

# The Caucasian Dimension of the Russian Power

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# The Caucasian Dimension of the Russian Power

## Abstract

The Caucasus has always been and remains one of the main geopolitical crossroads between the Eurasian continent, the Middle East, the Black Sea and Central Asia. Since when Russia engaged in an attempt to renew the global basis of its power, the region became a crucial testing ground. To reaffirm its influence, Russian action should have an impact on an intricate balance of ethnic, energetic, religious and diplomatic relations. For Moscow, the stake is not only to affirm its authority over the South Caucasian states but also to assure the stability inside the Federation itself. Indeed, there is a thick web of cross-border ties linking the peoples of the region on both sides of the main Caucasian ridge. In addition, in the latest years, the also Caucasus returned to be an important pillar for the projection of Russian power toward the Middle East. The study is an ambitious effort to illustrate the main factors of the Russian geopolitical posture in both the North and South Caucasus.

## *1. Introduction: Russia and the Caucasus an Intimate Relationship*

Although always perceived as an “exotic” land, the Caucasus is intimately connected with Russia’s history. The region is key to the country’s position as a major power at least since the XVI century, when Ivan IV (the “terrible”, 1530-1584) extended the State reach to the South and married a Circassian princess to seal an alliance against the nomads of the steppe. Entering the region during the following centuries, Russia went into a long rivalry with the rival Ottoman and Persian empires in a struggle that still conditions Moscow present-day relations with Turkey and Iran, and through them with the whole Middle East. Therefore, the Caucasus never stopped to be a major geopolitical theatre for Russian global standing.<sup>1</sup>

Apart from geopolitical rivalries, the main problem for Russia was (and still is) how to incorporate within its state populations belonging to profoundly different cultural and religious background. This happened not only through harsh clashes and repression, as a certain historiography conveys,<sup>2</sup> but also through a complex process of interaction and integration along which the majority of the Caucasians came to recognise the Empire as a way to access the advances of European civilisation and a bearer of legal and social order in a region for centuries prey of decadence and internecine strives.<sup>3</sup> All the same, given the complexities of this interaction, the region has constantly offered the rivals of Russia opportunities to weaken its geopolitical capacities. The events of Crimean war (1853-1856) were emblematic in this sense, preannouncing dynamics bound to be repeated in the wake of the collapses of Tsarism and then of the Soviet Union, until our days. In the effort to rule the complexity of the region, the Soviet power introduced a specific ethno-territorial

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<sup>1</sup> A. Ferrari, *Breve storia del Caucaso*, Carocci, Roma 2007, pp. 152,

<sup>2</sup> An emblematic title for a huge bibliography: M. Bennigsen Broxup (ed.), *The North Caucasus Barrier. The Russian Advance towards the Muslim World*, C. Hurst & Co., London, 1992.

<sup>3</sup> T .M. Barrett, *Lines of Uncertainty: The Frontiers of the North Caucasus*, *Slavic Review*, Vol. 54, No. 3 (Autumn, 1995), pp. 578-601; A. Jersild, *Orientalism and empire: North Caucasus mountain peoples and the Georgian frontier, 1845-1917*, Montreal & Kingston, McGill-Queen's University Press, 2002; V. O. Bobrovnikov, I. L. Babich (ed.), *Severnii Kavkaz v sostave Rossiyskoy imperii*, Moscow, Novoye literaturnoye obozreniye, 2007.

administration which linked citizens' rights and possibilities to the single's belonging to a given national community.<sup>4</sup> Such an administrative order was among the causes precipitating the collapse of the USSR in 1991.

Following the opening of the region in the 1990s, Western encroachments in the South Caucasus foresaw a drastic fall of Russia's possibilities to act in the region. In parallel, the chaotic effects of the civil war in Chechnya and other separatist conflicts proved how control of the region continues to be a precondition for the Russia's capacities to function both as a polity and an international power. Accordingly, it was exactly from the Caucasus that Vladimir Putin first started his enterprise of restoration of the Russian State and then affirmed the country's great power status. After the restoration of sovereignty over Chechnya, the defeat of the main American client in the region, Georgia, meant a denial of the USA pretention to unilaterally define the rules of the game in Eurasia.<sup>5</sup>

This article reviews the main turning points in the Russian strategy towards the region since the end of the USSR years trying to highlight assets and hindrances of the Russian stance.

## ***2. The General Posture of Russia in the Caucasus: Containing instability, Projecting Power.***

Russian strategic thinking encompasses the region as an integrated whole, the 'Big Caucasus' (*bolshoj Kavkaz*), of which Russia is an integral part in economic and security terms. Indeed, seven regions of the Russian Federation (RF), from West to East, Adygea, Karachaevo-Cherkesia, Kabardino-Balkaria, North Ossetia, Ingushetia, Chechnya and Dagestan are found in the North Caucasus, and four more regions (Krasnodar and Stavropol territories, the Rostov region, Kalmykia) are on the adjacent steppes, culturally part of the Caucasus as well, as it is the entire Black Seacoast of the Krasnodar region. Home to one of the most complex ethnic and religious mosaic on earth, with the collapse of the Soviet structure the region became the stage of several territorial disputes, many of which resulted in violent clashes. Starting with Nagorno-Karabakh (NK) in 1988, six armed confrontations flared up, two on the RF territory (Ossetian-Ingush conflict and then Chechnya). Moscow approach to the region has therefore been dominated by the need to contain endemic causes of instability. In doing this a pan-Caucasian standpoint has been unavoidable. The conflicts proved how Russian territories are to different degrees bi-politically interconnected with the South Caucasian states. First, NK clashes originated waves of refugees (some 100.000 Armenians found shelter among diaspora in Russia, notably in the Black sea regions) then up to 80.000 Ossetians from Georgia flooded their kin republic precipitating the conflict with Ingush and contributing to escalate the Chechen war. Also, Georgian other separatist conflict with Abkhazia consolidated the Circassian movements in Adygea, Karachaevo-Cherkesia, Kabardino-Balkaria, also reviving connection along Diaspora ramification in Turkey and the Middle East. Apart from these mentioned main cases, there is another array of small peoples whose cases can be dealt only in a trans-border framework. Conflict asides, the effect of the regional economic crisis pushed hundreds of thousands to migrate from the region (both North and South) to the

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<sup>4</sup> T. Martin, *The Affirmative Action Empire. Nations and Nationalism in the Soviet Union, 1923–1939*, Cornell University Press, 2001; R. G. Suny, T. Martin, *A State of Nations. Empire and Nation-Making in the Age of Lenin and Stalin*, Oxford University Press, 200; N. Werth, *Histoire de l'Union Soviétique. De l'Empire russe à la Communauté des Etats indépendants 1900-1991*, Paris, PUF, 1992.

<sup>5</sup> G. Toal, *Near Abroad. Putin, the West, and the Contest over Ukraine and the Caucasus*, Oxford UP, 2017, p. 89.

main Russian cities.<sup>6</sup> As a result of these transborder human networks, the security in the Russian Caucasus is inseparable from the internal dynamics of Georgia, Armenia, and Azerbaijan as troubles there necessarily reverberates on the stability of the federal regions. According, the management of the conflicts in the South Caucasus, still totally or partially unresolved, are such to exert influence on the internal structures of modern Russia as well as its foreign policy.

Apart from causing internal troubles, the dissolution of the USSR has opened the region to external geopolitical interests, economic interests, firstly, but also strategic, connected with painful historical legacies and opposing claims.<sup>7</sup> It was naturally the case of the neighbouring powers of Turkey and Iran, both returning to exert influence into the region after centuries of exclusions in a situation recalling the beginning of the Russian expansion in the XVIII century.

