

EXPERT
forum

THE POST- COMMUNIST TRANSITION FOR DUMMIES



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**How Putin & Xi Jinping lie about our recent past.
And why it matters for today's politics and the war in
Ukraine**

The great dictatorial and revanchist powers, Russia and China, are working hard to discredit the post-communist transition in Eastern Europe, which must be presented as a failure. Or, at any rate, as a colonialist project of the West, triggering negative sentiment rather than rational analysis. Heavy investment is being made in rewriting history, in propaganda that promotes "nostalgia" for a supposedly golden past, or in exaggerating the shortcomings of the new democracies. It is all part of a broader project to undermine the liberal international order with a view to returning to collectivist and authoritarian arrangements.

The Republic of Moldova and Romania, for which 2025 was an election year, are being systematically bombarded with such propaganda. It is intended to discredit the institutions built after 1990 and to mock the transition to democracy. Many flagship narratives fuel this propaganda effort, yet all converge on a single overarching theme: the Great Pro-Putin Narrative (GPPN), which serves as its ultimate goal.

This pamphlet traces how the post-communist transition, once celebrated as a historic opening, came to be systematically discredited. The assault targeted all three pillars of transformation: **politics**, the **economy** and **security**. What should have been remembered as the

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difficult birth of democracy, markets and integration into the Western security order was instead recast as decline, chaos and loss. At the centre of this inversion lies what we call “**nostalgia propaganda**”: the calculated manipulation of memory, crafted to turn disappointment into resentment and grievance into ideology.

Therefore, the four chapters that follow explore this process in turn, addressing politics, the economy, NATO, and the machinery of nostalgia agitprop itself.

1 DISCREDITING THE TRANSITION: FROM PLURALISM TO PARANOIA

The collapse of the communist regimes in 1989 triggered an extraordinary political experiment across Eastern Europe and the former Soviet Union. The euphoria of liberation quickly collided with the harsh realities of dismantling command economies and single-party rule. The early 1990s were a period of improvisation, mistakes, dashed hopes, and fragile beginnings. Yet three decades later, this transitional decade has become a contested memory. Moscow, with Beijing nodding approvingly, has transformed the hardships into a mythology of humiliation and betrayal – weaponised today to argue that democracy itself is chaos. This section examines how Russia's political transition has been distorted, and why that distortion matters.

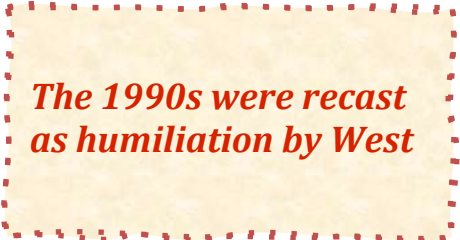
Valley of Tears and the Invention of Humiliation

In the early 1990s, every post-communist society stumbled through a valley of tears. Poland's 'shock therapy' meant unemployment and strikes; Hungary's transition unleashed a wave of corrupt privatizations; Romania, haunted by the violence of 1989, endured miners' riots that threatened fragile democratic institutions; Bulgaria fell into financial collapse so severe that wages were sometimes paid in eggs, bottles of oil, or plastic slippers. These hardships were not unique to Russia – they were the price of dismantling centrally planned economies and reorienting towards democracy.

Russia's difficulties – hyperinflation, crony privatization, fragile state institutions – fit into this wider regional story. But in the Kremlin's later retelling, these troubles were exceptional, the result of

foreign sabotage. In truth, Russia was not uniquely disadvantaged. With its size, educated workforce, and natural resources, it arguably had more room for manoeuvre than its neighbours.

Out of this common hardship, Russia fashioned a singular narrative: humiliation. In this story, the 1990s were a disaster not because transitions are inherently painful, but because the West imposed neoliberal shock therapy on a proud nation. Western advisers appear as villains, the Russian people as victims, and Putin as the saviour who restored dignity after 2000. This narrative – **let us call it the Great Pro-Putin Narrative (GPPN)** – has become orthodoxy inside Russia and has seeped even into Western commentary.



*The 1990s were recast
as humiliation by West*

Of all the myths surrounding Russia's political transition in the 1990s, none has proven more durable or more politically useful than this notion of national humiliation. According to this narrative, the decade after the Soviet Union's collapse was not an inevitable period of turbulence shared with other post-communist societies, but a uniquely tragic era of humiliation imposed upon Russia by the West. It is a story carefully cultivated and endlessly repeated: Yeltsin's Russia was chaotic, weak, and degraded; Putin's Russia restored dignity, order, and prosperity. Like all successful propaganda, the myth draws on fragments of truth, amplifies popular resentment, and repackages disappointment into a powerful tale of betrayal and revenge.

The Kremlin's version of the 1990s is built on three pillars: first, that the economic hardships of the transition were the fault of Western-imposed neoliberal reforms; second, that Russia was deliberately disrespected and marginalized in international politics; and third, that the West failed to offer a Marshall Plan for Russia,

thereby condemning it to collapse. These claims are not merely historical quibbles. They form the backbone of the (GPPN), which justifies both domestic authoritarianism and foreign aggression. To understand why the myth is so potent, one must contrast it with the facts of the decade.

Economically, the 1990s were undoubtedly painful. Inflation eroded savings, unemployment rose, and the visible inequalities of a new capitalist class angered ordinary citizens. Oligarchs amassed fortunes through the infamous loans-for-shares privatizations, while pensioners struggled to afford bread. For many Russians, the contrast between the rhetoric of democracy and the reality of daily survival seemed unbearable. These lived experiences gave the humiliation narrative emotional weight. Yet the idea that these outcomes were dictated from Washington or Brussels is historically inaccurate. The most consequential decisions of the decade – the pace of privatization, the management of state enterprises, the handling of fiscal crises – were made in Moscow by Russian leaders serving Russian interests. Western advisers played a marginal role. Reformist Egor Gaidar, often caricatured as an imported neoliberal zealot, was prime minister for a mere six months. For most of the decade, power rested with figures like Viktor Chernomyrdin and Yevgeny Primakov, Soviet-era insiders hardly committed to the free-market gospel. To portray Russia as a laboratory for Western neoliberal experiments is to mistake rhetoric for reality.

Politically, the claim of humiliation also falls apart under scrutiny. Far from ostracizing Russia, the West invested heavily in integrating it into the international order. Russia was invited into the G8, a signal of prestige far beyond its economic performance. It received billions of dollars in Western investment, not just in oil and gas but also in technology, consumer goods, and finance. Russian citizens travelled abroad with unprecedented freedom, no longer shadowed by the KGB.

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Western governments, far from treating Russia as a pariah, bent over backwards to cultivate goodwill. The notion of Russia as an isolated, mocked power in the 1990s is therefore historically false. It was welcomed – perhaps naively so – into global forums and given a seat at the table even when its domestic governance was chaotic.

The argument that the West should have offered a Marshall Plan for Russia is equally misleading. The historical analogy is poor: postwar Europe had defeated fascism, possessed functioning state institutions, and was under the threat of Soviet expansion. Russia in the 1990s was a nuclear power with immense natural resources and sovereignty over its own choices. To demand that others underwrite its transition is to deny Russian agency. Moreover, Western support was not absent. Billions in aid, loans, and technical assistance flowed into Russia, even if much of it was mismanaged or siphoned off by elites. The problem was not Western stinginess but Russian corruption and weak institutions.

So why has the humiliation narrative proven so sticky? Part of the answer lies in its political utility. For Putin, casting the 1990s as a decade of national debasement serves to delegitimize the fragile democratic openings of that period. If the 1990s were humiliation, then Yeltsin's experiments with pluralism, a free press, and civil society were mistakes to be erased. The narrative turns democracy itself into a synonym for chaos. Authoritarianism, by contrast, is recast as dignity. This framing allows Putin to centralize power while presenting himself as the restorer of Russian greatness. It also supplies a ready-made justification for aggression against neighbours: if Russia was humiliated in the 1990s, then it is entitled to redress, even by force.

The myth resonates beyond Russia's borders because it taps into universal anxieties about globalization, inequality, and national pride. In Europe and the United States, populists cite the Russian 1990s as a cautionary tale about the dangers of rapid liberalization. In China, the

humiliation narrative dovetails with Beijing's own trauma of 1989. Chinese propaganda routinely contrasts the supposed chaos of Russia's democracy with the stability of China's one-party system, arguing that liberalization leads only to collapse. In both Moscow and Beijing, victimhood becomes a governing ideology: the people are told they have suffered indignities at the hands of outsiders, and only strongmen can defend them.

At home, the humiliation narrative is hammered into Russian consciousness through state-controlled television, school textbooks, and political rhetoric. Talk shows feature endless comparisons between the 'wild 1990s' and the 'orderly 2000s,' with selective statistics and anecdotes to reinforce the point. Textbooks depict the Yeltsin era as a period of weakness and dependency, contrasted with Putin's revival of state power. In speeches, Putin himself frequently invokes the 1990s as a time of humiliation, positioning his rule as the antidote. Over time, the narrative has become so embedded that even critics sometimes accept its premises, debating not whether the 1990s were disastrous but whether they could have been managed differently.



Neighbours' reforms show how Russia squandered its chance

Yet stripping away the propaganda reveals a more complex reality. The 1990s were indeed chaotic, but they also saw genuine democratic openings. Independent media flourished, civil society organizations emerged, and competitive elections were held. Russians experienced freedoms unimaginable under Soviet rule. These gains were fragile and often overshadowed by corruption and hardship, but they represented real progress. To reduce the decade to humiliation is to erase these achievements and to deny that another path was possible. That erasure

is precisely the point: it clears the ground for authoritarian consolidation.

The invention of humiliation is therefore more than a historical misinterpretation. **It is a deliberate political project.** By recasting the 1990s as a national trauma inflicted by outsiders, the Kremlin absolves itself of responsibility, delegitimizes democracy, and justifies aggression. Beijing's amplification of this narrative adds global weight, presenting authoritarian order as a universal alternative to Western democracy. The myth is powerful because it simplifies, emotionalizes, and weaponizes history. Confronting it requires not only factual rebuttals but also a reassertion of the dignity of 1989: the courage of citizens who dismantled totalitarianism and chose freedom, however messy its aftermath.

The Myth of Neoliberal Dictatorship

Closely tied to the humiliation narrative is another persistent myth: that Russia's 1990s were dictated by a clique of Western-backed neoliberals who imposed radical economic reforms with catastrophic results. This story has a simple structure. A handful of Russian reformers, acting under the influence of Washington, embraced 'shock therapy' that destroyed the Russian economy, impoverished ordinary people, and enriched a corrupt few. By the end of the decade, the country was on its knees, a victim of neoliberal dogma. Putin's rise, according to this account, marked a return to sanity: the restoration of the state after the neoliberal disaster.

