

Russia's Role in the Big Caucasus in the Shadow of Ukraine and the Middle East

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The Big Caucasus: the main political trends

At present the political situation in the Caucasian region has been pushed off from the news agenda by the events related to the Middle East and Ukraine. However, despite the shift of attention of experts and diplomats, this region still preserves its strategic importance.

First, it is worth mentioning the unresolved conflicts and, in particular, the Nagorno Karabakh confrontation, where the number of armed incidents (not only along the contact line of the parties, but also along the Armenian-Azerbaijani border beyond the conflict region) is growing.¹ Unlike Nagorno Karabakh, the situation in Abkhazia and South Ossetia seems relatively quiet. Two partly recognized republics have received political-military guarantees and socio-economic assistance from Russia, and Tbilisi, despite the official rhetoric on restoration of the territorial integrity as the utmost priority, does not make any effort to reestablish its jurisdiction over Sukhumi and Tskhinvali. It is necessary to admit that the Abkhazian and South Ossetian choice has strengthened Georgia's ties with the US, NATO, and the EU. The *Georgian Dream* Government has not reviewed the pro-Western vector of the Mikheil Saakashvili administration; quite contrary, it made it stronger. At the same time, the South Ossetian actions aimed at a delimiting the border (the process is also known as 'borderization') and supported by Moscow, cause suspicions in Georgia and the West that Russia is advancing into the Georgian territory proper.

Second, Russia and the US still consider the South Caucasus as an area for their geopolitical competition, and the Ukrainian events have just casted some shadow but not made this fact fade away. For

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¹On November 12, 2014, Azerbaijani armed forces shot down an Armenian military helicopter Mi-24 (three members of the crew died). It has been the first case of destruction of an air fighting vehicle since May 1994, if an Iranian military transport plane, which took the wrong route and was shot down, is not taken into account. Available at: <http://www.kavkaz-uzel.ru/articles/252305/>

Washington, this region seems interesting in the context of the "energy pluralism," as an alternative supplier of Europe with gas and oil, as well as a leverage for containment of Tehran's and Moscow's ambitions. The Russian Federation, which includes also seven republics of the North Caucasus, views the developments in the neighboring countries on the other side of the Caucasus mountain range as a continuation of its domestic political agenda, especially in the security sphere.

Third, beside already existing problems, the role of so-called background factors has significantly grown. First of all, the threat coming from the "Islamic State" (IS), must be pointed out. The Middle East *Jihadist* structures, such as *Al-Qaeda*, had never declared the Caucasus a sphere of their interests or a priority region, but in the summer, 2014, the IS representatives issued a relevant statement; currently a significant number of its leaders are of the Caucasian origin.²

The Ukrainian crisis has raised the competition between the European and Eurasian integration to a higher level. A part of post-Soviet states chose to sign Association Agreements (including DCFTA) with the European Union, some others joined the Eurasian Economic Union under Russia's aegis and, finally, some of these states (for example, Azerbaijan) decided to balance between various integration projects. At the same time Armenia, Georgia, Moldova, and Ukraine are engaged into ethnic-political conflicts, and they consider the integration possibilities, *inter alia*, as an additional tool. The crisis in Ukraine has instigated the intensification of contacts between Georgia and NATO. And although Tbilisi has not obtained the NATO' MAP (Membership Action Plan), the package of "enhanced cooperation" with the North Atlantic Alliance has already been granted to it. In August 2015, the Joint Training Center was opened in Krtsanisi to train Georgian officers and the military, both from NATO member and its partner states.³

The Eurasian integration of Armenia, corresponding to Russian interests, faces some development problems against the background of the socio-economic crisis, the Western sanctions against Russia and not so good or adequate management of big Russian companies, operating in the republic. The stake of Armenian authorities on the

²Sergey Markedonov, *The Islamic State – a threat to the Big Caucasus*, November 9, 2015. Available at: http://russiancouncil.ru/inner/?id_4=6823#top-content

³Available at: <http://www.memo.ru/d/245378.html>

Eurasian vector is considered quite ambiguously inside Armenia as well: the opposition to Serzh Sargsyan (and bureaucratic *Fronde* in the structures of governance) insists that the Armenian President gave up the principle of *complementarity* in the foreign policy.⁴

