



24 December 2020 Russian peacekeepers holding security classes with pupils of one of Stepanakert's school in Nagorno-Karabakh
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War and Sovereignty: Lessons from Putin's War for the South Caucasus*

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Russia has presented its war on Ukraine as a peace enforcement mission dedicated to protecting Russian and Russian-speaking minorities from genocide in Ukraine. Its claims lack credibility, but they are nonetheless important for evaluating security risks to other post-Soviet republics, particularly the three South Caucasus republics. Both Georgia and Azerbaijan have witnessed Russian support for separatist movements in their territory, and Armenia's tensions with Azerbaijan and Turkey—exacerbated by its claim to Azerbaijan's Nagorno Karabakh—have rendered it dependent on Russia for its security. Russia's war on Ukraine, and the conflicted and inconsistent nature of the responses by South Caucasus leaders, provides a stark

reminder of how Russia exploits territorial conflict and aggrieved minorities to encroach on the sovereignty of neighboring states, with negative consequences for regional security and democracy building.

Azerbaijan

On February 22, 2022, just before the invasion of Ukraine, Russian President Vladimir Putin and Azerbaijani President Ilham Aliyev signed the Moscow Declaration, a 43-point agreement covering nearly all spheres of public life, including military cooperation. The agreement claimed to be founded upon "historical traditions of friendship and good neighborliness" and

the “deep cultural and humanitarian ties” between the two countries and their peoples. Article 8 expressed Azerbaijan’s formal appreciation for Russia’s role in mediating the ceasefire in Nagorno Karabakh in November 2020.¹ Immediately after it was announced, pro-government media sources in Azerbaijan called it “an important stage in Russian-Azerbaijani relations” and “perfect diplomacy for securing national interest” and territorial integrity.²

Such coziness with Putin, who has revived Soviet symbols and invaded Ukraine, clashes with Azerbaijanis’ post-Soviet memory and identity. Every year on January 20 (known as “Black January”), Azerbaijanis converge on the Alley of Martyrs memorial complex in Baku to remember those who died in January 1990 after President Mikhail Gorbachev ordered Soviet troops into Baku to restore order after a wave of anti-Armenian pogroms. Today, a commemorative plaque for each victim of “Black January” can be found in Baku’s memorial complex, along with similar markers honoring those who died in the ensuing war with Armenia. Ever since that time, Azerbaijanis have regarded the *absence* of Russian troops in their territory as a symbol of sovereignty.³ Their new historiography emphasizes the colonial nature of Russian and Soviet rule and celebrates local resistance to both.⁴ In 2011, Azerbaijan rejected military partnership with Russia—the very thing that the Moscow Declaration now advances.

For Russia’s part, the Declaration constitutes an extension of its diplomatic and strategic advance in the Southern Caucasus—something furthered through its intervention in the Armenian-Azerbaijani war over Karabakh. For decades, Russian peacekeepers patrolled the status quo, whereby Armenian separatists controlled Nagorno Karabakh

and the surrounding districts, while Azerbaijan demanded the formal and *de facto* restoration of its authority throughout the territory. When, in the Karabakh War of 2020, Azerbaijan regained control over most of the disputed region, it did so with Russia’s tacit assent. Russia’s intervention late in the war ultimately prevented Azerbaijan from retaking all of Nagorno Karabakh, while re-asserting Russia’s military and diplomatic presence as mediator in the conflict.⁵ The tripartite ceasefire agreement (signed by Russia, Armenia, and Azerbaijan) provides for monitoring by 1960 Russian armed troops, 90 armored personnel carriers, and 380 units of automotive and special equipment.⁶ Azerbaijani observers express anxiety that such peacekeepers have a pro-Armenian bias.⁷

Azerbaijani resentment for Russia’s intervention in this dispute has fostered profound pro-Ukrainian sympathy in Azerbaijan, something reflected in Aliyev’s diplomacy. On January 14, he visited Ukraine, his first visit since Ukraine’s Maidan Revolution of 2014. Officially, the visit concerned trade and economic partnership, but it also extended moral support to a nation whose security, like that of Azerbaijan, has been threatened by Russian support for or occupation of separatist regions. Notably, Aliyev’s government did not recognize Russia’s annexation of Crimea, and since Russia’s invasion, it has extended humanitarian aid to Ukraine.⁸

