

Dynamics of Friendliness of Communication Regimes in the South Caucasus Countries

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Abstract. The article presents a Rating of the friendliness of the communication regimes of post-Soviet countries for 2023. The author focuses on the countries of the South Caucasus, shows the trends in the development of communication regimes, the degree of their friendliness towards Russia. The communication regime is defined as a system of rules, norms, conditions and opportunities for communication between state and non-state actors. To determine friendliness, the legal, political, and socio-cultural conditions for the development of 12 types of cross-country communications are analyzed. The strengthening of the formation of a common communication space with Russia in South Ossetia and Abkhazia is argued. In Azerbaijan and Georgia, the strengthening of a pragmatic approach to the development of communications with Russia and the strengthening of the role of the economic factor are being recorded. The example of Armenia shows how the political elite strengthen the movement towards unfriendliness in conditions when there is no deep anti-Russian position in the consciousness of the Armenian society. The author has compiled profiles of the friendliness of communication regimes for each country and reveals their features. The article uses the materials of the annual monitoring of the communication regimes of post-Soviet countries. Monitoring is provided by the National Research Institute for the Communications Development (Moscow) under the guidance of the author of this article.

Keywords: communication regime, friendly countries, friendship rating, South Caucasus, Russian-Georgian relations, Russian-Azerbaijani relations, Russian-Armenian relations, Abkhazia, South Ossetia, international communications, international cooperation

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Introduction

Development of information society, digitalization of socio-political processes, information and cognitive wars make analysis and forecasting of the dynamics of norms and rules of communication within a particular country and with other countries crucially

important for taking managerial decisions, and above all, decisions concerning foreign policy. The concept of communication regimes was developed at the National Research Institute for the Communications Development as a new approach for the analysis and forecasting of intra- and inter-country communications. Starting in 2020, The Institute has published a number of scientific articles [4, 7-9], conducted pilot monitoring, held a series of scientific discussions, and presented a particular number of analytical reports.

The communication regime is considered as a system of norms, rules, conditions and opportunities for inter-country communications between state and non-state actors. Monitoring communication regime friendliness involves the analysis of legal, political, organizational and other opportunities and conditions of communication with Russia, and also the analysis of the information contents, public and political discourse regarding Russia.

The friendliness of the communication regime is expressed in the presence of legal, political and socio-cultural conditions for non-conflict development of various types of cross-country communications, for free and fair exchange of information between state and non-state actors. Friendship mainly presupposes mutually benevolent relations between countries based on mutual respect, principles of friendship and good neighbourly relations, mutual interests and values of peaceful coexistence in a multipolar world.

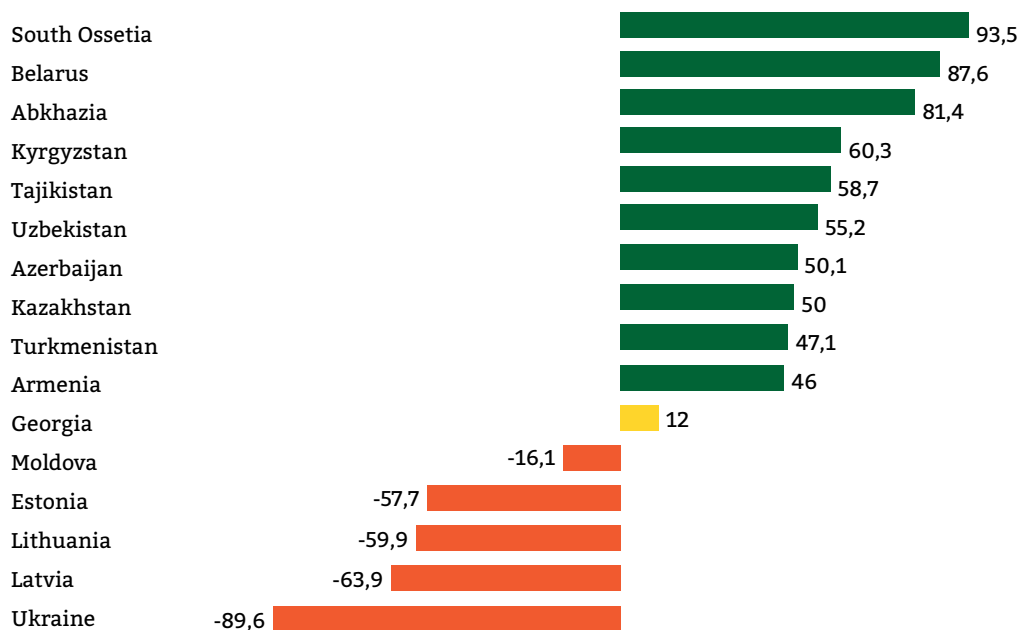
In 2021, The Institute conducted the first monitoring of communication regimes in 14 post-Soviet countries and published the First Rating of communication regimes friendliness. In 2022, The Institute conducted the second monitoring and compiled the Second Friendliness Rating. In 2023, The Institute expanded the sample of countries and conducted a monitoring of partially recognized states: the Republic of Abkhazia, the Republic of South Ossetia. Additionally, a special type of communication regime in Transnistria was analyzed. Besides, in 2023, the list of indicators for assessing the friendliness of countries' communication regimes was expanded.

