

“Eurasia faces a proliferation of perils”

English Introduction

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About the Etude: “Looking into Eurasia: The Year in Politics” provides some keys to understanding the events and phenomena that have left their mark on a region that has undergone a major mutation since the fall of the Soviet Union in 1991: the post-Soviet space. Using a cross-cutting approach that is by no means exhaustive, this study seeks to identify the key drivers, the regional dynamics and the underlying issues at stake.

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“Eurasia Faces a Proliferation of Perils”

Anne de Tinguy

In the period preceding his return to power, Donald Trump asserted that he could end the war in Ukraine “in twenty-four hours”. During this time, the post-Soviet space experienced an escalation in perils. In a context of intense international turbulence, Eurasia remained a region of concern in 2024, with ongoing extreme violence and a number of tensions that have had repercussions beyond the region’s borders. A closer look at developments in the Ukrainian conflict and the transformations underway in Moldova and the South Caucasus raises questions, once again, about the future of this region.

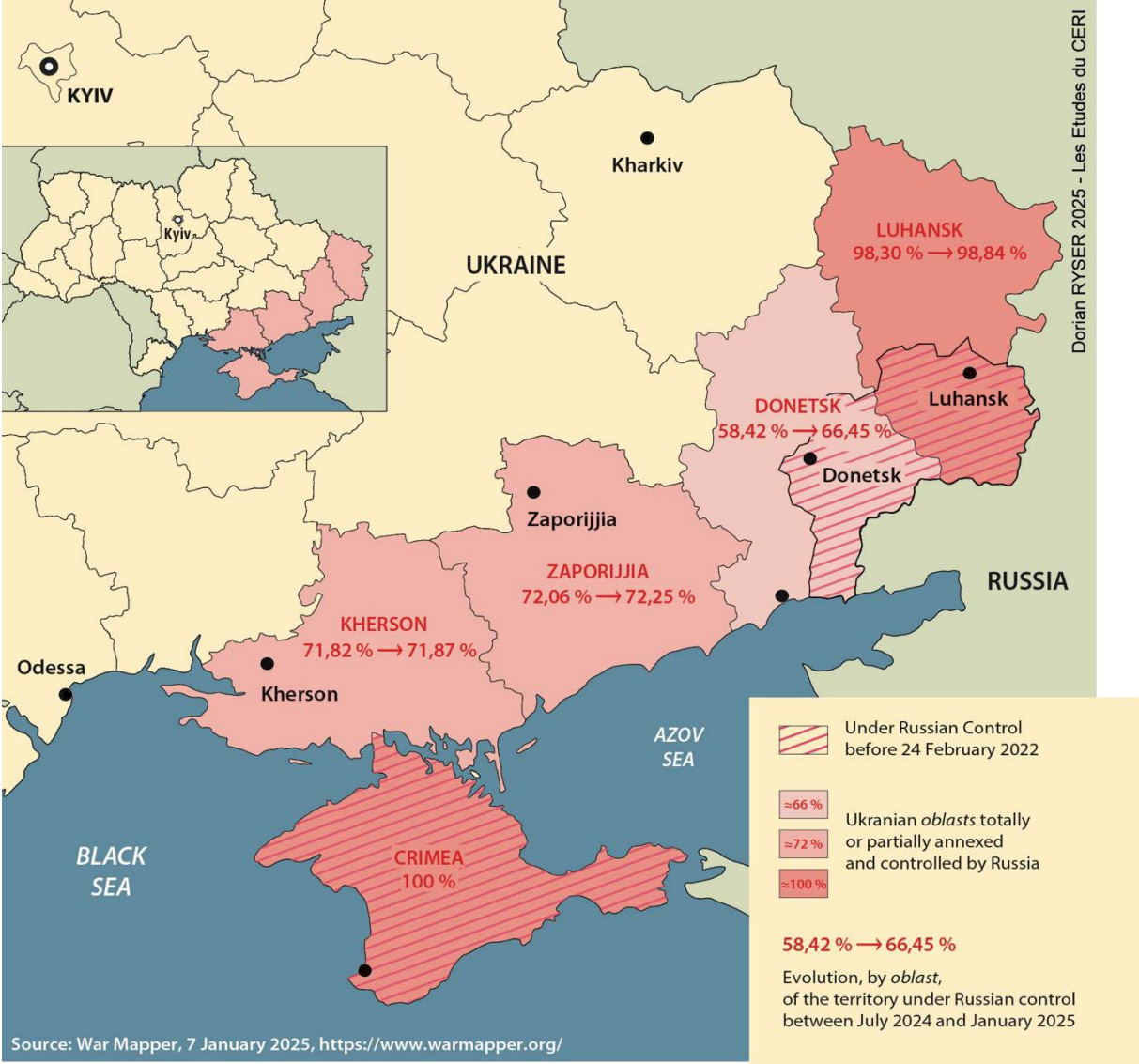
Ukraine: A war without end?