Russia's cooperation with two partly recognized republics (Abkhazia and South Ossetia) is no less important for its interests. When Georgia made next steps to solidify a pro-Western vector of its foreign policy, the moods in the two mentioned state entities for increasing cooperation with Russia and, as a matter of fact, handing over the functions of their security, protection of borders and defense to Russia, became even stronger. However, in Abkhazia it is accompanied with concerns on the "complete loss of sovereignty," meanwhile South Ossetia is displeased with Moscow's unwillingness to multiply the Crimean scenario and let it unite with the Northern Ossetia under the aegis of the Russian Federation.⁵

Russia-Georgia: strategic differences
against the background of tactical shifts

Parliamentary and presidential elections, which were held in Georgia in October, 2012, and October, 2013, respectively, significantly changed the internal political landscape of this state. The ten-year rule of President Mikheil Saakashvili came to an end. In that period the Russian-Georgian relations had reached the lowest point since the collapse of the Soviet Union. It is just in the time of his tenure Georgia broke diplomatic relations with Russia, two countries lived through a short five-day open military conflict. With the recognition of independence of Abkhazia and South Ossetia, the first – since 1991 – precedent for the of revision of borders between two former Soviet republics had been created. When President Saakashvili and his *United National Movement* party left power, some changes occurred in Russian-Georgian relationships. However, they were (and still are) tactical and selective: the new Georgian authorities, representing the *Georgian Dream* party have kept the adherence to strategic approaches of the former government, such as continuation and strengthening of integration ties with NATO and the European Union. It is just the new leaders, who first initialed (in November, 2013) and then ratified (in the summer, 2014) the Association

⁴Sergey Markedonov, *The Lessons of Armenia for Russia*, October 25, 2015. Available at: http://russiancouncil.ru/inner/?id_4=6753#topcontent

⁵Available at: http://www.minchenko.ru/netcat_files/File/Political%20risks%20in%20the%20South%20Caucasus%20region.pdf

Agreement with the EU. It extended participation of the Georgian military unit in the NATO operation in Afghanistan; the Government also expressed the readiness to take part in an operation under the EU aegis in the Central Africa (even without any progress in liberalization of the visa regime for Georgian citizens).

In the meantime, the *Georgian Dream* team, unlike the Saakashvili administration, have made some serious changes in the tactics. The strategic goal, i.e. membership in NATO and the EU, is now seen not through a head-on confrontation with Russia, but through a pragmatic approach to the relationships with Moscow. This policy has provided some evident results:

- A stopping the confrontation rhetoric and the use of Russia as a factor for domestic political mobilization by Georgian authorities;

- Tbilisi's refusal from supporting the North Caucasian nationalist movements and engaging in political alliance with them based on Georgia's positioning itself as a "Caucasian alternative" to Russia;

- Declaration of readiness for cooperation in security area during the Sochi Olympic Games;

- Establishment of a direct dialog between Georgian and Russian representatives, free from initiation and discussion of status debates regarding Abkhazia and South Ossetia (within the format of meetings between Grigory Karasin and Zurab Abashidze).

The Russian side opened a market for Georgian goods (alcohol, mineral waters, citruses) and eased the visa regime for Georgian carriers (drivers).

Despite the public support to the territorial integrity of Ukraine and condemnation of the "annexation" of Crimea, Georgia refused "tying up" its policy to the Ukrainian crisis.

However, the existence of contradictions related to the status of two partly recognized republics and different approaches to the engagement of NATO and the EU in the Caucasian affairs ("red lines"), has led to a quick exhaustion of the primary agenda of the Russian-Georgian normalization. Actually, currently the only issue for possible cooperation of the two states remains the anti-terrorist cooperation, taking into account the increasing radicalization of population in the Akhmeta region (Pankisi Gorge) of Georgia, bordering the Russian Federation, and the engagement of some people from this area into Islamist movements in Syria and Iraq, first of all in the Islamic State.

