

Central Asia-Caucasus Analyst

BI-WEEKLY BRIEFING
VOL. 16 NO. 12
18 JUNE 2014

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THE CENTRAL ASIA-CAUCASS ANALYST

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Svante E. Cornell

Research Director; Editor, Central Asia-Caucasus Analyst
Central Asia-Caucasus Institute & Silk Road Studies Program
Paul H. Nitze School of Advanced International Studies, The Johns Hopkins University
1619 Massachusetts Ave. N.W., Washington, D.C. 20036, USA.
Tel. +1-202-663-5922; 1-202-663-7723; Fax. +1-202-663-7785

REPERCUSSIONS OF UKRAINIAN SEPARATIST REFERENDUMS FOR THE NORTH CAUCASUS

Huseyn Aliyev

Russia's annexation of Crimea in March 2014 and the ensuing series of separatist referendums in Eastern Ukraine has led to numerous debates in the former Soviet Union, and beyond, about the repercussions of the Ukrainian events for the rest of the region. Although the primary focus has so far been on the de-facto independent separatist regions, such as Moldova's Transnistria, Azerbaijan's Nagorno-Karabakh and Georgia's South Ossetia and Abkhazia, analysts have also started drawing parallels between the ongoing developments in Ukraine and the deeply-rooted separatist aspirations in Russia's North Caucasus region.

BACKGROUND: Russia's military intervention in Ukraine's region of Crimea, which preceded the March 16 referendum and led to the annexation of Crimea and its "re-unification" with the Russian Federation, has not only reignited concerns over the de-facto separatist regions across the post-Soviet territory, but also given rise to debates in Russia about the possible repercussions of Russia's policies in Ukraine for separatist aspirations within the Russian Federation. The danger of pro-independence referendums, similar to the Crimean one or the latest May 11 referendums held in the separatist Eastern regions of Ukraine, has been voiced both by the Russian political opposition and by regional experts.

In fact, the assertion that Western politicians exercise "double standards" with regard to Russia's actions in Ukraine – increasingly popular in the Russian media and blogosphere – appear to be particularly relevant in connection to Russia's own policies in its non-ethnic Russian regions. For

instance, the new legislation approved in 2013 that introduces direct elections of Russia's governors, has not yet been implemented in the North Caucasus – where the Kremlin-appointed leadership of autonomous republics insisted on preserving the previous system of direct appointments. Yet, even the Kremlin's own appointees express their discontent with overly centralized policies in the region. Thus, in February 2014, the head of Dagestan, Ramazan Abdulatipov, unsuccessfully demanded from the federal government to allow his republic to administer its own natural resources. In addition, continuous denials of the Circassian genocide and the heavy-handed approach towards the ongoing insurgency in the North Caucasus demonstrate the Kremlin's unwillingness to allocate more autonomy to its regions populated by ethnic non-Slavs.

IMPLICATIONS: Russia's support for, if not outright involvement, in a series of referendums in the Russian-speaking regions of Eastern Ukraine, as



(Wikimedia/Andrew Butko)

well as in Crimea, has now set a dangerous precedent not only for other former Soviet republics, vulnerable to regional or ethnic separatism, but also for Russia itself. First to exploit the idea of regional referendums in Russia was the controversial Russian opposition leader Alexei Navalny. Famous for his “Stop feeding the Caucasus” campaign, Navalny conducted an online poll on his blog in March, designed to gauge the popular support for the independence of the North Caucasus. 74 percent of the poll’s participants expressed their support for holding a referendum to decide on Chechnya’s independence from Russia and 67 percent of the respondents appeared to be in favor of having a similar referendum on the independence of the entire North Caucasus region.

These figures are hardly surprising. During the past several years, the popular attitude among ethnic Russians towards the North Caucasus has continued to swing in favor of separation of the region from Russia. Not only popular in Russian nationalist circles, who have conducted numerous polls to support their claims, the idea of allowing the North Caucasus to exit from the Russian Federation was

notable in the all-Russian polls administered by the independent research institute Levada Center in June 2013. The results of the poll revealed that only ten percent of respondents across Russia supported the idea of keeping Chechnya as a subject of Russian Federation.

The parallels between the Ukrainian referendums and similar developments in the North Caucasus is, however, rigorously denied by the Kremlin. On May 7, the head of a pro-Kremlin civil society foundation, Konstantin Kostin, urged the public not to compare the situation in Ukraine, where Russia supports “people who currently struggle for their civil and political rights” and the North Caucasus, where Russia “is fighting terrorists.” The Kremlin-appointed leaders of the North Caucasus similarly avoid comparing the separatist sentiments in their republics with events in Ukraine. Instead, government-organized rallies in support of Crimeans and other expressions of solidarity with pro-Russian activists in Ukraine have taken place in most major cities of the region. Yet, the popular attitude in the North Caucasus toward Russia’s actions in Ukraine appears to differ from the images of solidarity promoted by Moscow. For instance, in April, a well-known Ingush human rights activist and opposition leader, Ibrahim Lyanov, suggested holding a referendum on Ingushetia’s secession from Russia and on the return to Ingushetia of lands given to other republics during the Soviet period. This last claim appears to be of much greater danger to the

Russian authorities than the potential secession of the entire North Caucasus.

While it is unlikely that the Russian support for ethnic separatism in Ukraine will encourage popular anti-Moscow sentiments across the North Caucasus, or other regions of the Russian Federation populated by non-Russians, it could nevertheless lead to an increase of internal border disputes between different autonomous republics. Indeed, the first echo of the Ukrainian separatist referendums in Russia occurred in May in the autonomous Republic of Bashkortostan bordering the North Caucasus, where a minority Tartar population demands holding a referendum on the annexation of Tartar-populated areas in the republic to the neighboring autonomous Republic of Tatarstan.