Considering that this issue of the journal "Russia and the World: Scientific Dialogue" is dedicated to the South Caucasian countries, this article presents the results of monitoring in Abkhazia, Azerbaijan, Armenia, Georgia, South Ossetia.

Materials and methods

While preparing the article, materials for monitoring the communication regimes of post-Soviet countries, conducted under the guidance of the author of this publication, were used. The monitoring methodology is described in the The Institute reporting materials [10]. 12 communication groups were analyzed and evaluated according to 74 indicators. The article analyzed foreign policy, economic, interregional, educational, scientific, cultural, youth, religious and inter-religious communications, media communications, NGO communications, attitudes towards the Russian Federation, Russians, ethnic Russians within the studied countries, the peculiarities of the visa regime and foreign citizenship.



Figure 1. Quantitative indicators of the Rating of friendliness of communication regimes of post-Soviet countries by the end of 2023 (in points from +100 points (the most friendly) to -100 (the most non-friendly))

The empirical base consists of normative legal acts, state strategic documents, speeches, statements by heads of state, current practices (decisions and actions) of communication participants; traditions, customs, familiar patterns and narratives reproduced in modern conditions, materials from country mass media and social networks; statistical data, results of sociological surveys, and expert interviews. The main methods were document analysis, content analysis, event analysis, and expert polling. We analyzed hundreds of government documents, dozens of speeches by government officials, and interviewed 225 foreign experts, 50 Russian experts, and 78 participants in scientific discussions conducted by The Institute. The materials of scientific discussions were used in the preparation of this article, in particular, the materials related to the countries of the South Caucasus [2, 5, 13].

Results

According to the results of monitoring in 2023, 10 post-Soviet countries entered the group of friendly communication regimes, including South Ossetia (first place in the Rating of friendliness), Abkhazia (third place), Azerbaijan (ninth place), Armenia (tenth place). Not a single state of the South Caucasus was included in the group of unfriendly communication

Table 1. Dynamics of friendliness of communication modes

Place	Country	Rating points (max 100) 2023	Rating points (max 100). In brackets – place in rating 2022	Dynamics
Friendly communication regimes				
1.	South Ossetia	93,5	–	
2.	Belarus	87,6	88,4 (1)	≈
3.	Abkhazia	81,4	–	
4.	Kyrgyzstan	60,3	60,6 (2)	≈
5.	Tajikistan	58,7	57,9 (6)	≈
6.	Uzbekistan	55,2	59,3 (3)	≈
7.	Azerbaijan	50,1	57,0 (7)	↓
8.	Kazakhstan	50	58,4 (4)	↓
9.	Turkmenistan	47,1	47,1 (8)	=
10.	Armenia	46	58,3 (5)	↓
Relatively friendly/non-friendly communication regimes				
11.	Georgia	12	24,2 (9)	↓
Non-friendly communication regimes				
12.	Moldova	-16,1	8,3 (10)	↓
13.	Estonia	-57,7	-51,8 (13)	↓
14.	Lithuania	-59,9	-49,0 (12)	↓
15.	Latvia	-63,9	-45,8 (11)	↓
16.	Ukraine	-89,6	-83,6 (14)	↓

regimes, although Georgia is as close to this group as possible in terms of foreign policy communications. However, Georgia was assessed as a relatively friendly/unfriendly state.

The overall rating of friendliness based on the results of monitoring is shown in Figure 1.

Dynamics of friendliness / non-friendliness of communication regimes in 2022 и 2023 (shown in Table1).

The results of monitoring in 2023 showed that Russia was considered an ally and partner in friendly countries. Russia was unconditionally regarded as a strategic ally in South Ossetia and Abkhazia. Other countries of the South Caucasus considered it mainly as a partner.

