

Russia and the Caucasus Since the Invasion of Ukraine: Providing More Fuel for the Fire

Stephen Blank*

Introduction

Even if Russia had not invaded Ukraine in 2014, the Caucasus would have remained a tinderbox for two reasons. One reason for its proneness to violence is the absence of legitimate and effective governance in Armenia and Azerbaijan. The second cause for violence is Russia's policies that intersect with and exploit these latent domestic and democracy defects to exploit every opportunity for provoking conflict and keeping the region divided and authoritarian so that Russia can better control it. Moscow has no interest in conflict resolution, quite the opposite. And since 2008, it has also added to its arsenal the willingness to use force to advance its objectives. Therefore the war in Ukraine and Moscow's justifications for fighting it should not have surprised attentive observers of Russian policy. In fact, Moscow has expanded its forcible activities in the Caucasus since it invaded Crimea. Consequently in the light of its invasion of Ukraine this conflict-prone zone has become even more dangerous than it was before.

Therefore, Moscow's tactics all point to its primary strategic goal: recreation of an imperial formation resembling the Tsarist if not the Soviet empire. Russian observers fully understand the intrinsically imperial or neo-imperial cognitive foundation of this great power mantra. For instance, Alexei Malashenko observed that Russia's response to the Chechen threat in 1999-2000 only made sense if Russia continues to regard itself as an empire.¹ Since then, Russian political scientist Egor Kholmogorov has observed that, " 'Empire' is the main category of any strategic political analysis in the Russian language. Whenever we start to ponder a full-scale, long-term construction of the

* Dr. Stephen Blank, Senior Fellow, the American Foreign Policy Council, Washington, D.C.

¹Maura Reynolds, *Moscow Has Chechnya Back--Now What?* Los Angeles Times, June 19, 2000.

Russian state, we begin to think of empire and in terms of empire. Russians are inherently imperialists."²

Moreover, Russian military presence in the Caucasus (and the Black Sea area) serves as a basis or point of departure for its efforts at power projection into the Middle East and we now see just how dangerous that projection has become to international stability due to Moscow's intervention in Syria. A recent analysis by the Canadian-based Azerbaijani analyst Mahir Khalifa-Zadeh observes correctly that, Russia's military base in Armenia transforms this country into a so-called "Russian fortress," ensuring Russia's regional dominance and preventing NATO's deployment in the South Caucasus, which holds geostrategic importance for Israel, as part of the Greater Middle East, as well as for the US and Europe. The strategic characteristics of this base, thanks to newly deployed Fulcrum fighter jets and attack helicopters, render it a key military installation in the region to project Russia's military power as far as the Persian gulf and deep into the Middle East. Russia's military base in Gyumri (Armenia) and its naval base in Tartus (Syria) are key elements in Putin's plans to expand Russia's influence in the Middle East and undermine America's dominance in the region as well as to shake America's global role, as it did during the Soviet era. In this context, Moscow is not interested in the Turkish-Armenian rapprochement. If this occurs, there is no doubt it will erode any grounds for keeping the base in Armenia. Moreover, in the light of Russia's recent invasion of Crimea (Ukraine), the Russian military base in Armenia has become a real threat to Azerbaijan and Georgia's independence."³

And, as noted below, apart from what Russia has done recently to destabilize the Caucasus, the internal dynamics of Russia, Armenia and Azerbaijan, though probably not so much Georgia, combined with Russia's policies, also make major security challenges – if not real violence – a disturbing probability in the future. As of September 2015, the following manifestations of a pre-conflict situation (added to those already existing before Ukraine was invaded) were visible to all.

-Russia has all but annexed South Ossetia and Abkhazia and incorporated them into the Russian Federation while strengthening its

²Quoted in Boris Rumer, *Central Asia: At the End of the Transition*. In: Boris Rumer Ed., *Central Asia At the End of Transition*, Armonk, NY: M.E. Sharpe & Co. Inc., 2005, p. 47.

³Mahir Khalifa-Zadeh, *The South Caucasus: Obama's Failed Russia "Reset" and the Putin Doctrine in Practice*, *Middle East Review of International Affairs (MERIA)*, Vol. 18, Issue 3, 2014.

military forces there thereby violating once again Georgian sovereignty.⁴

-Russia has essentially refused to negotiate about anything seriously with Georgia, least of all those two provinces and maintains a tense pre-war situation on the border with Georgia.⁵

-In mid-2015, Russian military forces further encroached into Georgian territory beyond the borders of those provinces with Georgia proper thus threatening both Georgia and the pipelines running through it to Batumi that are vital not only to Georgian but Azerbaijan's security.⁶

-As a result, NATO, despite its continuing refusal to confer membership upon Georgia, has built a training center there and, "The United States is practicing how quickly it can deploy its military to Georgia in order to respond to "Russian aggression."⁷

-According to several press reports, Russia may have a secret plan to "resolve" the Nagorno Karabakh conflict at both Armenia's and Azerbaijan's expense.⁸ Moscow is also steadily trying to woo Azerbaijan into subservience to its designs and exploit what have become truly acrimonious US-Azerbaijani relations, namely due to the degenerating human rights situation in Azerbaijan.⁹

-At the same time Russia continues to sell Armenia and Azerbaijan more weapons even as it claims to be seeking peace in Nagorno Karabakh. Indeed, in early September, 2015, it announced the new transfer of 200 million USD in weapons to Armenia in the form of

⁴Alexander Cooley, *Scripts of Sovereignty: The Freezing of the Russia-Ukraine Crisis and Dilemmas of Governance in Eurasia*, Washington, D.C.: Center on Global Interests, 2015, pp.15-21.

