

UA: UKRAINE ANALYTICA

Issue 4 (22), 2020



- NON-RUSSIAN VIEWS
ON CURRENT RUSSIAN POLITICS

Russia Non-Russian View on Current Russian Politics

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Publisher:

Published by NGO "Promotion of Intercultural Cooperation" (Ukraine), Centre of International Studies (Ukraine), with the financial support of the Representation of the Friedrich Ebert Foundation in Ukraine and the Black Sea Trust for Regional Cooperation - a Project of the German Marshall Fund of the United States.

UA: Ukraine Analytica is the first Ukrainian analytical journal in English on International Relations, Politics and Economics. The journal is aimed for experts, diplomats, academics, students interested in the international relations and Ukraine in particular.

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ISSN 2518-7481

500 copies

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RUSSIA AND THE DILEMMA OF SEPARATIST TERRITORIES

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An important part of Russia's grand strategy since the 1990s has been the use of conflict zones across the post-Soviet space for geopolitical aims. Moscow's battle with the West over the borderlands – i.e., the regions that adjoin Russia from the west and south – has involved keeping Moldova, Ukraine, and the South Caucasus through at times deliberate stoking of separatist conflicts. This policy has been successful so far, as the EU and NATO have refrained from extending membership to Georgia, Moldova, and Ukraine. However, over the past several years, Russia has started to face long-term problems: financing the entities; attaining a wider recognition for the separatist regions; inability to reverse the pro-Western course of Georgia, Moldova, and Ukraine; and the failure to produce a long-term political or economic development vision for the unrecognised territories.

Russia's Policy on Separatist Regions of Third States

Russia's policy toward the conflicts in the post-Soviet space has been conditioned by various factors, including Moscow's relations with the West, Turkey, and Iran, pure military calculations, as well as ups and downs in bilateral ties with specific states neighbouring Russia¹. Although it has been hard to see the emergence of a veritable Russian strategy in the 1990s and early 2000s toward territorial conflicts, by 2020 (as evidenced by the results of the second Karabakh war), it could be argued with some certainty that a purposeful use and subsequent management of conflict zones across the post-Soviet space has turned into an important part of Russia's grand strategy toward the Eurasian landmass.

The emergence of the strategy is also closely related to the ongoing geopolitical struggle Russia has with the West over the borderlands – i.e., the regions that adjoin Russia from the west and south. The competition is manifested in the expansion of Western institutions such as the EU, its related Eastern Partnership, and NATO into Eastern Europe and, as a countermeasure, the Russian efforts to build the Eurasian Economic Union (EEU) with the aim to engulf what once constituted the Soviet territory. Therefore, maintaining buffer states around Russia has been a cornerstone of the Kremlin's foreign policy against the West's eastward projection of military and economic influence. The emergence of the Russian strategy toward territorial conflicts has also been conditioned by the arising constraints as an effective countermeasure


1 T. de Waal, N. von Twickel, *Beyond Frozen Conflict: Scenarios for the Separatist Disputes of Eastern Europe* (ed. M. Emerson), Brussels 2020, pp. 18-24.

against the neighbouring states' westward geopolitical inclinations. The Russian political elite knew that because of the country's low economic attractiveness, the South Caucasus states would inevitably turn to Europe. The same was likely to occur with Moldova and Ukraine on Russia's western frontier, as their geographical proximity to and historical interconnections with Europe render them particularly susceptible to the West's attractiveness.

To prevent Western economic and military penetration and the pro-Western foreign policy vector in the neighbouring states, the Kremlin has in many cases deliberately fomented various territorial conflicts. This policy has proved successful so far. Although the EU and NATO refrained from extending membership to Ukraine, Georgia, and Moldova because of economic and judicial problems even before the active phases of territorial conflicts, currently it is the land disputes and Russian military presence that serve as the biggest obstacle for the West's institutional expansion.