According to Varvara Pakhomenko, a researcher with the International Crisis Group, the Kremlin's policies of re-drawing borders in Ukraine have created a "danger of opening the Pandora's Box, first of all, in the North Caucasus." In the immediate aftermath of Crimea's annexation, Ingushetia's president Yunus-bek Yevkurov had to face questions from the public about the return of historical Ingush lands in North Ossetia and Chechnya. In fact, the disputed border area between Ingushetia and Chechnya has long been a source of tensions between the two autonomous republics, leading in 2013 to a bitter exchange of arguments between Yevkurov and the head of the Chechen republic, Ramzan Kadyrov. Similar border disputes exist not only between republics, for example between

Chechnya and Dagestan over the Aukhovskiy district – but also within republics. Nogay and Kumyk aspirations for separation from Dagestan and Balkar separatist demands in Kabardino-Balkaria are among a number of ethnic problems in the region which could potentially be reinvigorated by Russia's willingness to back ethnic Russian separatism in Ukraine.

However, since the break-up of the USSR, Moscow's policy with regard to border disputes, ethnic secession and autonomy claims in the North Caucasus has strongly supported existing republican or regional borders. The bitter experience of Chechen separatism during the 1990s, which has resulted in two devastating wars and the spread of an Islamist insurgency across the entire region, has until the Crimean precedent determined Kremlin's stance against regional separatism within Russia's borders. A further stir in the North Caucasus was caused by the decree "on rehabilitation of the rights of deported peoples of Crimea," adopted in April by President Putin. The decree, evidently drafted to comfort Crimea's Tartar minority, stands in stark contrast to Russia's unwillingness to accept the mass deportation of Circassians in the nineteenth century and the deportations of Balkars, Ingush and other ethnic groups of the North Caucasus during the Stalin era.

CONCLUSIONS: While Moscow's support for ethnic separatism in Ukraine and its explicit moves to re-draw the national borders of its

neighboring states have given rise to hopes for secession in de-facto independent enclaves of the former Soviet Union, it has also provided a glimpse of hope for Russia's own separatists. Russia's policies in Ukraine offer a precedent for holding referendums and re-drawing national or republican borders to numerous non-Russian ethnic groups within the Russian Federation. Apart from the volatile North Caucasus region, still engulfed in the aftershocks of the two Chechen wars, regions with non-Russian majorities like Tatarstan and the autonomous republics of the Far East may find secession referendums to be plausible scenarios. However, in contrast to Moscow's encouragement of referendums in the Russian-speaking parts of Ukraine, it is highly unlikely that the Kremlin would support similar referendums in its own non-ethnic Russian regions.

AUTHORS' BIO: Huseyn Aliyev is a Ph.D Candidate at the University of Otago, New Zealand. His articles have appeared in the *Journal of Southeast European and Black Sea Studies*, *Demokratizatsiya* and *Ethnopolitics Papers*.

DUGIN, AZERBAIJAN, AND RUSSIAN ENERGY STRATEGY

Dmitry Shlapentokh

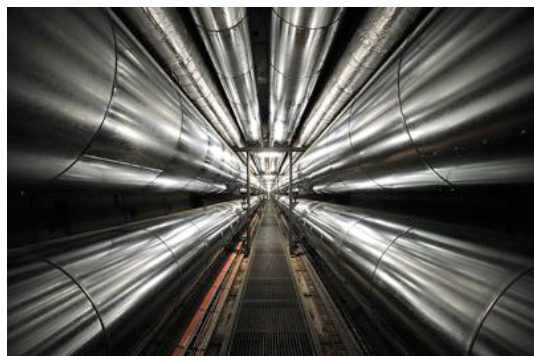
Alexander Dugin, the well-known Russian conservative public intellectual and publicist, stated in April 2014 that if Baku would proceed with its anti-Russian policy, Moscow would not be able to guarantee the country's territorial integrity. The implication is that Moscow would increase its support for Armenia and Azerbaijan would never be able to regain control over Nagorno-Karabakh, which remains Baku's major foreign policy priority. While Dugin does not hold any official position, he has frequently functioned as an informal spokesman for some segments of the Russian elite and for this reason his views should be taken into account. They reflect Moscow's displeasure with Baku due to Azerbaijan's attempts to provide alternative gas routes to Europe.

BACKGROUND: Soon after independence, post-Soviet elites discovered that gas export is not just a major source of revenue but also a potent foreign policy tool in their dealings with, especially, Europe. Europe's gas supply has become increasingly complicated among other due to Ukrainian politics over the last decade, while Moscow has accused Kiev of neglecting its gas debts and even of stealing gas. In order to avoid these complications, Moscow built the North Stream pipeline through the Baltic Sea and plans to construct the South Stream pipeline through the Black Sea, both of which are intended to bypass chokepoints in Eastern Europe.

While Moscow acknowledges the potential competition that Liquefied Natural Gas (LNG) will present to pipeline-delivered gas, it expects such problems to materialize only in a distant future. The delivery of LNG from Qatar is limited, while Turkey

does not permit massive transport of LNG through the Bosphorus and Dardanelles into the Black Sea, allegedly for security reasons. U.S. LNG will not constitute a serious problem, in the view of Moscow observers. Even if shale gas production would increase considerably in the future, Moscow expects Transatlantic LNG delivery on a large scale to be overly expensive and hardly a competitor to Russian gas export. Conversely, gas from Central Asia and the Caucasus, and from Azerbaijan in particular, is considered to present more serious competition, and Russia has alternatively courted and threatened Azerbaijan in relation to its gas projects. And judging from Dugin's statement, Moscow presently regards sticks as more viable than carrots. The tension between Moscow and Baku is likely to benefit Yerevan.

Azerbaijan first emerged as a challenge to Russia's energy strategy in the 1990s,



(Wikimedia /Bill Ebbesen)

when it was a crucial player in planning the twin Baku–Tbilisi–Ceyhan and Baku–Tbilisi–Erzurum oil and gas pipelines, which provided outlets for Azerbaijan gas to Turkey and then to Europe. The discovery of new gas deposits in the country raised concerns in Moscow that gas from Azerbaijan could compete with Russian gas, and especially that Azerbaijan together with Turkmenistan could play a crucial role in filling the Nabucco pipeline, which would deliver gas directly to Europe rather than through Russia. Moscow was especially concerned over Iran’s implicit support for Turkmenistan’s participation, which would imply that Iran could send gas to European markets via Turkmenistan and Azerbaijan.