In Ukraine, the total and murderous war unleashed by the Kremlin on 24 February 2022 has now been ongoing for three winter periods. Russia continues to carry out military operations and hybrid attacks (systematic bombing of energy infrastructures, destruction of cultural heritage, manipulation of information, etc.), and it has internationalised the conflict by deploying North Korean troops on its territory in October 2024.

After serious military setbacks in the first months of the invasion, as the months went by, the balance of power shifted in favour of Russia. Thanks to a sharp increase in its defence budget, the establishment of a war economy, and military aid from North Korea and Iran, Russia has regained the initiative. Since November 2023, its forces have been advancing slowly but steadily in the Donbass. And thanks to its allies, albeit few in number, notably China, it has avoided international isolation. Despite all this, the outcome of the war does not seem decided. Vladimir Putin is far from having achieved the war goals he set: “denazification”, demilitarisation and neutrality of Ukraine, and

international recognition of “military realities”, i.e. the occupied territories.¹ And today, the Russian armed forces do not seem capable of winning a decisive battle. Their advances in the Donbass are very limited (see Figure 1), they are being made at the cost of long battles and heavy losses in men² and material, and they are far from having enabled Russia to control the entire territory of the oblasts it has annexed (see Map 1).

Map 1: Oblasts annexed by Russia: percentage of territory controlled by Moscow



¹ See, for example, his speech on 14 June 2024.

² Yuri Fedorov “Russian army strength after two and a half years of war in Ukraine”, *IFRI Studies*, No. 48, November 2024, pp. 16-17.

Ukraine has not achieved its objectives either: it has not regained full sovereignty, and a return to the 1991 borders seems an unattainable short-term goal. Since the failure of its counter-offensive launched in June 2023, Ukraine has been on the defensive, weakened by serious human and material problems. The army is shorthanded, has difficulty recruiting, and suffers from a lack of ammunition and weapons. Despite this, the Ukrainians continue to resist, backed by some fifty countries, most of them Western. The proportion of those willing to accept territorial concessions in exchange for peace has risen sharply in a year, but in December 2024 half the population (51%) remained opposed, and 57% said they are “ready to endure war as long as necessary”.³

This resistance, evident on the Donbass front, is also reflected in spectacular operations: targeted strikes deep inside Russian territory, the August offensive in the Russian Kursk region, interventions in Crimea and the Black Sea. As we can see, the results have been mixed, as many observers explain, in particular, by saying that Ukraine’s allies “did what was necessary to prevent (Ukraine’s) defeat, but not enough to enable (it) to win”.⁴ This attitude is linked to the limited capabilities of most of these allies, but also to the fear of escalation with Russia.

Will the arrival to power of Donald Trump, who even before taking office reiterated his will for an “immediate ceasefire”, change all this?⁵ A suspension of military aid to Ukraine from the United States, the country’s main arms supplier, would have an immediate impact on its ability to continue fighting. The cessation of hostilities hypothesis was at the centre of all debates at the end of 2024. At the forefront of the many questions about the conditions under which it would take place is its ability to be part of a peace logic, which implies in particular the provision of credible security