Shattered by its internal transition, during the first post-Soviet years, Moscow proved unable to pursue a coherent policy toward the region. This stemmed from a wrong assessment of the scale and the extent of the geopolitical changes induced by the Soviet liquidation in 1991. After early attempts by the new liberal elite to abandon perceived “imperial burdens” to concentrate on an exclusive pro-Western orientation, realities on the field forced decision-makers to reconsider their strategic outlook. Noticeably, the Karabakh conflict served as catalyser, as it risked bringing back Turkey into the regional balance by the alliance that Ankara established with Azerbaijan against Armenia. Because that, already, in the mid-1990s, Russia elaborated a foreign policy doctrine encompassing former Soviet republics as a “**near abroad**”, a zone crucial for the country’s national interests needing Russia to have a say in its geopolitical developments. This doctrine was at first conceived within the military circles,<sup>8</sup> to become then an official strategic policy.<sup>9</sup>

However, Moscow proved unable to adequately assess the extent of geopolitical changes in motion since 1991 with the extent of the fractures brought by the conflicts and the appearance of new players. Indeed, the importance of the South Caucasus as an interests’ priority zone was set to rise further with the entrance of the United States into the regional balance of power. As relations with Moscow became more complicated after the early post-Soviet euphoria, Washington started to build up relations with all the former Soviet countries, notably along the former Union’s “southern tier”, that is the Caucasus and Central Asia. This interest was initially motivated in economic terms, as driven by energy related interests. Given the access to Caspian oil it was a matter to create an East-West energy corridor through Azerbaijan and Georgia for transporting these resources via the South Caucasus. The plan was intensively promoted by Washington diplomacy and received European full support so that Western oil majors appeared in the regional web of influences. However, later on more sober estimates of the importance of the Caspian reserves showed how the costs of extraction and evacuation could hardly justify the Eurasian corridor in economic terms.<sup>10</sup> Clearly, the USA entrance in the region was rather motivated by strategic considerations. Indeed, the control of the South Caucasus allows to influence developments in the Caspian Sea, Central Asia and the Middle East. By this way

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<sup>6</sup> S. Markedonov, *Turbulentnaya Yevraziya*, Moscow, Academia, 2010.

<sup>7</sup> A. Ferrari, “L’evoluzione delle strategie russe nel Caucaso (1991-2006)”, *ISPI Working Paper*, novembre 2006, [https://ispionline.it/sites/default/files/pubblicazioni/wp\\_5\\_2006\\_0.pdf](https://ispionline.it/sites/default/files/pubblicazioni/wp_5_2006_0.pdf)

<sup>8</sup> See the Ministry of Defence military concept (issued in December 1993) arguing for the need to preserve military presence and capacities to act in the “near abroad”. Text available at: <https://fas.org/nuke/guide/russia/doctrine/russia-mil-doc.html>

<sup>9</sup> This change was facilitated by the assumption of the function of Foreign Ministry by the orientalist, Tbilisi born, diplomat Evgenyj Primakov (1929-2015).

<sup>10</sup> ICG, “Central Asia’s energy risks”, *Asia Report* N°133, 24 May 2007.

Washington tried to define a system of regional relations minimising Russian interests and preventing Iran to make use of the new opportunities in the region. This was confirmed by relentless efforts to extend the NATO device closer to the Caspian Sea. As a result, the Caucasus became a place of confrontation of gigantic international interests, in geopolitical terms nothing less than a re-edition of the XIX century “Great Game” for global hegemony.<sup>11</sup>

Against this background, Russia’s main objective became to contain or even roll back the Western bid for regional control. The new Russia of Vladimir Putin adopted a consequent approach in this direction, notably integrating the geo-economic potential of Russian companies active in local markets to offset western oil companies’ bid to dominate Azerbaijani and Georgian economies.<sup>12</sup> However, stakes were further raised during the Bush administration’s years, when Washington approached the South Caucasus in the framework of the “Greater Middle East” strategy, also exploiting the Iran issue as leverage for far-reaching long-term geopolitical transformations. Using the pretext of the “war on terrorism”,<sup>13</sup> the US managed to bring NATO closer to the Caucasus, granting Individual Partnership Action Plans (IPAPs) to the three southern countries. From its side, Russia structured the Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO), a regional security organisation modelled on NATO in a process that augmented the militarization of the region, already high because of the unresolved conflicts. Under a Western sponsored regime since 2003, Georgia embraced enthusiastically this way, multiplying its military expenses and assuming a confrontational attitude towards Russia. These tensions resulted in the August 2008 war. Then, the Russian intervention against the Georgian attempt to militarily crush South Ossetian separatism became the way to signal to the world that Moscow would not tolerate anymore violations of its perceived national security interests in the “near abroad”.

Increased competition with the Western players pushed Russia to reconsider its relations with regional powers. Over the years, **Iran** emerged as an important ally, with whom relations has been extended from economic to military spheres. Co-operation in the Caucasus has been one of the main pillar of this evolving partnership, underpinned by a common understanding that external intervention of NATO and Israel in the regional conflicts should be refused to leave resolution addressed by the states in the region only. On such basis, Iran and Russia had worked on an alternative geo-economic arrangement for the whole region by developing a North-South transport corridor balancing the Western supported East-West. Following Georgian closure of its territory to the Russian military after 2008 crisis, Iran became the only channel available (via the Caspian Sea) to the RF Army to supply troops stationed in landlocked Armenia. This links have been further developed following Russia’s intervention in Syria, thus playing against US-Israeli hard-liners’ push for an attack against Iran, a perspective considered several times over the last decade.<sup>14</sup>

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<sup>11</sup> S. Blank, “Every Shark East of Suez: Great Power Interests, Policies and Tactics in the Transcaspien Energy Wars”, *Central Asian Survey*, 1999.

<sup>12</sup> A. Yegiazaryan, “Russia in the South Caucasus: Investing and Foreign Trade Aspects”, *REGNUM*, 06/16/2006; <http://regnum.ru/english/657319.html>

<sup>13</sup> This was another proof of the limits of Russia since Putin had adopted himself a “war on terrorism” rhetoric.

<sup>14</sup> According to a convincing scenario voiced by Lt. General (retired) Yury Netkachev, former deputy commander of RF forces in Transcaucasia, in case of Western attack, “*Possibly, it will be necessary to use military means to breach the Georgian transport blockade and establish transport corridors, leading into Armenia*” in order to prevent the isolation of the bases, possibly also blocking the Western sponsored South

Last year, Russian led regional bloc EAUE (see below) signed an interim agreement with Iran with the purpose of forming a full-scale free trade area in the near future, what, will further raise the Caucasian dimension of the tandem's cooperation.

Similar consideration informs Russian relations with **Turkey**, which have been growing as Ankara became progressively disillusioned with the Western policies for the region (notably with the main client Georgia) stopping on the way its support for Chechen and separatism. Despite hurdles on Syrian terrain, the RF and Turkey found an agreement on conservative status quo order for the region which also allowed the two to minimize the negative impacts of their serious divergences over the NK conflict resolution and then the turmoil in Ukraine.<sup>15</sup>

Overall, the Caucasian interests are guiding Russian strategy for its involvement in the **Middle East** where the main concern is to reduce Islamist influences on Russian Muslims and the consequences of the possibility of their participation in the Syrian conflict as "foreign fighters" under the "Islamic State" (ISIS) banners.<sup>16</sup>

Finally, concerns for the stability of the region also make Moscow to welcome the involvement in Caucasian affairs of an external player as **China**. The One Belt and One Road Initiative is seen as contributing in the reinforcement of regional connections and in this sense the EAUE signed its first major economic and trade agreement with China in May 2018. At the same time, there remains doubt on how the Chinese initiative will articulate with the Russian presence in the region as well as with the Western supported corridor.

### ***3. Russia and the South Caucasus***

The 2008 war changed indeed the regional balance of power putting a check on NATO expansion and forcing local political elites to reconsider Russian position as, once again, the strongest power player in the Caucasus. At the same time, regional competition continued, now more in the framework of the "soft power"'s possibilities of the actors. Moscow had to face a renewed Western attempt to attract the country of the region, this time the US leaving the field to the European Union's action. In 2009 Brussels launched the so-called "Eastern Partnership" programme (EaP), aimed at fostering closer relations with all the former Soviet Republics of East Europe and the Caucasus to shape their development. Following the EU example, Moscow launched its own alternative integration project, the Eurasian Economic Union (EAUE). Thus, the EU-Russia "shared neighbourhood" became the arena of a zero-sum game between competitive bloc regionalisms as the two sides increasingly invested in institutionalized ties as vehicles for

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Caucasus energy corridor. Quoted in Cfr. S. Konovalov, *Moskva optimiziruet vojennuju gruppirovku na jube*, «Nezavisimoe voennoe obozrenie», 15.12.2011; [http://nvo.ng.ru/nvo/2011-12-15/1\\_gruppirovka.html](http://nvo.ng.ru/nvo/2011-12-15/1_gruppirovka.html).