Nabucco did not materialize, yet Azerbaijan and Turkmenistan maintained the possibility of westward gas export as an option. At that point Moscow decided to employ carrots, and Russia’s then President Dmitry Medvedev visited Baku in September 2010, offering that Russia would commit to buying all Azerbaijan’s gas. President Putin made a similar visit to Baku in August 2013 and substantiated Moscow’s appeal by announcing large sales of Russian weaponry to Baku.

Thus, Moscow sent clear messages to both Yerevan and Baku. For Yerevan, it signaled that Moscow did not consider its relationship with Armenia as crucially important and that it could be sacrificed if Yerevan failed to follow Moscow’s line. For Baku, it implied that under the right conditions, Moscow would not intervene in case of renewed war between Azerbaijan and Armenia.

IMPLICATIONS: Yet Baku proceeded with its plan to deliver gas to the West with the help of Turkey. Moscow’s apprehension was enhanced by Azerbaijan’s continued flirtation with NATO, and NATO’s vice chairman recently praised Baku as one of its most important partners. Moscow is increasingly concerned that Azerbaijan’s association with NATO could lead to the emergence of a NATO presence on the Caspian Sea. A stronger NATO presence might well revive plans to construct a Trans-Caspian pipeline and enlist Turkmenistan’s participation in this project. Turkmenistan has entertained this dream for a long time but has been unable to accomplish it, in part due to strong Russian objections. Ashkhabad also hopes to deliver gas to Europe through the TANAP project in which Azerbaijan also participates.

Turkmenistan’s participation would be bad news for Russia, but Iran’s potential involvement would be catastrophic for Russia’s standing on the European market, due to Iran’s enormous gas reserves. Moscow’s concerns are enhanced by the possibilities opened by the relaxation of

sanctions against Iran and that Moscow was seemingly not able to reach agreements with Teheran on a variety of issues related to the Caspian Sea. In addition, Teheran was clearly displeased by the fact that it was not even mentioned as a potential partner in the emerging Eurasian Union.

In light of these developments, Moscow appears to have decided to move decisively toward the use of sticks in its relations with Azerbaijan. In May 2013, Moscow stated that it will end its agreement with Baku on sending Azerbaijani oil through the Novorossiysk pipeline in 2014 – but a new agreement was inked in February 2014. However, Moscow has also implicitly threatened the use of force against Azerbaijan. In April 2014, Russia's Southern Military District announced a "non-planned check of military readiness of the Caspian flotilla," involving around ten ships and 400 sailors. In all likelihood, the main message intended for Azerbaijan and Turkmenistan by the maneuvers was that if Baku and Ashkhabad were to move forward with the construction of a Trans-Caspian pipeline, Moscow would seek to prevent this by all means, including the use of force.

The Kremlin has expressed its displeasure with Baku through various spokesmen and Dugin's comments can be taken to reflect the opinions of parts of the Russian elite. Yet the practical implications of this thinking are still unclear. For example, Moscow's actual willingness to respond militarily to the construction of a Trans-Caspian pipeline is an open question, especially

if combined with a stronger NATO presence. The recent events in Ukraine demonstrate that Moscow is predatory but at the same time opportunistic. It annexed Crimea facing little resistance but has refrained from invading Eastern Ukraine, which could entail a more serious confrontation with the West. Moscow has continued to avoid direct military involvement despite passionate appeals to Putin from Dugin and similar intellectuals to send troops. The importance of European gas markets for Moscow might also decline in the future due to the increasing demand in Asia, especially China, as demonstrated by the recent agreement between Moscow and Beijing. Moscow also seems determined to continue delivering weapons to Baku as stipulated by old contract.

Still, Moscow's policies toward Baku have clear implications for the South Caucasus; they clearly indicate that Armenia will retain its position as Russia's only ally in region and that Moscow will deter attempts by Azerbaijan to retake Nagorno-Karabakh by force.

CONCLUSIONS: Dugin's recent hostile statement on Azerbaijan was directly connected to Azerbaijan's policy of intensifying its delivery of gas to Europe and the competition this implies for Russia's own gas export strategy. Moscow is especially concerned over the prospect of a gas alliance between Azerbaijan, Turkmenistan and Iran, which could create a serious challenge to Russia's standing as the primary supplier on the European gas market. While the

concrete implications of Moscow's tougher line toward Baku remain unclear, it constitutes positive news for Armenia, which can now rest assured that it will retain Moscow's backing in its conflict with Azerbaijan.

AUTHOR'S BIO: Dmitry Shlapentokh is Associate Professor of History, Indiana University at South Bend.

WASHINGTON MISSES THE POINT ON NAGORNO-KARABAKH

Stephen Blank

Presumably to fend off mounting criticism of U.S. policy, Ambassador James Warlick, the U.S. Representative to the Minsk Process on Nagorno-Karabakh, recently gave a series of speeches and interviews outlining U.S. policy on the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict. Warlick outlined U.S. support for the six principles that he said had already been agreed upon by all parties, and concluded that the main obstacle to resolving the conflict lay in the failure until now of the Armenian and Azerbaijani governments to make the hard decision for peace over domestic opposition. Warlick's remarks reflect the Obama Administration's failure to grasp what is at stake in the Caucasus or to take conflict resolution there sufficiently seriously.

BACKGROUND: Warlick's six points are as follows: First, in light of Nagorno-Karabakh's complex history, the sides should commit to determining its final legal status through a mutually agreed and legally binding expression of will in the future. This is not optional. Interim status will be temporary.

Second, the area within the boundaries of the former Nagorno-Karabakh Autonomous Region that is not controlled by Baku should be granted an interim status that, at a minimum, provides guarantees for security and self-governance.

Third, the occupied territories surrounding Nagorno-Karabakh should be returned to Azerbaijani control. There can be no settlement without respect for Azerbaijan's sovereignty,

and the recognition that its sovereignty over these territories must be restored.

Fourth, there should be a corridor linking Armenia to Nagorno-Karabakh. It must be wide enough to provide secure passage, but it cannot encompass the whole of Lachin district.

Fifth, an enduring settlement will have to recognize the right of all IDPs and refugees to return to their former places of residence.

Sixth and finally, a settlement must include international security guarantees that would include a peacekeeping operation. There is no scenario in which peace can be assured without a well-designed peacekeeping operation that enjoys the confidence of all sides.

While these points are all essential to a settlement they do not resolve the fundamental issues of the conflict.



