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Old and new threats to security in the South Caucasus

Over the past decades since the collapse of the USSR, the small states of the South Caucasus on the periphery of Europe and Asia have developed different political trajectories – reflected in the specifics of ongoing domestic politics and in the nature of interactions with the key geopolitical actors. At the same time, their destinies are strongly intertwined, and it is difficult to speak about the security threats in the region without taking into account both their common geopolitical environment and mutual relations.

The legacy of the Soviet past still strongly influences the current state of affairs, and has revealed itself over the last years through the weak development of democratic institutions and political culture, along with sporadic or more sustainable displays of authoritarianism, repression, civil wars and ethno-political conflicts. These have narrowed the range of political and social discourse and caused, although with different dynamics and to varying degrees, forms of 'competitive authoritarianism' or 'hybrid regimes', which combine a high degree of state centralization with the stripping democratic institutions of real content, in order to avoid challenging of incumbent leaderships' hold on power.[1]

Internal developments have created risks of instability in all three states. Armenia and Azerbaijan have experienced a bitter war with one another over Nagorno (Mountainous) Karabakh with sporadic rekindling of mutual hostilities. Georgia lost control over two of its territories – Abkhazia and South Ossetia--currently recognised by Russia, Venezuela and couple of other tiny states as sovereign, but actually hosting Russian military bases and increasingly integrated within the Russian Federation, a process especially accelerated after the devastating August 2008 Georgia-Russia war. All of this has created the general atmosphere of insecurity and volatility, further aggravated by the ongoing change in the geopolitical environment and the restructuring of the world order.

[1] J. Wheatley, Ch. Zürcher, *On the Origin and Consolidation of Hybrid Regimes: The State of Democracy in the Caucasus*, "Taiwan Journal of Democracy", Volume 4, No.1, 2008. pp. 1–31, http://www.tfd.org.tw/docs/dj0401/001-032-Jonathan%20Wheatley.pdf.

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Regional Security Patterns

When speaking about regional security in the South Caucasus, a few clarifications are due. First, the focus below will be on hard security and threats that are directed at the populations (human security) and institutions, national borders and sovereignty. Insofar as there are no regional South-Caucasian institutions that may be threatened, the regional dimension of security is understood as that of the states within the region, including threats that are common to all three. To add a note, another form of security breach is when a state is forced by an external party to make a policy decision that is in conflict with how its national interests had been understood until that point, probably best illustrated by Armenia's volte-face on September 3, 2013 when, under Russian pressure, it suddenly refused to sign association agreement with the EU and was obliged instead to join the Eurasian Economic Union.[2]

There are significant differences between the three countries in terms of security patterns, and these differences continue to increase as a result of diverging geopolitical directions and under the influence of the rapidly changing environment. Lately, these processes have accelerated even further. The key difference lies with the different orientations and actual engagement with Western-based or, alternatively, Russia-centred collective defence groupings, i.e. with NATO or the CSTO (Collective Security Treaty Organization) [3]. Armenia is a member of the CSTO; Georgia has consistently pursued its goal of joining NATO and closely cooperates with it, while Azerbaijan is trying to maintain approximately equal distance from both groups, on one hand maintaining a close strategic partnership with NATO member Turkey, and, on the other, good relations with its major (up to 85%) supplier of armaments – Russia. At the same time one should observe the frustration in Armenia due to its overdependence on Russia as security provider, so that lately the Armenian military has decided to participate in NATO-led drills in Georgia[4], and at least nominally try to have an alternative option for strategic affiliation.

The second important difference relates to the growing inequality in military funding and hardware available to the three countries[5]. Oil-rich Azerbaijan, with a population bigger than the combined populations of the other two SC countries, has by far the biggest defence budget, exceeding the total budget of its main regional adversary and challenger,

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2 H. Kostanyan, *The Rocky Road to an EU-Armenia Agreement: From U-turn to detour*, "CEPS Commentary", 3 February 2015, https://www.ceps.eu/system/files/EU%20Armenia%20Agreement%20H%20Kostanyan%20CEPS%20Commentary%202.pdf .

3 E. Abrahamyan, *The South Caucasus: United, and Divided, by NATO: Georgia, Armenia and Azerbaijan have different hopes for the Atlantic Alliance,* "The National Interest", June 9, 2016, http://nationalinterest.org/feature/the-south-caucasus-united-divided-by-nato-16534.

4 A. Grigoryan, *Armenia and Georgia Hold Joint Exercise with NATO Soldiers,* Jamestown Foundation, February 7, 2017, https://jamestown.org/program/armenia-georgia-hold-joint-exercise-nato-soldiers/

5 S. Roblin, *This Is the Arms Race from Hell (And Russia Is Adding Fuel to the Fire),* "The National Interest", November 21, 2016, http://nationalinterest.org/blog/the-buzz/the-arms-race-hell-russia-adding-fuel-the-fire-18475.

