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Russia and the United States in the Caucasus: cooperation and competition

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ABSTRACT

Today, the Caucasus region receives much less attention among scholars and decision-makers than a few years ago. Eurasian security studies are currently dominated by the coverage of the armed conflict in east Ukraine and the turbulence in the Middle East. The South Caucasus, however, remains rather unstable due to its geopolitical fragility. As Russia and the United States (US) find themselves in the midst of the most severe crisis in their relations since the end of the Cold War, their relationship in this sensitive part of Eurasia deserves every attention. While looking in this paper at the bilateral relations between Moscow and Washington in the Caucasus region, the authors seek to avoid framing the present state of the relationship as a second edition of the Cold War. Instead, the basic reasons for disagreements between Russia and the US in the Caucasus since the dissolution of the USSR are critically examined. The authors also aim to explain specific reasons driving Russia's and the US' respective engagements in regional security issues. They also focus on similarities and specifics of the US and Russian policies vis-à-vis regional ethno-political conflict resolution processes in Abkhazia, South Ossetia and Nagorno-Karabakh.

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Introduction

The dissolution of the USSR brought new challenges to the Caucasus. The former republics of Soviet Transcaucasia immediately became international actors who identified their own national interests and foreign policy priorities. The formation of independent states in the South Caucasus has been accompanied by a search for new mechanisms to ensure regional security and enshrine the new formats of international cooperation. All those processes have also been closely connected with the ethnopolitical conflicts and border disputes. These developments pushed a number of regional and outside actors to turn their eyes to this part of Eurasia after almost 70 years of Soviet dominance and possession of the Caucasus. An array of geopolitical and economic opportunities that emerged made both state and non-state actors rush to explore these uncharted waters (Shaffer 2009). However, it was the United States (US) that for almost three decades has arguably had

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a serious policy impact on the region and has been the prime irritant for Russia's own regional policies (Cornell 2005).

Certainly, one could make the opposite argument suggesting the region's security issues are more a product of internal developments rather than outside influence. In fact, ever since the break-up of the Soviet Union the regional dynamics have often been susceptive to the overall state of the US–Russian relationship, if not reflective of its character. When the bilateral relationship steadily declined after the US invasion of Iraq, the uprisings in Georgia and Ukraine, dubbed "colour revolutions" in Moscow, would split Russia and the US further apart. Some Russian and American academics and policy advisers argue that the ultimate state of the US-Russia relations could be best described with a phenomenon from psychology called the fundamental attribution error, on which more below (Sushentsov 2018).

Today Russia and the US face the most severe crisis in their relations since the end of the Cold War. Washington accuses Russia of violating international law in Ukraine,[1] while Moscow claims that the West violated similar laws earlier in the Balkans and Middle East. Today's confrontation grows out of these opposite accounts of who is the "revisionist-in-chief" with regard to the world order and primary generator of risks for international stability. However, now Ukraine is the focal point of this confrontation in the post-Soviet space. Most of the literature concentrates on the Moscow-Washington controversies around Crimea and Donbass (Sakwa 2016; Charap and Colton 2017). Caucasus issues in this context seem to play a subordinate role. They are treated (especially the Russo-Georgian War of 2008) as the prerequisites of the Ukrainian conflicts of 2014 or studied in the context of potential Crimean-style territorial expansion of Russia (Welt 2016, Toal 2017).

Nowadays, despite America's less acute interest to the region, the overall situation has not changed much from where it was thirty years ago: along with Ukraine, the Caucasus is still the space where the two states have the most overlapping interests (Nation 2007). Even though the post-Soviet armed conflicts have a lot of commonalities, Washington's engagement of Moscow in each of the conflicts had different driving forces behind it and differed in form. Moreover, there is no single model of the US-Russian relationship around conflict resolution processes or security issues in the former USSR in general and in the South Caucasus in particular. Therefore, while recognizing the serious implications of the Ukrainian crisis on Moscow's and Washington's approaches across Eurasia, we should consider developments in the Caucasus region from the break-up of the Soviet Union until today from the particular perspective of this region rather than a uniform approach to the former USSR at large.

In this article, we will define the roots of competing US and Russian interests in the Caucasus. At the same time, we will address the Nagorno-Karabakh issue that seems to remain a unique Eurasian challenge where Washington and Moscow are still cooperating. This comparative analysis is useful both for academic and applied reasons in helping to better understand the corridors for diplomatic manoeuver for the two power-rivals and opportunities to normalize their relationship at the regional and international levels.

Correspondence bias and the fundamental attribution error

An idea originally invented by social psychologist Lee Ross in 1977, the fundamental attribution error concept is meant to describe perceivers' tendency to underestimate the

impact of situational factors on human behaviour and to overestimate the impact of dispositional factors (Ross 1977). The theory suggests that people frequently tend to perceive aggressive behaviour as caused by aggressive personality characteristics, whereas aggressive behaviour can also often be provoked by situational circumstances.

