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Russia and the conflicts in the South Caucasus: main approaches, problems, and prospects

Sergey Markedonov

South Caucasus: the conflict dynamics

In recent years the developments in the Middle East and in Ukraine pushed the political situation in the South Caucasus to the periphery of the international agenda. However, despite the reduced spotlight provided by experts and diplomats, this region continues to hold strategic importance.

The Caucasus is a unique bridge between Europe and Asia. This region is extremely important from the energy security standpoint. The Caucasus neighbors the Middle East, and some of the countries of the region share a border with Iran and Turkey who are key players in the ongoing Syrian conflict. It also constitutes a part of a larger Black Sea region where the two competing integration strategies clash (European Union and Eurasian Economic Union). Both Russia and the European Union (the latter went through a series of expansions in the 1990s and 2000s) view the South Caucasus region as its “close neighbor.” Russia’s situation in this regard is even more important since the North Caucasus, the territory of which is bigger than Georgia, Armenia, and Azerbaijan together, is part of the Russian Federation.

Even though experts dealing with the post-soviet spaces currently pay less attention to the region due to ongoing military confrontation in

Donbas (Southeast of Ukraine), the conflicts in the Caucasus still remain relevant. Neither of the conflicts can be considered resolved if the concept of resolution implies an encompassing compromise among all the parties involved. The South Caucasus is the home to half of the de facto states currently existing in the post-Soviet space (Abkhazia, South Ossetia, and Nagorno-Karabakh). Two of them acquired limited recognition in August of 2008.

The situation in Nagorno-Karabakh is the most dangerous. November 2017 marked the tenth year since the “Madrid Principles,” which stipulate the main provisions of the peace settlement, were developed. In July 2009 the updated version of the “basic principles” was published and the co-chairs of the OSCE Minsk Group (Russia, USA, and France) urged the conflicting parties to reach an agreement by following the implementation of these principles. However, during all this time the sides did not take even the minimum steps to implement the considerations proposed by the mediators to Baku and Yerevan. Thus, the updated “Madrid Principles” remain a “rhetorical figure,” rather than a functioning algorithm for achieving peace (Caucasian Knot 2016).

It would be wrong to characterize the Armenian-Azerbaijani conflict as “frozen.” Every year, the number of violent incidents along the “contact line” increases. In April 2016, the most significant violation of the ceasefire regime since the indefinite Armistice Agreement (May 12, 1994)⁴ entered into force was registered. Lower scale military clashes happened in February, May, June, July, and October 2017 (OSCE 2018).

Tensions also exist along the internationally recognized Armenian-Azerbaijani border, which is outside of Nagorno-Karabakh’s “contact line.” Violent incidents routinely happen along that border as well. Since June 2018, information on the so-called “Nakhichevan operation” has been widely circulated. Azerbaijan refers to it as “the liberation of 11K hectares of land,” although the details led to contradictory assessments and interpretations in Baku and Yerevan (PRA 2016). In the summer of 2018, the number of incidents on the border of the Azerbaijani exclave of Nakhichevan and Armenia also increased (Rzaev 2018). This area, while less famous than the Nagorno-Karabakh “contact line,” nevertheless harbors even more risks.

⁴ See the text of the agreement: <http://vn.kazimirov.ru/doc10.htm> (in Russian).

Nagorno-Karabakh is not recognized as an independent state and the territorial integrity of Azerbaijan has not yet been questioned. Even if Baku launches military operations, direct military interference by any third party is highly unlikely (although there is no doubt about full diplomatic pressure from all sides). The situation can be very different with the Armenian-Azerbaijani border, which is not viewed as a disputed territory. In the case of an open confrontation between Baku and Yerevan, interference by the Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO), where Armenia holds membership, is rather inevitable. As a member of this integration structure, Armenia can rely on the help of Russia and other partners. However, there are significant issues regarding the unity among the CSTO members especially considering Kazakhstan's and Belarus' highly developed relations with Azerbaijan (including the military-technical ties). At the same time, the unfolding of a negative scenario around Nakhichevan can raise collisions inside the Eurasian integration projects that are actively supported by Moscow.

After the “velvet revolution” in Armenia, the negotiation process that already was not particularly effective, entered a stage of complete “stagnation.” The Armenian government’s positions represented by Nikol Pashinyan became more rigid. Statements on the necessity of involving the leadership of the unrecognized Nagorno-Karabakh Republic (NKR) in the negotiations were made. Also, in fact, a precondition for returning to the negotiation table was set: Baku’s complete rejection of “military rhetoric.” Moreover, the negotiation process was labeled as “not an end in itself” (Sputnik 2018). Even though after the “velvet revolution” the foreign ministers of Armenia and Azerbaijan met twice, the meeting of the heads of the states of the two countries is unlikely before the parliamentary elections in Armenia.