However, Russia now faces a different problem: It has so far failed to produce a long-term vision for the separatist regions. Creating a unified economic space with the separatist territories is not an option, as usually little economic benefit is expected. Even if in some cases benefits could still be harnessed, the territories' poor infrastructure prevents active Russian involvement. Additionally, local political elites are often sensitive to Russian domination. For instance, Abkhazia has for decades resisted Russian businesses' attempts to buy local land. Moscow understands that more financing has to be dedicated to the regions, whose populations could otherwise turn increasingly disenchanted with the hopes they pinned

on Russia. Indeed, the system is difficult to navigate for Russia: While in the first years following the collapse of the Soviet Union, Russia had to manage breakaway conflicts only in small and poor Georgia and Moldova, Moscow's responsibilities have increased significantly by late 2020 with Donbas and now Nagorno-Karabakh conflicts added to its strategy.



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Following the events in Ukraine in 2014, Donetsk and Luhansk became part of Russia's sphere of territorial conflicts. One could also add Syria to the list. The latter's inclusion might be surprising, but, considering the level of Russian influence there and the stripping away of many of Damascus's international contacts, the war-torn country is essentially now fully dependent on Russia².

With Syria and Donbas on the roster, the Kremlin now has to manage a range of territories that rely almost entirely, in both the military and economic senses, on Russia – but that are also geographically dispersed, economically disadvantageous, and geopolitically vulnerable.

This means that at a time when economic problems resulting from the COVID-19 pandemic, Western sanctions, and the lack of reforms are looming large on the Russian

2 E. Avdaliani, *Russia's Troubles with Its "String of Pearls"*, Besa Center, August 2020 [<https://besacenter.org/perspectives-papers/russia-separatist-states/>].

home front, Moscow has to pour yet more money into multiple separatist actors spread across the former Soviet space as well as Syria. Moscow's broader strategy of managing separatist conflicts is therefore under increasing stress.


It is more and more difficult for the Kremlin to manoeuvre across so many diverse conflicts simultaneously. At times, actors in the conflict zones try to play their own game independently from Moscow and the latter has to closely monitor any deviations lest they harm the Kremlin's strategic calculus. This has often happened in Abkhazia, where in early 2020 Raul Khadjimba resigned, not without Russian interference, or in Donbas, where occasional infighting, as in 2015 and 2018, among rebel groups takes place.

Apart from internal differences, the geographic dispersal of those conflicts also creates difficulties for Russia's projection of power. Since 2014, Kyiv and Chisinau, for example, have considered constraining the breakaway territory of Transnistria, and Moscow – which has no direct land or air route (Kyiv would likely block the latter) – can do little about it, although overall the situation seems to be quite manageable for Russia. Following the changes after the presidential election in Moldova, demands for Russian troops' removal are likely to increase. What is crucial here is how Russia will be able to respond. Even in Georgia's Abkhazia and South Ossetia, where Russian troops altogether number more than 10,000, the deadlock is evident. Russian forces stand by and watch as NATO exercises take place on Georgian soil – an indication that despite Russia's military presence, the West is continuing to expand its military support for Georgia, although it still falls short of outright NATO/EU membership.

Geopolitical trends indicate that Russia's long-term strategy to stop Western expansion in the former Soviet space is losing its rigour. While it is true that Moscow

stopped its neighbours from joining the EU and NATO, its gamble that those breakaway regions would undermine the pro-Western resolve of Georgia and Ukraine has largely failed. In Moldova, a victory by the pro-EU candidate Maia Sandu signals the country might be setting on a course of fewer internal divisions and a more coherent pro-Western foreign policy.

Apart from the failure to preclude pro-Western sentiments among the neighbouring states, economic components also indicate Moscow has been less successful. Western economic expansion via the Eastern Partnership and other programmes is proving to be more efficient.



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Nor can the Russian leadership entice states around the world to recognise the independence of the breakaway entities. For instance, in the case of Abkhazia and South Ossetia, only Syria, Nicaragua, Venezuela, and Nauru have extended them recognition. This trend is not likely to change anytime soon. Moscow simply does not have sufficient resources – and in any case, US laws on withholding financial aid from states that recognise the independence of separatist territories throughout the former Soviet space remain a major disincentive. In case of other territorial conflicts, no recognition has taken place.

Nor does Russia have any long-term economic vision for the breakaway territories. Dire economic straits have inevitably caused populations to flee toward abundant medical, trade, and educational opportunities other countries provide. Usually these are the

territories from which the separatist forces initially tried to break away. The Kremlin has failed to transform those entities into secure and economically stable lands. Crime levels as well as high-level corruption and active black markets have been on an upward trajectory, which undermines the effectiveness of financial largesse Moscow has to provide on a regular basis.