It is an appealing tale, particularly for audiences predisposed to see neoliberalism as a global villain. It resonates with Western critics of globalization as much as with Russian conservatives. But like most propaganda, it rests on exaggeration and distortion. The reality of Russia's 1990s is more complex, and far less convenient for those who use the neoliberal myth to discredit democracy.

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Let us begin with the supposed architects of the neoliberal experiment. The name most often invoked is Egor Gaidar, the economist and brief prime minister who introduced market reforms in late 1991. In Russian political folklore, Gaidar has become a symbol of 'wild capitalism,' a zealot who sold out the nation at the behest of the West. Yet the facts do not support this caricature. Gaidar was prime minister for barely six months. His reforms, focused on price liberalization and fiscal stabilization, were chaotic but unavoidable in a country emerging from decades of central planning. Inflation was already spiralling out of control; shortages had hollowed out Soviet-era supply chains. To blame one man, or even one policy package, for the economic turmoil of the decade is historically absurd.



Blame was shifted from domestic elites to "neoliberalism"

More importantly, after Gaidar's brief tenure, Russia was governed by men who were anything but neoliberal crusaders. Viktor Chernomyrdin, prime minister from 1992 to 1998, was a classic Soviet insider. He had spent his career in the oil and gas sector and became famous for his wry remark: 'We wanted the best, but it turned out as usual.' Chernomyrdin's instincts were pragmatic, not ideological. He presided over a system of oligarchic privatizations and half-hearted reforms, driven less by neoliberal dogma than by the raw scramble for power and resources in a collapsing state. His successor, Yevgeny Primakov, was even more openly skeptical of the West. A career diplomat and intelligence insider, he leaned toward statist economics and geopolitical confrontation. To label such figures as neoliberals is to stretch the term beyond recognition.

The neoliberal myth also obscures the agency of Russian society. Privatization in the 1990s was not imposed at gunpoint by foreigners;

it was negotiated, manipulated, and often corrupted by domestic elites. The infamous loans-for-shares program, which allowed oligarchs to acquire vast industrial assets in exchange for financing Yeltsin's government, was conceived and executed by Russians. Western advisers may have cheered it on, but they did not design or implement the scheme. To blame neoliberalism is to exonerate the Russian political class of its own responsibility. It is to suggest that Russia was a passive object, when in reality it was an active agent – albeit one whose elites chose self-enrichment over institution-building.

Statistics further complicate the myth. Russia's economy did contract sharply in the 1990s, with GDP falling by more than 40 percent between 1991 and 1998. But so did the economies of many other post-communist states undergoing transition. Poland, Hungary, Romania, and Bulgaria all experienced severe recessions, double-digit unemployment, and widespread social pain. The difference is that these countries recovered more quickly, thanks to political choices that anchored reforms in the prospect of European Union accession. Russia, by contrast, lurched from crisis to crisis, not because neoliberalism was imposed, but because reforms were inconsistent, institutions weak, and corruption endemic.

The myth also downplays the structural disadvantages Russia inherited from the Soviet system. Unlike Poland or the Czech Republic, which had relatively diversified economies and closer ties to Western Europe, Russia inherited a bloated military-industrial complex, decrepit infrastructure, and an economy heavily dependent on raw material extraction. Transitioning such a system to a market economy was bound to be painful. Western economists at the time debated whether gradual reform would have been preferable to shock therapy, but all agreed that there was no easy path. To reduce the complexity of Russia's challenges to 'neoliberal imposition' is not analysis; it is scapegoating.

Another striking feature of the neoliberal myth is its selective memory. Critics point to the misery of pensioners and the conspicuous consumption of oligarchs as proof of neoliberal failure. But they overlook the genuine, if fragile, gains of the 1990s. Independent media flourished, political competition existed, and Russians experienced freedoms unimaginable under Soviet rule. These openings were messy, but they were real. By erasing them, the neoliberal myth aligns with the humiliation narrative in discrediting democracy itself. If the 1990s were nothing but neoliberal disaster, then Putin's authoritarian consolidation appears not only justified but necessary.

The international appeal of the myth lies in its versatility. For Russian nationalists, it is a **story of betrayal by Western advisers**. For Western critics of globalization, it is a parable of **neoliberal hubris**. For Chinese propagandists, it is a cautionary tale: **liberalization leads to chaos, while one-party rule delivers stability**. Each audience finds in the myth a reflection of its own anxieties. This flexibility makes it a potent ideological tool, able to bridge ideological divides while reinforcing authoritarian arguments.

Yet the most damning indictment of the neoliberal myth is empirical. If neoliberalism was the decisive factor, why did Russia fare worse than countries that adopted similar reforms? Why did Poland, after a painful start, become a European success story, while Russia stagnated? Why did the Baltic states, smaller and poorer, manage to build functioning democracies, while Russia slid back into authoritarianism? The answers lie not in neoliberal ideology but in governance, institutions, and political choices. Russia's elite chose corruption over reform, centralization over pluralism, and nostalgia over accountability. That, not neoliberalism, explains its trajectory.

The myth of neoliberal dictatorship thus serves a clear political purpose. It shifts blame away from domestic elites, delegitimizes democratic reforms, and reinforces the narrative that only strong

centralized power can protect the nation. It is a myth eagerly propagated by the Kremlin, amplified by Beijing, and embraced by audiences eager to see neoliberalism as a universal villain. But myths, however useful, are not history. The reality of the 1990s is more complex, less comforting, and ultimately more revealing: Russia was not the victim of neoliberal dogma, but of its own elites' failure to build accountable institutions. That is the real tragedy of the decade.

Yeltsin's Russia in Context

One of the most effective ways to puncture the Kremlin's self-pitying narrative is to compare Russia's trajectory with that of its neighbors. All post-communist states faced steep challenges in the 1990s: collapsing industries, rising unemployment, and fragile political institutions. Yet their outcomes diverged dramatically. Some countries endured the pain, reformed their institutions, and eventually prospered. Others muddled through with partial reforms, remaining trapped in cycles of corruption and stagnation. Russia, despite its immense advantages, fell into the latter category. To understand why, it helps to examine a few case studies.

Poland offers perhaps the clearest counterexample. In 1990, its economy was a shambles: inflation was above 600 percent, shortages plagued consumers, and the country was burdened with foreign debt. Finance minister Leszek Balcerowicz introduced a radical stabilization program known as 'shock therapy.' Prices were liberalized, subsidies slashed, and state-owned enterprises exposed to competition. The immediate impact was brutal: unemployment soared, and strikes erupted across the country. Yet the long-term outcome was strikingly positive. By the late 1990s, Poland was growing faster than any other post-communist state. Its integration into the European Union anchored reforms, reassured investors, and opened access to markets.

Today, Poland's GDP per capita is more than double that of Russia, despite starting from a weaker position.

Hungary followed a somewhat different path. In the 1990s, it privatized aggressively, often to foreign investors. This process was riddled with corruption, but it also brought capital and technology into the country. Hungary's democratic institutions, while imperfect, provided some checks on elite predation. By the early 2000s, Hungary had secured EU and NATO membership. Although recent years have seen democratic backsliding under Viktor Orbán, the trajectory of the 1990s was one of integration and reform. Hungary's experience demonstrates that corruption during transition did not inevitably doom a country to authoritarian regression; political choices made later mattered more.

Romania's path was perhaps the most tumultuous. After the violent overthrow of Nicolae Ceaușescu in 1989, the country lurched between fragile reform and violent backlash. The miners' riots of the early 1990s, in which thousands of miners descended on Bucharest to demand political concessions, threatened to derail democratic consolidation. Economic reforms were halting, inflation high, and corruption endemic. Yet Romania persisted. The lure of European Union membership eventually provided a framework for reform. By the 2000s, EU accession negotiations locked in institutional changes that curbed the worst excesses of corruption and created momentum for modernization. Romania's GDP today is three times higher than neighboring Moldova's, a testament to the long-term payoff of integration.

Bulgaria, meanwhile, experienced one of the most catastrophic transitions. In the mid-1990s, its banking system collapsed, wiping out savings and plunging the population into poverty. Inflation hit 2,000 percent, and the economy shrank by more than a third. At one point, wages were so worthless that employers paid workers in eggs, sugar,

or cooking oil. Yet even Bulgaria managed to stabilize, largely thanks to pressure from the International Monetary Fund and the EU. By pegging its currency to the deutsche mark and later joining the EU, Bulgaria slowly clawed its way back. The process was painful, but it underscored the possibility of recovery even from near-total collapse.

Then there were the Baltic states – Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania. These small countries faced enormous obstacles: tiny domestic markets, dependence on Soviet-era trade links, and vulnerable geopolitics. Yet they moved quickly to liberalize, privatize, and align with Western institutions. Estonia, in particular, embraced digital governance, becoming a pioneer in e-government and technology. By the mid-2000s, the Baltics had joined both NATO and the EU. Their economies, though initially battered, rebounded spectacularly. Today, Estonia's GDP per capita surpasses that of Russia. The Baltic example demolishes the idea that the post-communist transition was inevitably disastrous; it shows that with strong institutions and clear political choices, success was possible.

Against this backdrop, Russia's experience looks less like a tragedy imposed from outside and more like a squandered opportunity. Unlike Poland or the Baltics, Russia had enormous natural resources, a large educated workforce, and global geopolitical clout. Yet it failed to create stable institutions or to anchor itself in Western structures. Instead, it oscillated between half-hearted reforms and elite predation. When the 1998 financial crisis struck, the ruble collapsed, banks failed, and millions lost their savings. This trauma cemented the perception that the 1990s were a lost decade. But the loss was not inevitable; it was the product of choices – choices that other countries facing similar hardships made differently.

What do these case studies reveal? First, that the pain of transition was universal, not unique to Russia. Second, that recovery and success were possible, given consistent reforms and institutional anchors.

Third, that Russia's failure was less about neoliberal dogma and more about governance. Where others used the prospect of EU and NATO integration to lock in reforms, Russia resisted, preferring sovereignty without accountability. That sovereignty was quickly captured by oligarchs and, later, by Putin's centralized regime. In short, Russia's tragedy was not neoliberalism, not Western betrayal, but the unwillingness of its own elites to build a functioning democracy and market economy.

The comparative lens also undermines the propaganda value of the 1990s. If Russia's hardships were imposed by the West, why did Poland, Romania, and the Baltics – also subject to Western advice – emerge stronger? If neoliberalism was the culprit, why did other countries that pursued similar reforms achieve success? The Kremlin avoids these questions because they expose the myth at the heart of its narrative. Russia's 1990s were not a humiliation imposed from abroad, but a squandered chance for renewal, lost through corruption, weak institutions, and the seductions of authoritarian nostalgia.

