

"Configuring, Mal-figuring, Dis-figuring of the EU's/Russia's 'Neighbourhood'"

Syuzanna Vasilyan

Prologue

Empirically, with the '(re-)advent' of *realpolitik* which shattered the solidity of sovereignty as ingrained in world politics codified via the Treaty of Westphalia, trust vis-à-vis international law has crumbled. On the one hand, this is viewed as an odd chance for re-inventing international order; on the other hand, it has opened up the Pandora's box through amplification of dis-order. *Ontologically*, this has entailed that the non-viability of existing constellations hinging on hegemonic arrangements, thus, prompting re-molding of the regional layouts if not global architecture. *Theoretically*, these have encouraged a move from determinism to constructivism through de-essentialization of terms, notions, concepts to de-construction by (re-)shuffling the existing state 'makings'.

Conceptions

With the break-up of the Soviet Union the Newly Independent States (NIS) had to figure out their borders. Despite the complacency with the inherited architectural design, compliance with Moscow broke with the wars in Transnistria, Nagorno-Karabakh, Abkhazia, South Ossetia. Whereas the South Caucasus was perceived through the Russian look at the 'region' (Vasilyan 2006) as a 'terrace', the eastern periphery of Ukraine, Moldova, Belarus was viewed as a 'veranda'. The West's, primarily the US' policy stemmed from the willingness to reinforce relations with the 'democratized'/'liberalized' states and the unwillingness to confront the existing disarray by entering into a quagmire. The EU itself had to unleash the forthcoming Maastricht Treaty with the full-fledged external affairs policy via the Common Foreign and Security Policy (CFSP) in 1999 and manage the former socialist states of Central and Eastern Europe in the aftermath of the then pending Big Bang enlargement of 2004, as well as the potential accession of Western Balkan countries (Vasilyan 2016). Diplomatically, the Embassies in Moscow were charged with covering also the former Soviet states (Vasilyan 2020). For Russia the stability of its borders had to be secured via the Montreux Convention over the non-access of non-riparian states to the Black Sea via the Straits of Bosphorus and Dardanelles, and the agreement of the littoral states surrounding the Caspian Sea banning foreign military presence in the region.

The cease-fires signed in mid-1990s over the wars in Abkhazia, South Ossetia and Nagorno-Karabakh left the borders in 'draft' mode and by establishing respective conflict-resolution mechanisms, namely, the UN Group of Friends, the Joint Control Commission (JCC) and the Minsk Group, respectively as 'patron' entities (Vasilyan 2013). The border-cuts left an 'after-taste' of mal-figuring for the 'parent' states.

The economic re-drawing of borders to take shape as a result of AA/DCTAs proposed by the EU to Georgia, Armenia, Moldova and Ukraine was viewed by Russia as dis-figuring the established configuration. Such a scenario was to further disrupt the 'figure' of the Soviet design with the annexation of Crimea and the onset of the New Cold War over Ukraine since 2014 (Vasilyan 2024). Despite Georgia's the application for EU membership in 2022 together

Moldova and Ukraine, the government's suspension of candidacy until 2028 has left the political re-arrangement in limbo. Armenia's current dodgy quest of freezing its relations with the CSTO – and speculating its application for membership in the EU is prone to have repercussions for membership in the EaEU (Vasilyan 2026).

While in terms of conceptions Russia was guided by 'border logic' (Vasilyan and Petrossian 2014) in its 'near abroad', the EU moved from external European Neighborhood Policy (ENP) to foreign logic via the Eastern Partnership (EaP) and has recently transcended into extra-territorial 'logic', and the US has advanced from an alien to foreign logic vis-à-vis the NIS. The shaking of the structure and the shattering of the system has engendered fluidity given the malleability of borders demonstrated by the reversal of infrastructure, re-qualification of religious values, diversification/diversion of energy chains and economic patterns, as well as allegiances and perceptions.

Infrastructural Drafting (not Crafting)

The Transcaucasian Railway was built by the Russian Empire starting in 1865 for strategic military control and trade between the Black Sea and the Caspian Sea primarily connecting Poti, Tbilisi, and Baku bringing Caspian oil into the Soviet supply chain until 1991.

Under its Global Gateway Strategy for 2021-2027 with a sum of 300 billion EUR the EU funds feasibility studies and infrastructure overhauls along the Trans-Caspian Transport Corridor called the Middle Corridor. The latter starts from China and extends to Central Asia through Kazakhstan, Turkmenistan using the Trans-Caspian Sea route, followed by Azerbaijan and Georgia, Turkey and then to Europe reaching the UK. This includes an agreement to upgrade the non-functional railway line through Nakhchivan to reactivate regional trade.