Over the past several years, there have been hints in the media about rising discontent within the Russian political elite on how the breakaway territories (plus Syria) are being run. Questions have been raised about how Russian money is being spent and about the increasingly predatory nature of the separatist (plus Syrian) political elites, which are focused on extracting as much economic benefit as they can from Moscow. As a result, it has become increasingly difficult for the leaders in the non-recognised entities to secure Russian funding. Usually, it takes several visits to Russian leadership and counterdemands by Moscow that would further increase Russian influence in the territories. For example, Abkhazian leadership has barely secured finances from Russia, but has also received conditions upon which the largesse was dependent – the right to buy land and partake in the electricity system in Abkhazia³.

This situation with Russian financing of these regions is similar to the state of affairs in the late 1980s, just prior to the Soviet Union's collapse. At that time, members of the Soviet elite started to realise that Moscow had become little more than a supplier to the Soviet republics that had grown more and more predatory as corruption skyrocketed and production levels sank. That was one of the reasons for the Soviet Union's dissolution.

The Soviet level of endowment to the republics was far higher than what Moscow provides to the non-recognised regions, but a similarity in patterns is evident. Moscow has to cope with domestic economic troubles, “disobedience” from separatist leaders, and problematic relations with the West. These challenges make it difficult for Moscow to pull the strings in multiple separatist regions at once. As a result, the Russian elite has grown less willing to provide direct economic benefit to the separatists, as the return is too marginal to warrant the expense. This produces counterdemands by Moscow to further cement its influence and maximise the dependence of the entities on Russian largesse.

The Case of Nagorno-Karabakh

A special case for the study of Russia's evolving approach toward territorial conflicts along its borders is the Nagorno-Karabakh issue. The long-standing Armenia-Azerbaijan conflict, in which Russia has never been militarily involved but has indirectly been in its orbit, is now under the Kremlin's direct geopolitical influence. Russia's decision to send some 2,000 peacekeepers to the conflict zone signals toward the existing pattern of Moscow's geopolitical approach to the territorial conflicts discussed above.

Although Russia has long been the guarantor of order in the South Caucasus, Azerbaijan's recent military success in and around Nagorno-Karabakh has presented Moscow with a major challenge. Its approach of maintaining the post-1994 status quo between the two South Caucasus rivals was clearly no longer sustainable. A new reality, reflecting a new balance of power with another power – Turkey, has been emerging.

3 A. Bzhania, *A Group of States in the Post-Soviet Space... Will Organise Some Union (Группа государств на постсоветском пространстве... будет организовывать некий союз)*, “Ekho Kavkaza”, December 2020 [<https://www.ekhovkavkaza.com/a/30982664.html>].

Russia found itself boxed out of easily influencing future outcomes in the region.

This moment has been a long time coming. Azerbaijan has raced far ahead in the regional arms race, managing to purchase high-tech weaponry from Turkey and Israel, all the while successfully quashing any attempts by Nagorno-Karabakh to gain international recognition. Moreover, the 2016 four-day “April War” over Nagorno-Karabakh can in retrospect be seen as Azerbaijan testing out what it already judged to be its growing military superiority. Although the conflict did not lead to any major territorial adjustments, Armenia clearly saw itself as the loser, with President Serzh Sargsyan firing several top generals in its aftermath. At its conclusion, Russia managed to play its traditional role of the arbiter, with a ceasefire negotiated in Moscow.

Additionally, although Russia has been selling arms to Azerbaijan, its leverage over authorities in Baku has been in decline, while the Turkish influence has been on the rise. Therefore, Moscow faced a somewhat similar dilemma to what it witnessed in other regions: an emergence of another power gradually eating at Russian regional standing. Elsewhere it has been the collective West; in the case of Nagorno-Karabakh, it is Turkey.

In the 2020 war, the territorial gains made by Azerbaijan are a concrete manifestation of the growing military imbalance that was already apparent four years ago. And this time around, Russian attempts at brokering some kind of a lasting ceasefire in Moscow were patently ignored by troops on the ground. Indeed, faced with a territorial *fait accompli* Russia felt tempted to openly legitimate Azerbaijan’s gains rather than appear even more powerless.