In psychology, evidence for the fundamental attribution error comes from three different lines of research, two of which are of particular relevance to the US-Russia relationship. First, people tend to infer stable personality characteristics from observed behaviour, even when this behaviour could also be due to situational factors. The tendency is called the correspondence bias (Hamilton 1998). Initially, the terms correspondence bias and fundamental attribution error were used interchangeably to refer to the same phenomenon – perceivers' tendency to see human behaviour as controlled by the individual factors and underestimate the impact of situational factors. However, recently the situational factors have been increasingly recognized as a factor in perceptions of correspondence bias (Gawronski 2004). The other research line on the fundamental attribution error is concerned with cultural differences in perceivers' explanations of human behaviour. To be precise, the fundamental attribution error has its roots in an individualist worldview that sees each individual as independent and unique. This explanation is derived from cross-cultural research, showing that people in collectivist cultures attribute a stronger weight to situational factors than do people in individualist cultures (Ross and Nisbett 1991).

In the case of US–Russian relations, the phenomenon of the fundamental attribution error is often materialized in the fact that one party tends to explain its own behaviour in terms of external circumstances and to explain the other party's behaviour and actions in terms of "innate" bad qualities believed to be "natural" (Sushentsov 2018). This interpretation is frequently projected onto the regional policies of Russia and the US, and especially so in the post-Soviet space. For instance, Russia is frequently criticized for what is seen as its ultimate intolerance of democratic processes in neighbouring countries. This, in turn, is attributed to fundamental vulnerability of the nature of the Russian regime against democratic developments (Rojanski 2019). In turn, the political establishment in Moscow often sees some "big plot" behind America's foreign policy actions, dismissing the very idea that a policy may be a product of one man's emotions, interagency mismanagement or merely an opportunistic move.

We contend that this phenomenon of the fundamental attribution error in large part creates the perception asymmetries in US-Russian relations and often leads the two countries to erroneous conclusions about one another that subsequently lead to unnecessarily confrontational policies.

The US and Russia in the Caucasus: geopolitical disproportions

To identify US-Russia divergences and convergences we should first and foremost evaluate the importance of the Caucasus region for both powers. After the USSR's demise, Moscow defined the South Caucasus as an area of its particular interest and concern. Ensuring stability in the former Soviet republics of Transcaucasia has been considered by Moscow a prerequisite for Russia's peaceful domestic development and for the preservation of its territorial integrity (Suny 2010). Without any exaggeration, Russia can be considered a Caucasian state. Seven constituencies of the Russian Federation (Adygea, Ingushetia,

Dagestan, Kabardino-Balkaria, Karachaevo-Cherkessia, North Ossetia and Chechnya) are immediately situated on the territory of the North Caucasus and four other subjects (the Krasnodar and Stavropol territories, the Rostov region and Kalmykia) are situated in the steppe foothills of the Caucasus. Additionally, the Black Sea shore of the Krasnodar territory and the region of the Caucasian Mineral Waters of the Stavropol territory are also part of the Caucasus region. The territory of the Russian North Caucasus is bigger than the three South Caucasus independent states put together. Furthermore, as a practical matter, the ethno-political tensions that have arisen in Russia's regions have been closely connected with conflicts underway in the South Caucasus. The dynamics of the Georgian-Ossetian conflict have had a serious impact on the Ossetian-Ingush conflict in Russia's North Ossetia and the Georgian-Abkhaz situation has influenced the identity politics of the Circassian population within Russia. The security environment in Chechnya and Dagestan has also been connected with the developments in Georgia's Pankisi Gorge. As they share a common border, Russia and Azerbaijan have faced the issue of divided ethnic groups (Lezgins and Avars). It is important to understand that it is in Russia's interests to have a positive relationship with Baku regardless of its strategic military partnership with Armenia. Thus, ensuring stability in the Russian Caucasus is indivisible from the achievement of stability in Georgia, Armenia and Azerbaijan (Markedonov 2013).

The US approach has been based on other perceptions. As Eugene Rumer, Richard Sokolsky and Paul Stronski rightly note,

> the United States has important but not vital interests in the South Caucasus, which include preserving regional stability; preventing the resumption of frozen conflicts; and supporting democratic change and better governance as well as the international integration of Armenia, Azerbaijan, and Georgia. (Rumer, Sokolsky, and Stronski 2017, 5)

While the geopolitics of the Caucasus are seen as central from the perspective of Russia, the region's issues are considered to be much more remote problems for the US. In this sense, American policy towards the Caucasus has another primary motivation that is tied to the fact that, from the US perspective, the region is not valuable in isolation. Rather, it is essential as a forum through which the US can work on a number of broader security and foreign policy conundrums. Georgia, for example, is seen by US policy-makers as the weak link among the former Soviet states that Moscow could use as a tool to establish dominance in Eurasia, while Azerbaijan is considered to be secular state, reliable partner and energy supplier of countries in the European Union (EU). Armenia occupies a different position of importance. It is considered an instrument of political pressure – such as through the campaign for the recognition of the Armenian genocide – on Ankara, which in recent years has turned away from the general foreign policy course of the US and Israel (Mankoff 2012; Troitskiy 2015, 2016).

The Caucasus issues play an incomparably lesser role in the US domestic policies than in Russia, leaving aside the activities of the lobbyist groups (Galstyan 2016). The US pays more attention to the international order in general, and views Eurasian developments in particular through the prisms of the ambitions of Russia, Iran, and Turkey, and the challenge of terrorism as well. Thus Caucasus issues are treated as parts of larger geopolitical puzzles (the Greater Middle East, Wider Black Sea region, energy policy and democratization). We consequently observe a definite asymmetry of the region's significance for the two powers. They have different motives and the intensity of their engagement with the

regional agenda varies. However, the US and Russian interests regularly overlap with each other.

