

The 2013 Electoral Cycle in the South Caucasus and the Russia Factor

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Abstract

Russia continues to consider the South Caucasus as a region of significance for its strategic interest. Therefore, Moscow viewed the presidential elections held in Armenia, Azerbaijan and Georgia during 2013 with great interest. However, none of these elections signaled any major shifts or breakthroughs for Russia's foreign policy in the South Caucasus. Nonetheless, Moscow is largely satisfied with the outcomes of the elections in terms of its main interest of retaining the status quo that has emerged in the South Caucasus since August 2008. However, Russia lacks an overall strategy towards the region, including a lack of engagement with the wider civil societies of the region, which may be storing up problems for its relations with these states in the long-term.

In 2013, presidential elections took place in all three states of the South Caucasus: 18 February in Armenia, 16 October in Azerbaijan and 27 October in Georgia. Aside from their domestic significance, elections in this region also have a geopolitical dimension to them. Not only are each of these countries involved in unresolved ethno-political and secessionist conflicts, but the region as a whole is often also seen as a platform for the competing geopolitical interests of larger neighboring, regional and global powers, including Russia, the US, the EU, Turkey and Iran.

Russia plays a major role in the geopolitical landscape of the South Caucasus, with Moscow seeing it as a region with special significance for its strategic interests. However, unlike the USSR, modern Russia does not claim to play the role of a global actor, with its ambitions and sources of influence on the international stage largely stemming from its position as a nuclear power and a permanent member of the UNSC. Together with China, Russia has for some time argued for the need to balance the principle of the inviolability of state sovereignty as a central tenant of the international system with that of international intervention. This is in spite of the fact that in practice in the South Caucasus, Moscow has not behaved completely consistent with its position relating to the centrality of state sovereignty, by recognizing the independence of Abkhazia and South Ossetia. This act of recognizing these two breakaway regions of Georgia as independent entities set a precedent for a reconsideration of the territorial borders of the former Soviet republics. Whilst it has not yet formulated an official strategy for the region, Russia has clear ambitions to act as a regional leader in the South Caucasus.

However, contrary to popular media stereotypes, Russia's actions in the South Caucasus are not aimed at restoring the Soviet Union or imperial domination. Instead, Moscow is primarily concerned with maintaining stability, often interpreted as the stability of the established political regimes in the region. Russia itself

is a Caucasian power with seven of its national republics forming part of the greater Caucasus space. Indeed, the territory of the Russian Caucasus is larger than that of the three South Caucasus states combined. Many of the current ethno-political problems in the Russian North Caucasus are themselves closely linked to conflicts in the South Caucasus. Russia, therefore, is, to a lesser and greater extents, intertwined within the socio-political processes of the South Caucasus, including presidential elections. This article, thus, examines the significance of the most recent presidential electoral cycle in the South Caucasus for Russia's foreign policy towards the region.

Georgia: More Than an Election

The 27 October Presidential election significantly altered the internal political landscape of Georgia. Aside from Giorgi Margvelashvili becoming the new President, the earlier constitutional changes had also resulted in the division-of-power between the presidency and parliament to be altered in favor of the prime minister and the parliamentary majority.

Whichever way this transition from a Presidential Republic to a Parliamentary model develops, one thing is for certain—Mikhail Saakashvili's ten-year period in power since the Rose Revolution in 2003 has come to an end. The departure from power of the third Georgian President has given rise to hope that a change in relations with Russia are possible, particularly since one of the election pledges of the 'Georgian Dream' party was to normalize relations with its larger-neighbor. As part of his presidential campaign, Giorgi Margvelashvili talked about his goal of lowering the temperature in Georgia's tense relations with Moscow. Such pledges, however, did not emerge out of thin air. Some changes in relations were already evident following the 2012 parliamentary elections, in which an overall parliamentary majority was won by the 'Georgian Dream' coalition, centered on Bidzina Ivanishvili. The first direct diplomatic dialogue between Russia and Georgia, following

a long-break, took place on 14 December 2012, when Russia's Deputy Foreign Minister, Grigory Karasin and the Special Representative of the Georgia Prime Minister, Zurab Abashidze met in Geneva. This was followed by a meeting between the Russian Prime Minister Dmitry Medvedev and his Georgian counterpart, Ivanishvili at the World Economic Forum in Davos on 24 January 2013. This was the first time that the Russian and Georgian Heads-of-Government had talked since the August 2008 war.

