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(Non) “Russian World”, (Non) Soft Power: Putin’s Serpentine Policy in the South Caucasus

By Andrey Makarychev, Tartu, and Alexandra Yatsyk, Kazan

Abstract

This article provides an overall introduction to this issue of the Caucasus Analytical Digest, describing the nature of Russia’s relationships with Georgia, Armenia, and Azerbaijan in light of the Ukraine crisis.

Introduction

One of the most immediate effects of the crisis in Russian–Ukrainian relations for the South Caucasus is the growing realism in regional politics. As a mainstream Russian author suggests, with power (geo)politics back, “responsible stakeholders in Tbilisi, Yerevan and Baku have realized that should there be serious warfare in the region, no international institutions will be powerful enough to stop it, nor will any great European powers be ready for a head-on military collision to defend their clients’ interests.”¹ To put it simply, countries of the “near abroad” cannot expect any external help if they face security problems with Russia. What stems from here is another argument widely articulated by Kremlin loyalists after the crisis in Ukraine: the time for multi-vectoral policies is over, and most post-Soviet countries are supposed to get ready to make their—deeply political—choices², each one coming with a political price.

Evidently, Russia intends to force the West to recognize the inclusion of eastern Europe and the south Caucasus into the Russian sphere of interests.³ Yet in the south Caucasus Russia faces a reality substantially different from that in eastern Europe, with the key distinction being a limited space for the “Russian world” ideas. In fact, Moscow can use the “Russian world” only as an element of its policies toward South Ossetia and Abkhazia—two break-away territories that nicely fit in the wider Russian strategy of supporting separatism and secessionism as a political tool.⁴ This makes Russia develop its policies toward Georgia, Armenia and Azer-

baijan as a combination of economic and military security instruments, which often brings controversial results.

Russia–Georgia

Georgia, which has a record of military confrontation with Russia and signed the Association Agreement (AA) with the EU, is the most troublesome country for the Kremlin. Russia prefers to couch its Georgia strategy mainly in soft power terms that content-wise are based on a number of arguments.

First, accentuating cultural and religious affinity with Georgia is for Moscow a political instrument that allows for emphasizing the incompatibility of “traditional” Orthodox values with the liberal emancipatory agenda of the EU that allegedly “calls for respecting sin” and “forgets about nations and patriotism.”⁵ Politically this approach leads to the direct projection to Georgia of the Kremlin’s Ukraine discourse—as exemplified, for example, by the presidential advisor on Ukraine Sergey Glaziev, who is known for his harsh rhetoric toward the EU.⁶

Second, as in the case of Ukraine, Moscow insists that the “color revolution” in Georgia led by Mikhail Saakashvili was socially ineffective and politically self-defeating. Ultimately it was conducive to the drastic deterioration of Georgia’s relations with Moscow and the loss of Abkhazia and South Ossetia in 2008.⁷ Saakashvili’s support for the EuroMaidan in 2013–2014 is interpreted as a continuation of his attachment to the idea of “color revolutions” that ultimately marginalized him politically within Georgia.⁸ The EuroMaidan was

1 Maxim Suchkov. Echoes of the Ukrainian Crisis in the South Caucasus. Moscow Carnegie Center, 24 October 2014, available at <<http://carnegie.ru/eurasiaoutlook/?fa=5705>>

2 Fyodor Lukianov. Konets mnogovektornosti, Rossiiskaya Gazeta, 4 June 2014, available at <http://www.rg.ru/2014/06/04/mno_govektornost.html>

3 Sergey Markedonov. Rossiya i konflikty na Bol’shom Kavkaze: v poiskakh optimal’nykh resheniy. Russian Council on International Affairs, 24 April 2014, available at <http://russiancouncil.ru/inner/?id_4=3583#top>

4 Paul Goble. Putin Said ‘Organizing Separatist International’ Against Europe, Windows on Eurasia, November 12, 2014, available at <<http://windowoneurasia2.blogspot.com/>>

5 Nana Devdariani. Evrodesant v Patriarkhii, “Rossiya-Gruzia: Expertniy Dialog” web portal, 26 May 2014, available at <<http://www.georgiamonitor.org/detail.php?ID=562>>

