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THE CAUCASUS

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Introduction

Whenever one is discussing Russia's insecurities and vulnerabilities, the Caucasus is frequently studied. The region has always had a special place in Russian history and geopolitics, and has been an inspiration for Russian literature from Alexander Pushkin to Mikhail Lermontov to Leo Tolstoy. A former part of the Great Silk Road, the Caucasus has historically been an arena for struggle and limited cooperation between three prime regional actors – Russia, Turkey, and Iran. The situation has been aggravated as great world powers turned their eyes to the region – first Great Britain (19th to 20th centuries), and Germany (during WWII) and later, the United States. In their struggle for control and influence in the region that possesses a colossal energy, logistics, and trade potential as well as overriding geostrategic significance, all of the contenders resorted to different means, leading at times to open confrontation.

Geographically, the Greater Caucasus Range divides the region into two parts – the Northern and the Southern Caucasus. But mountains here mean more than a geographic feature and a natural beauty. For centuries they have marked the borders for political entities, shaped cultural – and later political – identities, bred the sense of ethnic uniqueness that due to the natural barriers had to exist in isolation for millennia (Wertsch, 2013). Moreover, as nations in the region sought to revive their identities, some scholars introduced the geopolitical notion of “the Mountains” alongside those of “Sea” and “Land” (Ryabtsev, 2011: 19).

The rich cultural heritage of the region has been its blessing and its curse. There are about 50 peoples with distinctive cultures and languages (Topchishvili, 2011) while religion-wise, a very rough estimate of today's Caucasus say 57% are Christians (17 million people) and 43% are Muslims (13 million people).¹ This diverse plethora of actors on a relatively small territory of 400,000 sq km (40 million hectares) has inevitably led to their continuous social, cultural, and economic “interweaving.” It also has a high conflict potential both in the North and the South of the Caucasus, earning the region the notorious title of the “knot of contradictions” (Sukhankin, 2014).

With the collapse of the Soviet Union, the Caucasus has become portrayed as a source of chronic instability (Ilyasov, 2012). Ethnic tensions, some of which stemmed into gory skirmishes and wars, growing Islamic radicalism, competition for access to the oil and natural gas reserves of the Caspian basin – these and some other factors have ensured that the region would become and remain a source of “significant international engagement and concern” (Nation, 2007).

For the newly independent states in the South Caucasus – Georgia, Armenia, and Azerbaijan – the break-up of the Soviet Union meant a promise of independence. For Moscow it signaled alarming prospects of a potential secession of some of its North Caucasus entities. Although there was – and still is – a sound Russian ethnic presence in the region, Dagestan, Chechnya, Ingushetia, Karachay–Circassia, Kabardino–Balkaria, North Ossetia–Alania, Adygea came to be referred to as “republics,” meaning they were non-Russian ethnic areas in the Russian Federation.

To make matters worse, the conflicts in Nagorno–Karabakh, South Ossetia, and Abkhazia not only had an immediate devastating effect on Armenia, Azerbaijan, and Georgia but triggered a far-reaching impact on the Russian North Caucasus as well. Sergey Markedonov, Russia’s leading authority on the Caucasus, scrutinizes the phenomenon of what he called the “intertwined conflicts” in his concise history of Eurasia in the first years after the collapse of the USSR (Markedonov, 2010a: 40–47).

Given the fact that most of the conflicts stem from the days of the Soviet Union – historians would argue some go back to even more ancient times – and the grave security implications the spread of the conflicts could have had on Russia’s own “soft underbelly” of the North Caucasus, Moscow played a key mediating role in all of the conflicts. It eventually managed to bring the warring parties to the negotiating table to sign ceasefire treaties. The conflicts have never been resolved, ultimately making the Caucasus a home to three out of four “de facto” states in the post-Soviet space. Russian historians and political analysts still argue whether it was beyond Moscow’s ability to make such a resolution happen given the maximalist demands of the local elites, politically galvanized societies, and the “memory politics” promoted by political parties and civic movements seeking a rather “winner takes all” solution than an acceptable compromise.

All these factors make it possible for scholars to adapt different approaches to the region. Some look into the regional dynamics and Russia’s role here through the lens of Moscow’s own insecurities (Blank, 2013) and the nature of Russian political regime. Others draw analogies with the past to explain Russia’s contemporary phobias and interests in the region (King, 2011). Still others link the challenges Moscow faces in the Caucasus to Russia’s broader security environment (Hahn, 2007; Markedonov, 2010a). This chapter takes these approaches into account and stresses internal drivers and external irritants that have shaped Russian policies in the Caucasus since the early 1990s.