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Armenia, which compensates by far lower-priced purchasing armaments from Russia, eager to arm both sides under the pretext of maintaining balance in their relative military capabilities. Georgia is falling far behind the two neighbours in this area, although doing its best to maintain good and balanced relations with the both of them.

One security-related issue that is common for all the South Caucasus republics is the increasing unpredictability of their geopolitical environment and of the most important actors engaged with the region. If previously the only such country was essentially Russia, nowadays it is not quite clear where developments may take the US, Turkey, or the EU, with not only their internal affairs uncertain, but even more so their mutual relations and foreign policies in general. Probably one good example is the rapidly changing relations between Ankara and Moscow that have recently oscillated between an extremely hostile attitude to close cooperation, notwithstanding radically diverging views on a number of strategic issues (Syria, Crimea, Kurds, etc.). This creates an overall atmosphere of nervousness among both the SC governments and the populations.

A new version of the Cold War is looming, and even the possibility of a new large scale war is being discussed[6]. Currently, we are in a situation of rapidly changing security environment and the applicability of international law[7] – following the *Anschluss* of Crimea, the dangerously unresolved hybrid war in East Ukraine, generally unpredictable practices of expansionism, *revanchist* and revisionism of the Russian leadership against the indecisive response from an international community[8] overburdened by its own multitude of problems, and by the policy impact of emotional shenanigans of Russia's highly personalized small circle of the top decision maker(s).

External Factors of (In)Security

The influence of external factors, and in particular, of the geopolitical environment, often plays a significant role in determining both external and internal security threats experienced by small nations, especially those located on the periphery of former em-

[6] *A nuclear war with Russia is imminent, says a former NATO General,* "Newsweek", August 1, 2016, http://europe.newsweek.com/russia-nuclear-war-nato-richard-shirreff-485818?rm=eu; E. Lukas, *I hope I'm wrong but historians may look back and say this was the start of World War III*, "Daily Mail", April 15, 2014, http://www.dailymail.co.uk/news/article-2605578/Edward-Lucas-I-hope-Im-wrong-historians-look-say-start-World-War-III.html; M. Payton, *Russia launches massive nuclear war training exercise that 'involves 40 million people'*, "Independent", October 6, 2016, http://www.independent.co.uk/news/world/europe/russia-nuclear-weapon-training-attack-radiation-moscow-vladimir-putin-a7345461.html.

[7] J.D. Sachs, *Ukraine and the Crisis of International Law,* http://www.project-syndicate.org/commentary/jeffrey-d--sachs-sees-in-russia-s-annexation-of-crimea-the-return--with-us-complicity--of-great-power-politics#FgUCQYAcxcAorAxY.99 ; F. Zakaria, *Our new international tension is global norms vs. national interests*, "The Washington Post", April 10, 2014, http://www.washingtonpost.com/opinions/fareed-zakaria-our-new-international-tension-is-global-norms-vs-national-interests/2014/04/10/0bbcd68e-c0f0-11e3-bcec-b71ee10e9bc3_story.html.

[8] I. Krastev, *Putin's World,* April 1, 2014, http://www.project-syndicate.org/commentary/ivan-krastev-blames-the-west-s-weak-response-in-crimea-for-empowering-russia.

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pires or important geopolitical and geo-economic regions, as is the case of the South Caucasus. Such influence may have different purposes and various forms of expression, but often take the form of pressure aimed at changing the system and principles of national governance, and sometimes even a radical change of a policy or even a regime. As stated above, such pressures should be seen as security threats.

Let us consider various modes of influence an external state may use in order to change (or sometimes preserve) the status quo, that can be identified as security threats. In many cases, it is more political developments that are influenced, but subtle or even radical regime change may also take place, although it may appear difficult to unambiguously single out the external impact from the complex combination of factors leading to change. It makes sense to distinguish several modes of disruptive external influence that may be used at the different stages of political development:

- support/disrupt the sustainability of the existing regime through assistance/sanctions and sabotage; support one of the sides during regime change, or influence the procedure of such change;
- induce and promote gradual change of a regime, through (promise of) support or integration based on conditionality, or threaten withdrawal of such support, or using incentive-based pressures or rewards (bribes) to influence elite regime preferences;
- impose regime change by force, including regime change on a part of the territory (supporting conflict, annexation), and clandestine operations such as 'hybrid warfare';
- apply various tools of propaganda, fake new, cyber-trolling, also hacking and other forms of cyber warfare.