<sup>15</sup> To be noted how during this period the two have been pursuing engagement and cooperation instead of competition, a fact exemplified by the highly symbolic granting to Turkey of the "dialogue partner" status in the SCO framework (April 2013) or the organising on RF territory of the first Russian-Turkish Social Forum meeting (November 2013). See: F. Özbay, Turkish-Russian Relations in the Shadow of the Syrian Crisis, *Journal of Caspian Affairs*, Vol. I, No. 1, Spring 2015, pp. 73 – 91.

<sup>16</sup> R. Dannreuther, "Russia and the Middle East: A Cold War Paradigm?", *Europe-Asia Studies*, vol. 64, n. 3, 2012, pp. 543-560.

their influence.<sup>17</sup> This was visible in 2013 when Armenia had to about-turn from the expected signing of the EU Association Agreement (AA) to join the EAEU under pressure from Moscow. Since then Georgia joined the EU camp while Azerbaijan remained neutral but the perspective of their inclusion in the EAEU remain an actively debated alternative. One line of the Russian action has been the sponsoring of civil society organisations bearers of anti-liberal values in support the legitimacy of Russian objectives against those of the US and the EU. A key point in this action has been Moscow's narrative of Russia as the defender of the supposed authentic, "Judeo-Christian", roots of the European identity. This has found attentive audiences among the peoples of the region, sincerely disturbed in particular by Western supported NGO programs of promotion of sexual minorities' activism and other issues perceived against family's value.<sup>18</sup> In this same perspective, the Russian Orthodox Church (ROC) has grown as an institution associated with Russian influence in the South Caucasus. There, although pure Orthodox links exists only with Georgia, the ROC often finds receptors among representatives of other religious institutions, especially with Shia Muslims and Apostolic Armenians (see below). Generally, the region is witnessing an intricate confrontation of visions, where subtle actions and diversions are common. This raises the fear that "Hybrid Warfare" tactics may be employed in order to influence public opinions and make local constituencies switch towards one of the camps along the lines which brought to the opening of the Ukrainian flashpoint.

The effect of the latter has been to divert Russian geopolitical attention and resources from the Caucasian theatre while also undermining Moscow's capacity to pursue the Eurasian integration's project. Also, armed confrontation in Ukraine reinforced factions supporting NATO extension to the region causing a new turn in the local militarisation. Indeed, since the opening of the Ukrainian crisis, Russia has reinforced the equipment (including air force and modern long-range weapons) and preparedness level of the forces deployed in the South Military District (SMD), where the Caucasus is the central piece, also creating a unified air defence network at the SCTO level.

### 3.1 Georgia: Love and Hate

A country of paradoxes, Georgia stands at same time as the regional country the most intimately linked to the Russian civilisation and the champion of the Western advancement into the Caucasus.

Invading South Ossetia in August 2008, Georgia provided Russia with the opportunity for reaffirming itself as a great sovereign power.<sup>19</sup> Russia performed war actions to symbolically punish the country and curtail NATO's plans to expand into the region (what was admitted by then-President Medvedev in 2011). The outcome of the war was catastrophic for Tbilisi who completely lost sovereignty over the former Autonomies of Abkhazia and South Ossetia following the recognition *de jure* of their independence by Russia. Georgia has since then rescinded diplomatic relations with Russia and

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<sup>17</sup> L. Broers, "The South Caucasus: Fracture without end?" in Anna Ohanyan, (ed.), *Russia Abroad. Driving Regional Fracture in Post-Communist Eurasia and Beyond*, Washington, DC: Georgetown University Press, 2018, pp. 81-102.

<sup>18</sup> J. Mankoff, "Un-Civil Society" and the Sources of Russian Influence in West Asia. The South Caucasus", in Mehran Kamrava, *The Great Game in West Asia: Iran, Turkey and the South Caucasus*, Oxford University Press, 2016, pp. 141-160.

<sup>19</sup> F. Vielmini, "The Systemic Impact of the Five-Day War in Georgia", 07 August 2018; <https://ispionline.it/it/pubblicazione/systemic-impact-five-day-war-georgia-21100>



continues to display a stalwart will to retake control at whatever price on the former breakaways regions, what preserves risks of a new war always high.

Ten years after the war, the relations between the two neighbours (and the US-EU sponsors of Georgia) remain fragmented and highly contradictory. Détente followed the demise of the regime of president Saakashvili in 2012 but the new Georgian Dream coalition preserved a strict Euro-Atlantic foreign policy alignment. With disaster in Ukraine, Georgia became the “success story” needed by the EU for the EaP effort of advance in the Post-Soviet area, what resulted in an association agreement with the EU and the granting of visa-free entry to the Schengen zone for Georgian citizens.<sup>20</sup> At the same time the country has increased its connection with the NATO military device directed against Russia, with the granting of an “enhanced cooperation” package, creating a NATO-Georgia Joint Training and Evaluation Centre (JTEC) in 2015 and signing a military cooperation agreement with the US, marking a shift of the assistance from training to capacity building.<sup>21</sup> By this way NATO-Georgia military relationship has reached a new high,<sup>22</sup> a risky path the national elite doesn’t seem to assess properly while the country continues to lack the Alliance’ security guarantees.<sup>23</sup>

At the same time, the **exit of Saakashvili brought big improvements** in the relationship. From Moscow perspective the main one is that Georgia stopped the strategy of nuisance of the Russia regional position by support of opposition forces among the peoples of the North Caucasus. A hidden component of this line was intelligence infiltration of Chechen insurgent groups.<sup>24</sup> Indeed, the new conjuncture created by the Russian victory in Syria created room for security cooperation between the two, especially since many Georgian born volunteers fought for ISIS and there is now a shared concern in the two capitals for their return.

**Georgian societies present several “receptors” for the RF soft power which is trying to support** different public associations and **political groups**. In doing so the accent is on cultural and religious affinity. Russians oppose “traditional” Orthodox values to the EU-US supported liberal agenda in order to discredit the latter’s position. This discourse finds audience, especially since the association with the EU is not translating into immediate gains for the mass of the population. An important dimension of the relation between the two countries in this perspective is the **religious** one. In the absence of official diplomatic

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<sup>20</sup> After hesitations, substantial advancements occurred in the implementation of the Association Agreement signed in 2014 and the connected Deep and Comprehensive Free Trade Areas (DCFTA) and then the granting of visa-free entry to EU for Georgian citizens. See: A. Paul, “The EU and the South Caucasus 25 Years Since Independence”, 25.11.2016. <https://eu.boell.org/en/2016/11/25/eu-and-south-caucasus-25-years-independence>

<sup>21</sup> NATO, “Substantial NATO-Georgia Package (SNGP)”, June 2016: [http://nato.int/nato\\_static\\_fl2014/assets/pdf/pdf\\_2016\\_06/20160614\\_1606-georgia-sngp-factsheet-en.pdf](http://nato.int/nato_static_fl2014/assets/pdf/pdf_2016_06/20160614_1606-georgia-sngp-factsheet-en.pdf); See also P. Stronski, A. Vreeman, *Georgia at Twenty-Five: In a Difficult Spot*, 25.05.2017, <http://carnegieendowment.org/2017/05/25/georgia-at-twenty-five-in-difficult-spot-pub-70074>

<sup>22</sup> T. de Waal, “Whither the South Caucasus?”, 28.03.2017; <http://carnegieeurope.eu/2017/03/28/whither-south-caucasus-pub-68427>

<sup>23</sup> N. Silaev, *Rossiia — Gruzija: stanet li dezorijentatsiya produktivnoy?*, 26.04.2107, <https://eadaaily.com/ru/news/2017/04/26/nikolay-silaev-rossiya-gruziya-stanet-li-dezorientatsiya-produktivnoy>

<sup>24</sup> This became evident during the so-called “Lopota incident” of 2012, when Georgian services eliminated fifteen guerrillas previously trained by their colleagues and then by the killing of the Chechen leader Ahmed Chataev in November 2017 in Tbilisi. See: “Report of the Public Council at the Public Defender’s Office of Georgia on the Special Operation of 28 August 2012 near the village of Lapankuri, Lopota Gorge, Georgia”, Tbilisi, 2014, p. 34. To be noted that the report was made public in 2014 but it is since then unavailable on line on the Ombudsmen site. A detailed, although partisan, account of Georgian “special relationship” with Chechen insurgency in: I. Saydayev, *Ubrat’ Svidetelya*, AN ČR, Groznyy, 2012.

relations, the influential Georgian Orthodox Church (GOC) has been the main channel of connection between the two capitals while the theme of the Russian-Georgian Orthodox brotherhood is solid also on the basis of growing concerns in the face of the expansion of Turkish interests and presence in Georgia.<sup>25</sup> However, so far, **Russian supported subjects have remained at the margins of Georgian national politics** while the GOC presents consolidated internal political differentiations that prevent its use to influence the government.