Sources of Russia’s concerns in the Northern Caucasus

Dominated for centuries by the Russian Empire and later the Soviet Union (Martin, 2001: 496), in the 1990s the Caucasus found itself in the “power vacuum.” Regional and outside actors turned their eyes to the part of Eurasia to rediscover its geopolitical assets, natural resources, and logistical opportunities (Shaffer, 2009b: 131–142). Having serious problems with projecting its own power and ensuring control of the region, Moscow was especially susceptible to any real or hypothetical foreign influence over the region. The region’s ethnic variety and territorial disputes were seen as pretexts for foreign states to encroach on Russia’s “near abroad.” Of all the array of states that sought to increase its regional presence, the United States seemed to be the prime irritant for Moscow. The reasons for such a sensitive reaction fall into three major problem areas.

First, the perception of each other’s regional policies predominantly through the lens of the “zero-sum game”: security stakes were – and still are – so high for Moscow in the Caucasus that virtually any U.S. initiative deemed to undermine Russia’s security or status was viewed as

a grave challenge for the other. The opposite was also true: Russia's policies to strengthen its position in its immediate neighborhood were perceived as a thinly veiled effort to "restore the Soviet Union" or chart out a "zone of influence."

Second, since the break-up of the Soviet Union, the dynamics of many regional processes in the Caucasus has been influenced by the United States – directly or circumstantially (Suchkov, 2013). With time, the fact that Moscow and Washington were frequently finding themselves on opposite sides of almost all regional developments only exacerbated the brewing contradictions: South Stream gas pipeline vs. the Nabucco pipeline, the GUAM Organization vs. the OCSA (Organization of Collective Security Agreement), Georgia vs. Abkhazia/South Ossetia, etc.

Finally, Moscow has always perceived the post-Soviet space (including the Caucasus region) as the zone of its vital security interests. Hence, virtually any U.S. – or, broadly, Western – initiative in the region was seen in Moscow as an attempt to exert more influence over Russia's most volatile region – the North Caucasus. The Kremlin soon concluded that the United States was not interested in security cooperation with Russia, but was rather oriented towards gaining influence in the post-Soviet space.

In this respect the war in Chechnya was a catalyst for Russia's perception. It was also then when the West formed its perception of Russia's regional policy. Fighting an extremely unpopular, bloody, and expensive war in the rebellious republic made Moscow especially susceptible to military activity near its borders let alone any foreign presence in and support for Chechnya. During the two wars, first separatist and then jihadist warlords found sympathy in Turkey and some Gulf states

Since the first Chechen war (1993–1996), the issue of the human rights abuses by the Russian federal security forces has become a popular theme among Western analysts, journalists, and human rights activists. Using the historical analogies, they were alluding to the Russian imperial practices of cracking down on the indigenous peoples of the North Caucasus (Applebaum, 1999). They also argued that under the pretext of fighting terrorism, Russia was strangling freedom in the most ethnically complex area of the country and thus the West – the United States in particular – should have their say on the cause. The idea that Russians were fighting "freedom fighters" rather than "violent jihadists" – as was claimed by Moscow – had been propagated at the top level. The notion was based on the premise that Russia exercised "brutal neo-colonialist" policy in the North Caucasus. The argument went that since "the rebels" fight back against "the suppression," Moscow can only blame itself for the chaos in the region.

Clearly, the Kremlin made and is still making a great number of strategic errors in the region. The cocktail of poverty, high unemployment rates, demographics, and migration statistics make it more prone to the extremist ideas. Being unable to manage it creates a temptation to hide behind the "terror threat" to justify a tightening-the-screws policy. Yet the different language used in U.S. and Russian discourse went far beyond their linguistic nuances, for it reflected divergent interpretations and created polar narratives.

Conceptually, it's still difficult for outside observers to think outside "the Chechen" paradigm and recognize other actors involved in the process. Until recently, many analysts rejected ties between the notorious Caucasus Emirate and Al-Qaeda, making U.S. decision-makers believe Russia and the United States were facing challenges of a different nature (Williams, 2007: 156–178). They insisted that while the United States and its allies had to deal with Islamist fundamentalist groups, separatism in the North Caucasus was of an ethno-nationalist character and was purely a "Russian problem."

In reality, the ethno-nationalist agenda in the North Caucasus and in Chechnya in particular exhausted itself in the 1990s and was rapidly replaced by radical Islamism (Markedonov, 2010b). By the time Vladimir Putin became President in 2000, the divide among Chechen

leaders over the political future of Chechnya was palpable. Some welcomed the influx of foreign – predominately Arab – fighters, preachers, and emirs as they hoped it would further push Chechnya to the forefront of the global jihadi movement with more money and resources coming to the region. Others, however, believed the resistance was thus stripped of the initial idea and was moving Chechnya in the wrong direction. Putin discerned this trend and came to rely on one of the most powerful men in the “second group,” Akhmat-Haji Kadyrov, the former mufti of the unrecognized Chechen Republic of Ichkeria and the father of current Chechen President Ramzan Kadyrov. Kadyrov proved to be instrumental in defeating the international terrorist groupings in Chechnya and was later elected the first president of the post-war republic. The phenomenon that later became known as the “Chechenization” of the Chechen conflict (Ware, 2009) was attributed as one of the key political successes of Vladimir Putin, cementing his authority in Russia.