Compared to Nagorno-Karabakh the situation in Abkhazia and South Ossetia is calmer. The conflicts in this part of the Caucasus region are more in line with the definition of “frozen” ones. While there are no violent incidents, detentions and arrests of the representatives of one of the conflicting parties by law enforcement representatives of the other party, unfortunately, became a usual practice (Caucasian Knot 2018).

With Russia’s recognition in 2008, Abkhazia and South Ossetia also acquired its military-political guarantees and social-economical support.

Despite the official rhetoric of re-establishment of the territorial integrity as the country's most important national priority, Georgia is not attempting a military solution to re-establish its jurisdiction over Sukhumi and Tskhinvali. At the same time, border demarcation on the part of South Ossetia that is supported by Moscow (known as "borderization") raises concerns in Tbilisi and in the West regarding Russia's advancement on the territory of Georgia proper. Abkhazia's and South Ossetia's choice toward the Russian Federation strengthens Tbilisi's ties with the US, NATO, and EU. The government led by the "Georgian Dream" not only did not revisit the pro-Western vector of policies adopted during Saakashvili period but also defined it more clearly. It was this government that initiated and later signed the Association Agreement with the European Union. In addition, in February 2017 Georgian citizens obtained a right for visa-free short-term travel to Schengen countries. Even though Tbilisi was not granted a NATO membership action plan (MAP), in September 2014 it received a substantial package of "enhanced partnership" with the North Atlantic Alliance.

Out of all the regions of the former Soviet Union, only the Caucasus has neighboring countries that do not have diplomatic relations with each other, namely between Armenia and Azerbaijan and Russia and Georgia. Armenia does not have diplomatic relations with Turkey as well. Armenia's both borders (with Azerbaijan and Turkey) are closed. At the same time, the implementation of the regional Baku-Tbilisi-Kars railway project (the railway linked Azerbaijan, Georgia, and Turkey) increased Armenia's isolation even more. Moreover, Nakhichevan remains Azerbaijan's exclave that is only accessible via air routes or through the territories of Iran and Turkey.

Thus, resolution of the conflicts in the Caucasus is important due to the following three factors. First, the settlement of status and border disputes will significantly enhance regional predictability, security, and stability. Second, positive dynamic in the South Caucasus will contribute to the convergence of the positions of the three Eurasian "giants": Russia, Turkey, and Iran. Third, it will lead to a reduced confrontation level between Russia and the West (at least in one of the directions).

Russia and the conflicts in the South Caucasus: evolution of approaches

After the collapse of the Soviet Union, Russia played and still continues playing a significant role in the processes in the South Caucasus, and in particular, in the conflicts. Moscow sees the region as an especially important territory for its strategic interests because Russia itself is a Caucasus state. The Russian Caucasus is home to nine of Russia's regions, seven republics, and two areas/krais. Most of the open and latent conflicts in this part of the country are closely linked to the confrontation in former republics of the Soviet Transcaucasia.

In the current commentary in Western literature about Russia's policies in the South Caucasus, certain political emphases can be clearly identified. The attention usually is focused on three main plots:

- The confrontation between the West and Russia in the post-Soviet space where the Caucasus represents one of the battlefields of that confrontation (Hunter 2017, 304)
- Russian "revisionism" and Moscow's role in supporting South Ossetia and Abkhazia (Hill, Kirsic, and Moffatt 2015).
- Interpretation of the situation in the Caucasus in the context of Crimea's transition under Russian jurisdiction, as a result of which conflicts in the South Caucasus are studied either as prerequisites for Russia's actions in 2014 or as possible cases for the repetition of the "Crimean scenario" (Treisman 2016).

These approaches not only bring back the "cold war" discourse but also oversimplify the situation and ignore the substantial role that Russia has to play in the resolution of the conflicts in the Caucasus.

First of all, when talking about Russia's position, one should recognize that throughout the entire period after the collapse of the Soviet Union this position did not stay static. In the first years after the collapse, Russia played a decisive role in achieving ceasefire agreements for conflicts in South Ossetia (1992), Abkhazia (1993-1994), Nagorno-Karabakh (1994), ending the Georgian civil war (1993), and ensuring deployment of a peacekeeping operation in Georgia. It was Russia who formed the political-legal format of the peace process in these "hotspots." These are the 1992 Dagomys Agreement on South Ossetia,

1994 Moscow Accords on Abkhazia, and the Ceasefire Agreement of 1994 for the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict. Moscow's role as the central mediator in the resolution of the Transcaucasian conflicts was recognized by the West and international organizations.