The Curse of Natural Resources

Among the many factors that shaped Russia's troubled political transition, few are as decisive – or as misunderstood – as the role of natural resources. To outside observers, Russia's inheritance of vast oil and gas reserves seemed like an unqualified advantage. Surely a country so rich in hydrocarbons, metals, and other raw materials could finance its recovery, modernize its industries, and build prosperity for its people. Yet in practice, the very abundance of resources became a curse. Instead of fostering development, it entrenched corruption, undermined accountability, and gave the Russian elite both the means and the incentive to avoid building strong democratic institutions.

This paradox is well known in development theory. Economists speak of the '**resource curse**' – the tendency for resource-rich

countries to suffer from poor governance, authoritarian politics, and economic volatility. The logic is simple. When governments can finance themselves through resource rents, they become less dependent on taxation. Without taxation, citizens have less leverage to demand accountability. Instead of a social contract – taxes in exchange for services – politics becomes a clientelist game, with rulers distributing resource revenues to buy loyalty.

Oil wealth entrenched corruption, not democracy

Meanwhile, resource rents create vast opportunities for corruption, since a few key decisions about licenses, pipelines, or export quotas can generate fortunes for insiders. Russia in the 1990s was a textbook example of this dynamic.

The Soviet Union had already left Russia with a heavily resource-dependent economy. Oil and gas exports provided the hard currency that kept the system afloat in the 1970s and 1980s. When world oil prices collapsed in the mid-1980s, the Soviet Union entered a fiscal crisis that hastened its demise. The newly independent Russia inherited the same dependency. Throughout the 1990s, its budget and foreign currency reserves rose and fell with the global price of oil. When prices dipped, revenues collapsed, forcing the state to print money or borrow heavily. The 1998 financial crisis, in which the ruble devalued and banks collapsed, was triggered in large part by a fall in commodity prices. Instead of cushioning the transition, resources amplified volatility.

Resources also distorted Russia's politics. Control over oil and gas became the ultimate prize in the post-Soviet scramble for assets. Privatization of resource companies in the 1990s was notoriously corrupt, creating a new class of oligarchs whose fortunes depended on political connections. These oligarchs, in turn, wielded immense

influence over politics, financing campaigns, and shaping policy to protect their interests. The loans-for-shares scheme epitomized this dynamic: in exchange for financing Yeltsin's struggling government, a handful of insiders acquired stakes in oil giants at knockdown prices. The public saw a few men become billionaires overnight, while their own living standards stagnated. The resentment this generated was fertile ground for the later narrative of humiliation.

When Putin came to power, he did not dismantle this oligarchic system – he restructured it. The most independent oligarchs, like Mikhail Khodorkovsky of Yukos, were crushed. The rest were brought to heel, forced to pledge loyalty in exchange for continued wealth. The result was not the elimination of corruption but its centralization. The resource rents that had once flowed chaotically through the oligarchic system were now channelled through the state, controlled by Putin's inner circle of siloviki. The Kremlin used these revenues to consolidate power at home and project influence abroad. In this sense, the resource curse was not overcome; it was weaponized.

The impact of resources on Russia's political development is best understood by comparison. Consider Norway and the United Kingdom – both resource-rich countries, but ones that discovered oil and gas after building strong democratic institutions. In those contexts, resources were managed transparently, revenues invested in sovereign wealth funds, and citizens continued to exercise accountability through taxation. In Russia, by contrast, resources landed in the lap of a fragile state with weak institutions. The result was predictable: instead of strengthening democracy, resources undermined it.

Another aspect of the resource curse is the temptation of populism. Because resource rents can finance the state, leaders often promise citizens prosperity without taxation. In Russia, this took the form of cheap energy at home, subsidies for favoured industries, and

periodic wage increases for state employees. These measures bought temporary loyalty but discouraged structural reform. Why diversify the economy or build institutions when oil money can paper over the cracks? The long-term consequence was stagnation. As soon as oil prices plateaued or fell, the system's fragility was exposed.

In the international arena, resources gave Russia leverage but also fostered paranoia. Control over gas pipelines to Europe became a tool of foreign policy, allowing Moscow to bully neighbours with threats of supply cuts. Domestically, resource wealth fuelled the belief that Russia was entitled to great power status. When revenues flowed, the Kremlin projected confidence; when they shrank, it lashed out. This volatility contributed to the sense of grievance that underpins Putin's foreign policy. The humiliation narrative thus has a material foundation: not Western imposition, but the boom-and-bust cycle of resource dependence.

It is striking that none of Russia's neighbours enjoyed such a resource cushion, yet many managed transitions more successfully. Poland, the Baltics, and Romania had to raise taxes, build functioning revenue services, and reform their institutions. Citizens, paying taxes, demanded accountability in return. The absence of easy rents forced governments to take reforms seriously. Russia, by contrast, could always fall back on oil and gas. This easy money delayed institution-building and entrenched corruption. The very thing that seemed like an advantage – resource wealth – proved to be a liability.

The curse of resources also helps explain the durability of Putinism. Oil and gas revenues provided the fiscal base for his social contract: rising living standards in exchange for political passivity. During the oil boom of the 2000s, many Russians genuinely felt their lives improve, and they credited Putin. This reinforced the narrative that he had rescued Russia from the chaos of the 1990s. But when growth slowed after 2013, and especially after sanctions in 2014, the

same resource dependence revealed its fragility. Without diversification, Russia was vulnerable to shocks. Rather than admit failure, the Kremlin doubled down on grievance, turning the humiliation narrative outward in the form of aggression against neighbours.

In sum, the resource curse is central to understanding Russia's political transition. It explains why corruption was so entrenched, why institutions remained weak, and why authoritarianism triumphed over democracy. It also reveals the hollowness of the Kremlin's propaganda. The hardships of the 1990s were not the result of neoliberal imposition or Western humiliation, but of the structural distortions created by resource dependence and the choices of Russian elites. By ignoring this, the humiliation narrative absolves those elites of responsibility. By amplifying it, Beijing reinforces its own claim that authoritarianism, not democracy, delivers stability. The truth is simpler: resources bought time, but they also bought complacency. In politics, as in economics, there is no free lunch – even when oil and gas seem to pay the bill.

Democratic Regression, Freely Chosen

Perhaps the most unsettling truth about Russia's political transition is that its democratic regression was not imposed from outside, nor inevitable. It was, in significant measure, freely chosen. The early 1990s were marked by genuine democratic openings. Independent newspapers flourished, political parties competed, and civic associations emerged. Russians could, for the first time in generations, criticize their leaders without fear of the gulag. These were fragile gains, often overshadowed by economic hardship and corruption, but they were real. To suggest that democracy never took root is to erase the genuine pluralism of the Yeltsin era. Yet within a decade, most of these freedoms had vanished. The regression was

gradual, but deliberate – and it was accepted by much of Russian society.

The Yeltsin years illustrate both the promise and the perils of early democratization. The 1991 presidential election, in which Boris Yeltsin triumphed with popular legitimacy, was a watershed moment. For the first time, a Russian leader came to power through a free vote. The parliament, the State Duma, became a forum for noisy political debate. Television channels hosted critical talk shows, newspapers investigated corruption scandals, and political satire flourished.



Russians traded freedoms for Putin's stability

There was a sense, however tentative, that Russia might join the community of democracies. At the same time, the weaknesses were glaring. Parties were fragmented, institutions weak, and corruption endemic. The constitutional crisis of 1993, when Yeltsin ordered tanks to fire on the White House, exposed the fragility of the system. Chechnya's brutal wars eroded trust in the government. By the end of the decade, many Russians had come to associate democracy not with freedom, but with chaos and weakness.

This disenchantment was not unique to Russia. Across Eastern Europe, publics grew weary of politicians' squabbling and corruption scandals. In Romania, violent miners' protests nearly toppled governments. In Bulgaria, financial collapse discredited political parties. In Hungary, scandals over privatization eroded trust. But the crucial difference is that in Central Europe and the Baltics, the prospect of European Union accession anchored reforms and reassured citizens that short-term pain would yield long-term gain. Russia lacked such an anchor. Its elites never sought to bind themselves to democratic institutions beyond their borders. Without an external framework,

disillusionment with democracy easily morphed into nostalgia for strong leadership.

When Putin assumed power in 2000, he did not abolish democracy overnight. Instead, he carefully dismantled it, piece by piece, while cultivating the narrative that the 1990s were a disaster best forgotten. Independent television channels were brought under state control. Oligarchs who resisted were punished, while loyalists prospered. Elections continued, but they became rituals rather than real contests, with opposition figures marginalized or barred from participation. Civil society organizations were harassed, foreign NGOs expelled, and critical journalists intimidated. Each step was justified in the name of restoring order, fighting corruption, or defending sovereignty. And each step was accepted – or at least tolerated – by a public weary of uncertainty.

The demonization of the 1990s was central to this process. By presenting the decade as chaos, Putin positioned himself as the antidote. The implicit message was simple: democracy equals disorder, while authoritarianism equals stability. Russians who had suffered through unpaid wages, collapsing pensions, and corrupt privatizations were receptive to this argument. For many, the price of freedom seemed too high; better to have predictability under a strong leader than the uncertainties of pluralism. This sentiment was not manufactured entirely from above; it reflected genuine preferences. But it was skillfully manipulated by the Kremlin, which provided a selective memory of the 1990s and exaggerated the stability of the 2000s.

The tragedy is that Russia's democratic regression was not inevitable. The 1990s revealed real potential for pluralism. There were opposition parties, independent media, and vibrant civic activism. Corruption was rampant, but corruption alone does not preclude democracy: see Italy or India. What doomed Russia was the absence of

institutional consolidation. The judiciary remained weak, the bureaucracy unreformed, and federal structures unstable. Without strong institutions, democracy was vulnerable to backsliding. Putin exploited this vacuum, offering stability in exchange for freedom. The public, exhausted by crisis, largely accepted the bargain.

One of the ironies of Russia's regression is that it occurred not during a period of collapse, but during recovery. The oil boom of the 2000s provided rising living standards, allowing Putin to deliver on his promise of stability. Freedoms were surrendered not under duress, but in exchange for prosperity. This makes Russia's case particularly instructive: democratic backsliding does not require coercion if publics are willing to trade liberty for material comfort. It also underscores the hollowness of the humiliation narrative. If Russia's democracy was doomed by Western betrayal, why did Russians themselves accept its dismantling in exchange for consumer goods and rising wages? The answer is uncomfortable but necessary: Russians made choices, and those choices had consequences.