At the same time, there are ways an external actor can support a state and contribute to its security and stability by helping it to counter the above disruptive actions, through:

- strengthening defence capability by providing armaments, training, strategic advice, technical assistance, adapting advanced standards of military organisation and combat, or strengthening the capacity to build own defensive capability by assisting in developing economic and industrial resources, technological know-how;
- providing diplomatic support through multilateral institutions, by mediating conflicts, or by pressing the sides in a conflict to adhere to peaceful forms of conflict resolution; supporting a party by diplomatic or symbolic actions, including statements or high level visits at the time of crisis;
- conducting peacekeeping operations or launching observation missions that help maintain a ceasefire or peace between parties in conflict;
- integrating into defense organisations, creating supportive military infrastructure or bases, or otherwise providing some security guarantees.

Below we will observe how some of these instruments are used by external players in order to disrupt or defend the security and stability in SC states and the region as a whole.

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Russia: Projecting Insecurity

The South Caucasus, strategically located at the intersection of Europe, Russia, and the Greater Middle East, is one of the most important and at the same time most explosive areas bordering Europe; Russia being responsible for many of its problems. The hybrid war in Ukraine, Russian annexation of the Crimea and actions in Syria, and as a result, the collapse of the system of European security and world order that had emerged after the end of the Cold War[9], have dramatically changed (and continue to modify) the security system of the South Caucasus. By annexing and subsequently militarizing Crimea, Russia has greatly increased its strategic control over the Black Sea. It has begun investing heavily in modernizing its Black Sea Fleet at Sevastopol[10], and has moved its most sophisticated anti-aircraft armaments (S400) there. After the annexation, Russian president Putin admitted he had ordered the country's nuclear forces on high alert during the Crimea crisis – the first such open threat of using nuclear weapons since the end of the cold war. With all of this Russia, has signalled its return as a dangerous and unpredictable international actor, not only to the Caucasus and the Black Sea region but to the whole world.

Recent events have unequivocally demonstrated that the Russian Federation may easily neglect norms of international law and conduct when its leadership assumes this is in its national interests. This can be observed in a number of developments since the 2008 war in Georgia, with even larger scale interventions in Ukraine and then in Syria. It can be expected then that Russia will use again its formidable power and influence in these three countries to either steer them in the direction it finds fitting its interests or use available resources to destabilize regimes that are not sufficiently obedient.[11] What is new, however, is that after Crimea, Moscow does not seem to be shying away from the direct use of force or of violating international agreements when it believes doing so is conducive to achieving its geopolitical goals.[12]

Peter Doran, director of research at the Center for European Policy Analysis in Washington, D.C., and co-author of a report on security in Central and Eastern Europe, has stated, "Crimea has changed the world. The treaties—the U.N. Charter, the Helsinki Final Act, the Budapest Memorandum, the NATO-Russia Founding Act and the Russo-Ukrainian Treaty of 1997—that created peace in Europe for the past 20 years have been called into question by the invasion and annexation of Crimea. Georgia was

[9] F. Zakaria, *Russia endangering global order,* http://globalpublicsquare.blogs.cnn.com/2014/03/31/zakaria-russia-endangering-global-order/?hpt=wo_r1 ; E. Lucas, *The Realism We Need,* "The First Things", October 4, 2016 https://www.firstthings.com/web-exclusives/.

[10] D. Sharkov, *Russia Will Unveil Revamped Black Sea Fleet off Crimea: NATO and Russia are both pondering reinforcement in the Black Sea,* "Newsweek", July, 2016, http://europe.newsweek.com/russia-navy-will-unveil-revamped-black-sea-fleet-warships-crimea-481766?rm=eu.

[11] А. Муринсон, *Путин активизируется и на кавказском направлении*, http://novosti.az/expert/20140409/300178127.html.

[12] K. Tüür, V. Morozov (eds.), *Russian Federation: Short Term Prognosis,* University of Tartu, 2014, http://www.ut.ee/ABVKeskus/sisu/prognoosid/2014/en/pdf/RF2014.pdf .

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the first sign that Vladimir Putin is a revisionist. Then came Ukraine. What will the third country be?" The answer came in September 2015 – Syria for the time being[13] – but now the question is, who is next?

Indeed, recent events in Ukraine reminded us of the 2008 Russian-Georgian war because there are a number of striking similarities,[14] in particular if one looks at it as punishment for the government's pro-Western orientation, even though the Georgian leadership did provide an opportunity for Russia to at least somehow justify its actions. So, on the fourth anniversary of the war, Russian president Putin admitted his personal responsibility for both preparing for the war and arming South Ossetian militias, and actually ordering the intervention.[15] Previous president and now prime-minister Medvedev also admitted the real interests behind the Russian intervention in a speech to officers of the Russian Southern Military District, on November 21, 2011.[16]

The ideological framework for respective Russian actions is formed by the complex blend of internal political consideration and unrestrained populism as well as the anti-Western, nationalist-imperialist worldview of *derzhavnost* and neo-*Eurasianism* à la Alexander Dugin[17], the increasingly influential apologist of Russia's imperial future and neo-fascist 'traditionalism'[18]. Currently, the biggest threats emanating from Russia

[13] M. Fischer, *In Syrian War, Russia Has Yet to Fulfill Superpower Ambitions,* "New York Times", September 26, 2016, http://www.nytimes.com/2016/09/25/world/middleeast/russia-syria-ambitions.html?_r=0.

