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Why did Russia allow the second Nagorno-Karabakh war? Comparing the conflicts in South Ossetia and Nagorno-Karabakh

Abstract

The purpose of the study is to analyze the ongoing ethnic tensions in the South Caucasus. The study compares the neighbouring Georgian-Ossetian conflict in South Ossetia and the Armenian-Azerbaijani conflict in the Nagorno-Karabakh

It is considered, that Russia is manipulating ethnic conflicts in the neighbourhood as a strategic aspect of its regional policy. The purpose of the article below is to analyze the last two South Caucasus conflicts, where one claims that Russia is trying to repress the foreign aspirations of the “defeated” parties, Armenia and Georgia.

Introduction

The South Caucasus region has been one of the most desired destinations for ethnic conflict scholars for the past thirty years. Each conflict has become possible in the aftermath of the collapse of the Soviet Union. However, the origins of the hostilities can be uncovered in the nineteenth century, the age of the Russian Empire's Caucasian expansion. The conflicts in South Ossetia and Nagorno-Karabakh represent a direct continuation of the conflicts of the 1990s. Much has changed in these conflicts since the 1990s. If decades ago, opposed peoples lived side by side in the same towns and villages, The 2008 and the recent 2020 conflicts have fully transformed into real, well-planned warfare between more or less professional armies.

The West is attempting to accomplish a mediating role in the region. However, Russia is the crucial factor. Russia's role in the development of these conflicts is central to our investigation. Hence, our focus is primarily on Russia's regional agenda.

This paper attempts to seek the possible third-party purpose of Post-Soviet ethnic conflicts by comparing the two latest cases. The role of the Russian Federation in both conflicts allows us to attempt

analyzing Russia's strategy in these events. The study argues that Russia's actions in the second wars in South Ossetia and Nagorno-Karabakh are part of the regional strategies/purposes and serve to maintain effective control mechanisms over conflict participating countries (Armenia, Georgia, and Azerbaijan).

Since the crucial object of our study is to seek Russia's impact on the transformation of the two very recent conflicts of the South Caucasus, the research question which has to be inquired is this:

How do the Russian foreign policy priorities impact the ethnic conflicts of the South Caucasus?

The study is qualitative and relies on the discussion of secondary materials, the methodology of the inquiry is based on the comparative analysis of similar cases. The South Ossetian separatism declares its intention to reach and develop a more sophisticated relationship with the North Ossetian Autonomous Republic of The Russian Federation. Armenians of Nagorno-Karabakh aspire to "unite" with Armenia. In this view, Russia may have less interest in the Armenian – Azerbaijani conflict because, unlike the South Ossetian war, the possible outcome of the Nagorno-Karabakh dispute does not include the possible territorial expansion of the Russian Federation. However, there are other aspects, which can attract Russian interest towards the Armenian – Azerbaijani rivalry, the strategically important oil resources of Azerbaijan, with the potential to balance European dependence on Russian energy.

In the comparative study of parallel conflicts, the strategy of Russia is the central object of analysis.

The first chapter of the paper discusses the events of the 2008 August war. The second chapter recalls the 2020 Nagorno-Karabakh conflict, outcomes and similarities of these conflicts are concluded and discussed in the context of Russia's geopolitical gains and losses.

Conceptual outline

Carment and James have offered two opposing views, which are used to explain the conflicts that have arisen between different peoples/nations since the collapse of ethnically diverse states. This "collapse" can also be conceptualized as "de confederation" (Carment and James 2000). The first view indicates that the collapse of ethnically diverse states (such as the "de confederation" of The Soviet Union) causes the rebirth of ancient hatreds and ethnic antagonisms (Cohen 1992). With the dissolution of the centre of power, new power actors and institutions are built on these rivalries. The second view indicates that ethnic conflicts always spread with purpose rather than inevitability (Snyder 1993).