Over the course of the 2013 Georgian presidential electoral campaign, Moscow remained a fairly passive player, deciding not to throw its support behind a "preferred" candidate. This is perhaps explained by Russia's attempts to move away from its principled position on the recognition of the independence of Abkhazia and South Ossetia from Georgia. During the Russia–NATO Council meeting in December 2013, Russia's Foreign Minister, Sergei Lavrov once again called on NATO to acknowledge the changing realities in the South Caucasus, in spite of the fact that the maintenance of Georgian territorial integrity continues to be supported by all political camps within Georgia. Even Nino Burjanadze, who received 10% of the vote during the October election, and who had openly called for the normalization of relations with Moscow during the election campaign, supports this position. As a result, in today's political environment in Georgia, less than 10% of the electorate do not consider a pro-Western foreign policy direction as the only viable path for Georgia. Furthermore, even this particular strand of public opinion supports the maintenance of the territorial integrity of Georgia, including South Ossetia and Abkhazia. It should be noted that Nino Burjanadze is perhaps not best placed to act as a leader of the pro-Russian factions within Georgia, because some cannot forgive her for being part of the Sakaashvili team that dispersed the opposition protests in November 2007.

Inter-state relations are not, however, solely based on the interpersonal relationships between leaders. Many of the problems between Moscow and Tbilisi go back to the 1990s, with the Saakashvili regime simply providing a new impetus to them following the Rose Revolution. The Georgian authorities, however, seem to have over-estimated the extent of the split and under-estimated the myriad of overlapping interests between Russia and the West. At the present time, Russia and Georgia remain fundamentally divided regarding the future prospects of the Georgian state-building project. During the pre-election debate in 2013, the eventual winner, Giorgi Margvelashvili, talked about the need to continue the politics of 'non-recognition', in other words the stated goal of persuading other states and international orga-

nizations to recognize Abkhazia and South Ossetia as occupied territories. However, this position openly challenges Moscow's interests, and characterizes Russia as an occupying power, whilst Abkhazia and South Ossetia would lose all of their political status.

At the same time, the difficult and tense situation in the North Caucasus, suggests the need for a greater cooperation between Russia and Georgia in security affairs. Even the Georgian Defense Minister, Irakli Alasania during his August visit to Washington expressed an interest in engaging in greater cooperation over security provisions for the 2014 Sochi Winter Olympics, in spite of the difficult legacy of the 2008 Russian–Georgian military conflict. Judging from recent events, such as the arrest of Mikail Kadiev and Rizvan Omarov on suspicion of the murder of Alimsultan Alkhamatov, the head of Khasaviurt rayon in Dagestan, and of Yusip Lakaev, accused of the murder of the Russia vice-consul to Abkhazia, Dmitry Vishernev and his wife, there would seem to be a possible avenue for cooperation.

Nonetheless, such cooperation remains very piecemeal. On the surface, it seems that both sides have developed a more pragmatic attitude to their relations without obvious complications. It is likely that in the near future, both sides will seek to normalize their bilateral relationship in spite of their ongoing diplomatic rift. Healing their diplomatic ties, however, is likely to remain highly problematic for the future.

Russia–Armenia: a Difficult Year

Unlike Georgia, Armenia has always been seen as Russia's closest ally, not only in the South Caucasus, but in the whole of the post-Soviet Space. In 2012, around 50% of all foreign investment into Armenia came from Russian investors, and a quarter of all businesses with foreign capital also come from Russia. Armenia is a member of the Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO), and the 102 base in Gyumri (besides its military contingents in Abkhazia and South Ossetia) is Russia's only remaining military base in the South Caucasus. Moreover, Russian border guards patrol Armenia borders.