It should also be noted that, given the absence of a sound institutional framework for national minorities' rights in Georgia, Russia maintains leverage among these communities, especially the Armenian one (by way of the Diaspora on its territory) but also the Muslims groups, as confessional divisions may be used to destabilise Georgia. Ideologies apart, the two societies have been coming back together. Following the unilateral removal of the entry visa and the development of tourism, Georgia was visited in 2017 by 1,392,610 Russians (a growth of 34.1% over the previous year).<sup>26</sup> This trend underlines growing economic connections between the two. In 2017, bilateral trade reached 1.08 billion dollars, making Russia the main importer of Georgian products, such as wines and mineral water, essential for the national economy since agriculture occupies more than half of the workforce of the country.<sup>27</sup> Also, money transfers and banking links with the RF are very important for Georgian economy. Therefore, this dependences may represent leverages for Moscow, which can restrict the trade in order to force Georgia towards the EAEU. Such an attraction seems set to grow since joining the European Union appear to be an unreal possibility for Georgia, at least in the foreseeable future.

### 3.2 Armenia: “Russia’s Israel in the Caucasus.”<sup>28</sup>

Armenian presence in the Caucasus depends on Russia’s protection at least since the late XVIII century a tradition that is fully observed by contemporary Russia-centric foreign policy orientation of Armenia. In force of the unresolved Karabakh conflict, Russia is for Yerevan the main, vital, external support preventing the common pressure of Azerbaijan and his Turkish ally to overwhelm the country.

In its turn, Moscow found in Armenia, the only Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO) Caucasian member, the main regional platform for its hard power, the 102nd military base, the main direct military presence in the South Caucasus along with the facilities established in the former Georgian Autonomies after 2008. In 2010, Armenia extended Russia’s rights to use the base until 2044.<sup>29</sup> In this framework, Armenia occupy a key position in the Russian-sponsored CIS Joint Air Defence System, providing air base and radar facilities that allows the Russian Air Forces to project power toward the Middle East from this most southern stand. Russian forces are also responsible for patrolling the Armenian borders with Iran and Turkey.

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<sup>25</sup> S. Serrano, *Géorgie: sortie d’Empire*, Paris, CNRS, 2007.

<sup>26</sup> <http://georgiatoday.ge/news/8689/Record-Number-Tourists-Visit-Georgia-in-2017>

<sup>27</sup> J. C. K. Daly, “New Georgian Government Attempts Reset With Russia While Balancing Euro-Atlantic Aspirations”, *Eurasia Daily Monitor*, Vol. 15, N. 106, 17.07.2018; <https://jamestown.org/program/new-georgian-government-attempts-reset-with-russia-while-balancing-euro-atlantic-aspirations/>

<sup>28</sup> Quote from a statement by Aleksei Arbatov, then head of the Institute for the World Economy and International Relations (Russian Academy of Sciences), to the newspaper *Trud*, no. 52, 26 March 2005.

<sup>29</sup> “Russia extends lease on military base in Armenia through 2044”, Sputniknews, 20 August 2010; <http://sputniknews.com/military/20100820/160276128.html> (accessed 22 November 2018)

Apart from military guarantee, Russia provide non less fundamental subsidies as oil, gas and nuclear fuel (for its one nuclear power plant) while Russian companies are by far the main investors in Armenian economy. In September 2000, Presidents Kocharian and Putin signed a ‘Declaration on Allied Cooperation for the 21<sup>st</sup> Century’, expanding upon the ‘Treaty of Friendship, Cooperation and Mutual Assistance’ signed in 1997. Assets-for-debt deals and other agreements signed in 2002-2003 transferred ownership of state-owned industrial enterprises from Armenia to Russia, including the main thermal electricity plant, six hydroelectric plants, and management of the Metsamor nuclear plant to Russia’s state-run United Energy Systems. This deepened economic dependence on Russia, particularly in the energy sector railway systems and gas transportation and distribution infrastructure were also later transferred to Russian control as debt mounted.<sup>30</sup>

At the same time, political relations are far from stables. Armenian elites, especially the influential groups of the international Diaspora, particularly strong in France and the United States, are growing sick at the limitations that the privileged relationship with Moscow entails for the country, notably the insistence on preventing American and EU influences. Armenia foreign policy has long-time strived to adhere to a “foreign **policy of complementarity**” including the Western powers.<sup>31</sup> Many received badly the 1993 sudden U-turn in the relations with the EU in favour of alternative EAEU integration with Russia, perceived as the result of coercion from Moscow’s side.<sup>32</sup> Similar simmering tensions erupted last year with the “Velvet Revolution” which pushed the old elite out in favour of the opposition lead by Nikol Pashinyan. The new elite expresses forces willing to put EAEU connexion under question, Armenia being the only member where the public approval for the organisation stands below the 50 per cent threshold.<sup>33</sup>

The task for Moscow now is not to interfere with this ongoing internal political adjustments in order to minimise the existing polarisation of the Armenian political spectre, what could have repercussions in the regional stability. Despite structural difficulties for its specific position, the Armenian case is important for the future definition of the balance of power in Eurasia. Today the EU and the EAEU coexist in the country on a division of labour where the first provides economic assistance and the second security guarantee.<sup>34</sup> If Yerevan will be able to make this arrangement sustainable striking a balance between Western orientations and Russian partnership, the Armenian case will serve in defining a better relation between the two main bloc ordaining Western Eurasia. This best case scenario is complicated by the action of the United States. The visit of U.S. national security adviser John Bolton's to Yerevan in October 2018, clearly expressed

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<sup>30</sup> E. Danielyan, ‘Russia Tightens Grip on Armenia with Debt Agreements’, *Eurasianet*, 05 July 2003, <http://eurasianet.org/departments/business/articles/eav050703.shtml> (accessed: 20 November 2018).

<sup>31</sup> A. Iskandaryan, Alexander, “Armenia’s Foreign Policy: Where Values Meet Constraints.” In *Armenia’s Foreign and Domestic Politics: Development Trends*, in Mikko Palonkorpi and A. Iskandaryan (eds), Yerevan: Caucasus

Institute and Aleksanteri Institute, 2013, pp. , 6-17.