Georgia continues to view Russia as a threat in terms of foreign policy. The unfriendliness of Armenia has increased. In 2023, both Armenia and Moldova were indicative as examples of the split between the position of society and the position of the

countries' authorities (the majority of the population continues to advocate the preservation of friendly relations with Russia). Realizing this, the governments increased censorship of media content, limited the work of information channels presenting alternative views, increased the number of pro-government media and tried to inculcate anti-Russian narratives and stereotypes into the public awareness. In fact, in 2023 in Armenia, we could see not an information war, but a cognitive war against their own population.

Next, we will take a closer look at the friendliness profiles of communication regimes in each country and give a brief summary on each of them. A detailed description for each country is provided in the full NRICD report on the results of monitoring in 2023 (the report is posted on the website NICRUS.ru).

The friendliness profile of the communication regime in South Ossetia

In 2023, the Republic of South Ossetia participated in monitoring friendliness of communication regimes for the first time. The country took the first place in the Ranking (93.5 points out of 100 possible). The image of the friendliness profile shows that for all communication groups, the estimates of South Ossetia are close to maximum values.

The communication regime of South Ossetia is the friendliest of all post-Soviet countries. The norms and rules of communication are largely synchronized with Russian approaches and are developing towards the formation of unified information, socio-economic, cultural and historical space, based on mutual foreign policy support and allied relations. South Ossetia has decided to send volunteers to Special Military Operation and is providing full support to Russia.

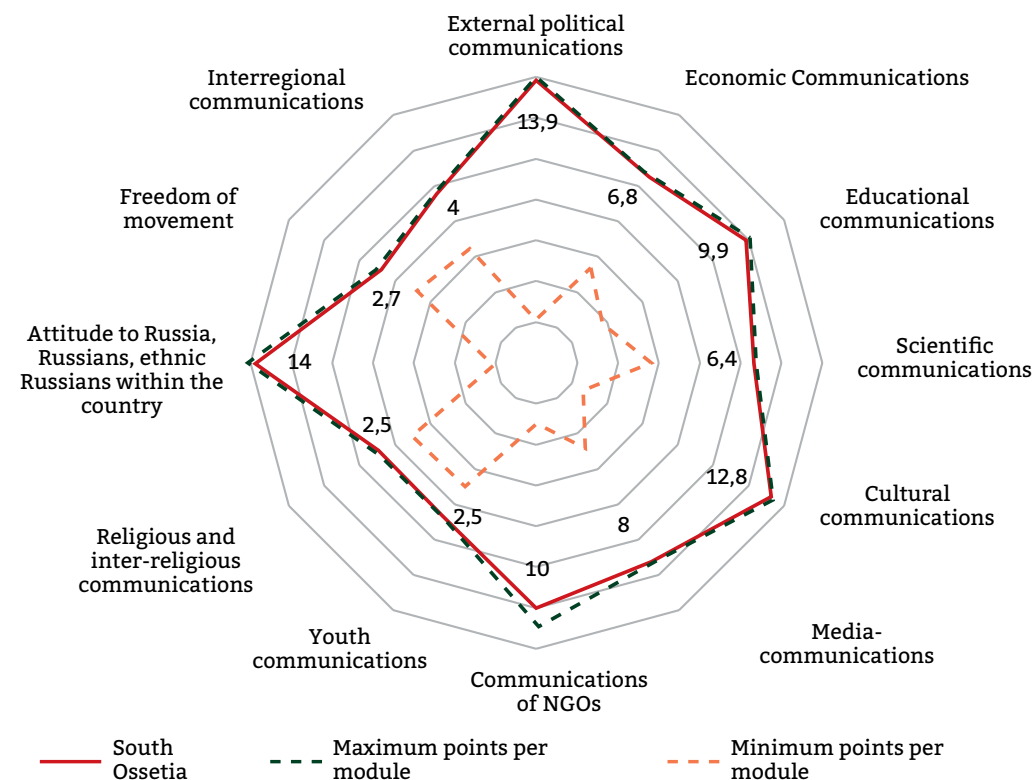
The accumulated experience of establishing its statehood, legal and material base created in cooperation with Russia; make it possible to set new tasks: development of internal resources, beneficial use of geo-economic potential, activation of South Ossetia's human capital to increase the efficiency of using the country's potential. Educational and scientific communications of South Ossetia are the instruments to enter into a wide range of international communications, but for the full use of these tools, a qualitative improvement in the base and human resources of scientific and educational institutions of the country is required.