All the conflict parties in the Caucasus had different expectations from Russia. Georgia saw Moscow as a possible partner in the pursuit of restoration of its territorial integrity and as a party who is in the position of influencing Abkhazia's and South Ossetia's return under Tbilisi's jurisdiction. Separatist elites of Sukhumi and Tskhinvali had a different view. They hoped for Russia's support in their separation from Georgia. Yet while the goal of the Abkhazian movement was an independent nation state, the leaders of the South Ossetian movement never hid their goal of unification with North Ossetia under Russian leadership (as a subject within the Russian Federation). In many ways, the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict was the reason behind the development of the Armenian-Russian strategic union (primarily in the area of defense and security). On the other hand, Azerbaijan's diversified foreign policy with emphasis on special relations with Turkey also contributed to this. Both Baku and Yerevan saw rapprochement with Moscow as mutually exclusive.

All these diverse interests limited the opportunities for resolution of political conflicts. In fact, balancing between these diverse interests for so many years turned Moscow into the "freezer" of these conflicts without any substantial change in the prospects of their resolution. This situation pushed the states that directly suffered from the secessionist movements and lost control over their de jure territories to revise the unfavorable status quo. Here is where the "internationalization" of the conflicts in the South Caucasus took its roots. They started as a quest for foreign policy alternatives to the Moscow's privileged position. As a result, the countries of the region expressed more active interest in the involvement of the US, EU as a whole, and individual European countries, as well as Turkey and Iran in the resolution of these conflicts.

Throughout the entire post-soviet period, Russia's attitude towards the countries of the South Caucasus, as well as the unrecognized entities and the resolution of the conflicts, underwent significant transformation. Moscow, faced with the Chechen separatist challenge, initially

supported Tbilisi's intention on the restoration of the country's territorial integrity. After the start of the first anti-separatist⁵ campaign in Chechnya, Russia closed the border with Abkhazia along the Psou River on December 19, 1994. Later, on January 19, 1996, the Council of the Heads of States of CIS, with decisive role of Russia and Georgia, adopted a decision "On measures to resolve conflict in Abkhazia, Georgia," which announced the cease of any trade and economic, transport, financial, and other operations with the unrecognized republic. Moscow completely abandoned sanctions against Abkhazia only in April 2008. In 1997, the Russian Foreign Ministry offered Abkhazia a "common state" solution within the borders of the former Georgian USSR. Details of this solution were elaborated upon in the new "Protocol on Georgian-Abkhaz settlements." The successful "shuttle diplomacy" carried out by then Russian foreign minister Yevgeny Primakov lead to a personal meeting between Eduard Shevardnadze and Vladislav Ardzinba (Lakoba 2001).

Evolution of the Russian approach toward Georgia became visible only in 1998. This process was facilitated by several developments including Tbilisi's unilateral attempt to alter the status quo and regain control over Abkhazia⁶, change the Georgian government's position on the Chechen issue⁷, and develop relations between Georgia and NATO, which already started during Shevardnadze's period and became more salient after the "rose revolution" of 2003. This list also includes the expansion of contracts between Moscow and Sukhumi (the most sensitive issue for the Georgian side was and still is the issuance of Russian passports to Abkhazia residents).

The developments of May-August 2004, when Tbilisi tried to regain control over South Ossetia by force, became a watershed moment in the worsening of Russian-Georgian relations. The military escalation after twelve years of ceasefire, the negotiation process, and compromises

⁵ This is the term used by the author. The Caucasus Edition editorial team considers these events as the "First Chechen War."

⁶ These developments include the confrontation in the Gali district of Abkhazia in May 1998 and the attack of the Chechen field commander Ruslan Gelayev in the Kodori Gorge in October 2001 that was supported by Tbilisi.

⁷ For more details on this, see the author's previous work: (Markedonov 2010)..

made set back the resolution of the Georgian-Ossetian conflict and pre-determined the future “five-day war” in August 2008.⁸ To a large extent, these developments expedited Russia’s transition from the role of mediator of the peace process to the role of a security guarantor of these de facto entities. This process ended with the recognition of Abkhazia’s and South Ossetia’s independence, halting of diplomatic relations between Russia and Georgia and setting a precedent for the redrawing of inter-republic borders that the Eurasian newly independent states inherited from the Soviet period.

Russian-Azerbaijani relations followed a different trajectory. After the collapse for the Soviet Union for many years the most problematic country in the South Caucasus for Russia was Azerbaijan and not Georgia. Unlike in Georgia⁹, where Russia maintained a military presence until 2006, and where the border control officers patrolled the outer perimeter of the border until 1999, the last units of the Russian army left Azerbaijan in May 1993 (104th airborne division). Russia’s first president Boris Yeltsin never visited Baku in an official capacity. During the Chechen campaign, Azerbaijan took openly friendly stands towards Chechnya lead by Dudayev and Maskhadov (Izmodenov 2003). It was only in 2001 when Vladimir Putin visited Baku as the leader of the new Russia after the collapse of the USSR. This visit and then the bilateral agreement signed in 2002 moved Russian-Azerbaijani relations from the “freezing” point. Constructive relations were built (including a military-technical format) despite the unresolved Nagorno-Karabakh conflict and the strategic relations between Moscow and Yerevan, and Baku and Ankara. And now, both Armenia and Azerbaijan, despite the absence of even hints of reaching compromises on the Karabakh conflict, see Russia as an important mediator playing a special role in the peace process.

