



A general trend of the Russian foreign policy -“the reactionism”- is very much pronounced here in the South Caucasus where on many occasions the Kremlin behavior signals bewilderedness. It is especially true on a number of issues with Georgia.

Assesing Russian Soft Power in the South Caucasus: Ten Reasons Why Moscow Looks Lame

Rusya'nın Güney Kafkasya'daki Yumuşak Gücünün Değerlendirilmesi:
Moskova'nın Zayıf Görünmesinin 10 Nedeni

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Özet

Söz konusu makale, Rusya'nın Güney Kafkasya'da izlediği dış politikasındaki sorunu yumuşak güç bakımından ele almaktadır. Moskova'nın bölgedeki potansiyel ve deneyim açısından büyük bir kazancı olmasına rağmen, bölgede yer alan cumhuriyetler kendisini çok da cazip bir ortak olarak görmemektedir. Rusya bölgedeki varlığını garantilemek ve Güney Kafkasya halkları arasındaki popülerliğini arttırmak adına bazı hassas etki araçları mı kullanacak, yoksa nüfuz mücadelesi için sert güç – askeri ve boru hattı politikasına mı başvuracak? Yazar bu açıdan Rusya'nın bölgesel dış politikasını zedeleyen kilit unsurları ana hatlarıyla belirtip geleceğe yönelik beklentileri ele almaktadır.

One of the common arguments both among diplomats and in the Russian expert community is that Russia still maintains healthy potential to overplay its opponents in the humanitarian area due to some historical ties, common values and culture, large diasporas.

Abstract

The article tackles the problem of Russian foreign policy in the South Caucasus through the lens of its soft power toolbox. While obtaining so much of the potential and experience in the region, Moscow is often looked at by the republics as not so attractive of a partner. Can Russia use some exquisite influence instruments to secure its presence in the region and increase its popularity rate among the peoples of the South Caucasus or it is bound to use the hard power - the military and the pipeline politics to struggle for influence? The author outlines key factors that make Russian regional foreign policy in this regard weak and examines prospects for the future.

Keywords: Russia, soft power, the South Caucasus, foreign policy toolbox

Introduction

The term «soft power» has been a buzz word in discussions on international relations since it was coined by J. Nye in the early 1990s.¹ Nowadays, it's often regarded - mostly by default - as criteria for how subtle a foreign policy of a state is. Essentially, in the time when intellectual and informational resources acquire greater importance in the global "battle for the hearts and minds", soft power tools are getting more sophisticated and diverse. Working with the media, supporting political opposition, taking advantage of NGOs, engaging ethnic lobbyists and diasporas, influencing expert community, implementing exchange programs are nothing new but nowadays, more than ever, it demands a great deal of political will, wit, patience, expertise and resources - simply because the stakes are higher.

Vladimir Putin has a reputation of a stalwart critic of the West who is, considering his background, inclined to use rather tough foreign policy toolbox. He is often portrayed as an iron-fist ruler, restoring Russia's role as world's super-power through conventional means - upgrading the weaponry, reforming the army, empowering the security ministries (*the "siloviki"*), suppressing the dissent, and expanding the pipelines network to the West and the East. But is this enough in making things work for Russia in its probably most volatile neighborhood - the South Caucasus? The immediate damage to the Russian international image after the war in Georgia in 2008 exposed Moscow's own vulnerability in the Caucasus² and demonstrated its inability to delicately use some fine political tools in the region where it has so much of "the soft power potential".

A Decade of Missed Opportunities

Remarkably, Moscow seemed to learn little lessons from the conflict. Shortly after, it secured its stronghold in the region through the key military treaties. On September 15th, 2009 it signed military agreements with Abkhazia and South Ossetia for the 49-year term.³ Later, in 2010, it managed to prolong the presence of the 102nd military base in Armenian Gyumri until 2044.⁴ Although it can be deemed as an immediate foreign policy success, in the long term it strengthened "the stick" not "the carrot". In fact, since the collapse of the Soviet Union, Russia made little effort in projecting its soft power onto its neighbors in the South Caucasus. The reasons are many and quite nuanced.