In 2008, Armenia signed a 30-year – until 2038 - concession transferring its entire state railway network to South Caucasus Railway (SCR), a 100% owned subsidiary of Russian State Railways. Since 2018 Pashinyan has taken steps to terminate or alter the agreement, even proposing that a neutral third-party country (such as Kazakhstan, the UAE or Qatar) buy out the management rights. In April 2026, Turkey and Armenia held a meeting in Kars to establish a joint technical working group. They have begun structural and infrastructure assessments to rehabilitate the Kars–Gyumri line. In May 2026 Pashinyan announced that Armenia will be linked with the EU through the Akhalkalaki (Georgia)-Kars (Turkey) railways. Moreover, he referred to the restoration of the Gyumri–Akhurik line and the Yeraskh junction through Nakhichevan, which are part of the Araxes Rail Link built in 1899 and 1941, respectively.

Unholy Battle (not *Sacrum Bellum*)

Ukraine has taken steps to cut the religious ties with Moscow, the urge for an independent Ukrainian church grew after Russia's annexation of Crimea in 2014. In 2018, the Ecumenical Patriarchate of Constantinople granted full independence (autocephaly) to a newly unified, independent Orthodox Church of Ukraine. In August 2024 Ukraine enacted legislation forcing the UOC to fully cut its canonical ties to Moscow.

Provided Moldova's ecclesiastical split, as a result of the war in Ukraine priests of the Metropolis of Moldova (under Moscow Patriarchate) started shifting their canonical allegiance

to the Metropolis of Bessarabia (under Bucharest Patriarchate). Yet, in Transnistria the Metropolis of Moldova is uncontested.

With respect to Georgia the Russian Orthodox Church claims both nations are "one nation". Whereas following the 2008 Russo-Georgian War Russia recognized Abkhazia and South Ossetia as independent states, the Russian Orthodox Church still viewed them as part of the *Georgian* Church's canonical territory. However, the ROC has used the 'card' to grant independence (autocephaly) to the Abkhazian church. Subsequently, the GOC has not recognized the independence of the Orthodox Church of Ukraine. In early 2026, Russia's Foreign Intelligence Service accused the Ecumenical Patriarch of Constantinople - the spiritual head of global Orthodoxy of trying to meddle in Georgia's church elections to plant a pro-Western patriarch after the passing away of the Georgian Patriarch Ilia II in March 2026.

While in 2022 Armenia's Catholicos Karekin II accepted a state honor from Russia's President Putin, the government did not target the church until the public protests in mid-2025 when Archbishop Galstanyan started leading the "Sacred Struggle" movement and was eventually arrested. The Russian Orthodox Church condemned the Armenian government of meddling in church affairs leading to a demand by Pashinyan that the Catholicos should resign and a new Catholicos should be elected.

Even after the war in Ukraine the Caucasus Muslims Board headed by Chairman Pashazadeh in Azerbaijan and Moscow's Patriarch have held high-level meetings. As for the EU, it recognizes Chairman Pashazadeh as representing also Muslim communities in Georgia and North Caucasus.

Energy (Inter-)Dependence

Energy Resources	Oil	Gas	Electricity
Armenia	60% (Russia), Iran, Azerbaijan	60% (Russia), Iran	1% Georgia and 0,01% Iran (swap/barter)
Georgia	45% (Russia)	91% (90% Azerbaijan, 1% Russia)	62,4% (Russia), Turkey, Azerbaijan, Armenia
Azerbaijan	91% (Russia)	85% (Russia - re-routing), Iran/Turkmenistan (swap for Nakhichevan)	0,6% (Russia)
Belarus	100% (Russian)	100% (Russia)	0
Moldova	80% (Romania)	99% (Romania)	80% (Romania), 15% (Ukraine)
Ukraine	16,2% (Poland), 15,1% (Greece), 11,9% (Lithuania), 9,7% (Turkey), India	55.4% (Switzerland via Hungary, Slovak, Poland routes), Netherlands, 1,2% (Greece), 9% US (via Poland), Slovakia (20,5%), Germany (12,2%)	49% (Hungary), 21% (Romania), 18% (Slovakia), 15% (Poland), 1% (Moldova)

Source: EBRD, International Energy Agency, UNSD, European Network of Transmission System Operators for Electricity

Economy (Diversification/Diversion)

GDP

According to assessments by the Eurasian Economic Commission (EaEC), Armenia has benefited most from EAEU integration.