Consequently, the Kremlin’s dominant motivation in resolving conflicts is not a cover for some ideological program or a comprehensive geopolitical strategy but is a response to changing circumstances (changing of the status quo not in Russia’s favor, penetration of new players into the region, fear of losing its influence). At the same time,

⁸ For more details on this, see the author’s previous work: (Markedonov 2008).

⁹ Here the author means the core territory of Georgia minus Abkhazia and South Ossetia.

Moscow does not initiate changes in the status quo: it rather responds to such attempts (as in the case of Georgia from 2004–2008). Moreover, the “Crimean precedent” did not become the basis for its actions in the South Caucasus, which has its own value. After 2014 Moscow did not use any of the scenarios that it tested in Crimea in any of the conflicts in this part of the post-Soviet space.

In between the status quo and revisionism

Russian leadership does not have a universal approach either to conflicts or to the de facto state of the South Caucasus. We can identify two fundamental positions that Russia has.

The first one can be defined as a revisionist position. Moscow recognizes the independence of Abkhazia and South Ossetia and officially withdraws support for Georgia’s territorial integrity. The second position supports the current status quo and is made clear by the refusal to recognize the Nagorno-Karabakh Republic (NKR) and establishing any types of contact with it except those that are within the mandate of the OSCE Minsk Group in which Russia is one of the co-chairs. Russia recognizes the territorial integrity of Azerbaijan, while it is engaged in a strategic alliance with Armenia and is helping to work toward a settlement of the conflict between Armenia and Azerbaijan.

The 2016 Foreign Policy Concept of the Russian Federation (in this regard this document repeats the provisions of the 2013 Foreign Policy Concept) stipulates that Russian priorities include “assisting the establishment of the Republic of Abkhazia and the Republic of South Ossetia as modern democratic States, strengthening their international positions, and ensuring reliable security and socioeconomic recovery” (MFA-RF 2016). During the normalization of relations with Tbilisi that started in 2012-2013, Moscow limited this process by drawing some “red lines.” Russia is not engaging in negotiations over the status of Abkhazia and South Ossetia. In the Foreign Policy Concept document, Moscow expresses interest in “normalizing relations with Georgia in areas where the Georgian side is willing to do the same, with due consideration for the current political environment in the South Caucasus.” In practice, this means the current state of affairs that was established in the region after recognition of the independence of the two former autonomies of the Georgian SSR.

Thus, from Moscow's point of view, the South Caucasus consists of not three states (UN member states Armenia, Azerbaijan, and Georgia), but five. Moscow builds its relationships with Abkhazia and South Ossetia based on bilateral agreements "On Strategic Partnership and Alliance" (signed on November 24, 2014) and "On Alliance and Integration" (signed on March 18, 2015). Even though both documents sealed Moscow's increasing military-political presence in both partly recognized republics (currently the South Ossetian army is integrated into Russian armed forces), they can hardly be regarded as new milestones. These agreements formalized the set up that emerged in August 2008 when Moscow became the guarantor of security, recovery, and social-economic development of Abkhazia and South Ossetia.

Along with a basic structure, these two agreements have their own peculiarities. These differences can be explained by a fundamental divergence of the two projects. While Abkhazia strives to maintain its statehood (with Russian military-political guarantees), South Ossetia views independence not as a final goal but as a transitional stage on the way to unification with North Ossetia within Russia. In the case of Abkhazia, the elite tries to emphasize its own preferences (Russian citizens do not have the right to receive Abkhaz citizenship but have access to land resources and real estate; the word "integration" was removed from the title of the agreement). The Abkhaz leadership subjected the document of alliance with Russia to a number of revisions.¹⁰

However, South Ossetia is interested in maximal integration with Russia, including unification with it (per Crimea's example). In July 2015, South Ossetian border guards (with the support of Russia) installed new border signs along the Khurvaleti-Orchosani line. As a result, a piece of the strategically important Baku-Supsa pipeline appeared under Tskhinvali's control. Currently, the South Ossetian border post is located just 450 meters from the all-Caucasian significant highway connecting Azerbaijan, Armenia, and Eastern Georgia with its Black Sea ports and Turkey (Gamtselidze 2015).

¹⁰ See the evolution of the drafts of the bilateral agreements between Russia and Abkhazia: <http://www.kavkaz-uzel.eu/articles/252874/>.