The comparison with Ukraine is telling. In the 1990s and 2000s, Ukraine faced similar challenges: corruption, oligarchy, and weak institutions. Yet popular mobilization repeatedly resisted authoritarian consolidation, from the Orange Revolution in 2004 to the Maidan protests in 2013–14. Ukraine's democratic culture, however fragile, prevented the entrenchment of Putin-style authoritarianism. Russia experienced no such mass mobilizations. Instead, disillusionment with democracy curdled into acceptance of authoritarianism. This divergence underscores that history was not predetermined; choices mattered.

Beijing has eagerly amplified Russia's story of democratic regression. Chinese propaganda points to the chaos of Russia's 1990s as proof that political liberalization leads to collapse. By contrast, the Chinese Communist Party claims that its model – authoritarian politics

paired with economic growth – delivers stability and prosperity. In this framing, Russia's regression is not a failure but a return to sanity, confirming the wisdom of one-party rule. For audiences in the developing world, this argument is seductive: it suggests that democracy is not universal, but a Western fetish, ill-suited to societies that value order over freedom.

The Russian experience therefore carries lessons beyond its borders. It demonstrates how fragile democratic openings can be, how quickly freedoms can erode when institutions are weak, and how easily publics can be persuaded to trade liberty for stability. It also shows how authoritarian regimes weaponize history to delegitimize democracy elsewhere. By portraying the 1990s as humiliation, chaos, and neoliberal dictatorship, the Kremlin erases the genuine pluralism of that decade and justifies authoritarianism. Beijing reinforces the message, using Russia as a cautionary tale to argue against democratization. Together, they present a powerful counter-narrative to 1989: that the fall of communism was not liberation but disaster, and that the real path to dignity lies in obedience.

Confronting this narrative requires honesty. The 1990s were messy, painful, and often corrupt. But they were also a moment of freedom, creativity, and possibility. To remember only the chaos is to accept the Kremlin's propaganda. To acknowledge both the failures and the achievements is to reclaim the dignity of that decade, and to remind societies today that democracy is never guaranteed – it must be nurtured, defended, and demanded.

Beijing's Parallel Trauma

If Russia's narrative of the 1990s revolves around humiliation, China's trauma is rooted in 1989. The Tiananmen Square massacre, in which the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) crushed a mass pro-democracy movement, remains one of the most sensitive taboos in

modern Chinese history. The official line is silence; the event has been scrubbed from textbooks, media, and the Chinese internet. Yet beneath the censorship lies a clear lesson the CCP has drawn from 1989: political liberalization is dangerous, destabilizing, and ultimately suicidal for one-party rule. In this sense, Tiananmen is Beijing's equivalent of Russia's 1990s: a trauma rewritten as justification for authoritarianism.

Chinese propaganda since 1989 has consistently portrayed democratization as chaos. The fall of Eastern European communist regimes is depicted not as liberation but as collapse. Textbooks describe the dissolution of the Soviet Union as a tragedy of betrayal and weakness, contrasting it with China's resilience. State media emphasize the supposed chaos that followed in Russia and other post-Soviet states: economic collapse, corruption, and foreign domination. The implicit message is clear: China was wise to suppress dissent, because democratization leads to humiliation.

This narrative dovetails neatly with the Kremlin's own mythology. When Russian officials decry the 'catastrophe' of the 1990s, Chinese commentators nod in agreement. When Beijing describes Eastern Europe's transitions as Western-engineered disasters, Moscow amplifies the message. Together, they weave a shared anti-1989 discourse: democracy is not universal but a Western imposition, unsuited to 'civilizational states' like Russia and China. Authoritarianism, by contrast, is presented as authentic, stable, and dignified.

The CCP's hostility to 1989 is not only historical but existential. The fall of the Berlin Wall and the Velvet Revolutions demonstrated that authoritarian regimes could crumble overnight. For Beijing, this was a terrifying revelation. The massacre in Tiananmen was therefore not just a tactical decision but a strategic doctrine: never allow political liberalization to challenge Party rule. Every anniversary of 1989, every

whisper of dissent, is treated as a threat to regime survival. By aligning itself with Russia's anti-1989 propaganda, China reinforces its own narrative of survival against Western plots.

China's amplification of Russia's humiliation story also serves its foreign policy. In the global South, Beijing portrays liberal democracy as a tool of Western dominance.

The chaos of Russia's 1990s is invoked as proof that democratization leads to dependency, while China's own model – authoritarian rule plus economic growth – is presented as the superior path. This message resonates in parts of



*China recasts
Tiananmen drama to
discredit democracy*

Africa, Asia, and Latin America, where leaders resent Western conditionality and admire China's rapid development. By retelling Russia's 1990s as neoliberal catastrophe, Beijing not only validates its own path but offers it as a template to others.

Internally, the CCP has cultivated a narrative of victimhood that mirrors Russia's. Both regimes speak of '**centuries of humiliation**' at the hands of foreign powers. For China, this refers to the Opium Wars and the 'unequal treaties' of the nineteenth century; for Russia, it is the alleged humiliation of the 1990s. Both narratives serve the same purpose: to rally citizens around the flag, delegitimize dissent, and portray authoritarian rulers as defenders of national dignity. By aligning these victimhood stories, Moscow and Beijing strengthen each other's propaganda.

The alliance is also tactical. Beijing rarely comments on Russia's domestic politics, but it consistently echoes the Kremlin's criticism of Western democracy promotion. In return, Moscow supports Beijing's claim that the 1989 massacre was necessary to preserve stability. Both

regimes thus shield each other from international criticism: Russia defends China's suppression of dissent; China defends Russia's aggression against neighbours. Their shared hostility to 1989 – whether in Tiananmen Square or in Eastern Europe – is the ideological glue of their partnership.

There is also a generational element to Beijing's trauma. For the Chinese leadership, many of whom were mid-level officials in 1989, the memory of Tiananmen is personal. They saw colleagues defect to the protesters, institutions wobble, and the regime come perilously close to collapse. The crackdown saved their careers and cemented their worldview. To this day, the lesson informs their policies: tight censorship, surveillance, and zero tolerance for dissent. Russia's humiliation narrative reinforces their conviction that any hint of pluralism must be crushed early.

For younger Chinese, who have no memory of 1989, the lesson is taught indirectly. School curricula highlight **the dangers of 'color revolutions'** abroad, warning that foreign powers seek to destabilize China as they did the Soviet Union. Documentaries dwell on the chaos of post-Soviet Russia, contrasting it with China's prosperity. Social media is tightly policed to erase alternative narratives. The effect is to naturalize authoritarianism: it is not a regrettable necessity, but the only path to stability.

When Moscow and Beijing jointly promote this anti-1989 worldview abroad, they do more than rewrite history. They offer a rival model of modernity. Instead of liberal democracy, they propose **civilizational authoritarianism**: tailored to local traditions, resistant to Western influence, and justified by historical traumas. For vulnerable democracies in Eastern Europe, this propaganda is corrosive. For authoritarian-leaning leaders in the developing world, it is inspiring. Together, Russia and China are not just revising the past; they are reshaping the future by delegitimizing democracy itself.

Beijing's parallel trauma therefore matters far beyond China. It reinforces Russia's myths, amplifies anti-democratic narratives, and provides ideological cover for authoritarian regimes worldwide. **Just as the Kremlin has turned the 1990s into a story of humiliation, the CCP has turned 1989 into a lesson in obedience.** Both narratives converge on the same message: democracy is dangerous, order is priceless, and history must be rewritten to prove it.

Why the Narrative Matters

It would be tempting to dismiss Russia's myth of humiliation and China's anti-1989 trauma as mere propaganda: distortions aimed at domestic audiences, not serious contributions to historical understanding. But to underestimate their significance would be a grave mistake. These narratives matter profoundly, not only for the citizens of Russia and China but for the international system as a whole. They are not innocent misrememberings. **They are strategic weapons in a global contest over legitimacy, power, and the meaning of democracy.**

First, the narratives matter because they shape domestic politics. In Russia, the story of the 'wild 1990s' as humiliation provides the foundation for Putin's legitimacy. Every election, every anniversary, every major speech includes references to the chaos of that decade. State television routinely juxtaposes images of empty shelves, strikes, and unpaid wages with footage of Putin presiding over orderly parades and military exercises. The contrast is hammered home: before Putin, humiliation; after Putin, dignity. By controlling the memory of the 1990s, the Kremlin controls the terms of political debate. No opposition figure can campaign on a return to democracy without being tarred as a revivalist of chaos.

In China, the narrative of 1989 as a near-death experience for the Communist Party justifies repression in perpetuity. Surveillance,

censorship, and the crushing of dissent are not presented as unfortunate necessities but as lessons learned from history. Without them, the argument goes, China would collapse like the Soviet Union or fragment like Yugoslavia. This narrative has been remarkably successful at inoculating Chinese citizens against democratic aspirations. Generations have grown up believing that pluralism equals instability. The silence around Tiananmen is itself eloquent: an entire society has been taught to forget, and in forgetting, to accept authoritarian permanence.

Second, these narratives matter because they shape foreign policy. Russia's grievance against the West is not only rhetorical but operational. By casting NATO enlargement, EU expansion, and democracy promotion as extensions of the 1990s humiliation, the Kremlin legitimizes aggression against neighbours. The annexation of Crimea in 2014 and the invasion of Ukraine in 2022 were justified in part as responses to the 'betrayal' of the post-Cold War settlement. The 1990s, far from being a closed chapter, are kept alive as an open wound, one that demands redress. Beijing, for its part, uses the memory of 1989 to resist international pressure on human rights, portraying criticism as neo-colonial meddling. When Western governments call for democracy in Hong Kong or Xinjiang, Chinese officials invoke the chaos of Russia's 1990s as a cautionary tale: foreign influence brings only disorder.

Third, the narratives matter because they travel. Russian and Chinese propaganda does not stop at their borders. It is exported through media outlets, cultural diplomacy, and online influence campaigns. In Eastern Europe, Russian disinformation plays on nostalgia for stability, depicting the 1990s as proof that democracy fails. In Africa and Latin America, Chinese officials showcase Russia's 'neoliberal disaster' alongside China's own economic success, arguing that authoritarian development is a superior path. These stories

resonate because they exploit real grievances: inequality, corruption, disillusionment with democracy. They provide a ready-made explanation: democracy is a Western trap, authoritarianism is authentic. By rewriting their own pasts, Moscow and Beijing seek to rewrite the future for others.

Fourth, the narratives matter because they erode the moral authority of democracy. Since 1989, liberal democracy has claimed legitimacy as the system that triumphed over communism.