And yet, 2013 has become one of the most difficult years in the bilateral relationship between Russia and Armenia. Over the course of a few months, Moscow has sought to prevent Yerevan from signing an Association Agreement with the EU. Only in September, did President, Serzh Sargsyan make the announcement that Armenia would join the Customs Union and the Eurasian Union, rather than following a European integration vector. This is in spite of the fact that over the course of the year high-level officials in Armenia, including the Prime Minister Tigran Sargsyan and the deputy Foreign Minister Shavarsh Kocharyan, adopted a skeptical posi-

tion with regard to Armenia joining the Customs Union, citing in particular that lack of a territorial border with Russia and the need to diversify Yerevan's foreign relations. So the question remains to what extent did the presidential elections played a role in this?

On the one hand, Moscow made it clear, in various ways, that it's preferred negotiating partner would be the incumbent President Serzh Sargsyan. Whilst on the other, Sargsyan's victory in the polls on 18 February 2013 marked his de-facto first term as an independent political figure. By the end of his first-term in 2013, Sargsyan was no longer seen as simply the chosen successor of the 2008 outgoing President, Robert Kocharyan, having managed to move himself out of the shadows of the previous administration, both in domestic and foreign affairs. He managed to draw a line under the tragic events of May 2008, when the previous presidential campaign was marred by wide-spread protests, the regime's use of force to put these protests down, and the opposition's subsequent refusal to recognize the election result. In his first five-year term, Sargsyan succeeded in minimizing the polarization within Armenian society and dealing with the protests' fervor in the country. Unlike Kocharyan, Sargsyan has built relations with the opposition, and most of the leading political forces are now represented in the key political institutions, including the opposition 'Armenian National Congress' and the Heritage party. In foreign affairs, Sargsyan has, in turn, succeeded in preventing the emergence of a rift with the West, a prospect which loomed large under the previous Armenian administration, particularly between 2003–8.

At the same time, opposition voices in Armenia have frequently rallied together around their criticisms of Armenia's one-way dependent relationship with Russia. Such groups have also directed criticism at the regime in Russia, which is seen as responsible for supporting not only the prevailing political leadership in Armenia, but also the powerful oligarchs and the existing political order. This is particularly the case in regard to Robert Kocharyan and his personal responsibility for the tragedy in March 2008. The main opposition figure during the 2013 elections was the leader of the Heritage party, Raffi Hovannisian, who, unexpectedly for many, won over 36% of the vote. His electoral successes can be explained by the fact that he managed to bring together most of the protest votes. Serzh Sargsyan, who unlike his predecessor presented himself as against any use of force against opposition groups, has also sought to promote a more diversified course in Armenian foreign policy. Unfortunately, this has often resulted in more fraught relations with Moscow, made more difficult by Yerevan's despondence at the growing military-

industrial relationship between Russia and Azerbaijan, and the rising cost of Russian gas.

And yet in September 2013, Yerevan announced that it will join the Russian-led Eurasian Union integration project, thus taking a key pro-Russian decision, suggesting a similar direction in its foreign policy. In response, the opposition made their reservations about Russian influence in Armenia known, as seen with the local protests against Putin's visit to Gyumri and Yerevan. Whilst their numbers were incomparable with those which took place for example in Ukraine in recent weeks, protests against an official visit by a foreign Head-of-State have been unknown in Armenia until now. However, the Kremlin's enduring support for the incumbent Armenian regime, a lack of interest in understanding the motives underlying the opposition movement (i.e. their desire to see the emergence of constructive relations with the EU), and a disinterest in building relations with opposition groups, has resulted in the emergence of forces within Armenia itself that are critical of the relationship with Russia. Although these groups are splintered, they all agree that Russia's monopolizing influence on Armenia is undesirable.