Azerbaijani - Armenian conflict was "frozen" for seven decades and had returned to the active phase upon the collapse of the USSR. Still, it is almost impossible to seek the real "dissolution of power" or the rebirth of new power actors and institutions while Russian Federation has inherited

The Soviet institutions and power remains in the region despite massive changes in the aftermath of The Soviet collapse.

Our analysis is based on the fact, that despite the revived Armenian – Azerbaijani animosity, the centre of power remained intact and was inherited from the Soviet Union to the Russian Federation. Hence – in parallel with the rival interests, which try to influence the dynamics of ethnic conflict – a third – Russian interest has emerged. Russia – the regional superpower – owns the capacity of military, economic and political mechanisms to pursue its interests in pragmatic manoeuvres with the three South Caucasus states, and ethnic conflicts represent one of the most desired areas for Russian pragmatism to operate.

I have introduced a slightly provocative line in the article: the famous American Gospel "Let My People Go". This song describes the story of Hebrew slaves, who seek to gain freedom from their Egyptian Masters and find the land to settle and establish their community. The gospel describes the events of the August 2008 and 2020 Nagorno-Karabakh conflicts. It is noteworthy that this phrase has been ingrained in African American culture since the second half of the nineteenth century and has even become a paraphrase of the liberation of African Americans from slavery, the most famous performer of this composition being Louis Armstrong. The rationale behind my decision to use this song as a subtitle while discussing the relationship between Russia and Georgia/Russia and Armenia is the nature of Russian policy towards the region. If these countries coexisted in the Soviet Union for decades, after the Soviet collapse Russia is focusing restrain these countries and "halt" any unwanted foreign accession.

Justifying the comparison

The Soviet Historiography described the Sovietization of Armenia and Georgia as the establishment of Soviet rule by Armenian and Georgian workers with the assistance of the Red Army. In this discourse, the annexation of all three countries of the South Caucasus comprises another chapter of the Russian Revolution. Throughout the brief period of independence, the hostile Armenian-Azerbaijani conflict in Nagorno-Karabakh (Artsakh) and Nakhichevan (1918-1920) was happening. Moreover, the Democratic Republic of Georgia led by the Menshevik wing of the Russian Social Democratic Labour Party suppressed the uprising in Liakhvi Gorge (Shida Kartli Region). The peasant unrest was supported by Bolsheviks, who conceptualized this conflict as a war between Georgian landlords and Ossetian peasants.

The Soviet rule has decided to quell several ongoing ethnic unrests by introducing the system of autonomies. The area, including the Liakhvi Gorge (and the surrounding lands), was incorporated into the South Ossetian Autonomous Oblast within Georgian SSR (with the mixed Georgian-Ossetian population). Nagorno-Karabakh Autonomous Oblast was incorporated into Azerbaijan SSR (The area with Armenian majority and Azerbaijani minority.)

The existence of ethnic tensions before the Sovietization supports the argument of ancient hatreds, but the permanent (until the Soviet break-up, during the break-up and after the break-up) peaceful coexistence between Georgians and Ossetians outside South Ossetian Autonomous Oblast (in Tbilisi and other municipalities of Shida Kartli) and Armenian-Azerbaijani coexistence in Georgia (including Capital - Tbilisi and also the region of Kvemo Kartli, where ethnic tensions have never happened) may contradict the argument of the continuation of ancient hatreds¹.

It is legitimate to argue that by setting up autonomies, the Soviet rule had structured the manipulative mechanism over South Caucasus republics. For instance: hostilities of the 90s granted the inclusion of three republics into the modified Russian influence sphere, the CIS. In the 21st century, conflicts had a modified purpose, the obstruction of Westernization and the attempt to halt the possible accession to Western supranational alliances of Armenia and Georgia.

Eighteen years ago, Georgia declared its choice to become a member of NATO and the EU, while Azerbaijan and Armenia do not express this intention. Moreover - Armenia is still a member of the Russian-initiated customs union, which was formed as an alternative to the EU's enlargement in Post-Soviet Eurasia.