Such a move, however, could come with costs to Russia’s clout within Armenia. As a full member of the Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO), Armenia expected

Russian aid should its territorial integrity come under direct threat. But given that Nagorno-Karabakh is not even officially recognised by the Armenians themselves, Russia is not treaty-bound to intervene.

Nevertheless, Russia did not make a move for weeks. Some speculated that the reason for Russian reticence could have been Moscow’s antipathy toward Armenia’s reformist prime minister, Nikol Pashinyan, who came to power in 2018 following the so-called Velvet Revolution and has since tried to foster deeper ties with the West than his predecessors. However, the Russian vision was purely geopolitical. The Armenians, trapped between Azerbaijan and Turkey, had no potential alternative patrons and the Russians may have banked on a stinging defeat hurting Pashinyan to attain additional concessions from Yerevan.

The defeat did not mean the fall of the densely populated core of Nagorno-Karabakh. This would have been a red line for Russia. Such a defeat would inflict a lasting damage to Russia’s reputation in the region: By allowing Azerbaijan to reconquer all its claimed territories, Russia would lose one of its main sources of leverage in the region – over both countries. Therefore, sending Russian peacekeepers to the conflict was a major decision Moscow has been working toward.

Such a decision fits neatly into the Russian vision of using unrecognised territories for geopolitical aims of keeping other powers at bay. The Russian move was also conditioned by Turkey’s bold policy in the region. Turkey’s very vocal and active support of Azerbaijan cuts at the very essence of Russia’s role as a regional arbiter. Although Russia’s decision to move its peacekeeping troops into the conflict zone is a definite retrenchment of its power in the South Caucasus, Moscow, similarly to other territories discussed above, will face an unenviable task of maintaining peace,

building a long-term solution that would not question its geopolitical position, fostering closer relations with Yerevan and Baku without causing resentment in either of the capitals, and, last but not least, containing Turkey's pressure.

One of the first problems Moscow will face is the lack of vision over the political status for Nagorno-Karabakh. This is bound to create uncertainties and insecurities for the remaining Armenian population. What kind of communal coexistence is possible between the Azerbaijanis and Armenians is yet another question⁴.

The November agreement reads that "internally displaced persons and refugees shall return to the territory of Nagorno-Karabakh and surrounding areas under the supervision of the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees"⁵. The stipulation's viability is unclear unless Yerevan and Baku willingly cooperate – an unlikely scenario. Concomitant competing property claims between both ethnic groups will further complicate the peace process.

Yet another challenge will be the division between Armenian and Azerbaijani sides, which now goes right between Shusha and Stepanakert, Karabakh's capital. Since the cities are only 10 kilometres apart, the defence of Stepanakert, which is downhill from Azerbaijani-controlled Shusha, will be particularly difficult. This makes Stepanakert militarily vulnerable – another source of tensions Russian troops will have to face.

The five-year term of the Russian peacekeeping mission in the region is also an uncomfortable reality for the Armenians

in Karabakh. As the stipulation says, both Armenia and Azerbaijan have a right to stop the extension of the agreement. Surely, Russia will work hard to make sure neither Baku nor Yerevan would want to have Russian peacekeepers return home. It is also clear that Yerevan is unlikely to be a side that would support the removal of the Russian troops. Baku, on the contrary, could pedal this scenario. This would create problems for Russia and its geopolitical interests in the region. After all, with the euphoria around the war gains slowly dissipating, Azerbaijan's political elites and the general public will start to realise that the conflict has not been resolved and that Yerevan still has a direct line to the truncated Karabakh territory. Besides, the very prospect of Russian troops' long-term presence on Azerbaijani soil undoubtedly would be an uncomfortable reality for the country's politicians.

While thankful to Moscow's reticent position during the war, Baku could see resentment toward the Russian military presence unwilling to leave Karabakh slowly emerging. In Ukraine, Georgia, and Moldova, Russian presence was either negatively viewed from the very beginning or became so over a certain period of time. Azerbaijan is unlikely to be a different case. Navigating between its geopolitical needs to influence both Yerevan and Baku and the latter's growing resentment, Moscow will have to constantly keep balance between the two states, remain as unbiased as possible, and lay out a realistic approach to the final resolution of the conflict – an unenviable task for Russian policy-makers. However, the opposite scenario of ignoring the balancing option for gaining other political benefits is also possible.