Russia consistently avoids raising the question of changing South Ossetia's current status and expanding the state by including a new federation subject. From 2014 to 2017, discussions in South Ossetia on a referendum on unification with Russia intensified. At the end of May 2016, the South Ossetian leadership decided to postpone the popular vote to take place after the presidential elections, which were held in April 2017. The leader of "United Ossetia" party Anatoly Bibilov (former chairperson of the parliament) won the elections. While he was consistently pushing forward the idea of unification of "two Ossetias" within the Russian Federation, Moscow didn't support this idea. The repeat of the "Crimea Scenario" did not happen. Bibilov himself actually halted the "unification project."

A series of electoral campaigns in Georgia during 2013-2016 significantly altered the political landscape within the country. After Mikhail Saakashvili's departure together with the United National Movement party, certain changes took place in Russian-Georgian relations. Nevertheless, they were (and still are) tactical and selective. The new Georgian leadership (represented by the Georgian Dream party) maintained their loyalty to the strategic approaches of the previous government: supporting and strengthening of integration with NATO and the European Union. However, the Georgian Dream team, unlike Saakashvili, made serious changes in its tactical approaches. The strategic goal of membership in NATO and the EU is viewed not through an open confrontation with Russia, but through a pragmatic approach to relations with Moscow. Some clear results of this approach are:

- Ending confrontational rhetoric and using Russia as a factor for domestic political mobilization by the Georgian authorities;
- Tbilisi's refusal to support the North Caucasian nationalist movements and a political alliance with them based on positioning Georgia as a "Caucasian alternative" to Russia;
- Declaration on readiness to cooperate on security issues; and
- Establishment of direct and regular dialogue between Georgian and Russian governments that is free from raising and discussing the status disputes over Abkhazia and South Ossetia (the meeting format between Georgy Karasin and Zurab Abashidze).

Russia opened its market for Georgian goods (alcohol, mineral water, citrus fruits) and eased the visa regime for Georgian cargo service providers (truck drivers). In early February 2017, Karasin and Abashidze made a statement expressing their readiness to return to the six-year-old treaty on opening trade corridors between the Russian Federation and Georgia through Abkhazia and South Ossetia. Previously, this document was part of the Russian-Georgian agreement on Russia's accession to the World Trade Organization (WTO). Most likely this process will not be quick, because it affects the interests of not only Tbilisi and Moscow but also of Yerevan and Baku, as well as of partially recognized entities. However, the very fact of putting forward some constructive initiatives despite the existing differences is a positive signal.

Despite public support to Ukraine's territorial integrity and condemnation of "annexation of Crimea," official Tbilisi refused to "link" its policies to the crisis in Ukraine. However, the existence of such contradictions as the status of the two partially recognized republics and diverse foreign policy positions regarding the involvement of NATO and the EU in Caucasian affairs (the "red lines") quickly exhausted the primary agenda for normalizing relations between Russia and Georgia. Today, the only topic of possible future cooperation between the two countries in countering terrorism, especially taking into account the radicalization of the population in the Akhmeta district of Georgia (Pankisi) bordering Russia and the involvement of people from there in Jihadist movements in Syria and Iraq, primarily in the "Islamic State" (Charkviani 2015).

Moscow adopted another approach for Nagorno-Karabakh. NKR is not mentioned at all in the 2016 Foreign Policy Concept, either as an unrecognized entity or as a party to a conflict (while Transnistria is viewed as a party to a conflict with Moldova). Moscow is interested in maintaining a maximum balance between Yerevan and Baku (which is even more important after losing the leverage over Georgia in 2008). Unlike in the cases of Georgian-Abkhaz and Georgian-South Ossetian conflicts both parties to the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict are interested in Russian mediation. For Armenia, who is actively involved in integration processes dominated by Russia (CSTO and EAEU), Russian mediation implies certain guarantees for non-resumption of full-scale hostilities. For Azerbaijan cooperation with Russia allows distancing from the West

who has very critical views of the internal political situation in the country (human rights issues, authoritarian regime). In 2016, Russia supported a constitutional referendum that extended the term of the presidential legislature from five to seven years and expanded the powers of the head of state. In February 2017, Russia also supported the appointment of President Ilham Aliyev's spouse Mehriban to the post of vice president. Therefore, the official position of the Russian Federation is an important factor in the international legitimization of political order in the Caspian state, which Baku appreciates.

The Russian-Azerbaijani bilateral partnership also has clear boundaries. Azerbaijan aims to be an independent player in the regional energy projects and be a partner with the West. Baku clearly and consistently supports Georgia's and Ukraine's territorial integrity. This Caspian state is not rushing to become part of Eurasian integration processes led by Moscow. In the meantime, Russia also tries to engage in an integration process that would not resemble CIS ("instrument for civilized divorce"). But until the resolution of the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict, Armenia's and Azerbaijan's participation in the same integration structure can reduce the efficiency of the latter to a zero.

