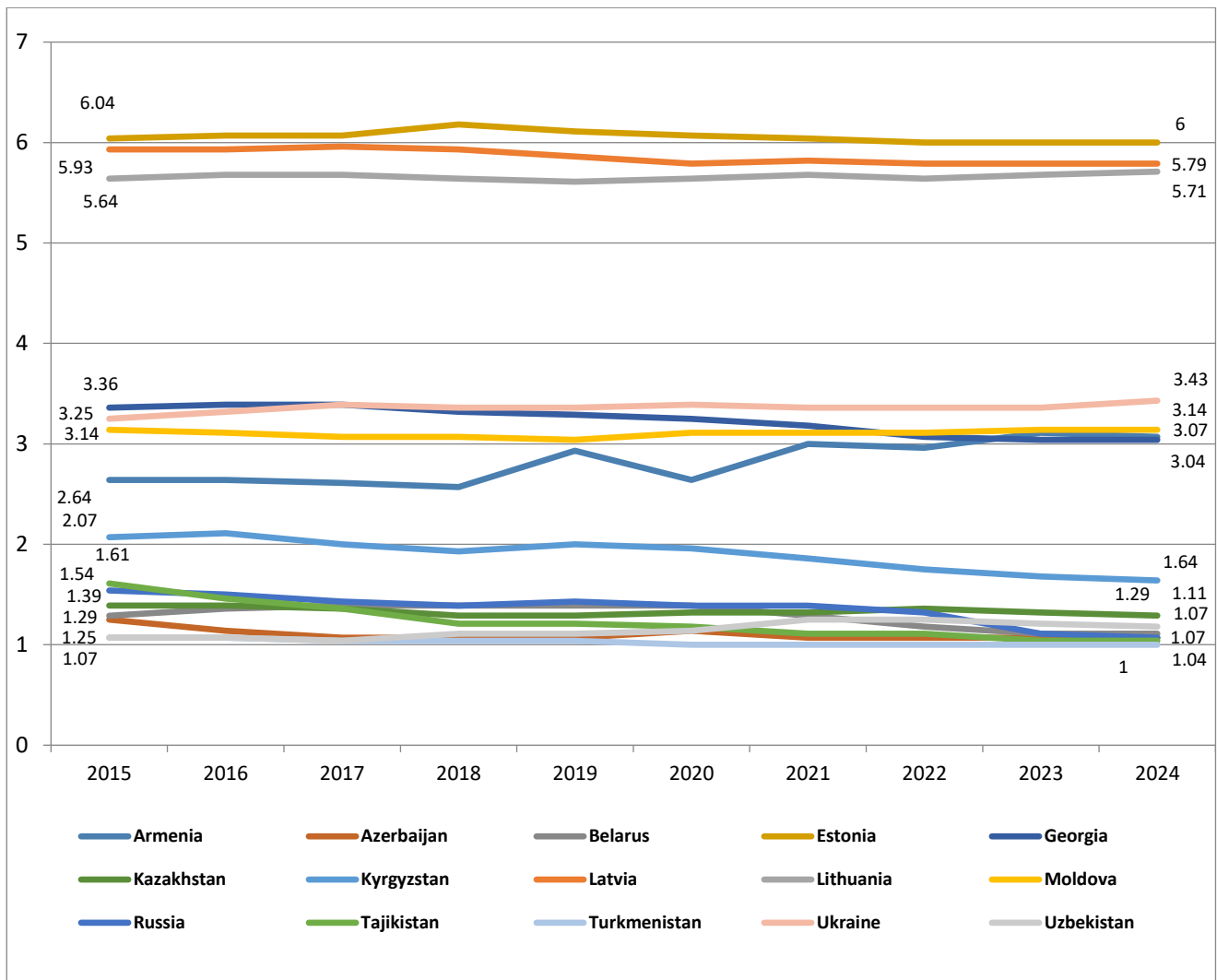
Figure 3.
Trajectories of democratization in former Soviet Republics in 2015-2024.

Finally, Figure 3 defines the recent trajectories of democratization for former Soviet republics. Based on the analyzed data and taking into consideration the features of political transition in the aforementioned countries, three groups of former Soviet republics can be determined. The whole process of political, social, and economic changes and modulations in the post-Soviet space resulted in the formation of deep autocracies, transitional governments, and consistent democracies.