4 E. Avdaliani, *Russia's Unenviable Position in Karabakh*, "Caucasus Watch", November 2020 [<https://caucasuswatch.de/news/3288.html>].

5 *Official text of Nagorno Karabakh armistice*, November 2020 [<https://armenpress.am/eng/news/1034480.html>]

Another challenge for Russia is of a much bigger calibre. NATO member Turkey's emergence as a direct military player in the South Caucasus after 100 years is a significant development, which will influence Russia's calculus. Although scholarly discussions on the results of the war vary⁶, what is clear is that Azerbaijan allied itself with Turkey and won a war, while Russia's ally – Armenia – lost. This has been made possible through Azerbaijan's decade-long military buildup and Turkey's continuous logistical support and training.



As the case of sending a peacekeeping mission to Nagorno-Karabakh shows, Russia views the conflicts in its neighbourhood as a potential to advance its interests, maximise gains, and keep foreign powers at bay

Russia's decision to station its forces in Karabakh is in a way an escalation of those options, which were traditionally in the hands of Russian politicians since the breakup of the Soviet Union. As a dominant power, Russia ideally should have navigated the disputes between Armenia and Azerbaijan without entering the fray. Acting as a power that dissuades from war based on its prestige, rather than acts out of necessity, is what constitutes a great power position⁷. The Russian decision, however, signals if not an outright decline, then a limit of options, escalation of commitments. In addition, Turkey is instrumental here. After all, if not

for the dispatch of forces, Ankara's influence in Baku would have grown even further.

The Kremlin's inability to address Turkey's role is also seen in the fact that the country has not been mentioned in the November agreement. This creates a significant loophole. Ankara will try to gain its own military presence on Azerbaijani soil. Cooperation with Russia will take place, but as long as it fits in with Turkish interests. Otherwise, Moscow's military position could be challenged through various means considering how intensive Turkey's relations with Azerbaijan are. A negative trend in Moscow-Baku relations would be an opportunity for Ankara to use.

Although Russian peacekeeping troops in Karabakh have stopped the war, the November agreement leaves numerous questions unanswered: safe return of refugees, humanitarian concerns, security of the Armenian community in the truncated Karabakh, Turkey's fluid role, etc. Moscow's position is much more limited than it was before the conflict. The Kremlin will have to navigate between different actors and try to find a balance by not causing resentment in Baku, which could push it to embrace Turkey.

Conclusion

Although Russia's approach to each territorial dispute near its borders differs, an overall pattern is nevertheless evident – the use of separatist conflicts to increase its geopolitical influence. As the case of sending a peacekeeping mission to Nagorno-Karabakh shows, Russia views the conflicts in its neighbourhood as a potential to

6 J. Losh, *Russian Troops in Nagorno-Karabakh 'Clearly a Win for Moscow'*, "Foreign Policy", November 2020 [<https://foreignpolicy.com/2020/11/25/russian-troops-nagorno-karabakh-peacekeepers-win-moscow-armenia-azerbaijan/>];

E. Avdaliani, *Winners and Losers in the South Caucasus*, "CEPA", December 2020 [<https://cepa.org/winners-and-losers-in-the-south-caucasus/>].

7 L. Broers, *Did Russia Win the Karabakh War?*, "EurasiaNet", November 2020 [<https://eurasianet.org/perspectives-did-russia-win-the-karabakh-war/>].

advance its interests, maximise gains, and keep foreign powers at bay.

Along with the increase in influence, however, the separatist political elites in all the above-discussed entities have become increasingly predatory, raising unwillingness in the Kremlin to disburse financial aid. The long-term economic effects of the pandemic as well as Russia's difficult economic situation also undermine development of a long-term vision for the unrecognised regions. Nor did wider international recognition materialise. Moreover, although Georgia, Moldova, and Ukraine have not attained NATO/EU membership status, the Russian policy of using the disputes has failed to reverse pro-Western sentiments in those states.

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UA: UKRAINE
ANALYTICA

Issue 4 (22), 2020

ISSN 2518-7481