

No peace no war: the role of Russian in the Caucasian conflicts

**IREn5019 No War, No Peace: Frozen Conflicts in the Caucasus
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Structure

Russian strategic interests: Russian grand strategy

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Post imperium

Russian strategic interests

- Identify Russia's strategic interests in the region the crucial factors that shape Russian policies.
- Russian policies are not designed to achieve long-term stability in the Caucasus: *controlled instability* seems to suit the Kremlin.

Debate on Russia's Grand Strategy

After the collapse of the USSR there was apparent identity crisis and ideological vacuum.

What happens after the demise of the Empire?

Russia's Grand Strategy I

- **Westernisers** - pessimistic about Russia's use of soft power in the post-Soviet region.
- The role of the Russia, as Western nation, has to be the spread of western values and setting standards of liberal democracy.
- To only effective way how to address its regional problems is through multilateral institutions and cooperation with the West.

Russia's Grand Strategy II

- **Stabilizers** - soft power is significant for achieving grand strategic goals of Russia. Key objective is greater security and stability in Russia's periphery, which can be achieved through economic modernization.
- The best way how to achieve grand strategic goals are transforming Russia into a “nation-civilization”.

Russia's Grand Strategy III

- **Imperialist** - military forces are key element, particularly in such conflict area as Caucasus is.
- The most effective way to achieve this objective is through supplying arms to secessionist territories, granting them status of independent states, giving Russian passport to those who is pro-Russian oriented and is willing of reunification with Russia and applying economic sanctions on politically “disloyal” states

Russia's security interests – a sphere of influence

- Russia's threat assessment is different from other powers.
- Threat is coming from all directions:
 - the Caucasus, Central Asia, a dispute with Japan over Kuril Islands, a war of words with Canada over drilling right in the Arctic, deployments of US BMD systems in Poland and Romania, US warships in Black and North Seas and NATO further enlargement. Opinion that Russia's aggressive reaction in August 7-8 of 2008 was caused by Georgia's integration in NATO - is the well-known argument.

Russia's security interests I

- The foreign policy guidelines in 1992 established that the most important foreign policy tasks, requiring 'the coordinated and constant efforts of all state structures', included:
 - regulating armed conflicts around Russia,
 - preventing their spread into Russian territory,
 - guaranteeing the observance of the Russians' and Russian-speaking populations' rights.
- Accordingly, the conflicts in the Caucasus were viewed as a security threat to Russia with a high level of spillover.

Russia's security interests II

- The foreign policy guidelines issued by the Security Council in March 1993 reflected Russia's position regarding its 'near abroad' even more clearly and argued for an external CIS border over which the international community should **recognize Russia's key role and rights.**
- The rhetoric used by the Russian president and foreign and defense ministries echoed the desire to view the **post-Soviet space as a Russian sphere of influence** and called for a possible reintegration of the independent republics into a structure where Russia would play its 'historical role'.
- **A post-imperialist strategy was designed, which implied the restoration of Russian imperial power over the Baltic, Caucasus and Central Asia, monopolization of the Caspian Sea, and allowing the new states a limited sovereignty.**

Russia's security interests – a sphere of influence I

- The ultimate result of the disintegration of the Soviet Union for Russia was **an identity crisis** in political circles, and the resulting inconsistency was manifest in the country's foreign policy.
- An unclear preference formation in Moscow's foreign policy more or less had two dimensions:
 1. the Euro-Atlantic trend, which saw Russia's future in Europe as a member of Euro-Atlantic civilized nations,
 2. the Eurasian trend, which was unwilling to recognize the independence of former Soviet republics and expressed antagonism towards the West, aspiring to restore Russian post-imperial rule.

Russia's security interests – a sphere of influence II

- The Realpolitik of Russian leadership is rooted in the belief, that the world is composed by great powers – USA, China and Russia – and their “spheres of influence.”
- characteristic feature of global politics is to compete over these spaces.

