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Russia's attitude towards the post-Soviet space after the war in Georgia

Russia has always retained a special place in its foreign policy agenda for the so-called near abroad. The country's recent revival and self-confidence have provided it with the occasion to revise its position towards these states and, through them, to show a new kind of engagement with the West. The August war in Georgia was the foremost example. This analysis aims to explore what has changed in Moscow's attitude towards the common EU-Russia neighbourhood after the Georgian conflict. What are the features of Moscow's approach to this area considering its most relevant issues, i.e. the frozen conflicts in Azerbaijan and Moldova?

The near abroad seen through Russia's new foreign policy doctrine

On July 12 2008, President Medvedev announced Russia's new Concept on foreign policy, which replaced the 2000 doctrine signed by then President Putin. After the five-day war, the Concept was summarised (and slightly modified) by President Medvedev in five guiding principles. Two of them are particularly significant to the new Russia's approach towards the post-Soviet space: (1) "Russia sees protecting

the lives and dignity of Russian citizens, wherever they may be, as an indisputable priority of its foreign policy", and (2) "Russia pays special attention to particular regions, regions in which it has privileged interests. Russia will build special relations with the countries in these regions, friendly relations for the long-term".

From Moscow's point of view, the first one explains what prompted it to enter the war, i.e. the defense of Russian peacekeepers attacked by the Georgian military and of Russians living in South Ossetia. It is worth noting that the 2000 foreign policy doctrine did not place this region among Kremlin's priorities. However, during the last years Moscow changed its stance on the near abroad. It launched a massive campaign of promotion of Russian citizenship in countries like Georgia, Moldova and Ukraine as a means of regaining control over them. The successful implementation of the scheme provides the political and legal foundation of Moscow's claims to protect the lives and dignity of Russians living in these neighbouring countries.

Yet the introduction of such statements heralds Moscow's intention to intervene, even by using force as the Georgian conflict showed, in order to

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Summary

Russia has always retained a special place in its foreign policy agenda for the so-called near abroad.

The country's recent revival and self-confidence, and the war in Georgia have provided it with the occasion to revise its position towards these countries. In particular, the frozen conflicts in Azerbaijan and Moldova are the most obvious examples of this recent posture.

While embodied in its new foreign policy doctrine, Russia's attitude on the near abroad is today characterised by a more active diplomacy aimed at solving the two territorial disputes and, concurrently, by a strong militarisation drive. But which are the prospects for success of such politics?

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defend national interests. In the case of the near abroad this reasoning provides not only a pretext for seeking to accomplish defense goals but also the occasion to counter Western influence and secure Russia's dominant control. In other words, nothing will be possible without the acquiescence of the Kremlin. However, while self-attributing this "right", Russia has actually breached "its own new foreign policy concept which states that Russia proceeds from the premise that only the UN Security Council has the authority to sanction the use of force, and that Russia will seek political and diplomatic settlement of regional conflicts on the basis of collective actions of the international community proceeding from the premise that modern conflicts cannot be solved by the use of force"¹.

The issue of a possible military intervention raises the question on future regional implications: is the war only an isolated case or can we expect other similar military actions? From a military point of view, it is unlikely that Russia engages in a new military confrontation taking into consideration the shortcomings of its military capabilities². It seems that also from a short-term strategic perspective any sig-

nificant tensions can be excluded as the August war has already achieved its purpose of pointing to the West the shift of power occurring in the area.

As for the second principle, the allusion is to the post-Soviet countries³. The concept of "privileged interests" was added by President Medvedev only after the war in Georgia. It marks a new and special relationship between Russia and the post-Soviet space. What Moscow announces is that it will seek to ensure the protection from any external (i.e. Western) interference to those governments that choose a pro-Russian orientation. Such an intrusion, clarifies Moscow, will be treated as a threat to its privileged interests. The legitimacy of this exclusive sphere of influence has been unilaterally decided by Russia as it serves its further strategic regional plans, namely its affirmation as a regional power. The post-Soviet space provides Russia with economic and security sources of strength, which, once implemented, will allow the country to step up its role and leverage in global scenarios.

