

## Great Power Competition in former Soviet space. Public Perceptions and Elite Alignment of the United States, Russia, and China.

This study aims to contribute to the debate on great power competition among Russia, United States and China in former Soviet states.

United by common history as a part of the same country for decades, the former Soviet states, after gaining independence, have been subject to new influences by power states other than Russia.

The great powers use different tools of public diplomacy to influence public perceptions and elite alignment. They send positive messages about their culture, values, and beliefs for consumption by general audiences and establish communication channels to facilitate interactions between citizens and elites in order to increase mutual understanding and closer ties.

This study aims to shed light on the outcomes of US-Russia-China strategic interaction in the former Soviet Union, measured by public perceptions and elite alignment. This study does not aim to explain the relative differences in public perceptions and elite alignment towards the three powers, but rather present their current state of influence and its dynamics over the past two-three decades.

### *Public Perceptions on the Great Powers in former Soviet states*

In order to track the dynamics of public perception in former Soviet states, the study uses survey data conducted by the Gallup World Poll. Since 2006 Gallup has been continually surveying residents all over the world, including all the post-soviet states, using randomly selected and nationally representative samples. The study analyzes the following survey question: “Do you approve or disapprove of the job performance of the leadership of [this country]?”, referring to the United States, Russia, and China. There are four possible answers to the question: approve, disapprove, don’t know, and refuse to answer. This study focuses on answers “approve” and “disapprove”.

Figure 1 depicts the proportion of respondents who approved the leadership of the United States, Russia and China over the period of 2006-2018. The highest approval rates go to Russia’s leadership in all the states, with the exception of Ukraine after 2013, which coincides with the Euromaidan, and Georgia, where the American leadership has the highest approval rates among the three great powers during the specific period. Another interesting trend is that Central Asian states, in general, give higher approval ratings to China’s leadership compared to the United States, yet Russia still strongly dominates both of them with its favorable image in the region.