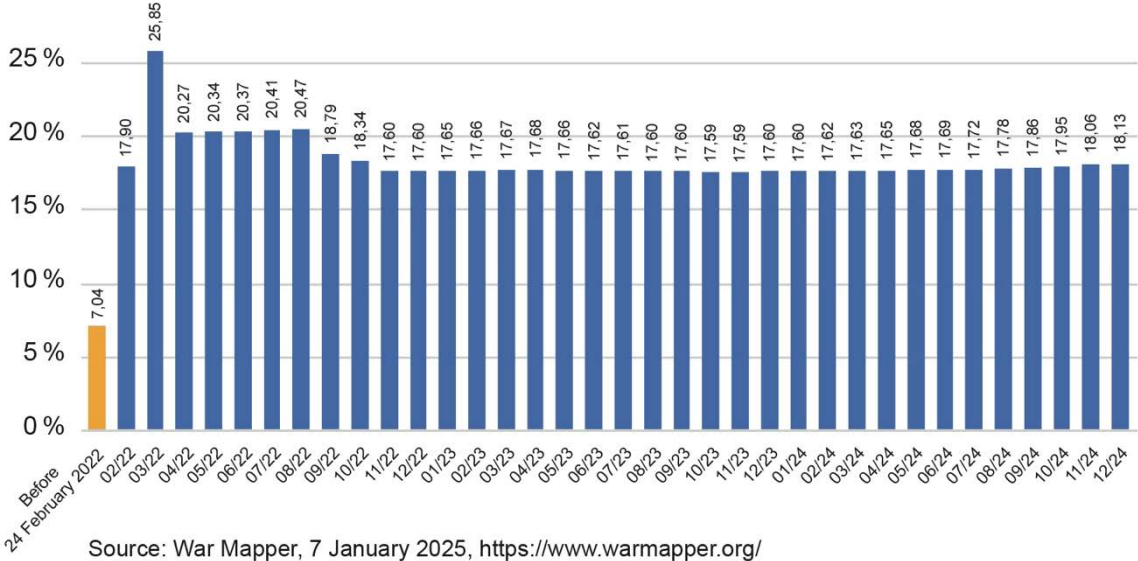
³ KIIS (Kyiv Institute of Sociology) survey, 3 January 2025 and 2 January 2025.

⁴ Timothy Garton Ash “Le choix ukrainien de l’Europe : comment sortir de notre moment Hamlet ? ”, in G. da Empoli (dir.), *Portrait d’un monde cassé*, Gallimard, Paris, coll. “Le Grand Continent”, 2024, pp. 78- 79; Claudia Major and Jana Puglierin, “The West’s responsibility for Ukraine’s future”, *International Politik Quarterly*, 28 August 2024.

⁵ See Gilles Andréani’s chapter in this volume and Michael McFaul’s “How Trump can end the war in Ukraine?”, *Foreign Affairs*, 12 December 2024.

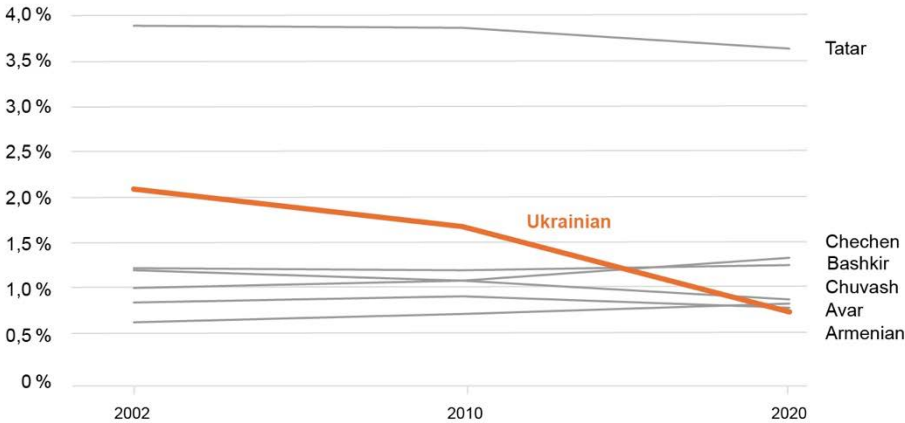
guarantees to Ukraine.⁶ A ceasefire agreed on between the United States and Russia, which would allow the latter to retain the territories it occupies with impunity and to rebuild its armed forces before resuming its offensive against Ukraine or even NATO countries, would jeopardise the future of Ukraine, the sovereignty of other Eurasian states, and European security.

Figure 1: Ukrainian territory occupied by Russia: changes since 2014 (in %)



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Figure 2: Change in the ethnic composition of Russia's population (2002-2020): the seven largest minorities (in %)



Source: Rosstat, *Rossija v tsfrakh 2024*.

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⁶ On Ukraine’s positions, see Volodymyr Zelensky’s address to the Rada on 19 November 2024 and his interview with the British TV channel Sky News on 29 November 2024.

