

RUSSIAN FOREIGN POLICY DYNAMICS IN THE SOUTH CAUCASUS. CONTINUITY AND EXISTING PROBLEMS

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History helps us to create a wider picture of the reality in which the South Caucasus exists now. That is why we are going to discover the influence of the Russian Imperial and Soviet eras on the states in the region and identify the causality of foreign policy relations between Russia and the South Caucasian states.²

The main question is why neither Russia nor any of the individual South Caucasian states succeeded in developing an effective strategy towards each other despite their shared borders in the Russia-Azerbaijan and Russia-Georgia cases and being a proclaimed strategic partner in the case of Armenia? How did the Soviet period influence the current state of relations between Russia and the South Caucasian states? Those are the issues analyzed in this paper.

International relations in the South Caucasus are convoluted because of their rich and complicated past, among other things. Over the centuries, interstate relations inside the region developed in unpredictable directions. Georgia was a real partner for Russia in the conquest of the Caucasus in the 19th century. Yet, since 1991, relations between Russia and Georgia have been tense at best. The proclaimed secular states of Azerbaijan, though mainly Shia, and Turkey, which is mostly Sunni, are now solid allies, whereas Armenia enjoys a relationship of trust with the Islamic Republic of Iran.

Turkey, Iran, and Russia are still the main external players in the region though they have, to some extent, even become “domesticated”.

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² I mean three independent internationally recognized states when something else is not mentioned.

Except for a brief period of turmoil during the Bolshevik Revolution and the ensuing Russian Civil War, the entire Caucasus remained within the Russian sphere of influence until the collapse of the Soviet Union. Even now Russia continues to play a significant role in economy, energy and security policy in the South Caucasus.

The Russian Empire and the Soviet Union in the South Caucasus

In previous centuries, the South Caucasus was coveted by empires competing for control over it. The Ottoman, Persian and Russian Empires were the main actors in the region, which was one of the key communications bridges between Europe and Asia. The Russian Empire continued its expansion in the Caucasus in the 19th century. In 1801, almost two decades after the Treaty of Georgievsk, which established a Russian protectorate over Kartli-Kakheti (modern eastern Georgia), Georgia became a part of the Russian Empire. With the treaties of Gulistan in 1813 and Turkmanchay in 1828, some territories of modern Azerbaijan and parts of Armenia and Georgia were also included into the Russian Empire. The enlargement process was continued after the Russo-Turkish Wars in 1828-1829 and 1877-1878. Parallel to its expansion, as an empire, Russia was working on the suppression of secessionist policies, usually driven by movements to preserve national identity. The Church and educational entities that were frequently supervised by churches were among those upon whom the policy of suppression was implemented. The Russian Revolution in 1917 became the beginning of a new era in Russian politics. Of course, such kinds of scenarios had an influence on minorities living in the empire. A year after the revolution, in May 1918, Georgia, Azerbaijan and Armenia proclaimed independence.

The fact of having been part of the Russian Empire had a huge impact on modern states, and the dissolution of the Russian Empire brought a new set of problems to the former empire, both its center and its provinces.

The process of Sovietization became a common political reality for the South Caucasus. In 1922, the Transcaucasian Socialist Federative Soviet Republic, consisting of the Azerbaijani, Armenian and Georgian Soviet

Republics, was established and existed until 1936. After that, all the states became Union Republics.

During the Soviet period, member-states had no right to establish diplomatic or trade relations with foreign states and had no armies of their own. The center was Moscow but not Russian national elites per se (somehow due to the regime's proclaimed internationalist ideals), and that was one of the features that arose in the Soviet period. The Sovnarkom decree concerning the "Separation of Church and State, and of School from Church," of 25 August 1918 affirmed the secular nature of the state and proclaimed freedom of conscience and religion, and deprived religious organizations of property rights or the rights of a legal entity. Naturally, it had an impact on states where the religious factor was crucial for national identity conservation. For example, for the Armenian nation, the Church was the entity that for many years had functioned as a centralized power and conservator of national identity with its traditions and language, including while there was no sovereign statehood.

