Russia’s role in the South Caucasus

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After the collapse of the USSR, the level of stability in the post-Soviet countries of the Caucasus, and in the whole South Caucasus region as well, has not exhibited a tendency to become strengthened. The reason for this lies in many factors.

Primarily, it is caused by inner instability in each of the South Caucasian states. Secondly, the situation is unable to change because of either the deterioration or stagnation of the economy. Economic stagnation is exemplified by a minimal realisation of the existing economic ties between the three South Caucasian countries.

Demographic crisis is another important factor. In addition to a scant population increase and low natality indices, a considerable part of the able-bodied, young population leave their homeland for Russia and other countries in order to seek employment. Other significant factors are the non-consolidation of the power elites of these countries, the absence (at least in Armenia and Azerbaijan) of acknowledged national leaders and a generally accepted national programme, and the common weakness and corruptibility of the authorities. As a result, there is a vacuum of power and inaptitude in the exercise of what remains making political stabilisation impossible.

This feebleness of authority predetermines other factors of destabilisation, especially terrorism. It is still possible to establish a base for international terrorism on the territory of the South Caucasus.

At particular times, several states (primarily Georgia) have been unable to resist the temptation to use international terrorists for their immediate goals (for example, the raid on Abkhazia by Gelaev’s gang in 2001). Terrorist information and training centres operate more or less extensively not only in Georgia, but also in Azerbaijan and neighbouring Turkey. In this way international terrorism stands a good chance of obtaining support from regimes in the Caucasus.

The threat, destabilising the situation with the so-called unrecognised states remains, and has even been worsening during the last six months. Negotiations have reached a deadlock in all three areas (Abkhazia, Karabakh and South Ossetia). The governing bodies of the three FSU states are not able to rely on public support and do not have the confidence to take unpopular measures in order to resolve the existing crises. In order to reinforce their hold and to consolidate their nations, the governments of the South Caucasus could attempt a hazardous military solution to the problem of separatism. On the other hand, a reckless military operation by the centre might actually serve the interests of the governments of the unrecognised countries. In the situation where central powers suffer a new military defeat,

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separatist regimes will become stronger, gain legitimacy and ensure the continued preservation of the status quo.

Taking into consideration the present state of affairs in Transcaucasia, it would be ideal for Russia to build an equidistant and balanced policy regarding all the subjects of the South Caucasus. The question is how to do this while taking into account the Armenian-Azerbaijani opposition, the Dzhavakhetia factor and the involvement of the North Caucasus region in the ethnic and political problems of Georgia. Finally, we must consider the obvious Russian involvement in the situation of unrecognised states in Georgian territory. Obviously, the unconditional ‘surrender’ of Abkhazia and South Ossetia by Moscow would fundamentally undermine Russia’s position in the entire North Caucasus. The North Caucasian population would not forgive having to suffer the same humiliating experience as their southern brothers. It must be remembered that South Ossetians are part of the Ossetian population residing mainly in Russia, and Abkhazians belong to the Abkhazian-Adygei community predominant in the Russian part of the Western Caucasus.

To what extent could the improvement of Russian-Azerbaijani relations influence our ties with Armenia? It is vital not to neglect the presence of anti-Russian propaganda which informs public opinion in Georgia to a considerable degree. An inadequate assessment of the role of Georgia in the surrounding political reality, and in the world in general, appears to be a peculiarity of the Tbilisi elite. These steep expectations from NATO and the EU, confidence in a relatively quick and smooth entry into these organisations, and repeated attempts to play the anti-Russian card in order to consolidate USA-Georgia relations are notions concerning Georgia which form one of the sides of a triangle together with the USA and Russia.

Thus, taking into consideration these minus points in the equidistant policy towards the South Caucasus countries, it is also significant to point out the fact that the orientation on pro-Russian forces, consisting of states (Armenia), regions (Dzhavakhetia) and unrecognised republics, is no less faulty and dangerous. This threatens the gradual loss of Russia’s authority not only in Georgia and Azerbaijan, but over the entire region as well. It seems that both ways have their strong and weak points and therefore could hardly be implemented in a pure form.

Considering the presence of additional factors and political actors, namely the Armenian diaspora and the Republic of Armenia, Russia has limited its involvement in the Karabakh conflict. Moreover, the level of Russian influence in the events relating to Karabakh is very slight and has a tendency to diminish. Therefore, it should be quite possible to construct mutually beneficial and neighborly relations with Azerbaijan. Using the support of I. Aliyev, Russia could try to secure the resolution of two issues — at least the partial renewal of communications between Azerbaijan and Armenia, and the long-term improvement of Azeri-Iranian ties. In the latter case, we would obtain guarantees against the future possibility of Azerbaijan becoming a beachhead of American pressure on Iran, something which would greatly destabilise the entire Caspian region.