Moreover, they have been agreed to for years so there is nothing new here.

At the same time, the Minsk process has long since proven itself to be a failure while Moscow has exploited and incited tensions here to its own ends. Those needs include permanent military bases in Armenia replete with large-scale deployments there and throughout the Caucasus, substantial arms sales to both sides, and the coercion of Armenia into dropping its attempts to orient itself to Europe and the EU in return for what amounts to a forced membership in the far inferior and more exploitative Customs Union.

Indeed, Moscow's efforts to militarize the entire area may be seen in the recent arms sales it is making to Azerbaijan. Moscow is selling Baku 100 top of the line T-90 tanks, BAL-E coastal anti-ship missile systems, and 18 TOS-1A Sointsepyok multiple launch rocket systems (MLRS). While the anti-ship missiles pose no threat to Armenia, the other systems certainly do. The news of these sales have forced Armenian observers and should force our own policymakers to ask exactly how Russia can pose as an impartial mediator while it conducts such policies.

And these are only the overt policies. Between 2010 and 2013, 38 Il-76 transports loaded with weapons from top to bottom flew covertly from Podgorica in Montenegro to Stepanakert, showing that Russia is covertly arming Nagorno-Karabakh. If one adds what we know of Russian policy and thinking from Ukraine to this mix, on what basis can we say that Russia and Washington see eye-to eye, as Warlick claimed?

IMPLICATIONS: Clearly, U.S. policy still refuses to grasp that resolving this conflict is very much in its interests as is a vigorous diplomatic initiative to regain a U.S. and Western position in the Caucasus lest another conflict breaks out and imperil vital European energy routes as well as regional security. The fact that both the Georgian and now Ukrainian wars – and Moscow's acts in Ukraine are undoubtedly acts of war – have both had profound international repercussions should galvanize members of the Administration to awake from their dogmatic slumbers that the CIS is Russia's backyard and that Washington should refrain from acting boldly there and actually attempt to resolve conflicts before they explode. Unfortunately, the evidence of U.S. policy as shown by Warlick's speech shows that an understanding of what is at stake in the Caucasus if not Central Asia still eludes the Administration.

Neither is this confined to the conflict in Nagorno-Karabakh. Simultaneously with Warlick's speech, the U.S. Ambassador to Azerbaijan, Richard Morningstar, gave a public statement

warning the Azerbaijani government that its increasingly repressive measures against dissidents could lead to a Maidan in Baku, clearly infuriating the Azerbaijani government. While Morningstar is undoubtedly right that Azerbaijan has become much more repressive and is running serious risks, this kind of public lecturing in the absence of any U.S. willingness to engage with Baku on its most pressing security issues ensures in advance that all of its protests will go for nothing.

Thus, we have a situation where the U.S. sees no need to explore initiatives for resolving the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict, refuses to see, understand, and react to Russian threats to peace, and insists in the face of all experience and evidence that our main concern in Baku is human rights to the exclusion of anything else. Is it any surprise that Azerbaijani-U.S. relations are essentially a dialogue of the deaf?

There is a way out of this impasse but it calls for a fundamental change of outlook and policy. While it is indeed critical to the U.S. that Azerbaijan be internally secure; it is critical to Baku and indeed to Yerevan and Washington that this conflict be resolved. It has already taken the government in Yerevan hostage and is constantly in danger of getting hotter to the point of becoming another major international crisis. To improve its own position and the chances for genuine peace and security here, Washington must renounce its policy of moralistic disengagement and come to grips with realities.

If Washington wants both Baku and Yerevan (who are equally culpable) to improve their human rights records it must engage seriously with them on Nagorno-Karabakh to the point of proposing a wholly new format that breaks the self-imposed stalemate and helps both sides confront their domestic obstacles to peace. Moscow cannot be allowed to monopolize the discussion and ratchet up tensions while subordinating Armenia and ultimately Azerbaijan – as it clearly wants to do – to Russian interests.

CONCLUSIONS: Only by engaging these states seriously on the security issue of the greatest importance to them can the U.S. have any serious hope of improving conditions for human rights in either or both Caucasian states. Failure to grasp this elementary truth will lead to a situation whereby human rights in both countries will deteriorate and could well lead to domestic explosions in either Armenia or Azerbaijan. But beyond that, failure to engage only makes certain that Moscow will be the only alternative to these two states and that this conflict will continue until it is resolved either by Moscow's dictates or by war. Are these outcomes really in America's or these countries' interest?

AUTHOR'S BIO: Stephen Blank is a Senior Fellow with the American Foreign Policy Council.

POLITICAL CHANGE IN ABKHAZIA AND SOUTH OSSETIA AHEAD OF GEORGIA- EU AGREEMENT

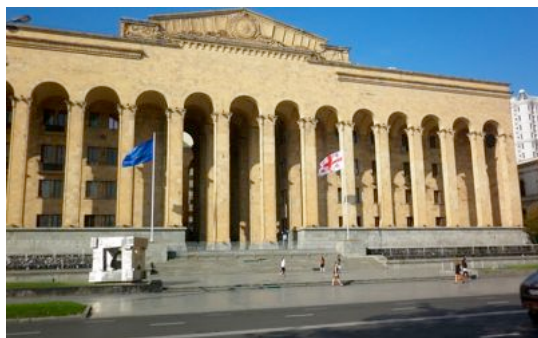
Valeriy Dzutsev

Profound and simultaneous changes in Georgia's breakaway regions of Abkhazia and South Ossetia signify Moscow's increasing involvement in the affairs of its satellites. The changing political landscape in these territories appears to reflect Russia's desire to establish greater control over them and make them more useful for its purposes. Russia's control over Abkhazia and South Ossetia still fills the primary purpose of exerting pressure on Georgia. Georgia may again encounter hurdles in the run-up to signing its Association Agreement with the EU, although Russia too faces constraints as it is tied up in the battle for Ukraine.