The analysis of political leaders' speeches, as well as the analysis of projects and plans for the development of the country allows us to predict strengthening of the development of a common socio-political and socio-economic space of South Ossetia and Russia in 2024, and also strengthening cooperation within the framework of Russia and Belarus Union State and other interstate formats where Russia also participates.

The friendliness profile of the communication regime in Abkhazia

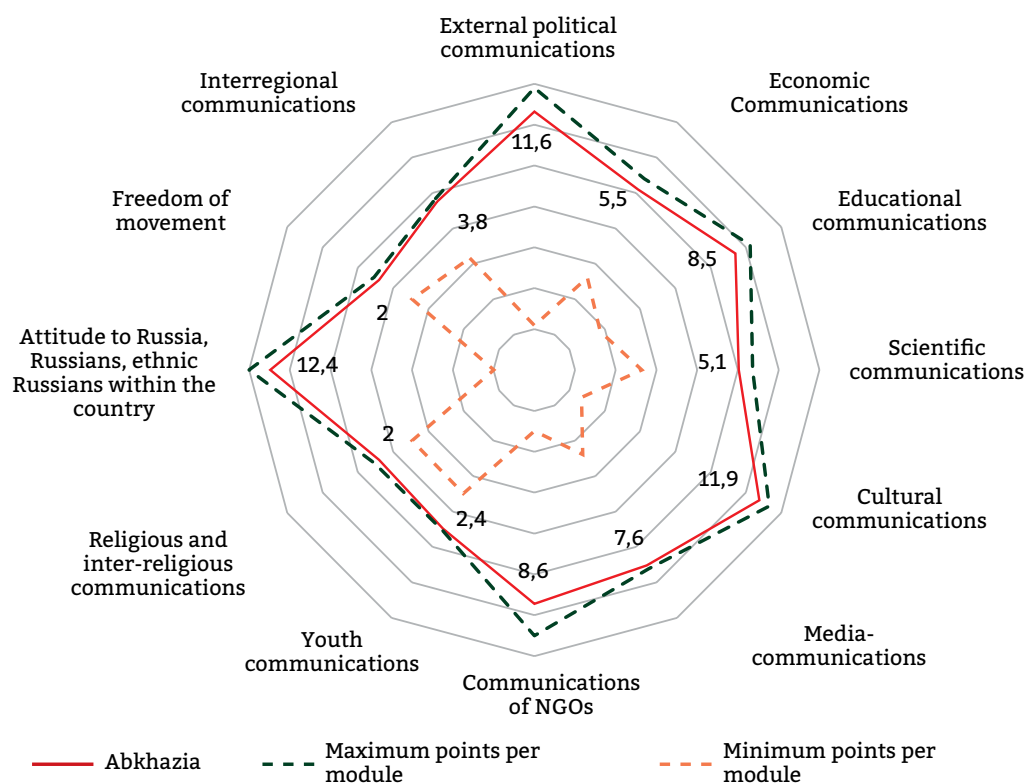
The Republic of Abkhazia, like South Ossetia, participated in monitoring friendliness

Figure 2. The profile of the friendliness of the communication regime of South Ossetia (in points)



of communication regimes for the first time in 2023 and took the third place (81.4 points out of 100 possible). In almost all communication groups, the estimates of Abkhazia are close to maximum values.