The Caucasus factor in the US–Russia rivalry and cooperation

The reasons for US-Russian rivalry and cooperation in the Caucasus are numerous but can be grouped into three major problem areas. First, the inertia of the "great-power rivalry" is still quite vibrant in both countries. As Professor Mark Kramer rightly notes, "the Cold War metaphor has gained wide popularity over the past several years, particularly with the surge of East–West tensions" (Kramer 2018). The ongoing hostilities in south-eastern Ukraine and Syria are perceived by the Russian military and foreign policy establishment as "proxy conflicts" between Washington and Moscow (Chekov et al. 2019), and the topical discussions on Russian "interference" in US domestic politics and vice versa have strengthened those discourses (Cohen 2018).

The information confrontation between the media of the two states continuously exposes increasingly polarized narratives in both countries. In this regard, the Caucasus, with the tremendous leverage it gives to those dominating the region, is an arena of critical power competition where traditional features of the Russo-American "love-hate relationship" are highly pronounced. Because the security stakes for Russia are high, a successful initiative by one state is viewed as a defeat and a challenge for the other.

Second, since the break-up of the Soviet Union, the dynamics of many regional processes in the Caucasus have been influenced by the United States – directly or circumstantially. Washington allocated millions of dollars in assistance to the South Caucasus republics while American government agencies and private companies got involved in practically every significant political, economic, military or humanitarian project in the region (Mankoff 2012; Rumer, Sokolsky, and Stronski 2017). What exacerbates the situation is that the two parties have frequently supported competing, sometimes even mutually exclusive initiatives: the South Stream gas pipeline vs. the Nabucco project, the GUAM Organization vs. the CSTO (Collective Security Treaty Organization), Georgia's territorial integrity vs. Abkhazia/South Ossetia secessionism under Russian auspices, etc. Besides, the very location of the Caucasus enables it to be embedded into other geopolitical puzzles primarily the Central Asia and the Middle East which raises additional risks for the Russian foreign policy in the neighbouring regions where Washington also has interests.

Finally, Moscow initially articulated the post-Soviet space (including the Caucasus region) as a zone of its particular concerns. In turn, in 1994, three years after the break-up of the Soviet Union, the US created an interdepartmental working group on the Newly Independent States. Later, in 1997, the National Security Strategy clarified the intent: "We have made it a priority to work with the countries of the region [the Caspian basin and the Caucasus] to develop multiple pipeline ventures that will ensure access to the oil".[2] In the end, Russia has always considered the Caucasus to be an interdependent system where processes in the South Caucasus have an impact on the North Caucasus and vice versa. Therefore, for Moscow, it has always been a far more sensitive issue in terms of security. It saw the American initiative as an ambition to exert more influence over Russia's most volatile region – the North Caucasus.

In turn, over the next 30 years, Washington experienced three major stages in its "Caucasus strategy". Each stage has its own implications for the bilateral relationship and had

its own "core problem". The first, back in the 1990s, was something of a "get-to-know-the-region" phase. US policy of that time was pursuing three principal interest areas:

- Building partnerships – including military ones – with the Newly Independent States of the region that would promote the multi-channel American involvement in the region;
- Securing energy projects launched in the Caspian and Black Seas where American companies had large shares. For instance, four American oil giants – ExxonMobil, Chevron, Devon Energy and The Hess possessed 40% of the international consortium "AIOC" (the Azerbaijan International Operating Company) formed to develop oil reserves in Azerbaijan;
- Making sure no major threats for American national security emerge from the region that was entering an era of the state-building.

A "toxic" context

Although economic interests, resource policy and democracy promotion were portrayed as dominant, all of the three stated interests were security-oriented (Coppieters 2000). Therefore, when the US first initiated NATO-led military exercises in the Black Sea in the 1990s, Russia considered this, so to speak, a poke in the eye. In substance, during this time the US was less interested in security cooperation with Russia in that part of Eurasia and more in gaining influence in the post-Soviet space. Moscow, for its part, lacked the resources and the political will that were necessary to stand up to this strategy and had to agree to a reactive policy. There also was a critical domestic facet that the Kremlin could not ignore: Russia was fighting an extremely unpopular, bloody and expensive war in Chechnya. Moscow was thus especially susceptible to foreign military activity near its borders, considering them as targeted at threatening its national security.

It was then that a principal misconception formed that has subsequently aggravated bilateral relations to this day. On most of the developments in the North Caucasus the American vision was very different from that of Russia. Certainly, military operations Russia carried out in the region, or, perhaps, the human rights abuses associated with them, were a focal point for Americans, but there were other issues on the agenda. Since the first Chechen campaign (1994-1996) the issue of human rights abuses by the Russian federal security forces has become a popular theme among many Western analysts, journalists and human rights activists on both sides of the political spectrum. Using historical analogies, they alluded to the Russian imperial practices of cracking down on the indigenous peoples of the North Caucasus (Applebaum 1999). They also argued that under the pretext of fighting terrorism, Russia was strangling freedom in the most ethnically complex area of the country and thus the US should have its say on the situation. The idea that Russians were fighting "freedom fighters" rather than "violent jihadists" was propagated at the top level. The notion was based on the premise that Russia was, in fact, implementing a "brutal neo-colonialist" policy in the North Caucasus. The argument went that since "the rebels" were fighting back against "suppression", Moscow could only blame itself for the chaos in the region (Lapidus 1998).