<sup>32</sup> F. Vielmini, “Armenia’s shift towards the Eurasian Economic Union: a Rejoinder of Realpolitik”, *ISPI Commentary*, 22 October 2013,

[http://ispionline.it/sites/default/files/publicazioni/commentary\\_vielmini\\_25.10.2013.pdf](http://ispionline.it/sites/default/files/publicazioni/commentary_vielmini_25.10.2013.pdf)

<sup>33</sup> Integratsionnyy barometr EABR–2017, 06.12.2017; <https://eabr.org/analytics/integration-research/cii-reports/integratsionnyy-barometr-eabr-2017/>

<sup>34</sup> S. Minasyan, *New Opportunities in Armenian-EU Relations*, PONARS Eurasia Policy Memo, No. 476, May 2017; [http://ponarseurasia.org/sites/default/files/policy-memos-pdf/Peppm476\\_Minasyan\\_May2017.pdf](http://ponarseurasia.org/sites/default/files/policy-memos-pdf/Peppm476_Minasyan_May2017.pdf)

Washington's will to exploit existing tensions to drive a wedge between Armenia and Russia, notably breaking Russian monopoly on weapons sales to the Armenian Army.<sup>35</sup>

### 3.3 Azerbaijan: a Model of Balanced Relation?

After having been tense in the first post-Soviet decade, Russia-Azerbaijani relations presents nowadays a good pattern for Moscow. Indeed, even if Baku continues to act as a crucial partner (as the main energy provider) for the Western project of Transcaucasian infrastructure corridor (notably by way of the much-disputed Baku-Tbilisi-Ceyhan oil pipeline inaugurated in 2005), it maintains cordial relations with Moscow, in the best incarnation of the 'balanced foreign policy' doctrine already set under president Heydar Aliyev.<sup>36</sup> Avoiding alignment with either of European or Eurasian competing regional blocs, the Baku regime has traded off Russian support with commitment to keep NATO at distance.<sup>37</sup> After having considered a pro-Atlantic perspective to find support for its position in Karabakh, Azerbaijan draw proper conclusions from the August 2008 war, i.e. the USA incapability to exert hard power in the region. Accordingly, Baku opted for a position of neutrality in international security (stressed by joining the Non-Aligned Movement in May 2011) with great benefit for the Russia-Azerbaijan relations which, from the delimitation of state borders in 2011 to the development of military-technical cooperation making of Russia the main arms supplier for Azerbaijan, didn't stop to improve.

In facts, Moscow preference for bilateral agreements in regional relations the potential of cooperation between Russia and Azerbaijan is vast. It includes the management of the Caspian Sea, where they have similar positions for the reconfiguration of the relations in this sub-regional system, notably on the problem of the division of the sea, on which the two countries converged on a position of partition of the basin in national sectors. Despite the massive presence of Western companies, the two also cooperate in the energy sector, where Russian oil giant LUKOIL has considerable interests in the vast Azerbaijani reserves.

It is true that Moscow disposes of some strong leverage to influence Baku position. The main one is the number of Azerbaijanis working in Russia, up to two million, sending \$2.5 billion remittances back home, peer to 10% of national GDP,<sup>38</sup> a situation where a Russia imposition of a visa regime would be very hard to manage for Baku. In addition there are the described cross-border bio-political elements, with the presence of divided minorities, mainly the Lezgin one, which could be activated to foment unrest. On the other hand, Baku and Moscow both nurture fear (real or displayed for political purposes) for the **presence of Islamist networks** on their national territories and make of their curtailment another base for cooperation.

Developments in Eurasia following the Ukrainian crisis put Azerbaijan further closer to Russia, both being distrustful of US and EU democratisation policies for the region. Baku

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<sup>35</sup> "The U.S. Zeroes in on Russia's Borderland", Stratfor, 15 Nov 2018;

[https://worldview.stratfor.com/article/us-zeroes-russias-](https://worldview.stratfor.com/article/us-zeroes-russias-borderlands?fbclid=IwAR0rN9eRwqY3Ux6BBdzasctKUNv9Npw_dMCKBoCV27Wp_MxXErcZzNtcRyQ)

[borderlands?fbclid=IwAR0rN9eRwqY3Ux6BBdzasctKUNv9Npw\\_dMCKBoCV27Wp\\_MxXErcZzNtcRyQ](https://worldview.stratfor.com/article/us-zeroes-russias-borderlands?fbclid=IwAR0rN9eRwqY3Ux6BBdzasctKUNv9Npw_dMCKBoCV27Wp_MxXErcZzNtcRyQ)  
<sup>36</sup> A. Garibov, "Alignment and Alliance Policies in the South Caucasus Regional Security Complex", SAM - Center for Strategic Studies, Baku, *Comments*, Vol. XV, December 2015.

<sup>37</sup> Author's interview with Azerbaijani military expert, Tbilisi, December 2013.

<sup>38</sup> V. Tishkov et al., "Migration in the Countries of the Former Soviet Union: A Paper Prepared for the Policy Analysis and Research Programme of the Global Commission on International Migration," Global Commission on International Migration (GCIM), September 2005; <http://gcim.org/attachements/RS3.pdf>.

is also growing unsatisfied by the stalemate of the action of the OSCE Minsk group related to Karabakh, what it is perceived as a lack of support and double standards from the side of the Europeans. Therefore, Azerbaijan has explored an **alternative geopolitical orientations** intensifying contacts along the **Moscow-Teheran axis**, offering Azerbaijani territory as the indispensable overland connective element of the entente,<sup>39</sup> Baku and Tehran reviving the railway Qazvin-Rasht-Astara as a part of the North-South transport corridor.

Of course, all these positive moments for the Russian-Azeri relationship should be balanced against the structural datum that sees Baku refusing to join the EAUE (**despite occasional** demonstrative flirting over that possibility) to continue playing the role of main pivot for the whole Western-supported *cordon sanitaire*, first of all allowing **Georgia to pursue its line of resistance to the Russian policy for the region.**

### **3.4 The Karabakh Conflict as a Tool to Reinforce Russia's Presence in the Region.**

For Moscow, the management of the Karabakh conflict represents a complex device, apt at influencing strategic developments not only in the South Caucasus but also in the dynamic of relations of the regional countries with external players.

Indeed, the involvement serves different aims of Russian Caucasian policy. First, the pending threat is the main factor allowing to keep Armenia in check and to justify the important military presence there. At the same time, Moscow managed to use the conflict's risks to also build up relations with Azerbaijan, notably by way of supplying advanced weaponry (notably with the mega-deal concluded in summer 2013, worth 4 billion over 4 years).

By this parallel engagement, the Russian involvement is main factor preventing the complete escalation as it create a regional balance keeping Armenia within its institutional framework while influencing what remains for its capacities the main partner in the region. This was clearly seen during the escalation of spring 2016 (when Azerbaijan launched a major offensive to seize territory resulting in at least 30 soldiers killed and the destruction of heavy equipment), when only bold diplomatic moves from the RF Ministry of Foreign Affairs managed to stop the sides. Thus, the maintenance of Russian troops on the field can be presented as a factor to ensure peace in the whole of the Caucasus.<sup>40</sup>

Through commitment in Karabakh Moscow also raises its diplomatic status beyond the region as one of the co-chairs (with France and the USA) of the Minsk Group of the OSCE for NK conflict mediation. Here, it is remarkable to witness a European-American-Russian cooperation. Karabakh serves indeed as a litmus test of the limits of the Western engagement in the Caucasus. In front of the huge difficulties to make a resolution advance, given the lack of interest from most of its Member States, the EU has limited its involvement to formal support of the Minsk Group's (by themselves narrow) activities,

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<sup>39</sup> A.Mercouris, "Here's what happened in Baku between Russia, Iran, and Azerbaijan", 9 August 2016; <http://theduran.com/summit-baku-russia-iran-azerbaijan-new-axis/>

<sup>40</sup> See for instance a speech by Dmitry Medvedev in his capacity of RF President depicting the Gyumri military base as key for regional peace and the cooperation between Armenia and Azerbaijan: "Prezident Rossii, 'Sovmestnaya press-konferentsiya po itogam rossiysko-armyanskih peregovorov'", 20 August 2010, <http://kremlin.ru/transcripts/8695>.

basically getting comfortable with the maintenance of the status quo, what highlights critical issues where only Russia is able to deliver.

Apparently, so far the management of the Karabakh conflict has put Moscow in a win-win position, the status-quo in NK keeping Armenia and Azerbaijan off-balance with one another, solicitous for Russian influence, thus serving Moscow's plan to make of Transcaucasia a buffer zone. However, this cannot last forever as the situation on the terrain is set to degenerate sooner or later. The possibility of hostilities in Karabakh has been a central factor in shaping and maintaining on power the current elites of Azerbaijan and Armenia, both exploiting bellicose rhetoric to manipulate the domestic audiences in support of the ruling regime. This creates a vicious circle of provocations and armed incidents which attempts at mediation are increasingly uneasy to manage. If Moscow and Armenia are satisfied with the perpetuation of the *status quo*, this is not acceptable on the long run to Azerbaijan which should act to restore a territorial integrity elevated at the highest value. Hence Russia's policy of striking a balance between the two sides cannot yield results for ever and rapprochement with Azerbaijan may also serve as a stimulus to an aggressive posture. In Armenia also, Russian game is feeding public disappointment for the relations with the politics of the RF towards the country, what was especially alive after the outbreak of armed hostilities with Azerbaijan in spring 2016, given a perceived lack of support and the importance of Russian military transfers to Baku.

