In his interview to Tucker Carlson, Vladimir Putin talked a lot about “historical rights” of Russia to control what he perceives as a buffer zone between Russia and the West. But what is simply a territory for Moscow, is a social and political reality for the states who exist there and have their own view of their relations with the former hegemon.

From Moscow’s point of view, the strategic goal of the actual war against Ukraine is to reshape not only its relations with Kiev but to establish a new architecture of international relations in the whole post-Soviet area. A new format for the very traditional exclusive zone of influence centered on Moscow and secured from any external interference. Political, economic, cultural and, last but not least, military proximity of alternative centers of power raises Kremlin’s concerns on the stability of Russia itself and thus motivates Moscow to minimize the autonomy of the former Soviet republics, who gained independence in 1991. And those states see it and react.

Their strategic calculation is highly affected by the conflict, in an obvious way inflicting the following logic: if Ukraine is an object of ongoing direct aggression today, all post-Soviet states, particularly those sharing common border with Russian Federation may possibly become one tomorrow. Russian influence was always a major factor of their internal and foreign policy, but in the Ukrainian context, the Russian factor becomes a securitized one: Russian potential aggression is not any more a theoretical scenario but a realistic possibility that may materialize if the Kremlin, for its internal reasons, decides to make it real. And the latest interview of Vladimir Putin once again confirms it.

Baltic States, Belarus, Kazakhstan and other former Soviet republics were more than once qualified by members of the Russian political elite (including state officials) as a part of a single strategic entity, ‘naturally’ centered on Moscow and devoted to be Kremlin’s ‘zone of prioritized interests’ in order to establish conditions for the continental peace and stability. From Russian perspective, only by confirming, that the post-Soviet space constitutes an extension of Russian ‘strategic depth’ and thus any external military influence should be formally excluded from it, those countries (as well as external partners) will gain a durable stabilization and avoid a permanently possible conflict. (Paradoxically enough, Russia’s main

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continental partners – France, Germany and China – seemed and still seem to accept this regional postulate as a fair condition for turning Russia into a constructive partner globally\(^2\).

Evident it can be for the great powers seeking for a continental stabilization, the idea of introducing a new version of Brezhnev Doctrine that turns post-Soviet states into quasi-colonies with their strategic sovereignty delegated to Moscow and their military controlled by Russians (and used according to Kremlin’s needs as it is actually happening in Belarus these days) is entirely unacceptable for the incriminated states as a direct negation of their independence. And after three decades of building their independence and identity this is true, both for the elites and for the peoples.

If they left Soviet Union, it was not to give up their sovereign rights to any other supranational entity, and over thirty years of independence strengthened the conviction of a national state being an optimal framework for their existence within the international system, which is true for both the national elites and the vast majority of their societies. Ukrainian determination in defending its state as well as the reality of Russian rule on the occupied territories only strengthens this conviction and motivates to look for diversification of international partners. If it is not for the rapprochement with the formal structures of the West such as EU and NATO (whose formal conditions and informal expectations may often be difficult to accept), it certainly is for bilateral ties with several Western and non-Western states as well as the regional integration.

To Moscow’s great disappointment, there is no intention to make any kind of concession in the Baltic States, Georgia or Kazakhstan, let alone any sign of separatism directed at a loyalty shift from the national capital to Moscow of a kind that happened in Crimea or Donbass. Even Belarus, a country where Russian influence is the strongest, both on political and popular level, shows fierce opposition to effectively integrate any sphere of its national competences with Russia\(^3\) (an example has lately been observed with its spectacular – an up to now efficient – procrastination to actively join Russian war effort against Ukraine\(^4\)).

The demand for a geopolitical diversification in the post-Soviet space is strong and rising. Former Soviet republics seek for a place in the international system that will be determined by

\(^2\) Judy Asks: Are France and Germany Wavering on Russia? [https://carnegieeurope.eu/strategiceurope/88588](https://carnegieeurope.eu/strategiceurope/88588)


their own interest and not by the one of the former hegemon. On the other hand, they have no intention to invite a new one to replace Moscow. The question is whether external partners are ready and apt to perceive them as partners and invest, both politically and economically in strengthening of their sovereignty?