Nagorno Karabakh: the menacing escalation

In the recent two years the situation in the area of the Nagorno Karabakh conflict has been seriously aggravated. Incidents have been registered both on the contact line of the parties to the conflict and on the Armenian-Azerbaijani border, in the areas not considered in official documents of the peace process ("renewed Madrid Principles") as a part of the ethno-political conflict. They have become the most large-scale cases of violation of the cease-fire regime in the entire period of the truce.

Such escalation is fraught with the following serious threats. First, breaking down of the *status quo* and resumption of military actions with possible foreign engagement into the conflict (taking into account the strategic nature of military and political partnership between Baku and Ankara). Second, although the attack against infrastructure of the unrecognized Nagorno Karabakh Republic (NKR) may be formally considered as an action against separatists, the spillover of hostilities to the Armenian territory will force activating the mechanisms of the Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO) due to Armenia's membership in it. However, such a decision will most probably not have a unanimous support within the CSTO, taking into consideration the stable cooperation between Baku and Astana, Minsk and Baku, as well as special positions of Nursultan Nazarbayev and Aleksandr Lukashenko in the Eurasian integration. Furthermore, it may have a negative impact on the dynamic of Eurasian integration, which potentially might pose additional risk for Russian foreign policy.

The outburst of violence in Nagorno Karabakh and on the Armenian-Azerbaijani border mostly became possible due to the increasing confrontation between Russia and the Western states, which – unlike in the case of "Georgian" conflicts – have successfully cooperated in the settlement of the Nagorno Karabakh conflict for many years. Actually, it is possible to argue about the attempts of parties to the conflict to test the readiness of the OSCE Minsk Group co-chair states – the US, France, and Russia, for a joint reaction to armed incidents and for keeping a unified approach on holding negotiations and ensuring the peace process as a whole.

Nevertheless, since the outbreak of the Ukrainian crisis each member of the Minsk Group intends to hold its own peace-making activity. The US diplomat James Warlick's statement with "settlement elements," presented as a plan of the US Government, but not as a coordinated line of the three mediators, and the debates on the Act on

Prevention of Russian aggression in the Congress (which also covered Azerbaijan). In September, 2014, the leaders of two South Caucasus republics held talks with the State Secretary John Kerry on the margins of the NATO summit in Newport. In turn, Russia initiated a three-party meeting of the Russian, Armenian, and Azerbaijani Presidents in Sochi in August, 2014; and France organized another meeting in November of the same year. However, up to date, the Russian leadership has not principally changed any of its previous approaches to the Nagorno Karabakh conflict settlement (the NKR status, the role of the Minsk Group and Russia's participation in it). The Russian government has only made an insignificant correction, actually offering a three-party meeting with participation of the Russian leader as an additional format for negotiations. However, after the Sochi meeting this idea has not been consistently fulfilled; it rather can be considered as a declaration of intentions. Anyway, the problem of cooperation of three Co-chair states in case of repetition of incidents similar to those which happened in the summer of 2015, remains topical.

Armenia and the Eurasian integration: gains and costs

In January, 2015, Armenia officially joined the Eurasian Economic Union (EAEU). This South Caucasian state is traditionally considered the key political and military ally of Russia in the region. However, this thesis reflects only external contours of those complex processes of the choice between the Euro-Atlantic and Eurasian integration taking place in the Trans-Caucasus nowadays. Besides, there are also substantial nuances.

Up to September, 2013, the Armenian leadership could not decide which integration vector to choose. The skepticism of some high-ranking officials concerning the Customs Union and Eurasian integration (former Prime Minister Tigran Sargsyan, who resigned in early April, 2015, and some high-ranking diplomats, including Deputy Minister of Foreign Affairs Shavarsh Kocharyan were among them) was explained by a number of reasons, including the absence of common border with Russia and dependence from the "Georgian window" to the outside world (two thirds of Armenian exports and imports have been moving through this "window"), and the need of diversifying foreign policy to prevent the unilateral strengthening of Azerbaijan's positions in the West.