Yet Aliyev’s regime gravitates toward authoritarianism, echoing trends in Russian rather than Ukrainian governance, and Russian non-intervention in the early part of the Karabakh War furthered this outcome. The Karabakh victory in 2020 brought Aliyev broad acclaim, even from long-standing political opponents.⁹ Overnight, Aliyev went

from authoritarian leader to national hero.¹⁰ Far from destabilizing Aliyev, lingering uncertainty on the status of Karabakh benefits his regime, which claims geopolitical insecurity as an excuse to clamp down on political opposition.¹¹ It is certainly telling that Aliyev signed the Moscow Declaration one day after the Russian Federation recognized the independence of two self-proclaimed republics of Ukraine: Luhansk (LDR) and Donetsk (DNR), the Ukrainian equivalent of what would be renewed Russian support for the separation of Karabakh from Azerbaijan.

Meanwhile, recent reports that Azerbaijani soldiers advanced toward Armenian positions in Karabakh, despite the presence of Russian peacekeepers, have sparked speculation about the waning influence of Russia in the region. Were the actions of Azerbaijani troops an attempt to exploit Russian “distraction,” as a *New York Times* article suggests?¹² Frankly, given Armenia’s pro-democratic leanings and the recent Moscow Declaration, Azerbaijan’s small strategic gain might be seen as a matter of collusion. After all, Russia—though Armenia’s security guarantor—did not uphold Armenian interests in Karabakh, limiting its commitment to protecting Armenia proper. Though Azerbaijan relied heavily on Turkish drones and military support, it benefited from implicit and explicit support from *both* Russia and Turkey. The growing influence of Turkey may perhaps challenge the long-standing regional dominance of Russia, but it seems premature to suggest that Azerbaijan is ignoring Russia’s strength or exploiting its weakness.

Armenia

Armenia’s position on the war in Ukraine seeks to balance pro-Russian and pro-Western orientations.¹³ Like Azerbaijan, it abstained from the United Nations resolution opposing the Russian invasion, and on

the 4th of March, Armenia likewise abstained from voting in the UN Human Rights Council (HRC) for the creation of a commission to investigate violations of rights committed in the context of the Russian military operation in Ukraine.¹⁴ (Georgia and Azerbaijan are not members of the HRC and thus did not vote.) This does not mean that there is no support for Ukraine in Armenia. On the contrary, a recent survey of ordinary Armenians points to significant support for Ukraine as a symbol of democratization.¹⁵ Armenia’s geostrategic vulnerability dictates its search for neutrality.

Surrounded by two hostile states, Turkey and Azerbaijan, Armenia has few alternatives to Russian military support. In the Karabakh War, Armenia lost its “security belt” and the city of Shusha (called “Shushi” by Armenians). The losses called into question Armenia’s relationship with Russia, as did Azerbaijani encroachment on Armenian-held territories in portions of Nagorno Karabakh, despite the presence of Russian peacekeepers.¹⁶ Yet, as one commentator stated, neither the U.S. nor European countries have shown any inclination to uphold the Armenian claim to the territory of Nagorno Karabakh (which Armenians call “Artsakh”), so that a Russian loss in the war with Ukraine could further reduce Armenia’s control over portions of Nagorno Karabakh.¹⁷ Ongoing negotiations over establishing diplomatic relations with Turkey—a potentially stabilizing initiative—have in fact proven controversial, prompting public protests by an opposition party (the Dashnaksutiun) in front of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs.¹⁸

Given such vulnerability, there is significant support for Russia in Armenia. Artsrun Hovhannisyan, former press secretary of the Armenian Ministry of Defence and retired colonel of its armed forces,