[14] Ch. Stefes, http://www.rockymountainnews.com/news/2008/aug/18/speakout-facing-russias-threat/ ; E. Lucas, *The New Cold War: Putin's Russia and the Threat to the West*, Palgrave-Macmillan 2008; R.E. Kanet, M.R. Freire Key (eds.), *Players and Regional Dynamics in Eurasia: The Return of the Great Game*, 2010.

[15] "The Russian president affirmed that the military offensive against Georgia was premeditated and prepared by the General Staff under his orders. He also acknowledged that the Russian military had armed and trained local militiamen in South Ossetia, one of Georgia's separatist regions, in the center of the August 2008 conflict… It is Vladimir Putin himself who has just confirmed that on television. 'There was a plan, it's not a secret ... It's within the framework of this plan that Russia acted. It was prepared by the General Staff at the end of 2006 or the beginning of 2007. It was approved by me, agreed with me,' said the Russian president…" I. Lasserre, *Poutine reconnaît avoir planifié la guerre en Géorgie,* "Le Figaro", August 10, 2012, http://www.lefigaro.fr/international/2012/08/10/01003-20120810ARTFIG00541-poutine-reconnait-avoir-planifie-la-guerre-en-georgie.php.

[16] "If we had faltered in 2008, geopolitical arrangements would be different now and a number of countries in respect of which attempts were made to artificially drag them into the North Atlantic Alliance would probably be [in NATO] now… And for some of our partners, including for the North Atlantic Alliance, it was a signal that before taking a decision about expansion of the alliance, one should at first think about the geopolitical stability." Quoted in: D. Satter, *Russia's Looming Crisis*. FPRI, March 2012. p. 48, http://www.fpri.org/pubs/2012/201203.satter.russiasloomingcrisis.pdf .

[17] See more details: A. Dugin, *Foundations of Geopolitics* (Основы геополитики. Москва, 2000): (p. 141)

[18] See, e.g. А. Шеховцов, *Палингенетический проект неоевразийства идеи возрождения в мировоззрении Александра Дугина*, „Форум новейшей восточноевропейской истории и культуры", 2, 2009. стр. 105-126, http://www1.ku-eichstaett.de/ZIMOS/forum/docs/forumruss12/7Shekhovtsov.pdf. On Dugin's latest activities, see: M. Campbell, *Rise of the new*

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originate in the ruthless policies of the Kremlin menacing European and international stability[19], as it started moving along the road outlined by Alexander Solzhenitsyn a couple of decades ago[20], i.e., gathering together the lands and territories that the by now institutionalized Russian nationalist worldview[21] considers its own, and then possibly re-establishing the USSR II, with the mottos of a 'special path', 'sovereign democracy', and the 'traditional values'[22] of Russia (as opposed to those of degenerating West) replacing outdated Communist slogans.[23]

Russia still may, or may not, implement the Crimea scenario elsewhere in the former Soviet space, but it is likely to also have other plans regarding its post-Soviet neighbours that are difficult to predict due to the often irrational factors influencing such decisions.[24] The Russian writer, Vladimir Sorokin, a veteran observer of politics in his country and rare voice of dissent, admits to being at a loss, because Putin's intentions are impossible to read: "Unpredictability has always been Russia's calling card, but since the Ukrainian events, it has grown to unprecedented levels: no one knows what will

Russian empire, "Searchlight Magazine", April 20, 2014, http://searchlightmagazine.com/news/international-news/rise-of-the-new-russian-empire.

19 Back in 1946, George F. Kennan wrote in his famous Long Telegram: "At bottom of Kremlin's neurotic view of world affairs is traditional and instinctive Russian sense of insecurity. … for Russian rulers have invariably sensed that their rule was relatively archaic in form fragile and artificial in its psychological foundation, unable to stand comparison or contact with political systems of Western countries. For this reason they have always feared foreign penetration, feared direct contact between Western world and their own, feared what would happen if Russians learned truth about world without or if foreigners learned truth about world within. And they have learned to seek security only in patient but deadly struggle for total destruction of rival power, never in compacts and compromises with it." http://www.facebook.com/l.php?u=http%3A%2F%2Fwww2.gwu.edu%2F~nsarchiv%2Fcoldwar%2Fdocuments%2Fepisode-1%2Fkennan.htm&h=zAQFV1Vn6.