Actually, the *1st group* includes the Baltic States (Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania) that were the most successful on their path to fast democratization due to their pre-Soviet democratic experience, strong civil society and geographical neighborhood to European democracies.

The *2nd group* includes Armenia, Georgia, Ukraine, and Moldova with their transitional governments or hybrid regimes, most likely intended to pursue the democratic path of development despite regional and security challenges as well as Russia's permanent pressure on them to fully stay in its zone of influence.

And the *3rd group* includes 8 other former Soviet republics with their autocratic trends and consolidated authoritarian regimes, even with their irreplaceable political leaders like in Belarus, Russia, Azerbaijan, and previously in Kazakhstan. In these countries the democracy has more declarative nature and is not considered as a real path of development. Even there is no evidence that these societies make real efforts for their democratic development.

Summarizing the post-Soviet political transition after three decades, it can be argued that the majority of former Soviet republics have failed to democratize and have opted for authoritarian leadership and regimes.

5. Challenges to Democratization
The democratization in the post-Soviet space has been fraught with numerous challenges that have hindered the establishment of stable democratic systems in the majority of former Soviet republics. These challenges are both internal and external, mainly arising from the legacy of Soviet rule, economic difficulties, the persistence of authoritarian elites, the absence of democratic traditions, and regional geopolitics. This section of the research explores the key obstacles to democratization in post-Soviet countries, offering an in-depth analysis of the political, economic, and social barriers that have hindered democratic progress in the region.

Among the core challenges, the Soviet legacy is perhaps the most significant obstacle to democratization. Soviet rule was characterized by a highly centralized, top-down political structure, with limited political pluralism and total suppression

of dissent. The absence of democratic institutions, such as independent courts, institutionalized political parties, free media, and civil society meant that the vast majority of citizens had no experience with participatory culture and governance. Furthermore, Soviet policies of repression and coercion cultivated a political culture of passivity, obedience, and compliance, which has proven difficult to overcome in the post-Soviet era.

The lack of democratic traditions in Soviet society meant that many post-Soviet leaders lacked the incentive to promote democracy once they gained power. Instead, many former Communist Party elites, who retained significant influence over political and economic resources after independence, sought to maintain control through undemocratic means. This continuity of authoritarian practices, often referred to as "post-Communist authoritarian leadership" [39], has been particularly pronounced in countries such as Belarus, Azerbaijan, Russia, Kazakhstan, Uzbekistan, and others. In these countries, the old Soviet apparatus was repurposed to perpetuate authoritarian rule, making the transition to democracy all the more difficult.

Moreover, the absence of solid civil society institutions in many post-Soviet states has posed significant barriers to democratization. In almost all countries, civil society organizations were weak or non-existent during the Soviet era, and this vacuum has persisted in the first decade of the post-Soviet period. The lack of a vibrant and active civil society made it difficult for citizens to mobilize around democratic reforms, thus stalling the democratization process [40].

The economic legacy of the Soviet Union has also had a profound impact on democratization in former Soviet republics. The transition from a centrally planned economy to a market-oriented one has been quite challenging, particularly in countries with little experience in market economies. Economic hardship, widespread poverty, and inequality have created fertile ground for the development of populist rhetoric and anti-democratic sentiments. Economic crises often serve to reinforce authoritarian regimes by creating a sense of insecurity and dependence on the state, undermining support for democratic reforms [40].

In many former Soviet republics, the privatization of state assets in the 1990s led to the emergence of oligarchs—wealthy elites who gained control over key sectors of the economy and who have since used their economic power to influence politics. In the 1990s, especially in countries like Russia, Ukraine, and Kazakhstan, oligarchs played a central role in maintaining political power, often in collusion with the state. This has led to the creation of "patronage networks," where access to state resources is controlled by a small group of elites, further entrenching authoritarian rule. As noted by A. Wilson, the concentration of wealth in the hands of a few individuals or groups makes it difficult for new political actors to emerge and for democratic institutions to take root [30].

The problem of oligarchic control was compounded by widespread corruption. In many post-Soviet states, corruption has become institutionalized, with government officials, business leaders, and security services working together to extract rents from the state. Transparency International's Corruption Perceptions Index consistently ranks some post-Soviet states among the most corrupt in the world, including countries like Tajikistan, Russia, and Turkmenistan [41]. The prevalence of corruption undermines trust in democratic institutions, discourages political participation, and hinders efforts to build accountable governance [42]. As a result, many former Soviet republics are stuck in a cycle of systemized corruption and authoritarianism, which weakens the prospects for genuine democratization.