⁵Iskra Kirova, *Public Diplomacy and Conflict Resolution: Russia, Georgia and the EU in Abkhazia and South Ossetia*, Los Angeles, Figueroa Press, 2012. Available at: <http://uscpublicdiplomacy.org/sites/uscpublicdiplomacy.org/files/legacy/publications/perspectives/CPDPerspectivesConflict%20Resolution.pdf>

⁶Vasil Rukhadze, *Russia Annexes Additional Georgian Lands, Closing in on the Strategic East-West Highway*, Eurasia Daily Monitor, July 20, 2015.

⁷Joshua Kucera, *Georgia: U.S. Military Practicing Response To Russian Aggression*, Eurasia Insight, September 8, 2015. Available at: <http://www.eurasianet.org/node/74991>

⁸Paul Goble, *Does Putin Have 'Secret Plan' to Return Karabakh to Azerbaijan?* Window on Eurasia, New Series, September 8, 2015. Available at: <http://windowoneurasia2.blogspot.com/2015/09/does-putin-have-secret-plan-to-return.html>

⁹Stephen Blank, *Regional Partnerships in Azerbaijan's Foreign Policy*, Global Energy Monitor (Forthcoming).

a loan.¹⁰ Since these new transfers come on top of billions sold to both parties to the conflict, and Azerbaijan pays full value for the advanced weapons Moscow sells to it, in effect Azerbaijan is subsidizing Armenia's weapons buys!

-Since-compelling Armenia to forego signing an Association Agreement with the European Union in 2013, Moscow has significantly expanded its control over Armenia's economy thereby making Armenia, despite its claims to the contrary ever more of a satellite of Moscow with diminished sovereignty. As Armen Grigoryan has recently written, "It is hardly a secret that the Russo-Armenian agreements in recent years denoting a "strategic partnership" – including the extended deployment term of the Russian military base, Gazprom's monopoly for 30 years on Armenia's gas distribution network and Armenia's EEU membership (Eurasian Economic Union. –Editor's note.) – are in fact not agreements but diktats. However, not only the Armenian government but also the opposition (with a few exceptions) consider those agreements valid sources of obligations and do not offer the voters an alternative approach suggesting an eventual way out of these unfair obligations."¹¹

But by doing so Moscow has significantly raised the stakes should the rickety structure of Armenia's economy or government fall apart. In this context it is a telling sign of the inherent insecurity of the region that many Russian leaders saw the 2015 demonstrations against electricity price hikes in Armenia as manifestations of an American-led conspiracy against Russia.¹² One can only imagine what might occur should a real crisis occur due to the "illegitimate governance" of the regimes in either Armenia or Azerbaijan, especially as the collapsing energy prices have now put Azerbaijan's economy under significant strain.¹³

¹⁰Giorgi Lomsadze, *Russia to Loan Armenia \$200m for Guns*, Eurasia Insight, September 8, 2015. Available at: <http://www.eurasianet.org/node/74981>

¹¹Armen Grigoryan, *Armenia and the Iran Deal*, Central Asia Caucasus Analyst, August 31, 2015. Available at: <http://www.cacianalyst.org/publications/analytical-articles/item/13263-armenia-and-the-iran-deal.html>

¹²Alec Luhn, *Armenia Protests Escalate After Police Turn on Demonstrators*. The Guardian, June 24, 2015. Available at: <http://www.theguardian.com/world/2015/jun/24/armenia-yerevan-protests-electric-prices-russia>

¹³Max Manwaring, formerly a professor of National Security Studies at the Strategic Studies Institute, US Army War College, coined the term "illegitimate governance." Max Manwaring, *The Inescapable Global Security Arena*, Carlisle Barracks, PA: Strategic Studies Institute, US Army War College, 2002, pp. 2-3.

-Due to the occupation of Crimea and parts of Ukraine Moscow has begun building up a combined arms (land, air, sea, and possibly nuclear) force capable of striking throughout the Caucasus as well as the entire Black Sea basin thus making it much more difficult for NATO or any Western power to come to the aid of a Caucasian state that Moscow threatens.¹⁴

Finally, if we look at the domestic structures of governance in Armenia and Azerbaijan and possibly although less likely Georgia, it is not hard to see the real possibilities for a security crisis originating in the illegitimate governance of both these authoritarian states. The crises in states like Ukraine are very much the result of illegitimate governance leading to what has been called hybrid wars failed states, civil wars, etc. Armenia has already shown that economic sovereignty of Russia over Armenia could easily become entangled with more purely domestic sources of unrest and that Russia could easily see these challenges as threats from the West to its position and conspiracies as it has already charged. Furthermore if energy prices stay low and Azerbaijan's regime cannot sustain its economic programs or if Islamic revolts against the regime's secularizing tendencies and the regime's mounting repressiveness alienates it from the West still further, it is not too difficult to envisage a failing state scenario there punctuated by unrest aided and abetted by either or both Russia and Iran. Indeed, we have seen both of those states threaten to do that in the past specifically by attempting to exploit ethnic or religious discontent inside Azerbaijan.¹⁵ Moscow may now be trying to attract Baku but if internal factors conjoin with external ones to incite widespread unrest in one or more Caucasian state we could see another replay of a scenario that has become all too familiar where "hybrid threats" amidst a failing state lead to a "hybrid" or some other kind of war.