Finally, the new foreign policy Concept is deeply entrenched with Russia's domestic policy and the need to guarantee broad national consensus on the current political direction as designed by Putin and Medvedev. This reinstates Russia's prestige as a unique

state, strengthens the link between today country's resurgence and history, provides for the successful transformation of the Russian society according to formula promoted by Putin (like "sovereign democracy"), and affirms that Russia is a great power in all its dimensions⁴. In this sense foreign policy actions in the near abroad are driven by pragmatism responding to domestic policy aspirations of the current political elite.

Russia's more active diplomatic role

Moscow is trying to assert itself as an indispensable mediator in disputes between countries in the region, and between the latter and other international players. After the five-day war, Russia has undertaken diplomatic moves aimed to single-handedly "defrost" the other territorial conflicts such as Transnistria and Nagorno Karabakh (see below). For this purpose, Moscow made use of the internal political influence it enjoys in Moldova and Azerbaijan while marginalising any Euro-Atlantic intervention. It is likely that in the short-term Russia will continue to exploit the diplomatic tool in order to stabilise the area and avoid military clashes. Such an approach emphasises its role of security factor in the region. It should be noted that in the aftermath of the Georgian war (and with the exception of the financial aid

¹ O. PRYSTAYKO, *EU-Russia common neighbourhood*, in «Russian Foreign Policy», The EU-Russia Centre Review, Issue 8, October 2008, p. 61.

² *Russia's rapid reaction*, IISS Strategic Comments, Vol. 14, Issue 7, September 2008. The recent explosion of the nuclear submarine Nerpa and the announced modernisation program of Russian military highlight these deficiencies.

³ See interview of the Russian TV channels: "Rossiya", NTV and the First channel with President Medvedev, August 31, 2008.

⁴ T. GOMART, *Russia alone forever? The Kremlin's strategic solitude*, in «Politique étrangère» Special Issue 2008, IFRI.

for Georgia) no other international player (neither the EU nor the US) has carried out similar initiative.

As for *Transnistria*⁵, Moscow's diplomatic efforts should be placed within the framework of the shifting position of Moldova's President Voronin. From a "strategic partnership with Moscow" Voronin moved on to a firm pro-EU course (following the unveiling of the Kozak Memorandum in 2003 – see below) and, again, to a recent return to a pro-Russian stance.

In 2003 Russia advanced the so-called Kozak Memorandum calling for a Moldovan-Transnistrian federation. In addition, the proposal was aimed: (1) to sanction the presence and increase the number of Russian militaries in charge of controlling the stockpile of Soviet military equipment stationed in Transnistria, (2) to make the Russian an official language along with the Moldovan, and (3) to strengthen the influence of Transnistria in the national legislature, envisioning that the latter should have been accordingly modified⁶. However, Voronin rejected the troops' deployment as the Moldovan Constitution prohibits it. This decision caused a U-turn in Moldovan-Russian relations and the President, under the pressure of the West and the domestic opposition, did not sign the

Memorandum. Instead he chose a pro-EU orientation. Moldova called for a negotiated solution of the break-away region offering to it: (1) the broadest possible autonomy within the territory of unite Moldova (the Parliament should be composed of both Moldovan and Transnistrian deputies representing national interests), i.e. rejecting the idea of a federation, (2) including the right to secession, (3) the right to have a separate Constitution, legislature, budget, and tax system; (4) finally, Moldova should become a neutral and demilitarised state (banning both NATO and Russian military forces)⁷. In addition, Voronin opted for expanding the settlement of the Transnistrian dispute to major international actors launching the 5+2 format (Moldova and Transnistria; Russia, Ukraine and OSCE as mediators; and the EU and the US as observers). However, the formula did not work out and in 2006 the 5+2 meetings were officially suspended.