20 A. Solzhenitsyn, *Rebuilding Russia: Reflections and Tentative Proposals,* Harvill Press, 1991 (first published in "Komsomolskaya Pravda", September 18, 1990, http://www.kulichki.com/inkwell/text/hudlit/ruslit/solzheni/kak_obustroit.htm)

21 See more details: *И.* Зевелев, *Новая внешнеполитическая доктрина России,* „Ведомости", August 4, 2014, http://www.vedomosti.ru/opinion/news/24981841/novaya-vneshnyaya-politika-rossii?full#cut.

22 S. Blank, *Russia's Lurch toward Fascism,* http://www.huffingtonpost.com/stephen-blank/russias-lurch-toward-fasc_b_5169230.html#es_share_ended.

23 L. Shevtsova, *Putin Doctrine: myth, provocation, blackmail, or the real deal?,* http://www.the-american-interest.com%2Farticles%2F2014%2F04%2F14%2Fthe-putin-doctrine-myth-provocation-blackmail-or-the-real-deal%2F&h=uAQEPzA3v.

24 "Russia's actions in Ukraine, while still in full swing, signal nothing less than the maturing of a new and interventionist strategy. Resembling the original Brezhnev doctrine, the Kremlin seems fully resolved now to interfere with any of its post-Soviet neighbors, should they chose a political model at home or affiliations abroad that differ from what Moscow proposes: autocracy from within, and Eurasian integration from without." Joerg Forbrig. "Crimea crisis: Europe must finally check the Putin doctrine". CNN, March 14, 2014., http://edition.cnn.com/2014/03/14/opinion/ukraine-russia-putin-doctrine-joerg-forbrig/index.html.

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happen to our country in a month, in a week, or the day after tomorrow."[25] The Russian leadership seems to be ever ready to sacrifice long term national interests in order to achieve immediate geopolitical gains and increase popular support.[26]

Further on, Moscow support for secessionist regimes can be heated up any time. These "grey zones", notably Abkhazia, the Donbas, Nagorno-Karabakh, South Ossetia, and Transnistria, play key role in Moscow's "Near Abroad" chessboard. Even in Nagorno-Karabakh, where Russia maintains no troops, the state of 'no war, no peace' between Armenia and Azerbaijan with sporadic flare-ups (as in April 2016) enables Moscow to project power over the region. Russia's conduct in Syria or now also in Montenegro where Russia has allegedly masterminded an anti-governmental coup attempt, or cyber-attacks against western institutions, have aggravated worries over multiple threats emanating from Russia.

In case of Armenia, Russia is rather supportive of the incumbent government and the status quo, and its observers would always claim any rigged elections there as free and fair, whatever the evidence to the contrary. Armenia remains fully dependent on Russia for guaranteeing its security, being squeezed between Azerbaijan and Turkey, with which it maintains uneasy relations after capturing Karabakh and the significant territories around it. Russia is a member of the OSCE Minsk Group of mediators, and has made several demonstrative efforts at mediating a solution over Karabakh, and improving Armenian-Turkish relations, but there are many signs Russia perceives its national interest to maintain the status quo along both these dimensions and thus preserving it strong position in the region, unless there emerges an opportunity to strengthen its position even further, e.g. by stationing Russian peacekeepers around Armenian-occupied territories in Azerbaijan. Russia maintains a strong military base in Armenia's Gyumri and an airbase near Yerevan, and Russian troops are protecting Armenia's borders with Turkey and Iran. Russia also fully controls the Armenian energy sector and many other economic assets. Russia also attempts to integrate the Armenian military within its own defence system; an important step in this direction was made by actually integrating Armenian air defence and thus further consolidating the Russian A2/AD (area access/air denial) potential in the region.[27]

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[25] V. Sorokin, *Let the Past Collapse on Time!,* "The New York Review of Books", May 8, 2014, http://www.nybooks.com/articles/archives/2014/may/08/let-the-past-collapse-on-time/.

[26] J. Lough, *Putin's High-Risk Game in Ukraine,* Chatham House, April 14, 2014, http://www.chathamhouse.org/media/comment/view/199034?dm_i=1TYG%2C2DDIW%2CBLOKNG%2C8LVFL%2C1; D. Ignatius, *The cost of Putin's adventurism in Ukraine,* http://www.washingtonpost.com/opinions/david-ignatius-the-cost-of-putins-adventurism-in-ukraine/2014/04/15/f31efed0-c4ce-11e3-b195-dd0c1174052c_story.html; L. Thompson, *Perils Of Empire: Five Ways Putin Hurt Russia By Grabbing Crimea,* "Forbes", April 11, 2014, http://www.forbes.com/sites/lorenthompson/2014/04/11/perils-of-empire-five-ways-putin-hurt-russia-by-grabbing-crimea/.