Azerbaijan: Between Electoral Support and Xenophobic Incidents

Today, Azerbaijan has a special place in Russia's foreign policy in the South Caucasus. It does not occupy the same clear-cut position of close ally or difficult neighbor as is the case with Armenia or with Georgia. In September 2010, after difficult and prolonged negotiations, Russia became the first of all of Azerbaijan's Caucasian neighbors, with which it has finally settled the issue of border delimitation and demarcation. Unlike in the case of Georgia, Baku does not force the question of its membership of NATO into its relations with Russia, and is interested in some form of cooperation with Moscow in areas of security, particularly as the two actors share a 284 km border, which runs along the Russian Republic of Dagestan. At the same time, Azerbaijan is itself faced with an unresolved ethno-political conflict with Armenia over Nagorno-Karabakh and is extremely concerned about the ongoing and extensive military-industrial cooperation between Moscow and Yerevan. From its side, Moscow has expressed its concerns and fears over Azerbaijan's energy cooperation with the United States and the EU, which it sees as a challenge to Russia's dominance in Eurasia.

The 2013 Presidential elections have, therefore, highlighted once more Azerbaijan's conflicting external policy. There were no surprises in the electoral results, with the incumbent president Ilham Aliyev re-elected for a third term with 85 percent of the vote. This result

came following a 2009 constitutional amendment that removed a limit on anyone holding office for more than two terms. Azerbaijan has therefore now joined the ranks of other post-Soviet states, such as Belarus, Kazakhstan, Russia, Uzbekistan and Tajikistan, in which the same person can hold office for more than two presidential terms.

Despite its interest in greater energy cooperation, Baku does not welcome any scrutiny of its human rights record or (lack of) democratic practices from the West. For example, a sharp reaction came from the head of the presidential administration, Ramzin Mekhmitiev in relation to critical assessments by the US and international organizations' of the elections. He stated that Azerbaijan will not accept the OSCE and US' assessment of the elections, calling it a shameful response on the part of these two actors, suggesting some collusion between them in order to garner more pressure on Azerbaijan. In contrast, Moscow was fully supportive of Aliiev's re-election. It is telling that Vladimir Putin's first official visit to the South Caucasus, following his re-election for a third term in March 2012, was to Azerbaijan in September 2013 in the midst of the electoral campaign.

However, the Biryulevo incident in Moscow in October 2013, following the public arrest of an ethnic Azeri, Orkhan Zeinalov, for the murder of a Russian, seems to have perhaps put the increasingly positive developments in Russo–Azeri relations on ice. The subsequent virulent media campaign against migrants from the Caucasus, together with the fact that Zeinalov was later sent to the Russian Minister of Interior, provoked a very stern response from the Azeri ambassador to Russia and the Azeri Ministry for Foreign Affairs. No leadership in the South Caucasus can ignore nationalist and anti-migrant discourses against their co-nationals, particularly as one of the favorite topics among the Azeri opposition forces is the problem of emigration from Azerbaijan.

The Biryulevo incident demonstrated that regardless of the current support provided by Moscow for the regime in Baku, anti-immigration sentiments in Russia, (even if not directly backed by the Russian authorities) can severely dent Russia's prospects of becoming a powerful Eurasian power that can serve as an alternative center of influence to the NATO integration project, or any other integration drive.

Conclusion

To conclude, the elections in Georgia, Armenia and Azerbaijan in 2013 have not brought about any major shifts or breakthroughs in Russia's foreign policy in the South Caucasus. The reactions to these elections from Moscow and its involvement in the election campaigns reiterated once more Russia's basic interests and priorities in the South Caucasus. Moscow, in particular, seeks to ensure stability, predictability on the ground, as well as to retain its dominant position in the region whilst minimizing international involvement.

However, in areas and sectors in which the Russian authorities do not envisage increasing or broadening their influence, such as in the case of Georgia, Russia now behaves as a more passive actor, following a wait-and-see policy until the current regime leaves office. All in all, Russia is primarily interested in retaining the status quo that has emerged in the South Caucasus since August 2008. And, on the whole, this strategy has been successful in 2013. Nonetheless, such a policy that is mostly focused on individual tactical steps at the expense of an overall strategy has its own shortcomings and limitations. Indeed, Russia has not managed to develop its own substantive or substantial projects in the region that would include not only those in power, but also wider civil society. This, in turn, could severely weaken its regional position and store up major problems for the future.

About the Author

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