In October 2002, Russia was shattered by the theater hostage crisis in Moscow that took the lives of 130 hostages (Yefimova, 2002). Two years after on September 1, 2004, the Beslan school hostage siege ended in at least 330 hostages killed, including 186 children. The crises pushed the Russian government to adopt security and political measures that many found excessive and abusive of civil rights. The terrorist attacks also triggered Moscow to act more decisively in the North Caucasus. The Kremlin dismissed the proposal on the peace talks from Chechen warlords and criticized Europeans heavily for harboring top Chechen leaders (Caucasus report, 2005). An ever bigger irritant for Moscow were U.S. public organizations monitoring Chechnya – such as the American Committee for Peace in the Caucasus – that Russian security forces saw as cover-ups for intelligence gathering. All of that amassed deep-seated grievances and made Russian leadership conclude that Europe and the United States still didn’t seriously consider embracing Russia into the “Western camp,” but rather saw it as a geopolitical adversary that needed to be weakened, if not “softly partitioned” (Hahn, 2011).

The negative vibes that reached the Caucasus in 1990s were a clear indication of the dangers associated with the geography of the region. Its very proximity to the Middle East and Central Asia burdened Moscow’s security concerns with additional risks and forced Russia to be more watchful of the adjacent regions. And while the challenges Washington and Moscow were confronted with have a different pre-history and background, the ties between terrorist groups in the North Caucasus and in the Greater Middle East are obvious and well-proved – be it ideology, financial flows, or operational activity, Moscow lamented that this has barely been recognized by Western decision-makers which, in part, has shaped a respective narrative vis-à-vis the region in the United States. As a result, by the end of the 1990s, Russia and the United States had accumulated a heavy baggage of bitter disagreements.

Russia’s evolving policies in the 2000s

The external risks for the Caucasus increased dramatically after the atrocities of September 11, 2001 that marked a major shift in U.S. foreign policy towards the Middle East and Eurasia. Seeking new geopolitical venues for operations in Afghanistan and Iraq, the Bush administration “re-discovered the Caucasus.” Russia was among the first to show support for the U.S. tragedy, hoping for a change of heart in U.S. attitudes towards the situation in the North Caucasus. Indeed, The White House appreciated the Kremlin’s sympathy and readiness to engage in anti-terrorist measures in Afghanistan. A narrow but promising window of opportunity for a fruitful cooperation appeared. Barely did it last for two years.

As the Bush administration declared the “war on terror,” the military aspect of U.S. foreign policy augmented. The \$100 million military exercises in the Caspian Sea were launched in

the fall of 2003 to “defend key economic zones and conduct counter-terrorist operations.” In fact, the Caspian Guard program did help monitor trade and transport routes around vital oil derricks. It involved not only state agencies of the United States and Azerbaijan but attracted a number of private military contractors (Abdullayeva and Shulman, 2004). While its prime target was to deter Iran, the drills triggered strong disapproval from Moscow, as it was wary of a larger foreign military presence in the Caspian.

By the mid-2000s, the United States and Russia didn’t bother to create an illusion of a partnership in fighting terrorism. A series of landmark events – from the U.S. invasion in Iraq, to the “color revolutions” in the post-Soviet space – rolled the two countries back to “the Great Game” in Eurasia with antagonizing rhetoric coming from the two capitals. The aspirations for the two states to work productively towards joint efforts in securing the region gradually faded away leaving Washington and Moscow with even bigger grievances.

Feeling the need to enhance its power and control over the Caucasus, Russia tightened the screws in the North Caucasus and became more assertive regionally, making sure the South Caucasus states remained in its orbit of influence. The relations between Moscow and Washington in the second half of the 2000s went from bad to worse. The amount of bilateral disagreements over a number of issues in the post-Soviet space, as well as the way local leaders exploited these disagreements to their own political needs, culminated in the tragic five-day war in Georgia’s breakaway republic of South Ossetia. Not only did it signal at the time the biggest crisis in U.S.-Russia relations since the end of the Cold War but it seriously transformed the security of the Caucasus.

Unlike the Bush administration, the Obama team in the first few years of his presidency made the U.S. presence less visible in the South Caucasus and more cooperative on the challenges threatening the North Caucasus. Partly it was due to the “reset” policy with Russia; partly because the administration itself set other priorities on its foreign policy agenda.

In any case, on May 26, 2011, the U.S. Department of State listed the Caucasus Emirate (CE) as a terrorist organization with its militant leader, Doku Umarov. The commendable initiative was welcomed by the Kremlin with the hope for further cooperation. Essentially, it was exactly the sign of support Russia sought from the United States, and the kind of action it had been waiting for for a long time (Markedonov, 2011). Many policy-makers, however, signaled moderate optimism as the decades-long experience made them more cautious about a “close cooperation” between the United States and Russia.