In the event, the risk of a serious escalation is always real. Then the crucial dilemma for Moscow will be what to do with the security guarantee of the CSTO, which implies providing military assistance to Armenia. A possible solution, already advanced by Russia, would be to deploy troops under CSTO umbrella but Azerbaijan is against this.

The overall Russian approach appears even more fragile since the eruption of the conflicts in the Middle East with their possible long-term impact on the Caucasus, whose geopolitics are traditionally interwoven with that theatre.<sup>41</sup>

### **3.5 Moscow and the *De Facto* Republics of Abkhazia and South Ossetia**

Since the breakup of the Soviet Union, Russia was also involved in the management of the two separatist conflicts over the former autonomies of Georgia, South Ossetia (SO) and Abkhazia. Dictated initially by the spill-over effects of the two conflicts on the Russian territory (as described above), Moscow's involvement progressively became a manipulation of the situation on the terrain, aimed at disturbing the US aggressive posture in the region, which used Georgia as its main platform.<sup>42</sup>

In the event of the 2008 War, on the basis of the Kosovo precedent, Moscow claimed that the Georgian attempt to conquer SO produced "new realities", enough to justify the recognition of the independence of the two separatist regions, thus positioning itself as a source of international rules. As such, the move was to a large extent an act of displayed geopolitics, part of Russia's struggle to redefine its global influence as a "great power" in the framework of the larger confrontation with the US led "West".<sup>43</sup>

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<sup>41</sup> J. Neil, "Middle East conflict risks overspill into the Caucasus", 04 March 2016; <https://sipri.org/commentary/blog/2016/middle-east-conflict-risks-overspill-caucasus>

<sup>42</sup> P. Gahrton, *Georgia : Pawn in the New Great Game*, Pluto Press, London, 2010.

<sup>43</sup> G. Toal, *op. cit.*

However, **this new posture has proven costly for Moscow,**

First of all, in material terms. Also for effect of the Georgian boycott, the two partially recognised states are dramatically lacking resources and Moscow has to assist **financially their budgets - at the extent of 70 per cent for Abkhazia** (for example for 2015 budget over \$179.3 million) and 90 per cent to SO (\$85,31 million).

Secondly, the recognition broke the principle of internal non-interference and inviolability of the Soviet-inherited borders. Especially when this act has been reiterated with the Crimea annexation six years later, the impact of the recognition on Russia's **soft power possibilities** with the other post-Soviet states has been **considerable, playing against** the aim to structure an exclusive regional system in its immediate environment, one of the key prerequisites for every sovereign actor aspiring at great power status.<sup>44</sup>

On a larger plan, no Eurasian ally of Moscow (apart from Syria, recently) followed in the steps of the recognition, what also had a negative impact on **Russian standing as a regional power highlighting** contradictions in the relations with major allies as China and Iran, both resolutely against any sort of separatism. In the event, Russian foreign policy concerning secessionist conflicts produced an incoherent and unpredictable position of the Kremlin in international affairs.<sup>45</sup>

On the positive side, with the new military bases established in the two republics (in combined military groups with both Abkhazia and SO indigenous forces), Russia acquired two important strategic platforms offsetting its seclusion north of the main Caucasian ridge, from where it can extend its control on the Black sea while keeping in check Georgian US supported defences. By this way, Moscow also received additional leverages that may use to influence Tbilisi in the perspective to have it entering the EAEU framework. The presence of the Army in SO also meant the securitisation of a province, which for years served as a dangerous flashpoint adjacent to Russia's most vulnerable border of the North Caucasian.

Moreover, Tskhinval(i) started to provide useful services to Moscow policy in the breakaway territories of Lugansk and Donetsk in eastern Ukraine. SO became the only entity that recognized both regions with whom it concluded agreements on cooperation in the banking sectors. Thanks to this, given that SO is recognized in its turn by Russia, the republic is now acting as a financial offshore zone for transaction between Russia and the Ukrainian regions, what allows RF economic actors to circumvent Western sanctions.<sup>46</sup> SO company are also formally in charge of managing industrial assets in Lugansk as smokescreen for interests based in the RF.<sup>47</sup> In addition, although small, SO provided the

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<sup>44</sup> See on this the reflection of B. Buzan, *The United States and the Great Powers: World Politics in the Twenty-First Century*, 2004; (tr. it.), *Il gioco delle potenze*, EGEA Bocconi Editore, Milan, 2006, p. 167

<sup>45</sup> B. Harzl, "Russia's Approach to Abkhazia and South Ossetia: Problematic Legal and Normative Rationales for Citizenship and Bilateral Treaties", *Russian Analytical Digest*, No. 208 (Post-Soviet De Facto States), 10 October 2017, pp. 8-10.

<sup>46</sup> M. Gukemukhov, "Za chem Yuzhnoy Osetii dogovor s DNR?", 11.05.2017, <https://ekhokavkaza.com/a/28481010.html>

<sup>47</sup> "Kto upravlyayet zavodami na territorii samoprovozglashennoy NDP i LNR", *Kommersant*, 05.06.2017, <https://kommersant.ru/doc/3283539>; "Zakhvachennymi na donbasse zavodami upravlyayut iz yuzhnoy osetii", 10.05.2017, <http://biz.liga.net/ekonomika/all/novosti/3661802-zakhvachennymi-na-donbasse-zavodami-upravlyayut-iz-yuzhnoy-osetii.htm>

separatists with volunteer fighters to support the front against Kiev's Army. By this way, SO became an important cog for Moscow's reach into the Black Sea region.<sup>48</sup> Under the pushing personality of president A. Bibilov, following the recent recognition by Damascus, SO is now exploring possibilities to assist Russian action in Syria as well.

#### ***4. Chechnya and the North Caucasus: internal Challenges and possible Assets of Foreign Policy***

Compared with the first two post-Soviet decades, the situation of the half of the Caucasian region part of the RF became recently more stable, as testified by the sheer reduction in the number of acts of violence and terror attacks. Nevertheless, the region is still and will continue to represent a major problem to the Russian state. As a large non-ethnic Russian area (the second after the Volga- Urals), it constitutes an internal cultural challenge, growing larger as the locals are in a process of re-traditionalization and, for the majority, Islamization, while the ethnic Russian population, which had been a consolidating factor for the region, keeps on emigrating. At the turn of the century, the **Islamist factor**, a new-old challenge for Russian rule in the region has been growing stronger, brought in with the extended web of relations with the Sunni countries of the Middle East developed after the Soviet collapse. By effect of this process, ethnic nationalism gave way to aggressive Islamist propaganda based on ideas of social justice and supra-national values and slogans. Thus Islamism emerged as a threat to the legitimacy of the Russian government in North Caucasus, depicted as a power foreign to the region, and a factor of tensions with the still large Slavic and other Orthodox leaning sector of the local population. The concomitant **de-modernization of these processes** made of the North Caucasus an “internal abroad” of Russia and has an inertia such to drift it further away.<sup>49</sup> The “internal abroad” definition also illustrates nowadays ethnic separation between the communities, perceivable in the administrative division cutting the region, sometimes more similar to international borders than internal boundaries. This state of affairs is pretty much visible around North Ossetia, due in particular to the consequences of the ethnic conflict which opposed Ossetians to Ingush during the brief but harsh clashes of November 1992, still unresolved to our days.<sup>50</sup> Recently, the problem came again to the fore with protests in Ingushetia following an agreement for border re-definition with Chechnya.