Russian threats

All of these processes have their roots in pre-2014 developments. But the Ukrainian crisis has vastly accelerated and intensified them thereby destabilizing the Caucasus as a whole and

¹⁴Stephen Blank, *The Black Sea and Beyond: Naval and Strategic Consequences of Russia's Invasion of Ukraine*. Proceedings of the US Naval Institute, October, 2015.

¹⁵Stephen Blank, *Azerbaijan's Security and U.S. Interests: Time for a Reassessment*, Institute for Security and Development Policy, Stockholm, 2013, www.isdp.eu

significantly adding to the threat of war throughout Russia's largely self-made "arc of crisis." Thus they show fundamental and continuing elements of Russian policy in the Caucasus that have only intensified since Russia invaded Ukraine in February, 2014. Therefore we must understand that the wars in Georgia and Ukraine as well as Moscow's overall policies in the Caucasus are logical extensions of its demand, going back to Boris Yeltsin, for an exclusive hegemonic position in the former Soviet space. Indeed, in 2012 President Putin admitted he had preplanned the Russo-Georgian war of 2008 since 2006 with the deliberate use of separatists.¹⁶ And in Crimea we see a very considerable replication of the tactics that were employed against Georgia.

Putin's admissions and the Ukrainian crisis should remind us all that at the root of the many crises throughout the CIS lies the fact that Russia does not believe in the genuine and full sovereignty of the post-Soviet states in the former Soviet Union. The evidence in favor of this assertion is overwhelming and worse, long-lasting.¹⁷ Therefore it should evoke much greater public concern from governments from Washington to Baku. As James Sherr has written, "While Russia formally respects the sovereignty of its erstwhile republics; it also reserves the right to define the content of that sovereignty and their territorial integrity. Essentially Putin's Russia has revived the Tsarist and Soviet view that sovereignty is a contingent factor depending on power, culture, and historical norms, not an absolute and unconditional principle of world politics."¹⁸

This means that Moscow not only has not respected these states' sovereignty and integrity in the past, it will not do so in the future absent some viable countervailing force. This is particularly visible in regard to Armenia. Since Moscow coerced Yerevan in 2013 into rejecting an Association Agreement with the European Union, Armenia has joined the Eurasian Customs and Economic Unions and is now vulnerable to even more Russian economic pressure. And the recent demonstrations over electricity price hikes illustrated the abiding deformations of the Armenian economy under Moscow's heel. Armenian analysts may talk about Armenia's following a policy of

¹⁶ *Putin Admits Russia Trained S Ossetians Before 2008 Georgia War*. Transcript, August 10, 2012. President of Russia. Available at: www.kremlin.ru

¹⁷ Stephen Blank, *Russia and the Black Sea's Frozen Conflicts*. In: *Strategic Perspective, Mediterranean Quarterly*, Vol. XIX, No.3, Summer, 2008, pp. 23-54.

¹⁸ James Sherr, *Hard Diplomacy and Soft Coercion: Russia's Influence Abroad*. London: Chatham House, 2013, pp. 61-62.

complementarity or balancing between East and West. But in fact Armenia voted in favor of the annexation of Crimea at the UN and cannot go against Russian interests. Indeed, it voted with Russia arguably because it was afraid failure to do so could be used against it in regard to Nagorno Karabakh. Thus this surrender to outright aggression and the violation of the international treaties upon which Armenia's own sovereignty and integrity rest illustrates that Yerevan's policies are now hostage to its efforts to retain its conquests in Nagorno Karabakh. Paradoxically Armenia's nationalism in Nagorno Karabakh has cost it its sovereignty because it is now quite beholden to Russia for its political and economic stability and for holding onto those lands that it conquered from Azerbaijan in the 1990s. The illusion that Armenia will be able to accept so called "technical" measures from the EU towards greater economic-political interaction and thus combine European integration with military and strategic partnership with Armenia may sound good in Russian journals and Moscow but it does not accord with reality.¹⁹

Similarly, Susan Stewart of the Stiftung Wissenschaft und Politik has written that Russia's coercive diplomacy to force its neighbors into its Customs Union and Eurasian Economic Union undermines any pretense that this integration project is based on anything other than Russia making other countries "an offer that they cannot refuse." Furthermore its coercive behavior shows its own nervousness about the viability of these formats and the necessity to coerce other states into accepting it. She also notes: "Russia is more than willing to tolerate instability and economic weakness in the neighboring countries, assuming they are accompanied by an increase in Russian influence. In fact, Russia consciously contributes to the rising instability and deterioration of the economic situation in some, if not all, of these countries."²⁰

In the Caucasus the Western failure to seize the moment invalidated the concept of a Russian retreat but shows instead that rhetoric aside, Moscow has no interest in regional conflict resolution. Russia's arms sales to both Armenia and Azerbaijan even as it stations troops in and continues to upgrade its own military power in the Caucasus highlights this fact. Moreover, Russian elements aligned

¹⁹Sergei Minasyan, *Finlandization of the Post-Soviet Sphere*. Russia in Global Affairs, June 2014. Available at: <http://eng.globalaffairs.ru/number/Finlandization-of-the-Post-Soviet-Space-16712>

²⁰Susan Stewart, *The EU, Russia and Less Common Neighborhood*. SWP Comments, Stiftung Wissenschaft und Politik, January, 2014, pp.2-3.