6 Archil Chkoidze. Rossiya ne ispol’zuet potentsial svoikh storonnikov, kotorye est’ v Gruzii. NewsGeorgia, 12 February 2014, available at <<http://newsgeorgia.ru/point/20140212/216365535.html>>

7 Nikolay Silaev. Vtoroe priglashenie, Lenta.ru, 27 October 2014, available at <<http://lenta.ru/articles/2014/10/27/dogovor/>>

8 Georgy Mdivani. Kak ukrainskie sobytiya poblyali na rossisko-gruzinskije otnoshenia, “Rossiya-Gruzia: Expertniy Dialog” web portal, 19 March 2014, available at <<http://www.georgiamonitor.org/detail.php?ID=561>>

perceived by Georgian nationalists, the logic goes on, as at attempt to take revenge and come back to the old agenda of pushing Russia out of the post-Soviet area.⁹

Third, Russia tries to explore skeptical attitudes within Georgia to Western institutions, claiming that the AA puts this country in an unequal position.¹⁰ Hypothetical prospects of the possible deployment of NATO military infrastructure in Georgia are lambasted as challenging the idea of Georgian–Russian normalization.¹¹

Russia also transposes into the South Caucasus its (mis)interpretation of the AAs as documents conducive to the relegation of the signatories' sovereignties to the EU, to which Russia reserves a right to respond by more closely incorporating break-away territories. Against this backdrop, the political value of separatist territories for Russia's long-term strategy becomes more obvious: Moscow either threatens to absorb them in order to deter neighbors from a closer relationship with the EU, or attach these territories to Russia as a—mostly symbolic—compensation for a possible failure of deterrence.

Prospects for soft-power-based post-conflict settlement widened as soon as the Georgian authorities distanced themselves from the political heritage of former President Saakashvili. Moscow uses the criminal case opened against him as a proof of the validity of its interpretation of “color revolutions” as unfortunate and detrimental developments orchestrated by external powers. It is this argument that facilitates rapprochement between Moscow and Tbilisi—from the Caucasian Dialogue initiated by the Gorchakov Foundation to the resumption of commercial flights between the two countries. Yet all this could not prevent Georgia from signing the AA with the EU and seeking greater integration with NATO, to which Russia responded by fostering in October 2014 the Russian–Abkhaz Treaty on Partnership and Integration in which the military component was key. This suggests that Russia's soft power is heavily based on hard power resources. Zurab Abashidze, Georgia's special representative on Russia, confessed that the two parties remain standing on “radically divergent positions,” while Georgia's prime minister added that he does not see any headway in bilateral relations after Saakashvili

left the office.¹² It is not incidental that Georgia's AA with the EU unleashed a new wave of securitization in relations between Moscow and Tbilisi, with many in Georgia presuming that their country might be a possible “next target for the Kremlin” after Ukraine.¹³ In the Russian media one may find explicit references to the prospect of “the Ukrainian scenario” for Georgia, to which Russia would react not only by “defending” Abkhazia and South Ossetia, but also by “providing stability, security and economic safety for the population within Georgia through direct contacts with public authorities of individual Georgian regions.”¹⁴ To sum up, the multiple Georgian steps towards gradual rapprochement with Russia were not so far rewarded by Moscow, which keeps pursuing a highly controversial and inconsistent policy of both engaging Tbilisi in reconciliation and simultaneously threatening to further destabilize the country from the inside.

Armenia

Russia's policies toward Armenia, a country susceptible to Russian influence, are grounded in different premises. As opposed to the EU, Moscow's strategy is not about making a competitive offer that would ultimately change this country domestically, but rather about limiting Armenia's scope of choices to the point of eliminating the very possibility of alternatives to the pro-Russian orientation. It is not the adherence to common norms or values, but the security trump card that Moscow used to force Yerevan to discontinue its association talks with Brussels in exchange for security protection—a logic that is based on the fact that among the three South Caucasian countries, Armenia is the only one that was not traumatized by painful territorial losses.