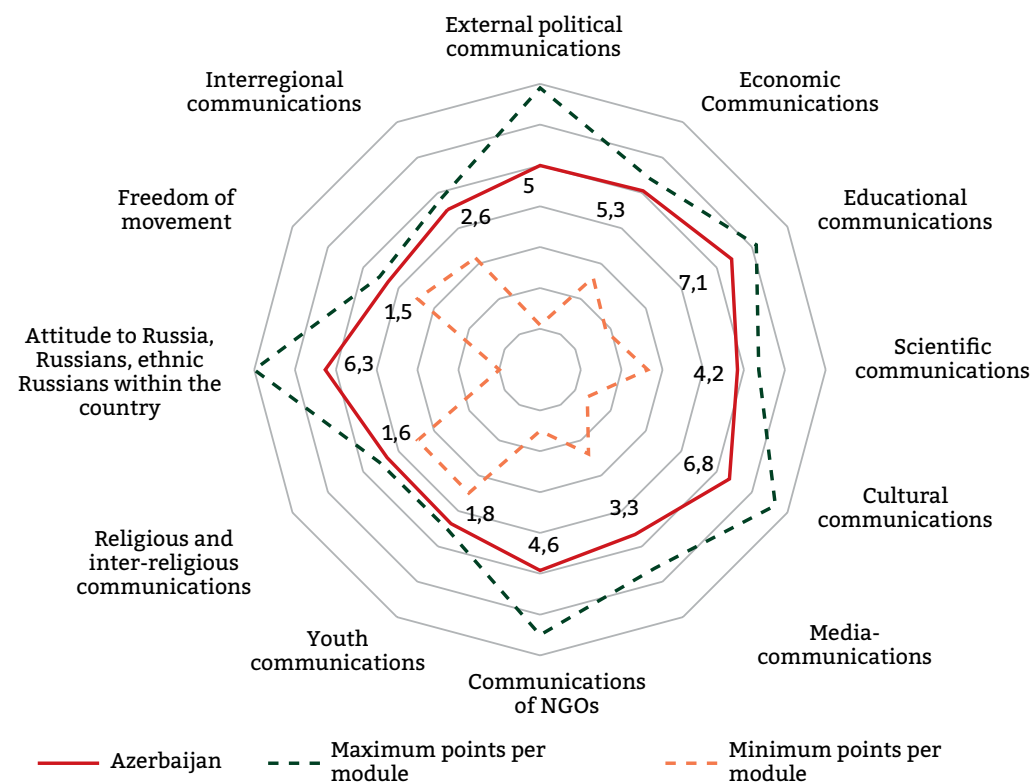
The norms and rules of communication that have developed in Abkhazia are in many ways similar to those in Russia and contribute to the formation of a common economic, informational, humanitarian, and political space of Abkhazia and Russia. Being one of the countries of the Black Sea region, Abkhazia would like to use this potential more profitably and build relations not only with Turkey, but also with the Black Sea countries of the EU. Trying to put this idea into force, Abkhazia comes across a firm position of non-recognition from the EU countries. The EU considers Abkhazia an "occupied territory", as well as South Ossetia, which poses a threat of external expansion onto the territory of these countries. Negotiations within the framework of the Geneva discussions still can't bring the desired results. Expanding the range of international communications is possible for Abkhazia within the framework of scientific and educational international projects, but this requires strengthening the material base and human resources of scientific and educational institutions of the country.

Figure 3. The profile of the friendliness of the communication regime of Abkhazia (in points)

The content analysis of statements and foreign policy documents of Abkhazia in 2023 shows an increase in anti-Western rhetoric. Changes in the communication regime in 2023 concerned strengthening control over NGOs with foreign financing, expanding the range of Russian-language media resources (portal "Abkhazia.rf", the newspaper "Bulletin of Abkhazia"), increasing opportunities for Russian-Abkhazian youth communications. In 2024, there is a high probability of greater integration with Russia and greater involvement in cooperation within the framework of the Union State of Russia and Belarus and other interstate formats with the participation of Russia

The friendliness profile of the communication regime of the Republic of Azerbaijan

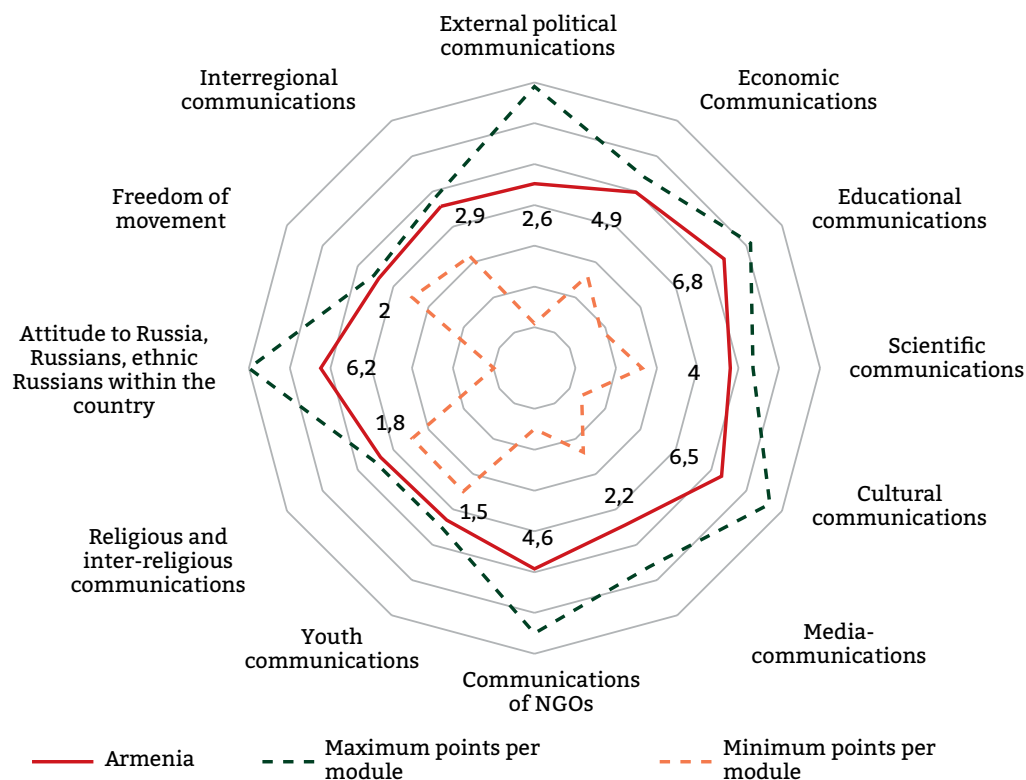
The Republic of Azerbaijan took the seventh place (50.1 points out of 100 possible) in the Rating of communication regime friendliness. The visualization of the friendliness profile in Figure 4 clearly demonstrates which communication groups in the country are