The behavior of political elites in former Soviet republics has been another major challenge to democratization. While some leaders initially embraced the idea of democratic reforms (like Moldova, Ukraine, Georgia, Armenia), many were reluctant to relinquish the power and privileges they had inherited from the Soviet system. Elite resistance to democracy has been particularly pronounced in countries with strong authoritarian traditions, such as Russia, Belarus, Kazakhstan, Azerbaijan, and others, where leaders have entrenched themselves in power through a combination of electoral manipulation, repression, and patronage networks.

The challenge of elite-driven authoritarianism is exemplified by the case of Russia under V. Putin. Although Russia initially made some progress toward democracy under B. Yeltsin, the political landscape began to shift dramatically down in the early 2000s, as Putin and his allies consolidated power and rolled back democratic reforms. Russia's authoritarian turn was facilitated by the "weakness of institutions" and the failure of democratic elites to build a stable, inclusive political system [30]. Instead of fostering democracy, Putin's regime has relied on a combination of state control over the economy, media, and security services to maintain political power.

In some cases, elites have been able to co-opt the democratization process itself, creating the illusion of democracy while retaining control over the political system. This has led to the emergence of hybrid regimes, where elections are held but political freedoms are restricted, and opposition parties face significant obstacles. Many former Soviet republics have developed such hybrid political systems, which combine elements of authoritarianism with the formal structures of democracy. These regimes often maintain a veneer of democracy, holding elections and making constitutional reforms, but they lack the key features of democratic governance, such as political competition, the rule of law, and respect for human rights [32].

Regional geopolitics, particularly Russia's opposition to democratization in neighboring countries, Delcour and Wolczuk [43] has played a significant role in hindering democratization. Russia, as the largest and most powerful successor to the Soviet Union, particularly under V. Putin, has viewed the democratization of its neighboring states as a direct threat to its own political stability and sphere of influence [29]. Since the dissolution of the Soviet Union, Russia has consistently sought to maintain its influence over its neighbors through political, economic, and military means. This has been particularly evident in countries like Ukraine, Georgia, and Moldova, where pro-Western movements have clashed with Russian-backed regimes. Russia's annexation of Crimea in 2014 [44] and its support for separatist movements in eastern Ukraine have underscored the extent to which Russia is willing to undermine democratization in its neighboring states.

Notably, Woojeong [23] rightly states that Russia taps into communist legacies to resuscitate the Cold War-era political and economic ties. Russia's growing influence has counteracted the West's democracy promotion in its "near abroad", where

it has the most robust connections. This pattern suggests that, to comprehend where and how authoritarian legacies resurface, it is essential to probe into how different types of international ties are juxtaposed and how they produce heterogeneous effects on domestic politics [23].

The "Color Revolutions" of the mid-2000s in Georgia, Ukraine, and Kyrgyzstan Way [45], as well as the "Velvet Revolution" of 2018 in Armenia [32], demonstrated the potential for popular mobilization to challenge authoritarian regimes, but they also revealed the limits of democratization when faced with Russian opposition. Russia's reaction to these revolutions was to support the regimes in power in order to preserve its dominance over the post-Soviet space. In Ukraine, for example, Russia backed the pro-Russian government of President V. Yanukovych during the 2004 Orange Revolution, even though the revolution was a direct challenge to his government's legitimacy [16]. Russia's support for authoritarian regimes during these uprisings, through economic and political means, illustrated its efforts to maintain control over its "near abroad" and prevent the spread of democratic norms. Russia has actively worked to destabilize pro-democracy movements in these countries, providing political (in some cases, military) support to authoritarian leaders. For example, Russia's annexation of Crimea in 2014, its ongoing support for armed insurgencies in eastern Ukraine and the large-scale war in 2022 are seen as part of a broader effort to prevent Ukraine from shifting toward a Western-oriented democracy [46].