*Propaganda myths
shape politics and
power*

By recasting 1989 as a disaster, Russia and China seek to strip democracy of its aura of inevitability. They argue that the so-called 'end of history' was a mirage, that the liberal order was an interlude, not a destination. In their telling, Western democracy is decadent, unstable, and imposed by colonial powers. By contrast, their own systems – Russia's 'sovereign democracy' and China's 'socialism with Chinese characteristics' – are portrayed as authentic, resilient, and successful. This reversal is designed not only for domestic consumption but for global persuasion. In a world where many countries feel let down by globalization, the appeal is real.

Finally, the narratives matter because they make reconciliation and reform harder. As long as Russians believe that the 1990s were humiliation imposed from outside, there is little incentive to confront the failures of their own elites. As long as Chinese citizens believe that Tiananmen was a necessary defense of stability, there is little appetite for political liberalization. Both societies are trapped by their own myths. Without a reckoning with the past, the possibility of a different future remains remote. **The myths are not just distortions of history; they are barriers to change.**

So what can be done? The answer is not to deny the hardships of the 1990s or the traumas of 1989. On the contrary, it is to acknowledge them fully, but without surrendering to propaganda. Yes, the 1990s were chaotic, but they were also a time of real freedoms. Yes, democratization was messy, but it was also courageous. Yes, many suffered, but they also achieved something extraordinary: the dismantling of totalitarianism. To remember only the chaos is to give victory to the Kremlin and the Chinese Communist party. To remember the dignity is to reclaim the true legacy of 1989.

The task for democracies today is therefore twofold: to defend their own histories from distortion and to offer compelling alternatives in the present. This means supporting independent media in vulnerable states, promoting historical literacy, and exposing propaganda narratives for what they are. It also means delivering results: tackling corruption, reducing inequality, and proving that democracy can work. **Propaganda thrives on disillusionment. The best antidote is not only truth, but performance.**

In the end, history is never only about the past. It is a resource for politics, a tool for legitimacy, a weapon in ideological conflict. Russia and China have weaponized their traumas to discredit democracy and to promote authoritarianism. That is why the narratives matter. To contest them is not an academic exercise; it is a political necessity. The struggle over memory is inseparable from the struggle over the future. Thirty-five years after 1989, the lesson is clear: if democracies do not defend their story, others will rewrite it – and use it against them.

2 ECONOMIC TRANSITION: MYTHS, METRICS AND THE MAKING OF PROSPERITY

Let us examine now a core plank of the Kremlin–Beijing narrative about 1989 and its aftermath: that Western-style capitalism ‘wrecked’ Eastern Europe while Moscow’s and Beijing’s models protected ordinary people and delivered stability. The claim wilts under data. Across Central and Eastern Europe, European Union (EU) integration and market reforms raised incomes, diversified exports, modernised industry and financed rural catch-up. Romania’s story, often caricatured by Russian and Chinese state outlets as a cautionary tale, illustrates the wider pattern.

The long divergence: Romania and Moldova since 1989

Propaganda line: “EU integration drains real economies and traps them as markets and cheap labour. Better to avoid it.”

Reality: countries that locked in EU rules, capital and market access outperformed neighbours that stayed in Russia’s geopolitical and regulatory orbit. A simple comparison between Romania (EU since 2007) and the Republic of Moldova (outside the EU, long constrained by Russian energy leverage and trade shocks) shows the divergence in living standards.

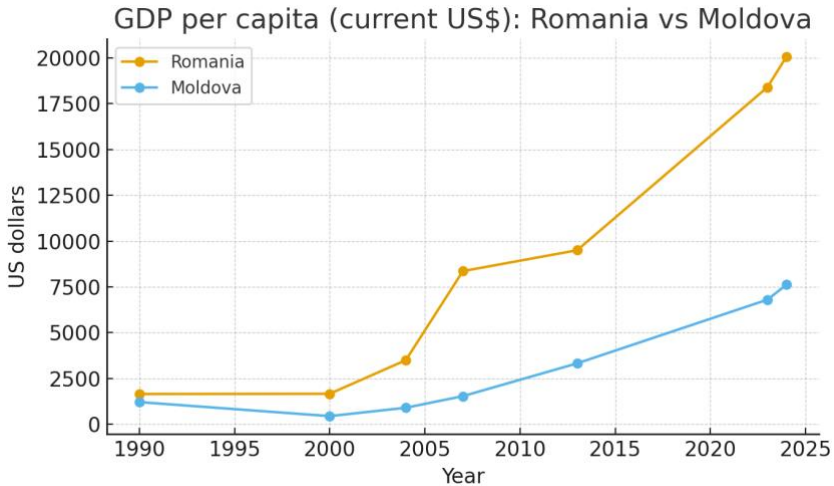


Figure: GDP per capita divergence after 1989. Romania's accession path (negotiations opened 2000, concluded 2004, entry 2007) coincides with an acceleration in incomes; Moldova's gains are later and smaller.

Beyond GDP per capita, the growth model also shows up in what countries sell. Romania moved from low-value textiles to cars, auto parts, appliances, IT services and sophisticated agri-food; exports are four-times higher than in 2006 and mostly go to the EU single market. Moldova's export base remains narrower and more volatile, with remittances cushioning shocks rather than investment doing the heavy lifting.

Fact-checking the talking points

Below are the most common economic myths pushed by Moscow (and flattered by Beijing's 'order-and-development' rhetoric), and what the numbers say.

Myth A: “EU membership destroys local industry.”

- What the narrative says: Brussels ‘de-industrialised’ the East and turned new members into assembly lines. Chinese state media echo this by lauding China’s “self-reliant” model and Belt and Road alternatives.

- Reality: competitiveness rose where EU rules and capital landed. Romania’s industrial output today outstrips the late-communist peak; the Dacia plant at Mioveni went from under 100,000 cars/year before 1989 to more than 300,000 cars/year today, a modern hub producing a car roughly every minute, serving an integrated European supply chain. Suppliers cluster around that hub; wages and skills climbed with it.

Myth B: “The EU is a budget millstone.”

- Narrative: net contributors in the West exploit the East, while Russia and China offer “no-strings” finance.

- Reality: Romania has been a large net beneficiary. EU cohesion, CAP and recovery funds financed roads, water, schools, hospitals and farm modernisation. Agriculture alone received heavy support through per-hectare payments and rural investment schemes.

Myth C: “Living standards stagnated; the minimum wage proves it.”

- Narrative: after 1989, ‘Western’ reforms froze wages and bred precarity.

- Reality: the minimum wage rose many-fold since EU entry, and median pay tracked productivity. Yes, inflation bites in cycles; yet in level terms workers are far better off than in the 1990s or mid-2000s.

What EU money actually did

The Kremlin's favourite sleight of hand is to call EU funding "political control" while ignoring what it bought on the ground. Three areas stand out: agriculture, infrastructure and export capability.

Agriculture: from subsistence to viable farms

- Direct payments per hectare created predictable income flows that farmers could bank; layered schemes (redistributive top-ups, eco-schemes, coupled support) lifted effective support well above the basic rate.
- Result: mechanisation, consolidation and a bigger formal market for inputs and services.
- Kremlin line ("CAP kills peasant farming") misses the lived reality in villages: grants for irrigation, storage and animal health kept family farms alive and made commercial ones bankable.

Infrastructure: time is money

- Motorways and expressways went from a rounding error to a genuine network, slashing travel times and connecting factories to ports and borders.
- EU procurement rules were painful – but they also curbed the worst rent-seeking and raised engineering standards.

Exports: scale and diversification

- The single market – zero tariffs, common standards – turned Romania into a reliable supplier for Germany, Italy, France and beyond.
- The export basket moved up the value chain: vehicles, components, electronics, white goods, business services, processed foods.

Beijing's echo chamber

China's propaganda machine rarely carries water for Moscow out of charity; it advances its own story: that 'stability-first' authoritarian capitalism beats chaotic democracy. In the region, that narrative takes three forms:

- Projecting Belt and Road as a faster route to development than "bureaucratic" EU programs;
- Painting EU regulatory conditions as 'political interference' while China offers 'win-win' loans and soft power;
- Amplifying talking points that 1989 was a Western 'colour revolution', to delegitimise both European transitions and Tiananmen's memory.

Romania in numbers: the inconvenient facts for nostalgists

This is a non-exhaustive snapshot that punctures the myths:

- GDP per capita (current USD): from ~\$5,758 (2006) to ~\$18,404 (2023), then ~\$20,072 (2024).
- Moldova comparison: ~\$1,183 (2006) to ~\$6,800 (2023) and ~\$7,618 (2024).
- Minimum wage: roughly €115/month in 2007 to a gross minimum of ~4,050 lei (≈€800+) from January 2025.
- EU funds: over €100 billion disbursed to Romania since 2007 across cohesion, CAP and recovery envelopes; the balance is strongly positive.
- Agricultural support: base per-hectare payments around €95–110/ha in recent years, with redistributive top-ups and eco-schemes often lifting effective support into the €130–240/ha band – and substantially more for certain coupled schemes.

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- Exports of goods & services: around €126–127bn in 2023 (Eurostat), roughly four-times mid-2000s levels; EU partners account for the bulk.
- Road network: In 2007 Romania had fewer than 300 kilometres of motorway; by 2025 it will reach 1,500 kilometres of motorways and expressways, with major east-west and north-south spines under use or construction.
- Auto industry: Dacia's output and cadence illustrate the step-change from late-communist capacities to integrated European production.

How the disinformation works (and how to answer it)

1. Move the goalposts. When wages rise, point to prices; when prices stabilise, point to emigration; when people return, point to “foreign ownership”. The answer is to stay with comparable indicators across time.
2. Rebrand EU conditions as “colonial dictates”. In practice, conditionality bought better procurement and higher standards. The answer is to tie rules to concrete outcomes: safer food, cleaner water, sturdier bridges.
3. Invoke “cultural sovereignty” to reject liberalisation. The answer is to separate identity politics from the hard math of investment, trade access and technology transfer.

A final note on nostalgia economics

Late communism promised full employment and cheap bread; it delivered queues, rationing and decay. The post-1989 recovery was bumpy, with hard recessions in 1997–99 and 2009–10. But the trend is unmistakable. Where EU law and markets anchored expectations, productivity and pay followed. That is precisely why both the Kremlin and the Chinese Communist Party prefer to discredit the story of 1989.