Russia's security interests – a sphere of influence III

- “Civilization unity”
- Russian speaking world (Russkij Mir)
- Russian Federation was proclaimed “as the locus of Russian national identity”
- Protection of “near abroad” and opposing the NATO expansion

Russian interests in the I

- Russia's doctrine is based on "controlling the civilization role of the Russian nation in Eurasia", because "Russia is traditionally linked with the former Soviet republics, and now newly independent states, by history, the Russian language and great culture, cannot stay away from the common striving for freedom".

Russian interests in the Caucasus II

- The Caucasus represents a buffer zone between the Russian North Caucasus and the Islamic world.
- Area in which Russia feels threatened and there is a risk of rise of other regional powers, such as Turkey.
- Gateway for Russian influence in the Middle East and Central Asia
- Pipelines and energy resources.

Russian interests in the Caucasus III

- Russia's post-imperial objectives:
- every republic of the former Soviet Union should be in the CIS,
- military presence in these states should be secured,
- the CIS external border with Iran and Turkey in the south should be guarded by Russian soldiers.

Russian strategy towards armed conflict in the Caucasus

- **All statements and official policy guidelines in the 90s stressed the threat of possible conflicts in Russia's vicinity and the need to regulate them.**
- The Kremlin viewed the Caucasus as a single **geopolitical region** and also as a **security complex**, that is a region of security interdependency.
- **The spillover potential** of the Abkhazian and South Ossetian conflicts, which were occurring in Georgia and subsequently affecting the North Caucasus, and the possibility of a Turkish engagement in the Mountainous Karabakh conflict raised concern over Moscow's great power status.
- creation of the of satellite states, to control the extraction and transportation of energy resources, penetration economic influence, moderation of armed conflict and keeping the region out of Western influence.
- keep Caspian pipelines under its control and overcome the diversification of energy resources to Europe.

Russian policy instruments I

- Inconsistent during the first years of the Yeltsin period, so that one could not observe a single Russia or Russian elite, but a **number of sometimes parallel, sometimes intersecting entities.**
- The Russian position was represented independently by the **president (the state position), the parliament and the military, each acting autonomously.**
- There were a number of situations where it is not clear whether certain actions committed on behalf of the Russian state were a part of the Russian state policy or purely private actions.
- **Example: the Russian state**, represented by President Yeltsin and the Ministry for Foreign Affairs, from the onset of the conflict **conveyed unilateral support to Georgia's territorial integrity** and developed an interest in preventing the disintegration of Georgia as a state.
- This was conditioned by the concerns of the Yeltsin executive that Abkhazia's and South Ossetia's secession from Georgia, and the success of separatism in the post-Soviet space, would create a precedent and encourage separatism in Russian North Caucasus.
- **The instability in South Ossetia and later in Abkhazia had a high level of spillover into Adygeyya, Chechnya and North Ossetia, partly because of kinship between the ethnic groups.**

Russian policy instruments II

- A contrary policy to that of the Yeltsin executive was that of the **Russian Duma, the media and the Russian military bases stationed in Abkhazia, and the volunteers from the North Caucasus.**
- At least half of the fighters in South Ossetia and Abkhazia against Georgian forces were volunteers from the North Caucasus.
- **The volunteers were stimulated by a feeling of solidarity and compassion for their ethnic kin in the South.**
- The scale of Russian military assistance in the conflict within a short period of time after the start of the conflict, the Abkhazian side managed to access 100,000 landmines and some heavy weapons, neither of which had existed in Abkhazia before the outbreak of the conflict.
- What is not clear, though, is whether these Russian foreign policy in the South Caucasus weapons were delivered unilaterally by the Russian military base in Gudauta (in Abkhazia), or whether there was any commanded assistance from Moscow.