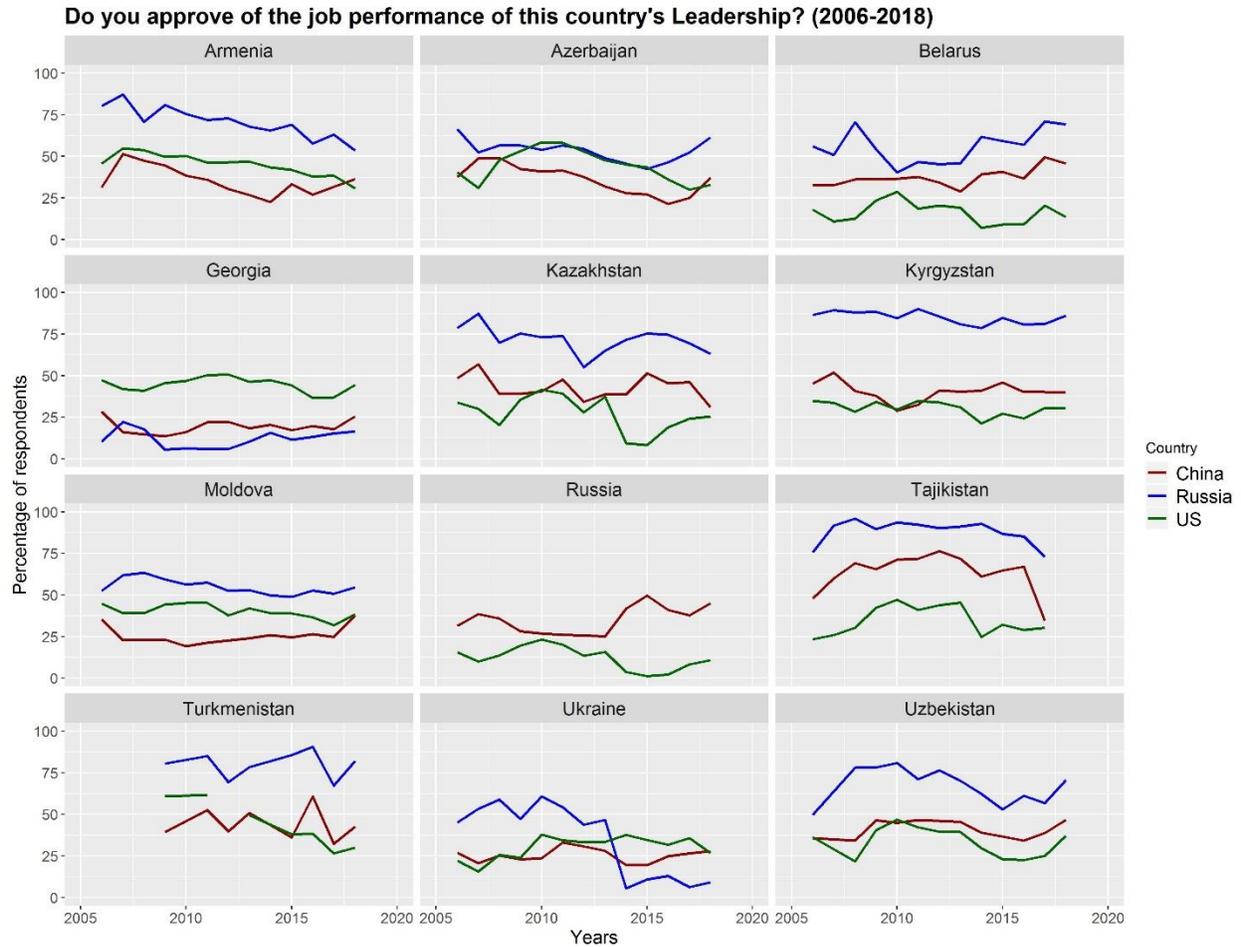


Figure 1: The vertical axes indicates the percentage of respondents approving the country's leadership, the horizontal axes indicates years. Source: Gallup World Poll.

Figure 2 depicts the proportion of respondents who disapproved the leadership of the United States, Russia and China over the period of 2006-2018. Disapproval rates are the highest for the United States in all states with the exception of Georgia, where Russian leadership is the most disapproved, and Ukraine, where Russia has become the most unfavorable country since 2013, following the Euromaidan. The lowest disapproval rates go to Russia, which is especially apparent in Central Asian states. This is in line with the findings of Figure 1, where Russian leadership strongly dominates with its favorable image in the region.