Thus, when building its policies towards the conflicts in the Caucasus, Russia avoids using uniform standards. It recognizes the independence of Abkhazia and South Ossetia, but at the same time tries to avoid a complete collapse of relations with Georgia (in this regard Vladimir Putin's statements on the necessity to ease or abolish the visa regime with Georgia are very illustrative) (RIA Novosti 2015). Moscow also balances between Baku and Yerevan in the process of the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict settlement while supporting its priority—a strategic alliance with Armenia.

Yet, Moscow's influence over Abkhaz and South Ossetian elites should not be exaggerated and explained exclusively by the military and financial support. Many internal processes have their own logic. As an example, in 2014 the leadership of Abkhazia changed as a result of mass protests; however, the opposition protests did not stop after the election of another leader, Raul Hajimba. In 2017, Anatoly Bibilov became the president of South Ossetia, while Vladimir Putin publicly showed his support for his main opponent, incumbent president Leonid Tibilov.

Russia and the West: Between confrontation and cooperation

The relationship between Russia and the West in this complicated region cannot be reduced to a confrontation model. We have a more diverse/mosaic pattern.

Currently, the main issue for competition (and confrontation) between Russia and the West on the post-Soviet space is Ukraine. Developments in this country and around it did not cancel the fact that Moscow, Brussels, and Washington have already clashed in the South Caucasus. And they currently have significantly fundamental differences. Moscow and Washington and Brussels have diverging views about conflicts in Abkhazia and South Ossetia. Moscow views these two republics as newly independent states, while the US and EU insist on the maintaining of "Georgia's territorial integrity." In addition, the US and EU and several other countries use the term "occupied territories" when referencing Abkhazia and South Ossetia. In the strengthening of Russian military presence in the region and attempts to alter borders between republics, Washington and Brussels see Moscow's attempts to restore Soviet or imperial domination in Eurasia. After changing the status of Abkhazia, South Ossetia, and, especially Crimea, the US is particularly concerned about the possible repeat of this experience in other parts of the post-Soviet space.

On July 29, 2011, the US Senate adopted a resolution in support of Georgia's "territorial integrity," which demanded Russia to stop the occupation (the authors of the resolution were Republican senator Lindsey Graham and Democratic senator Jeanne Shaheen) (WH 2010). Some European countries (Lithuania, Romania), the European Parliament, and NATO Parliament Assembly also recognized Russian "occupation" of Georgian territories.

However, the Western countries are not united around the issue of Georgia's membership in the North Atlantic Alliance. The US, Baltic states, Poland, and Romania insist on expediting the process. At the same time, the "locomotives" of European Integration Germany and France do not consider accession of a new member reasonable at least until the conflicts are resolved and all disputes between Tbilisi and

Moscow are settled. In this context, the regional visit of German Federal Chancellor Angela Merkel in August 2018 was illuminating. During this visit, Berlin sent an unambiguous signal: Georgia cannot count on Germany's support to join NATO. Meanwhile, Tbilisi's accession into the Alliance is totally unacceptable for Russia. For Moscow, such a move means the development of an extremely unfavorable strategic situation, especially in conflict zones.

Unlike the conflicts in Abkhazia, South Ossetia, Transnistria, Southeastern Ukraine, and the Balkans, the positions of Russia and the West virtually overlap regarding the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict. Currently, the three co-chair countries of the Minsk Group (US, France, and Russia), despite their other differences, share consensus regarding the revised "Madrid Principles" as the foundation for the peace process. The West also supports Russia's individual peace initiative in Nagorno-Karabakh (the trilateral negotiation format Moscow-Baku-Yerevan). Even today, when relations between Moscow and Washington have reached their lowest level since the collapse of the USSR, American diplomats positively assess the role played by the Russian leadership both in the process of de-escalating the military confrontation and in supporting the negotiation process (Regnum 2017).

The Karabakh settlement remains, perhaps, the only relatively successful format of interaction of the United States and Russia in the post-Soviet space. Like Moscow, Washington also balances between different interest groups. On the one hand, the issues of energy security bring it closer to Baku. Yet on the other hand, the liberal views are closer to the positions of the Armenian lobby (the Nagorno-Karabakh movement is viewed as a response to Soviet national discriminatory policies) (Galstyan 2016). As for the European Union, Brussels does not officially have independent peacekeeping projects in Nagorno-Karabakh. France acts as the official representative of Brussels in the Minsk Group.

Russia, Iran, and Turkey: problems and contradictions

Turkey and Iran are other players in the South Caucasus besides the West and Russia. Their interests cannot be identified with the positions of Washington and Brussels or with Moscow's approaches. Turkey's interest in the Caucasus is determined by several factors. First of all, it has strong ties with Turkic-speaking Azerbaijan. Over the past quarter

century the two countries have become strategic allies. Turkey consistently supports Azerbaijan's territorial integrity and condemns the actions of Armenia in Nagorno-Karabakh. The Turkish military is actively involved in the training and retraining of the Azerbaijani officers. From April 1993 to the present, Turkey has imposed a blockade on the land border with Armenia (about 300 km). This decision was made during the open military confrontation in Nagorno-Karabakh. During the period, when military escalation in Karabakh began in April 2016, only Turkey and Ukraine fully supported one of the conflicting parties—Baku. Furthermore, Turkey is not just a member of NATO, but a country with the second largest army in the Alliance (PRT 2016). However, its positions are different from those of the United States and France—the two co-chairs of the Minsk Group that are Ankara's military allies.

