



# Russia's backyard – unresolved conflicts in the Caucasus<sup>1</sup>

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**Abstract:** *The Caucasus played a prominent role in the Russian foreign policy for a long time, which has not changed since the dissolution of the Soviet Union. Beginning with four general hypothesis about Russia's interests in its "near abroad" the essays gives an insights in the current status and developments in the relations between Russia and its southern neighbors Armenia, Georgia and Azerbaijan. A special focus is on the frozen conflicts in South Ossetia and Nagorno-Karabakh and Russia's role in these conflicts.*

**Keywords:** *Russia, Caucasus, Foreign Policy, Frozen Conflicts, South-Ossetia, Nagorno-Karabakh*

## Introduction – Russia and the Caucasus

The Caucasus is playing a role in Russia's foreign Policy for a long time. Since the 19<sup>th</sup> century Georgia, Azerbaijan and the northern Caucasus have been a long contested part of the Russian Empire. Wars with the Osman Empire and Persia as well as with the region's mountainous inhabitants shaped the Russian image of its southern neighbors. After the Russian civil war the three newborn republics of Georgia, Armenia and Azerbaijan were swiftly incorporated into the new construct of a "Soviet Union, where they would stay for almost 70 years. The "backyard" of Russia's foreign policy became part of the house. This situation changed again during the collapse of the USSR, when old aspirations for freedom and national states arose together with old conflicts and tensions. During the 90ies the Caucasus would not only see the birth of three national states but as well two major conflicts – the war over Nagorno-Karabakh from 1988 until 1994 and the Georgia Civil War from 1988 – 1993 – resulting in four

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unclassified constructs: The semi-states of Abkhazia, Adzharia,<sup>2</sup> Nagorno-Karabakh and South Ossetia. The region should not become restful any time soon and the conflicts remain unresolved until today.

During this transformation period the government in Moscow was occupied with its own problems; therefore the engagement in the Caucasus was limited to peacekeeping missions in South-Ossetia and Abkhazia and complete neglect of Nagorno-Karabakh. But the Caucasus should remain part of the “near abroad” and therefore a pivotal part of the Russian foreign policy. This role as “near abroad”, constituting an area of protection for Russia, got challenged for the first time after 2003, when a new regime in Georgia decided for an embrace of the West and especially for a deep cooperation with the United States (Asmus 2010).

The 2008 following war between Russia and Georgia marks a clear cut in the Kremlin’s foreign policy and was a signal to all post-soviet countries aligning themselves with the West. Therefore the insight gained by examining the Russia’s southern neighbors can be transferred to the overall foreign policy. Under Putin, whose foreign policy takes place within neorealistic framework (Mearsheimer 2014) Russia’s approach to its neighbors and the world is guided by these principles:

- 1) Stabilizing its own role as energy supplier. As the latest crisis shows Russia’s national budget as well as its economy as a whole are highly dependent on the disposal of oil and gas. In the past the largest share went towards the west, to Europe. Accordingly, any aspirations to elude this position either by increasing the own trade with Europe or even by introducing own pipeline-projects are a threat to Russia.
- 2) Create or support similar regimes as ruling in Moscow. Given the shared soviet history a way away from the Kremlin into more democratization and even a more of material wealth is hard for Russia’s ruling elites to tolerate. It might lead to questioning the Russian way and the position of the government.
- 3) Keeping the borders safe. In regard of the Caucasus this attempt has two dimensions. On the one hand to hold off NATO and especially the US from its borders. In the Kremlin’s view of the world not only military alliances and NATO enlargement are perceived as threats. The same goes for “remote-controlled” street protests as for example the “color revolutions” and the mass demonstrations in Moscow in 2011 (Krastev/Leonhard 2014: 3). On the other hand Russia has to deal with its own insurgency in the northern Caucasus, which terroristic attacks still claim hundreds of lives every year. Establishing a “sphere of interest” especially amongst the former Soviet Republics is part of this objective.

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2 Unlike the other conflicts, the status of Adzharia got settled in a peaceful manner in the course of the Rose revolution 2003.

Based on these principles, the main thesis of this paper is that Russia's main objective to secure its own political influence in the Caucasus, to keep western powers – both the EU and the US – out and to disturb regional cooperation (Abushov 2009: 204). But how is this policy in detail and especially in regard of the different situation in the three countries enforced? And what role do the still prevailing conflicts play?