[27] *Armenia ratifies agreement on joint air-defense system with Russia*, Reuters, June 20, 2016, http://www.reuters.com/article/us-armenia-russia-defence-idUSKCN0ZG2AS.

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Although it is difficult to find any influential anti-Russian and openly pro-Western politician in Armenia, the Russian preference remains to stay on the safe side and preserve the status quo and the fully-controlled incumbent government, easy to manipulate with all its authoritarian tendencies and corruption. However, public attitudes toward Russian policies are changing due to a number of incidents involving Russian military in the country, but mainly due to its providing armaments to Azerbaijan that are subsequently used against the Armenian side. Questions are being asked whether the strategic partnership with Russia is fully justified for security reasons.[28]

The case of Azerbaijan is a good illustration of the fact that the rich and the poor are treated differently, whether it is people or states. On the one hand, the oil wealth of Azerbaijan allowed the government to secure public support by redistributing at least a part of these riches;[29] on the other, it may allow it to be less dependent on international assistance, and therefore, be more resistant to imposed change; finally, its huge resources and strategic importance allow Azerbaijan to achieve more tolerance from Western countries, and to bribe its way through more corrupt individuals, institutions or countries (so called 'caviar diplomacy')[30]. The West has limited leverage over Azerbaijan, and its criticism about strengthening authoritarianism, unfair election procedures, human rights abuses, or suppression of democratic freedoms often fall on deaf ears. At the same time, Azerbaijan conducts an active international policy of promoting its image, and spends significant funds on its PR campaigns in the West, and also participates in Western-sponsored programmes and initiatives. In general, Baku leadership and elites lean towards the West, where they see a comfortable place to spend time, get education for their children, and invest oil revenues, but on their own conditions – the regime should not be threatened in any way.

While there has been a cooling of relations between Russia and Azerbaijan, the leadership in Baku is still well aware that Moscow holds much stronger 'sticks' than the West and that the West could counterbalance with its weaker 'carrots'. One of the traditional instruments of Moscow's influence is diasporas, and Azeri diaspora in Russia is very significant, including, among others, a few influential billionaires. Even stronger leverage is related to ethnic minorities in Azerbaijan's north and the south, and the possibility to provide Armenia with additional advance armaments, or other instruments to covertly destabilise a country. However, the Baku leadership is cautious enough in its policies, and at present, Moscow rather prefers to appease Baku, e.g. by selling it

[28] A. Mghdesyan, *Opposition Over Russian-Armenian Air Defence: Fears that Moscow cannot be trusted as a guarantor of national security*, IWPR, June 19, 2016, https://iwpr.net/global-voices/opposition-over-russian-armenian-air-defence.

[29] B. Smith, *The wrong kind of crisis: Why oil booms and busts rarely lead to authoritarian breakdown*, "Studies in Comparative International Development", Winter 2006, Volume 40, Issue 4, pp. 55–76, http://link.springer.com/article/10.1007%2FBF02686303#page-1.

[30] *The European Swamp (Caviar Diplomacy Part 2) – Prosecutors, corruption and the Council of Europe. ESI Report*, December 17, 2016, http://www.esiweb.org/index.php?lang=en&id=156&document_ID=181.

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military hardware or inviting into the Eurasian Union, than risking further alienation of this important player.

Relations between Russia and Georgia have relatively stabilised after president Saakashvili's government was replaced following the 2012 parliamentary elections. While Russia is currently seen as a less immediate threat in Georgia, diplomatic relations have not been re-established, and Georgia continues to prioritise integration into Western institutions. Russian policies towards Georgia still remain rather ambiguous and unpredictable. On one hand, anti-Georgian rhetoric in official statements and the state-controlled Russian media has to a great extent subsided, the trade embargo has been abolished, and Georgia has become one of favourite destinations for Russian tourists. At the same time, Russia continues to strengthen its military presence in Abkhazia and South Ossetia, arbitrarily and unjustifiably moved the fenced dividing line with South Ossetia, and continues to make threatening statements with regards to Georgia's plans to join NATO and host NATO-affiliated institutions, such as the above-mentioned NATO training centre in Sachkhere. Russian anti-Western propaganda has been very active lately, exploiting traditional clichés about the West being morally degraded, unable to protect its allies, and destined for failure and disintegration. These actions demonstrate Russia's aggressive instincts toward Georgia, and only strengthen the wariness and pro-western attitudes among Georgian political elites, even those inclined to conduct a more friendly policy toward Russia.

Key Security Threats in the South Caucasus

While Russia is a real and unpredictable threat, one has to acknowledge that other sources of insecurity have not disappeared. Against the background of possible direct and indirect threats emanating from Russian revisionism, in the longer term all the traditional threats on one hand pale in comparison, but on the other, they may be reinvigorated by Russia's actions.