Some "technical problems" are still topical (actually, they are very important for the domestic Armenian policy); for example, the issue of customs tariffs, to say nothing of the fear of losses owing to

the West's sanctions against the Russian Federation. At the same time, opponents of the Serzh Sargsyan administration also spread their critical attitude to the Kremlin, which provides support to the Armenian President. Among the political forces of this wing are in particular the "Civil Contract," Free Democrats, and the "Heritage" parties. The mentioned factor is extremely important against the background of the constitutional reforms, which have raised controversial opinions in the Armenian society and political circles.

Armenia's choice for the Eurasian integration was also accompanied by skepticism of some strategic partners of Russia. And although President of Kazakhstan Nazarbayev has already taken away his concerns on Armenia's membership in the EAEU, one cannot rule out that this discontent may continue to exist in a "sleeping condition:" in case of any escalation of the Nagorno Karabakh conflict or resumption of hostilities between Armenia and Azerbaijan, the Kazakhstani position may be articulated with utmost precision.

Azerbaijan: partnership without overrated expectations

The relations between Moscow and Baku suffered some downfall after their failure to reach a compromise over prolongation of exploitation of the Gabala radar station, however since 2013 they have begun to improve again.

Unlike Georgia, Azerbaijan does not aim to become a NATO member. At present this Caspian republic is a member of the Non-Alignment Movement. Being a Muslim country, Azerbaijan is extremely watchful concerning the Western policy of democratization of the Broader Middle East (first of all, meaning the perspectives of its engagement into confrontation with neighboring Iran). As a consequence, the leadership of this state is interested in maintaining cooperation with Russia.

Azerbaijan highly evaluates the trans-border cooperation with Russian Federation in the combat against terrorism (two states share a common border at the Dagestani area). Azerbaijan and Russia display common approaches to the status of the Caspian Sea. They have developed a very active military-technical cooperation.⁶ Intensive

⁶In 2010–2012, a number of contract packages were signed on arms supply from Russia to Azerbaijan. In 2013, the implementation of agreements of 2011–2012 started. During Vladimir Putin's visit in Baku (2013) this sphere was announced as one of priorities of the bilateral cooperation in the future. In the process of the visit of Russian Defense Minister Sergey Shoygu (October, 2014) an agreement was reached on joined Russian-Azerbaijani military exercises in the Caspian Sea.

purchases of Russian arms by Baku have actually become a good compensation for Moscow for pro-Western elements in the Azerbaijani energy policy. They demonstrated that Russia is not a potential adversary for Azerbaijan in the Nagorno Karabakh conflict despite Russian security guarantees for the territory of Armenia proper (both at the bilateral Russian-Armenian level and within the CSTO framework). At the same time these actions created an active displeasure in the Armenian society and political circles, hence in any escalation of violence in Nagorno Karabakh this topic in the Russian-Armenian relations becomes definitely actual.

Unlike the Western states, Russia does not criticize the Azerbaijani domestic political standards (especially related to parliamentary and presidential elections). Hence, the Russian position is an important factor for the international legitimization of political reality in this Caspian state, and it is highly appreciated by official Baku.

However, their bilateral partnership has also strict limitations. First, Azerbaijan tries to play its own role in the regional energy projects, presenting itself as a partner of the West. Second, Baku firmly and consistently supports the territorial integrity of both Georgia and Ukraine. It is worth mentioning that on March 27, 2014, Azerbaijan voted at the UN General Assembly for a resolution, supporting the territorial integrity of Ukraine and considering the referendum in Crimea as illegal. Third, this Caspian state has no intention to join Eurasian integration projects under the Moscow patronage. Meanwhile, Russia itself tries to implement an integration that would not resemble the CIS ("a tool for a civilized divorce"). Unless the Nagorno Karabakh conflict is settled, the joint presence of Armenia and Azerbaijan in one integration structure will reduce its efficiency to a zero.

Moscow and the partly recognized republics:

strengthening Russian influence and the factors of hidden dissatisfaction

Strengthening of the pro-Western vector of the Georgian foreign policy has led to the political radicalization in Abkhazia and South Ossetia. On June 8, 2014, the *United Ossetia* Party, consistently supporting the project of unification of the republic with the Northern Ossetia under the aegis and within the Russian Federation, won the parliamentary election in South Ossetia; its leader, Anatoly Bibilov, became speaker of the parliament. The extraordinary presidential election (August 24, 2014), held as a result of mass protests of the opposition (May 27, 2014) and the resignation of the head of the

republic Alexandr Ankvab, was won by the leader of *Forum of People's Unity of Abkhazia* Raul Hajinba. He supports intensification of the military and political cooperation with Russian Federation and practically complete freezing of contacts with Georgia.