## **Russia's relation to its southern neighbors**

Despite their similarities and the small geographical space, in which they are located, Russia's approach towards the countries of the South Caucasus is distinct. In the one corner we have the obvious bad boy – Georgia; in the opposite a country so economically dependent on Russia it is close to follow the fate of South Ossetia and Abkhazia and become a Russian satellite state. Azerbaijan is in the middle, following a multidirectional foreign policy. It is due to its resource-based prosperity able to go its own way and become a competitor of Russia in the field of energy supply. The common denominator for all three is Russia's status as the regional power in the Caucasus. Unregarding the different situation and future aims all three countries have to find a way how to behave towards Russia.

## **Armenia**

Armenia's situation is notoriously difficult. Due to the closed borders to two of its four neighbors its economy is more than struggling and the persistent hostility with Azerbaijan over Nagorno-Karabakh is a huge threat for the country's security. Lacking an own infrastructure for energy supply (and generally an own infrastructure for anything other than cognac, sacred places and nice scenery) and a constant need to rebalance Azerbaijan's armament have driven the small country in Russia's arms. The Russian Army maintains two military bases in the country and is without any doubt the dominating power in Armenian politics. Even the Armenian economy stretching from airlines over chemical products to telecommunication and of course energy supply is dominated by Russian companies. Due to the fact that there are no shared borders Russia is less perceived as a threat with facilitates good relations. The country's isolation and the conflict with Azerbaijan greatly benefits Russia, therefore its main interest is to preserve the status quo. The greatest issues in doing so are: Armenia's need to improve its relations other countries first of all Georgia. The oil shortage in Armenia in course of the five days wars showed drastically not only Yerevan's dependency on Russia's resources but as well on the transport corridor through Georgia. It is therefore a crucial interest for Armenia to maintain good relations with Georgia and engage in regional infrastructure projects (Petros 2008: 11). In conclusion

the more Russia increases the pressure on Georgia it damages its relations to Armenia. One other option for Armenia to improve its situation is to establish close ties to Iran, who as a pariah of international relations is happy to gain new partners. As an aspiring nuclear power, Iran's gaining more influence close to its borders, is definitely no pleasant perspectives for Moscow. The last possible option for Armenia to gain more leverage would be a rapprochement with Turkey, an option that gained speed after the 2008 war. The NATO-member and rising star Turkey, who already in the 90ties established close ties with Azerbaijan and some central Asian countries, is in Moscow seen a possible competitor over the Caucasus area and seriously questions Russia's self-assumed leadership role (Torbakov 2012).

## Azerbaijan

The first and most important issue for Azerbaijan is the regaining of its territorial integrity. Therefore the Russian support for Armenia in the Karabakh conflict did chill the relations compelling Baku to look out for new partners and raising distrust against Russia. It was aided in that mission by being not dependent on Russian oil for energy supply, enabling it to reach out further. In contrast to its southern Caucasian companions Azerbaijan profits from legroom in its relations with Russia. As part of its multi-directional foreign policy it has good relations with the US and the EU, especially in economic terms (Franke et al 2010: 162). Its relations to Turkey, from whom it receives military support up to NATO standards (German 2012: 222), have been described by President Heydar Aliyev as "two states, one nation". The two countries even signed an agreement about mutual military support, which would include any foreign – and especially Russian – engagement in Nagorno-Karabakh, which is seen as part of Azerbaijani territory. In regard of its general policy towards Russia, Azerbaijan tries to avoid conflicts while maintaining as much independency as possible (German 2012: 221). Especially this close relationship with Turkey is seen as a problem in the Kremlin. Another issue for Russia was the support Chechen fighters gained from Azerbaijan, culminating in the TV-appearance of the terrorist leader Shamil Basayev from a private station in Baku (Kelkitli 2008: 83). Moscow reacted with visa-restrictions and by demonstratively performing maneuverers with Armenian armed forces (Ibid.), coercing Baku back in line swiftly. This example shows on the one hand how little influence Russia has in Azerbaijan, but it makes as well clear how much Moscow is will to use the conflict in Nagorno-Karabakh to get its will. Other than Georgia, Azerbaijan does not seek to close – and especially no military – ties (Petros 2009: 5–7) to the US, which means it is less of a threat to Russia. Nevertheless, the area where Azerbaijan can have a negative impact on Russia is the field of energy policy. Especially projects as the South-Caucasus pipeline and the Baku-Tbilisi-Ceyhan

pipeline, which are supposed to continue in cooperation with the new Trans-Adriatic-Pipeline to Southern Europe (Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung 2013) were in direct competition to Russia's (now closed) own project South stream. On the one hand, they increase Europe's dependency on Russian oil and gas on the other hand they strengthen the cooperation Tbilisi-Baku and free Georgia from Gazprom's pressuring hands. Examples of Azerbaijan supporting stability in Georgia are plentiful (Idan/Shaffer 2012: 256). Since Azerbaijan has no access to the high seas the cooperation with other states – firstly Georgia, secondly Turkey, to a lesser extent Iran – is crucial for its economic success. It will remain Russia's highest priority to hinder the deepening of the relations. A good mean to do so, seems to be the conflict in Nagorno-Karabakh.

