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Russia's strategic interest in post-Soviet Countries

Emilia ALAVERDOV¹ & Liza AMILAKHVARI²

Abstract

After the dissolution of the Soviet Union, the influence of the Russian Federation on part of the post-Soviet countries gradually weakened, but the Russian political elite still does not want to realize the fact that the republics of the former USSR are no longer subordinate to Moscow (Alaverdov, 2020). The sphere of its strategic interests, Russia extends especially to the South Caucasus to the South Caucasus - the Black Sea-Caspian region, which has become the major attractive area of global and regional superpower rivalry in the post-Cold War era. This was significantly facilitated by the region's geopolitical location and solid energy resources (Tibold & Cillessen, 2006). Soon after the Soviet Union collapsed six documents have been adopted by the highest authorities of Russia, in which the basic principles, priority directions, goals, and objectives of the country's foreign policy have been formulated. Despite the periodic softening of the rhetoric, all documents have one invariable characteristic: all of them are focused on the importance of Russia in a new world order formation, the weakening of the position of the West, and the emergence of new dominant political and economic players in the international arena. In this case, we have to highlight that as a new state, Russia immediately showed disrespect for the territorial integrity of states and their territorial integrity. Moreover, it has tried and is still doing its best to change the security of European and Euro-Atlantic architecture and restore the principle of "spheres of influence" in its small and big neighboring states. All these have a negative impact not only on the security of the Russian Federation and its neighboring states but on European as well.

Keywords: Conflicts, South Caucasus, Euro-Atlantic integration, Russia, Security, Foreign policy

¹ Prof. Dr.; Georgian Technical University Department of Politics and International Relations, Tbilisi, Georgia
E-mail: Emily-78@mail.ru ORCID: 0000-0003-3282-172X

² Assoc. Prof. Dr.; Georgian Technical University Department of Politics and International Relations, Tbilisi, Georgia

E-mail: liza.a.1911@gmail.com

ORCID: 0000-0003-3076-7213

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INTRODUCTION

Since gaining independence post-soviet countries have undergone a very difficult way (Alaverdov, 2019). Here is worth highlighting that the most of South Caucasus countries are small and recently formed, and their domestic policies are still under development. As for foreign policy here, we can say that all the countries' foreign policy directions are still unclear with their see-saw policy which requires a very prudent balanced, and cautious approach. After gaining independence, mastering and implementing their strategic function became one of the important foreign policy goals for these young states, but at the same time, Russian political goals also developed, which came into sharp conflict with the interests of the states of the South Caucasus region.

In terms of geography, the South Caucasus is the connection between Europe and Asia. Moreover, it is a space where Slavic, Turkish, Persian, and Caucasian cultures, as well as Muslim and Christian civilizations, are gathered together (Henze, 1993), which turns the South Caucasus into an important crossroads for various large-scale projects, the implementation of which requires the cooperation of both regional and non-regional actors (Litvishko, Novoselovab, Kalabekova, 2022).

South Caucasus countries are given different positions by a very complicated political dimension. Here we have to say that all three South Caucasus countries do not respond to the challenge of European integration in the same way (Alaverdov, 2020). As for the situation in the region, we can say that it leaves much to be desired since is it seized by conflicts between Azerbaijan and Armenia; has a frozen conflict between Georgia and Abkhazia, and Georgia and "South Ossetia"; arbitrary occupation of the territories of Georgia; has lack of power balance and instability; and faces economic hardships and poverty.

After the collapse of the Soviet Union and gaining independence, first joining the UN, and then declaring its desire to integrate into the European Union and NATO, Georgia announced to the civilized world that it wants to be an independent, free, and sovereign state, a full member of the Euro-Atlantic space.

Russia, which has not yet come to terms with the loss of geopolitical importance and hegemony caused by the collapse of the Soviet Union, did not consider small countries equal to itself and did not find common ground with them causing the unsecured situation in the whole region which reflected negatively on its security.

Research Methodology

The paper is based on systematic and complex approaches, it uses certain research methods proven in the social sciences, such as:

- **Content analysis** - is one of the most common methods. It is used to obtain and analyze documented information in the form of texts, media, etc. It enables us to gain significant information about the processes happening in society and observe social life analyzing its certain aspects, to point out the inherent in a particular social group's values, customs, and norms in a certain historical period;
- **Observational method** - is a research technique where you observe phenomena in most natural settings. This enables them to see the subjects, make choices and react to situations in their natural setting;
- **Comparative method** - a certain method that compares two or more objects, such as ideas, phenomena, research results, etc.), underlines the differences and common to categorize and sort them (Alaverdov, 2022).