Huge international impact

This war, which has exacerbated the disintegration of the former USSR and the deterioration of Russian-Western relations, has contributed to the upheaval of the international system. The Russian-Ukrainian divide is widening at both the state and society levels. The collapse of Ukrainians' positive attitudes toward Russia,⁷ the end of the Russian-Ukrainian gas transit agreement with the European Union on 31 December 2024, and the decline of the ethnic Ukrainian population in Russia (see Figure 2 above) are just some of the many signs of this. The resulting dislocation of the former Russian empire is all the more pronounced as the Russian invasion has paved the way for three of the states in this region (Ukraine, Moldova, and Georgia) to join the EU, something that European policy had not previously envisaged, as Laure Delcour points out in this volume. The fifth summit of the European Political Community, which brings together all the countries of the European continent except Russia and Belarus, held on 7 November in Budapest, confirmed that the border of the post-Soviet space with Europe now runs between Ukraine and Moldova on the one hand and Russia and Belarus on the other.

This war goes beyond the borders of this area. Contrary to what the Kremlin claims, the West is not at war with Russia, but refuses to accept the violation of international law and territorial integrity of a sovereign state. Considering Russia to be an “existential threat” to Europe,⁸ western states work to counter it by taking a firm stand on the side of the aggressed, subjecting Russia to a regime of sanctions and by opposing its hybrid attacks.

Vladimir Putin's approach is not defensive but offensive. In his narrative of this war, he ignores the facts and gives the West a central role by reversing responsibilities. Denying Russia's responsibility for the outbreak of hostilities and claiming that Westerners see Ukrainians as “cannon fodder” used to make their country “anti-Russian”, he presents

⁷ KIIS survey, 7 November 2024.

⁸ See e.g. Josef Borrell, Vice-President of the European Commission, “Articulating diplomacy with security”, *Le Grand Continent*, 3 December 2024, p. 7; and NATO press release, 4 December 2024.

the conflict as a “proxy war” waged by the West against Russia.⁹ This narrative accompanies the hybrid attacks that Russia has been multiplying since 2022: manipulating information,¹⁰ cyberattacks, sabotage, exploiting migration, interfering in electoral processes (in Moldova and Georgia—we’ll come back to this—in Romania during the presidential elections in November 2024), and others.

In Moscow, the war in Ukraine is being instrumentalised for foreign policy purposes as an “opportunity” to accelerate the “de-Westernisation of the international order”¹¹ and thereby strengthen Russia’s position in the world. Its relations with the countries of the South—referred to in Moscow as the “world majority”—that do not wish to take a position in the conflict help to limit the international isolation it suffers as a result of Western sanctions.

After being suspended in Europe, Russia’s media influence has been redirected, particularly toward sub-Saharan Africa, where it is spreading an “anti-(neo)colonial” narrative aimed at legitimising its policies in Africa and Ukraine, discrediting the positions of Western countries, particularly France, and convincing people of the emergence of a new, “fairer”, multipolar world order.¹²

South Caucasus and Moldova: Regions in transition

The war in Ukraine has many other implications for the post-Soviet space. In particular, it is contributing to the transformation of internal and external balances in the South Caucasus and Moldova.

⁹ Vladimir Putin has frequently expressed these positions, see among others his speeches of 19 December 2023, 14 June, 7 November and 16 December 2024 and his interview of 13 March 2024; see also Sergei Karaganov *et alii*, “Politika Rossii v otnochenii mirovogo bol'chinstva” (Russia’s policy towards the world majority), *Rossiia v Global'noi politike*, 2023, p. 5; and Isabelle Facon “L’invasion russe de l’Ukraine: une guerre pour un autre ordre international?”, *L’année de la Défense Nationale*, IHEDN/La Documentation Française, 2024, pp. 131-137.

¹⁰ Maxime Audinet, see his chapter in this volume and “A bas le néocolonialisme!” - Résurgence d’un récit stratégique dans la Russie en guerre”, *Etude 119, IRSEM*, October 2024, 78 p.

¹¹ I. Facon, *op.cit*

¹² M. Audinet, *op.cit*.