## Georgia

The small country with a large history has proven to be Russia's most difficult neighbor, even compelling it to its first military mission outside its own borders since the Afghan war in the 1980 s. Despite the fact that the five days war in August 2008 ended with a quick and clear military victory for Russia, thus showing both its superiority and willingness to take action to other CIS-states flirting with the west, on a political level the mission turned out as failed. It did not stop Georgia to become Russia's main opponent in the Caucasus. It did not stop Georgia to support separatism in the Northern Caucasus and improve its relations with the republics of Chechnya, Ingushetia, North-Ossetia, Dagestan, Kabardino-Balkaria, Karachay-Cherkessia and Adygea (Dzutsev/Siroky 2012: 304–306). It did not convince Georgia to loosen its ties with the West and return to a more friendly relationship with Russia. It did not set an example deterring other post-soviet countries from doing so. On the contrary it rather deepened the distrust amongst the smaller states engaging the US as a possible counter-balance even more in the region. And it did not finally solve the issue of the de-facto states Abkhazia and South Ossetia.

What it did though was making a re-integration of these regions into Georgia – still one of the most important issues for the small country – more unlikely than ever before.

In the following years the Georgian foreign policy naturally grew rather careful and more focused on soft power approaches. One of the most successful was the so-called North Caucasus initiative, a change in the visa regime for Russian citizens and especially for the citizens of the northern Caucasian republics. The new regulations brought significant changes, almost completely freeing traveling to Georgia of restrictions. Although it might not seem a lot, but it means a great change for the citizens of the northern Caucasian republics, who are usually not even able to travel unrestricted inside Russia (Ibid.: 308). The advantages for Georgia are twofold. On the one hand it supports

the separatisms (and as claimed by Russian officials even terrorism) in these regions by offering a sanctuary for any kind of opposition in these republics, ranging from politically or ethnically persecuted to Islamic fighters. This of course makes it more difficult for Russia to put an end to the insurgency and withdraw its attention and especially the huge financial support from the region. On the other hand it offers an economic alternative for the usually rather poor republics. The plan behind this idea is to establish Tbilisi as a regional center in the Caucasus, thus creating closer ties amongst the small Caucasian countries and ultimately a counterweight to Moscow. This agenda is supported by several soft power initiatives especially in the areas of economics, education and cultural cooperation.

These ambitions do not constitute a very pleasant perspective for Russia. On the one hand an independent and Anti-Russian Georgia always bears the possibility of the presence of US-troops at its borders. The current crisis made this scenario even more likely (Smirnova 2015). On the other hand Tbilisi as a regional center in the Caucasus would have fatal consequences for Russia's interests in Armenia and Azerbaijan. It would enhance the separatism in the northern Caucasus by setting an example how things could go without Moscow. And it would offer an alternative for the actors close to Russia, namely Armenia. These developments could in the end have a fatal repercussion on the Kremlin's position itself.

Russia's first regularly used method to prevent undesirable developments in Georgia is to put economic and diplomatic pressure on Georgia, usually by introducing a harsher visa-regime or banning Georgian products from the country. Russia incentives to prevent these are also closely related to the frozen conflicts with Georgia's secessionist regions, which will be examined more closely on the following pages.

## **The role of the frozen conflicts in Russia's foreign policy**

The conflicts over Nagorno-Karabakh, South Ossetia and Abkhazia are all a relic from the 1990 s and the independence of their respective nominal states. Despite all the differences they all play such an enormous role in the involved country's policy that it is not to say that the future of the Caucasus depends on these issues. From the Russian point of view these conflicts are great opportunities to keep a foot in the door in regard to its former compatriots. At first the situation in Georgia will be elaborated and secondly there will be a closer look into the conflict between Armenian and Azerbaijan over the de-facto independent nation of Nagorno-Karabakh.