Following an opposition to NATO and the announcement of plans to withdraw from GUAM (Georgia, Ukraine, Azerbaijan, and Moldova), an organisation which openly criticises and counters Russia, and as such no longer suitable for Moldova's foreign policy goals of being a neutral state, reconciliation between Chisinau and Moscow was made possible. In fact, in April 2008 Russia succeeded in arranging a meeting between the leaders of Moldova and

Transnistria, who agreed to hold regular bilateral meetings. What Russia did after the August conflict in Georgia was to try to upgrade the negotiation process abandoning the previous approach based on the Kozak plan provisions and committing itself to a more active diplomacy. On August 25 President Medvedev met Voronin. On September 3 he met the Transnistrian leader Smirnov and affirmed that Russia was willing to solve the conflict on the basis of respect for Moldovan territorial integrity. Medvedev also ruled out any parallel between Transnistria and the recognition of Abkhazia and South Ossetia. Indeed, recognition of independence for Tiraspol does not match Moscow's regional strategies. On November 14, for the first time since 2003, the Russian Premier Putin met Voronin in Chisinau and according to some media reports the two leaders discussed the issue of Transnistria⁸ without however disclosing any detail.

⁵ It is a case of secession like Abkhazia and South Ossetia.

⁶ P. QUINLAN, *A foot in both camps: Moldova and the Transnistrian conundrum from the Kozak Memorandum*, in «East European Quarterly», XLII, No. 2, June 2008, p. 132.

⁷ Interview of the Russian daily Kommersant with the Moldovan President Voronin, www.moldpres.md, March 11, 2008.

⁸ Interestingly, on the previous day, US-Romanian consultations have been held on the issue. The US seems determined to prevent a resolution of the conflict based exclusively on Russia's proposal. Romania is not a part of the conflict. Its role however stems from its political declarations envisioning a union between Moldova and Romania. Hence Bucharest considers Russian influence over the country harmful to its interests and pushes Romania to search for a strategic alignment with the US. The reason why Russia insists on a federation state formed by Moldova and Transnistria is because this is the only possibility for Tiraspol to secede whenever a union of Moldova and Romania is to be found.

What is the rationale of these examples of Russian rapprochement to Moldova? They are the evidence that Moscow is trying to modify the discussion format from 5+2 to 2+1 (Moldova, Transnistria and Russia). Medvedev's two meetings were meant as the first stage of this plan. The further step should be to gather Voronin and Smirnov, and the third one – a trilateral meeting aimed at delivering a declaration on the principles regulating the frozen conflict. This declaration should serve as a basis for the definition of Transnistria's status and for the affirmation in a legally binding document of Moldova's political and military neutrality, including a rebuff of a possible NATO membership⁹. True, until now this scenario did not take place as Voronin and Smirnov continue to mistrust each other. Nevertheless, the 2009 double (presidential and political) electoral calendar in Moldova may support Moscow's initiative. Russia seeks to keep the West out of the 5+2 negotiation process and to thwart the latter's attempts to balance Moscow's influence. The purpose is to affirm Russia as the only promoter and guarantor of a final arrangement, a role which will allow Moscow to deploy military troops in the breakaway region whose task will be to secure the correct implementation of the frozen conflict accord¹⁰. Despite Moldova does not border with Russia, in a situation where

Ukraine has favoured a Western course, securing Moldova as an area freed from Western intrusion advances Moscow's strategic interests, and helps it to establish equilibrium to NATO enlargement. The war in Georgia has prompted Russia to adopt a peaceful and active diplomacy based on binding agreements and on a search for real solution, which however implies a security design (see below).