Despite the promises of Communism, the Soviet economy was dysfunctional, leading to the rise of the gray market and overwhelming corruption by the time of the late USSR, especially starting in the 1970s. The arguably associated rise of nationalism starting at the end of the 1980s then shaped the South Caucasus's future in the coming decades. The disintegration of the Soviet Union in 1991 marked the end of nearly five centuries of Russian history characterized by the Imperial and Soviet regimes forming the backbone of Russian statehood. While this event certainly had a huge impact on the world order, for the former Soviet states it was a momentous yet somewhat discombobulating development.

Dynamics of Russian Foreign Policy Since 1991

After the dissolution of the USSR, Russia concentrated firstly on its domestic policy and the development of its relations with the European states under the concept of "democratic solidarity". One of the reasons for the Bialowieza Forest agreement was the fact that Russia had grown tired of being an all-Union donor. Russia became the USSR's successor, keeping its symbols, its seat of government in the Kremlin, its nuclear briefcase, and its place as a

UNSC permanent member. The other states, despite their internal problems, had to find their own way to fit into international politics and establish relations with their neighbors and other states. For Russian diplomacy, the priority at that time was to adapt to its new role of no longer being a superpower and to find a new, apparently not “leading”, place in the democratic world system. And the diplomacy of the so-called newly independent states was mainly oriented toward establishing relations with the rest of the world, the ones that had been out of reach for them under Soviet rule.

But was it harder to lose positions or to create new ones and establish a different kind of diplomacy? In fact, an interesting phenomenon of disbalance is observable. The formerly great state, with its replacement in a weaker position, had lost a degree of its power and certain territories once part of an integral state system for it (e.g., the nuclear arsenals in Ukraine, the Baikonur Cosmodrome in Kazakhstan and numerous military bases found in periphery areas). For the other states, the collapse of the USSR became a way to establish or regain sovereignty, even though it was not achieved in the usual way, meaning a struggle for independence, which for centuries has been considered a key element in establishing new, independent states. Going through the national liberation process helps an emergent state establish some mechanisms for authority formulation, frameworks for action and a road map for its independent future. As a result of acquiring sovereignty “on a technicality” as it were, the former USSR states, the three independent states of the South Caucasus among them, have had to maintain a balance in the construction of their interactions with Moscow. The formation of these republics has brought up several challenges in the region since each of them has unique territorial and ethnic aspirations and socioeconomic priorities.

In 1991 the reality had changed and at that time there were a lot of internal problems, so there was no time or resources for the creation of sophisticated and innovative foreign policy standards.

In 2008 the Russian scholar Alexey Bogaturov presented the idea of three generations of Russian foreign policy doctrines, which helps us to understand and visualize these policy doctrines’ frameworks through the

lenses of the Russian authorities and scholars of each successive generation. The first generation of Russian foreign policy doctrine is a mix of Lenin's (the main purpose of Soviet Russian foreign policy being the formation of external conditions for the creation of socialism) and Mikhail Gorbachev's (new political thinking according to which the main universal value became the survival of humanity and its protection from the threat of nuclear war) these. Boris Yeltsin then remade both ideas defining a new main purpose of creating the external conditions for building democracy in Russia and the main universal value became the democratization of the whole world. Thus, in the early 1990s, the core concept was the idea of *democratic solidarity*. For the nation, it was easy to adopt this ideology because of its formal similarity to the Soviet one. At that time in Russia, there was no obvious need for political will to waste resources on the establishment of relations with the former USSR states. Firstly, diplomacy was focused on integrating Russia into the democratic world. Secondly, there was no money to pay for the development of a state academic elite. Academia was left without financing after the collapse of the ideology-based state and this fact contributed to the country's "brain-drain" and weakened academia. Beyond this, the representatives of academia that remained in Russia mostly became specialists in what is currently called American Studies, working in the Institute of the USA and Canada of the Russian Academy of Sciences (RAS). The two main reasons for that were, firstly, it was one of the very few ways to earn money being a scholar in political science (mainly via grants that became accessible after the dissolution of the USSR) and, secondly, it was a necessary subject at that time. Although this may be considered as having a positive impact on the development of that sphere, it was only in a narrow sense. This fact of this focus on American Studies supports the idea that in the first years after the USSR collapse, Russian foreign policy was passive and accommodative, whereas other former members of the USSR had to develop new strategies in foreign policy despite the fact that the core national diplomats in these states had been representatives not of their national states but of the defunct Soviet apparatus.