DISCUSSION

After the collapse of the Soviet Union, the influence of the Russian Federation on part of the post-Soviet countries gradually weakened, and several important countries of Russia's "close neighborhood", including Georgia, announced their aspirations to join the European Union and the NATO, thereby irritating the Kremlin. The EU and NATO foreign policy, which is aimed at strengthening democracy in the post-Soviet states and creating a "ring of friends" (Prodi, 2002) around Europe, is perceived by the Kremlin as a threat to its geopolitical interests in the region.

Since gaining independence post-soviet countries have undergone a very difficult way (Alaverdov, 2019). Here is worth highlighting that the most of South Caucasus countries are small and recently formed, and their domestic and foreign policies are still under development with the unclear and see-saw policy. Thus, having considered all these, it is especially important to ensure equal and integral security in the region (Pashayeva, 2015). After gaining independence, mastering and implementing their strategic function became one of the important foreign policy goals for these young states, but at the same time, Russian political goals also developed, which came into sharp conflict with the interests of the states of the South Caucasus region. Both in the speeches of Russian politicians and the political doctrines of this country, the significance of the South Caucasus region for Russia is constantly emphasized (Chkopoia, 2022).

In the formation of Russia's policy toward Georgia, the regional context plays the most important role (Tsereteli, 2021). Because the North Caucasus is a certain and solid breeding ground of instability, Moscow understands the growth of its impact in the region as a guarantor of steadiness in the North Caucasus (Alaverdov & Demircioglu, 2022).

The role of Russia is extremely negative in the modern development of Georgia. This manifested in the actual annexation of almost twenty percent of the territory of Georgia, in the constant attempt to change the foreign policy choices of the country, in rude interference in domestic political processes, and in the open use of different methods of influence, including aggression. Russia has been playing such a role since the 1990s, after the collapse of the Soviet Union, and the change of government in Moscow reflected only the intensity of the role, not the content.

If we will look back just at the last 20 years and do not go further, we will see that Russia, either to satisfy its interests or to punish its “disobedient neighbor”, had repeatedly used “Hard Power” against Georgia.

In addition to the "traditional methods" of expressing aggression, Russia often uses methods with a real purpose that is disguised by various declared, as they call them, "legitimate"

reasons. For example, the economic embargo imposed on Georgia (full or partial) and the mass deportation of Georgian citizens from Russia can be cited.

In 2008, Russia carried out military intervention and after the cease-fire as a result of the efforts of international partners, recognized the independence of Abkhazia and the Tskhinvali region, thereby bringing one step closer to the ultimate goal of uniting these regions within the framework of the Russian territory.

Along with the deepening of Georgia's Euro-Atlantic integration, Russian "soft power" is increasingly active in the country. All this led to a logical result - the number of Russia's supporters in Georgia increased (Makarychev, 2015).

Another strong Russian "weapon" standing in the way of Georgia's Euro-Atlantic course is Russian propaganda. Russia does not miss the opportunity to portray the West through propaganda channels as an unfavorable partner. Convince the public that the West is weak and unable to accept Georgia into its ranks. That the West is a "nest of debauchery" and corrupts the younger generation, etc. (IDFI, 2016).

It should be noted that recently in Georgian political discourse, there has been more talk about military neutrality, which is considered a guarantee of peace and stability. Despite the theoretical guarantees of neutrality, history, and current political processes prove that neutrality does not act as a deterrent against Russia's expansive policy (Kakachia, Lebanidze, Dzebisashvili, 2020).

Russia's actions are not specific to Georgia only; it treats its neighbors in the same way, including those it considers official allies. Russia's goal is to have satellite countries on the territory of the former Soviet empire, which should act as a kind of buffer concerning the rest of the world. By "reviving" the superpower status of Moscow, the Russian government is trying to cover up the need for reforms in its own country and to divert public opinion from domestic problems to foreign issues. Whatever the motivation of Russia's behavior, the result for Georgia is unchanged - the ruling regime of Russia perceives the existence of a successful democratic state on its borders as a direct threat and opposes it in every way.

The Russian political elite still does not want to realize the fact that the republics of the former USSR are no longer subordinate to Moscow (Alaverdov, 2020). According to the Kremlin's point of view, chaos in the South Caucasus states will allow Russia to get a kind of *carte blanche* from competing power centers (the US, the EU, and Turkey) and become the exclusive mediator in the region. So, as we see the European Union here cannot act as a big player or mediator. It is proved by the fact that the ceasefire deal between Baku and Yerevan in November 2020 was signed in Moscow.