The signing of bilateral treaties with Russia by Abkhazia and South Ossetia became key foreign policy events in the life of these two republics. The Russian-Abkhazian Treaty on cooperation and strategic partnership was signed on November 24, 2014, and the Russian-South Ossetian Treaty on alliance and integration was signed on March 18, 2015. And although these two documents strengthened the increasing military and political presence of Russia in the two partly recognized republics, they cannot be fully called a new milestone in their relationships. These documents formally fixed the configuration that came out in August, 2008, when Russia changed its status of a peace-maker into that of a patron and guarantor of the Abkhazian and South Ossetian security.

At the same time, these two treaties besides common features have also their peculiarities. In the Abkhazian case, the following collision was apparent: contradiction between the intention to build one's own national state project and the increasing dependence from the Russian military and financial assistance. The Abkhazian side tried to subject the document to revision aiming to preserve some preferences for itself. For example, Russians have not obtained the right to get the Abkhazian citizenship, the word 'integration' was excluded from the title of the document. To the contrary, the South Ossetian side was interested in the maximum possible integration with Russia, up to becoming a part of it (taking as an example the Crimea case). These discrepancies are explained by a fundamental difference in the two projects. Abkhazia tries to preserve its statehood (under the Russian military and political guarantees), meanwhile South Ossetia does not consider its independence an ultimate goal, but a transitional stage for unification with North Ossetia under the aegis of Russia. At the same time these two republics actually do not even consider the option to return under the Georgian jurisdiction. In the political agenda of Abkhazia and South Ossetia, the Georgian topic is not relevant anymore. It is now sidelined by the problem of quality of independence under the Russian aegis, as well as the price of the Russian influence. This issue is more topical in Abkhazia, seeking to maintain a certain freedom from the Russian presence (at least, from coming of the big business). Unlike Abkhazia, in South Ossetia there is

an interest in the more active direct engagement of Moscow, especially in the process of its rehabilitation after the 2008 war.

The Northern Caucasus: the foreign policy aspect

In 2015, the state of affairs in the North Caucasus, in comparison with 2013 and 2014, looks like more stable and quite. The number of terrorist acts keeps steadily decreasing. In the fourth quarter of 2014 there were 168 victims of terrorist acts and sabotage (101 persons were killed and 67 were wounded), however in the first quarter of 2015, the number of victims reduced to 50 people (killed - 31, wounded -19). In the second quarter 44 victims were registered, including 38 killed and 6 wounded people. Many leaders of the Islamist underground, in particular, the leader of the *Caucasus Emirate* Aliaskhab Kebekov, were killed.⁷

However, there are background factors, forcing to pay attention to this region of the Russian Federation. The so called Islamic State, which found itself in the focus of international attention in June, 2015 (when its forces occupied the strategically important Iraqi town of Mosul), issued statements with threats, addressed to Russia and its President. And although two focuses of the ISIS activity are Iraq and Syria, people from two South Caucasian states (Azerbaijan and Georgia) and North Caucasian republics are active members of its structures. One of the central personalities in this Syrian-Iraqi story is Umar (Omar) ash-Shishani.⁸

The armed violence in the North Caucasus has been considered a number of times in the context of possible foreign political threats for Russia. In 1990s-early 2000s, "Black Arab" Khattab (Habib Abdul Rahman, or "one-handed Ahmed") was a symbolic figure of the "Islamist International" in the North Caucasus. Such personalities as Abu Omar as-Seif, Abu Omar Kuwaiti (Abu Zeyt), Muhammad (Abu Anas), associated with *Al-Qaeda*, were seen in the North Caucasus. Abu Hafz al-Urdani made public his sympathy to Ben Laden, but has never identified himself with the well-known terrorist network. There were also some figures of less significance. At present, the anti-

