

RUSSIAN OUTPOURINGS IN THE CAUCASUS

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Introduction

It is restless again on the Russian Federation's (RF) southern border. This unrest should not be a surprise for the readers of my articles, considering the articles on the march of Islamic extremism and its pursuit of a (virtual) connection between a North Caucasus and Khorasan emirate. The focus is now on the word **again** and, contrary to the north side, especially the south side of the Caucasus should lessen the concerns of the little Tsar.

The southern part of the Caucasus



States on the Caucasus' south side

In previous years, developments in the western periphery of the RF have been the centre of attention. However, in the last couple of months, because of the advancing Islamic extremism, the emphasis has shifted to the North Caucasus. This shift makes it seem as if it is calm in the south of the Caucasus. Putin attempts to restore the old relations from the Soviet period in the south as well. On the one hand to stimulate the unstable Russian economy, on the

other hand to use the former Soviet countries as a buffer against the Islamic violence in the Middle East and Central Asia,² which could bring back peace to the northern part of the Caucasus. Looking at his successes in Georgia and Armenia, Putin seems to be well on his way to attain this goal, and this should be a source of great concern to the West.

Georgia

Turbulent times after the Rose Revolution

After the by Saakashvili initiated Rose Revolution of 2003, it has remained restless in Georgia. As in many former Soviet states, poverty, corruption, ethnic tension and rebellious regions are the most important push factors of this unrest. In 2008, this eventually culminated in attempts of South Ossetia to separate from Georgia; the Georgian army was deployed to restore stability in the region. Without success. The ethnic Russians living in the region called out to Moscow for protection against the violence of the Georgian army. It took the Russian army two days to secure the whole province, to block the Georgian Black Sea ports and to advance on Gori, which is near Tbilisi, the capital. A hasty agreement

between Russia and Georgia (temporarily) restored peace to that part of the country. Temporary because poverty and corruption keep further aggravating ethnic differences.

In spite of the agreement, the RF kept interfering with the Georgian domestic affairs. First, hybrid efforts in Abkhazia and South Ossetia were driven up to formalise the Russian occupation of these two regions. Russian passports were provided on a large scale to the population of both regions.

The historically incorrect boundaries, decided upon in 1991 when Georgia became independent, were constantly brought up by Russian state-owned media, who said that this error must be set right. The dissatisfaction of both provinces' populations and their ultimate wish to join the RF were frequently emphasised in the news.

South Ossetia and Abkhazia

A large part of the international community recognises Abkhazia as an autonomous republic within the Georgian territory. According to Abkhazia and a handful of other states, Abkhazia is an independent state. In practice, the region is independent since 1993, however, this independence is only acknowledged by several states, among which Nicaragua, Venezuela and – who does not know the states in the Pacific Ocean – Nauru, Vanuatu and Tuvalu. Russia, a country that has a force stationed in the region since long, recognized Abkhazia's independence on August 26th 2008.

The Kremlin believed that announcing elections would be the best way to give the Russian presence in South Ossetia a legal exterior. In 2011, Anatoly Bibilov was pushed forward by Moscow at South Ossetia's presidential elections. Against Moscow's expectations, not Bibilov but Alla Dzioeva³, a candidate from the opposition, won after two election cycles. Moscow immediately forced the Ossetian Supreme Court to annul the results and ban Dzioeva from the next elections, alleging that she committed electoral fraud. These undesired electoral results were attributed to the interference of western intelligence services/secret services, with the CIA as the well-known choirmaster.



Alla Dzioeva



Giorgi Kvirikashvili



Margvelashvili

Anatoly Bibilov, a former member of the KGB's South Ossetian branch and a loyal vassal of Moscow, won the 2012 elections in two rounds. Before his election, Anatoly declared he would first consult with the Kremlin before putting together a government. It is therefore

not surprising that the in 2012 composed government announced to merge with North Ossetia within Putin's geopolitical context and by that, to declare its independence from Georgia. The South Ossetian population sided with the government's initiative and openly declared itself in favour of joining the Russian Federation. During this period, joining the RF meant a better perspective than joining the then poorer Georgia.⁴

As the two regions are now formally regarded as Russian territory and the citizens considered Russian because of their passports, they are finally able to travel abroad.⁵ Russia's presence in both regions is strengthened by the Russian forces who are there to protect the population if necessary.