Certainly, the Kremlin made and is still making a great number of strategic errors in the Caucasus, both in the North and South. The cocktail of poverty, high

unemployment rates among the youth, population growth and troubling migration statistics make it more prone to fundamentalist ideas. Being unable to manage it creates a temptation to hide behind the "terror threat" to justify a tightening-the-screws policy. But the different language used in American and Russian discourse went far beyond the linguistic nuances: it reflected divergent interpretations and created highly polar narratives.

To a large degree, the two conflicting narratives are still maintained in the expert debate in the two countries on the situation in the North Caucasus. Not only is it a major stumbling bloc hampering effective anti-terrorist cooperation and data exchange but it also sows the seeds of mistrust and mutual suspicion. Conceptually, it is difficult for many American analysts and politicians to think outside of "the Chechen-stereotyped" paradigm and recognize other actors involved in the process. Some still rejected any ties between the notorious Caucasus Emirate and Al Qaeda, making American decision-makers believe the two countries are facing challenges of different nature (Williams 2007, 156–178). They believe that while America and its allies deal with Islamist fundamentalist groups, separatism in the North Caucasus is of ethno-nationalist character and is purely a "Russian problem". These widely cultivated ideas push Americans to selective engagement on some issues and selective criticism on others which is also not very helpful to bilateral progress in the area.

The truth, however, is that the ethno-nationalist agenda exhausted itself in the 1990s and was rapidly replaced by radical Islamism (Markedonov 2010). Since then, a large part of the North Caucasus has been one of the frontlines in the war on global Islamist terror. And while the challenges Washington and Moscow are confronted with have a different pre-history and background, the ties between terrorist groups in the North Caucasus and in the Greater Middle East are obvious and well-proved – be it ideology, financial flows or operational activity (Hahn 2014; Yarlykapov 2017; Zhemukhov, Markedonov, and Yarlykapov 2018). This has been a second misconception of the situation on the ground shaping expert and public opinion in the US toward the Caucasus region. As a result, Russia and the US accumulated significant baggage involving bitter disagreements that continue to have an impact even to the present day.

Between revisionism and the status quo

On the other side of the Caucasus mountain chain, things were barely any better. The South Caucasus of the 1990s was unstable and the future of the region was uncertain. Four out of eight armed conflicts that broke out across the post-Soviet space in the late 1980s-early 1990s did so in the South Caucasus. A number of destabilizing precedents also emerged in the region – like the recognition of former autonomous areas (Abkhazia and South Ossetia in Georgia) as independent states by Moscow. It also emerged as the only part of the former USSR where neighbouring states have no diplomatic relations with each other (Armenia and Azerbaijan, Russia and Georgia).

Contrary to a popular American narrative on Moscow using the region's rich conflict potential to manipulate the local elites back into the orbit of Russian influence, the Kremlin has never had a universal approach either to conflicts or to the de facto states of the South Caucasus. Analysing almost three decades of Russian foreign policy in the region one can outline two fundamental positions that drive Russian actions.

The first can be defined as a "revisionist position" and is associated with recognition of independence for Abkhazia and South Ossetia following the "unfreezing" of the conflicts in 2004–2008 and consequent "August war" with Georgia in 2008. In contrast, the second position supports the current status-quo and is manifested in refusal to recognize the Nagorno-Karabakh Republic (NKR) and even establish any contacts with Stepanakert except those that are allowed within the mandate of the OSCE Minsk Group where Russia serves as one of three co-chairs together with France and the US. Moreover, while engaged in a strategic alliance with Armenia, Russia recognizes the territorial integrity of Azerbaijan.

The 2016 Foreign Policy Concept of Russian Federation stipulates that Russian priorities include "assisting the establishment of the Republic of Abkhazia and the Republic of South Ossetia as modern democratic States, strengthening their international positions, and ensuring reliable security and socioeconomic recovery" (MFA-RF 2016), which goes to show Moscow's interest in fostering both as independent states rather than have them incorporated into Russia. During the normalization of relations with Tbilisi that started in 2012–2013, Moscow limited this process by drawing some "red lines": Russia is not engaging in talks over the status of Abkhazia and South Ossetia. In the Foreign Policy Concept document, Moscow expresses interest in "normalizing relations with Georgia in areas where the Georgian side is willing to do the same, with due consideration for the current political environment in the South Caucasus". In practice, this means the current state of affairs that was established in the region after recognition of the independence of the two former autonomies of the Georgian SSR (Soviet Socialist Republic).

Thus, from Moscow's point of view the South Caucasus consists of not three states (UN member states Armenia, Azerbaijan, and Georgia), but five. Moscow builds its relationships with Abkhazia and South Ossetia based on bilateral agreements "On Strategic Partnership and Alliance" (signed with Abkhazia on 24 November 2014) and "On Alliance and Integration" (signed with South Ossetia on 18 March 2015). Even though both documents sealed Moscow's increasing military-political presence in both partly-recognized republics (currently the South Ossetian army is integrated into Russian armed forces) they can hardly be regarded as new milestones. These agreements formalized the set up that emerged in August 2008 when Moscow became the guarantor of security, recovery and social-economic development of Abkhazia and South Ossetia.