Figure 4. The friendliness profile of Azerbaijan's communication regime (in points)

granted the most favourable conditions. These are economic, interregional, religious, and youth communications. Freedom of movement is generally appreciated, although there were cases of restrictions on the entry for some persons of Armenian nationality.

The analysis of the situation in 2023 showed that Azerbaijan's communication regime is more synchronized with Turkey than with Russia. The comparison of Azerbaijan's cooperation projects and programs with those countries shows Azerbaijan's purely pragmatic policy and strategic allied relations with Turkey. The attitude towards Russia and Russians fluctuated in 2023 and in some cases was determined by the events in Nagorno Karabakh.

Foreign policy communications were the most dynamic and controversial. The regime of Azerbaijan's foreign policy communications began to change due to changes in the South Caucasus region. Azerbaijan's clear understanding of its place and role in the civilizational strategic partnership with Turkey, the countries of the region and the countries of the Turkic world gave ground to cultural, educational and informational communications in 2023. There is a high probability that regime changes will affect these areas of communication in 2024.

Figure 5. The friendliness profile of Armenia's communication regime (in points)

The friendliness profile of the communication regime in the Republic of Armenia

The Republic of Armenia took the tenth place (46 points out of 100 possible) in the Rating of friendliness of communication regimes. Armenia's communication regime shows the greatest dynamism of all post-Soviet countries. From fifth place in 2022, the country moved to tenth place in 2023, increasing unfriendliness in the field of foreign policy communications with Russia.

According to the results of monitoring in 2022, Armenia was classified as a friendly but fluctuating regime. We predicted the country's shift towards unfriendliness, while noting the absence of a deep "anti-Russia" background in the consciousness of the Armenian society. In 2023, the forecasts were confirmed.

The analysis of the documentation base and communication practices showed that there were cases of imposing restrictions in the sphere of cooperation through media, NGOs, and cultural communications in 2023. The control over international communications of Armenian universities was also strengthened. Situational outbursts of anti-Russian

sentiment in connection with the war in Nagorny Karabakh were noted. But deep negative, anti-Russian sentiments in the Armenian society were not detected.

Nevertheless, in 2023, Armenia became a vivid example of how the ruling elite can change the regime of communication even in spite of the public position by using the power resource. We are talking about the introduction of new rules for the communication regime to follow: blocking information in the top-rated media that do not comply with the government's position; restricting the work of Russian media which publish an alternative point of view; restricting the entry of public opinion leaders from Russia into the country; strenuous accusations of Russia of the problems in Armenia, which actually arose due to the mistakes and miscalculations of the Armenian authorities themselves. The conditions and opportunities for communication with Russia changed based on the narrow corporate concepts of the elites about the ideal vision of these communications. At the same time, the Armenian society showed whether it can quickly change its mind under the influence of massive information attacks.