The paper considers the pro-Western agenda of Georgia's post-2003 Rose Revolution government as the direct cause of Russia's 2008 war against Georgia. Plus, the principal reason for the Karabakh conflict in 2020 is considered to be the Armenian revolution in 2018. The particular provocative factor for Russia - hitherto is Armenia's occurring democratization and the increasing likelihood of the rapprochement with The West.

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Despite the frozen conflicts in Abkhazia and South Ossetia (Samachablo), Georgia declared its desire to become a member of NATO and the European Union in 2003, in the aftermath of the Rose Revolution. This aspiration of Georgia, and the steps it took: the participation of several thousand Georgian soldiers in the Iraq war and the diplomatic campaign that was to end with Georgia's accession to NATO at the Bucharest Summit in 2007, were perceived by Russia as the hostile move. It was the

¹ "Armenians And Azeris Live In Harmony In Georgian Village"
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=aqjPSe-Z2d0>

point when the Russian Federation undertook a gradual violation of the declared neutrality in the Abkhaz-Georgian and Ossetian-Georgian conflicts².

Russia has made several manoeuvres before the outbreak of the August War. If we perceive the war as a planned annexation of Georgia's regions by Russia, it will be possible to evaluate these steps as part of a well-arranged strategy.

1) Amid the international recognition of Kosovo, Russia strengthened the discourse of allowing the example of Kosovo to be extended to other regions, primarily Abkhazia and South Ossetia

2) The Bucharest Summit has decided to delay the awarding of Georgia with NATO's membership plan (April 2, 2008). Some experts noted the possible political considerations of NATO's European members (Germany and France) to prevent the worsening of relations with Russia as the crucial reason.

3) April 16th - President Putin orders officials to establish semi-official ties with Abkhazia and South Ossetia; April 29 - auxiliary troops are sent to Abkhazia (to counter possible "attack" from the Georgian side³).

4) Tensions between Georgians and Ossetians at the beginning of August, 8th August - Russian full-scale invasion in Georgia.

5) Russia recognizes the independence of Abkhazia and South Ossetia on August, 26th.

Russia ensured the indefinite postponement of Georgia's integration into NATO and the European Union through the transformation of the conflict between Georgia and the breakaway regions in August 2008. By deploying its armed forces in Abkhazia and South Ossetia, Russia has created a new status quo that gives it a leading role in the conflict, the modus operandi, which significantly reduces Georgia's attractiveness to NATO and the EU.

The 2008 war has strengthened the "not letting go" policy of Russia towards Georgia in particular and the South Caucasus overall.

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The view, which describes Russia's approaches towards Georgia and its separatist regions as the policy of balancing the possible NATO expansion in the South Caucasus, is widely discussed (German 2012) (Fedorchenko and Krylov 2015). The similar structure of Russian strategy is less discussed in the context of the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict. Sushnetsov and Neklyudov argue that Russia uses a similar

² "Putin : Kosovo must become the precedent" (in the Georgian language) <https://civil.ge/ka/archives/140782>

³ "Timeline : Georgia's and Russia's worsening relations" <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-georgia-ossetia-russia-idUSLP54772720080826>

balancing strategy towards Armenia and Azerbaijan. The strategy relies on maintaining a military alliance with Armenia, supplying Armenia and Azerbaijan with arms. Thus, cooperating with both parties, to avoid possible NATO encroachment towards the region (Sushnetsov and Neklyudov 2020).

The evaluation of Sushnetsov perfectly sums up the Russian strategy until the Armenian velvet revolution in 2018 and the recent Nagorno-Karabakh war in the fall, 2020. However, I believe that Russia's strategy has changed since 2018, which has led to the final admission of the large-scale war in Nagorno-Karabakh. Markedonov and Suchkov discuss certain guarantees of preventing full-scale hostilities, which was delivered to Armenia through the Russian mediation of the conflict (Suchkov, Markedonov 2020). However, several months after the publication of Suchkovs and Markedonov's article, full-scale hostilities have happened, Armenia losing a large part of the Nagorno-Karabakh region, including Shushi the "second capital" of the disputed region.