with organized crime have used Montenegro, a notorious "playground for Russian organized crime" to run weapons covertly to Nagorno Karabakh. From 2010-2013, the arms tracking community has recorded 39 suspicious Ilyushin 76 flights leaving Podgorica airport in Montenegro for Armenia's Erebuni military airport in Yerevan with arms intended for Nagorno Karabakh where there has been a wave of border incidents since 2010.²¹ The use of these Russian planes and the link to the long-standing large-scale arms trafficking between Russia and Armenia immediately raises suspicions of Russian involvement if not orchestration of this program. Richard Giragosian observes that, Russia is clearly exploiting the unresolved Karabakh conflict and rising tension in order to further consolidate its power and influence in the South Caucasus. Within this context, Russia has not only emerged as the leading arms provider to Azerbaijan, but also continues to deepen its military support and cooperation with Armenia. For Azerbaijan, Russia offers an important source of modern offensive weapons, while for Armenia, both the bilateral partnership with Russia and membership in the Russian-led Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO) offers Armenia its own essential security guarantees.²²

The Western absence from conflict resolution in the Caucasus' many conflicts is striking because it applies to all the countries of the South Caucasus and opens the way to Russia to interfere with them by exploiting its monopoly over the conflict resolution process to strengthen its neo-imperial drive. In regard to Nagorno Karabakh, Moscow has obtained a base at Gyumri in Armenia until 2044 and undertaken a major buildup of its armed forces in the Caucasus, allegedly in fear of an attack on Iran, more likely in response to an imaginary NATO threat and to enforce its dominion. Ruslan Pukhov, Director of the Moscow Center for the Analysis of Strategies and Technologies (CAST) also observes that this military buildup signifies Moscow has acted to remain "in the lead" militarily in the Caucasus and invoked US and Israeli military assistance to Azerbaijan as an alleged justification for this posture.²³

²¹Joshua Kucera, *The Art of the Arms Deal*, Eurasia Insight, September 27, 2012. Available at: <http://www.eurasianet.org/node/65975>

²²Richard Giragosian, *Cause for Concern: The Shifting Balance of Power in the South Caucasus*, RSC Special Analysis, Regional Studies Center, Yerevan, June 25, 2013, p. 1.

²³Paul Goble, *Is Moscow Equating Kabardino-Balkaria and Abkhazia?* Available at: www.jamestown.org Blog, January 17, 2014.

Both Baku and Tbilisi have good reason to worry about this buildup that now includes Russia's dual-use Iskander missile based at Gyumri that puts both countries and their capitals within range of a strike. And the powerful radar installations there also enable Russia to monitor the entire air space over all three South Caucasus countries.²⁴ And that was even before the buildup subsequent to the invasion of Ukraine. Thus Russia openly and clandestinely arms both sides in this conflict that has become steadily more dangerous with increasing numbers of incidents between both forces. Russia does so to keep both sides dependent to a greater or lesser degree upon it and its 2011 "mediation" efforts here also revealed its unremitting focus on undermining local sovereignty.

Armenian political scientist Arman Melikyan claims in "mediation" in 2011 on Nagorno Karabakh, that Russia ostensibly "brokered," Moscow was to arrange for the surrender of liberated territories, thereby ensuring its military presence in return and establishing a network of military bases in Azerbaijan to prevent any further cooperation between Azerbaijan and NATO. While Armenian authorities reportedly accepted this plan, Baku refused to do so and saved Armenia, which clearly wants to incorporate Nagorno Karabakh, from relinquishing the territory in return for further compromising its sovereignty and Azerbaijan's security.²⁵ Armenia furnishes an outstanding example of what happens to a state that allows Moscow a monopoly over conflict resolution. In September 2013, Moscow brutally demonstrated its power over Armenia and the hollowness of Armenia's claims to sovereignty by publicly forcing it to renounce its plan to sign a DCFTA or Association Agreement with the EU and instead join the Moscow based Customs Union or EURASEC, even though it has no common border with any other signatory.²⁶ Armenia may have espoused a policy of "complementarity," seeking to bridge East-West conflicts by maintaining close contacts with Russia, and

²⁴Vakho Shamugla, *Russian Theater Ballistic Missile 30 Kilometers from Georgia. Rezonansi* (in Georgian), Tbilisi, December 19, 2013, FBIS SOV, December 23, 2013.

²⁵Joshua Kucera, *Azerbaijan told the U.S. It Wants "full Membership" in NATO*, Eurasia insight, September 5, 2011. Available at: <http://www.eurasianet.org/node/64129>

²⁶Richard Giragosian, *Strategic Setback: Armenia and the Customs Union*, RSC Analysis, Regional Security Center, Yerevan, October, 2013.

Iran and expanding them with the West.²⁷ But Moscow decisively ended that by threatening to withdraw support for Armenia in Nagorno Karabakh if it signed an Association Agreement with the EU. Armenian analysts may talk about an Armenian version of Finlandization but they are only deceiving themselves.²⁸ Armenia today bears little or no resemblance to the Finland of the Cold War period. And even Finlandization did not prevent Moscow from including the seizure of Helsinki and Finland as a military goal in the event of a European war.