⁷Available at: <https://www.kavkaz-uzel.ru/articles/261215/>

⁸This is a nickname of Tarkhan Batirashvili, who is a son of a Georgian father and Kistin mother (the Chechen population of Pankisi Gorge is called Kistins by Georgians). In 2008, he took a part in the "five-day war," after which he could not find himself in the military service. Afterwards he left for Turkey, then for the Middle East and joined the Islamic State. Available at: http://kavpolit.com/authors/arsen_ibragim-1615/

Russian movement in the North Caucasus operates under the slogan of "pure Islam," not ethnic separatism, and the substantially exhausted "Caucasus Emirate" actually starts moving under the wing of the Islamic State. By the end of 2014, a number of field commanders in the North Caucasus made public their support to the IS and swore an oath to its leader Abu Baqr al-Baghdadi. Splits within the North Caucasian sabotage-terrorist underground happened earlier as well (for example, in 2010, Doku Umarov had disagreements with some field commanders from Chechnya), but they did not spill over the borders of the region and passed without external powerful forces, even approximately comparable with the Islamic State. Hence the North Caucasian factor has become one of the triggers (far from being the only one) of the Russian involvement in the conflict in Syria⁹.

The IS sees in Russia and the West its enemies (despite serious contradictions between Moscow and Washington). Unfortunately, contradictions and different visions of many problems (from Georgia and Ukraine to the assessment of perspectives of deployment of the US anti-missile defense elements in Europe) do not allow the two states, facing similar challenges from *Jihadist* structures, to concentrate their efforts on cooperation strategies. Meanwhile, harsh differences of Russia and the US objectively contribute to consolidation of the "third forces" (first of all, such terrorist networks as the IS or *Jihad-an Nusra*), which are interested in weakening not only the West, but Russia as well.

Conclusion

Under the current circumstances it is extremely important for Russia to prevent risks in the Caucasus, which would allow it to concentrate on the promotion of its interests in Ukraine (where the prospects for European security as a whole are decided) and in Syria (where the stake is participation of the Russian Federation in the international anti-terrorist coalition as an equal partner).

In this regard, it seems extremely important to prevent a dramatic collapse of the available negotiations formats, such as the Geneva consultations on the situation in Georgia, Abkhazia and South Ossetia, and the negotiations on settlement of the Nagorno Karabakh conflict: these formats are channels of communication between the parties to the conflicts and all actors, engaged into the peace process.

⁹Alexey Malashenko, *Russia in Syria: successes and threats*, October 2, 2015. Available at: <http://carnegie.ru/2015/10/02/ru-61487/iigf>

In the Nagorno Karabakh conflict along with the current format of the OSCE Minsk Group, it is necessary to intensify the three-party negotiation process at the level of Russian, Armenian, and Azerbaijani Presidents. This format already proved itself in 2008-2012: it helped to hold Yerevan and Baku back from repeating the South Ossetian scenario, and even reach mutual agreements on humanitarian issues. Besides the increasing Russian participation, such a format would help to block the efforts of other members of the Minsk Group, especially the United States.

Diversification of the policy related to Abkhazia and South Ossetia, the elites of which have different views on the prospects of their existence, is also very important. At the same time, the coordination of these integration actions with Sukhumi and Tskhinvali should be held with a precise understanding that Russia has its own interests and reasons, and Moscow's position cannot be treated as just lobbying the Abkhazian and South Ossetian interests (in this sense, it would be useful to refrain from the Crimean-like implementation of United Ossetia plans).

In promotion of the EAEU integration project in Armenia, for Russia it is topical to build up relations with the entire political spectrum of the republic to prevent a sharp polarization within it based on evaluation of relationship with Russia and Eurasian integration. Constructive relations with the Armenian opposition should prevent its transformation into the US and EU tool on the eve of parliamentary elections of 2017 and presidential elections of 2018.

Building up a partnership with the United States and its allies to counter radical *Jihadism* in the Middle East (taking into consideration the impact of situation in this region on the North Caucasus) may also positively influence the regional security. And the last but not least, this cooperation can restrain various regional players from the temptation to "unfreeze" the conflicts.