These two agreements have their own peculiarities. These differences can be explained by a fundamental divergence of the two projects. While Abkhazia strives to maintain its statehood (with Russian military-political guarantees) South Ossetia views independence not as a final goal but as a transitional stage on the way to unification with North Ossetia within Russia. In case of Abkhazia, the elite of the Republic tries to emphasize their own preferences which is manifested in the fact that Russian citizens do not have the right to receive Abkhaz citizenship, to have access to land resources and real estate, and the word "integration" was removed from the title of the agreement. It has to be mentioned that Abkhaz leadership subjected the document of alliance with Russia to a number of revisions.[3]

On the other hand, South Ossetia is interested in maximal integration with Russia including unification with it (per Crimea's example). In July 2015, South Ossetian border guards with the support of Russian-installed new border signs along Khurvaleti-Orchosani line. As a result, a piece of the strategically important Baku-Supsa pipeline

appeared to fall under the control of Tskhinvali. Currently, the South Ossetian border post is located just 450 metres away from the highway of all-Caucasian significance connecting Azerbaijan, Armenia, and eastern Georgia with its Black Sea ports and Turkey (Gamtselidze 2015).

At the same time, Russia consistently avoids raising the issue of changing South Ossetia's current status and expanding the state by incorporating a new entity amidst intensification of discussions in South Ossetia over a referendum on "unification with Russia" throughout 2014–2017. At the end of May 2016, the South Ossetian leadership decided to postpone the popular vote to take place after the presidential elections which were held in April 2017. The leader of "United Ossetia" party Anatoly Bibilov, former chairman of the parliament, won the elections. While he was consistently pushing forward the idea of the unification of the "two Ossetias" within Russia, Moscow did not support this idea. Multiplication of the "Crimea scenario" was seen as undesirable and Bibilov himself actually had to halt the "unification project", since no support for it was forthcoming from the Russian leadership.

Importantly, Moscow's influence over Abkhaz and South Ossetian elites should not be exaggerated, when examined either through the lens of military or financial support. Many internal processes in both entities have their own logic independent of Russia. As an example, in 2014 the leadership of Abkhazia changed as a result of mass protests; however, the opposition protests did not stop after the election of another leader Raul Khajimba. In January 2020, Khajimba, in turn, left his post due to protest activities. In 2017 Anatoly Bibilov became the president of South Ossetia, while Vladimir Putin publicly showed his support to his main opponent (the incumbent president), Leonid Tibilov.

A series of electoral campaigns in Georgia during 2013–2016 significantly altered the political landscape within the country. After Mikheil Saakashvili's departure together with the United National Movement party, certain changes took place in Russian-Georgian relations. Nevertheless, they were – and remain – tactical and selective. Moreover, the whole normalization process depends on the domestic dynamics in Georgia and the Russo-Georgian political escalation of 2019 clearly demonstrated this. The new Georgian leadership represented by the Georgian Dream party maintained their loyalty to the strategic approaches of the previous government: orientation towards NATO and the EU. At the same time, the Georgian Dream team, unlike Saakashvili, made serious changes in its tactical approaches. The strategic goal of membership in NATO and the EU is now viewed not through an open confrontation with Russia, but through a pragmatic approach to relations with Moscow.

For its part, Russia opened its market for Georgian goods (alcohol, mineral water, citrus fruits) and eased the visa regime for Georgian cargo service providers (truck drivers). In early February 2017, then Russian Deputy Foreign Minister Grigory Karasin and the Georgian Prime-Minister Special Envoy on Russia Zurab Abashidze made a statement expressing their readiness to return to the six-year-old treaty on opening trade corridors between the Russian Federation and Georgia through Abkhazia and South Ossetia. Previously, this document was part of the Russian-Georgian agreement on Russia's accession to the World Trade Organization (WTO). Most likely this process will not be quick as it affects the interests of not only Tbilisi and Moscow but also of Yerevan and Baku, as well as of partially recognized entities. However, the very fact of putting forward some constructive initiatives despite the existing differences is a positive signal. Today, the only

topic of possible future cooperation between Moscow and Tbilisi is counter-terrorism, especially taking into account the radicalization of the population in the Akhmeta district of Georgia (Pankisi) bordering Russia and the involvement of people from there in various jihadi movements in Syria and Iraq, primarily in the "Islamic State" (Charkviani 2015).

In the context of Nagorno-Karabakh, Moscow adopted another approach. The NKR is not mentioned at all in the 2016 Foreign Policy Concept, either as an unrecognized entity or as a party to a conflict. Moscow is interested in maintaining a maximum balance between Yerevan and Baku, which is even more important after losing the leverage over Georgia in 2008. Unlike in the cases of the Georgian-Abkhaz and Georgian-South Ossetian conflicts both parties to the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict are interested in Russian mediation.