The same can be said about Turkey when it was announced that Turkey will send its army to Azerbaijan to help to restore its territorial integrity. In this case, we have to refer to the Russian Foreign Policy Doctrine approved on December 1, 1996, which states that:

- Russia will do its best to become the major power center of the international system;
- Russia considers NATO's expansion and any kind of its convergence to Russia's borders negatively;
- As well as Russia is concerned about the military activities of NATO and the deployment of its military equipment of alliance near its borders (Putin, 2016). Turkey is a member of NATO and Russia will never allow its direct engagement in Caucasus conflicts.

Since the collapse of the Soviet Union and the declaration of sovereignty by Russia, six documents have been adopted by the highest authorities of Russia, in which the fundamental principles, priority directions, goals, and objectives of the country's foreign policy have been formulated. Despite the periodic softening of the rhetoric, all documents have one invariable characteristic: all of them are focused on the importance of Russia in the formation of a new world order, the weakening of the position of the West, and the emergence of new dominant political and economic players in the international arena.

One of the meaningful parts of "Putin's Doctrine" in the Post-Soviet Space is: about the Russian-Speaking Population and the Use of Military Force" (Volkhonsky & Mukhanov, 2019). It has successfully been implemented in Ukraine since 2014. President Vladimir Putin

clarified that Moscow is developing a certain doctrine of Russian foreign policy concept prioritizing its internal and external security (Makarychev, 2015). The doctrine states that the priority of Russia is to become the guarantor of living abroad Russian-speaking population and protect their rights. Thus, Russia considers the application of military force in the post-Soviet space as a legitimate tool of its foreign policy and proves that it seizes the opportunity and name any action as a violation of the rights of Russian speaking population and turn it into a pretext for its military campaigns against any country.

In 2022, to legitimize the launch of a full-scale military campaign in Ukraine, the President of Russia, Vladimir Putin, approved the concept of a new foreign policy that is based on the idea of a "Russian World." It is a theoretical framework used by extremes, to justify intervention in foreign countries. According to the Russian authorities, the 31-page "humanitarian policy" should "protect, safeguard and advance the traditions and ideals of the Russian World" (Bergmann, Dolbaia, Fenton, 2022). It is worth noting that Putin repeatedly mentioned those millions of ethnic Russians' "tragic fate", who live in states that have regained their independence as a result of the collapse of the Soviet Union, and the collapse itself has also repeatedly been called a "geopolitical catastrophe" (NBC, 2005).

After the end of the "old" Cold War and the collapse of the Soviet Union, most Western countries expected that economic and political reforms would begin in Russia, and along with the world community, it would want to create a new, safer, and more cooperative world order. Today, in the background of Russia's aggressive policy against the West and the immediate neighborhood, mainly Georgia and Ukraine, these expectations practically no longer exist.

The issues of strengthening European security became especially active after Russia invaded Ukraine. It was the geopolitical upheaval caused by this war that forced the EU to step out of its comfort zone and start looking for unconventional solutions, including a possible eastward expansion of the union. In this process, the correlation between, on the one hand, the geopolitical interest and strategic benefits of the European Union and the demonstration of compatibility with the principles of the European Union and commitment to European

values by the applicant states is very important. Regarding the latter, in the case of Georgia, there are certain questions related to the recently deteriorated relationships with the EU institutions, the denunciation of the agreement reached at the request of the President of the European Council Charles Michel, the refusal of a long-term preferential credit from the European Commission, severe political polarization in the country, straining relations with the Ukrainian authorities, etc. Accordingly, the European Commission adopted the recommendation, which offers Georgia only a European perspective and conditions before the candidate status, unlike Ukraine and Moldova, to whom it offers candidate status with conditions to be fulfilled later.

CONCLUSION

In conclusion, we can say that for the moment Russia is the only big actor in the post-Soviet states, which acts as it is suitable for its foreign policy. European Union is indeed trying to be engaged in regional policy, and guarantee stability and peace in the region. However, it is only partially able of dealing with the problems existing in the conflict zones (ICCN, 2020). Consequently, at the moment, no matter how cynical it may sound, the Russian Federation, which is the initiator of conflicts, acts as a mediator and "peacemaker" in the same conflicts. Especially it becomes obvious if we refer to the 2008 Russia-Georgia war and the case of Azerbaijan's victory. Russia's aggressive policy, which, with its disturbing dynamics, even in close calculations, represents a serious threat not only for post-soviet states but European security in general.

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