The biggest local source of insecurity in the South Caucasus remains related to the unresolved conflict over Mountainous Karabakh, with several recent flare-ups. The worst escalation took place in April 2016, with scores (but suspected to be hundreds) of casualties reported on both sides. The relatively low-intensity clashes have never actually ceased. Now, there are several reasons why the Karabakh conflict may be reignited and cause large-scale disaster for the whole region.

First, there is the over-concentration of armaments in both Azerbaijan and Armenia that may cause a large-scale disaster[31]. Armenia has acquired advanced Iskander ballistic missiles (NATO reporting name SS-26 Stone) from Russia that may wreak havoc in a number of cities in Azerbaijan, or disrupt economic infrastructure. Azerbaijan, in turn, in addition to its total advantage in military aircraft and tanks, possesses older but still dangerous Tochka-U missiles that may appear even more disruptive due

[31] S. Roblin, *op. cit*. See also: *Trends in world military expenditure, 2015. SIPRI Report*, https://www.sipri.org/publications/2016/sipri-fact-sheets/trends-world-military-expenditure-2015.

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to their sheer number and the smaller size of Armenian territory, but also the accessibility of the Metsamor nuclear power station. It is obvious that neither party is actually eager to have a full-blown war, though possibly happy to maintain the frozen conflict as responsible for all public policy failures - but with increased clashes along the dividing lines, violence may spiral any time to a full-scale military action with disastrous results.

Neither is Russia interested in having a war on its borders, though it still exploits the conflict in order to maintain its hegemonic influence over the region and keep Armenia totally under control. Now Russia, having a military base in Armenia that was further strengthened recently, has provided anti-aircraft weapons in coordination with other A2/AD systems to Georgia's secessionist regions of Abkhazia and South Ossetia, which with its powerful S400 units in Crimea can fully control air space over the Caucasus and the Black Sea. Additional intrigue and uncertainty is created by the fact that Armenia, as an CSTO member, can rely on Russian military protection against any external intervention, but formally this protection does not cover Nagorno-Karabakh nor other occupied territories of Azerbaijan around it. It is not clear what Russia actions would be if combat operations were restricted to the Karabakh territory, and Moscow certainly enjoys this situation of ambiguity. Its interest is simple, to increase further its engagement without causing any large-scale war, and ideally, achieving consent from both sides on the stationing of Russian 'peacekeepers' along the dividing line, thus perpetuating the frozen conflict and Moscow's hegemony.

Now, war over Karabakh also bears severe security threats for Georgia, even though it is by no means directly involved in the conflict. The biggest danger once again originates from military involvement by Russia, which--having no common border with Armenia--will use Georgian territory for transit of its military units and equipment. Such scenarios have been voiced among Russian military experts, along with even more outrageous demands to establish a common border between Armenia and Russia, obviously by passing through and fragmenting Georgia[32].

A possible war over Karabakh creates other dangers. Georgia's two biggest ethnic minorities are Armenians and Azeris, often living side by side. There is a real danger of a spill-over of any conflict to Georgian territory, especially if there are local volunteers of both sides returning from combat. Finally, apart from the risk of destabilisation that may be caused by the massive influx of refugees, disruption of the economic infrastructure such as oil and gas pipelines from the Caspian Sea, or any accident with the nuclear power station in Armenia, may cause very serious problems for Georgia.

There are many discussions regarding the possible danger of Islamic militants from the South Caucasus returning from battlefields in Syria and elsewhere and causing

[32] *Границы осилит идущий: Россия начала «сшивать» постсоветское пространство в Закавказье*, "Lenta.ru", February 22, 2015, https://lenta.ru/articles/2015/02/26/kazkaz/ ; «*Прямая граница между Россией и Арменией появится в ближайшем будущем*», "Voskanapat", December 19, 2013, http://voskanapat.info/?p=5051; Я. Амелина, *Южная Осетия рано или поздно восстановит историческую справедливость*, "Вестник Кавказа", August 22, 2013, http://vestikavkaza.ru/news/YAna-Amelina-YUzhnaya-Osetiya-rano-ili-pozdno-vosstanovit-istoricheskuyu-spravedlivost.html.

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instability in Azerbaijan and Georgia (since the start of the Karabakh conflict, there remains no Muslim population whatsoever in Armenia). In case of Azerbaijan, the absolute majority are Muslims; about a third of the population are actually Sunnis, including ethnic minorities such as Lezghins and Avars. In Georgia, the fighters are recruited among the Sunni Azeris, Chechens in the Pankisi Gorge of neighbouring Chechnya, and from Ajara by the Black Sea, where the majority of Georgian Muslims live. While such a threat should not be neglected, it seems to be overblown, partly under the influence of Russian propaganda, as according to the majority of experts, zealot fighters would rather move to other battlefields, e.g. Libya or Afghanistan, rather than return home where no *jihad* is taking place.