To this point, T. de Waal has rightly argued that Russia's approach to its "near abroad" has been shaped by a desire to maintain its sphere of influence and prevent further Western encroachment [47]

Additionally, Moscow seeks to limit the influence of Western powers in post-Soviet Eurasia due to genuine security concerns [48]. In some cases, Russia has threatened or implemented economic sanctions, cutting off trade or energy supplies to countries that pursue closer ties with the West. This external pressure has made it more difficult for countries in the post-Soviet space to pursue democratic reforms without facing significant economic and political costs.

Periodically, Russia is using the energy crisis to advance its efforts to put pressure especially on Ukraine (and Moldova), increasing its leverages [49]. By controlling crucial energy supplies - such as natural gas and oil - Russia has been able to pressure post-Soviet countries into complying with its political interests. For example, in 2006 and 2009, Russia used gas cut-offs to pressure Ukraine into complying with its foreign policy, particularly with regard to NATO membership and relations with the EU. *The* dispute between *Russia* and *Ukraine* of January *2009* brought about *the* largest interruption in *the* supply of natural *gas* in *the* history of *the* EU [50]. These economic tools have often been wielded to curtail democratic reforms in countries seeking to pivot toward the West, thereby maintaining a geopolitical buffer against the expansion of Western influence.

In recent years, Russia has escalated its efforts to preserve its authoritarian influence in the region. The actions in Ukraine have not only resulted in a violent conflict but have also demonstrated the lengths to which Russia is willing to go to prevent democratic developments in its immediate neighborhood. Russia's aggressive foreign policy is driven by the fear that the success of democratization in neighboring countries might inspire similar movements within Russia itself. Thus, since the mid-90s, Russia has also been aggressive toward its internal democratic movements [33].

The weakness of civil society and political participation can be considered another significant challenge to democratization in post-Soviet republics. Under Soviet rule, the state maintained strict control over all forms of political and social organization, leaving little room for the development of independent civil society institutions. In the post-Soviet period, many of these countries have struggled to foster a vibrant and active civil society capable of holding the government accountable.

While there have been some successes in countries like Georgia, Ukraine, and Moldova, where civil society organizations have played a key role in advocating for democratic reforms [51], civil society in many other post-Soviet states remains weak and underdeveloped. It is important to stress that after 2022, Russia's invasion of Ukraine led to a democratic backslide in Georgia due to external factors, particularly fear of Russia's probable aggression. The lack of a robust civil society limits the capacity of ordinary citizens to mobilize for change or challenge entrenched authoritarian regimes. However, the development of strong civil society institutions is critical for the survival of democracy, as these organizations can promote democratic norms, facilitate political participation, and serve as a check on government power.

6. Foreign Influences on Democratization

In former Soviet republics, democratization has also been largely influenced from outside. Another important factor in understanding the post-Soviet transformation is the role of foreign actors, particularly regional and international organizations that have played and continue to play a crucial role in the democratic transition in these countries. The dynamics of democratization in this region are shaped by external forces, such as international organizations like the EU and NATO, which have sought to support democratization in the former Soviet republics through various forms of political and economic assistance [52]. The EU's enlargement process, in particular, became a powerful tool for promoting democracy, with countries like Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania using the promise of EU membership as a catalyst for political and economic reforms [53], encouraging them to adopt democratic norms, human rights standards, and market-oriented economic policies.

The process of Europeanization has been central to the democratization of the Baltic States, which successfully transitioned to functioning democracies and later became full members of the EU and NATO. However, the lack of a clear membership path for other former Soviet republics like Georgia, Moldova, Ukraine, and Armenia creates a sense of disillusionment with the West [54]. At the same time, the durable process of European integration also engenders risks of democratic regression in some former Soviet republics, as recently seen in the case of Georgia, an EU candidate, where some "anti-European" laws have been adopted by the parliament despite civil society's disagreement [33].

The EU's approach to democratization in its Eastern neighbors has been largely shaped by the European Neighbourhood Policy (ENP) and the Eastern Partnership program, which aim to strengthen ties with these countries and offer political and

economic support in exchange for reforms aimed at establishing democratic institutions, the rule of law, and respect for human rights [55]. However, the EU's influence has been uneven, with some countries benefiting from more extensive cooperation and others stagnating or backsliding in their democratic development. For example, while the Baltic States made significant progress toward democratization, countries like Belarus and Azerbaijan have remained largely authoritarian [56] with limited EU engagement due to the lack of willingness for meaningful reforms.