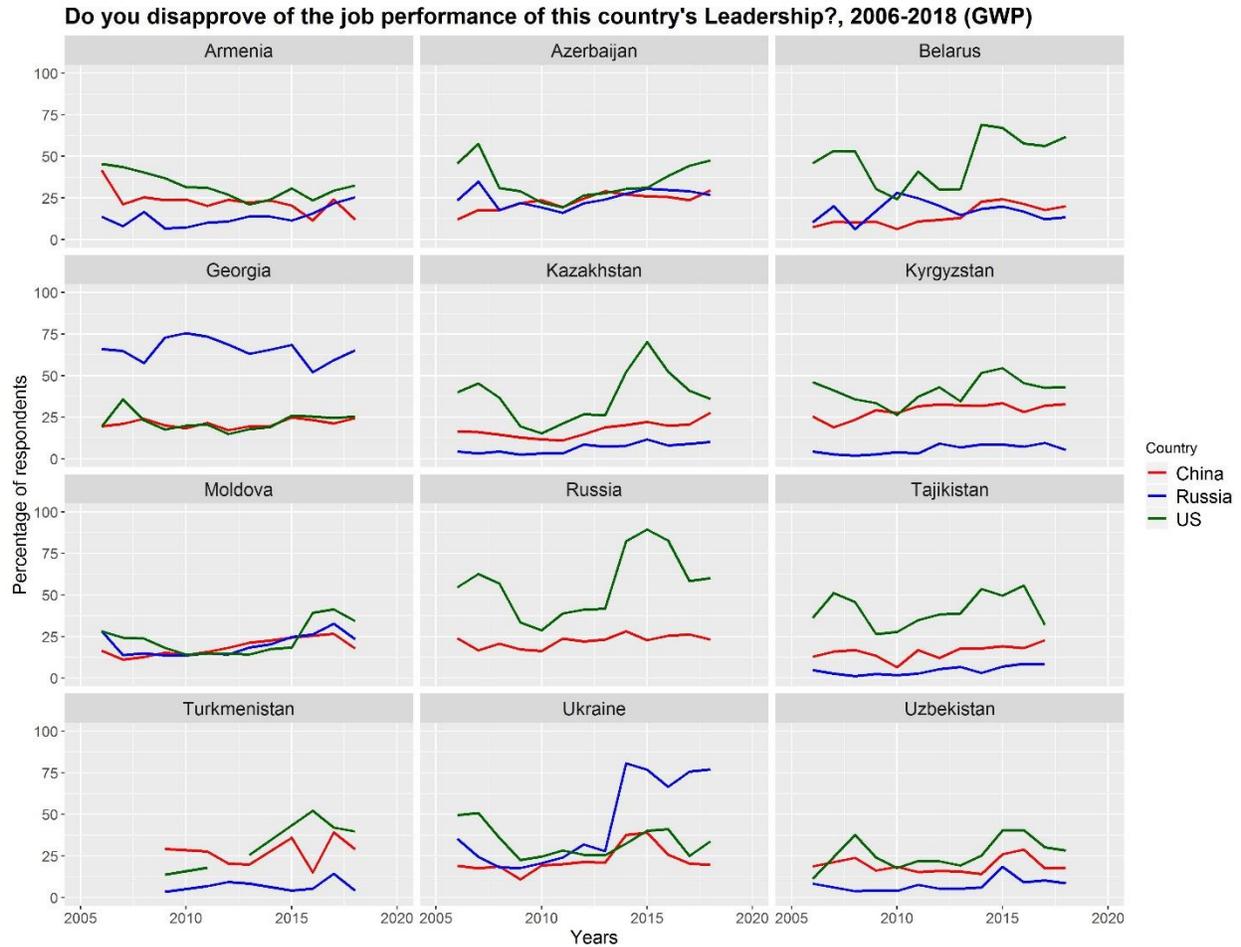


Figure 2: The vertical axes indicates the percentage of respondents disapproving the country's leadership, the horizontal axes indicates years. Source: Gallup World Poll.

### Elite Alignment with the Great Powers in former Soviet states

In order to quantify the elite alignment in former Soviet states with three great powers, this study measures state preferences over global issues, based on the United Nations General Assembly (UNGA) votes. In particular, it utilizes the ideal point data, which uses information about the content of the UN's agenda and makes estimates comparable across time (Bailey 2017).

The study calculates the distance between the ideal points of a given post-Soviet country and three great powers. Higher distances indicate greater misalignment, while lower distances indicate alignment.

Figure 3 depicts the ideal point distances of a given post-soviet state with the three great powers throughout 1992-2018.