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<sup>48</sup> The overall financial turnover between eastern Ukraine and Russia through South Ossetia is growing and in the first half of 2018 is assessed at about \$150 million. See: A. Troianovski, “To avoid sanctions, Kremlin goes off the grid”, *The Washington Post*, 21 November 2018. [https://washingtonpost.com/gdpr-consent/?destination=%2fnews%2fworld%2fwp%2f2018%2f11%2f21%2ffeature%2fhov-russia-avoids-sanctions-and-supports-rebels-in-eastern-ukraine-using-a-financial-system%2f%3f&utm\\_term=.26a67435e3f1](https://washingtonpost.com/gdpr-consent/?destination=%2fnews%2fworld%2fwp%2f2018%2f11%2f21%2ffeature%2fhov-russia-avoids-sanctions-and-supports-rebels-in-eastern-ukraine-using-a-financial-system%2f%3f&utm_term=.26a67435e3f1)

[http://messenger-inquirer.com/features/perspective/russia-avoids-sanctions-supports-rebels-in-eastern-ukraine-using-a/article\\_ce64af4e-edc4-11e8-8281-c7b10141fd5b.html](http://messenger-inquirer.com/features/perspective/russia-avoids-sanctions-supports-rebels-in-eastern-ukraine-using-a/article_ce64af4e-edc4-11e8-8281-c7b10141fd5b.html)

<sup>49</sup> U. Halbach, “Russia's Internal Abroad: The North Caucasus as an Emergency Zone at the Edge of Europe”, Berlin, SWP Research Paper 2010/RP 05, November 2010, p.34.

<sup>50</sup> In 1944 Stalin deported the Ingush and Chechens and dissolved the Checheno-Ingush Autonomous Republic. Ingush lands were transferred to North Ossetia until 1957 when Khrushchev rehabilitated the deported peoples and restored their autonomy leaving however the Prigorodny Region inside North Ossetia. With the Soviet demise, Ingush claimed back the region in an escalation which, exacerbated by the flow of Ossetian refugees from Georgia, led to harsh fights in October 1992. See A. A., Tsutsiev, *Osetinsko-Ingushsky konflikt (1992–...): Ego predystoriya i faktory razvitiya: Istitoriko-sotsiologicheskiy ocherk*, Moscow, Rosspen, 1998, p. 100; J. O'Loughlin, G. Ó Tuathail, V. Kolossov, “The Localized Geopolitics of Displacement and Return in Eastern Prigorodnyy Rayon, North Ossetia”, *Eurasian Geography and Economics*, No. 6, (49), 2008, pp. 635–669; Tishkov Valery, *Ethnicity, Nationalism and Conflict in and After the Soviet Union: The Mind Aflame*, London, SAGE Publications, 1997, pp. 334.



Needless to say after two bloody wars for its control, the situation with Chechnya is highly emblematic of all the problems that compose the Caucasian question for Russia. First of all, tragic developments around the republic stress how the possibility of violence has been the main element defining the region in the perception of the Russian public. This created a diffused demand for order which became the thrust for the establishment of the Putin's system during the 2000s. After the removal of the Chechen separatist groups, Moscow struck a major bargain with the Chechen Kadyrov clan, which performed reverse of positions turning from adversary into key asset for the stability of the region. This process of restoration of Moscow authority over Chechnya has been far from linear, with constant risks to degenerate into violence again. Notably severe relapses took place in the 2004-05 and then the 2009-11 years, when suicide terrorism spiked out from the region. In those occasions, the crisis had been used to justify centralising and other anti-liberal policy measures, diverting in facts Russian political trajectory from the announced democratic path. This again connected the Caucasian dimension to international relations of Russia as it introduced additional elements of strife in the relations with Western actors.<sup>51</sup>

Nowadays, even if the potential for violence still remains looming, it can be said that Putin successfully managed to internalise the conflict by transforming the Russian-Chechen war into a Chechen-Chechen one, to the point that the Russian public stopped to consider the conflict as an internal one.<sup>52</sup> To accomplish this task Kadyrov has formed an Army strong of 20,000-30,000 members, in their majority Special Forces.

From these bases, the new Chechnya proved able to provide **valuable assets** serving the interests of Russian foreign policy. Today, Chechen forces are among the elite of the RF Army. They first proved themselves during the August 2008 war in Georgia, with several battalions deployed, and have been a key resource in the Russian victory in Syria. Chechen "volunteers" have also been sent in support of Eastern Ukrainian separatists. In addition, Chechen military prowess is at the service of the State by way of preparedness centres as the Terek Special Police Forces Training Centre and, especially, the International Special Forces Training Centre (ISFTC) in Gudermes, a 400-hectare complex facility (for hostage rescue, urban warfare and anti-insurgency warfare),<sup>53</sup> which became a Russian centre of excellence allowing for establishing international cooperation with other countries SF in concurrence with US and NATO analogous structures.<sup>54</sup>

At the diplomatic level, the new Chechnya became Russian "Islamic showcase", helping to recompose Russian relations with a number of Sunni Arab states of the Middle East and North Africa.<sup>55</sup> There, acting as an interlocutor on behalf of Moscow, Kadyrov performed state visits which attracted Gulf investments to the Chechen capital, Grozny.<sup>56</sup> With its Russian Islamic University, the city became a centre of international Sunni discussions, to a large extent devoted to discredit Salafi Islam, where Chechen

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<sup>51</sup> C. King, R. Menon, "Prisoners of the Caucasus - Russia's Invisible Civil War", *Foreign Affairs*, July / August 2010, Vol. 89 Issue 4, p.20-34: <https://foreignaffairs.com/articles/russia-fsu/2010-07-01/prisoners-caucasus>

<sup>52</sup> A. Malashenko, "What the North Caucasus Means to Russia", Russia/NIS Center, *Russie.Nei.Visions*, No. 61, IFRI, July 2011, pp. 21;

<https://ifri.org/sites/default/files/atoms/files/ifricaucasianimpactmalashenkoengmai2011.pdf>

<sup>53</sup> E. Jones, "Kadyrov Expands Role of Chechen Special Forces", *NEWSREP*, March 30, 2015

<https://thenewsrep.com/40576/kadyrov-expands-role-chechen-special-forces/>

<sup>54</sup> I. Sidorkov, Training for Chinese special forces in Chechnya Dec 19 2016,

[https://rbth.com/economics/defence/2016/12/19/training-for-chinese-special-forces-in-chechnya\\_662113](https://rbth.com/economics/defence/2016/12/19/training-for-chinese-special-forces-in-chechnya_662113)

<sup>55</sup> S. Markedonov, "Severnyy Kavkaz: «akhillesova pyata» ili politicheskii resurs?", *Rossiya v global'noy politike*, №4, 2017; <https://globalaffairs.ru/number/Severnyi-Kavkaz-akhillesova-pyata-ili-politicheskii-resurs-18934>

<sup>56</sup> P. Luzin, "Ramzan Kadyrov: Russia's Top Diplomat", *Intersection: Russia/Europe/World*, 11 April 2017 <http://intersectionproject.eu/article/security/ramzan-kadyrov-russias-top-diplomat>

figures represent Russia's 20 million Muslim community.<sup>57</sup> By this way, the Chechen action has not only defused the negative image of Russia within the Muslim world but also promoted a **peculiar brand of Islam apt to foster** Russian Muslims attachment to the State. Overall, "Kadyrovism" emerged as a specific pan-Russian **patriotic ideology which overshadowed the anti-colonial Chechen narrative** of the first post-Soviet years.<sup>58</sup>

In the end, if the Chechen and other *ad hoc* arrangements with local rulers stabilised the region putting the Russian state again in control of its territories, the limits of the current solution are evident.

First of all, this kind of "normalisation" came to a high price. The "Chechen miracle", the transformation of Grozny and other cities from the rubble of the war into modern centres enjoying full fledged services, costed around \$30 billion of federal subsidies between 2000 and 2010 (\$1.000 per person, six times more than the Russian average).<sup>59</sup> Also the rest of North Caucasus republics is to be largely subsidized (60 to 80 percent of the feral subjects' budgets depends on Moscow).