BACKGROUND: On May 27, Abkhazia's opposition leader Raul Khajimba and his followers captured administrative buildings in Sukhumi in a surprise move. Within days, Abkhazia's ousted President Alexander Ankvab voluntarily stepped down, opening for the election of a new Abkhaz leadership in August. Moscow's envoy, Vladislav Surkov, played a significant role in the process of reaching a political settlement to the crisis in the region. Ironically, Khajimba lost the 2004 presidential elections to Ankvab's predecessor, Sergei Bagapsh, but is now making a strong comeback in Abkhaz politics. Russia actively promoted Khajimba in the 2004 elections, but the pro-Moscow candidate suffered a humiliating defeat that resulted in a political crisis in Abkhazia at the time. In 2005, Khajimba was awarded the position of

vice-president in a face-saving compromise to Russia. Khajimba's background in the Soviet-era KGB and Moscow's unwavering support for him position him as Moscow's preferred candidate to rule Abkhazia.

The coup-d'état in Abkhazia could have been regarded as a unique development, caused by the republic's internal conflicts. However, Russia's active involvement in resolving the standoff and similar recent developments in South Ossetia indicate that Russia may be implementing a larger plan aimed at consolidating control over the leaderships of these entities. In the June 8 parliamentary elections in South Ossetia, the opposition United Ossetia party won over 40 percent of the seats. The party's leader is South Ossetia's Minister for Emergency Situations (MChS), Anatoly Bibilov. Not unlike Khajimba in Abkhazia, Bibilov was



(Wikimedia/Spartaky)

Moscow's preferred presidential candidate in South Ossetia's 2011 presidential elections and lost them to the opposition candidate Alla Jioeva. Now, with strong financial support for his party, Bibilov has taken over the republic's parliament. While he has denied plans to overthrow the president of South Ossetia, Leonid Tibilov, the parliament's leverage on Tibilov will certainly increase manifold, which will allow United Ossetia's Russian supporters to implement their policies in the republic with greater ease.

After the brief Russian-Georgian war in August 2008, Russia recognized Abkhazia and South Ossetia as independent states despite strong protests from Georgia and the West. Since then, Moscow has maintained that Sukhumi and Tskhinvali are independent international entities, even though they remain strongly dependent on Russia for their security and economic viability. Yet the high level of international attention to the post-conflict situation in these regions circumscribed Russia's ability to exercise control over them and both strayed a little further away from Russia's embrace than it could tolerate. Ankvab did not allow Russian businesses to buy real estate in

Abkhazia, and Tibilov managed to retain all the key political figures in his government, in spite of pressure from Moscow.

IMPLICATIONS: Profound political changes have taken place in both regions, as Georgia is about to sign its Association Agreement with the EU. With the signing of the agreement planned for June 27, Moscow certainly needs maximum leeway in Abkhazia and South Ossetia. Both Ankvab and Tibilov have become increasingly problematic for Moscow, which is discontent with the limitations to its control over these small territories that are so dependent on Russia. The interests of Abkhazia and South Ossetia do not coincide with those of Russia as neatly as is sometimes assumed. In this particular case, while Moscow would like to use the Georgian breakaway territories to stall Georgia's progress toward signing the agreement with the EU, the leaderships of these territories would prefer political stability and economic development, which are certainly not the primary goals of Russia's present policies in the region.

In Abkhazia, the Russian government may use the issue of ethnic Georgians in Gali to pressure Georgia. The Abkhaz opposition has argued that Georgians in Gali received Abkhaz passports illegally and should be deprived of their citizenship. An estimated 25,000 Georgians in Gali may be affected. In addition, the Abkhaz opposition accuses the previous government of having granted citizenship to ethnic Georgians in the

republic in order to receive their support in elections. For the Georgians themselves, the benefits of being able to participate in the elections were probably of minor importance, while the primary advantage of holding an Abkhaz citizenship is that it allows them to cross the border with Georgia without obstacles. If they are deprived of their Abkhaz documents, Abkhazia's Georgian population may have to leave the territory, putting pressure on the government in Tbilisi.

In South Ossetia, the pressure arrangement is different, as the United Ossetia Party headed by Bibilov has declared that joining South Ossetia to the Russian Federation is its primary goal. Proponents of such a move argue that South Ossetians should be unified with their ethnic brethren in the republic of North Ossetia, a subject of the Russian Federation. Aside from exploiting Ossetian nationalism, it is frequently emphasized that unification would bring considerable economic benefits for the republic. South Ossetia's current president, Tibilov, has been much more reticent about accession to Russia, saying that it is desirable, but that the time is not ripe. North Ossetian politicians have also been unenthusiastic about unification, apparently fearing that the share of financial installments they receive from Moscow may decrease further if they are to share them with the impoverished South Ossetia.

Even though both Abkhazia and South Ossetia present plausible opportunities for Russia to ramp up pressure on Georgia, Russian officials have not

explicitly indicated any plans to impede Georgia's agreement with the EU. At a press conference on May 22, the Russian Ministry of Foreign Affairs official Alexander Lukashevich stated that Russia respected the right of all nations to join various international institutions. At the same time, however, Lukashevich warned that there would be consequences if Georgia signed the agreement with the EU, primarily of an economic nature.

As demonstrated by the events in Ukraine, Russia's tolerance for neighboring countries joining EU-sponsored integration formats is limited. At the same time, as it becomes increasingly tied up in what is becoming a long-lasting crisis in Ukraine, Russia's capacity for subversive actions elsewhere is also limited. Although neither the expulsion of ethnic Georgians from Abkhazia, nor annexing South Ossetia, are particularly costly moves in themselves, they will give rise to further international criticism and isolation of Russia. Hence, while Russia's preparations in Abkhazia and South Ossetia are most probably connected to Georgia's progress toward signing the agreement in June, they are also highly contingent on how the situation in Ukraine evolves and potential reactions from the West.

CONCLUSIONS: Increasing its control over Georgia's breakaway territories, Russia moves in closer to use these territories against Georgia to stall its drift toward the West. At the same time, this move can be regarded as the export of Russia's domestic political

model of relations between the central government and the regions. Moscow wants to retain a tool for putting pressure on Georgia, but the actual use of this tool depends on the resolution of the conflict in Ukraine. The tools themselves also have an expiration date, as the new political elites brought to power in Abkhazia and South Ossetia will over time seek greater autonomy from Moscow, and their loyalty can be effectively utilized only for a limited time.

AUTHOR'S BIO: Valeriy Dzutsev is a Senior Non-Resident Fellow at the Jamestown Foundation and Doctoral Student in Political Science at Arizona State University.