3 MILITARY AND SECURITY TRANSITION: FROM WARSAW PACT TO NATO (FACTS VS. FICTION)

Among the myths about 1989 that have enjoyed a long afterlife, one towers above the rest: that NATO's enlargement was a form of Western aggression that left Russia no choice but to 'defend itself'. It is a story of grievance that the Kremlin tells at every turn, and that Beijing politely echoes with familiar phrases about 'Cold War mentality' and 'bloc confrontation'. Yet the hard record of the past three decades points in a different direction. Enlargement was incremental and conditional; the European Union (EU) and NATO followed separate tracks; and when neighbours reached not for NATO badges but for EU trade and the rule-of-law package, the Kremlin reached for force. This chapter reconstructs the chronology, clears up the EU-NATO confusion, examines neutrality's real costs, and shows how Russia's wars were triggered not by tanks on its border but by the prospect of democratic prosperity next door.

Enlargement in context: what actually happened

Start with the sequence. In 1999, Poland, Hungary and the Czech Republic joined NATO. Contrary to the later myth, Moscow did not treat the step as a *casus belli*. Channels with the West remained open; Russia and NATO had just codified a framework for consultation in the 1997 Founding Act. Five years later, in 2004, the biggest wave arrived: Romania, Bulgaria, Slovakia, Slovenia and the three Baltic states entered the Alliance. Again, no crisis. Whatever the rhetoric, the Kremlin did not act as if its survival had been threatened. Indeed,

during Vladimir Putin's first presidential term, discussion of practical cooperation with NATO was routine, not taboo.

The 2008 Bucharest summit is often cited as proof of Western provocation. The reality is underwhelming. Ukraine and Georgia were not offered a Membership Action Plan (MAP). European leaders, cautious to a fault, blocked any step that might be read in Moscow as a timetable. The communiqué's ambiguous formula – these countries 'will become members of NATO' at some undefined point – was a political compromise that satisfied nobody. In Ukraine itself, public opinion at that time was tepid to hostile towards NATO membership; support lingered around minority levels. Nothing in 2008 amounted to an imminent NATO march on Russia's borders.

Reality check: Ukraine and Georgia were denied full NATO path

The 2014 and 2022 aggressions: not NATO, but the EU and elections

Six years after Bucharest, with the MAP door still closed, Russia moved – into Crimea and the Donbas. The trigger was not a NATO deployment but Ukraine's Association Agreement with the EU: patient, technocratic integration into the single market, paired with reforms in public procurement, competition, and the courts. The same year, Moldova and Georgia signed their own Association Agreements. To the Kremlin, that package – prosperity-by-rules and politics-by-ballot – posed a systemic challenge. A successful Ukraine would expose the failures of Russia's own crony capitalism and managed elections. Hence the land-grab in 2014 and the 'preventive' war in 2022: both aimed at preventing neighbours from choosing a European future.

Russia's own deployments give away the game. Even after escalating to full-scale war, Moscow stripped forces from the western frontier to feed the front in Ukraine. That is not how a state behaves if it fears an attack from NATO. The Alliance's posture remained defensive – most notably through rotational air policing, enhanced forward battlegroups, and prepositioned equipment, all of it designed to deter, not to invade.

EU ≠ NATO: two clubs, different purposes

Another hardy perennial in regional propaganda is the claim that joining the EU amounts to joining NATO by stealth. The facts are straightforward. Austria sits in the EU but is constitutionally neutral. Until 2022–2024, Sweden and Finland were EU members that chose not to join NATO for decades.

Conversely, Norway and Turkey (and post-Brexit Britain) are in NATO but outside the EU. Romania joined NATO in 2004 and the EU only in 2007. The two projects overlap in values but are institutionally distinct:



Reality check: Democracy next door, not NATO, alarmed Kremlin

the EU has no standing army and relies on member states for ad hoc missions; NATO is a collective-defence alliance whose core is Article 5. Conflating the two is useful to propagandists because it paints rule-of-law reform and trade access as a prelude to war. In reality, it is a route to prosperity.

Within the EU, security and defence remain national competences. The Union runs civilian and limited military missions under the Common Security and Defence Policy (CSDP), but there is no EU 'army' to conscript members into foreign adventures. Participation in

missions is voluntary and typically modest. As a matter of law and practice, Brussels cannot force a member state into a war.

Neutrality: myths, realities and the bill for standing alone

Neutrality enjoys a romantic aura in Central and Eastern Europe, and in particular in Moldova: dignity without entanglement. The reality is more prosaic. The European states that kept neutrality also kept serious armed forces. Finland combined universal male conscription with large reserves, dispersed infrastructure, and credible territorial defence. Sweden sustained a world-class defence industry, producing fighter jets, advanced missiles and armoured vehicles. Switzerland and Austria maintained capable forces and export-oriented arms sectors. In other words, **neutrality is a strategy for the well equipped, not a shortcut around defence spending.**



Reality check: Neutrality brings vulnerability, not safety

For countries like Moldova, constitutional neutrality coexists with hard constraints: a small budget, a frozen conflict on its territory, and, despite the constitution's letter, foreign troops stationed without consent in the breakaway region of Transnistria. If neutrality means self-reliance, then neutrality is expensive: air defence, fighter fleets, intelligence, logistics, ammunition stockpiles, mobilisation systems – the whole lot. Inside NATO, allies share burdens and specialise. Outside, you buy or build everything yourself. That is why the slogan '*neutrality equals peace*' so often dissolves upon contact with reality.

Even before 2022, neutral Finland spent at levels that many NATO members struggled to reach; since the invasion, it has surged above the 2%-of-GDP benchmark and ordered fifth-generation aircraft. Sweden,

shocked by Russia's behaviour, reintroduced or expanded readiness measures and moved to join NATO. The moral is simple: neutrality is not a refuge from geopolitics. It is a choice to shoulder the full cost of deterrence alone.

The Nordic pivot: when Russia made neutrals knock on NATO's door

Before February 2022, the share of Finns backing NATO membership was a minority. Within weeks of the invasion, support soared above 70%. Finland acceded in April 2023. Sweden's support crossed the majority threshold in spring 2022 and, after navigating Ankara's objections, Stockholm completed accession in March 2024. No one in Brussels 'expanded NATO' into Scandinavia. The decision flowed from Moscow's actions. If NATO were an aggressor on autopilot, public opinion in such sober democracies would have recoiled. It did the opposite.

The Nordic pivot also refutes another trope: that the Alliance drags members into wars. Finland and Sweden judged that the price of non-membership – deterrence gaps, uncertainty, exposure to coercion – now outweighed the costs of joining. They were not seduced by rhetoric but compelled by risk. The same calculus informs Poland's rearmament and the Baltic states' defence build-up.

What NATO actually deployed in the East

To understand how far the 'encirclement of Russia' story deviates from fact, look at posture. When the Baltic states joined in 2004, NATO established Baltic Air Policing: a rotating mission of a handful of fighter jets to patrol allied airspace, not a standing invasion force. After Russia's first Ukraine war in 2014, the Alliance created four multinational battlegroups in Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania and Poland, about a reinforced battalion each, as a tripwire to signal that an attack

on one would draw in many. After 2022, additional battlegroups were formed in Bulgaria, Hungary, Romania and Slovakia, still modest in size and designed for deterrence. This is not the footprint of an army preparing to charge eastward; it is the architecture of reassurance for allies who asked for it.

Meanwhile, the Alliance spent years trying to make cooperation with Moscow work, from the NATO–Russia Council to joint projects, before Russia itself walked away from arms-control regimes and chose coercion. The story of a predatory NATO simply does not fit the evidence.

Beijing's echo of the Kremlin

Beijing rarely mentions NATO without the stock phrases 'Cold War mentality' and 'bloc confrontation'. Chinese officials and state media blame the Alliance for 'stoking' conflict and portray Russia as reacting to the West. This line serves Beijing's interests in Asia: if U.S. alliances with Japan, South Korea or the Philippines are cast as destabilising, then China's own military build-up appears as a forced response. Since February 2022, Beijing and Moscow have formalised their rhetorical convergence, declaring a partnership with 'no limits'. On paper, their statements praise sovereignty and oppose hegemony; in practice, they excuse an unprovoked invasion and undermine democratic security architectures.

The cost of paranoia: people, infrastructure, strategy

Russia's campaigns since 2014 have wrecked lives and infrastructure on a continental scale. Millions of Ukrainians have been driven from their homes; towns in the east have been pulverised; logistics hubs in Crimea have become targets rather than trophies. Europe's energy systems and defence budgets have had to adapt in a hurry. None of this was forced by an aggressive NATO expansion. It

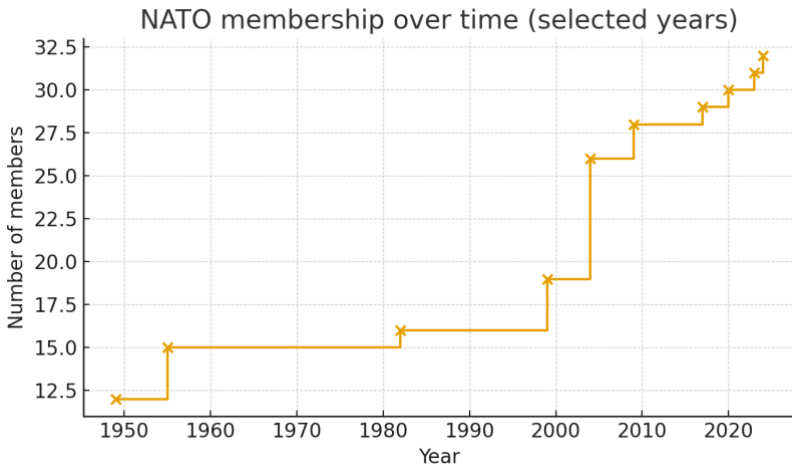
was forced by the Kremlin's decision to deny neighbouring peoples the right to choose prosperity and representation. The irony is that Moscow's wars produced the very outcomes it professes to fear: stronger NATO defences, tighter EU–NATO coordination, and a north that turned from neutrality to alliance.

Lessons for Moldova, Romania and the neighbourhood

For Moldova, constitutional neutrality (Article 11) sits uneasily with the presence of Russian troops in Transnistria, stationed without Chişinău's consent. The country has asked the EU for help against hybrid threats; the Union responded with a civilian mission to strengthen resilience. The pragmatic course is clear: invest in capabilities that deter coercion, deepen EU alignment to anchor reforms, and build partnerships that raise the cost of interference. Neutrality on paper is not security in practice.

For Romania and other NATO allies on the Black Sea, the post-2004 experience is instructive. Alliance membership delivered planning discipline, interoperability and allies on the ground: not an invitation to adventurism, but a guarantee that aggression would be met collectively. The transition from the Warsaw Pact to NATO was not a militarisation imposed by foreigners; it was a sovereign decision to insure against the very pattern of behaviour that Russia has since exhibited.