In terms of its global influence, Russia withdrew not only from the former post-Soviet republics but also from the Arab countries, the African

continent, Latin America and South Asia. Its limited resources were the main reason Russia prioritized and focused mainly on its domestic policy problems (the attempted coup d'état in 1993 and the Chechen question, etc.). During this period the Russian authorities were mainly preoccupied with the country's existing economic difficulties, which were mainly inflation-related, and dealing with the psychological perturbations generated by the loss of their great power [великая держава, velikaja derzhava] status.

Well-known as a pro-democratic foreign minister, in 1994, Andrei Kozyrev brought the territory of the former USSR back into the reality of Russia's special interests. This was the year that marked Russia's growing activity in its "near abroad", including the South Caucasus. The Russian term "near abroad" is used to refer to those states that neighbor the Russian Federation and which until the dissolution of the USSR formed part of it as Union Republics.

When Evgeny Primakov arrived on the scene, he opened a new era of Russian foreign policy, not only as a foreign minister but also by acquiring the prestige of a statesman [государственник, gosudarstvennik] who spoke about Russian national interests and the need to establish and develop relations not only with the Western states but also with the Asian ones like Japan, China, India and the Arab countries, as well as the Latin American ones. This is the moment that in Russia is called the "pivot to the East".

The second half of the 1990s and the second generation of Russian foreign policy is characterized by *selective cooperation*, which means that in this period interactions with the West were developed with some reservations (e.g., the Kosovo case of 1998-1999). The dissolution of Yugoslavia was a painful problem, and the Russian authorities feared a similar fate. In the last year of the 20th century, the Russian president signed a military doctrine (which came into effect in 2000) that included a curious point about "the first nuclear strike". It is possible that the unease that the Russian authorities felt over the Yugoslavian situation and the inclusion of this point are interconnected. However, there were no extraordinary pivots associated with the appearance of the new president Vladimir Putin in 2000. The Ministry of Foreign Affairs continued to be headed by the same person as before, Igor Ivanov, and no one at that time was imagining that Putin would become the

main force in changing Russian foreign policy. As he settled into his role as president, he launched the state onto a path of centralization and concentrated on domestic issues. He also initiated the live meetings tradition (“Direct Line with Vladimir Putin”), which is today one of the main sources of information for analyses of Russian domestic and foreign policy.

Until around 2004, Russia was too weak and internally divided to project power and influence in the wider Caucasus region. Moreover, the decision taken in 2005 to stop subsidizing Russian energy supplies to members of the Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS) turned out to be a milestone event in Russian policy. This decision helped give a fresh impetus to the economy after years of decline. From November 2001, when the price of oil was at less than US\$30, to November 2006, it rose to over US\$84. The next step in modifying Russian foreign policy was the implementation of the goal of increasing Russia’s role in international relations. In a summer meeting with the diplomatic corps in 2006, Putin said that it is time to *align Russian policy with its economic opportunities*, characterizing the third generation of Russian foreign policy.