Another step Moscow expected from Washington on the issue was the shutdown of the CE prime information tool, the “Kavkaz-Center” website, which operated freely outside Russia. This entanglement of donors and sympathizers of the CE was the tip of the iceberg, but represented an important need that Russia communicated to the United States to pool their efforts so as to at least clamp down on information threats from extremist groups. Nonetheless the State Department initiative was a serious breakthrough as it demonstrated there was a more accurate understanding of the phenomenon at the state level and it potentially laid the grounds for productive cooperation in this area.

On April 15, 2013, the Caucasus came under yet another notorious international spotlight. The Boston marathon bombings shook the United States and left many with dubious conclusions on the degree of cooperation between Russian and U.S. security forces (or lack of thereof) and how quickly U.S. law-enforcement reacted to the signals (Ioffe, 2013). The attack opened a debate on whether the United States should reassess its policy toward extremism and whether the logic of “the enemy of my enemy is my friend” was pernicious when it came to preserving national security. But the tragedy also opened a second window of opportunity for U.S.-Russia cooperation on terrorism (Trenin, 2013). Unfortunately, that opportunity was smashed against

the overall growing crisis in U.S.–Russia relations, with the reset policy swiftly exhausting itself and the gap on raging war in Syria growing.

Meanwhile, as Russia was preparing for the crucial event of the Sochi 2014 Olympics, new Caucasus-related thorny issues were raised with “the Circassian genocide” being at the top of the list. Complicated as it was, it played a contextual role in the expert debate in the West ahead of the Sochi Winter Olympics (Malashenko, 2013). At the official level, Moscow and Washington kept a relatively low profile on the issue. But as the Olympics approached, the information space was filling up with new feeds on it. The pressure was being mounted on the Russian leadership as various pundits, reporters, bloggers, NGO activists, and lobbying groups were raising awareness, calling on Western governments to use their powers and make Moscow address the legitimate concerns of the Circassian people living in the country and abroad (Bullough, 2012). Some U.S. academic venues launched research projects on the problem (most notable were the Johns Hopkins SAIS and the Rutgers University Center for the Study of Genocide, Conflict Resolution and Human Rights). The leading motive of the campaign was to hold Russians accountable for the mass killing of Circassian groups in the 19th century at the place where the Sochi Olympics was about to take place. Some even called for a boycott of the Olympics to showcase support for “the Circassian cause” (Richmond, 2013).

Needless to say, Moscow saw the debate as part of a coordinated effort to sabotage what was deemed to reboot Russia’s international image. Some Russian analysts compared the criticism over the Circassian issue to the Tibet problem fueled in the wake of the Beijing Olympics in 2008 and insisted it was meant to test Russia. As the Olympics approached, the critical focus had shifted from “the Circassian issue” to the “inhumane treatment of guest workers” and the “crackdown on the LGBT community” to the billions squandered on the construction of the Olympics infrastructure and allegations of massive corruption (Grove, 2013).

Russia’s policy in the South Caucasus: success or failure?

Relations with the states in the South Caucasus have been a mixed bag for Russia over the 25 years since their independence. Russia’s attitude toward this part of the region has been overshadowed by concerns over a possible accession of Georgia, Azerbaijan, and Armenia to NATO. This pushed Moscow to seek its own geopolitical strongholds in the region.

Armenia came to be perceived as Russia’s prime geopolitical beacon in the region, and rightly so. The Russia–Armenia “strategic partnership” was institutionalized through Armenia’s membership in the Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO) from 1992, and the Eurasian Economic Union (EEU) from 2015 as well as through a number of bilateral formats. The Russian Federal Security Service for Border Protection guards Armenia’s borders with Iran and Turkey together with the Armenian border patrol. The presence of the 102nd Russian military base stationed in Armenia’s second biggest city of Gyumri in August 2010 was prolonged until 2044, which secured Russia a solid military presence in the middle of the South Caucasus at least until that time.

On the economic front, about 1,300 companies with Russian capital are operating in Armenia, which represents more than a quarter of all foreign-backed enterprises in the country. Up to 50% of all foreign investment in the Armenian economy comes from Russia, and Armenia enjoys close business links with more than 70 Russian regions (Markedonov, 2013: 30). One of the biggest assets of the bilateral relations is the Armenian diaspora: not only do Armenians represent the seventh largest ethnic group in Russia (1.18 million people), but they are active in the business world and other key spheres of social and political life in Russia.

Until 2001, Russia's relations with Azerbaijan were rather strained. Russia's military units had to be withdrawn from Azerbaijan in May 1993, and President Boris Yeltsin never paid an official visit to Baku. The normalization of bilateral relations with Azerbaijan started under President Putin, who visited Azerbaijan's capital in 2001.

As Sergey Markedonov correctly observed:

In the case of Nagorno-Karabakh, Russia was faced not only with the issues of de-facto states and territorial secession but with a state-patron of secession that was interested, without serious preconditions, in cooperation with Moscow. This pushed the Russian leadership to "even" the level of its relationship with the South Caucasus countries. Those conditions (which could be defined as the first post-Soviet geopolitical status quo) predetermined Moscow's controversial policy approaches to Armenia.