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Gradual enlargement, with two big waves (1999, 2004) and the Nordic pivot (2022)

Counter-arguments, answered

“NATO promised not to expand.”

No treaty says so. The verbal understandings of the early 1990s concerned East Germany during reunification, not a blanket veto over future accessions by sovereign states. In 1997, Russia signed a Founding Act with NATO to manage relations; it did not include a bar on enlargement.

“NATO surrounded Russia.”

On a map, Russia borders fourteen countries; only five are NATO members. Where NATO is present, its posture has been modest and defensive.

“The EU drags countries into NATO.”

Austria's neutrality and the timing of Romania's accessions (NATO in 2004, EU in 2007) show otherwise.

"Neutrality means peace."

For states without Sweden and Finland's resources, neutrality can mean vulnerability unless paired with heavy investment and vigilant diplomacy.

Finally: "NATO caused the war."

The chronology refutes this. There was no NATO move in 2014 commensurate with Russia's seizure of Crimea; there was an EU Association Agreement. There was no NATO offer in 2022 sufficient to justify invasion; there was the possibility of a successful, democratic neighbour on Russia's doorstep. The conclusion is awkward for propagandists but unavoidable for historians; here it is.

Conclusion

The security transition after 1989 was not an aggressive march to Russia's borders. It was the story of sovereign choices by former Warsaw Pact states and Soviet republics, made after debates at home and negotiations abroad. Those choices reflected lived experience: the desire to insure against coercion and to join institutions that reward rules and restraint. **Russia's counter-story, of betrayal and encirclement, tries to turn cause and effect on their head.** By echoing it, Beijing seeks to legitimise its own authoritarian model. Against this fog of grievance, a few simple facts pierce through: the EU is not NATO; neutrality is costly; deterrence is cheaper than war; and the loudest advertisement for the Alliance was supplied not by Brussels, but by the Kremlin.

4 PROPAGANDA NOSTALGIA: GOLDEN PASTS, WEAPONISED MEMORIES

Nostalgia has always been good politics. It promises comfort without cost and order without effort. Since 1989, Russia – and, in its own idiom, China – have perfected nostalgia into an instrument of foreign influence. The method is simple: celebrate an imagined past of stability and moral certainty; contrast it with the supposed chaos of liberal democracy; and insist that prosperity requires obedience. In 2024–2025, this line was pushed hard in Romania and the Republic of Moldova, where economic anxiety and fatigue with politics made audiences receptive. The following pages map the narratives, explain their psychology, and show how to puncture them with facts and memory.



March on 23 august 1983 in Satu Mare

The nostalgia package comes as a familiar list of talking points, endlessly recycled on television studios, Facebook pages and Telegram channels: life was quiet and predictable; jobs and salaries were secure; energy was plentiful and cheap; food was 'organic'; the industry was mighty; communities were tight and moral. Beneath the warm colours, the record says otherwise. Choice did not exist. Young people could not leave the country; entrepreneurs were stifled; dissent brought a knock on the door. Cities froze and factories stood idle in winter blackouts. Queues and ration cards – one kilogram of sugar, one litre of oil a month – were the ordinary texture of daily life. 'Unity' meant fear of the secret police, not social trust. If the old days were so wonderful, why did millions risk their lives to flee?

Protochronism and Pseudo-history

The trouble with invented pasts is that they rarely stay in the museum. In both Russia and Romania, pseudo-histories seeded under communism have remained potent political tools long after the regimes collapsed. Moscow's sanctification of Kievan Rus as the cradle of eternal Russianness draws directly on tsarist imperial historiography, which for centuries cast Russia as the natural heir of Byzantium and guardian of Orthodoxy. The Soviet regime did not discard these tropes; it dressed them in Marxist colours to legitimise its expansion.

Romania followed a parallel course. Ceauşescu built a cult of the Dacians, insisting that Romanians had anticipated modern achievements and thus owed obedience to a paternal state. This protochronism had deeper roots in the pre-Communist Romantic nationalism, which celebrated the peasantry as the "eternal nation." The persistence of such myths in classrooms and textbooks today shows how thin the line is between scholarship and propaganda.

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Institutionalised over decades, they became cultural common sense: what began as propaganda survives as heritage.



Collage: Post stamps from 1980 issued on the occasion of the fictitious 2,050th anniversary of the creation of Burebista's "centralized and independent" state; Romanian film "Burebista" produced in 1980; Romanian recent nationalist manifestations using dacic symbols.

The political uses are plain, and they work across the spectrum. On the far right, Romanian sovereignists march under stylised Dacian wolf banners, brandish tricolour shields painted with invented runes, and promise a purified nation free of Western decadence. Their imagery, nineteenth-century inventions polished in the 1970s and recycled on TikTok. On the far left, paeans to the *narod* – the imagined self-sufficient peasant village – re-enchanted collectivism as a lost harmony. The village is remembered not as a place of poverty and hierarchy but as a sanctuary of solidarity and morality. Both currents erase complexity: Dacia becomes a paradise without conquest; the village a community without oppression or hunger. The subtext is obedience. If ancestors lived whole and united, dissent today must be betrayal.

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This double appropriation is no accident. **Pseudo-history and protochronism exalt the collective over the individual.** They teach that greatness lies in merging into a timeless whole, not in asserting personal freedom. That is why these myths dovetail so easily with authoritarian playbooks. Russia presents itself as the eternal Eurasian civilisation, China as heir to millennia of Confucian harmony. In both cases, liberal democracy is caricatured as a phase of teenage disorder, best abandoned in favour of mature discipline.



Communist poster: “Working peasants, raise as many birds as possible and valorify them through the cooperative”

At a meta level, protochronism functions as pro-collectivist propaganda. Whether wrapped in wolf banners or nostalgic paeans to peasantry, the message is constant: the individual is secondary, freedom suspect, belonging requires submission. Once such myths take hold, they are hard to dislodge, because they flatter identity and offer easy answers: the warmth of belonging without the burden of debate. A Romanian schoolchild taught that the Dacians invented writing, or that the village embodied perfect democracy, is being conditioned to

see conflict as betrayal and freedom as dispensable. A Russian audience told that Kievan Rus was destined for Moscow's rule is primed to view Ukraine not as sovereign but as a rebellious province.

The consequences are political, not merely cultural. In Romania, Dacian imagery resurfaces in movements hostile to the EU and NATO, echoing Ceaușescu's protochronism. The claim is revived that Romanians need no lessons from abroad, that their destiny is unique and eternal. On the left, nostalgia for the "eternal village" blends with suspicion of markets and admiration for authoritarian "stability," creating a soft spot for Beijing's message that prosperity flows from discipline, not democracy. In Russia, the same logic sustains both the cult of Stalin and the cult of empire. What looks like heritage is geopolitics; what sounds like pride is often preparation for submission.

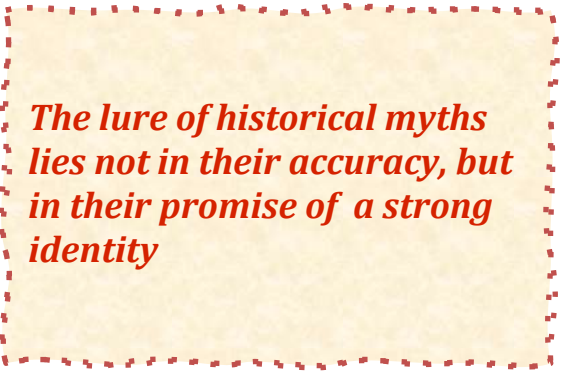
Don't fall for the fairy tale of Soiuz or ceaușism. It was no golden age. It was a cage

Propagandists exploit nostalgia by reaching for grandiose histories. Kievan Rus is recast as the cradle of a unitary civilisation whose destiny Moscow must guard. In Romania, Ceaușescu elevated protochronism and Dacomania into state policy, insisting that the nation anticipated modern achievements and thus owed obedience to a paternal state. These pseudo-histories blur scholarship into political licence: if the past was heroic and unified, today's dissenters are traitors. Modern sovereignist and neo-fascist currents pick up these threads. The aesthetic is retro; the policy is repression; the promise is sentimental: we will make communities whole again by silencing conflict. It is less a programme than a mood, a warm state of mind, and such moods spread faster than facts.

To challenge these myths, one must first grasp their seduction. They are not about accuracy but about identity. They offer continuity to societies marked by dislocation and uncertainty. The task of democratic politics is not to erase memory but to keep it honest: to teach the village as it was (poor, hierarchical, often brutal) as well as the solidarity it did contain; to present Dacia as one polity among many, conquered and transformed, not as an eternal utopia; and to show that modern progress in Romania and Moldova came not from self-sufficiency but from integration into European markets, rules, and institutions. Freedom, not fabricated continuity, is what delivers prosperity.

Romania: the return of the ‘Golden Age’, and how to answer it

Romania’s public debate has seen a persistent revival of Ceaușescu nostalgia, much of it amplified by social media. Polls in mid-2025 found that a majority of respondents viewed the communist period more positively than negatively, and that two-thirds considered Nicolae Ceaușescu a ‘good leader’. Newer generations, too young to remember shortages and surveillance, encounter glossy TikTok montages of full shops and tidy streets, spliced with slogans about order and cheap utilities. The tone is wistful rather than doctrinal; that makes it harder to challenge.



The lure of historical myths lies not in their accuracy, but in their promise of a strong identity

The antidote is precision and proximity: facts tied to lived memory. Electricity consumption per capita collapsed in the 1980s;

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district heating failed; industry produced to quotas rather than demand and failed on export markets. Measured against today's EU membership, wages and mobility, the picture is unambiguous. The point is not that the present is perfect, but that the past was poorer, darker and less free, while the years after 2007 delivered the steepest rise in living standards in modern Romanian history.

Social media complicates the task. TikTok clips romanticising the 'Epoca de Aur' are optimised for emotion: music, vintage filters, heroic footage of parades. A single glossy video can reach hundreds of thousands of young viewers overnight. Counter-messaging that simply scolds will not work; what does work are short, human stories: grandparents' ration cards, factory downtime logs, footage of winter blackouts. All must be paired with the tangible gains of EU integration: better wages, free travel, safer food, and real consumer choice.



Ration paper and empty markets

Moldova: ‘stability’, ‘sovereignty’ and the Soviet sepia filter

Moldova is a prime target for nostalgia operations. It is small, divided, and constitutionally neutral, with a frozen conflict in Transnistria and a large diaspora. Pro-Kremlin channels have insisted that European integration means the loss of sovereignty, the imposition of alien values, and even ‘dragging Moldova into the war’. They add sepia-tinted memories of Soviet ‘stability’ and cheap goods. Coordinated Telegram networks cross-post these messages with remarkable speed, blending them with local grievances about energy prices and corruption.