Thus Armenia has become a prisoner of its own success in the earlier phases of the Nagorno Karabakh war and is being dragged even further against its will into an apparent satellization process vis-à-vis Russia. This is all the more striking when one reads the recent statement by the Commander of Russian troops in Armenia who told an interviewer that if Azerbaijan sought to restore control over Nagorno Karabakh by force the Russian military group at the base in Gyumri, might join the war on Armenia's side in accordance with Russia's obligation as a member of the CSTO.²⁹ This posture is despite the fact that Russia exploits both sides, so neither of them can count on it to reliably protect their interests.

In this context it is not surprising Georgian commentators openly worried, even before the invasion of Crimea, that Russia will unleash its economic power against Georgia as it did against Ukraine for gravitating toward the EU or that if it is not stopped in Crimea it will come next for Moldova and Georgia. The Crimean affair has only intensified concerns of a future operation against Georgia.³⁰ The Russian threats to Caucasian and by extension European security are not merely confined to Russia's forcible integration of states into its Eurasian Union. It also includes the creeping annexation of Abkhazia

²⁷Sergei Minasyan, *Explaining Multi-Vectorism in the Foreign Policy of Post-Soviet Eurasian States*. Demokratiztsiya, Vol. XX, No. 3, Summer, 2012, pp. 269-270.

²⁸Minasyan, *Finlandization of the Post-Soviet Sphere*, Russia in Global Affairs.

²⁹Joshua Kucera, *Russian Officer: We Would Intervene in Karabakh Against Azerbaijan*, Eurasia Insight, November 1, 2013. Available at: <http://www.eurasianet.org/node/67712>

³⁰*Georgia Fears Russia Will Not Stop at Crimea*, March 11, 2014. Available at: <http://www.turkishpress.com/news/394025>; *Tbilisi Fears Pressure From Russia*, Kyiv Post, December 27, 2013. Available at: <https://www.kyivpost.com/content/ukraine/tbilisi-fears-pressure-from-russia-334331.html#>

and South Ossetia and continuing pressure on Georgia.³¹ Georgia's Prime Minister Irakly Garibashvili, may boast that Moscow will not and cannot put much pressure on Georgia by repeating the "Ukrainian scenario" in Georgia although Russia has previously waged bitter economic warfare against Georgia. Georgia is not as dependent on Russia as is Ukraine, but the military instruments, and creeping annexation of Abkhazia and South Ossetia arguably belie such misplaced optimism.³²

If anything, Moscow is steadily moving forward on incorporating those areas into its formal political structure. In 2013, *Izvestiya* newspaper reported Moscow was pondering creating a defensive perimeter for the Sochi Olympics along the borders of both Abkhazia and Kabardino-Balkaria that would appear to put them on an equal administrative footing under Russian control. Such actions are not taken lightly by Russia as it fully grasps their significance.³³ Tbilisi may be setting its sights on a NATO membership action plan rather than membership but neither is likely anytime soon, especially if the Abkhaz and South Ossetian situations are not overcome and resolved, another thing Moscow fully grasps. Neither is NATO likely to take much stock in Georgian claims that failure to gain even a plan or to give it a MAP until those conflicts are resolved could undermine domestic stability in Georgia, may only encourage Moscow in its obduracy and neo-imperial policies, and do nothing for Georgian security.³⁴ Although NATO has built a training camp in Georgia to signify its intentions, it will be a long time before Georgia can count on NATO for something more than symbolic support. Meanwhile Moscow shows no sign of relenting on its territorial grab and insists that it is up to Georgia to reopen relations, a precondition of any conflict resolution. But such "normalization" is inconceivable in Georgia as long as Russia occupies Georgian territory. Hence we have

³¹Joshua Kucera, *Sochi Olympics "Security Zone" Extended Into Abkhazia*, Eurasia Insight, January 20, 2014. Available at: <http://www.eurasianet.org/node/67956>

³²*Interfax*, Moscow (in English), January 16, 2014, *FBIS SOV*, January 16, 2014; *Kvinis Paltra* (in Georgian), Tbilisi, December 23, *FBIS SOV*, December 24, 2013.

³³Paul Goble, *Is Moscow Equating Kabardino-Balkaria and Abkhazia?* Available at: www.jamestown.org Blog, January 17, 2014.

³⁴*Georgia Sets Sights on NATO Membership Action Plan*, Radio Free Europe–Radio Liberty, January 16, 2014.

a standoff that only benefits Russia, prevents conflict resolution and leaves open the recurrent possibility of a new Russo-Georgian war.³⁵

Ethnic and internal threats to security in the Caucasus

But Russian machinations against the integrity and sovereignty of the South Caucasian states do not end here. Given the complex ethnic makeup of the Caucasus, the ensuing possibilities for tension offer Moscow many opportunities for exploiting those potential seats of tension, an art that Moscow has long since mastered. In 2008, Vafa Guluzade observed that President Medvedev's visit to Azerbaijan was preceded by deliberate Russian incitement of the Lezgin and Avar ethnic minorities there to induce Azerbaijan to accept Russia's gas proposals.³⁶ Such policies appear to be systematic on Russia's part. It has intermittently encouraged separatist movement among the Armenian Javakhetian minority in Georgia and all but taken control of the Crimea for potential use against Ukraine.³⁷ And, as noted above, it admitted using separatists to plan the war against Georgia in 2008. Russia states it has no claims on Azerbaijani territories but articles in the Russian press have advocated government action to protect these Azerbaijani minorities as Russian citizens to punish Azerbaijan for flirting with NATO.³⁸

In 2013, in advance of the most recent Presidential election a group of billionaires created a so called "National Council" that was widely believed to be a Muscovite creation, in line with Moscow's efforts to create similar pro-Moscow political parties in other post-

³⁵*Interfax*, Moscow (in English), January 21, 2014, *FBIS SOV*, January 21, 2014; *Rossiya 24 TV* (in Russian), Moscow, January 21, 2014, *FBIS SOV*, January 21, 2014.