For Armenia, which is actively involved in integration processes dominated by Russia (namely, the CSTO and Eurasian Economic Union), Russian mediation implies certain guarantees for the non-resumption of full-scale hostilities. For Azerbaijan, cooperation with Russia allows some distancing from the West, which has very critical views of the internal political situation in the country (human rights issues, authoritarianism). In 2016, Russia supported a constitutional referendum that extended the term of the presidential legislature from five to seven years and expanded the powers of the head of state. In February 2017, Russia also supported the appointment of President Ilham Aliyev's spouse Mehriban to the post of vice-president. Therefore, the official position of the Russian Federation is an important factor in the international legitimization of political order in the Caspian state, which official Baku appreciates.

At the same time, the Russian-Azerbaijani bilateral partnership also has clear boundaries. Azerbaijan aims to be an independent player in the regional energy projects and be a partner with the West. Baku clearly and consistently supports Georgia's and Ukraine's territorial integrity. This Caspian state is not rushing to become part of Eurasian integration processes led by Moscow. In the meantime, Russia also tries to engage in an integration process that would not resemble the Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS, once branded as "a tool for civilized divorce of Soviet republics"). Until the resolution of the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict, however, Armenia's and Azerbaijan's participation in the same integration structure can reduce coefficient of efficiency of the CIS to zero.

Thus, when building its policies towards the conflicts in the Caucasus Russia avoids using uniform standards. It recognizes the independence of Abkhazia and South Ossetia, but at the same time tries to avoid a complete collapse of relations with Georgia. Moscow also balances between Baku and Yerevan in the process of Nagorno-Karabakh conflict settlement at the same time supporting its priority area – strategic alliance with Armenia.

The South Caucasus: an apple of discord?

Ever since the break-up of the Soviet Union, the South Caucasus has come to be seen – as it was in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries – as an area for serious rivalry between Russia and the West, the US in particular. Indeed, as mentioned, over more than two decades Moscow and Washington have found themselves opposed on a number of critical issues and appeared to be promoting parallel agendas.

Moscow on the one hand and Washington and Brussels on the other have diverging views about conflicts in Abkhazia and South Ossetia. Moscow views these two republics

as newly independent states, while the US and EU insist on maintaining "Georgia's territorial integrity" and perceive Abkhazia and South Ossetia as "occupied territories." Russian military reinforcements in the region coupled with attempts to alter the established and internationally recognized borders between the republics are perceived by a large part of the American political establishment as Russia's pursuit to restore Soviet or imperial domination in Eurasia. After changing the status of Abkhazia, South Ossetia and especially Crimea, the United States is particularly concerned about the possible multiplication of these experiences in other parts of the post-Soviet space (Treisman 2016).

On July 29, 2011, Republican senator Lindsey Graham and Democratic senator Jeanne Shaheen initiated a US Senate adopted resolution in support of "territorial integrity" of Georgia, which demanded Russia to stop what Georgia and its Western allies see as occupation.[4] Several European countries (Lithuania, Romania), the European Parliament, and the NATO Parliament Assembly also recognized Russian "occupation" of Georgian territories. This said, it should be noted that the Western countries are anything but united over the issue of Georgia's accession to NATO. The US, Baltic states, Poland and Romania insist on expediting the process, whereas France and Germany – the "locomotives" of European integration – take a more cautious stance seeing accession of a new member state unreasonable at least until its internal conflicts are settled and the disputes between Tbilisi and Moscow are managed. In this context, the regional visit of German Federal Chancellor Angela Merkel in August 2018 was illuminating. During this visit Berlin sent an unambiguous signal: Georgia cannot count on Germany's support for the expansion of NATO to include this South Caucasus republic. For Russia, Tbilisi's accession into NATO means the development of an extremely unfavourable strategic situation, especially in conflict zones, and Moscow will continue to impede the process with all means.

Apart from the Georgia issue, Russian-American relations in this complicated region are more nuanced and should not be reduced to a confrontation model. Unlike the conflicts in Abkhazia, South Ossetia, Transnistria, the south and east of Ukraine, the positions of Russia and the West overlap on many counts in case of the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict. The three co-chair countries of the Minsk Group – Russia, France and the US – share the consensus regarding the revised "Madrid Principles" as the foundation for the peace process. The West also supports Russia's individual peace initiative in Nagorno-Karabakh (the trilateral negotiation format Moscow-Baku-Yerevan). Even today, when relations between Moscow and Washington have reached their lowest level since the collapse of the USSR, American diplomats positively assess the role played by the Russian leadership both in the process of de-escalating the military confrontation and in supporting the negotiation process (Regnum 2017).

The Karabakh settlement process, however, remains perhaps the only relatively successful format of interaction of the United States and Russia in the post-Soviet space. Like Moscow, Washington has to balance between different interest groups. On the one hand, the issues of energy security and Caspian geopolitics pull American policymakers closer to Baku. On the other hand, the liberal views dominating Washington are closer to the positions of the Armenian lobby as the Nagorno-Karabakh movement is viewed as a response to Soviet national discriminatory policies. Following the collapse of the USSR, Washington has supported the principle of territorial integrity for all of the newly independent states of the Caucasus and it has rejected the recognition of de facto

states as sovereign countries. However, there is only minor exclusion from this general rule. Due to the Armenian lobby activity since 1998 USAID and other US agencies have been providing funds for humanitarian and other assistance programmes in the de facto Nagorno-Karabakh Rebublic, whose independence is recognized by nobody including Yerevan. Moreover, from time to time, different State legislations adopt the declarations addressed to the US Federal Government on the recognition of this entity as an independent country (Galstyan 2016).