Common interests bring together Turkey and Georgia. Ankara consistently supports the territorial integrity of this country, participates in joint infrastructure and military-technical projects. The presence of the Abkhaz diaspora within Turkey, as well as the business contacts of Turkish citizens of Abkhazian descent with their historic homeland, make Ankara's policy more nuanced. The Turkish authorities do not prevent the organizations of the Abkhaz and North Caucasian diaspora from developing cultural and business contacts with Abkhazia. Russian-Turkish confrontation of 2015-2016 imposed its own adjustments, and Sukhumi, following Moscow, joined the sanctions against Ankara. Naturally, the improvement of Russian-Turkish bilateral relations was positively perceived by the Abkhaz side.

Iran also brings on its own approaches. For many years, the Islamic Republic consistently promoted its vision of a regional security system of conflict settlement in the South Caucasus. The vision implies the "3 + 3" format (Regnum 2003). The two triads are composed of Armenia, Azerbaijan, and Georgia, as well as Iran, Russia, and Turkey. And although Iran is hostile to any Western presence in the region and is not ready to cooperate with the United States and the European Union in resolving conflicts in the South Caucasus, its position of being committed exclusively to diplomatic methods and opposing any military solution to the status quo deserves attention. In 2009, Iran's representative declared the country's unwillingness to recognize the

independence of Abkhazia and South Ossetia, thus supporting the territorial integrity of Georgia (FNA 2009). With Nagorno-Karabakh, the situation is rather paradoxical. While Russia and the West demonstrate a willingness to cooperate, Iran is critical of the implementation of the updated “Madrid Principles.” Tehran is uncomfortable with the resolution of the conflict in Karabakh, which would involve the deployment of international peacekeeping forces into the region (it does not matter under whose flag these forces will be deployed). Representatives of Tehran have always stated that there should be no external players in the region. Iran’s position regarding the “basic principles” of the conflict settlement does not coincide with the Russian approaches, although, like Russia, the Islamic Republic unequivocally opposes a military solution. In a paradoxical way, it brings Iran’s position closer to the opinion of the two “Western” co-chairs of the OSCE Minsk Group.

Recommendations

Currently, there are a few opportunities for resolving conflicts in the South Caucasus. The positions of all the parties involved do not have room for a compromise. Abkhazia and South Ossetia view Moscow’s recognition of their independence as a final decision, while Georgia sees this as a temporary occupation. The Armenian side understands the settlement as the self-determination of the Armenians of Nagorno-Karabakh, and not their reconciliation with the Azerbaijanis. Baku processes the restoration of territorial integrity (including by military means) without a broad discussion on the possible status of the disputed territory within a single country.

Today, conflicts in the Caucasus are influenced by external factors to a much greater degree. Among them are the confrontations between Russia and the West as well as the armed conflict in the Southeast of Ukraine and in Syria. As a result, the issues in the Caucasus become embedded in broader contexts. Their regional format is increasingly complemented by geopolitical considerations, which reduce the possibilities for reaching a compromise since the principle of “zero-sum games” becomes dominant.

Nevertheless, the search for a way out of the impasse, and at least, building structures to manage if not resolve the conflicts and minimize

additional risks, is possible. First of all, it is necessary to overcome the popular misconception that it cannot get worse. There are possible scenarios that can lead to a situation where the current relative turbulence can be replaced by a rough shakeup, including military escalation. For example, in the case of Georgia's expedited accession to NATO, it is possible that South Ossetia (and less likely Abkhazia) will be annexed to Russia like Crimea was. The growing number of incidents in Nagorno-Karabakh is fraught with the involvement of Russia, Turkey, Iran, and under certain circumstances, the United States and its European allies into the conflict, even via military means.

Today, all players involved in the Caucasian processes admit that conflict resolution is impossible without Moscow's participation. However, expectations of what Russia should do and the vision of the situation by its leadership are very different. It is unlikely that the Kremlin is ready for the "de-occupation" of Abkhazia and South Ossetia, which Tbilisi, as well as the US and its allies supporting Georgia, demand from Russia. At the same time, the West will not agree with the establishment of Russian dominance in the South Caucasus.

