

Russia, the Western world and the Past-Soviet Countries

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ABSTRACT

The post-Soviet space represents one of the most important and conceptual challenges of the Foreign policy of the USA and Russia. Even after 25 years from the collapse of the Soviet Union, Russia remains committed to the Monroe's doctrine-like policy that puts the aspiration of Western governments and business circles to enter the region, on the same level as invasion of the backyard of its own house, which proves that it does not fully recognize the sovereignty of the post-Soviet states. This kind of attitude of the Russian ruling elite is one of the main reasons for the tension between Russia and the West. The occupation of Georgian Territories by Russian troops in 2008 is one of the most striking examples of the fact that Russia preferred to demonstrate its influence over the post-Soviet space to cooperation with the West in the bilateral spheres of interest.

Keywords: Post-Soviet Countries, Georgia, the West, USA, Russia

Fifteen former Soviet republics, with definitely diverse ethnic and religious compositions, income levels, or attitude towards their Soviet past as well as modern Russian Federation, form so called post-Soviet space, that is among the most conceptual challenging problems for the foreign policy of the USA and the entire western world. Despite post-Soviet states' gradual appearance as sovereign members of the international community, Russian officials continue to maintain a Monroe Doctrine-like exclusivity over them, rejecting any significant security role of western

powers in the region. The continuation of the problem is closely linked to the Kremlin's aspiration to restore Russia as a world super power.

Here we face more complex state of affairs, than just former hegemon's violent crushing of its smaller neighbors' interests. For the authorities of many post-Soviet countries, geographic closeness and shared Russophone and Soviet cultural heritage make Russia a natural partner. For Russian officials and businesses, the region is closer and more familiar than for their Western counterparts. It must be also admitted, that Russia considers the region as unquestionably tied to it, that cannot be left behind despite anything. In this way, the West appears to be a danger for Russia because it encourages and supports post-Soviet nations' democratic and hence anti-Russian movements.

Soon after the dissolution of the Soviet Union and regaining their independence, some post-Soviet countries were ruled again by former members of communist party apparat, for whom, the West appeared to be a dangerous partner because it encouraged or even supported opposition movements, challenging existing regimes.

For instance, in Georgia, the nationalist movement led by Georgia's future first president Zviad Gamsakhurdia, that was seeking a sharp break from the Soviet past, came to power briefly after the Soviet collapse, but soon was dragged into civil war and replaced by regime consisting of former Communist apparatchiks. As for their departure, it was a prolonged and difficult process pushed forward by indignant attitude towards Moscow's excessive political manipulation.

From the moment the Soviet Union collapsed, it was the policy of the United States and its Western allies to give Russia's neighbors, like other post-communist states, a chance to integrate themselves into the Western world. In the 1990s, states of the former Soviet Union - unlike Hungary and Poland, or even Bulgaria and Romania - were not considered good candidates for the ultimate prize: full membership in the European Union and NATO. But they enjoyed many other forms of support from the West: sponsorship of oil and gas pipelines that provided access to

international markets, the encouragement of foreign direct investment, mediation efforts to resolve separatist disputes, technical advice to speed accession to the World Trade Organization, training and equipment to combat drug trafficking and nuclear smuggling, cooperation on intelligence and counterterrorism, and funding for nongovernmental election-monitoring groups. All these were the same tools that the United States employed in its relations with Russia, and their goal was also the same: to encourage the emergence of somewhat modern-looking, somewhat European-looking political and economic systems from the Soviet remains.

Russia, on its own, firmly refuses to recognize its onetime dependencies as fully sovereign states, that makes tension with the West even deeper. The clearest examples in recent years is the 2008 war with Georgia, when Moscow withheld its cooperation with the West, even in the areas of mutual interest, in order to pressure the West into accepting its claim to exclusive influence over the post-Soviet space. The biggest challenge for the United States and its allies lies in harmonizing Western strategic objectives in the post-Soviet space (including gaining access to new sources of energy, enhancing security cooperation and encouraging political and economic liberalization) with the goal of a closer partnership with Moscow. It is unfortunate, that these dual objectives appear to be directly in conflict, as their integration requires proficient diplomacy on the part of U.S. and European officials. Russia's aspiration for seeking a privileged role in the affairs of the post-Soviet space directly and indirectly causes difficulties in the relationship with the West. The belief that Russia will always have a special responsibility in upholding world order is still deep seated and held by Russian political elite. This self-conception shapes Russia's perception of its interests; according to political scientist Alexander Wendt, deliberation about national interests takes place against the background of a shared national security discourse... which may substantially affect its content. [3]

The national security rhetoric of the Kremlin is clearly focused on promoting and strengthening Russia's position as a great power in a world dominated by a finite number of powers. This self-perception contributes to competition and is essential destabilizing factor in Russia's relations with other states. [4]

In the process, Russian policy not only limits opportunities for its neighbors to pursue full economic integration with the outside world (a step that would in most cases improve their standard of living); it also prevents their political development by constraining the choices available to their leadership. Even though official Russian discourse has given up the use of the term “near abroad” for several years, the kremlin’s approach for the post-Soviet space still reflects the continuing belief that the countries of the former Soviet Union are somehow less sovereign, less “real” than countries in the “far abroad”. The war between Russia and Georgia was perhaps the apotheosis of Russia’s policy of keeping the post-Soviet states within its the sphere of influence by any means necessary.