The conflict between Armenia and Azerbaijan has upset the regional order, a disruption further accelerated by the Russian aggression in Ukraine. At the end of the war between these two states in 2020, Armenia lost the self-proclaimed Republic of Nagorno-Karabakh, which officially ceased to exist in January 2024.¹³ The ensuing negotiations resulted in Yerevan and Baku reaching an initial, limited agreement on border demarcation on 19 April, ceding plots of land in four border villages. But peace between the two states still seems a long way off, hampered in part by the dispute over the opening of the Zanguezur corridor that used to link Azerbaijan to its enclave, Nakhitchevan.¹⁴

One of the main consequences of these two wars is the distancing of Armenia from its traditional Russian ally, long perceived as its great protector. Since 2020, the perception of this ally has deteriorated sharply: in September 2024, 64% of Armenians had a negative perception of Russia.¹⁵ Angry that Russia and the Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO), did not respond to its calls for help in either 2020 or 2023, Armenia suspended its participation in the organisation and then announced in 2024 its decision to put its participation on a freeze. It also demanded the withdrawal of Russian border guards who had been stationed on its borders since 1991: an agreement signed in April 2024 was implemented in the following months. At the same time, it is increasingly turning to the EU. In 2013, under pressure from the Kremlin, it had to renounce an association agreement with Brussels and join Russia's Eurasian Economic Union (EEU) project. In 2024, Armenia remains a member of the EEU, but is deepening, once more, its ties with the EU and diversifying its relations, in particular by purchasing arms from various countries, including France, which is leading to a sharp deterioration in relations between Paris and Baku. The setback to Russian positions resulting from these events is accentuated by the strengthening of the also traditional relations between Baku and Ankara and the growing role of the latter in the security field: military support for

¹³ Louise Amoris "La fin du Haut-Karabakh : symptôme d'un espace sud-caucasien en transformation", *La Revue Internationale et Stratégique (RIS)*, Autumn 2024, n° 135 pp. 181-190.

¹⁴ Gaïdz Minassian, see his chapter in this volume and "Caucase du Sud, un nouvel échiquier stratégique ?", *Politique étrangère*, Autumn 2024, no. 3, pp. 114-116.

¹⁵ Survey by the International Republican Institute, "Public opinion survey: Residents of Armenia", 18 October 2024.

Azerbaijan, which allowed for the latter's victory in 2020, the supply of drones to Ukraine and Kyrgyzstan, and military-industrial cooperation with Kazakhstan, Uzbekistan, and Tajikistan.

Georgia found itself at a crossroads in 2024. Although the country has enjoyed EU candidate status since 15 December 2023, in line with the long-standing desire of the vast majority of Georgians, 80% of whom are pro-European according to surveys, an acceleration of the democratic regression led to a re-evaluation of its European commitments in 2024. On 28 November, Prime Minister Irakli Kobakhidze suspended negotiations on EU accession until the end of 2028.

In this country, which saw significant progress in its reform process and appeared to have distanced itself from Russian influence, the Georgian Dream, the party in power since 2012, is pursuing a policy that is increasingly less democratic. This policy is presented in this volume by Silvia Serrano. In the period leading up to the parliamentary elections in autumn 2024, there was a noticeable reinforcement of authoritarian tendencies, as evidenced by the adoption of a series of legislation that restricts personal liberties and promotes conservative values. This includes the adoption of laws on 14 May regarding “foreign influence” and on 3 October concerning “the protection of family values and minors”, numerous irregularities during the 26 October legislative elections (officially won by Georgian Dream), and the election of Mikheil Kavelashvili, an openly pro-Russian president, on 14 December within a college controlled by the government. These political developments are occurring in parallel with a rapprochement with Russia that has intensified since the start of the war in Ukraine. Evidence of Russian influence can be seen in the aforementioned laws, in the government's discourse on traditional values, and in increasingly anti-Western rhetoric.

Georgian Dream retains a certain popularity, which can be explained by the ambiguity of its positions—while pursuing a policy incompatible with EU values, the party continues to affirm an objective of integration into the EU—and by the instrumentalisation of the war in Ukraine. Spreading the idea that alliances with the West inevitably lead to confrontation with Russia, the government is playing on the fear that the war will spread

to Georgia. But its policy is meeting with resistance within society, which has been growing over time.¹⁶ The decision of 28 November appears to be a turning point. Street demonstrations intensified and spread throughout the country. Supported by President Salomé Zourabichvili (whose term of office ended on 29 December), the protesters, bearing pro-European and anti-Russian slogans, called for the decision to be reversed and for new legislative elections to be organised. Will we see a revolution that will lead to a change of power, as happened in Ukraine in 2014? At the end of 2024, the outcome of the protest movement remains uncertain.¹⁷