It is obvious that the South Caucasus, a region located in the Three Seas zone (the area formed by the Caspian, Black and Mediterranean Seas), became the active vector of Russian foreign policy in the second half of the first decade of the twenty-first century. Russia began to see NATO’s enlargement with the Eastern Partnership Initiative (launched in 2009) as an attempt to decrease its own influence in its near abroad. At the same time, the concept of Russia as a great power took shape and replaced the imperial idea.

The significant difference between “empire” and “great power” in the Russian foreign policy concept is the following. Whereas the empire is concerned about the development and support of the non-central parts of the state often even more so than its central parts, according to the status of great power, a state puts the emphasis above all on strengthening its own might and international influence. Within the framework of “rebuilding” foreign policy in the middle of this century’s first decade, the term “near abroad” remained relevant.

The understanding of those facts helps us to formulate a representation of the regional and international order as seen through the Russian lens. One of the features of this image includes the idea of an area of vital interest located outside of Russia's borders. At the same time, the Russian authorities are aware of and try to eliminate the growing influence of other powers like the EU, United States, China, Turkey and so on. Russian authorities clearly understand that their own geopolitical ambitions are framed by economic and political realities.

The changes in Russia's foreign policy became obvious to its international partners especially after Putin's well-known speech at the Munich Security Conference in 2007, where he spoke about NATO's enlargement as a factor that reduces credibility in international relations, the UN Security Council as being the only body with the right to legitimize the use of force, how the unipolar world has nothing in common with democracy and so on. It was at that time that the general line was developed that the admission of former Soviet states to the Euro-Atlantic community was a challenge for Russian national security. But Russia itself wanted to establish stable relations with the West. Relations with the EU and the United States are valuable for Russia itself and particularly for its economy despite the fact that in times of crisis the authorities restrict relations, using sanctions as one of their tools.

During the current period of Russian foreign policy that started in 2006 and continues through the present, the main dates have been 2008-2009 with the economic crisis and the August 2008 war, 2014-2015 with the Ukrainian crisis and the starting of the military campaign in Syria and 2020 with the 44-day Artsakh war, the Russian mandate on the deployment of peacekeeping forces and the situation in Belarus. All these events take up enormous resources and energy expenses. We may conditionally characterize the current doctrine as based on a policy of *increasing influence abroad* and establishing Russia as a great power.

Bilateral relations with South Caucasus states

The region that today consists of Armenia, Georgia and Azerbaijan is plagued by many problems, including incomplete nation-building, cultural

disorientation, deeply rooted corruption, socio-economic and environmental disintegration, regional conflict, fragile democratization and criminal networks. For Russia, the South Caucasus is highly important not only as an element of its foreign policy but also as a part of its domestic security because the region shares borders and history with the North Caucasus. At the same time, geopolitically, Transcaucasia (The term Закавказье, Zakavkaze is used in Russian as a synonym for South Caucasus region.) is a link between Europe and Asia; therefore, its political stability and economic development is also important to many countries in Asia and Europe.

The South Caucasus is attached to the greater Middle East both geographically and by the Islamic factor, to Europe by institutions (the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe, the Council of Europe, the European Union, the North Atlantic Treaty Organization and the Partnership for Peace) and the aspirations of elites, and to the Russian north by economic dependencies and complex cultural and demographic affiliations. It is, like the modern Middle East, a region with important oil and natural gas holdings and a large number of unresolved local disputes.

Armenia

In 1991, Armenia, like all the newly independent former Soviet republics, faced a complicated reality. The republic, among other problems it needed to solve, also had to manage the consequences of an earthquake and difficulties raised during the Artsakh (Nagorno-Karabakh) conflict. From the very beginning of its independence, Armenia found itself under a blockade as the borders with Azerbaijan and Turkey were closed, and that vastly impacted its economic development. Armenia has only been able to deal successfully with two of its neighbors—Georgia and Iran. Russia played a huge role in the cease-fire agreements of 1994 and 2020, and Russia also was one of the mediators during the attempt to establish an Armenia-Turkey dialogue through the Zurich Protocols.