It is at this point that the neocolonial nature of the Russian reintegration project comes to the surface.¹⁵ “If Armenians want to feel safe, they have got to speak Russian, Moscow's propagandist-in-chief, Russian media-personality Dmitry Kiselyov, has instructed Russia's

9 Nana Devdariani. Mайдan izmenil mirovoi poriadok, “Rossiya-Gruzia: Expertniy Dialog” web portal, 16 March 2014, available at <<http://www.georgiamonitor.org/detail.php?ID=558>>

10 Giorgi Mdivani. Pravila igry ES s Gruzией nel'zia schitat' ravnopravnymi, “Rossiya-Gruzia: Expertniy Dialog” web portal, 21 May 2014, available at <<http://www.georgiamonitor.org/detail.php?ID=578>>

11 Zaal Andzhaparidze. Primet li Gruzia oboronitel'nye systemy NATO? “Rossiya-Gruzia: Expertniy Dialog” web portal, 14 May 2014, available at <<http://www.georgiamonitor.org/detail.php?ID=576>>

12 Gruzia ne vidit politicheskogo progressa v dialoge s RF. The Voice of America, 17 October 2014, available at <<http://www.golos-ameriki.ru/content/georgia-russia/2487216.html>>

13 PM says Russia Lacks Levers to Deter Georgia's EU Association, Civil Georgia web portal, 16 January 2014, available at <<http://civil.ge/eng/article.php?id=26862>>

14 Mikhail Chernov. Rossiya vyidet na granitsy Armenii. Lenta.ru, 7 November 2014, available at <<http://lenta.ru/articles/2014/11/07/russianarm/>>

15 Babken DerGrigorian. Armenia's Membership in the EEU Raises More Questions Than It Answers. Asbarez.com, 17 October 2014, available at <<http://asbarez.com/127993/armenia%E2%80%99s-membership-in-the-eeu-raises-more-questions-than-it-answers/>>

closets Caucasus ally, Armenia.”¹⁶ Such incidents explain the widely spread criticism of the Russian soft power.

Russia intentionally deploys its relations with Armenia in the East–West confrontational dichotomy, which allows Moscow to play the role of defending its ally from “dark pro-Western forces”¹⁷ that are eager to detach Armenia from further integrating with Russia. In the meantime, Russia tries to implicitly take advantage of the traditionally securitized perception of Azerbaijan in Armenia by claiming, for example, that Baku considers a closer alliance with “Turkish countries,” including Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan, which might be harmful for Armenia.¹⁸ Russia also popularizes opinions of those Armenian experts who praise further association with Russia, claiming that in case of necessity, Moscow will defend Armenia militarily as it did in August 2008, applying military force to protect South Ossetia¹⁹—an argument that de-facto justifies not only the five-day war between Georgia and Russia, but also further recognition by the latter of the two break-away regions.

The references to Abkhazia and South Ossetia in this context are substantial for understanding one of pivotal arguments in the Russian discourse—that of the existence of a community of post-Soviet territories that seceded from internationally recognized countries in their bid for either independence or reintegration with Russia. This imagined community can be metaphorically dubbed “CIS-2”, to include Transnistria, Abkhazia, South Ossetia, Nagorno-Karabakh and, after the unleashing of insurgency in eastern Ukraine, the so called “Novorossiya”. It is at this point that the crisis in Ukraine became a trigger for the closer association of Abkhazia with Russia.²⁰ Within this logic, all cases of post-Soviet separatism and irredentism are elements of a wider picture of Western provocative policies of fueling conflicts that Russia ought to withstand.

In the meantime, Russia denies that there are grounds for political discussions on making a choice between the

EU and the Eurasian Union, which resonates within Armenia as well where many claim that the pro-Russian turn was not a matter of political choice but a rational—though enforced—calculation.²¹ Russia requests from Armenia not to improve its governance, but simply to “ensure political stability”, for which Moscow itself can be instrumental: thus, according to the director of the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) Business Club Denis Tiurin, “We in Russia do have legislation on foreign agents, and Armenian civil society might wish to positively assess this experience.”²² In fact, in countering the Western “democracy promotion” strategy, Russia ends up promoting autocracy in neighboring countries. Russia also ably uses in its interests the obvious fear of an “Armenian Maidan” that the ruling circles in Armenia display.²³

The military argument—Russian troops on the Armenian territory as a security protection against possible attempts to retrieve Nagorno-Karabakh back by Azerbaijan to whom Russia sells weapons—was the most instrumental in dissuading Yerevan from further rapprochement with Brussels. Yet a direct effect of Russia’s policy of blocking Armenia from signing the AA is the deeper entanglement with the conflict over Nagorno-Karabakh, which only complicates Russia’s policy of striking a balance between the two conflicting parties.