(Markedonov, 2013: 32)

Since then, Moscow has started to seek ways to reconcile Azerbaijan. One of the key principles Moscow chose to stick to was to avoid any decisions that could have tipped the balance in Nagorno-Karabakh either to favor Yerevan or Baku. Preserving the status quo was – and still is – seen as the best possible option under the given circumstances. Hence when Russia decided to help guard Armenian borders, it was a clear message to Azerbaijan. Yet, as an act of "geopolitical balancing" in 2007, Moscow supplied arms to Azerbaijan. Russia also saw Azerbaijan as instrumental in providing security for its turbulent Dagestan where the border area had been a major concern for both Moscow and Baku. Azerbaijan remained crucial in Russia's energy security and pipeline politics (Shaffer, 2009a), with Gazprom offering to buy more Azeri gas in 2010. The set of "leveling policies" on the part of the Kremlin triggered contradictions that shadow Russian-Armenian relations to this day.

Moscow too had its own grievances vis-à-vis Yerevan. It had to do with Armenia's response to the war in South Ossetia in 2008 where the Armenian government refrained from unequivocal support for Russia. Neither did Yerevan characterize the events as "the genocide of the Ossetian people" – the wording Moscow chose to label Saakashvili's reckless seizure effort – or express solidarity with Russia in recognizing the independence of Abkhazia and South Ossetia. On the contrary, after 2008 Yerevan pursued a rather constructive engagement with Tbilisi. It certainly wasn't a "sudden eye-opener" for the Kremlin, but a sign that there were clear and rigid limits to how far cooperation with even the closest allies might go.

Russian-Armenian relations have been remarkably dependent on the fractured perception of each other's policies stemming from frequently high expectations of one another. Armenians quite jealously react to any deals Moscow is seeking and striking with Azeris, especially when it comes to cooperation in the military-technical field. Russia, in its turn, often continues to operate on the inertia of "historic ties," expecting Armenia to show loyalty without an investment – political and financial – in this loyalty.

As for Azerbaijan, Dmitri Trenin, leading expert on Russia's Eurasian policies, argues that Baku managed "to play Russia extremely well." It virtually freed itself of the Russian military presence and subsequently replaced Soviet-era energy outlets with modern-day gas and oil pipelines "without irreparably damaging its relations with Moscow." A big part of these rather successful policies, according to Trenin, is that "Azerbaijan has long decided not to cross two red lines: seeking NATO membership and hosting U.S. military bases" (Trenin, 2011: 93–101).

This certainly wasn't the case with Georgia where aspirations for NATO membership heated the security agenda in the border area fueling Moscow's irritation with Georgian authorities.

During the Chechen War, international militants found a safe haven in the Georgian Pankisi Gorge. Even though Tbilisi had its traditional fears of the mountaineers who used to come down for hit-and-run raids, helping Chechens represented a poke in the eye for the Kremlin that Tbilisi couldn't resist given Moscow's own support for Abkhazia and South Ossetia. The Kremlin likened the harboring of Chechen militants by Georgia to the Taliban accommodating al-Qaeda. In 2002, Moscow "strongly warned" Tbilisi, using the language similar to that of the United States condemning al-Qaeda activities.

Not prioritized under the Yeltsin administration in the 1990s, Russia's overall policies toward Georgia were tainted by a genuine distrust most Russian decision-makers – especially among the security apparatus who managed most of the Caucasus activities – had vis-à-vis the then-president of Georgia, Eduard "the Silver Fox" Shevardnadze. Ironically, Moscow helped bring Shevardnadze to power in 1992. But since 1995, the Georgian president had charted the course towards a closer relationship with the United States as opposed to Russia. Therefore, Moscow regretted little when Shevardnadze himself was toppled in the Rose Revolution by a young and passionate Mikheil Saakashvili.

In 2004 Putin and Saakashvili established a fairly close relationship, which created an impression – at least in Moscow – that the two leaders could do a lot of mutually beneficial business together. One of the first "concessions" the Russians offered to Saakashvili, for the prospect of a long-term partnership, was Ajara. An autonomous republic of Georgia bordering Turkey, Ajara had long hosted a Russian military base, had assets from top Russian businessmen, and was ruled by a rebellious leader friendly with Moscow's movers and shakers. Letting Saakashvili take full control of the territory didn't make him thankful to Moscow, as was expected. On the contrary, the impulsive Georgian leader saw it as a green light to continue to ensure Tbilisi's jurisdiction over the other two break-away republics.

Contrary to the wide-spread view, it wasn't the attempt to restore Georgia's territorial integrity that made Putin snap. Experts and diplomats privy to the situation argue that the Russian President was prepared to cooperate on a step-by-step settlement of the conflicts. What concerned Moscow most was the way President Saakashvili wanted the conflicts resolved. Placating the domestic audience with populist promises to "return the lost territories" – in certain cases setting a specific timeline for the seizure of South Ossetia and Abkhazia – Saakashvili burned the political bridge with Moscow. A failure to deliver on those promises also meant the loss of political support among Georgians.