TAJIKISTAN AND BELARUS INCREASE MILITARY COOPERATION

Oleg Salimov

Tajikistan's President Emomali Rakhmon visited Belarus on May 23-25, 2014. The stated purposes of the visit were to improve socio-economic cooperation and to develop an agrarian-industrial complex in Tajikistan. The secondary agenda of the Tajik president's visit appeared to be the enlistment of military support from Belarusian President Alexander Lukashenko after the withdrawal of international forces from Afghanistan. Rakhmon's arrival in Belarus coincided with an unofficial visit by Vladimir Putin to Minsk and a meeting between the three leaders on the sidelines.

Although not widely publicized, the issue of military cooperation appears to have been an important topic in the conversation between the two leaders. Lukashenko and Rakhmon discussed regional security, Afghanistan, coordination between the Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO) and the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO), and Belarusian military assistance to Tajikistan. Lukashenko publicly assured Rakhmon of material-technical military support after the U.S. and NATO withdrawal from Afghanistan. Rakhmon is actively seeking military assistance from its partners in the CIS, CSTO, and SCO. The timing of the visit and the unofficial meeting with Putin coincided with several major military events taking place in Belarus and Tajikistan.

First, Russia recently decided to expand its military presence in Belarus through additional provisions of the anti-aircraft and S-300 anti-missile system (NATO-indexed SA-10/20), based on an agreement from September of 2005. In addition to existing systems in Belarus, Russia will deliver additional S-300 units as Lukashenko announced in an official press conference on April 25 this year. Lukashenko pointed out that these systems will protect not only Belarus but also Russian territory in the northwest.

Second, Russia will launch its "Window" space defense monitoring system in Tajikistan into full operational readiness in summer/fall 2014. The system protects Russia's southern and southeastern boundaries from intercontinental ballistic missiles. The launch takes place alongside the recent 30-year extension of Russian basing permits in Tajikistan. Russia's military base in Tajikistan is its largest military force abroad with significant authorities and capabilities. The armed and technical capabilities of the military base were reinforced with machinery and drones, among other, soon after the extension. According to Russia's Minister of Defense Sergey Shoigu, Russia's military base in Tajikistan will be also enlarged in manpower and rearmed with the latest weaponry by the end of 2014.

At the same time, Rakhmon intended to expand socio-economic and political cooperation with Belarus during his visit. The official statement by Rakhmon and Lukashenko presented highly successful negotiations that resulted in about 20 signed agreements and contracts. Among others, agreements were concluded between the countries' National Olympic Committees, Belarus' and Tajikistan's agrarian universities, Belarus' Ministry of Architecture and Tajikistan's Committee on Architecture, Belarus' State TV and Radio Broadcasting Company and Tajikistan's Committee on TV and Radio, Belarus' light industry complex and Tajikistan's Ministry of Industry and New Technologies. A series of agreements on cooperation in trade and economy, culture, and science and technology were signed between various cities and regions in the two countries. The two sides discussed the possibility of transferring some of Belarus' industrial capacities to Tajikistan. In particular, they referred to the assembly of Belarus-made agricultural equipment and the organization of centers servicing equipment imported from Belarus.

In their public statements, both presidents stressed the benefits of mutual ties between their countries, which are based on their personal friendship and solidarity in opinions on issues in international politics. They also expressed their long-term commitment to maintaining and expand their existing relationships.

A comparison of the two regimes' political structure, their systems of governance, and their political associations reveals other aspects of where Tajikistan and Belarus converge. Among the post-Soviet republics, Tajikistan and Belarus are among Russia's closest and most consistent partners. The two are highly influenced by and dependent on Russia politically, economically, and militarily. Tajikistan and Belarus have entered into various political agreements with Russia; they were among the first post-Soviet republics to sign dual citizenship agreements with Russia and to allow a Russian military presence on their territories. Tajikistan and Belarus also partner with Russia in regional political, economic, and security organizations.

In a number of ways, relations between Belarus and Tajikistan are sustained by Russian involvement and influence, most prominently in their political and military components. While the latest agreements between Belarus and Tajikistan could have been reached on the ministerial level, without presidential involvement, Rakhmon's official meeting with Lukashenko and the unofficial one with Putin were necessary in order to coordinate military cooperation between the three countries. In this connection, the initiated talks on military cooperation between CSTO and SCO members are likely to move forward in the nearest future.

KYRGYZSTAN'S PRESIDENT VISITS ANKARA

Arslan Sabyrbekov

On June 2, upon the invitation of his Turkish counterpart, Kyrgyzstan's President Almazbek Atambayev paid a visit to Ankara to participate in a meeting of the Supreme Kyrgyz-Turkish Interstate Council. The Council was formed after the April 2010 events in Kyrgyzstan and determines the strategy of bilateral relations in a wide range of areas, including in the economic, agriculture and cultural spheres. As part of his Turkey visit, the Kyrgyz President also took part in the fourth meeting of the Cooperation Council of Turkic Speaking States along with the presidents of Turkey, Kazakhstan, Azerbaijan and Turkmenistan.

Since its establishment in 2010, a number of meetings of the Supreme Kyrgyz-Turkish Interstate Council have taken place, where parties reached a joint agreement to increase the trade volume between their countries up to one billion dollars. To reach this goal, Turkey has continuously expressed its readiness to more actively engage its businesses in Kyrgyzstan and invest in the hydropower, tourism, transport and communication sectors. But despite these statements, the volume of bilateral trade remains low at slightly over a quarter billion US\$. For comparison, trade between Turkey and Tajikistan has recently reached US\$ 600 million, and with Kazakhstan the amount is close to US\$ 4 billion.

Kyrgyzstan's entry into the Russia-led Customs Union was also discussed during the President Atambayev's meeting with Turkish Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdogan. The head of the Turkish government described Kyrgyzstan's intention to join the Union as "a positive step that opens up great opportunities for the Kyrgyz Republic." Kyrgyzstan's former Minister of Economy Akylbek Dzhaparov described Erdogan's statement as a symbolic gesture of diplomacy and believes that Ankara is preoccupied with finding ways to maintain its influence in the region despite Russia's intention to create a larger Eurasian Union. Regarding the volume of bilateral trade, an expert noted that it will decline after Bishkek enters the Customs Union. According to him "because of the law tariffs, goods from Turkey and China arrive first to Kyrgyzstan and are then exported to other countries. The Customs Union will lead to the same rates and therefore it is logical that the goods from these countries will be delivered directly to Russia through seaports." To further discuss Kyrgyzstan's entry into the Union and escape the possible negative consequences for Kyrgyz-Turkish economic relations, the Turkish Minister of Economy will visit Bishkek on June 20.