In Moldova, the year 2024 ended with confirmation of the country's European choice. Accession negotiations were officially opened on 25 June. The referendum on EU accession on 20 October resulted in a positive outcome. And Maia Sandu, elected president in 2020 on a resolutely pro-European programme, was re-elected on 3 November with 55.3% of the vote. However, these election results were obtained after months of high tension, not all of which has subsided. The victory of the pro-Europeans, which will have to be confirmed in the legislative elections of 2025, is not as clear-cut as predicted by the opinion polls and surveys. In the referendum, the "yes" vote won with 50.3% of the vote. Without the votes of the diaspora, Maia Sandu would not have been elected. And the country appears divided: In the presidential elections, the capital and its surroundings as well as the diaspora voted for Maia Sandu (57.4% in Chisinau, 82.9% in the diaspora), while the Russian-speaking regions and the poorest parts of the country, in the north and south, voted for her challenger Alexandr Stoianoglo (97% in Gagauzia), who was supported by the Moscow-leaning Socialist Party.

This situation seems to be largely the result of heavy Russian interference. Russia, described in the Moldovan National Security Strategy of 2023 as "an existential threat" to the country, continues to oppose the European path of Moldova as well as that of the other states of the post-Soviet space concerned. In 2024, it is influencing political

¹⁶ Elene Panchulidze, Richard Youngs, "The source of Georgia's democratic resilience", *Journal of Democracy*, January 2025, vol.36, n° 1, pp. 123-134.

¹⁷ Kornely Kakachia, Shota Kakabadze, "Where does it end? Three possible outcomes of the political turmoil in Georgia", REUNIR, 15 December 2024.

processes through disinformation, intimidation, electoral corruption, and cyberattacks. A large-scale vote buying scheme has been orchestrated by Ilan Shor, the oligarch in exile in Moscow, a prominent pro-Russian figure, sentenced in Moldova to 15 years in prison for his role in a high-profile financial scandal in 2014.¹⁸ The anti-European narratives and other disinformation campaigns are similar to those found in Georgia. Pro-Russian Moldovans and Russians also play on the fear of war, particularly that of a regional escalation from Transnistria, a separatist region on whose territory Russian forces are stationed, a risk that seemed to increase when the Transnistrian authorities appealed to Russia for protection on 28 February 2024.¹⁹ And they are exploiting the country's socio-economic tensions, which have been exacerbated by the war in Ukraine and by the reduction in Russian gas supplies to Moldova.

The Russian aggression in Ukraine continues to be a powerful accelerator of the fragmentation of the former Russian empire. It amplifies the rift between Russia and Ukraine. It is encouraging most of the states in the region to strengthen their multi-vector policies, which is leading to a recomposition of forces in favour of the EU, China, or even Turkey, depending on the country. It widens the gap between authoritarian regimes—Russia (Vladimir Putin has been in power there for 25 years), Azerbaijan (President Aliyev was re-elected there in February for a fifth term with 92% of the vote), Belarus, the countries of Central Asia—and the states that have chosen democracy—Ukraine and Moldova. Its repercussions extend beyond the borders of this area. In particular, it has caused a new division of the European continent. It is not the only source of upheaval—as we have seen in Georgia, Moldova and Armenia—but at the end of 2024, it dominates all the challenges facing this region. If the hypothesis of a

¹⁸ Vladimir Solovyov, "Moldova's ambiguous election results are unsurprising", *Carnegie Politika*, 25 October 2024.

¹⁹ Florent Parmentier, see his chapter in this volume. See also "La Transnistrie, à l'ombre de la guerre en Ukraine", *Décryptage*, Institut Jacques Delors, May 2024; Denis Cenusă "Moldova's foreign policy after 2024 presidential elections: staying on the EU path, moving Eastwards or becoming multi-vector?", *IFRI Editorials*, 17 October 2024.

ceasefire is confirmed, under what conditions will it be implemented? A cessation of hostilities, decided without the endorsement of Ukraine and without the participation of the EU, and which would not be part of a logic of peace, would jeopardise the future of Ukraine, the sovereignty of the other states of the former USSR, and European security. In what state will the victim, whose territory continues to be ravaged by war and who is still waiting to find out what security guarantees it will be able to benefit from, and the aggressor be when this conflict ends? At the end of 2024, the economic and international cost of this war, which Russia is responsible for, appears to be increasingly high for Russia.²⁰

[The full text Etude is available in French here.](#)

²⁰ The fall in December 2024 of the regime of Bashar al-Assad (Syria) is one of the latest setbacks experienced by Russia in international life. On the economy, see Jason Corcoran, *The Moscow Times*, 21 November and 17 December 2024.