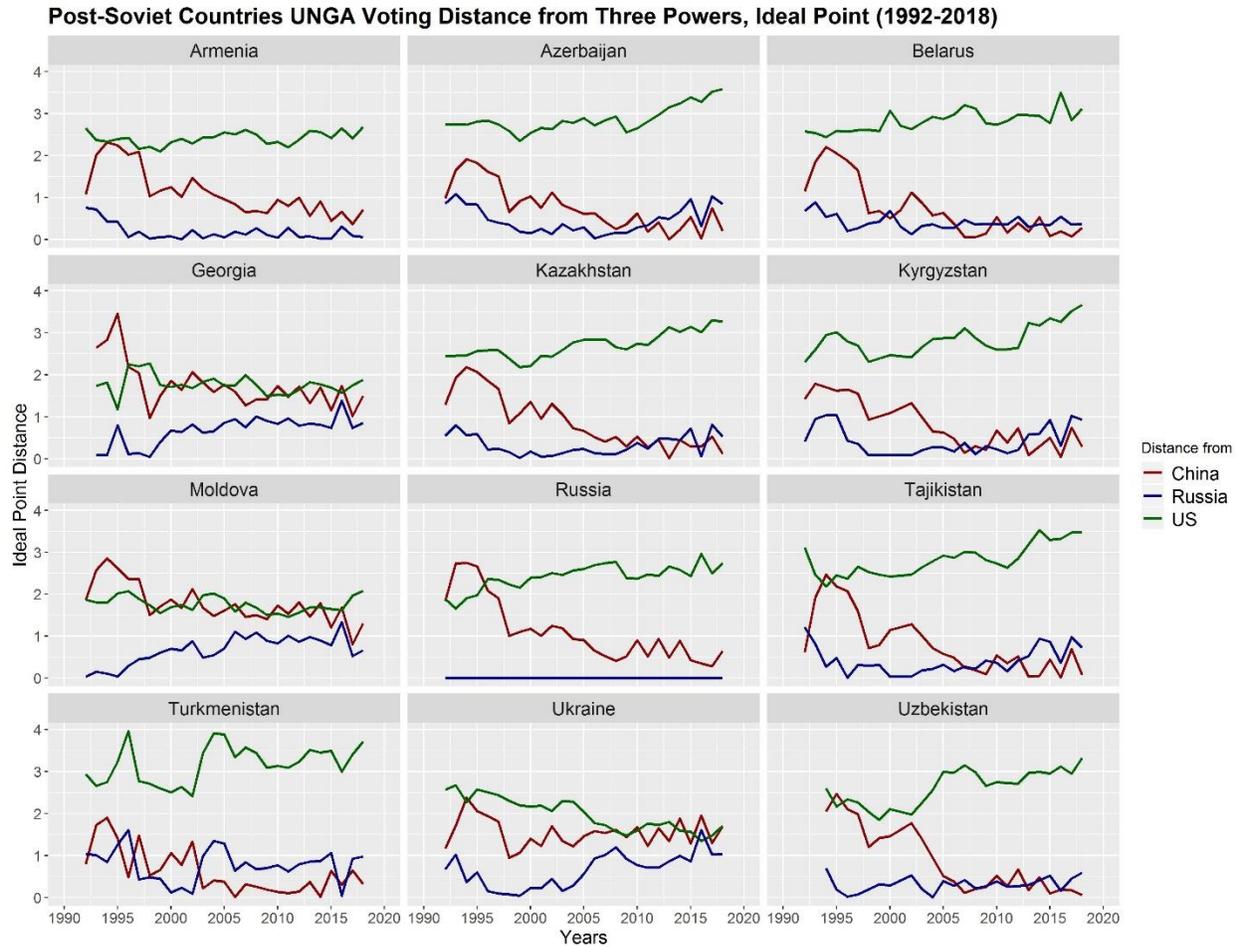


Figure 3: The vertical axes indicates the extend of misalignment, the horizontal axes indicates years. Source: UNGA.

The patterns of misalignment differ across the post-soviet states. While the highest misalignment is with the US for majority of the states, it is mainly driven by Central Asian states, as well as Armenia, Azerbaijan, and Belarus. The misalignment with the US has decreased in Ukraine, and the rest of the states demonstrate higher misalignment with China. Overall, post-soviet states continue to be the most aligned with Russia, with the catch-up of China in the past decade, which can also be explained by increasing similarity of voting patterns between China and Russia.

Caution should be exercised while interpreting the alignment with a great power as a result of its influence. While alignment can indeed be determined by a great power influence, the possibility that is a mere coincidence cannot be ruled out. While misalignment with a great power can indeed indicate that it has not influenced the voting pattern of a small post-soviet state.

In conclusion, Russia has been and continues to stay the most influential power in the post-soviet states in the eyes of the public and elites. The rise of China in the region is not translated to any notable results, while the United States continues to be viewed as unfavorable and uninfluential in region.