Then, stability is strictly connected with the figure of Ramzan Kadyrov whose positions stands on a very personal relationship with Vladimir Putin, raising issues of what will happen when one of the two will step out.<sup>60</sup> The Kadyrov-Putin axis reconfirmed the long trend seeing Moscow's management of the relations with the Caucasian periphery by way of establishing privileged alliances with players "on the ground" a role that for centuries had been played by the Ossetian element. In this traditional arrangement, local ethnic-legitimated bosses act as power-brokers with their communities. However, as the personalised power of Kadyrov shows, the brokers often use the federal economic sinecures they receives to pursue local priorities. Arrangements with Ingushetia and Dagestan also present spaces of exception of the national laws, where local overlords have free hand to implement order. Within these ethnic defined spaces, iron hand methods create a climate of fear that can also feed new resentment against Moscow. On the other hand, there are also concerns, in the region as well as in Moscow, that the strong armed Chechen power may get again out of control.

By this way, another long-term dysfunction in the federal approach, the disproportionate weight of security forces and intelligence agencies, is set to persist. Despite this securitisation, Russian rule continues to struggle in front of organised crime, defined in ethnic and clan basis, in a vicious circle feeding corruption, hence unemployment, poverty and with that the reproduction of the social environment for Islamism.<sup>61</sup> Such issues are also strong arguments for the internal opponents of the Putin system, in particular the nationalist groups.

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<sup>57</sup> N. Hauer, "Putin Has a New Secret Weapon in Syria: Chechens", *Foreign Policy*, 04.05.2017.

<http://foreignpolicy.com/2017/05/04/putin-has-a-new-secret-weapon-in-syria-chechens/>

<sup>58</sup> M. Laruelle, *Kadyrovism: Hardline Islam as a Tool of the Kremlin?* Russia/NIS Center, Russie.Nei.Visions, No. 99, IFRI, March 2017.

<sup>59</sup> Ivi.

<sup>60</sup> Apart from excessive personalisation in Moscow policies for the region, the Nemtsov killing suggested that Kadyrov's "liberties" may have possible destabilising backlashes at the core of the Russian political system. A view from the opposition to Putin in I. Yashin, "'A Threat to National Security", *An Independent Expert Report*", Moscow, February, 2016; Available at: [www.putin-itogi.ru](http://www.putin-itogi.ru)

<sup>61</sup> A. Mateeva, "The North Caucasus: Russia's Fragile Borderland", *Chatham House Paper*, London, RIIA, 1999, pp. 97.

Given this, to address the root problems challenging its grip on the internal Caucasian periphery, the Russian State should work at overcoming the entrenchment of the **ethnic principle** in the administrative set-up of the region. To this end, the RF would need a reform of its constitutional order, introducing alternative basis, more tuned at effective integration than hard control and loyalty as it is now.<sup>62</sup> However, the number of the federal subjects together with the way local elites have consolidated in the given structures makes an extremely difficult task to touch at the given institutional arrangement.

## 5. *Conclusions and Scenarios for the Future*

Despite the enormous trials it had to overcome as an effect of the badly managed Soviet collapse first, the following years of neglect next and the Western encroachment finally, Russia managed in the last ten years to reconsolidate its positions in the Caucasus, such to stabilise the region and to use it as a platform for further projections of its power to the Middle East. Russian strategy in the “southern tier” of the former Soviet Union ceased to be one of imperial control to aim at re-establishing some sort of hegemony.<sup>63</sup> Leveraging military and energy assets Moscow has reached a position of relative primacy in regional affairs but this will continue to face serious challenges in the years to come and lacking proper moves, the new elements introduced in the regional equation may even prove additional elements of weakness and destabilisation.

**With regards to the internal regions, a sustainable** stabilisation of the Caucasus requires a revision of the power structures legacy of the Soviet order such to enlarge the scope of local actors able to contribute to the needed socio-political development. The key here is to stop approaching local communities only as suspicious appendages to be insulated by delegating power to local proxies, which are always at risk to become distant from their own peoples, and keeping security structures on the lead. For sure, without a clear and innovative strategy, underpinned by a sound normative component defining what does it mean being part of Russia, security and financial investments are not a guarantee of stable loyalty of the federal subjects. To this regard, Chechnya will remain a crucial political laboratory of the possibilities of the Russian system of opening and normalise, notably in relation to another major challenge to the state, larger than the Caucasian dimension, i.e. the integration of the growing national Islamic community (expected to make up at least a third of Russia’s population by the mid-century).

On the southern side of the Caucasus, **if it wants to retain its influence**, Russia should prove able to revise all the tools is using in relations with **the three republics. First, in relation to the separatist conflicts**, Russia cannot continue ceaselessly to bet on the prolongation of the *status quo*. A consensual regulation able to satisfy the other regional actors is necessary to finally overcome destructive processes which, being at play since the Soviet disintegration, remain sources of additional fragmentation and instability.<sup>64</sup> It is necessary a plan for the future of the secessionist regions beyond using them to disturb Western encroachment in the region. This will depend on the relevance that will retain the possibility of NATO expansion into the region, what underlines again the importance of Russian-Georgian relations for regional stability. A pragmatic approach to the existing

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<sup>62</sup> S. Markedonov, *Turbulentnaya Yevraziya*, cit..

<sup>63</sup> R. G. Suny, “The pawn of great powers: The East–West competition for Caucasia”, *Journal of Eurasian Studies*, vol. 1, n. 1, 2010, p- 10–25.

<sup>64</sup> K. S. Gadzhiev, *Geopolitika Kavkaza*, Moscow, Mezhdunarodnye otnosheniia, 2001.

challenges can create basis for normalisation.<sup>65</sup> Russia should shake the conservatism of its approach, for instance reciprocating on the visa free regime applied by Tbilisi, what would be a game changer in bilateral relations, strengthening Georgian political forces advocating for neutrality. The same can be said suggesting a better Russian management of migratory flows from the whole Caucasian area.

The Russian approach should also be innovative in proposing a strategy to tackle problems connected to Islamic extremism and other transborder security threats. Such a strategy may provide a platform for cooperation not only between former Soviet states but also on the larger regional setting, with Turkey and Iran. As it has already built an alliance of convenience in Syria, Moscow should find a formula to compose with these countries a mutually compatible regional security system from the Black Sea to the Caspian.

The trap to be avoided remains to “securitise” regional issues every time the problems that they pose have difficult solutions. The insistence on “stability” at all cost undermines the perspectives of Russian influence in the region as it prevents the Kremlin’s leadership to start sound projects of modernization.<sup>66</sup> Indeed, in a region traversed by manifold fractures (both among neighbours and internal ethnic communities), there are still many constituencies looking at Russia as a needed external balancer. Many are ready to accept Moscow as a patron power, one able, if needed, to intervene militarily, a role which, so far, it has been the only player willing to fulfil. However, local demand for Russian integrationist projects remains offset by the fact that the mainstreams of South Caucasian societies, especially the younger generations, no longer perceive Russia as the source of modernity it has been in the previous two centuries.<sup>67</sup> Hardly Russia will reverse similar trends if bloc competition with Western actors will continue. The regional web of relations is becoming even more complex with the growth of Chinese presence. This should suggest Russian regional politics exploring alternative ways for a *modus vivendi* with Western interests, also giving the connexions with another fragile and more complex regional environment as Central Asia. For instance, it would be a matter of making of a country like Armenia, member of the EAEU but with structured links with the EU, a forum of dialogue between the two.

Also, given the economic opportunities brought by the entrance of other actors, the further development of regional trade schemes and transport infrastructure stands as a positive opportunity for future re-composition of the current geopolitical fractures.

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<sup>65</sup> D. Trenin, “The Southern Vector: Russia’s Need to Upgrade Its Policy in the South Caucasus”, *Carnegie Moscow Center*, 10.04.2018; <https://carnegie.ru/commentary/76025>

<sup>66</sup> M. Laruelle, “When the “near Abroad” looks at Russia: the Eurasian Union Project as seen from the southern Republics”, *Russian Analytical Digest*, n. 112, 20.04.2012, pp. 8-11.

<sup>67</sup> J. Nixey, “The Long Goodbye: Waning Russian Influence in the South Caucasus and Central Asia”, Chatman House, Russia and Eurasia Programme, June 2012, pp. 16; <http://chathamhouse.org/publications/papers/view/184065>



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