Incorporated in the Russian Federation

Evidently, Georgia is satisfied with its new association with Moscow and the country only opposes the situation in the two northern regions for the sake of the political stage in international fora. The West obviously slept through all these developments in Georgia. Western politicians and media failed to notice, due to the little news coverage about that particular part of Europe, that Georgia has been admitted into the RF because of a Moscow oriented government and the presence of Russian forces in both regions. It is therefore remarkable that Georgia is still generously supported by the West.

Armenia



Oil and gas transports from the Caspian Sea to Turkey and Georgia.

Armenia appears to orientate increasingly more towards the West – a thorn in the flesh of Moscow. This desire obstructs the still strong bonds with the RF. Russia manages the entire Armenian railway network that connects Armenia with harbour cities bordering the Black Sea, Russia and Turkey. Russia also supplies Armenia with gas that comes through Georgia. By closing down gas supplies and borders ,

Moscow shows Armenia that the latter is still very dependent on the capriciousness of the first.

The invitation of Vigen Sargsyan, the Armenian Minister of Defence, sends a clear signal that Russia is aiming to hitch Armenia to its triumph cart , as it previously did with Georgia. On 27 February 2017, Sargsyan met with the Chief of the Russian General Staff and acting Minister of Defence Field Marshal Gerassimov in Moscow, to reach a Military Task Force Agreement.



Vigen Sargsyan



Valeri Gerassimov

During this meeting, the Russian authority explained to Sargsyan why the Russian military base in Gyumri (Northern Armenia) would be essential to the security of the perimeter of the former Soviet territory and why a firm agreement between both states is vital. Armenia's centuries-old friendly relationship with Russia will be confirmed again in the treaty⁷ – it will be put down in writing that, in the event of foreign threat, Armenia has the right to Russian protection.



Russian tanks practise in the vicinity of Gumry

Gyumri – heritage from the Soviet period, based in the northern part of Armenia – is home to 5,000 men who are stationed there to keep the air defence operational. Their air force is composed of Buk M1-2,⁸ S-300V, MIG 29 twin-engine jet fighter aircraft, MI 35M armoured helicopters and MI-BMT transport helicopters. Furthermore, Russia plans to operationalise the ISKANDER Surface to surface missile systems on the base, with which Russia is able to cover the whole of southern Caucasus.

If Moscow is able to bring Armenia into the RF, Putin has succeeded in expanding the Russian range of influence to Turkish and Iranian borders. Additionally, Moscow dominates the oil and gas transport between the Caspian Sea and the Black and Mediterranean Sea

repectively. Azerbaijan and Turkey feel – also because of the century-old fight about the Armenian enclave Nakorno Karabach in Azerbaijan – uncomfortable under the increased presence of the Russian force and an imminent military agreement between both states.

Stomach-ache for the West

If Putin reaches his goals south of the Caucasus, he has all means to control the oil and gas transport between the Caspian Sea and the Mediterranean Sea. Also, by closing the ports of the Caucasus and controlling the routes to the north of the Caucasus, Putin will successfully limit the flow of Jihadists to Dagestan and Chechnya and increase pressure on Turkey and Iran to support him. This increases his chances to stabilise the north of the Caucasus, and, as a bonus, he can restrict the extremist options to threaten the RF's hartland from the norther of the Caucasus and Central Asia.

Due to its structural passiveness and aversion to clash of arms, Europe now has to stand by and watch how Georgia and Armenia are taken from Europe – Putin's aforementioned chances and possibilities increase this pain.

² Turkmenistan, Kyrgyzstan, Kazakhstan, Uzbekistan, Tajikistan.

³ A former teacher who was Minister of Education from 2008 to 2012, and acting Prime Minister of South Ossetia after the election results were declared invalid.

⁴ Economic growth of 5.2% in 2014, and 2.8% in 2015. 12% unemployment in 2015. Moreover, 11.5% of the population lives below the poverty line. It ranks 44th on the list of the most corrupt countries.

⁵ Before, inhabitants of the province only possessed a Soviet passport that allowed them to travel freely within the Soviet Union.

⁶ A pro-Russian president, Giorgi Margvelashvili; and a former Gazprom director, Giorgi Kvirikashvili, as Prime Minister.

⁷ Armenia is Orthodox while Azerbeidzjan and Turkey are Islamic.

⁸ BUK: NAVO name: SA Gadfly.