³⁶*Kavkazskiy Uzel* (in Russian), June 19, 2008, *FBIS SOV*, June 19, 2008.

³⁷Maciej Falkowski, *Russia's Policy in the Southern Caucasus and Central Asia*, Centre for Eastern Studies Warsaw, www.osw.waw.pl, 2006, p. 56; William Varretoni, *Sweetness of the Status Quo: Strategic Patience and the Technology of Russia's Capture of Crimea*, Paper Presented to the Annual Convention of the Association for the Study of Nationalities, Columbia University, New York, April 15, 2010; Lada Roslycky, *The Soft Side of Dark Power: a Study in Soft Power, National Security and the Political-Criminal Nexus With a Special Focus on the Post-Soviet Political-Criminal Nexus, the Russian Black Sea Fleet and Separatism in the Autonomous Republic of Crimea*, Doctoral Dissertation, University of Groningen, 2011.

³⁸*Interfax*, Moscow (in English), February 13, 2011, *FBIS SOV*, February 13, 2011; *Novoye Delo*, Makhachkala, (in Russian), August 29, 2008, *FBIS SOV*, August 29, 2008.

Soviet states.³⁹ This tactic has appeared in both Azerbaijan and Ukraine and the effort to create a pro-Russia party in neighboring states is a hallmark of Russian imperialism dating back to the Tsars.⁴⁰ Essentially this example, as well as the others, represents the continuation of the Tsarist idea of exploiting divisions within a targeted country so that there is always a pro-Russian faction or party waiting in the wings or on stager that could serve as an alternative to a targeted country's regime if it proves to be excessively uncooperative with Russia.

This operation acquires more importance in the light of the recent massive demonstrations in Armenia against price hikes for electricity. Moscow increasingly voiced its paranoid apprehensions that these demonstrations were the work of the US and NATO, warned that it might use force, and pressured Yerevan into suppressing them.⁴¹ It did the same thing in Ukraine before and after the fall of the Yanukovich regime in 2013-2014, which it explicitly regards as a kind of American-inspired coup d'etat. Thus we see a pattern wherein Moscow insists on freezing the status quo in all of its desired client states to the point where the domestic political system cannot deal with its own self-generated crises. At that point Moscow either threatens to intervene in order to compel even more subordination to Moscow and curtail the country's independence. Or else Russia intervenes massively itself because matters have gotten out of control—exactly as occurred in the numerous and repetitive Warsaw Pact crises after 1953 and in Ukraine in 2014. Thus there is a constant threat that if the government in Azerbaijan does not liberalize, it will eventually confront a crisis that it cannot deal with: this will lead Moscow to intervene or pressure the government to intervene or create its own pro-Muscovite political if not military force in the country. Neither can we consider Armenia a paragon of stability. Indeed, its inclusion in the Russian economic sphere ensures perpetual backwardness and crises.

At the same time if a political opposition cannot be created in a targeted state an ethnic one can and may then be manufactured as we have seen above. More recently it appears that Moscow has raised the

³⁹Baki Xabar, Baku (in Azerbaijani), May 30, 2013, *FBIS SOV*, May 30, 2013.

⁴⁰John P. LeDonne, *The Russian Empire and the World, 1700-1917*, New York: Oxford University Press, 1997.

⁴¹Stephen Blank, *Armenia's Lessons For Russia*, July 1, 2015. Available at: <http://www.interpretermag.com/armenias-lessons-for-russia/>; *Russian Foreign Minister Lavrov Warns Against Politicization of Armenian Protests*, *Reuters*, July 2, 2015.

idea of the small Talysh Shiite and Iranian speaking minority in Azerbaijan as having never belonged to it through the medium of so called "historical" debates. As Vladimir Socor observes, "Why is a Russian nationalist site pushing this idea now? At least three possible reasons exist, and each of them should be a matter of concern to anyone worried about stability in the South Caucasus. First, Russia may be nervous that Iran is itself stepping up activities among the Talysh, and Moscow wants to counter that trend. Second, the Russian government may feel that backing an anti-Baku movement now will improve its standing in Armenia given the continuing tensions over the murder in Gyumri (where a Russian soldier murdered an Armenian family). And third, the Kremlin may want to send a signal to Baku that Moscow has resources within Azerbaijan that it is quite prepared to put in play, if Azerbaijan does not go along with Russia's wishes."⁴²

It is also possible that recent tensions that have erupted in the city and vicinity of Derbent in Dagestan can be interpreted either as Islamist incitement against Azerbaijan or as a part of a Russian plot to exploit tensions in neighboring Dagestan to upset conditions in Azerbaijan.⁴³

Russia also disposes of considerable economic-political if not economic-military instruments with which it tries to persuade Azerbaijan to move towards its political line. In the past it has made veiled threats against Azerbaijan and potential partners like Turkmenistan if they try to ship Central Asian gas westward while bypassing Russia.