Russia's intention to get rid of the legacy of the Gorbachov-Yeltsin epoch and to break with the "old Russia" image is also evident in the case of *Nagorno Karabakh*¹¹. The arrangement of this conflict involves the so-called OSCE Minsk Group comprising France, Russia and the US. The aftermath of the Georgia war in this region too was marked by Russia's decisive interventionism designed to solve the conflict. In October both Medvedev and the Russian Foreign Minister Lavrov visited Armenia; in addition, on the day after Yerevan's visit, Medvedev talked to Azerbaijan's President about Nagorno Karabakh. Russia's President also visited Azerbaijan. The

major breakthrough came on November 2 when Russia hosted a meeting between Azerbaijan and Armenia supported by the Minsk Group. The three parties issued a joint Moscow declaration¹² to support confidence-building measures in the breakaway region and to strengthen the negotiation process on solving the dispute in cooperation with the Minsk Group. However, no agreement was reached. The document formulates a phased settlement that initially foresees the liberation of almost all Azerbaijani districts around the troubled region, which were fully or partly seized by Armenian forces in the military conflict in early 1990s. In return the Armenian population in Nagorno Karabakh will be allowed to decide the status of the occupied area through a future referendum. But here comes the stumbling block. Azerbaijan seems determined to grant Karabakh's Armenians only a right to determine the extent of their autonomy within the administrative borders of Azerbaijan, and not to recognise their right to self-determination and a possible independence. Some analysts

⁹ *Iavka k povinnomu*, Kommersant, November 14, 2008.

¹⁰ V. SOCOR, *Russia in Moldova: a counter-example to Ukraine and Georgia?*, in «Eurasia Daily Monitor», September 26, 2008.

¹¹ This is the only case of frozen conflict combining a dispute between two post-Soviet states – Armenia and Azerbaijan – as well as secession aspirations. Nagorno Karabakh is an Azerbaijan's breakaway region with its own institutions and populated by ethnic Armenians seeking to join Armenia. Azerbaijan is therefore accusing Armenia of having seized around 18% of its territory and insists on restoring it. It is worth noting that unlike the cases of Abkhazia, South Ossetia and Transnistria, in Nagorno Karabakh there are no Russian troops deployed.

¹² The statement was also welcomed by Turkey, whose regional strategy advocates a peaceful solution of the conflict. In fact, the Moscow declaration is consistent with the Turkish mid-August proposal for a *Platform for Security and Stability in the Caucasus*. However, some Turkish analysts interpreted Russia's growing diplomatic efforts in the territorial dispute as a loss of leverage for Turkey. S. KARDAS, *Turkey Develops Special Relationship with Azerbaijan*, in «Eurasia Daily Monitor», November 10, 2008.

have even reported that Baku is considering a military solution of the conflict. On the contrary and in compliance with the November 2007 "Madrid principles" set by the Minsk Group, Nagorno Karabakh claims to have recognised the right to self-determination, including the right to hold a referendum to determine the region's status. This meeting and the consequent declaration is important as it is the first one since the signing of the 1994 cease-fire agreement ending hostilities in Nagorno Karabakh.

These two cases of diplomatic efforts exemplify the new Russian strategy and politics towards the region. Yet they are a consequence of the general international framework: the recent US presidential election, global financial crisis, internal social and political upheavals in Georgia after the war in August, and to some extent, they take advantage of the weaknesses of the regional status quo. Moscow is exploiting the opposition to Saakashvili to convince other regional leaders that: (1) the only viable way to solve the frozen conflicts is the diplomatic approach and Moscow is willing to adopt it; (2) it is a diplomatic approach which necessarily involves Russia; (3) this diplomatic approach may marginalise the presence of forces such as the US (after the war, Washington did not take any significant steps in the region due to the presidential election race. The only exception was the unsuccessful visit in early September of the US vice-President Cheney to Azerbaijan, Georgia, and

Ukraine, which did not put forward any conflict settlement solution; it was rather a way to protect US regional energy interests); (4) it is important to coordinate an initial solution at regional level (see the 2+1 format for Transnistria or the Moscow declaration for Nagorno Karabakh) without involving external players. The latter should be involved only in a subsequent phase of negotiation.