The first, and an obvious one, is that it lost its time and an array of opportunities in the 1990-s. Being plagued by internal concerns and external problems Russia failed to come up with a decent integration project. The Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS), crafted to be the one, was (and, to a great extent, is) a lame bureaucracy-dragged organization unable to fully engage former USSR republics. The stunning statistics show that by 1997 of all the 880 treaties concluded in the framework of the CIS only 130 (15%) were implemented.⁵ The republics chose their own identity models, development patterns, prioritized their foreign partners and formed alternative organizations -such as GUAM. It was getting even more challenging for Russia as the two rivals- a regional (Turkey) and a global (the United States)⁶ craved for the same geopolitical space, forging political alliances, developing energy projects, clinching military deals with the republics.

The success of the Rose Revolution in Georgia was a promise for the rest of the post-soviet space, including the South Caucasus. Or, at least, they thought so in Washington. However, similar failed attempts to unseat governments in Azerbaijan and Armenia rose suspicions in the ruling circles of the respective countries and as they tried hard to remain in power it made them more careful (or fearful) in their relations with Western partners. This was probably Russia's second historical opportunity to bolster its influence in the two countries. Once again Moscow failed to fully embrace it. Certainly, there was visible, some would even argue sustainable, economic activity: a strategic Russian bank "VTB" came to own 100% of CJSC "VTB Armenia"⁷ and 51% of "Bank VTB in Azerbaijan";⁸ in 2006 world-largest gas company Gazprom signed a 25-year strategic cooperation agreement with Armenian government enabling the company to control all of the natural gas-related projects in the country; Russian cell phone operators Beeline, MTC and Megafon purchased large shares in national operators in Georgia, Armenia, and Abkhazia.

However, these were targeted moves which enriched Russian companies and fortified eco-

nomie presence of Russia as a state but which did little for Russia as a country. And in time when it could have obtained loyalty it brushed it off. Surely, Georgia chose a path toward partnership with the US while Azerbaijan was relying on its own development through natural resources, Turkish support and West-oriented pipelines. In that sense it was hard, if ever possible, to divert their course. But Armenia which is often referred to as "Russia's last bastion in the region" deserved a treatment of a partner. When in 2006 Russia increased the gas price twice to \$110 per 1000 m³ it raised many eyebrows in Yerevan, so did many other economic "initiatives".⁹ Armenian alliance with Russia is rather the one born out of necessity than that of choice - that is one thing Moscow should bear in mind and is something the Kremlin should learn how to take advantage of, not how to abuse.

Russia in the South Caucasus: A Problem of the Policy-Making

This second problem, failure to secure greater loyalty, has a lot to do with the third one - rooted in the very making of the Russian foreign policy.¹⁰ Russia's limited toolbox is in that it often supports current authorities and neglects opposition forces. As a result, many of the conflicting policies of ruling elites get associated with Moscow which supports the government and not the nation. This is especially true with Armenia and the South Ossetia. The attitude and policy are plain and sometimes remind of the worst practices of the imperial time. Indeed, inserting/supporting a loyal ruler, allocating wads of cash, leaving it all for them to work it out is a poor strategy in modern politics with dynamic competitiveness. Even if it works it does so to a point - until some offers more resources and/or brings their own man in a more exquisite manner (a color revolution may be?). The Kremlin has a lot to learn in the art of diversifying its contacts inside the republics making sure the relations at least do not deteriorate when a new government is in place. To a great extent it is what happened to Russian-Georgian relations after Mikhail Saakashvili's rise to power.

Working with the opposition without irritating the ruling elite is a gentle resource-demanding and a time-consuming effort. However, taking advantage of the “second track diplomacy” is even more challenging to some degree. NGOs and other civil groups are critical to country’s foreign policy in the era when states delegate more powers to non-state actors. In the Russian case it could be exactly the instrument that would have made up for the pitfalls of the official policies, improved country’s profile among the population, brought an understanding that Russia is bigger than its current ruling class, but this is exactly the absence of the tool that is the fourth problem.