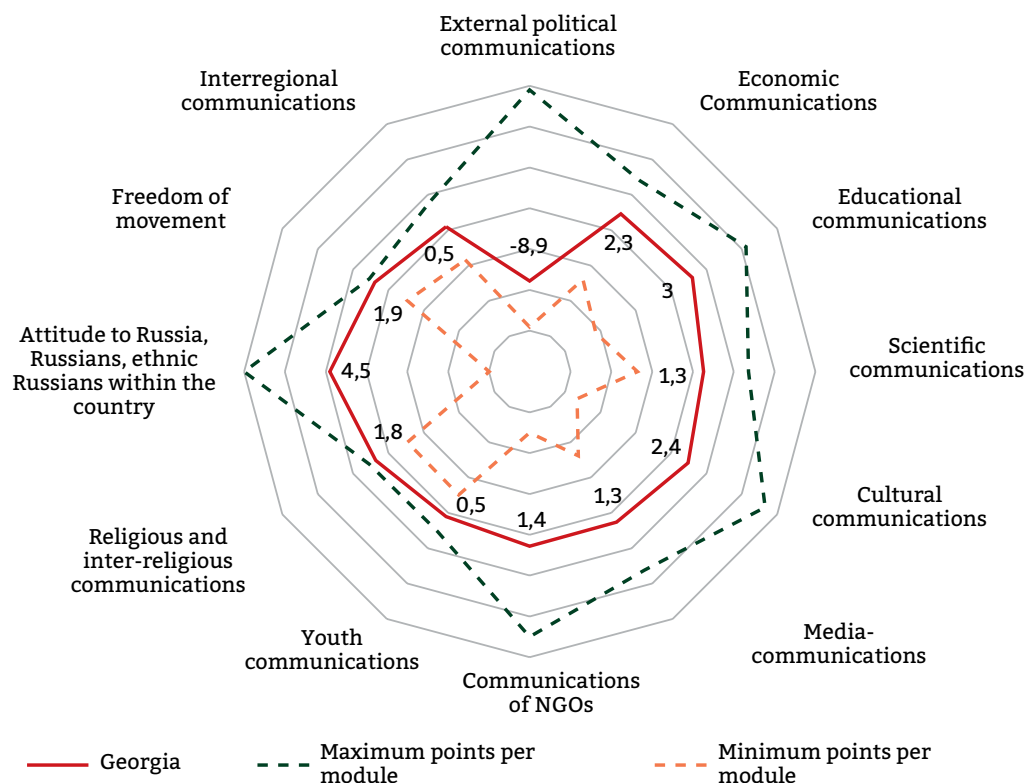
During the monitoring, it was revealed that Armenia is characterized by several splits: 1) the split between the society and the elite in assessing the correctness of the chosen foreign policy priorities; 2) the split within the society in their attitude to Russia and to the decisions of the Armenian government; 3) the split within business in assessing the economic benefits of the chosen foreign policy priorities; 4) the split within the security forces, as well as the split between the security forces and the political elite in assessing the real capacity (and the desire) of new foreign policy partners to ensure Armenia's security. It is highly likely that these splits will contribute to inconsistency and discrepancy of Armenia's communication regime in 2024.

The friendliness profile of the communication regime in Georgia

Georgia took the eleventh place (12 points out of 100 possible) in the Rating of friendliness of communication regimes. For the second year in a row, Georgia's communication regime demonstrates duality and cannot be completely classified as either friendly or unfriendly.

On the one hand, the country can be classified as unfriendly, since all types of communications are significantly limited due to the severance of diplomatic relations with Russia. Georgia remains committed to European integration, makes steps to align itself with NATO and condemns Russia's foreign and domestic policies. Georgia's anti-Russian rhetoric on international platforms only intensified in 2023.

On the other hand, trade and economic relations with Russia continued to develop in 2023 (despite Western recommendations to reduce the "dependence" of Georgian economy on Russia), transport and logistics projects were being discussed. Diaspora contacts and religious communications were not prohibited, and collaborative cultural projects appeared. Part of Georgian youth were interested in participating in Russian youth projects and receive education in Russian universities. In this regard, Georgia balances between unfriendly and friendly communication regimes and does not fully relate to either the first or the second.

Figure 6. The friendliness profile of Georgia's communication regime (in points)

As can be seen in Figure 6, foreign policy communications are in the negative field, the conditions are not favorable enough for the development of media communications and NGO communications. At the same time, the regime of economic and civil communications improved due to the increase in trade turnover, cooperation of business missions, launching of air flights, etc. There was observed a split in the assessments of the political and economic expediency in relations with Russia among the Georgian political elite and business. In this regard, the elections in Georgia in 2024 acquire particular importance for the dynamics of the communication regime of state and non-state actors in Russia and Georgia.

Discussion

The dynamics of communication regimes friendliness of the South Caucasus countries partially reflects the dynamics of all post-Soviet countries, but also has its own specifics. This specificity, which was frequently identified in 2023 monitoring, is associated

with “inter-state competition” [11], imbalance in the region [1, 6, 12], a number of territorial disputes and conflicts. All this reduces the possibility of developing mutually acceptable rules for cross-country communications. A number of special public expectations were formed regarding Russia, concerning its role in ensuring regional security, as well as its economic role for the countries of the South Caucasus region. Communication regimes are being formed and communications between state and non-state actors are being built with regard to these features.