Since August 2004, when Saakashvili carried out a police raid operation in South Ossetia, relations between him and Putin were set on a steady path for a direct confrontation. Both sides exchanged hostile acts – the spy scandal in 2006, the subsequent deportation of Georgians from Russia, and the embargo on Georgian products. Both sides pursued independent policies towards South Ossetia and Abkhazia – Russia launched the "passportization policy" while Georgia started to create "governments in exile."

Remarkably, however, even at the highest peak of those crises, neither Russia nor Georgia went to recognize Abkhazia and South Ossetia as "independent states" – though the two were bombarding Moscow with visits and pledges for it – neither did it halt the drawdown of its troops from Soviet-era military bases in Georgia. The move was set to be a quid pro quo in return for Georgia's own pledge not to seek to join NATO. Moreover, the deals Russia offered to the Saakashvili administration on a peaceful settlement of Abkhazia and South Ossetia – the final one in the beginning of 2007 – were constantly declined.

By that time Saakashvili had made powerful friends in Washington and had been well-received in European capitals (King, 2004). Effectively playing the "Russia threat" card, he concluded that if he continued on a tough unilateral course of dealing with the Abkhaz and

Ossetians he'd have full Western support and Moscow wouldn't dare to resist. The dangerous game of continuous escalations and provocations against the backdrop of the NATO Bucharest Summit declaration that promised Georgia [and Ukraine] a membership "one day" resulted in Saakashvili's calculation to seize the moment of a power transition in Russia from Putin to Medvedev and up the ante by launching an offensive on Tskhinvali.

The August war ended in the defeat of the Georgian troops and Russia's recognition of Abkhazia and South Ossetia as independent states. The move came to be erroneously interpreted as Moscow's response to the Kosovo recognition. However, a more accurate analysis of the situation around the pre-war Abkhazia and South Ossetia suggests Russia's choice didn't have anything to do with the "cookie-cutter" approach. Should there not have been the Saakashvili attempt at the blitzkrieg seizure of Tskhinvali, both South Ossetia and Abkhazia might have still been in the "de facto" status.

The war in Georgia seriously shuffled the status quo in the region and put an end to any serious consideration of Georgia's NATO membership, at least within the near future (King, 2008; Philips, 2008). It also made Moscow more cautious of its southern flank and pushed it to beef up its security and military infrastructure along its perimeter. As part of the initiative, Russia signed some important security treaties with its new allies in Sukhumi and Tskhinvali.

Moscow's dealings with South Ossetia and Abkhazia, however, differed due to diverging agendas in the newly recognized republics. To this day South Ossetia remains a land-locked territory poor with resources and highly dependent on Russian financial aid and other support, with very bleak prospects of political existence as an independent entity. The two most frequently discussed options for the future status of South Ossetia are either its "entrance" into the Russian Federation as yet another [maybe even autonomous] republic, or its "accession" with North Ossetia as part of a united Republic of Ossetia. The options are politically and financially costly, and Moscow doesn't seem to be willing to push the developments voluntarily.

It's much more complicated with Abkhazia that set itself on a steady course for independence from Georgia and Russia alike. The Treaty on Alignment and Strategic Partnership between Russia and the Republic of Abkhazia, signed on November 24, 2014, won itself many opponents in Russia and Abkhazia. The Abkhaz opposition argued it would make the Republic more dependent on Russia, thus depriving it of long-sought-after independence. Russian critics, in turn, insisted it would put Moscow in a position of being an eternal donor to Abkhazia without any viable gains. Yet, the product of several previous drafts, the treaty covered bilateral, political, economic, and military cooperation and was an important signal of the direction Russian foreign policy was taking in the region.

Over the years since Russia and Abkhazia established diplomatic relations, the two have signed more than 80 bilateral agreements detailing practically every aspect of the relationship. In substance, the treaty helped Abkhazia to continue play its own game: it ultimately outsourced the Republic's social and economic policy to Russia thus leaving enough time and resources for the Abkhaz leadership to focus more on constructing a virtual ethnocracy. Ideally, Moscow might have wished to fully integrate Abkhazia into the Eurasian Union. But facing strong opposition from Belarus and Kazakhstan – as well as potential international repercussions – Russia was using tools available at the time to engage Abkhazia in bilateral cooperation. Therefore, the treaty had some practical value and was mutually beneficial at a tactical level.

Its long-term dimension with the emphasis on "strategic cooperation" signaled Moscow's strategic choice. As attempts to build a constructive dialogue with new Georgian authorities crashed against the stumbling block of the status of the disputed territories, both Moscow and Tbilisi foresaw little progress in dealing with each other. Subsequently, the Georgia-EU association agreement signed on June 27, 2014 and Georgia's new status as one of five

“enhanced NATO partners” that was acquired in September, 2014, produced real concerns in Moscow over a potential beefed-up foreign military presence close to Russia’s borders in the South.