One of the most notable examples of the EU's influence on democratization is Ukraine's European integration process [57]. The 2014 Euromaidan protests [58], which were sparked by President Yanukovych's decision to abandon an association agreement with the EU in favor of closer ties with Russia, marked a critical moment in Ukraine's struggle for democracy. Western member states, for their part, have raised concerns about the Eastern neglect of the rule of law and democratic backsliding [59]. But the democratic movement was largely driven by young Ukrainians who sought to align the country with European values of democracy and the rule of law. The EU responded by offering economic and political support to the new Ukrainian government after Yanukovych's ouster, including sanctions against Russia and significant financial aid to support Ukraine's democratic transition.

However, the EU's influence had its limitations. While it has been successful in fostering democratization in some states, the EU's inconsistent engagement and lack of a clear membership path for other potentially pro-European former Soviet republics have led to frustrations. The EU's failure to offer a concrete roadmap for membership has allowed Russia to exploit the uncertainty and influence political developments in these republics, particularly when they seek closer ties with the EU. The EU's performance in promoting democracy in its neighborhood is not only compromised by the lack of a membership perspective but also by the selective sanctioning of non-compliance with democracy standards caused by conflicting foreign policy objectives [60].

While NATO's primary goal has been to ensure regional security and stability, it has also been a platform for countries to align themselves with Western democratic values. The accession of the Baltic States as former Soviet republics into NATO was a key milestone in their democratization, as it provided security guarantees and reinforced their commitment to democratic principles. NATO has also supported military and security sector reforms in other post-Soviet countries like Georgia and Ukraine, although Russia has strongly opposed NATO's expansion, perceiving it as a direct threat to its influence in the region. NATO's democratic values currently seem to be under enormous strain, with their relevance deeply challenged. NATO's failure to refrain from "promoting" democracy on operations rather than just addressing security issues jeopardized stability [61].

Therefore, the West, in turn, has faced its own limitations in promoting democratization. In this respect, Hedlund [42] rightly points out that while Western institutions like the EU and NATO have offered incentives for democratic reform, they have often been inconsistent in their support of this process. Thereby, such dynamics have created a complex geopolitical environment where external actors often compete for influence, further complicating the democratization process [42].

The United States (U.S.), as a major global power, also plays an important role in supporting democratization in former Soviet republics. Following the dissolution of the Soviet Union, the U.S. sought to promote democratic reforms, free-market economies, and integration into the international system for former Soviet republics [62]. This was particularly evident in the 1990s, when the U.S. supported democratic movements in post-Soviet countries through diplomatic, financial, and technical assistance. The U.S. also provided support for civil society development, media freedom, and anti-corruption efforts, recognizing that a thriving civil society is crucial for the development of democratic governance [52].

However, the U.S.'s efforts have been complicated by its geopolitical competition with Russia, as well as by inconsistencies in its support for democratization. In countries like Azerbaijan, Kazakhstan, and Turkmenistan, where energy resources are strategically important, the U.S. has been reluctant to push for democratic reforms due to its broader geopolitical and economic interests. This has created a situation where the U.S. has sometimes prioritized stability and security over democratic principles, as evidenced by its relationship with authoritarian regimes in the post-Soviet South Caucasus and Central Asian republics. As new authoritarian governments emerged in the former Soviet republics, Washington found a mix of reasons for developing friendly relations with most of them, such as gaining investor access to Kazakhstan's rich oil fields or Azerbaijan's natural gas [63].

Moreover, the U.S.'s support for democracy in the post-Soviet space has sometimes been criticized as being overly interventionist, particularly in the aftermath of the 2003 war in Iraq. As a result, due to Russia's huge propaganda, the U.S. efforts to promote democracy have been met with resistance not only from authoritarian leaders in the region but also from some segments of the population who view Western influence as a form of neo-imperialism [64]. This kind of dynamic has considerably complicated the U.S.'s role in supporting democratization in post-Soviet space.

While the EU, and the U.S. have been the dominant external actors in post-Soviet democratization, in recent years China's influence in the region is gradually growing. China's interest in post-Soviet Central Asia and South Caucasus, particularly in the context of its Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), has increased its economic and political presence in the region [65]. Like Russia, China does not promote democracy but instead focuses on economic development and political stability. China's growing economic influence, particularly in resource-rich countries like Kazakhstan, Azerbaijan and Turkmenistan, provides these states with an alternative to Western financial and political support. However, China's non-interference policy allows authoritarian regimes to maintain their control while benefiting from Chinese investment [57].