The idea to project influence through non-governmental sector would probably trigger a fair amount of skepticism. Some Russian NGOs are preoccupied with Russia’s own issues of democracy and civil-society building; many set local goals, and receive foreign funding for the needs inside the country. Almost all lack resources to operate outside of Russia and unlike their Western counterparts do not position themselves as “globally-oriented”. The bigger question would be what kind of a constructive agenda they may be able to bring to South Caucasus societies? With this in mind it is still worth to note that it is exactly the “people-to-people” platform that other actors effectively utilize and until Russia does not have its own fully-fledged civil society and powerful non-governmental organizations this vital resource will remain underdeveloped.

One of the common arguments both among diplomats and in the Russian expert community is that Russia still maintains healthy potential to overlay its opponents in the humanitarian area due to some historical ties, common values and culture, large diasporas.¹¹ This view reflects the trend of relying on the inertia of brotherly [special] relations with post-Soviet republics just because “we used to be one country”. While Russia does have this advantage one should bear in mind that this resource is quickly fading away as new generations appear who do not have this experience of living in a “common home” and to whom Russia is just a foreign, though neigh-

boring, country. This is Russia’s fifth miscalculation in the region. The diasporas could indeed be a potential leverage but to a point. The latest census showed there are 1,182,388 Armenians, 157,803 Georgians and 603,070 Azerbaijani living in Russia.¹² Although the numbers are grossly underestimated it shows the significance of economic and cultural ties between Russia and the republics for their peoples. Some would justly argue that they have little, if any, power to influence policies toward their native lands. Russia is no the United States in that politicians running for Parliament aren’t pressured on foreign policy issues from their constituencies neither are there heavy-weight ethnic lobbying groups such as the ANCA, the AAA or the USAN. The challenge is how to master the resource and engage the diasporas in decision-making process concerning the South Caucasus, though for now the prospects for it look bleak.

A general trend of the Russian foreign policy - “the reactionism” - is very much pronounced here in the South Caucasus where on many occasions the Kremlin behavior signals bewilderment. It is especially true on a number of issues with Georgia. When Tbilisi offered a visa-free travel for North Caucasus residents, and later, for all Russian citizens Moscow looked as if it was taken by surprise. The best it could do was to suggest restoring diplomatic relations - a move that was initially not only unacceptable for Georgia without first resolving the so called “status issues” but that also puzzled the leadership in Tskhinvali and Sukhumi who for a second thought the Kremlin was going to trade them in.¹³ This can be considered as Moscow’s sixth problem in dealing with regional challenges.

Russia watches as the United States, the European Union, Turkey, and other principle actors build up their political, military, economic¹⁴ and cultural presence in the region with ill-concealed irritation. Frequently it is reflected in the cold war-style rhetoric coming from the Kremlin which also renders bad services for the Russian image in the world and in the post-Soviet space in particular. It feeds various phobias on its “imperial” ambitions and scares many in the region



What really concerns (at least it should) Russian policy-makers is something many analysts talk about time and again: Russian foreign policy in the South Caucasus is in many ways a direct continuation of its domestic politics in the North Caucasus.

off the Russian presence there. The whole idea of any Russian activity in the South Caucasus as part of its “revisionist” strategy is a tremendous stumbling block for Russian foreign policy and the *seventh* problem Russia encounters. The phobias are partly fueled by other interested players, partly - a product of Russia’s own actions and wordings. In November 2008, shortly after the war in South Ossetia, then-President Medvedev called the former Soviet space “a zone of Russian privileged interests”,¹⁵ raising even more suspicions on whether Russia is willing to restore its regional and global status via assertive policy toward its neighbors.

The Internal Dimension as a Diagnosis

What really concerns (at least it should) Russian policy-makers is something many analysts talk about time and again: Russian foreign policy in the South Caucasus is in many ways a direct continuation of its domestic politics in the North Caucasus.¹⁶ Since this region, in the words of Moscow Carnegie Center expert Alexey Malashenko became Russia’s own “internal abroad”¹⁷ many of the problems the Kremlin encounters in the North “spill over” to and get projected in the South.¹⁸ So do some policy patterns. While a number of experts and political activists argue

Russia should “stop feeding the Caucasus” the general consensus, however, recognizes Russia’s need to have a stable South in order to have a stable North. But sometimes there’s a feeling that either nobody knows what exactly is to be done or they believe it is too complicated to get serious about it. Unfortunately for Russia, leaving it up for grabs is in many cases a preferred “solution”. The challenge of “binding the management” in the Caucasus is an eighth, probably most daunting problem Russia faces and until it puts its own house in order, no substantial progress in its foreign policy in the South Caucasus should be expected.