Moscow's drive towards militarisation

The August war in Georgia has adjusted the underlying principles of Russia's security arrangement in the post-Soviet space. Prior to the conflict, Russian peacekeepers' missions stationed in breakaway regions were deemed to guarantee to Moscow, along with the presence of pro-Russian internal forces, mainly a political influence over the countries. Moreover, the *raison d'être* of the peacekeepers' deployment was restricted to the secessionist areas and their governance. Since August 2008, the task of the armed forces is no longer strictly limited to the troubled regions but it meets specific Russia's regional security architecture requisites. First, it is a means to prevent the outbreak of new armed conflicts, to which Moscow may not be able to adequately react. The search for a diplomatic solution will be easier if promoted in a stable breakaway area. Second, a greater militarisation of the region is aimed not only at the breakaway regions but it is also meant to

ensure Russia's energy routes, its Black Sea naval forces and, strictly speaking, its security interests (including the offset of NATO eastward enlargement). Third, Moscow's drive towards militarisation implies the "transformation" of the post-Soviet space according to new security, political and regional criteria, which demonstrate the strength of the new resurgent Russia. In fact, Moscow's reaction in August emphasises its capacity to overturn people's sentiments and reform the foreign policy of a country such as Georgia, which has long ago declared its firm Western leaning. It is a kind of face-saving operation after the failure of Russian politics during the Coloured Revolutions and the current military stationing in these states will strengthen this course.

As for Georgia, Russia's security measures in the area were translated into the creation of a broad buffer security zones located in the periphery of South Ossetia and Abkhazia¹³ (including the

¹³ It is interesting to note that the August Sarkozy-Medvedev six-point plan shortcomings have significantly contributed to Russia's militarisation drive. The first deficiency is when the plan allowed Russian peacekeepers to determine additional security measures until the launch of the international discussions in Geneva. These measures turned out to be the establishment of security buffer zones beyond the borders of the two breakaway regions. The consequent withdrawal of Russian peacekeepers ahead of the agreed deadline of October 10 occurred in accordance with these measures. The second weakness has to do with the stationing of Russian peacekeepers in the two regions

strategic Senaki airfield and the entrances to the harbour of Poti). Moreover, in late November Russia declared that its military bases in Abkhazia (Gudauta) and South Ossetia (Tskhinvali) had been staffed with 3.700 personnel each and were expected to be fully operational by the end of 2010. The Russian troops, deployed at the bases (as explicitly requested by the two regions' authorities), will patrol the entire territory of the two disputed republics, including the Kodori Gorge in Abkhazia.

Undoubtedly, among the two regions, Abkhazia is the most attractive one considering its strategic and economic worth. Already in the 1990s Russia acknowledged that its strategic power in the Black Sea depends on the presence of its troops on the South Caucasus Black Sea coast. The August conflict represented the ideal occasion to implement this long-craved scheme. Furthermore, the latter is today linked to the prospect of Russia losing its Black Sea Fleet naval base in Crimea (Ukraine) by 2017 in compliance with the Ukrainian President Yuschenko's decision. Having recognised the independence of Abkhazia provides Russia with a viable

alternative to the Crimean naval base, namely the possibility to use the Abkhazian port of Ochamchire¹⁴. When functioning, probably in 2009, "Ochamchire base will operate in close coordination with three other Russian military installations in Abkhazia: the Gudauta land and air base (which Russians are now refurbishing), the FSB border troops in the Gali district (created in October to face the rest of Georgia), and the planned naval station in Sukhumi. Under the Russian Navy's modernisation program, 16 new ships are said to be planned for delivery to the Black Sea Fleet in 2015"¹⁵.