After the dissolution of the USSR, Armenia became a member of the Collective Security Treaty Organization and Eurasian Economic Union. Armenia became one of the states loyal to the Russian Federation among the former USSR member-states and in the South Caucasus particularly.

President Serzh Sargsyan, after negotiations with the EU on Association Agreements in 2017, rather than signing a Comprehensive and Enhanced Partnership Agreement with Europe decided instead to join the Russia-centric EAEU. Currently the CIS, CSTO and EAEU are tools that assist Russian foreign policy in the near abroad, including in the Armenian case.

The Artsakh (Nagorno-Karabakh) problem with its two cease-fire agreements, dependence on Russian energy supplies and assistance in the military sphere (There is a base in Gyumri and the enlargement of the Russian military presence is currently being considered.); security issues and the Russian presence in the Armenian economy in strategic areas (namely SCZD/RZD, Gazprom Armenia, Metsamor NPP, Armenian Electric Networks, etc.) are the key points in bilateral relations. All these factors have led Armenia to establish and develop relations with Russia in the form of a proclaimed strategic partnership. It is symbolic that Armenian and Russian border guards are collaborating together on the former Soviet borders, currently Armenia-Turkey and Armenia-Iran. Moreover, the so-called Velvet Revolution of 2018 was proclaimed by those behind it as an internal event that had no links with Armenian foreign policy, and the authorities highlighted the fact that there would be no changes in foreign policy. But reality is usually more complicated than we expect, and the events in Armenia had their influence on security issues in the whole region and bilateral relations with Russia. It should be noted that high-ranked Armenian officials related to foreign policy (the president, foreign affairs minister and prime minister) usually visit Russia first. This is also a significant gesture that highlights the country's priorities in foreign policy.

Relations with Armenia are vital for Russia and its regional security policy. The military base in Gyumri is a pillar for its security. The location of Armenia in the Three Seas zone makes the state a possible hub for further infrastructure projects. This potential may be used only after the so-called de-blockade, which will give Russia an opportunity to wield more influence over local and regional infrastructure projects. This will be possible only after an increase in the level of confidence in relations with the strategic partner, particularly within the frameworks of the realities established after the 2020 Artsakh war. One of the essential elements connecting Armenian

and Russian societies is the Armenian community in Russia. The Diaspora members will probably make their own contributions towards the improvement of bilateral relations through non-traditional diplomacy tracks.

The asymmetry in relations between the two countries is perfectly visible in different spheres; for example, Russia is Armenia's biggest trade partner, but Armenia is far from high on Russia's list of trade partners. Despite the fact that both states have their own approach to and role in regional processes and that their views may be different, Armenia is still Russia's primary partner in the South Caucasus.

Georgia

Georgia-Russia relations depend on several factors, including the South Ossetia and Abkhazia issues. In the early 1990s, Russia was involved in the negotiations over South Ossetia and Abkhazia which resulted in the Sochi and Moscow agreements. Russia also had a military presence in Georgia at that time. Internal factors such as the second Chechen campaign and the nearly uncontrolled Pankisi gorge became reasons for reducing the level of relations. After the Rose Revolution in 2003 and further negative developments in bilateral relations, both sides lost some leverage with which to influence the other. At the same time, Russian capital is still found in the Georgian energy and communication sectors.

Despite the fact that after 2008 Russia recognized the independence of Abkhazia and South Ossetia, and Russia and Georgia seemed to be on the poorest level of relations, in reality, both states understand the challenges of their own national security issues that the other side eliminates. Relative stabilization was seen after the 2012 elections with the elected Georgian Dream coalition and Prime Minister Bidzina Ivanishvili. In 2014, there was an economic activation (regular flights being resumed and an embargo canceled), but over the last few years, negative changes have been seen. The ideal of the Georgian political mainstream is a democratic unitary state throughout the borders of the Georgian SSR integrated into Western security structures. The Georgians' "European Choice" is viewed by Russia as an anti-Russian step. That is the main problem of the Russian attitude toward its near abroad.