Quite often Moscow’s failure to project more of its political capacity is linked to Russia’s inability to become a fully functional mediator in regional conflicts. While this could be considered another, ninth, problem of Russian soft power toolbox in the region one needs to admit a great deal of mediating efforts it took in concluding the truces. And if “the politics is the art of the possible” it did the best it could at the initial stage in South Ossetia, Abkhazia and Nagorno-Karabakh (the Dagomys Agreements of 1992, the Moscow agreements of 1993, and the Bishkek Protocols of 1994 respectively). With time, however, Russia transformed from an intermediary into a conflict party and, later, into a belligerent in Georgian conflicts pushing the prime participants -Abkhazia and South Ossetia to the side- a strategic miscalculation Russia cannot now and probably won’t find a smart solution for.

In Nagorno Karabakh, however, the picture looks different. Putin’s personal attitude toward mediation is well known¹⁹ and since Russia under Medvedev showed more mediating activity in the Minsk Group it doesn’t look like there’s anything more it can and wants to do - especially after many of the efforts were labeled a failure. Being caught between the devil and the deep blue sea Russia will not, for its own geopolitical sake, choose sides, thought tacitly nodding to Yerevan. Eventually the role of a mediator is to help settle a conflict, not guarantee its resolution while it’s for the two parties to come to agreement. If Russia decides to go beyond that it will

most likely run into another disastrous blunder of the kind -the tenth- picking up initiatives that are politically dead on arrival.

Conclusion

A common recommendation for raising Russia foreign policy efficiency in the post-Soviet space reads as “become a role-model”, “lead by example”, and “offer a decent [political, economic, cultural] integration project”. It could have been a main conclusion of the paper as well and to a large extent it is. The bitter truth for the Kremlin is that Russia is in many ways a fairly unattractive partner for its regional neighbors and for twenty years since the end of the Soviet Union it did not design any project to engage them. This is something that many seem to understand and talk about in the Russian expert community²⁰ and is probably no surprise for the Russian government.

But there is some paradox a few talk about: while Russia displays a great number of political “tumors” -suffocating scale of corruption, non-transparency of governing institutions, lack of (if any) rule of law, non-accountability of the officials, irremovability of the elites, and basic theatricality of the political system- many of the same features can be observed in the republics of the South Caucasus.²¹ In other words, on the one hand they shy away from Russia for these reasons, on the other - they themselves do little to get rid of them within their countries. So whether Moscow prefers to work within this very “environment” or to change itself and its partners to a more transparent and effective relationship system is in some sense a decisive question. But until Russia is able to show a positive example of managing ethnic conflicts, religious tensions, territorial disputes it will be perceived by many as a part of the problem, not a part of the solution.

Russia’s opportunities in the regions are not yet fully wasted but are evaporating at a high speed. Russia is still a largest investor and a trading partner for Armenia. It has military presence in the country (about 5,000), as well as Abkhazia

and South Ossetia (up to 4,000 in each republic). The latter two are totally dependant on Russian aid and in a short-run will be under its tight patronage. At the same time, there is a promise of a Russia-Georgian “reset” with a new government in Tbilisi in place and several cooperation avenues are already being worked through.²² Some joint projects with Azerbaijan, though fall under the fire of skepticism, are negotiated.²³ Although it is unlikely to change the main course of the events it may open some space for Russian political maneuvering, give it some amount of time to fill in the gaps of the past pitfalls. The main conclusion Moscow should draw is not to try to pin the blame for them on others, but look into

its own policy or the absence of thereof. As far as the very soft power facet is concerned it is important to pre-analyze how any political and economic initiative Russia comes up with would resonate with country’s popular image in the region.

Certainly, every state has a record of foreign policy miscalculations. But the record shows that making too many errors in regions of strategic importance, which the Caucasus is, can be costly. To paraphrase the idiom - it takes a strong state to make tender foreign policy. The question is how tender Russian regional foreign policy really is?

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