Russian policy instruments III

- Furthermore, Gamsakhurdia's anti-Russian stance and nationalistic rhetoric had already reduced the Russian president's willingness to pursue a pro- Georgian policy in the Abkhazia conflict.
- The Abkhazian leader, Ardzinba, enjoyed good relations with Yeltsin's opponents, namely the Duma speaker Khasbulatov and a number of key government officials.
- That fact coupled with Abkhazia and South Ossetia receiving sympathy from North Caucasian elites.
- Russian assistance to Georgia against South Ossetia would create a dilemma for the Kremlin, as during the previous 200 years the Ossets had predominantly acted in support of the Russian Empire in the North Caucasus.
- The conflicts in Abkhazia and South Ossetia had become levers for the Kremlin to use to coerce Georgia into entry to the CIS in 1993.

Russian policy instruments IV

- Tbilisi received support including limited military assistance from Moscow in order to prevent the disintegration of the state
- Russian support sought a legal framework through the **Treaty of Friendship and Cooperation between Tbilisi and Moscow**, signed by the Russian president in Georgia in 1994.
- Although the treaty was not ratified by the Duma, it implied a broad framework for Russian military, economic and political support to Tbilisi, which would strengthen Georgia in relation to Abkhazia and South Ossetia.

Russian tools

- Russia today is not the USSR of the cold war. It has no broad-based military posture and no explicit aggressive strategic doctrine. But it has nevertheless maintained a military presence in every neighbourhood state since the breakup of the Soviet Union in 1991.
- Russian troops are often placed in areas blighted by secessionist conflicts – allowing them to be branded as “peacekeepers”. The presence of Russian troops limits the sovereignty of neighbourhood states, both directly – by denying states full control over their territory – and indirectly, by limiting their foreign policy options: states with Russian military bases can hardly envisage joining NATO, for example.

Russian Troops

EaP Country	Approximated number of Russian troops in 2011
Armenia	3,214
Azerbaijan ³⁵	900
Belarus	850*
Georgia (Abkhazia & South Ossetia)	7,000
Moldova (Transnistria)	1,500
Ukraine	13,000

Source: author's own compilation based on data from the International Institute for Strategic Studies,³⁶ Klein,³⁷ Lukin,³⁸ Popescu & Wilson.³⁹

*Data for 2008; however, no changes were publicly reported

Russian tools II

- **Russia claims that it has a responsibility to ensure the security of Russian citizens, ethnic Russians and even mere Russian-speakers in its “near abroad”.**
- But the war in Georgia led to allegations that Russia deliberately handed out passports to foreign nationals in order to create or bolster minorities it could then claim the right to protect: there are estimated to be around 179,000 Russian passport holders in Georgia.
- There are almost 160,000 in Azerbaijan, and 114,500 in Armenia. The existence of these “Russian minorities” in neighbourhood states gives Russia a potential excuse for involvement in conflict in any of these countries.

Russian tools III

- Trade **embargoes** as political tools. It has banned wine from Georgia (since 2005) and Moldova (2005-07) when relations have soured, as well as Moldovan, Ukrainian and Georgian vegetables, meat and dairy products.
- The most comprehensive economic pressures were applied to Georgia after Tbilisi arrested four Russian spies in September 2006. Russia introduced a **transport and postal blockade**, closed Verkhni Lars, the only land border crossing between the two countries, and expelled several hundred Georgian workers.

Russian tools IV

- This last act raised concerns across the neighbourhood over Moscow's willingness to use the millions of migrant workers in Russia as leverage.
- Neighbourhood states fear that if they antagonise the Kremlin, Russia could introduce visa requirements, suspend money transfers or deport large numbers of workers, placing already fragile economic and political systems under huge strain.
- All the neighbourhood states are exposed to this risk. For example, in Azerbaijan no less than 70% of the income of the country's rural population comes from **remittances**. There are nearly 2 million Azeri migrants in Russia, compared to a total Azeri population of 8.4 million; if Russia forced even a small proportion of these migrants to return home, the social and political consequences for Azerbaijan could be devastating.