The Black Sea bears a particular importance for Russia, which has gradually grown during the latest years and especially after the five-day war. Moscow fears that its supremacy over the Black Sea may be severely challenged as the control of the Sea has now fallen into the hands of Turkey, Bulgaria, Romania (all NATO members) and risks to do so with Ukraine and Georgia (two countries that do not share Moscow's view). In addition, in the aftermath of the August conflict, the US has uninterruptedly maintained its naval presence in the Black

Sea and talks are underway to hand two US frigates equipped for anti-submarine and surface combat as well as for air defense to the Ukrainian Navy. Facing such a regional framework, the deployment of Russian contingents at military and naval bases in Abkhazia and South Ossetia is meant to counter-balance the Western control of the region, and to ensure that Russia's regional design is respected and, if does not, to guarantee that any future scheme will not ignore Russia's security interests. Certainly, the relationship between Moscow, Sukhumi and Tskhinvali will be strongly influenced by the military arrangements. The Geneva international discussions on security in the South Caucasus (held in mid-October and on November 19) confirmed the status quo following the August conflict and, to some extent, "acknowledged" Russia's primary role in the post-Soviet security architecture. However, one important issue remains unsettled on Russia's agenda: the question whether Moscow will succeed on imposing an arms embargo on Georgia. This goal appears a crucial element in implementing Moscow's control over the region.

In the case of Transnistria, besides the diplomatic efforts to implement those parts of the Kozak plan that refer to armed forces deployment, the militarisation trend is linked to the Conventional Armed Forces in Europe Treaty (CFE) and the implications of Russia's December 2007 suspension of its implementation. Russia explains its

and the need to withdraw them. Russia instead declines any such obligation as it has not stationed peacekeepers in the concerned area but military contingents, as explicitly asked for by the South Ossetian and Abkhazian governments. This way, the cease-fire accord has facilitated the transformation of Russia's peace-keeping forces into military contingents. J. SHERR, *Russia and Georgia*, The World Today, October 2008, Chatham House.

¹⁴ R. ALLISON, *Russia resurgent? Moscow's campaign to "coerce Georgia to peace"*, in «International Affairs», 84, 6, 2008, p. 1162. Ochamchire was used during Soviet times as a submarine base and later for coastguard. In the 1990s it was abandoned and after the war in Georgia it is again in Russia's possession.

¹⁵ V. SOCOR, *A rogue Fleet in the Black Sea*, in «Eurasia Daily Monitor», November 26, 2008.

decision with Western parties' reluctance to sign the 1999 Adapted CFE Treaty. The West, on its part, refrained from signing the accord claiming Russia did not meet its political commitment to withdraw its military bases from Moldova and Georgia. But Moscow insists that its military peacekeeping forces in Transnistria are necessary to secure weapons control, and that troops and military equipment remains a strictly bilateral issue. Russia's moratorium sets Moscow free from reporting the military figures of its presence in Moldova. It thus becomes a bargaining chip with the West ensuring Russia's role in any future negotiation with the West on conventional forces.

Concluding remarks

Russia is trying to become an attractive and legitimate political, economic and security centre for its near abroad. It is a trend that has increased in the last years and especially in the aftermath of the August Georgian conflict. And it will continue to play an integral part of Russia's foreign policy. Becoming such a centre implies Russia's strategic independence, i.e. an independent pole in the emerging multipolar world. However, the exclusive reliance on economy and energy (particularly in a situation of global financial crisis affecting also the Russian market) did not bring the expected results. Moscow therefore seems determined to develop a kind of "soft power" (displayed through more active diplomatic efforts in the two frozen conflicts

arrangement) strengthened by its new foreign policy doctrine ideology. Still, the political and ideological foundations of this "soft power" remain somehow vague and, to a certain extent, it is this weak point that undermines the progress of Moscow's regional projects. In order to strengthen its influence Russia is exploiting its military presence in the region. This is a means that will become even more relevant than in the past. But due to deficiencies of the current status of Russia's armed forces, in the short-term the military contingents may only accomplish actions guaranteeing the status quo or fulfilling rhetoric purposes. The difficulty for Russia thus appears to be implementing a combination of a peculiar Russian "soft power" and a "hard power", with the latter element being somewhat insufficient to uphold the former.

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