Usually, the US and Russian approaches to the Caucasus are opposed along the lines of being oriented towards the promotion of democratically-oriented regimes of the support of conservative stability. However, the realities are much more nuanced. The very particular rhetoric utilized in statements made by the White House and State Department towards Baku is notable given that human-rights issues, though mentioned, have ultimately been overshadowed by two issues of higher priority: energy and military-technical partnerships. While the issue of democratization is addressed, it has been relegated to the periphery of bilateral relations with Azerbaijan, especially when compared to the tenor of US relations with other South Caucasus states (especially Georgia). In this way, American approach is closer to the Russian one focusing on the stability of political regimes and economic predictability (Troitskiy 2015).

Echoes of the Ukraine crisis in the South Caucasus

The crisis in Ukraine may have been continuously appearing on the world's radar screen since 2014, but it certainly triggered a broader confrontational trend in relations between Russia and the US. Certain shockwaves from the crisis in Ukraine have also reached the South Caucasus, one of the most susceptible regions to changing dynamics between Russia and the West.

First, a great deal of scepticism about the capability of European institutions and American diplomacy to resolve conflicts in the post-Soviet space has been prevalent among South Caucasus elites. Ironically, this understanding served to prevent violence in the region to a certain extent: Responsible stakeholders in Tbilisi, Yerevan and Baku realized that if there should be serious warfare in the region, there will be no international institutions powerful enough to stop it, or any great European powers ready for a head-on military collision to defend their clients' interests.

At the same time, the South Caucasus states found themselves in an unenviable position: The Ukrainian crisis has shown that deciding between European and Eurasian integration comes at a high price, but that indecision is an even worse path. Thus, the startling developments in Ukraine have triggered two processes: On the one hand, they have accelerated Moldova's efforts and galvanized Georgia's rhetoric on the need to expedite the integration process into Euro-Atlantic institutions. On the other hand, the Ukraine crisis has pushed Armenia to seek full membership in the Russian-led Eurasian Union and encouraged Georgia's breakaway regions of Abkhazia and South Ossetia to forge closer ties with Russia. The domestic support for Eurasian integration in Armenia, South Ossetia and Abkhazia seemed to have been spurred by the relevance of Eurasian integration to local national projects. All three have, to a degree, a common cause: historical reunification or at least closer geopolitical ties with a significant other, an idea that has re-energized by the "Crimea precedent." Armenian supporters of Eurasian integration

have projected "re-incorporation of Crimea into Russia" onto the disputed territory of Nagorno-Karabakh, suggesting it is a precedent for reunification of Armenia's historical lands. Supporters of integration in South Ossetia might use the same logic to reincorporate their territory into Russia. Smaller states often scramble to side with great powers, as contemporary bandwagoning processes in the Caucasus suggest. But there is also a different trend: those who expect the tit-for-tat game between Russia and the West to continue have opted to manoeuver between the two. Azerbaijan has chosen this path, floating between the East and West in its stance toward the crisis in Ukraine, and reaffirming its commitment to multivector diplomacy. Yet the time may come for Baku to make hard choices as well.

Although Ukraine itself has not historically been the biggest player on the South Caucasian chessboard, echoes of the Ukrainian crisis across regional affairs should not be underestimated. The precedents and examples created by Ukraine's Maidan protests, the war in the Donbass, and the case of Crimea are reverberating across the South Caucasus. It may not yet be fully recognized that the transformed realities of Eurasian geopolitics have surely revived the idea that there are distinct geopolitical zones – creating new fodder for political and academic hard-liners who love to ponder what this might mean for the Caucasus. At the level of individual countries, ever since Georgia was among the first of the former Soviet republics to sign the treaty "On Friendship, Cooperation and Mutual Help" with Ukraine, in April 1993, Tbilisi has been Ukraine's most loyal ally in the region. The dynamics and the content of the relationship have certainly changed over time, but what has been preserved and re-emphasized is a focus on strategic cooperation. Georgian elites viewed Ukraine as an alternative power centre to Moscow in the post-Soviet space. The Georgian elites have come to see the crisis in Ukraine as a microcosm of the bigger geopolitical standoff between Russia and the West, rather than as a *sui generis* crisis that arose out of various domestic political developments. As a result, for Georgian leaders, the Ukraine crisis has been a prime driver of Tbilisi's ambitions for integrating into Euro-Atlantic institutions.

Armenia, as already mentioned, saw the developments in Ukraine as an incentive to go the opposite direction. Ideally, the Armenian leadership would have liked to stick to a balancing, "complementary approach", having both Russia and the West woo it, playing one off against the other just as Ukraine had managed to do to varying degrees after the Orange Revolution. After the Maidan, however, it saw the Eurasian Economic Union (EAEU) as the better deal: an opportunity to re-configure bilateral relations with Russia and to secure some additional sweeteners from Moscow. The association agreement with the EU, the leadership judged, would just as surely scupper Yerevan's complementarity without giving it any of the tangible benefits that Moscow was offering. The government decision to do so, however, triggered a great deal of scepticism among some sectors of Armenia's elites, and strengthened support for opposition parties. The other precedent Ukraine set for Armenia had to do with the resurgence of nationalism. There is growing sentiment across the political spectrum that the "re-incorporation of Crimea into Russia" justifies Yerevan's striving to win back "Armenia's historical lands" in Nagorno-Karabakh. Perhaps not surprisingly, then, the summer of 2014 saw the largest number of reported cases of ceasefire violations in the region since overt hostilities ended in 1994. The next most intensive escalation took place in April 2016.