## Separatism in Georgia – South Ossetia and Abkhazia

The loss of the two regions is an open wound in the flesh of Georgia. Although having a long history and ethnical identity the wish for separatism arose in both regions during the 1990 s and got inflamed by the aggressively promoted nationalism under Georgia's first president Zviad Gamsakhurdia. The first blood was shed in the course of the Georgian civil war in 1993, with the prelude of declarations of independence in Abkhazia in 1992 and in South Ossetia in 1990. In both conflicts Russian troops were involved in establishing the ceasefire and in fixating the status quo. These peacekeeping troops were stationed until the new outbreak of the conflict in 2008, which should change the situation drastically. The origins, background and outcomes of this conflict have already been discussed at length elsewhere (Asmus 2010). The most drastic long-term change was the recognition of Abkhazia and South Ossetia as independent states by Russia, who thereby gave up its role a neutral mediator. Although the story of these de-facto states sounds similar there are a few noteworthy differences. On the one hand the population and economic capabilities. Meanwhile Abkhazia has a population of still 240.000 people and due to its access to the Black Sea and beautiful landscape some economic possibilities<sup>3</sup> (Kapanadze 2014). South Ossetia is much smaller – estimated 72.000 inhabitants – and is completely dependent on Russia's support in order to sustain its survival. On the other hand the political will for independence. Most recently in 2014 the Abkhazian citizens have made it clear in several mass demonstrations that they do not wish any closer alignment to Russia to speak of a complete integration (Cecire 2015). It might seem odd for a country, where 96 % percent of the population owns a Russian passport, where the official currency is the Russian Ruble and where most commonly spoken language is Russian. Nevertheless, the Abkhazian will for sovereignty is quite strong and re-unification with Georgia is out of imagination for most Abkhazians. In South Ossetia the situation is different. The ties to Russia are just as close or even closer, but in difference to Abkhazia independence might not be South Ossetia's final destination. Since the country can hardly survive on its own, integration into Russia seems likely. But even in regard to a re-unification with Georgia the Ossetian administration is surprisingly open (Abushov 2009: 206–207).

As mentioned before, one similarity between the regions is their economic dependence on Moscow. Every year estimated 20 billion ruble flow into Abkhazia and South Ossetia (Wechlin 2014). What does Russia get back from these expenditures?

First and most important, it is a way to keep Georgia unstable. Therefore it makes Georgia less attractive for Western partners, especially NATO, which

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3 Not at least to mention the newly developed partnership with Turkey, which (?) became Abkhazia's most important trading partner after Russia.

usually would not allow membership to a country with unresolved military issue on its own territory. It also might work as leverage to convince Georgia that NATO might not be the way for its future. As Kavus Abushov (2009) puts it: “[...] Georgia would only withdraw from NATO membership if Russia helped it restore sovereignty over the breakaway regions. Whether Russia has the resources to assist Georgia to subdue Abkhazia and South Ossetia is another question.” The fact that it seems rather unlikely for Russia to convince Batumi that a re-unification with Georgia is its best interests plus Russia increasingly menacing projection on its neighbors might lead to a closer alignment with NATO unregarding the unresolved issues.

Nevertheless, Russia’s support for Abkhazia and South Ossetia serves yet another purpose. It keeps a gap between Tbilisi and the republics of the North Caucasus. The sympathy for the Ossetians and the Abkhazians are the cause of anti-Georgian animosities amongst many ethnicities in the North Caucasus, especially amongst the North Ossetians. During the 2008- war and earlier the local troops in Abkhazia and South Ossetia were significantly supported by fighters from the other side of the mountains (Abushov 2009: 193). This animosity serves Russia’s aims in the Caucasus greatly. On the one hand it prevents Georgia from becoming a regional center with too much influence on its neighbors on the northern border, on the other hand it helps to prevent separatism in Russia itself, by portraying a positive image of the central administration. The last point is the instability these ongoing conflicts create in Georgia, binding a huge heap of Georgia’s political will and resources on the regain of the lost territories. In addition constant possibility of a new outbreak of hostilities, which might be used to a repeated military engagement of Russia, is a threat not only Georgia but also its possible partners feel. In conclusion, Russia prefers situation of controlled instability in the South Caucasus rather than long-term stability for the region (Ibid.: 205).