Atambayev's visit to Ankara immediately received various

comments from local experts. According to political analyst Mars Sariev, Kyrgyzstan's entry into the Russia-led Customs Union will have a negative impact on Kyrgyz-Turkish relations and on the country's foreign policymaking in general. In his words, "the Customs Union is foremost Moscow's geopolitical project and smaller countries that are heavily dependent on Russia, such as Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan, will feel pressured and will not be in a position to carry out a multi-vector foreign policy, unlike Kazakhstan or Uzbekistan. In that geopolitical situation, Kyrgyzstan will not have any other option but to cooperate and seek agreement on its foreign policy actions from Moscow."

In Ankara, the fate of Manas International Airport was also discussed. Turkey once again expressed its plans to participate in the transformation of the airport into a civilian hub. In turn, President Atambayev stated that "American soldiers have almost left Manas and soon it will be a truly civilian airport. Which country will come to the airport, we do not know, but we would welcome the participation of investors from our partners and work out joint projects." Russian media has also featured speculation that Turkey will purchase the Kyrgyz airport assets and then rent it to the United States. In light of those developments, the Russian state owned company Rosneft reached a preliminary agreement with the Kyrgyz authorities to purchase shares in the airport, but Kyrgyzstan has refused to continue the talks due to

its internal political instability and demonstrations by the National Opposition Movement. Thus, the airport's fate after the complete withdrawal of U.S. troops remains unclear.

During his visit to Turkey, along with his other counterparts, President Atambayev also participated in the fourth meeting of the Cooperation Council of Turkic Speaking States. As a result of the summit, the participating states adopted the "Bodrum Declaration," calling for more cooperation in developing the tourism sector.

GEORGIA'S POLITICAL ENVIRONMENT WORSENS AHED OF LOCAL ELECTIONS

Eka Janashia

Election watchdogs groups have given a negative verdict on Georgia's pre-election situation in the run-up to the June 15 local elections. According to their reports, pressure against municipal candidates and political violence has increased and reflect a deterioration of the political climate compared to that during the 2013 presidential polls.

Georgian legislation requires that at least 15 candidates are featured in proportional party lists in districts with more than 75,000 voters, and at least 10 candidates in districts with fewer voters. Hence, the withdrawal of one nominee could distort a party's whole proportional list. The election watchdogs argue that pressure exercised by the authorities has caused the cancellation of the entire party list of some non-parliamentary opposition parties in several municipalities.

Former parliamentary speaker Nino Burjanadze's United Opposition party was disqualified from the proportional contest for positions in the Dmanisi Municipal Council (Sakrebulo) after five of its candidates withdrew from the race. In the same district, candidates of the Christian-Democratic and United National Movement (UNM) have allegedly also been under pressure to cancel their registration of candidates. The removal of three candidates from Georgia's Way party, led by former foreign minister Salome

Zurabishvili, caused the invalidation of its proportional list in Akhaltsikhe municipality. In addition, the election observer groups disclosed that nine UNM candidates had refused to run in Tsalka, Tetrtskaro, Borjomi, Adigeni, Akhalkalaki, Dedoplistskaro and Lentekhi municipalities.

Meanwhile, the election commission of the Marneuli electoral district de-registered Akmamed Imamquliyev – the UNM candidate to head Marneuli's municipal administration – allegedly due to a failure to meet the law's requirement of a two-year term of residency. UNM insisted that Georgian Dream (GD) MP Ali Mamedov personally required that Imamquliyev should withdraw his candidacy. The Tbilisi City Court later restored his candidature.

Aside from tensions incurred by the authorities' alleged pressure on municipal candidates, physical confrontations and assaults against people involved in political activities have become frequent. One of the UNM leaders, Zurab Chiaberashvili, was attacked in a downtown Tbilisi café on May 27. Although the assailant hit Chiaberashvili several times in the head with a cup, the offender was charged with deliberate infliction of minor injuries, instead of hooliganism which would have implied a much stricter punishment.

On June 6, protesters surrounded UNM's local office in Zugdidi, Samegrelo region, throwing stones and condemning the party's candidate for the head of the Zugdidi municipality administration, Tengiz Gunava. The rally occurred after PM Irakli Garibashvili stated that Gunava had been involved in the murder of Paata Kardava, a military intelligence officer in Zugdidi who disappeared on August 27, 2008 and had officially been considered missing until June 5, 2014. Attacking and hitting Gunava and his supporters, demonstrators were screaming that he had no right to run in the elections. The next day, a scuffle broke out in Batumi when a few GD activists arrived at a meeting held by the UNM's leaders with a small group of voters as part of their election campaign.

The U.S. embassy in Tbilisi expressed concerns over the violent incidents and called on authorities to investigate cases objectively, and to take measures both technically and politically to meet high standards of elections. The EU's special adviser for legal reforms and human rights in Georgia, Thomas Hammarberg, even suggested that the authorities should launch "a national campaign against violence."

In a survey conducted by the National Democratic Institute (NDI) from March 26 to April 18, 48 percent of the likely voters said they intended to vote for the ruling GD coalition, followed by UNM at 12 percent. United Opposition and the Labor Party got 4 percent each. Of the respondents, 19 percent were undecided, 8 percent

refused to answer, and 3 percent rejected all candidates.

Whereas GD still enjoys higher popular support than other parties, the government's actions and rhetoric have been accompanied with reduced support, especially in regions outside Tbilisi. Garibashvili's statement, "we will not allow the victory of any political force [other than Georgian Dream] in any region or city" drew heavy criticism from the civil society sector and was assessed as wording typical for totalitarian leaders.