Signals from Moscow in this respect are far from conclusive. On the one hand, Moscow has to be sensitive to the Armenian expectations of its membership in the Eurasian Economic Union as a means to get not only economic, but foremost security advantages in its conflict with Azerbaijan.²⁴ Col. Andrey Ruzinsky, commander of the 102nd Military Base at Gyumri in Armenia, affirmed Russia’s preparedness and intention to “join the armed conflict” against Azerbaijan if it “decides to restore jurisdiction over Nagorno-Karabakh by force.”²⁵ Some analysts predict that Russia will also seek to raise the role of the Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO), as opposed to the Minsk group.²⁶

16 Giorgi Lomsadze. Kremlin Propaganda-Chief Asks Armenians to Speak Russian, 12 June 2014, available at <http://www.eurasianet.org/node/68551?utm_source=dlvr.it&utm_medium=twitter>

17 Rossiya vlozhitsya v Armeniyu. Utro.ru web portal, 15 October 2014, available at <<http://www.utro.ru/articles/2014/10/15/1217006.shtml>>

18 RF i Armenia nuzhdayutsa drug v druge, zayavili uchastniki telemosta. RIA-Novosti Information Agency, 29 September 2014, available at <<http://ria.ru/politics/20140929/1026134399.html>>

19 Sergey Shakariants. Armenia poluchit ot vstupleniya v EAES suschestvennye vygody. RIA-Novosti Information Agency, 18 October 2014, available at <<http://ria.ru/world/20141008/1027434747.html>>

20 Yurii Kosov. Situatsiyu v Abkhazii nuzhno rassmatrivat’ skvoz’ prizmu Novorossii, Center for Support of Russian–Armenian Strategic and Public Initiatives (CSRASPI) web site, available at <<http://russia-armenia.info/node/9672>>

21 Levon Zurabyan, Kliuchi upravleniya protsessami na Yuzhnom Kavkaze—u Rossii. New Caucasus web portal, 1 November 2014, available at <<http://newcaucasus.com/index.php?newsid=7111>>

22 Ibid.

23 V Erevane obsudili veroyatnost’ provedeniya Maidana v Armenii, CSRASPI web site, October 10, 2014, available at <<http://russia-armenia.info/node/11143>>

24 Shushan Khatlamadzhan. EAES—vozmozhnost’ ukrepleniya bezopasnosti Armenii, CSRASPI web site, 10 July 2014, available at <<http://russia-armenia.info/node/10784>>

25 Alexandros Petersen. Russia Shows Its Hand on Karabakh, EU Observer, 18 November 2013, available at <<http://euobserver.com/opinion/122032>>

26 Irina Dhorbenadze. Strakhi Armenii. The Gorchakov Foundation, 28 October 2014, available at <http://russiacouncil.ru/inner/?id_4=3759#top>

Yet this policy is contested by those who are sure that in this case of overcommitments “Russia will have to sustain heavy losses fighting an enemy that it has itself armed to the teeth, which the Russian population will not understand or support.”²⁷ Moreover, as a member of the Russian Presidential Council on Human Rights ventured to state, Russia has to help the Azeri refugees come back to Karabakh, and excluded a chance for any support to a Russia-led military operation from the CSTO, since Karabakh is not part of any of its member states.²⁸