Russian objectives in the Southern flank

- 1) to join CSTO
- 2) to join the EEU (Eurasian Economic Union)
- 3) to establish Russian military bases
- 4) to protect Russian minorities and promote Russian language and culture

- At minimum, prevent any country to join NATO, develop trade relations and military cooperation.

Russian policies under the Putin government

- Firstly, during the early years of his presidency, Putin managed to **centralize the power and decision-making mechanism** of the Kremlin, and limited the free will of the regional elites, including those in the North Caucasus.
- Putin pressed hard to establish the **strong hand** of the Kremlin over all structures of the state, filling civilian positions with security staff (siloviki).
- Secondly, when Putin came to power, the Kremlin had no option but to pursue a consistent policy for the South Caucasus, as from 1994 the West, driven by its economic interests (the USA and the EU), had started to penetrate the region and compete for influence in that area.

Russian policy towards the Mountainous Karabakh conflict I

- The conflict has become an important lever in Russian foreign policy towards the region and it enables Russia to influence a large number of issues: **military presence, Turkey's potential military and political intrusion, and the Caspian energy development and pipeline routes.**
- Russian policy at the start of the Karabakh conflict was **inconsistent and had no clear strategy:**
- caused the departure of the Kremlin-loyal political elite in Azerbaijan, led by Mutallibov, following Azerbaijani accusations of Russian military assistance during the Khojaly massacre.
- The massacre of Azerbaijanis by Armenian forces in Khojaly was noted for its particularly brutal treatment of civilians and caused an outrage in Baku, which led to Mutallibov's resignation and the instalment of an anti-Russian, pro-Turkish, pro-Western government under President Elcibey.

Russian policy towards the Mountainous Karabakh conflict II

- Russian assistance to the Armenian side at the start of the conflict was as much based **on identity** as on strategic interests: based upon religious fraternity.
- After 1992 : instrumentalising the conflict.
- Assisting Armenia and the Karabakh Armenians in the conflict, Russia used the conflict as a lever against Baku to impose conditions, which included **Azerbaijan's entry to the CIS, deployment of military bases, guarding the country's borders with Turkey and Iran, and jointly using the resources of the Caspian Sea.**

Georgian-Russian relations I

- “Rose revolution” – Russian fear to lose its control over the region.
- After 2008 Russian built trenches, fences and minefields
- Integration of Abkhazia and South Ossetia into Russian economic, political and security system.
- November 2014 “alliance and integration”, transfer of responsibility for South Ossetia’s security to the RF. South Ossetian armed forces – Russian army and security services (FSB) as well as customs regime through EEU. Russian regulation on education and health insurances. In sum, Russian legislation in the SO.