On October 19, 2011, Turkmenistan's Foreign Ministry blasted Russia's politicized objections to its participating in a Trans-Caspian pipeline (TCP), stated that such a pipeline was an objective vital economic interest of Turkmenistan, rebuked Moscow for "distorting the essence and gist of Turkmenistan's energy policy," and announced that the discussions with Europe over this pipeline would continue.⁴⁴ Moscow's reply came soon. On November 15, 2011, Valery Yezov, Vice Speaker of the Russian Duma and head of the Russian Gas Society, openly threatened Turkmenistan with the Russian incitement of an "Arab Spring" if it did not renounce its "neutrality" and independent sovereign foreign policy, including its desire to align with

⁴²Vladimir Socor, *Is Moscow Putting the Talysh in Play Against Azerbaijan?* Eurasia Daily Monitor, February 3, 2015.

⁴³Valery Dzutsev, *Ethnic Conflict In Dagestan Could internationalize Rift With Azerbaijanis*, Eurasia Daily Monitor, January 26, 2015.

⁴⁴*Interfax*, Moscow (in English), October 19, 2011, *FBIS SOV*, November 19, 2011.

Nabucco. Yazev said that, "Given the instructive experience with UN resolutions on Libya and the political consequences of their being 'shielded from the air' by NATO forces, Turkmenistan will soon understand that only the principled positions of Russia and China in the UN Security Council and its involvement in regional international organizations – such as the SCO (Shanghai Cooperation Organization), CSTO (Collective Security Treaty Organization), Eurasian Economic Union – can protect it from similar resolutions."⁴⁵

In other words, Turkmenistan should surrender its neutrality and independent foreign policy and not ship gas to Europe otherwise Moscow will incite a revolution there leading to chaos. Other Russian analysts and officials threatened that if Turkmenistan adheres to the EU's planned Southern Corridor for energy transshipments to Europe that bypasses Russia, Moscow would have no choice but to do to Turkmenistan what it did to Georgia in 2008.⁴⁶

Among the other economic instruments that could be used to pressure Azerbaijan are remittances from Azeri workers in Russia, the "lure" of the Customs Union and Eurasian Economic Union – the centerpiece of Putin's CIS economic policy –, and the division of the Caspian Sea for purposes of commercial exploitation.⁴⁷

As regards the Eurasian Customs Union, the centerpiece of Moscow's hegemonic economic designs for the CIS, Azerbaijan has on principle refused to join multinational organizations where its sovereignty would be compromised by Russia and this institution compromises it more than most.⁴⁸ Russian political figures and media, however, continue to express not only their desire to see Azerbaijan

⁴⁵Senior MP Advises Turkmenistan to Stick with Russia to Avoid Libya's Fate. *Interfax*, Moscow, November 15, 2011. Also available from *BBC Monitoring*.

⁴⁶Vladimir Socor, *Moscow Issues Trans-Caspian Project Warning*, Asia Times Online, December 2, 2011, www.atimes.com

⁴⁷For example, Azerbaijan has approximately two million citizens working in Russia, sending 2.5 billion USD back home – 10% of GDP. The Azeri population resident in Russia constitutes a particularly strong form of leverage insofar as Russia has threatened to deport illegal workers and impose a visa regime. James Nixey, *The Long Goodbye: Waning Russian Influence in the South Caucasus and Central Asia*, London, Royal Institute of International Affairs (Chatham House), 2012, p. 6.

⁴⁸Sergey Markedonov, *The Caucasian Factor in Eurasian Integration*, Russia in Global Affairs, March 21, 2014. <http://eng.globalaffairs.ru/number/The-Caucasian-Factor-in-Eurasian-Integration-16500>; Anar Valiyev, *Azerbaijan's Elite between Scylla and Charybdis EU OR CUSTOMS UNION?* Program on New Approaches to Russian Society, PONARS Eurasia Policy Memo No. 309, February 2014.

join this union but their belief that it will. In other words there is a steady campaign to exercise pressure on Baku to make this decision that would undermine its economic and foreign policy independence.⁴⁹ And as we have seen from the foregoing, the lure is the possibility of Russian support on Nagorno Karabakh that would almost certainly be and is seen as a snare by which Azerbaijan in fact loses its sovereignty and independence.

At the same time we should not overlook Russia's more hidden efforts and pressures to preserve former Soviet republics in general in anti-democratic forms of power lest the domestic contagion seep into Russia and to make sure that Moscow's men rule in these places. Already a decade ago we could see an alternative Russian model opposed to that of the liberal values inherent in the EU and Westernization project taking shape. By 2003 European scholars observed a process of conflict resolution for the "near abroad" that they called Russification.⁵⁰ Although they were discussing Transnistria and Abkhazia, the process can be applied as well throughout the Balkans. By Russification they meant not only the integration of targeted areas' domestic structures with those of the Russian Federation, but also a process aiming to stall if not reverse the movement towards democratic governance, the genuine self-determination of the people as an active political subject, and the rule of law. Mature Putinism, the contemporary crystallized version of this model, is a regime that is authoritarian, wholly corrupted, disdainful of checks and balances, increasingly willing to use repressive force to stay in power, criminalized, and riven by informal deals and understandings among elites. Consequently these experts already saw in 2003 the rivalry between East and West as leading to a stalemate that has now fully crystallized.⁵¹

⁴⁹*Russia Expects Azerbaijan's Accession to Eurasian Customs Union Jointly With Turkey*. Available at: <http://en.trend.az/business/economy/2200218.html>, October 11, 2013; *Azerbaijan May Become Part of Eurasec or Customs Union – Russian Minister*, *The Voice of Russia*, June 17, 2014. Available at: http://sputniknews.com/voiceofrussia/news/2014_06_17/Azerbaijan-may-become-part-of-Eurasec-or-Customs-Union-Russian-minister-2795; *Chairman of the Russian State Duma Committee for CIS Affairs: "We Hope Azerbaijan Will Join the Customs Union."* Available at: www.en.apa.az, December 4, 2013.

