

# War Shrinks Russia's Grip on the Neighbourhood

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*Through its full-scale invasion of Ukraine, Russia intended to consolidate its position as an undisputed great power. This plan has not only failed, but led to Russia losing ground in its own sphere of interest, write Johan Engvall and Jakob Hedenskog, analysts at the Stockholm Centre for Eastern European Studies (SCEEUS). Russia's reputation as a military power has also been degraded and neighbouring countries are increasingly seeking to forge ties with the West.*

Russia's major offensive against Ukraine on 24 February 2022 was aimed at gaining political control over the neighbouring country and overthrowing it as a sovereign state and nation in its own right. The overall aim was to secure Russia's great power status with its own exclusive sphere of interest, while in the process dealing a mortal blow to the European security order.

As we know, however, the war has not gone as Moscow expected and the geopolitical earthquake triggered by it is causing Russia to lose ground in neighbouring countries it has long dominated. Admittedly, Russia has further strengthened its grip on Belarus, but Belarus is the exception as the only state in the region to openly support the Russian onslaught.

The war has shrunk the Russian sphere of influence. Moscow's revanchist and imperialist actions have cast doubt over the entire post-Soviet region from Moldova in the west, through the South Caucasus all the way to Central Asia. The political leaders in these countries are being forced to rethink their relations with Russia and to look for others to cooperate with. For the countries to the west of this region, the European Union is the main option. The desire to forge closer ties with the EU has never been stronger than since the Russian invasion.

## **Moldova Turns West**

In Moldova, wedged between Romania and Ukraine, the pro-European government applied for EU membership in March 2022. EU leaders granted both Moldova and Ukraine EU candidate status three months later. The earlier gradual rapprochement with the EU under the Eastern Partnership, involving an association agreement, visa-free travel and free trade agreements, has now turned into a rapid step towards European integration.

Nonetheless, Moldova is in a vulnerable situation. The political leadership must balance the ambition to integrate into the EU with the country's traditional dependence on Russia, not least for trade and its energy supplies. The government is supported by a fragile majority in parliament and challenged by political forces funded by Russia.

There are also fears that the war will spill over into unrest in the breakaway region of Transnistria, which borders Ukraine. Ever since Moldova's independence, Moscow has kept this region under its political, military and economic thumb. In violation of both the Moldovan Constitution and international law, Russia maintains an operational military foothold in Transnistria. Amid a dramatically worsening external situation, this military presence is becoming increasingly dangerous. Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov has warned that actions that jeopardise the safety of Russian soldiers in Transnistria will be perceived as an attack on Russia.

## **Armenia and Azerbaijan Look Beyond Russia**

Geopolitical shifts are also evident in the South Caucasus, which comprise Armenia, Azerbaijan and Georgia. The region's economic importance is growing as the EU looks for more and new ways to resolve its energy supply problems. In July 2022, the EU signed an agreement with Azerbaijan that will almost triple gas imports from Azerbaijan to the EU by 2027. The region also has the potential to link Europe with Central Asia, giving European countries access to the even greater oil and gas resources there.

With Russia occupied in Ukraine, Moscow has less power to devote to the conflicts in the region, even though there are Russian troops on the ground in all the conflict zones in the South Caucasus – in the breakaway regions of Abkhazia and South Ossetia in Georgia, and in Nagorno-Karabakh, which is inside Azerbaijan but predominantly populated by Armenians.

It is the dynamics of the conflict between Armenia and Azerbaijan over the control of Nagorno-Karabakh that have been most clearly affected by Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine. Armenia is dependent on Russia for its military security as it is sandwiched between Azerbaijan and Turkey, with which it has no diplomatic relations. The conflict has flared up several times in the past year. The militarily stronger Azerbaijan has made gains in the presence of Russian soldiers who are supposed to monitor the fragile ceasefire but have done little to enforce it.

Armenian dissatisfaction with the lack of Russian backing is increasingly being played out in the open. When Armenia's Prime Minister, Nikol Pashinyan, chaired a meeting of the Russia-led Collective Security Treaty Organisation (CSTO) in November 2022, he ended the gathering early in protest at the organisation's failure to stand up for Armenia against pressure from Azerbaijan. In January 2023, Pashinyan announced that his country will not host any joint military exercises under the CSTO this year. Shortly afterwards, Armenian activists protested outside the Russian military base in Gyumri, Armenia's second city, demanding that Armenia leave the CSTO and that the Russian peacekeeping contingent in Nagorno-Karabakh open the only road from Armenia to the Armenian-controlled part of the region, which has been blockaded by Azerbaijan since December 2022.

Unlike Armenia, Azerbaijan is not a member of the CSTO, but instead enjoys increasingly close defence cooperation with its closest ally and NATO member, Turkey. In principle, the Azerbaijani leadership takes a negative view of the Russian military presence in Nagorno-Karabakh, stressing that it should end when its mandate expires in 2025.

Both Armenia and Azerbaijan are thus opposed to Russian policy, which is clearly aimed at ensuring that the conflict between them remains unresolved in order to continue to play the countries off against each other. This growing frustration with Russia gives the EU a possible role in conflict resolution. In the autumn of 2022, the EU established a temporary observer group on the Armenian side of the border with Azerbaijan with a mandate to patrol, report and support the normalisation process along the border. Unlike Russia, the EU is perceived by both sides as a neutral mediator with no ulterior motives and thus as an actor capable of contributing to a genuine peace agreement.

### **Georgia in the EU Waiting Room**

Georgia has long aspired to join both the EU and NATO. According to a recent opinion poll, around 80% of Georgians are in favour of joining the EU. Like Moldova, Georgia applied for membership in March 2022 but, unlike Moldova and Ukraine, it was not granted immediate candidate status. Much of the explanation lies in the unforgiving political climate that has plagued Georgian domestic politics for some time and shows no sign of abating despite the carrot of EU membership. The opposition accuses the government of not fully supporting Ukraine and even of playing into Moscow's hands. The government in turn accuses the opposition and the West of trying to drag Georgia into a war with strident rhetoric. The Georgian population is very much in support of Ukraine in the war, which reminds Georgians of their own war against Russia in 2008, but that support has not been translated into increased popularity of the political opposition in the country.

Relations with the EU are further complicated by the fact that Georgia's strongman – the oligarch and former prime minister, Bidzina Ivanishvili, who effectively runs the country from behind the scenes – is being indirectly targeted by the 'de-oligarchisation' that is one of the EU's explicit requirements for granting Georgia candidate status.

Russia's preoccupation with the war in Ukraine has caused it to lose influence in its neighbourhood at rapid pace. Setbacks on the battlefield are also degrading Russia's reputation as a military power and surrounding countries are using the opportunity to seek protection in Western organisations. For Ukraine and Georgia, it is both the European Union and NATO, for Moldova and possibly in the future also for Armenia it is the EU. Historical experience shows that Russia's imperialist pretensions remain constant, regardless of periods of military rise or fall. There is also a not inconsiderable risk that the war in Ukraine could spread to neighbouring countries. Apart from Belarus, which is already involved by giving up its territory to Russian forces, the risk is greatest for Moldova and Georgia. The question is whether the EU can show sufficient unity and courage to grant the countries' obvious desire to be fully included in the European Community.

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