Among the general trends in the development of communication regimes characteristic of all countries of the post-Soviet space (with varying degrees of depth and intensity), we note the following:

Firstly, new generations of citizens and elites have a peculiar worldview and it is becoming more and more obvious. They have no experience of life in the USSR, they have limited and politicized knowledge about the contribution of the Russian Empire and the USSR to the development of their countries, minimized information about the mutual exchange of different cultures and religions among the Soviet people and a stereotypical (based mainly on knowledge from the media, from expatriate communities and migrants) understanding of modern Russia. The new political elite of these countries, replacing the old one, are representatives of the same generation. They did not participate in the formation of the post-Soviet model of relations in the 1990s, they don't bear any responsibility for previously reached agreements and in some cases reconsider them, leaving their “mark in the history.” The year of 2023 became very significant in this aspect. The contradictions and inconsistencies of political decisions in a number of countries, the multi-vector nature bordering on confusion are largely due to the differences in worldviews of old and new generations, old and new elites.

Secondly, the growth of competition among cultural-civilizational worlds has been revealed. All countries of the South Caucasus continue to preserve elements of Russian civilization and the Soviet past (with a greater or lesser presence). However, the analysis of their state policies regarding cultural and linguistic environment, religion and historical memory shows trends towards integration in the formats of: 1) Russian civilization (South Ossetia, Abkhazia); 2) Turkic civilization (Azerbaijan); 3) Western civilization (Georgia, partly Armenia). A similar situation arose in the countries of Central Asia [7]. It manifests itself revealing the features of its own specifics in the countries of Eastern Europe as well.

Thirdly, strengthening of the mass media role in the legitimization practices of political actors, strengthening of the media mediation in public relations (including political ones) have been confirmed. The role of media in shaping perceptions of reality is increasing. In fact, we are talking about a special type of collective memory – media memory. The most striking example was the events in Nagorny Karabakh and the position of Russia presented differently in the media of Armenia, Azerbaijan and Russia itself and in the media of other countries. From a theoretical point of view, the concept of media memory developed in the research of D. S. Artamonov [3], is quite interesting for further analysis and forecasting of the friendliness of communication regimes.

Fourth, the growing importance of economic communications is obvious. Relations between the post-Soviet countries are becoming more pragmatic and rational, especially in conditions of scarcity of resources and investments, and restrictions to access markets in other countries. Economic projects and cooperation plans have strengthened ties with Russia in a number of countries and consolidated Russia's position as an economic partner. According to foreign experts (from the countries studied), in the near future it is economic communications that will determine the foreign policy vectors of post-Soviet countries. This is likely to be typical even for countries oriented towards military-political blocs hostile to Russia.

Conclusions

The communication regimes of the South Caucasus countries demonstrated a wide range of levels of friendliness in 2023. The formation of a single communication space between Russia and South Ossetia and Abkhazia, pragmatization of the communication regime in Azerbaijan and Georgia, a decrease in the level of friendliness and growth of irrational, elite-oriented decisions in Armenia (which was characterized by situational, emotional, corporate dominance of political decisions with extremely weak consideration of objective facts in 2023) became obvious.

The comparison of the results of monitoring communication regimes (2021-2023) in countries moving towards unfriendliness shows that the judgements of Russia and Russians is initiated not by the population, but by the ruling political elite. Political decisions are determined by corporate and personal interests, preferences and views of the elites on the "ideal type" of the country's political development. Initially, these decisions do not reflect the interests and needs of the people in these countries. Moreover, in most cases, they discriminate and abuse a number of social groups. But as the information pressure through the media increases, restrictions on communication with Russia and Russians are imposed; some people fall silent under the fear of persecution, and some turn radical. People try to flee from the countries if they have the opportunity. To erase historical memory at the individual level, to change people's worldview, the tools of cognitive wars are used, which involve not only the media, but also institutions of socialization.

Monitoring of 2023 showed that communication regimes (despite their socio-cultural foundations and the role of civil institutions in shaping the rules and conditions of communication) transform into the embodiment of political regime, infringing on people's rights to objective information, freedom of speech, movement, religion, historical memory, etc. Public institutions are playing an increasingly smaller role in shaping the norms and rules of communication, both within the country and between countries.

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Contribution of the author

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