## **A complicated situation and no way out – Nagorno-Karabakh**

The still ongoing conflict over Nagorno-Karabakh is one of the world’s most dangerous clashes waiting to break out again. Despite its origins in the 1920 s, the current conflict over Nagorno-Karabakh started already during soviet times in 1988. It ended with a military victory of the Armenian and Karabakh forces and the displacement of estimated one million people. The result is far from being a final solution and the frontline between the two countries is closer to a combat zone than an international border. Nagorno-Karabakh became a de-facto – but not recognized<sup>4</sup> – independent republic, meanwhile Azerbaijan continues to regard the region as part of its own territory. Even more interesting

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4 Despite by other commonly not recognized republics: Abkhazia, South Ossetia and Transnistria.

is the relation between Karabakh and Armenia. Despite the fact, that Karabakh seems to be an integrated part of Armenia in daily affairs and is completely dependent on its neighbor in the west and the Armenian diaspora, it remains an independent republic, which is not even recognized by Armenia. Despite various peace-talks since 1994 – always but not exclusively under Russian guidance – no improvement has been reached since, especially because the situation is made more difficult by the additional occupation of Azerbaijani territory (the Lachin-corridor connecting Armenia and Nagorno-Karabakh), possible security guarantees for the Armenian population of Karabakh and the high number of refugees on both sides.

Russia's engagement in the conflict did not start with its role as an "honest broker". Due to the fact, that the conflict broke out while the involved countries were still soviet republics, the communist authorities had to deal with the problem. In the case of Armenia, the unsatisfactory solution of the problem became the driving force behind the independence movement (Zürcher 2007: 156). It was the leaving of the Red Army and the opening of the arsenals, which led to the evolution of a small-scale local conflict to a full-scale war in 1992 and the Russian president Boris Yeltsin brokered the ceasefire in 1994.

Russia has been actively involved in the peace-negotiations, as well as part of the Minsk Group as most famously on the initiative of president Medvedev in 2011. Since the conflict takes place in a region, Russia considers its distinct sphere of interest in a multipolar world order, its preoccupation with the conflict is unmistakable. A peace treaty under Russian guidance would bring the regime in Moscow great international reputation and underline its ability to solve the problems in the world – or at least in its neighborhood – without help from the outside, especially from the US. Russia's role as an honest guide in the negotiations is emphasized by that fact that the conflict Nagorno-Karabakh is the only post-soviet dispute without the engagement of Russian troops.

Nevertheless, Russia might also be able to make use of the continuation of the conflict. As mentioned above the threat of Azerbaijani military superiority keeps Armenia, which might otherwise go the same way as Georgia and seek closer alignment to the West, a close and dependent ally. But also in its relationship to Azerbaijan the continuation of the conflict has some benefits. Without Russia withdrawing its support the regain of Karabakh for Azerbaijan is out of question, so support for a more Azerbaijan friendly outcome of the situation is a great incentive for Baku. In addition, the ongoing conflict rather adds to the authoritarian style of leadership practiced by President Ilham Aliyev, which in turn creates an obstacle for the formation of cordially relations to the EU. The reluctance of the EU to take a clear stand on the issue also creates a negative image of Europe amongst the Azerbaijani population (Simão – Freire 2008: 56; Musabayov – Shulman 2009).

## Conclusion

As these examples show the power of Russia's foreign policy is in decline, cautious of losing influence and rather controlling and destabilizing the situation than creating or shaping it. This can especially be seen in regard to the frozen conflicts. Moscow can use these the situation, but it neither invents not initiates it. Despite trying to remain the *Ordnungsmacht* in the Caucasus, Russia will in the future be increasingly challenged by other emerging powers, especially Georgia and Turkey, as well as "outsiders" to the region like the US and the EU. Even now, Russia has lost its position as a hegemonial power, although it of course remains the most important actor for any state in the region. Russian interests remain present but it has lost its dominance over the region. Even without a solution to the conflicts, the continuation of which supports Russia's position; its presence in the countries of the South Caucasus will in the long run recede. Armenia will have to continue seeking other option especially since the war in 2008 showed the fragility of its economic dependency on Russia. Possible partners would be Georgia, Iran and – less, likely as a partner due to its traditional ties to Azerbaijan but nevertheless a new window to the world – Turkey. Azerbaijan is, due to Russia's support for Armenia, more and more drawn to Western partners, especially Turkey. Last but not least Georgia, who continues to see in Russia its main antagonist in its struggle over territorial sovereignty. Although military means are after the devastating defeat in 2008 out of question, Georgian soft power policy and anti-Russian alliances will continue to be a thorn in Russia's southern flank.

These insights can be transferred to the general Russian foreign policy. Despite its rhetoric and global aspirations, Russia is an empire in decline, trying to keep as much of its power as possible and securing its homeland. The Russia's military expenditures are similar to single European countries as France and the United Kingdom do not match those of China not to mention the US. The sanctions and the drop of the oil-prices showed distinctly Russia's economic weakness and its dependency on the global economy. Even the developments in the Ukraine show that Russia has become prone to simply reactions on events instead of creating and shaping the international relations. How this new instability will affect its relations to the south Caucasus and the developments there, remains to be seen.

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