Two years after coming to power, GD desperately needs to maintain the image of a functional political unity capable of synchronizing the multiple interests of its various member parties. While victory in the local elections is a matter of prestige and political survival for GD, it seems that UNM's immediate goal is simply to gather a sizable amount of votes. If the UNM would gain a grip on local power, that would enable GD to place part of the blame for potential misconduct on the UNM, and possibly to divert popular anger towards the opposition party. Thus, the UNM seemingly strives to allow the ruling coalition space to discredit itself through unfulfilled promises, after which it hopes to regain its own popularity among voters.

TAJIKISTAN'S AUTHORITIES TIGHTEN CONTROL AHEAD OF 2015 ELECTIONS

Kirgizbek Kanunov

Recent weeks have seen a number of kneejerk reactions on the part of the Tajik authorities that indicate a mounting suspicion against Western engagement with local civil society. The fear is especially palpable in the aftermath of the events of July 2012 and May 2014 in Gorno-Badakhshan Autonomous Oblast (GBAO) in eastern Tajikistan that have seen mass protest rallies prompted by unprecedented heavy-handedness on part of the authorities.

After the events in Ukraine and especially the annexation of the Crimea, the authorities see an existential threat in independent contacts between the West and civil society in Tajikistan.

A recent example is the detention of Alexander Sodiqov on June 16 in Khorog. He was allegedly conducting a reconnaissance mission for a foreign government. Sodiqov is a doctoral student at the University of Toronto (and a frequent contributor to the *Central Asia-Caucasus Analyst* -ed.). But Tajikistan's National Security Committee (KNB) maintains that he was deployed by a foreign government to negotiate with Alim Sherzamonov, leader of the Social Democratic Party of Tajikistan (SDPT), along with civil society actors in GBAO. The KNB report states that Sodiqov was arrested while transferring "biased" materials to Sherzamonov. Sherzamonov, however,

claims that Sodiqov's only fault was to speak with him.

Even prior to the May 2014 events in Khorog, the authorities reacted extremely negatively to an EU delegation's visit to Khorog in early May and its dialogue with local civil society.

After the incident in Khorog on May 21, several high-ranking Tajik officials were quick to accuse Western countries of destabilizing the situation in the region, and in June, the government introduced travel restrictions to GBAO for representatives of international organizations and diplomatic missions.

During the same period, the Head of the Russia's Federal Security Service, Alexander Bortnikov, released a statement to the media in Minsk at a meeting of the Council of heads of security agencies and special services. The FSB chief claimed that there are illegal forces in the CIS countries, which are funded by certain western non-governmental organizations and recommended that actions against them should be tough.

On June 10, the British Ambassador to Tajikistan, Robin Ord-Smith, travelled to Khorog as a tourist due to the imposed restrictions on diplomatic travel, demonstrated that blocking contacts between Western diplomats and representatives of civil society is becoming a routine. The obstructionist

behavior toward the British Ambassador by members of the National Security staff effectively cut off his access to local civil society groups. According to representatives of civil society scheduled to meet the UK diplomat, the local Serena Inn hotel where Ord-Smith sojourned had been surrounded by law enforcement personnel and access to it had been completely blocked.

According to SDPT leader Sherzamonov, despite the fact that this was not the ambassador's first visit to Khorog, the security measures introduced this time were unprecedented. At the same time, in spite of perceived security threats, Ord-Smith was allowed to meet with representatives of law enforcement agencies and local authorities.

During Ord-Smith's stay in Khorog, in the afternoon of June 10, a few residents of Dushanbe rioted and threw rocks at the British Embassy in Dushanbe. The Protesters offered no reason for their dissatisfaction and made no mention whatsoever as to their demands. But according to local media, they constantly chanted "Pamir," thus making clear their disagreement with the British Ambassador's visit to Khorog.

Since President Rakhmon's rise to power, he has never tolerated rallies in Tajikistan, and the authorities have reacted harshly to protests in Dushanbe. For example, on August 29, the District Court of Dushanbe imposed heavy fines and ordered administrative arrests of participants of a mob in support of Zayd Saidov, the

leader and founder of the political party New Tajikistan. However, over the past two years, the authorities have decided to employ paid mobs to deal with the opposition.

The rent-a-mob tactic was tested for the first time in April 2013. Then, around a hundred people gathered in front of the U.S. Embassy in Dushanbe. The protest action was held in connection with the release of Tajikistan's former Prime Minister, Abdumalik Abdullodzhonov, now a U.S. citizen, from detention in Ukraine. Protesters demanded his extradition to Tajikistan. The authorities then spoke about prosecuting the protesters, but nothing has happened to date. Subsequently, several participants of this rally were seen on December 10, 2013, when a group of 20 people attempted to disrupt a press conference in Dushanbe of the SDPT.

The June 10 attack on the Chairman of the Islamic Renaissance Party of Tajikistan (PIVT), Kabiri in Kulob, indicates that this kind of premeditated actions are systematic. During a debate on the incident in Parliament, Kabiri and a representative of the Communist Party of Tajikistan stated that all these events are interrelated and their patrons are the same people.

One of the government's ideologists, the lower chamber MP Suhrob Sharifov, deems it necessary to create a special order for trips of ambassadors and other foreign diplomats to Tajikistan's border areas. Also, the Assistant to the President for Defense Issues, Sherali Khayrulloev, said that

the authors and masterminds of events that occurred in Khorog on and following May 21 are located outside the region.

Moreover, only during the first half of June, Internet providers in Tajikistan blocked access to YouTube, Google, and Gmail services.

Rakhmon's regime has periodically resorted to pressure tactics and even repression. However, according to observers, pressure of this magnitude on the media, the Internet, and the opposition has not been seen since the run-up to the parliamentary elections in 2005, which took place against the backdrop of the color revolutions in Ukraine and Georgia, and the overthrow of President Akayev in Kyrgyzstan. Then, the crackdown included closing a number of non-governmental newspapers and the office of the National Democratic Institute (NDI). Authorities then seriously believed that NDI was preparing a color revolution in Tajikistan.

Observers also note that with the exception of the statements of OSCE Representative on Freedom of the Media, Dunja Mijatović, Western countries still prefer to ignore unfriendly accusations and actions.

It seems that the pressure on civil society in Tajikistan will increase and that all these actions constitute test balloons in anticipation of a large-scale offensive against the opposition on the eve of parliamentary elections.