Azerbaijan

Russian Presidential advisor Sergey Glaziev presumed that taking into account both Armenia’s integration with the Customs Union and the conflictual state of its relations with Azerbaijan, Russia is interested in “a full-fledged participation” of the latter in the Eurasian integration.²⁹ Therefore, Russia sends amicable messages to Azerbaijan trying to prevent a possible alienation of this country as an effect of Armenia’s accession to the Eurasian Economic Union. For example, Deputy Prime Minister Dmitry Rogozin suggested that the Western sanctions against Russia only increased trade between Russia and Azerbaijan, and strengthened economic liaisons between them.³⁰ A journalist from the Kremlin-loyal “Rosbalt” agency even assumed that “for Moscow it would be more important to see Azerbaijan, not Armenia, in the Eurasian Union.”³¹

Russia’s policy is thus to leave the door open to Azerbaijan in both economic and security spheres. Against the background of the raising threats emanating from the Islamic State, Russia is claiming that Armenia, its military ally in the South Caucasus, is much better protected against radical Islamism than Georgia and Azerbaijan.³² There are even voices arguing that the Russian

military base in Gumri can serve as a protective force for the whole South Caucasus.³³ This reasoning is in line with the arguments of those who claim that the major goal of the Eurasian Economic Union is military security, namely “the creation of a strong military state in the post-Soviet territories and beyond.”³⁴

Conclusion

In this article, we argued that due to serious cultural and political constrains, Russia cannot rely on soft power—with the concept of the “Russian world” at its core—as an effective instrument in the South Caucasus. Therefore, ideas of civilizational proximity, shared values and historical commonality are of only limited use for Moscow’s diplomacy.

Yet it remains doubtful that reliance on material interests and physical dependence on Russia (from economy to security) constitutes a solid foundation for Russian long-term hegemony in the South Caucasus. Russia’s policies usually do not create a new international reality—they are more bent on maintaining a status quo, creating ad-hoc coalitions against external threats, or taking temporal advantage of others’ missteps. Without a clear normative component, Russia tends to increase its security and financial commitments to its southern neighbors without necessarily strengthening their loyalty in response. In Moscow-dependent Abkhazia the prospect of incorporation into Russia is a matter of deep political controversy; in Armenia the accession to the Eurasian Economic Union is widely perceived simply as “a choice of a lesser evil.”³⁵ Moreover the example of Ukraine sent controversial messages to Yerevan: “the case of Crimea can be perceived as proving the veracity of Armenian policy in Karabakh, yet Donbass is a story of the price to be paid for this.”³⁶

Besides, the Russian realist posture is vulnerable in one more respect—it never strongly conceptualized the idea of national interest, preferring to leave it fuzzy. This leads to multiple inconsistencies in Russia’s policies in the South Caucasus. Moscow lambasts the West for legitimizing Kosovo’s ambitions for independence,

27 Alexandr Khranchikhin. The Caucasus Mine Field, Valdai International Discussion Club, 3 February 2014, available at <http://valdaiclub.com/near_abroad/66565.html>

28 Maksim Shevchenko. Azerbaidzhantsy dolzhny vernutsa v Karabakh. Kavpolit Information Agency, 25 March 2014. available at <http://kavpolit.com/articles/maksim_shevchenko_azerbaidzhantsy_dolzhny_vernutsj-2195/>

29 Sergey Glaziev. Azerbaidzhan—vazhneishiy partnior Rossii na Kavkaze. Kavpolit Information Agency, 11 June 2014, available at <http://kavpolit.com/articles/glazev_azerbaidzhan_vazhnejshij_partner_rossii_na-5817/>

30 Dmitry Rogozin. Zapad sblizil Moskvu i Baku, Vestnik Kavkaza web portal, 15 September 2014, available at <<http://www.vestnikavkaza.ru/news/Dmitriy-Rogozin-Zapad-sblizil-Moskvu-i-Baku.html>>

31 Irina Dzhorbenadze. Evraziiskiy manok dlia Azerbaidzhana, Rosbalt, 17 October 2014, available at <<http://www.rosbalt.ru/exussr/2014/10/17/1328248.html>>

32 Mikhail Agadzhanian. Islamskoe gosudarstvo u vorot Kavkaza: chto zhdiot strany regiona. CSRASPI web site, 28 October 2014,

available at <<http://russia-armenia.info/node/11386>>

33 Vladimir Lepikhin. Pochemu Sargsian ne Yanukovich. CSRASPI web site, 14 October 2014, available at <<http://russia-armenia.info/node/10983>>