In spite of the current low level of relations, Georgia and Russia have the same challenges in the face of terrorist entities that pass through from the Middle East conflict zones. The strengthening of Turkey also is a challenge for Georgia with its Muslim-populated regions and an economy that partly depends on Turkey's goodwill and investments. The less Russia is involved in the region the less options and alternatives Georgia has in its relations with Turkey and Azerbaijan.

Azerbaijan

As to bilateral relations, their development in the first years after independence was painful, both countries adjusting to the new realities with difficulty. In December 1991, Russia closed its border with Azerbaijan in association with the operation called the "restoration of constitutional order in Chechnya", based on the Russians' charge that Baku was rendering military assistance to Chechnya. After 1994, Azerbaijan started to become an actor in international relations due to its opportunities as an energy supplier. The reduction of Russian positions in the Caspian Sea after the dissolution of the USSR was tremendous despite the internal situation after the Artsakh (NK) conflict in 1994 and the Russian leverage in that issue. In 1997 Azerbaijan became a member of GUAM and in 1999 left the CSTO. Years later, relations improved, and in 2001 the president of Russia paid the first official visit to Azerbaijan. Russia tried to support bilateral relations, for example, during 1995 and 2009 the Russian Lukoil invested over US\$1 billion. There is also Russian capital in the financing system of Azerbaijan (VTB and Uralsib banks). In total, more than 500 Russian companies are doing business in the Azerbaijani market, among them over 170 companies with only Russian capital and 237 joint ventures such as AzRosPromInvest and HazarLada. The problem of the Samur River on the border was solved in 2010 with the agreement on delimitation. In a different instance, Azerbaijan demanded a sharp increase in the rent Russia was paying for the Soviet-era Gabala radar station. The station was part of the Soviet and later Russian strategic early warning system. Azerbaijan stuck to its price demands and the Russians eventually closed the station at the end of 2012.

Since its independence, Azerbaijan has become more dependent on Turkey. In reality, Turkey has become a proactive power in the region, especially after the Artsakh war in 2020. It was the first time in the Russian near abroad when Russia's weakened influence in a former USSR state was replaced by rising Turkish influence. And it was an exceptional instance of Russian tolerance of a NATO member in its near abroad. Another principle point about Russia-Azerbaijan relations is that since the Artsakh war in 2020 Azerbaijan no longer protects Russian borders from radical elements. Moreover, the country may become a hub for such radical elements, taking into consideration the citation of Director of the Foreign Intelligence Service of Russia Sergey Naryshkin that thousands of terrorists were relocated into the conflict zone. Nowadays Russia-Azerbaijan relations are formally characterized as a partnership.

Two South Caucasus states, like some other former USSR republics, found their path to independence through breaking off from the Soviet core. Separation from the mother state is always damaging and resource intensive. But the seeming logic is the following: Preserving better relations leads to dependence and fewer opportunities for formerly dependent states in establishing new strategic partnerships.

There are a few options available for self-extraction from these asymmetric relations:

- 1) to cut down relations;
- 2) to continue developing until the states become nearly equal in various measures (for example, political, economic, military and demographic), at least on some points;
- 3) to wait until one (the former mother state or dependent one) or both states disappear or change cardinally;
- 4) to witness a significant change in the global or regional order, which could be the probable result of the third point,

Three South Caucasian states are currently moving towards different types of relations. Georgia and Russia have reduced their relations, representing a "no win" or "lose-lose" situation. After the 1994 "Contract of

the Century”, Azerbaijan started to develop its own oil-based relations with the West, weakening its ties to Russia but remaining dependent on the Artsakh issue. Armenia currently is the most dependent South Caucasian country in terms of its relations with Russia, and it is difficult to see any other option for the next few years, especially after the Artsakh war of 2020.