Azerbaijani interpretations of the developments in Ukraine, however, were based on different premises than those of its neighbours. For one thing, Azerbaijan has been an important partner to Ukraine since the two countries established diplomatic relations in 1992. Unlike Georgia, the strategic focus between the countries has been the creation of an alternative energy supply route to minimize Russian influence. Nevertheless, the authoritarian government in Baku remains extremely wary of any signs of agitation for regime change on its territory and in its periphery. Throughout the years, Azerbaijan's authorities have seen a number of protests, usually during election campaigns such as those in 2003 and 2005 and have come to see attempts to coup and revolutions in a certain circumspect way. Since the country's territorial integrity with the status of Nagorno-Karabakh is brought in question by the precedents in Ukraine, the ruling elite in Baku have sensibly adopted a wait-and-see approach, until a real power centre in Ukraine emerges that they can do business with.

The Ukrainian experience certainly will not be exactly repeated in any of the countries, but it has stirred passions across the political spectrum in all the important countries in the Caucasus, a region that neither Russia nor the United States is likely to let go easily. Even if President Donald Trump shows little interest in the Caucasus and, broadly, the post-Soviet space, there is potential for mounting US–China confrontation to push his administration to reevaluate the geopolitical opportunities the region in pursuit of deterrence in a new great power struggle in the twenty-first century.

Conclusion

When Western analysts describe the situation in the Caucasus, some use the term "mutual insecurity" (de Waal 2013). That, in a way, underlies the argument that no actor can feel secure by creating threats for others. In tangled and fractured regions such as the Caucasus this is especially true. Regrettably, the situation in the North Caucasus does not create a plethora of opportunities for cooperation, but seizing upon those few opportunities present is probably the key to surmounting that "mutual insecurity".

Currently, there are few opportunities for resolving conflicts in the South Caucasus. The positions of all the parties involved do not have room for compromise. Abkhazia and South Ossetia view Moscow's recognition of their independence as a final decision, while Georgia sees this as a temporary occupation. The Armenian side understands conflict settlement in terms of the self-determination of the Armenians of Nagorno-Karabakh, and not their reconciliation with the Azerbaijanis, while Baku processes the restoration of territorial integrity (including by military means), without a broad discussion on the possible status of the disputed territory within a single country.

Today, conflicts in the Caucasus are influenced by external factors to a much greater degree. Among them, we see the confrontation between Russia and the West and the armed conflict in south-east Ukraine and in Syria. As a result, the issues in the Caucasus become embedded in broader contexts and their regional format is increasingly complemented by geopolitical considerations, which reduces the possibilities for reaching compromises in the face of growing dominance of "zero-sum game" logics.

Nevertheless, the search for a way out of the impasse, and at least, building structures to manage if not resolve the conflicts and minimize additional risks, is possible. First of all, it is necessary to overcome the popular misconception that it cannot get worse. There are

possible scenarios that can lead to a situation when the current relative turbulence can be replaced by a rough shakeup, including military escalation. For example, in the case of Georgia's expedited accession to NATO, it is possible that South Ossetia (and less likely Abkhazia) will be annexed to the Russian Federation following the example of the Crimea. The growing number of incidents in Nagorno-Karabakh is fraught with the involvement of Russia, Turkey, Iran, and under certain circumstances, the US and its European allies into the conflict even via military means.

Today, all players involved in the Caucasian processes admit that conflict resolution is impossible without Moscow's participation. However, expectations about what the Russian side should do and the vision of the situation by the leadership of the Russian Federation are very different. It is unlikely that the Kremlin is ready for the "de-occupation" of Abkhazia and South Ossetia, which Tbilisi, as well as the US and its allies supporting Georgia demand from Russia. At the same time, the US and its allies will not agree with the establishment of Russian dominance in the South Caucasus.

In this context, it is extremely important to start a general and substantive dialogue on European security issues, which would include consideration of the situation around Ukraine, the Caucasus and the Black Sea region, with the participation of both the US and NATO member states and Russia. Currently, without a minimal positive dynamic on this issue addressing the conflicts in the Caucasus is problematic.

Notes

1. Crimea Declaration. U.S. Department of State. July 25, 2018. https://www.state.gov/crimea-declaration/.
   Remarks by John J. Sullivan, Deputy Secretary of State at the Ministry of Foreign Affairs' Diplomatic Academy U.S. Department of State. February 21, 2018. https://www.state.gov/remarks-at-the-ministry-of-foreign-affairs-diplomatic-academy/.
2. See *A National Security Strategy for a New Century* (1998, 32).
3. See the evolution of the drafts of the bilateral agreements between Russia and Abkhazia. http://www.kavkaz-uzel.eu/articles/252874/.
4. Resolution expressing the sense of the House of Representatives to support the territorial integrity of Georgia https://www.congress.gov/114/bills/hres660/BILLS-114hres660ih.pdf.

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