There was also a West-related facet. Understanding that the crisis in the relations wouldn’t get better any time soon, Moscow thought it was the right time to consolidate its volatile southern flank, no matter how bold the move would look. Moscow was acting out of the belief that since neither Russia nor the West was able to tailor the security pattern in the South Caucasus their way, both tried to secure as much geopolitical loyalty as they could. In a way, it was a reflection of what Putin alluded to during the NATO Bucharest Summit in 2008, when he boiled it down to a simple logic: “NATO status for Georgia will entail buffer zones in Abkhazia and South Ossetia.”

In a nutshell, for the Kremlin, there was a strategic calculation as well as symbolism to the treaty with Abkhazia. It may all be quite pricey, but Russia couldn’t afford the privilege of giving up on emerging geopolitical opportunities. This has been and will probably continue to be Moscow’s predominant attitude towards the region.

New challenges: ISIS and the Ukraine crisis

“The Sochi effect” placed all of Russia’s security services on their highest alert and helped stabilize the situation in the Caucasus for a couple of years after 2014. At the end of 2014, a factual decline in terrorist activity in the North Caucasus was observed with a total of 78 “crimes of a terrorist nature” taking place (24 Mir, 2014). It was three times less than in 2013 and four times less than in 2012. Even though the official statistics tend to paint a more optimistic picture, the progress was real: there was a lower incidence of “backlash” terror attacks in 2014 than in previous years.

The killing in March, 2014 of Doku Umarov, the head of the Caucasus Emirate and Russia’s most wanted terrorist crowned the government-led anti-terrorist efforts. Although it didn’t lower the overall threat, it was an important symbolic milestone for Moscow in the fight against jihadi extremists in the Caucasus. Yet, the attack in Grozny on December 4 of the same year and a subsequent skirmish in Kabardino-Balkaria’s capital city of Nalchik seven days later was an indication that the extremists were not as inactive as they might have appeared in the tally of formal statistics, and they still remain a serious security challenge for Russia.

Internally, sources of conflict in the Caucasus, some of which have been pushing local people to join the ranks of terrorists, have to do with the following: spread of radical ideas and (pseudo)religious teachings; dissatisfaction with the performance of local legal and administrative systems, including “daily corruption” (бытовая коррупция); high unemployment rates and limited opportunities, especially for the youth; peculiarities of demographic and migration trends; improper balance of governance and power – massive abuses in some places, “power vacuums” in others; territorial and land ownership disputes overlapping with ethnic identity and religious fault lines; influence of traditional habits and life styles; and negative historic memory and deep-seated “hatred narratives” between some ethnic groups.

Externally, the sources of extremism include the rise of like-minded groups in the Middle East and the problems associated with inequality that globalization severed in these regions. The real concern for the Russian government was the potential impact of the Syrian crisis and the entire Middle East turmoil for the volatile North Caucasus. A core of the concern was a potential unleashing of hazardous politico-social movements able to exacerbate Russia’s own radical Islamist problems. Moscow was using a mixture of tools to clamp down on the terror networks

from deterring the “radical Salafi Islam” from the promotion of “traditional Islam,” to fostering home-grown imams and secular pundits on Islam to fight the jihadist narrative of foreign preachers coming to the region (Yarlykapov, 2015).

The rise of ISIS threatened to re-energize these forces. The impact that ISIS had on the region was especially palpable in three key areas: ideological, social, and informational. Not only did it aggravate the region’s conflict potential but in some areas triggered a return to the *regressive archaism* associated with religious fundamentalism.

Initially, the coming of ISIS divided the self-proclaimed CE fighters over loyalty to various like-minded groups in the Middle East. Although earlier some of the Emirate militants fought against Syrian President Assad alongside al-Nusra, in the spat between the group and ISIS, the CE chief commanders opted to support the latter. It further solidified channels linking the two extremist groups.

In 2013, ISIS acknowledged receiving funds from the CE. As ISIS accumulated power, it had the capacity to sponsor its fellow men in the North Caucasus. As Tomas De Waal, a prominent expert on the Caucasus, argued at the time: “If even a fraction of the vast amounts of money ISIS is said to have seized in Iraq makes a way back to the North Caucasus, it could boost the militants there” (Waal, 2014).

While terrorists in the Caucasus represent a regional group that claims to be a chain in the global jihadist link, ISIS positions itself as the centerpiece and driving force of global jihad. Paradoxically, against this background, it was ISIS that was in greater need of CE’s back-up in an undeclared competition with its ideological rivals – Jabhat al-Nusra and the like – over influence on the umma.

For many outside observers, the ethnic component of ISIS fighters from Russia or wider Eurasia had become key. Indeed, many natives of the Caucasus made it to the top ranks of the ISIS leadership. However, what made both ISIS and CE more consolidated in substance and diverse in form was their strategic imperative which had to do with the religious rather than ethnic agenda. The ethnic card was rather effectively played out for the recruitment of more fighters, and it is where the ISIS social media strategy² proved efficient.