34 Vladimir Kravtsov. Glavnaya idea sozdaniya Evraziyskogo ekonomicheskogo soyuza—voennaya. CSRASPI web site, 20 October 2014, available at <<http://russia-armenia.info/node/11137>>

35 Dva golosa iz chetyriokh - Armenia v EAES kak faktor davlenia na Kazakhstan i Belarus. CSRASPI web site, 13 October 2014, available at <<http://russia-armenia.info/node/10931>>

36 Vadim Dubnov. S dumoi o Novorossii. Po-karabakhski, CSRASPI web site, 20 October 2014, available at <<http://russia-armenia.info/node/11152>>

yet does exactly the same in all separatist territories in the South Caucasus and beyond. The Kremlin villifies the EU, but considers borrowing many of its policy tools in launching its own integration project. The Russian diplomacy heavily invests in developing soft power resources in Georgia, which are then undermined by a

policy of de-facto annexation of Abkhazia, etc. A more or less clear vision of Russia's long-term strategy in the region is hardly imaginable without a solid normative foundation; a lack thereof turns Russian realism into a justification for mostly temporal and situational adjustment to the policies of others.

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The Ukraine Crisis: Repercussions on Georgia

By Kornely Kakachia, Tbilisi

Abstract

Russia's annexation of Crimea is reshaping the geopolitical map of Europe and sending ripples of apprehension across the South Caucasus and wider Black Sea region. Amid Moscow's direct involvement in eastern Ukraine, many Georgians are closely monitoring all regional foreign policy developments. With a tradition of friendly and strategic relations between Tbilisi and Kyiv, Georgians see the struggle for Ukrainian sovereignty as an analogue of their own fate. This article provides some insights and policy perspective from Georgia on the ongoing Ukrainian crisis and its impact on Georgian foreign policy and internal stability.

Explaining Georgian–Ukrainian Strategic Bonds

Events in Ukraine have made national security a top priority for governments throughout the post-Soviet region.¹ In Georgia, fears that a similar crisis can spread to Georgia have increased. In an April 2014 survey of nearly 4,000 Georgians commissioned by the National Democratic Institute,² half of the respondents viewed Russia as “a real and existing threat,” a proportion considerably higher than before the start of the Ukraine crisis in November 2013. The reaction in Georgia has been strongly in support of Ukraine. Tbilisi dispatched political and humanitarian support to Kyiv, including a humanitarian medical mission (vital medicine, equipment, doctors), while hundreds of demonstrators gathered on the streets nightly, waving Ukrainian flags, light-

ing candles, and singing Ukraine's national anthem. Some Georgians have even gone to fight in Ukraine to support its territorial integrity

Although distinct in their origins, Georgia and Ukraine were part of the same states for nearly 200 years. After the Soviet Union collapsed, Georgia was disillusioned by Russia's tacit support for Georgia's separatist regions, and Tbilisi had no choice but to be engaged in an unfolding pattern of alliances involving both smaller regional powers and great powers outside of the region. Georgia's political calculus also included the quest to find fellow states in the immediate neighborhood to rely on as strategic partners. Ultimately, Georgia's search for “*Suliko*” (soulmates) in the post-Soviet region resulted in the establishment of strategic relations with the new Ukrainian state. Due to their shared history and similar political and economic conditions, the two states have since reached a high level of political, security, and economic cooperation. The fact that both nations are Orthodox Christian with churches that have been revamping relations with the Moscow Patriarchate has also played a role in cementing their regional bonds.

Despite leadership changes in Georgia and Ukraine, both states have more or less seen themselves as fight-

1 An earlier version of this article was published as a PONARS Eurasia Policy Memo in September 2014.

2 Luis Navarro. Public attitudes in Georgia: Results of an April 2014 survey carried out for NDI by CRRG-Georgia and funded by the Swedish International Development Cooperation Agency (Sida), available at <https://www.ndi.org/files/Georgia_April_2014_Survey_English.pdf>; see also poll on pp. 17–20 of this issue, especially Figure 1 on p. 17.