Finally, it may be worth mentioning that a new regional actor is coming to the fore, as China is actively pursuing its One Belt One Road initiative that covers the South Caucasus. There s a paradoxical fact that, while a resurging China may be seen as a strongly destabilising actor along around its borders, in particular in the South China Sea, in the Caucasus China may play a stabilising role, being quite capable of protecting its significant investments and interests against Russia, its increasingly dependent partner.

Conclusions

Recent political developments in the South Caucasus once again explicitly demonstrated the difficulties of post-Communist transitions in the complex geopolitical environment. The current situation in the region is characterised by high volatility and unpredictability. Equally unpredictable is the security environment in which the region finds itself. Russia has emerged as the most-strongly motivated player in the region, and a player on one hand unpredictable and on the other, disrespectful of any norms and laws when dealing with what it considers its national interests. Therefore, under current conditions the soft power of the weakened and disoriented West appears to be an insufficient security guarantee and existing modest incentives of Euro-Atlantic integration are unable to counterbalance the direct hard threat of Russian expansionism and *revanchism*, or even its support for authoritarian regimes in its neighbourhood.

The possible Western response to such prospects should be at least three-fold – first, increasing the integration incentives and prospects, second, containing Russia's expansionism through sanctions, and finally, strengthening the ability (including military capability) of regional countries to withstand existing threats. However, it is the responsibility of leaders in the region to realise that the world order[33] is rapidly changing, the long and dangerous 'Cold War 2.0' between Russia and the West has actually started, and high political skills and determination will be needed in order to avoid looming

[33] J. Fischer, *The West on the Brink,* https://www.project-syndicate.org/commentary/western-elections-trump-le-pen-merkel-by-joschka-fischer-2016-10 ; J. Welsh, *The Return of History: Conflict, Migration, and Geopolitics in the Twenty-First Century*, 2016; R.N. Haass, *World Order 2.0.*, https://www.project-syndicate.org/commentary/globalized-world-order-sovereign-obligations-by-richard-n--haass-2017-01.

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risks and security threats emanating from this emerging conflict. Political leaders if the South Caucasus countries bear a heavy responsibility for the future – and they must realize that they need to be prepared for a long and dangerous new 'cold war' between Russia and the West that will inevitably involve them in one or another way.

Abstract: The paper discusses the factors influencing the state of (in)security in the South Caucasus, with special focus on the Russian factor. It is argued that the biggest security threat to the region is linked to the possibility of the resumption of military action over Nagorno Karabakh, something that may have repercussions throughout the region and possibly beyond. Differences in security-related patterns of the three South Caucasus republics are discussed as well as common problems that they share. Special attention is paid to the increasingly unpredictable situation in the contemporary geopolitical environment caused by developments in all of the key actors engaged with the region.
Keywords: South Caucasus, Armenia, Azerbaijan, Georgia, geopolitics, security, conflicts, Nagorno Karabakh, Russia

Старые и новые угрозы безопасности на Южном Кавказе

Аннотация: В работе рассматриваются факторы, влияющие на безопасность на Южном Кавказе, с особым акцентом на роль российского фактора. Утверждается, что самая большая угроза безопасности для региона связана с возможностью возобновления военных действий в Нагорном Карабахском конфликте, что будет иметь серьезные последствия для всего региона и, возможно, за его пределами. Обсуждаются различия в профилях безопасности трех южно-кавказских республик, а также общие для них проблемы. Особое внимание уделяется усиливающейся непредсказуемости в геополитической среде региона, вызванной развитием событий во всех ключевых акторах, вовлеченных в региональную политику.
Ключевые слова: Южный Кавказ, Армения, Азербайджан, Грузия, геополитика, безопасность, конфликты, Нагорный Карабах, Россия

Stare i nowe zagrożenia bezpieczeństwa na Kaukazie Południowym

Streszczenie: W artykule rozpatrujemy czynniki wpływające na bezpieczeństwo na Kaukazie Południowym, ze szczególnym uwzględnieniem czynnika rosyjskiego. Stwierdzamy, że największe zagrożenie regionalnego bezpieczeństwa jest związane z możliwością wznowienia działań militarnych w konflikcie o Górski Karabach, co będzie miało poważne konsekwencje dla całego regionu i poza jego granicami. Omawiamy podobne i różnicujące problemy bezpieczeństwa trójki południowokaukaskiej. Szczególną uwagę zwracamy na wzmożoną nieprzewidywalność środowiska geopolitycznego regionu, wywołaną rozwojem wydarzeń we wszystkich kluczowych aktach polityki regionalnej.
Słowa kluczowe: Kaukaz Południowy, Armenia, Azerbejdżan, Gruzja, geopolityka, bezpieczeństwo, konflikty, Górski Karabach, Rosja

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