From the standpoint of the West, Russia’s behavior in the post-Soviet space is problematic for a number of reasons. The West is not going to recognize the post-Soviet space as an exclusive sphere of influence or as a zone of privileged interests” as Medvedev described in the Aftermath of the August 2008 war [6] As Western Governments and companies seek to establish a presence in the region, they continually face resistance to what Kremlin views as intrusion in its own backyard. For this reason, the status of the post-Soviet space has become in many ways the most uncompromising and explosive issue in relations between Moscow and the West.

The United States and its European allies have no reason to oppose close relations between Russia and its post-Soviet neighbors; indeed, good relations among the post-Soviet states would greatly enhance security across the entire region and could improve relations between Moscow and the West. But the problem is that Russia’s strategy for promoting closer relations with its neighbors often appears to maintain a zero-sum bloc mentality. This approach definitely limits the policy options available to the post-Soviet countries and polarizes relationship between Russia and outside powers seeking to establish a presence in the post-Soviet space. This polarization plays out even in the domestic politics of these countries where the Kremlin has devoted significant effort to preventing uncontrolled political transitions (“colored revolutions”) and where the question of balancing relations with Russia and the West has become a central point for political competition.

Russian intervention has consequently sought to prop up authoritarian regimes in neighboring states, since the perception remains that democratization leads to a pro-Western (and hence anti-Russian) foreign policy [5]

When Russian tanks rolled across Georgia's borders in August 2008, they delivered a high-voltage shock to US-Russian relations than any event since the end of the Cold War. The U.S. policymakers got faced with new dilemma: how and how much to support a small Western nation with no chance of resisting a Russian invasion and to consider specific changes in policy on issues ranging from the military balance to democracy promotion to Russia's relations with its neighbors as well as to review what is working and what is not, in order to develop a new and more productive relationship with Russia that had sunk to a new low.

The Russo-Georgian War fundamentally changed Washington's thinking about Russia. Five years earlier the war, the U.S. ambassador in Moscow, Alexander Vershbow, said that the main difficulty in U.S.-Russian relations was a "values gap." The two sides were cooperating effectively on practical problems, but were diverging on issues such as the rule of law and the strengthening of democratic institutions. Well before Russian tanks rolled into Georgia in August, the list of issues separating Washington from Moscow had grown long, and, more important, these issues extended well beyond the values gap.

At the beginning, the efforts of the USA, to give Russia's neighbors the chance to integrate themselves into the Western world, did not threaten U.S.-Russian relations. But then, something unexpected happened: Russia's neighbors began to succeed. In a few years, the economic growth of many former Soviet states has outstripped Russia's own. While Russia became less democratic, several of its neighbors made important political breakthroughs. All of them began to seek ties with the West that would bring them out of Moscow's shadow, and two - Georgia and Ukraine - have sought to lay claim to membership in the European Union and NATO.

Washington probably underestimated the significance of encouraging such aspirations. The situation got only worse by pursuing a strategy designed to bring as much of the post-Soviet space as possible directly into the western orbit, regardless of the potential impact on relations with Moscow. With its own economy reviving, Moscow sought to block Western pipeline projects and to close off the West's military access to air bases in Central Asia. It accused Western nongovernmental organizations of trying to destabilize Russia's neighbors. And in April 2008, Putin labeled the further enlargement of NATO as a direct threat to the security of Russia.

The United States and its European allies have also fallen into bipolar, confrontational logic over relations with the post-Soviet states. NATO expansion has been the most visible and salient element of this strategy, particularly when the discussions have turned to the possible membership of Georgia, Ukraine and other post-Soviet countries. This approach treats Russia as the main security threat to countries around its borders, reinforcing Russian suspicions of Western intent and often (as in the case of Georgia) undermining the security of the countries that NATO expansion was designed to protect. On the background of Washington's support for Georgia's Euro-Atlantic integration, including the signing of the Association Agreement and Deep and comprehensive Free trade Agreement with the European Union in the framework of the Eastern partnership, Visa-free travel to Schengen area and Georgia's apparently bolstered democracy and the rule of law that has ultimately enhanced regional stability allows us to admit that Georgia deserves a place in the western alliance, but according to Columbia University professor and author Stephen Sestanovich, "nothing will do more harm to its security than to raise the issue before NATO is ready for the answer. [1]

The post-Soviet states like Georgia consider USA and the western world as the most natural partner and external balancer of their relations with Russia, but despite all efforts, real change will come only when Russia no longer considers the post-Soviet space as a "zone of privileged interests" from which other powers are to be excluded and when KGB style views such as "Ukraine is not even a state" and "Crimea is ours" no longer exist. Yet whatever else Putin has achieved by making life difficult for Georgia, he has failed a most important thing. Despite Russian leaders' openly candid desire for a sphere of influence, their actions have made Russia's takeover of such a sphere

less acceptable for the United States and Europe. Non-recognition policy of the occupied parts of Georgia and joint efforts for its integration and strengthening, cautious and thoughtful policy of sanctions towards Russia for its inadequate and harmful actions throughout the world will finally lead to desired results for the West and Georgia and in addition to this, as the Professor of security studies at Georgetown University Jeffrey Mankoff admits, time, especially the emergence of truly post-Soviet generation in Russia, Georgia and neighboring countries (in many of which knowledge of the Russian language is already declining rapidly) will do the rest. [2]

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