What worries Russian security experts to this day is not only ISIS’s ability to recruit people through its sophisticated use of social media technologies, but also the influx of potential “jihadi returnees” to the Caucasus.³ Addressing such “virtual radicalism” is something still to be addressed by the Russian government in the Caucasus.

The developments in Ukraine created an even more antagonizing framework for regional dynamics in the Caucasus from early 2014. In this regard, contradictory policies between Russia and the EU have never left the region. Now that the stakes are higher, and no party is willing to compromise its interests, the fragile balance between cooperation and confrontation has further swung to the latter.

First, a great deal of skepticism about the capability of European institutions to fix conflicts in the post-Soviet space is now prevailing among South Caucasian elites. Ironically, this understanding serves to deter violence in the region: responsible stakeholders in Tbilisi, Yerevan, and – to a lesser extent – Baku, have realized that if there should be serious warfare in the region there will be no international institutions powerful enough to stop it, or any great European powers ready for head-on military collision to defend their clients’ interests.

At the same time, the South Caucasian states have found themselves between the devil and the deep blue sea: the Ukrainian crisis has shown that deciding between European and Eurasian integration comes at a high price, but that indecisiveness is an even worse path. Thus, the startling developments in Ukraine have triggered two opposite processes: on the one hand, they

have accelerated Georgian efforts to integrate into Euro-Atlantic institutions. On the other, the Ukraine crisis has pushed Armenia to seek full membership of the Eurasian Union and encouraged Abkhazia and South Ossetia to forge closer ties with Russia.

The domestic support for Eurasian integration in Armenia, South Ossetia, and Abkhazia seems to have been spurred by a resurgence of national identity. All three have a common cause: historical reunification, an idea reenergized by “the Crimea precedent.” Armenian supporters of Eurasian integration have projected “re-incorporation of the Crimea into Russia” onto the disputed territory of the Nagorno-Karabakh, suggesting that it is a precedent for reunification of Armenia’s historical lands. Supporters of integration in South Ossetia hoped that it might use the same logic to reincorporate those territories into Russia.

When power politics are at play, smaller states often scramble to side with great powers. But those who expect the tit-for-tat game between Russia and the West to continue have opted to maneuver between the two. Azerbaijan has chosen this path, floating between East and West in its stance toward the crisis in Ukraine, and reaffirming its commitment to multi-vector diplomacy. Yet the time may come for Baku to make hard choices as well.

Finally, the crisis in Ukraine has had a remarkable impact on the South Caucasus. Although it may not yet be fully recognized, the transformed realities of Eurasian geopolitics have surely revived the idea that there are distinct geopolitical zones – daily bread for political and academic hardliners who love to ponder what this might mean for the Caucasus.

Conclusion

Describing the situation in the Caucasus, some analysts use the term “mutual insecurity” (Waal, 2013). That, in a way, underlies the argument that no actor can feel secure by creating threats for others. In the tangle-knot type of region such as the Caucasus, this is especially true. Regrettably, the situation in the Caucasus does not create a plethora of opportunities for cooperation between Russia and the West, but seizing up those few opportunities present is probably the key to surmounting that “mutual insecurity.”

By the end of the Obama term, the U.S.-Russia relations were at their lowest point in modern history. The post-Soviet space has arguably remained the most uncompromised area for the two states. In the Caucasus and elsewhere in Eurasia, the status of ex-Soviet republics as well as the “frozen conflicts” and the de facto states they entailed are to this day the issues where any compromise, let alone progress, between Moscow and Washington can barely be imagined. Russia has a mixed record of successes and failures in the region, and, should the security situation deteriorate, would face uneasy choices – as in the balancing act between Armenia and Azerbaijan – or serious challenges – as when the jihadists start returning from Syria to the North Caucasus. It is also in pursuit of an adequate *modus operandi vis-à-vis* “those it tamed” – Abkhazia and South Ossetia – and a reasonable *modus vivendi* with Georgia.

The several months of the Trump presidency have dashed many hopes in Russia for a fruitful cooperation with the United States. Yet one thing that some seemed to have proved to be accurate is that President Trump expresses little interest in the Caucasus or the post-Soviet space outside Ukraine. This doesn’t necessarily mean that the United States will abandon its allies in the region. But it may provide Russia with an opportunity to stabilize the region and engage with its states through mutually attractive projects. The question is whether Moscow takes advantage of the opportunity, or will the inertia of the political leadership continue to plague Russia’s standing in the South Caucasus and push the North Caucasus further to the “internal abroad” mode.

Notes

- 1 There are also those practicing Judaism and Yezidism.
- 2 www.al-monitor.com/pulse/ru/originals/2014/08/is-clinton-atrocities-social-media-baghdadi-mccain.html.
- 3 www.theguardian.com/world/2014/jun/23/who-behind-isis-propaganda-operation-iraq.

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