⁵⁰Bruno Coppetiers, Michel Huysseune, Michael Emerson, Nathalie Tocci, and Marius Vahl, *European Institutional Models as Instruments of Conflict Resolution in the Divided States of the European Periphery*. CEPS Working Document, No. 195, Centre for European Policy Studies, Brussels, 2003, p. 12.

⁵¹*Ibid.*, pp. 12-13.

We see this trend not only in Armenia but also in Azerbaijan which has become progressively more repressive and authoritarian and seems intent on further distancing itself from the West along Russian lines and rejecting Europe and European criticisms of its policies.⁵² At the same time there apparently are many pro-Moscow officials in the Azerbaijani government who care not about human rights and regard the American critiques as merely another reason for inclining to Moscow and cracking down further on dissent.⁵³ Evidently these elements within the Azeri regime would be happy to shut down productive relations with Washington and attach Azerbaijan in some measure to Russia's projected security bloc.

Therefore we should not lose sight either of Russia's overt or less visible efforts to influence and subvert the governments of the Caucasus even as we also should not overlook the fact that the Russian law permits the president to dispatch troops abroad to defend the "honor and dignity" of other Russians (a group who can be fabricated out of thin air e.g. by means of Russia' preexisting "passportization" policy) without any Parliamentary debate or accountability.⁵⁴ Putin did not even need the legislative farce of a request or law calling for intervention in Crimea and in any event probably preempted it by ordering troop movements on February 26-27, 2014. Moscow may now claim to have new ideas about resolving Nagorno Karabakh but it is doubtful they will facilitate conflict resolution rather than further extend Moscow's hegemonic drive here.⁵⁵

European governments know full well that a revitalized Russian empire represents a fundamental threat to European security as such. Therefore the outbreak of war in Europe and Eurasia cannot be ruled out and security throughout this expanse cannot be taken for granted. Indeed, when major demonstrations broke out in Kyiv in January, 2014, the Russian media began publishing articles claiming

⁵²Giorgi Lomsadze and Elizabeth Owen, *Azerbaijan to Sue French TV for Calling Ilham Aliyev a "Dictator,"* Eurasia Insight, September 10, 2015. Available at: <http://www.eurasianet.org/node/75021>

⁵³Joshua Kucera, *After Foreign Navies "Banned" From Caspian, U.S. and Azerbaijan Push Back,* Eurasia Insight, October 2, 2014. Available at: <http://www.eurasianet.org/node/70276>

⁵⁴Yuri E. Fedorov, *Medvedev's Amendments to the Law on Defence: The Consequences For Europe,* Finnish Institute of International Affairs, Briefing Paper No. 47, November 2009.

⁵⁵*Interfax*, Moscow (in English), January 21, 2014; *Pen Source Center, Foreign Broadcast Information Service*, Central Eurasia, (Hence forth FBIS SOV), January 21, 2014.

partition of Ukraine – an outcome only conceivable if force is used – was no longer inconceivable or off the table. Other writers similarly now warn of a civil war there.⁵⁶ Therefore governance or even state failure in the Caucasus could easily serve as a pretext for another Russian military intervention there. Thus what ultimately is at stake in Ukraine and in the Caucasus' many unresolved conflicts, such as Nagorno Karabakh, is the overall structure of security in Eurasia and Europe as a whole. For as was already apparent in the 1990s; the security of the Transcaucasus and that of Europe are ultimately indivisible.⁵⁷

This point assumes greater importance for, in the wake of the invasion of Ukraine, it appears that, "Moscow is seeking to enmesh other breakway territories (apart from Ukraine, i.e in the Caucasus – S.B.) into a deeper and more formalized set of economic, legal, and political networks under its control. In other words, the crisis appears to have initiated another stage in the broader evolution of the *de facto* states: the move away from their 'formal independence' towards closer legal and political association with Russia under an emerging new regional rubric."⁵⁸

Thus the continuing trajectory of Russian policy in the Caucasus is an imperial one. And in contemporary conditions, as we can all see, empire means war. Given the conjuncture of domestic misrule with external imperial policies based on stimulating and trying thereby to manage conflict while enlarging Russian territory is bound, sooner or later, to lead to more violence. That violence can be intra-state or inter-state violence or a combination of both. But given the fires raging next to the Caucasus in Ukraine, the North Caucasus, and Middle East can we really say that peace and security are in the offing here?

⁵⁶Russian International Affairs Council, Moscow, in English, January 31, 2014, *FBIS SOV*, January 31, 2014.

⁵⁷Stephen Blank, *Russia and Europe in the Caucasus*, European Security, Vol. IV, No. 4, Winter, 1995, pp. 622-645; Robert Legvold, *Introduction: Outlining the Challenge*. In: Bruno Coppieters and Robert Legvold, Eds., *Statehood and Security: Georgia After the Rose Revolution*, Cambridge, MA: and London: MIT Press, 2005, p. 29.

⁵⁸Alexander Cooley, *Scripts of Sovereignty*, p. 20.