Post-Soviet states are moving away from their Soviet past mainly through the rise of national identity, which is also linked to culture, traditions, and language. In many cases, aspects of the post-Soviet shift include anti-Soviet features. In many of the states in Russia’s near abroad, the post-Soviet period has been characterized by de-Sovietization and de-Russification. In some cases, the latter is due to natural reasons such as the migration of Russians and the growth of the local population. In the South Caucasus, the growth of the local population was seen in Azerbaijan.

Alongside the well-known international platforms of the CSTO and EAEU, Russia also expands its policy on its near abroad through such ideas as the Russian World. The concept of the Russian World encompasses numerous Russian-speaking communities inside Russia’s near abroad, ethnically Russian communities (a factor carelessly forgotten by the Russian authorities in the early 1990s but which became one of the key factors in Putin’s Russia in the case of Crimea) and parts of Orthodox world.

Organizations such as The Gorchakov Fund and Rossotrudnichestvo (The Federal Agency for the Commonwealth of Independent States Affairs, Compatriots Living Abroad, and International Humanitarian Cooperation), which in foreign countries is currently called Russian home and is mostly represented by the Russian Center for Science and Culture, are the main providers of Russian soft power in the South Caucasus region as well as other places.

In conclusion, Armenia is currently a country that is highly dependent on Russia while Georgia is deepening its relations with the West and Azerbaijan is deepening its relations mainly with Turkey.

Going back to one of the key questions: Why has neither Russia nor any given South Caucasian state succeeded in developing a proper strategy towards the other? When I asked this question at a summer school, one of

the participants answered that it was mainly because of nationalism. I will mention here key additional reasons for each state:

- Russia always has more important problems.

Relations with the EU, United States, China and numerous other states have far more influence on the contemporary Russian economy and policies than relations with the South Caucasian countries.

- Armenia does not see the need to do so because of the attitude it has adopted that it can change nothing globally. Being land-locked geographically and blockaded politically and economically by Turkey and Azerbaijan, Armenia has very few opportunities to change its political vector. Besides, the Armenian authorities have not succeeded in elaborating a working roadmap for the key foreign policy points, including the Artsakh issue. That is one of the reasons why other states, particularly Armenia's partners, including Russia, cannot share the Armenian position on that problem, or even find a partial concordance with the Armenian approach on certain topics.

- Georgian authorities do not want to find anything in common with their Russian colleagues because attempts to improve relations with Russia are unpopular and appear illegitimate. At the same time, Georgia enjoys its relations with the EU, Turkey, China and other states which are also its main trade partners.

- Azerbaijan also places emphasis on its relations with other actors. Military cooperation with Turkey, the procurement of Israeli armaments, petroleum-related projects and numerous other factors are lowering the significance of Russia-Azerbaijan relations for Azerbaijan itself.

During the examination of bilateral relations, it becomes obvious that Russia has no strategy for its relations with the South Caucasian countries and the South Caucasian states do not have a strategy for their relations with Russia either although there have been some attempts to create visions and follow them. One of the reasons for this lack of any strategy is that the former USSR republics, sharing a common past, make the same mistake of presuming they know each other and there is no need to "waste resources" on the examination of an opponent and evaluation of its primary interest. For a formerly dependent state or mother state this approach may result in losing

once loyal partners, and for formerly dependent states it could entail territorial and/or sovereignty loss.

Russia is continuing its predictable policy as mentioned in its 2021 National Security Strategy. In its other main foreign policy document, the 2016 Foreign Policy Concept, we find the cross-cutting theme of the preservation of the UNSC's role in international relations on a global level and the importance of the CIS, CSTO and EAEU for Russia at the regional level. The Russian policy-shaping papers consistently repeat the idea of being predictable, coherent and sequential. Today, Russia is continuing along its stated path with no essential changes and wants to adhere to its foreign policy principles with more predictable neighbors and partners.