The stories follow a template.

- **First, frighten:** the EU will force social change, will take your sons to the front, will bankrupt your farm.
- **Second, flatter:** you were safer and prouder in the old days.
- **Third, redirect:** if Brussels is the problem, Moscow is the solution, with its cheap gas, a ready market, a steady hand.

The aim is not to persuade everyone, just to exhaust the middle and demobilise the pro-European vote. In 2024–2025, when Moldova debated deepening EU ties, these lines flooded Facebook pages and Telegram channels linked to Kremlin-affiliated actors.

Again, context corrects the mirage. The Soviet ‘stability’ included rationing, political prisons and travel bans; the post-1991 hardships were caused not by democracy but by the collapse of a command economy. Countries in the region that locked in EU rules and access – the Baltics, Poland, Romania – are the ones that prospered. Moldova’s path to resilience is not backwards to a vanished empire but forward into a rules-based market.

Where nostalgia spreads: TV talk-shows, Telegram swarms, TikTok loops

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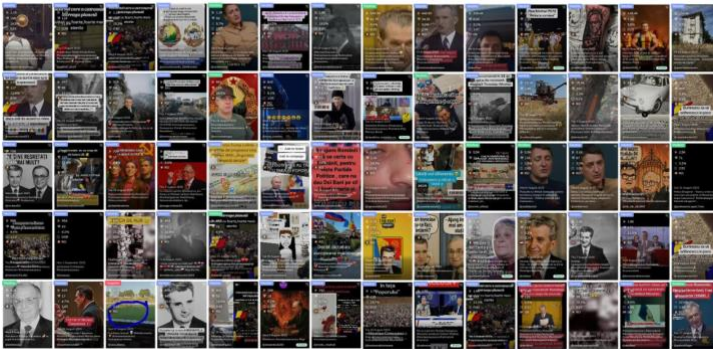
Television remains the amplifier of choice for the middle-aged, with ‘debate’ shows that juxtapose cherry-picked prices from 1988 with today’s utility bills, ignoring scarcity and quality.

Facebook pages act as distribution hubs for viral memes: ‘on his watch, bread cost...’, ‘we had jobs’, ‘people respected values’.

Telegram channels, often anonymous, sometimes automated, seed conspiracies about EU ‘militarisation’ and ‘loss of sovereignty’.

On TikTok, the format is simpler: a minute of images and music designed to trigger sentiment rather than thought.

Across platforms, the pattern is the same: emotion first, claims second, sources never. Detection outfits in Chişinău and across the EU have documented these trends in detail: spikes in disinformation during election cycles; cut-and-paste narratives that appear across languages; and coordinated posting from clusters of channels that move in lockstep. The language is local, the fingerprints are not.



Collage: hundreds of posts on TikTok are praising the golden ages of Ceauşescu’s dictatorship

Beijing's supporting role

China's role in nostalgia propaganda is subtler but no less strategic. Where Russia deploys blunt myths of empire, Beijing cultivates a narrative of order, discipline, and economic success. State media contrast Eastern Europe's 'chaotic' 1990s with China's 'stable rise' after 1989, suggesting that democracy brought decay while one-party rule delivered prosperity. In Romania and Moldova, this message resonates with audiences disillusioned by corruption or frustrated with the slow grind of EU integration.

Yet China's interventions do more than flatter authoritarian instincts. They borrow from the language of anti-colonialism and tiermondism, the intellectual current of the 1960s and 1970s that cast the West as an imperialist exploiter and the 'Third World' as a community of solidarity. In today's East-European information space, Moscow and Beijing recycle this framework but strip it of colonists. Brussels and Washington are depicted as new empires, imposing alien values and draining resources, while Russia and China appear as defenders of sovereignty and cultural identity. The irony is stark: two authoritarian powers that project influence abroad are cast as liberators from imaginary colonial masters.

This line works because it taps into genuine grievances. East-European countries did experience asymmetries after 1989: Western companies bought privatised assets, young workers emigrated en masse, and elites sometimes appeared more attentive to Brussels than to local voters. Beijing and Moscow exploit these frustrations, not by denying them, but by redirecting blame. The message is simple: the West is exploiting you again; turn to the East for dignity and independence. The fact that this argument circulates on social media in the same idiom as anti-colonial pamphlets from the 1970s is no accident.

Seen from a distance, this is a form of nostalgia politics on a global scale. Just as protochronism promises that Dacia or the village once held answers to modern dilemmas, so tiermondist propaganda promises that solidarity against the West will deliver justice today. Both are mirages. The real gains in living standards and sovereignty for countries like Romania and Moldova came from European integration, not from Eurasian dependency. To confuse imperial Moscow and authoritarian Beijing with anti-colonial allies is to misread history twice: once by romanticising the past, and again by mistaking authoritarianism for freedom.

Fact-checking five favourite myths

- Jobs and security: ‘Everyone had a job’ also meant forced placements, bans on private enterprise and low productivity. Today’s labour markets are volatile but offer mobility and choice.
- Cheap energy: prices were lower on paper; shortages and blackouts made supply unreliable. Today’s bills hurt, but the system delivers.
- ‘Organic’ food: local did not equal healthy; pesticide use was often poorly regulated; the real problem was scarcity.
- Strong industry: output was high in tonnage and low in value; most products failed on export markets once exposed to competition.
- Moral order: informants and censors kept the peace; that is not the same thing as trust or community.

These corrections work best when grounded in local memory – photos of ration cards and empty shelves, oral histories from factory workers, municipal records of power cuts – not in abstract lectures. The point is not to shame those who feel nostalgia; it is to separate sentiment for one’s youth from claims about good governance.

Fight against nostalgia: tone, timing, and truth-to-power

Smart rebuttals look and feel different from official press releases. Three rules help.

First, mirror the format. Short videos and carousels with side-by-side images: the queue and the supermarket aisle; the blackout and the lit street; the ration card and the payslip.

Second, use trusted messengers. Historians and teachers, yes, but also grandparents, engineers, nurses.

Third, translate gains into kitchen-table terms: the EU pays for the village water plant; the road takes an hour off your day; the export factory pays apprenticeships. Data helps, but stories win hearts.

The most effective counter-narratives also resist the temptation to romanticise the present. Life is hard for many; prices bite; corruption has not vanished. A credible voice concedes this and then shows the difference between a system that can be fixed and a system that cannot be questioned. Democracy is not perfect; it is repairable.

Nostalgia will not disappear. Nor should it: affection for one's youth is human. What matters is whether memory is used to learn or to lie. The Kremlin – and, in its own register, Beijing – seek to turn remembrance into resignation: democracy failed; go back to order. Romania and Moldova have shown that order and freedom are not opposites and that prosperity flows from rules, not from rulers. The honest task now is to keep telling the story of the 1980s as it was lived and the story of the last two decades as they were built: slowly, painfully, imperfectly, but vastly freer than the cage they escaped.

Appendix

Documented nostalgia narratives, 2024–2025 (Romania & Moldova)

- a. **“Life was better under Ceaușescu”** resurges on social media. 2025 surveys reported majorities or large pluralities saying the communist era was ‘more good than bad’ and that Ceaușescu was a ‘good leader’. Viral TikTok and Facebook clips glorify queues as order and scarcity as simplicity.

Debunk: archival data and testimonies document rationing, power blackouts and travel bans; the sharpest income gains came after EU accession.

- b. **“The EU will drag Moldova into war.”** A staple on anonymous Telegram channels, often cross-posting content from Transnistria, this claim spiked in early 2024 alongside rumours that Western F-16s would be stationed in Moldova.

Debunk: the EU has no army and cannot compel deployments; NATO’s posture in the region is defensive and transparent; the F-16 rumour was false.

- c. **“EU accession means legalising LGBT and abandoning tradition.”** Framed as a culture-war wedge, the line paints European law as an assault on sovereignty.

Debunk: EU law guarantees non-discrimination; member states retain broad space on family policy. The narrative exploits moral panic to tarnish economic and rule-of-law integration.

- d. **“Soviet stability”** as a trade-off worth making. Telegram pages push the idea that cheap gas and ‘predictable’ jobs in the USSR outweighed ‘chaotic’ democracy.

Debunk: stability was enforced by political policing; the economy under-invested and misallocated capital; shortages and low productivity were endemic.

- e. **“EU membership destroyed local industry.”** A cross-border trope recycled in Romania and Moldova alike.

Debunk: export data, automotive and appliances clusters, and SME participation in EU value chains show the opposite; where standards and capital arrived, competitiveness increased.

- f. **“Neutrality equals peace.”** Presented as an easy escape from geopolitics.

Debunk: genuine neutrals (Finland, Sweden pre-2022, Switzerland, Austria) built expensive self-reliant defences; Moldova’s constitutional neutrality coexists with foreign troops on its soil.

- g. **“The West wants to erase our history.”** A staple around May 9th commemorations in and school-curriculum debates in Moldova.

Debunk: what is rejected is not history but Russian state propaganda; rigorous history teaching and museum work are the antidote to myth-making.

- h. **“The diaspora proves democracy failed.”** Posts show young Romanians/Moldovans abroad as evidence of collapse.

Debunk: mobility is a freedom; remittances and return migration are part of the story; the correct comparator is opportunity, not autarky.

How are these narratives used to manufacture nostalgia?

Case 1. The ‘cheap bread’ montage: a 60-second TikTok with grocery prices from 1988, a triumphant hymn and a closing shot of a full pantry. The trick works by omitting scarcity: prices mean little when there is nothing to buy. A simple correction juxtaposes the montage with ration cards, municipal lists of limited supplies and testimony from shop workers who handled empty shelves.



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Case 2. The ‘EU drags us to war’ panic: a cluster of anonymous Telegram channels in Moldova pushed a rumour in early 2024 that Western F-16s would be stationed locally. The story spread across Facebook groups before being debunked by independent monitors. The tempo illustrates coordinated amplification: seed a claim in a small channel; cross-post to larger groups; harvest outrage; move on before the fact-check lands.



Case 3. The ‘mighty industry’ carousel: photos of socialist-era factories at shift change, framed as proof of prowess. Little is said about what those plants produced, their export performance or their energy intensity. A better carousel pairs the old image with data on today’s EU-integrated suppliers, apprenticeships and export orders. The point is not to sneer at the past but to show how prosperity actually scales.



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Case 4. The 'moral order' sermon: talk-show guests equate censorship with decency and surveillance with safety. A cut-down television clip can be answered with a minute of testimonies from artists whose plays were banned, journalists threatened with prison and priests pressured for informant reports. Morality without freedom is etiquette by fear.



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