In this context, it is extremely important to start a general and substantive dialogue on European security issues, which would include consideration of the situation around Ukraine, the Caucasus, and the Black Sea region, with the participation of both the EU and NATO member states and Russia. Currently, without a minimal positive dynamic on this issue addressing the conflicts in the Caucasus is problematic. In this regard, it is vital to update the "inventory" of the interests of all players, define competitive goals and objectives, and try to develop a "roadmap" despite existing disputes over status issues.

The following recommendations towards issues in the Caucasus are put forward considering the current trends:

1. The collapse of the existing negotiation formats should be prevented: the Geneva talks on the situation in the Caucasus and negotiations on the settlement of the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict. These are extremely important as channels of communication between the conflict parties and other players involved in the peace process.

2. In the current context, the utmost aim is to have the joint oral agreement on the non-use of force in Abkhazia and South Ossetia supported by all parties of the Geneva talks. Based on this not legally binding agreement, it will be possible to develop a more detailed document in the future.
3. The work of separate working groups in the framework of the Geneva discussions on security and humanitarian issues should be intensified. It is necessary to minimize detentions and arrests and ensure the most convenient contacts between the populations on both sides of the conflict.
4. Practical content to European Union's "engagement without recognition" approach in relation to Abkhazia and South Ossetia should be added. It is important to identify areas where interaction between Sukhumi, Tskhinvali, Tbilisi, Moscow, the EU, and other players is possible despite the unresolved status issues.
5. Trilateral processes (negotiations between the presidents of Armenia, Azerbaijan, and Russia) along with the existing diplomatic format (OSCE Minsk Group) should be activated. This (trilateral) format has already paid off in 2008-2012. This format managed to keep Yerevan and Baku from repeating the South Ossetian scenario and even reach mutual agreements on humanitarian issues, as well as come very close to compromise on "basic principles." In addition to increasing Russian participation, this format would allow Moscow to maintain cooperation with France and the United States, the two OSCE Minsk Group co-chairs interested in cooperating with Russia in this direction. Russia's effectiveness in this context would strengthen the confidence between Moscow and Washington and facilitate solving broader international issues.
6. Constructive relations between Russia and the new authorities in Armenia should be built in order to prevent the sharp polarization within this republic and the reevaluation of its relations with Russia and Eurasian integration. High-quality relations with the new cabinet are extremely important in the context of the Nagorno-Karabakh settlement. They will allow Yerevan to overcome the existing stagnation in the negotiations and return to a meaningful dialogue with Baku.

7. A special Russian-Armenian integration package should be developed as a bridge between the EU and the EAEU. While this topic directly is not related to the conflict settlement, such an “and-and” model and the rejection of the explicit choice between Moscow and Brussels is an important strategy when considering prospects of pragmatic relations between Russia and the West, or at least with the European Union.
8. Moscow’s policies towards Abkhazia and South Ossetia, the elites of which have different views about the prospects of their existence, should be diversified. At the same time, coordination of integration steps with Sukhum/i and Tskhinval/i should be conducted with a clear understanding that Russia has its own interests and reasons, and Moscow’s position cannot be that of a lobbyist for Abkhazia and South Ossetia (in this regard it would be useful to refrain from implementing “United Ossetia” plans per the Crimean model).
9. Areas of cooperation between Russia and Georgia that already have been tried and unite the positions of the parties despite the existing contradictions should be developed. This refers to the security issues on the North Caucasus border (especially countering radical Islamism). This is extremely important in the context of Pankisi, as well as the participation of immigrants from Georgia and the Russian North Caucasus in the Middle Eastern terrorist and extremist structures.
10. Pragmatic relations between Russia and the United States and its allies should be built to counter radical jihadism in the Middle East (considering the influence of the situation in this region on the Southern and Northern Caucasus).
11. Regular contacts should be established between NATO and Russia to exchange information on the military-political situation in the Caucasus. This model has been tested in Syria already. The possible risks during military exercises should be minimized.
12. Activate, and possibly, establish regular consultations between Moscow, Ankara, and Tehran on issues in the Caucasus. This format of cooperation already paid off in the Middle East. It seems that it could be tested in the South Caucasus as well.
13. A coordination mechanism should be established on security and cross-border cooperation in the framework of the Greater

Caucasus (including representatives of Georgia and Azerbaijan, which have a common border with the Russian Federation along Dagestan, Chechnya, and Ingushetia). The participants on the Russian side can include the staff of plenipotentiary representative in the North-Caucasian Federal District (North Caucasus Federal District) and representatives of the relevant departments of the Russian Foreign Ministry. Such experience already existed in the 1990s and the first half of the 2000s.

14. A coordinating expert-analytical structure should be created for the Greater Caucasus that would help facilitate interaction and exchange of information between experts working on the issues related to the South Caucasus and North Caucasus. It is extremely important to ensure regular interaction among expert structures dealing with Middle East issues, as well as counter-terrorism issues. This would improve the quality of expert support of practical recommendations on security, defense, and political development of the entire Greater Caucasus.

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