Something has changed, long-tested and the unshakeable (!?) status-quo was shaken and destroyed. Azerbaijani troops have gained a significant advance. The late ceasefire, brokered by Russia, returning to the process after weeks of suspicious absence, saved the Armenian-inhabited capital of Nagorno-Karabakh, Stepanakert from Azerbaijani advance.

The reason behind the recent tragic events in Nagorno-Karabakh can be the recent trend of revolutionary reforms and institution building in Armenia. Despite pledging the loyalty to the Russian-led Customs Union, months after coming to power, Nikol Pashinyan has announced that he was "neither pro-Russian, nor pro-Western, but pro-Armenian"⁴.

From the Armenian revolution until the 2020 war, the government sought to attract investments from The West. However, the context of Nagorno-Karabakh was limiting the foreign policymaking capacities of the new government. The new double-game in the discourse of being pro-Armenian can also be understood as the possible source for Russia's irritation.

Russia has managed to interrupt the possible outbreaks of conflict in Nagorno Karabakh three times (2016, 2018 and the spring of 2020). Eventually, the war has started in the autumn of 2020. The Azerbaijan army crossed the almost 30 years old dividing lines and entered the formerly Armenian-held territories. Everyone expected Russia to traditionally summon the leaders of Armenia and Azerbaijan, to ensure the immediate establishment of peace. However, this did not happen. At the beginning of the conflict, Russia was staying out of the process, only after six weeks, Russia managed to establish the cease-fire, leaving Azerbaijan with significant gains, including Shushi and the Armenian side with control over the capital, Stepanakert. Additionally, Russia gained the right to form a military presence in the region, Russian peacekeepers are responsible for a corridor between Armenia and NKR through Lachin.

⁴ "Why the Armenian Revolution might not succeed" <http://worldpolicy.org/2018/06/04/why-the-armenian-revolution-might-not-succeed/>

There is no indication that Russia could not secure immediate peace. However, the deal, which was brokered six weeks after the resumption of hostilities, had significantly widened Russia's control over NKR, Armenia, Azerbaijan and the South Caucasus overall. The Russian military is the only security guarantor of the remaining Armenian population of Nagorno-Karabakh. Armenia's economic vulnerability and the lost military competition puts the legacy of the Armenian Revolution under question. In the aftermath of the war, Russia had improved its control mechanisms over the country by retaining the Armenian population in Stepanakert and surrounding regions. Decisively suppressing any intention of collaboration with the West in Armenian elites.

Conclusion

Russia's intention of maintaining the existing conflicts and, in the circumstances, of manoeuvring through them is partly successful. Russia failed to overcome the pro-Western choice of Georgian society.

In The South Ossetian conflict, Russia's tactic was first to refrain from involvement in the conflict and then to intervene against Georgia. Since 2008, Russia's role in the South Ossetian conflict has changed from a peacekeeper to an occupier. In the case of Nagorno-Karabakh, Russia has successfully maintained a neutral position to this day, immediately after the end of the war, Russia has managed to deploy its troops in the region as a peacekeeper.

However, the South Ossetian war in 2008 has significantly delayed Georgia's rapid integration into the Western supranational institutions. In the case of Armenia, with the sudden collapse of the security guarantees of Nagorno-Karabakh, Russia has gained additional control mechanisms over the new Armenian government. The deployment of Russian troops in Nagorno-Karabakh significantly aligns Armenia's foreign policy with Russia's interests.

To conclude, recent escalations in South Ossetia and Nagorno-Karabakh have shown that ethnic conflicts are the principal part of Russia's South Caucasus policy. The 2008 Ossetian-Georgian escalation, as well as the 2020 escalation between Armenians and Azerbaijanis, had the purpose of ensuring Russia's undisputed influence over the South Caucasus region.

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