GDP (Growth and Contraction)	Armenia	Georgia	Azerbaijan	Belarus	Moldova	Ukraine
2022	12,6%	10,4%	4,7%	-4,7%	-5,9% (energy price spikes, drought, and supply chain disruptions)	-28,8%
2023	8,3%	7,8%	1,4%	3,9%	1,2%	5,5% (with Western aid)
2024	5,9%	9,5%	4,1%	4,1%	0,1%	2,9%
2025	7,2%	7,5%	1,4%	2,5%	2,4%	1,7%
2026	5,3%	5,3%	2,2%	1,2%	1,9%	2%

Source: IMF, World Bank, EBRD

Trade

Armenia - Russia (35,8%), China (12,5%), EU (11,7%), UAE (10%), Iran (4,5%), Georgia (3,8%)

Georgia – EU (23,1%), Turkey (15,5%), Russia (11,5), China (9,2), US (8,5%)

Azerbaijan – EU (41,5%), Turkey (13,91%), China (11,73%), Russia (7,94%)

Moldova – EU (61,8%), Ukraine (11,5%), China (9,5%), Turkey (5,5%), Russia (6,2%)

Ukraine – EU (53%), China (27%), Turkey (6,8%), US (4,9%)

Belarus - Russia (68,97%), China (10,41%), EU (10,6%), Ukraine (7,20%)

As to trade balance, all in deficit, except Azerbaijan.

Source: IMF

FDI

FDI (in USD)	Russia		EU	
	2022	2026	2022	2026
Armenia	697 million	-70 million	146.3 million	\$435 million
Georgia	105.6 million	56.7 million	850 million	350 million
Azerbaijan	517.96	234.3	1,10 billion	1,85 billion

Belarus	5.4 billion	4,5 billion	0	0
Moldova	261 million	0	469 million	4.6 billion
Ukraine	0	0	371 million	3.15 billion

Source: IMF, UNCTAD

Language Proficiency (not Affinity)

Languages	Russian	English
Armenia	80%	53%
Georgia	45%	40%
Azerbaijan	72%	25%
Belarus	70,2%	7%
Moldova	80%	40%
Ukraine	46%	51%

Source: CRRC, EF English Proficiency Index, Ethnologue, Kyiv International Institute of Sociology and Gradus Research

Acquired Adherences (not Allegiances)

Dual citizenship	Armenia	Azerbaijan (bans)	Georgia	Belarus	Moldova	Ukraine
Russian passports	hundreds of thousands	very few	tens of thousands	tens of thousands, possibly exceeding 100,000	200,000 to 300,000	several million
EU passports	80,000 and 120,000	fewer than a few thousand	fewer than 15,000	30,000 to 60,000	400,000 to 500,000	250,000 to 350,000 (184,000 throughout 2010-2020)

Source: United Nations Economic Commission for Europe, Eurostat

Perceptions: favored trajectory/integration course

Surveys	Russia	West
Armenia	6% (21% prefer a pro-Russian course with Western ties)	55%
Georgia	2% (40% - balanced course with the weight on the EU)	86.3%
Azerbaijan	47% trust in Russia	38% - EU
Moldova	57%	43%
Ukraine	0	75%
Belarus	36% (41,6% to align with both the EU and Russia)	9%

Source: IRI, European Commission, Chatham House

Epilogue

With previous structural rigidity having been dispelled and systemic robustness having dissipated, re-configuration of borders for the 'in-between/in-among'/'entre-deux/entre-plusieurs' (Vasilyan 2026) states is unfulfilled. Whether tangible – through border-demarcation/-delimitation or intangible – recognition through legal (including economic) agreements – this venture requires concurrence (if not concord) by middle and great powers so that conceptions and perceptions do not turn into deceptions at the grassroots level. To gain state security and human safety Armenia, Georgia, Azerbaijan, Moldova, Belarus and Ukraine remain at the discretion of the (un-)willing. While the variables dissected above impacting border re-drawing both on the grassroots and state level are linear or semi-linear the ultimate outcomes remain ulterior.

"The strong do what they can and the weak suffer what they must."

Source: Thucydides, History of the Peloponnesian War (The Melian Dialogue)

Great powers do with what they wish, middle powers do what they can, small states deal with what they have to.