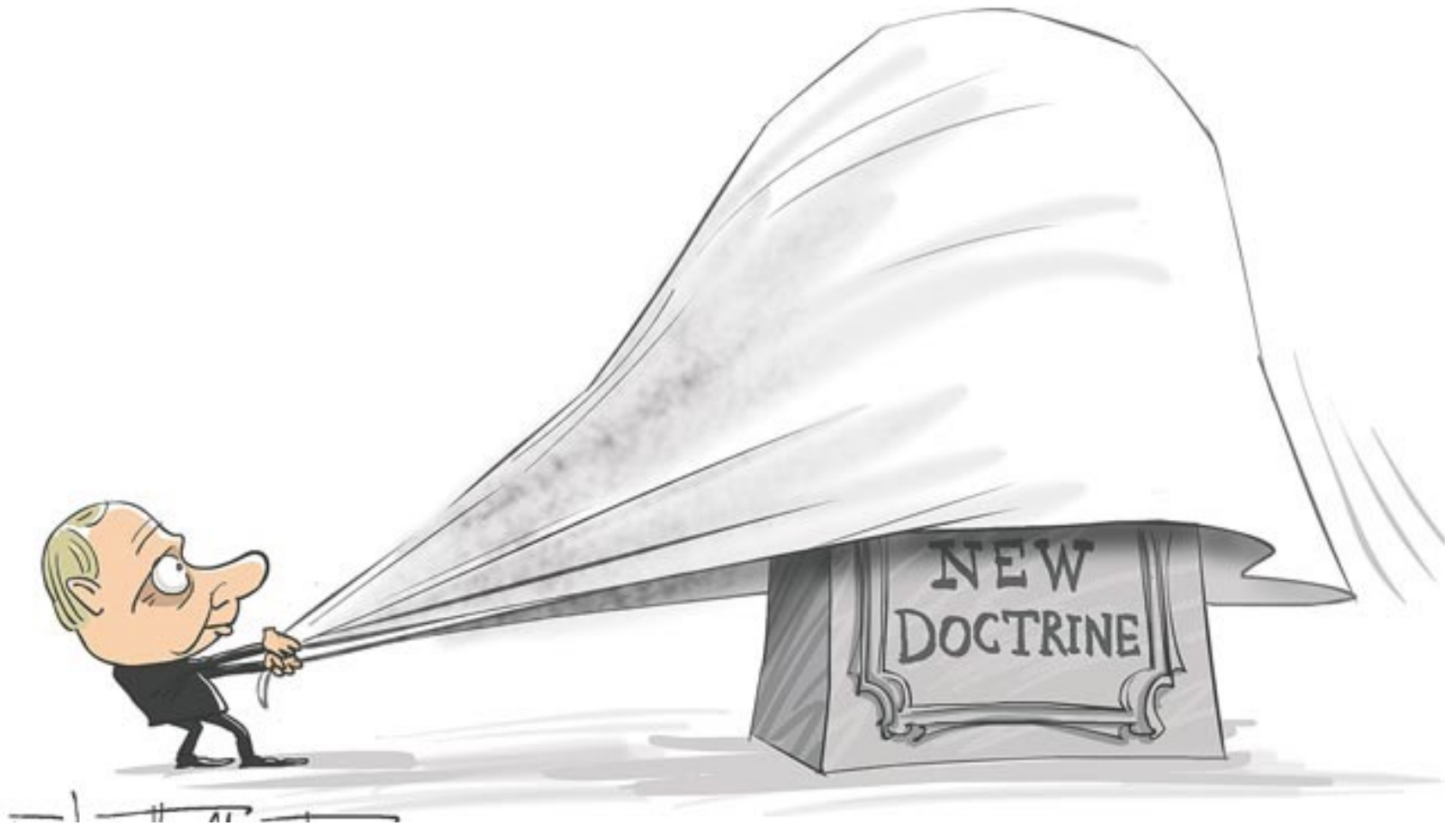
Georgian-Russian relations II

- SO : no foreign policy or military doctrine.
- Leonid Tibilov for referendum joining Russia: not only for security guarantees but hopes to subsidize the region.
- Russia needs SO as a method of destabilizing Georgia, but not as a territory of the RF.
- Moscow promise to allocate 111\$ million to Abkhazia in 2015 was not fulfilled – deterioration of relations.
- Abkhazia refused to ratify the strategic treaty signed in November 2014.
- 50% of Georgian oil, natural gas and electricity sector owned by Russian Inter RAO

Russian Chechen relations

- a) the repeated attempt of Russia's military and political elite to solve the ethno-political conflict by force justified by the fight with international terrorism was doomed to failure;
- b) the war enables the resolution of strictly political goals of certain Russian power groups but fails to address Chechnya's political status;
- c) in reaching its aims, Russian authorities are ready to sacrifice not only the lives of Chechen people but also the lives of their own citizens, not to mention the direct battle casualties;
- d) the war does not facilitate the establishment of democratic institutes of power and the formation of a civil community in Russia;
- e) the conflict has devastating effects on the Chechen community because an entire generation has been growing up under war circumstances. The radicalization of opinions is perceptible not only among Chechens, but also among the insurgents. The process of fostering puppet groups that agree to anything to secure their personal interests is closely associated with the formation of factions that do not believe in peaceful settlement of the war and support only the use of power;
- f) the war provokes and Russian authorities stimulate the escalation of nationalist and chauvinist tendencies. The Chechen community is gradually being alienated from other communities. In the current Russia, this alienation has become an everyday fact.