It is worth noting that foreign actors are not always neutral in their promotion of democracy, and their influence can be both constructive and counterproductive. Competing for political and economic influence in the post-Soviet region, these actors often create a complex geopolitical environment that can either support or hinder democratization efforts.

7. Conclusion

The democratization of post-Soviet countries over the past three decades has been a complex and multifaceted process, shaped by a variety of internal and external factors. As this paper has demonstrated, the trajectory of democratization in these nations has been influenced by a combination of *regional, historical, political,* and *socio-economic* challenges.

- While some post-Soviet countries, particularly the Baltic States, have successfully transitioned to democratic systems and integrated into European structures, others have struggled with authoritarianism, political instability, internal cleavages, widespread corruption, and have faced considerable setbacks in their democratic development (such as Belarus, Russia, Azerbaijan, and other autocratic regimes). Some other former Soviet republics, like Ukraine, Georgia, Armenia, and Moldova, continue to experience volatile political landscapes and strive to build a democratic future.

- One of the central themes in the democratization of post-Soviet countries is the tension between Western influences, primarily through the European Union (EU), NATO, and the United States, and the authoritarian tendencies reinforced by Russia. Russia has consistently used its political, economic, and military tools to either stifle democratic progress or directly intervene in the domestic affairs of its neighbors, preventing many from fully realizing democratic governance. At the same time, the EU and NATO have provided incentives for democratization, such as the promise of membership or cooperation, but their inconsistent and sometimes hesitant support has also limited their effectiveness in transforming the region. Nevertheless, the role of international organizations in promoting democratic norms and governance standards is still essential but needs to be more robust and context-specific to have a lasting impact.

- Regional influences, especially the dynamics of ethnic and national identities in countries like Georgia and Azerbaijan, further complicate the democratization process. These countries face challenges related to governance models, and if they fight for developing real democracies, they need an appropriate model such as 'consociational democracy,' which may hold promise for managing ethnic diversity and intergroup mistrust. The case of post-Soviet Armenia's democratization is quite particular because Armenia is the only former Soviet republic that has closed borders with two of its four neighbors, less economic growth, huge external dependence on Russia's energy supplies, and has been militarily invaded by Azerbaijan, which is currently the most democratically positioned country in the region. In this regard, Armenia has some similarities with the Baltic States, which had a previous democratic experience before Sovietization. Armenia's democratic potential can be explained by relevant prerequisites of democratic political culture as a legacy of the 1st Armenian Republic (1918-1920) before the Bolsheviks' invasion and annexation in 1921.

- At the same time, China's increasing involvement in the post-Soviet region adds a new dimension to the geopolitical landscape. China has focused more on economic partnerships and infrastructure development, providing an alternative to the Western-driven democratic model. This shift may influence post-Soviet states' trajectories, either creating space for more autonomy in governance or reinforcing authoritarian structures by offering alternative models of development that do not prioritize democratic reforms.

- As for the future of democratization in former Soviet republics, it depends on several key factors:

  a) Domestic political will and the strength of civil society are critical in pushing back against authoritarian tendencies and advancing the principles of democracy.
  b) The capacity of international actors to provide consistent, nuanced, and strategic support for democratic institutions will remain essential.
  c) The growing global challenges posed by autocratic resurgence and the rise of populism demand that more resilient, diversified approaches to democratic promotion are needed.

- Former Soviet republics also need to focus on the development of strong democratic institutions, including an independent judiciary, the rule of law, a free press, and a vibrant civil society. These institutions can anchor democracy and help sustain it in the long term, providing the necessary checks and balances against abuses of power. The experiences of Eastern Europe and the Baltic States suggest that even countries with a challenging historical legacy can achieve democratic consolidation with the right mix of domestic efforts and external support.

The region's future will be shaped by the ability of its citizens, governments, and external actors to adapt to the changing global environment and navigate the complex political terrain. As these nations continue to grapple with the legacies of authoritarianism and external pressures, their path toward democracy will require more *determination, flexibility*, and a *commitment to political pluralism and human rights*. The lessons learned from the successes and failures of democratization in former Soviet republics will be crucial not only for the region but also for understanding the broader dynamics of political transitions in other parts of the world.

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