The New Putin Doctrine



The New Putin Doctrine II

- **1. Russia no longer views the West as a credible partner.** He believes that the West dismissed his legitimate complaints against U.S. unilateralism and double standards that he articulated in his 2007 Munich speech. Despite claims that the Cold War has ended, the West continues to pursue a Cold War-like containment policy against Russia, Putin says.

The New Putin Doctrine III

- 2. Russia no longer considers itself part of European — much less Euro-Atlantic — civilization. **Russia is a democracy, but of a special type.** The country has rejected communist and "pseudo-democratic" dogmas. If more than 90 percent of Russians support the annexation of Crimea, it means the move had a strong backing and legitimacy based on the fundamental democratic principal of vox populi.

The New Putin Doctrine IV

- 3. International law is no longer a system of rules or set of reference points. Putin argues that **international law** has been reduced to a menu of options from which every **powerful state is free to choose whatever suits its interests**. To put down the uprising in Chechnya, for example, Moscow cited the international principle of upholding territorial integrity. But in annexing Crimea, it cited the fundamental right to self-determination.

The New Putin Doctrine V

- 4. The new Putin Doctrine applies to the entire territory of the former Soviet Union. Putin justifies the right to oversee this expanse by relying on a vague notion of "Russia's historical heritage" and the **need to ensure the country's security in its rightful sphere of influence**. As it turns out, from now on the sovereignty of the former Soviet republics will depend on how the Kremlin views its strategic interests. The only exceptions are the three former Baltic republics, which are NATO members.

The New Putin Doctrine VI

- 5. The main Westphalian principle upholding state sovereignty and territorial integrity now applies only to the strongest countries that protect their borders with their own armies or the armies of military blocs such as NATO or the Collective Security Treaty Organization. The sovereignty and integrity of weak and especially failed states becomes open game for powerful states and their blocs. States now fall into two categories: **the big leagues, with security and other guarantees for its members, and the little leagues, with far fewer guarantees.**

Post-imperium I

- Post-Soviet or post-imperial Russia **did not experience a rebirth** as a nation-state, like for example democratic Germany after the World War II or Kemalist Turkey. It did not shrink into a small fragment, as a memento of past imperial glory, like for example Deutsch-Oesterreich after 1918, which became the Republic of Austria.
- It created the Commonwealth of Independent States, which has however nothing to do with commonwealth except for the term itself. It has promoted a Russophobie in light of Russkiy Mir, but it has not been supported by attractive soft power components. Contrary to that, Russia's strategy was to use military power to protect its natural sphere of influence.

Post-imperium II

- From Russian perspective the downfall of empire is recognized, but Russia has to remain a great power.
- *The imperial élan has gone*, however Russian establishment defines their country as a “great power”.
- Russia’s interests in former Soviet region are real, but we can claim that privileged zone in that area is a chimera.

Post-imperium III

- Adopting a new role after **500 years as an empire, seventy years as an ideological warrior and over forty year during the Cold War period as a military superpower** is not easy for Russia.
- Russian Federation today is in a position of post-empire rather than neo-empire.
- “No great power walks alone” and close allies, satellite nations are significant part of a great power’s armory.

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- How effective is a support of ethnic conflict in advancing Russian grand strategic interests?
- How effective is ethnic conflict as a tool for Russia's grand strategic interests in the Caucasus region?
- Is destabilizing of the region the good way to keep these states from NATO membership?