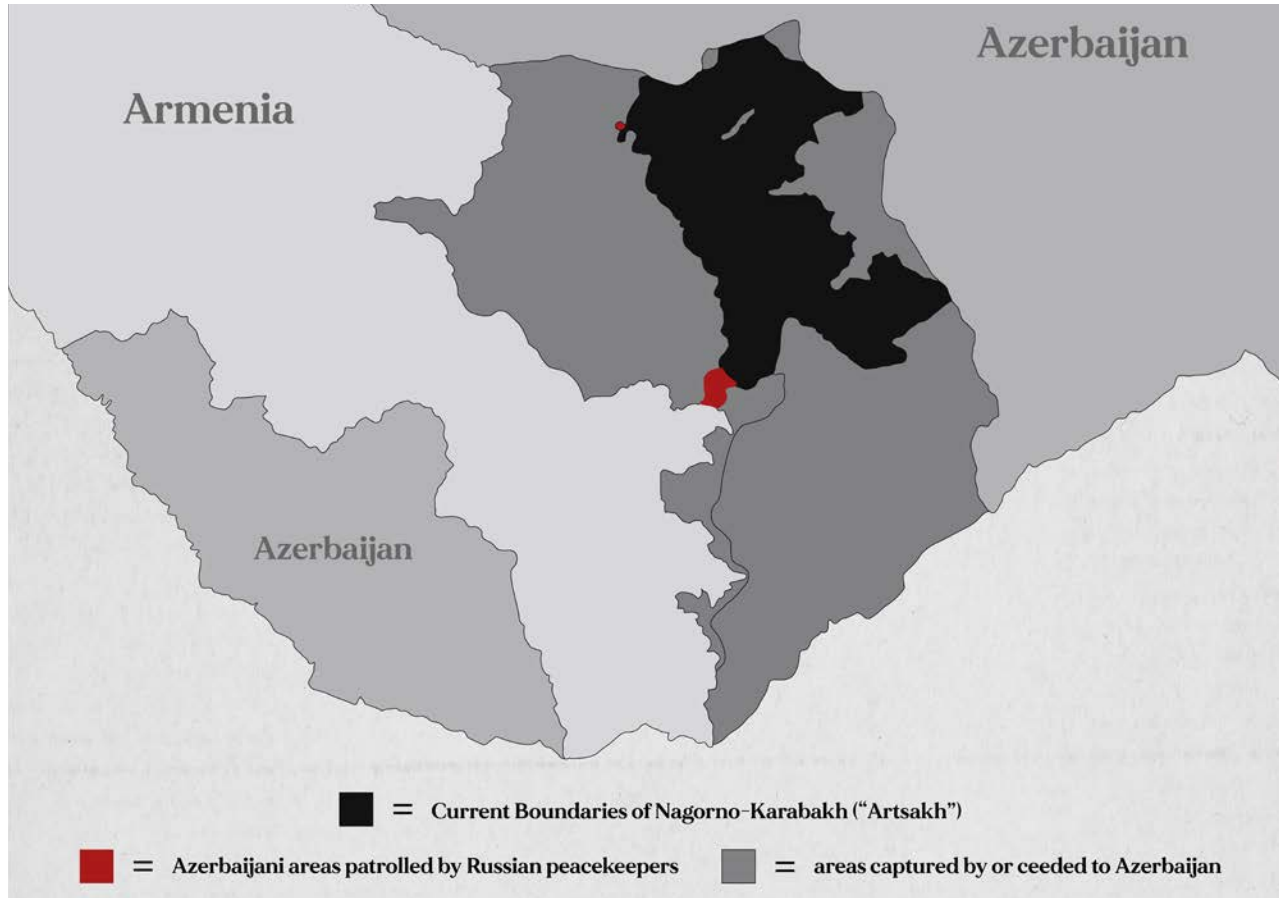


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has directly defended Russia’s support for separatist movements in Ukraine. Just as Soviet-era boundary-drawing gave Nagorno Karabakh (“Artsakh”) to Azerbaijan, he argued, so such Soviet border-making wrongly gave Russia’s historic Crimea to Ukraine.¹⁹ There have also been small rallies in support of Russia in Yerevan, though these have not drawn much enthusiasm or attention.²⁰

Yet Armenian leaders have tried not to pick sides, and something of Armenia’s in-betweenness can be seen in the contradictory ways in which Russia and the West perceive its role in upholding or

circumventing sanctions. On one hand, a Western observer speculated that Armenia might exploit its positions in both the Eurasian Economic Union and the Comprehensive and Enhanced Partnership with the European Union (CEPA) to help Russia evade European sanctions.²¹ On the other, Alexey Fenenko, associate professor of the department of international security at Moscow State University, viewed Armenia as the *first* of the South Caucasus republics to impose sanctions on Russia, attributing this to pro-Western sentiment in Armenian society.²²

Georgia

Of the South Caucasus republics, only Georgia voted in favor of the UN Resolution of March 2, 2022, calling for the immediate withdrawal of Russian forces.²³ The action reflects Georgians' broad support for Ukrainians, whom they regard as fellow victims of Russian imperialism.²⁴ Yet early in the war, Georgian exports to Russia and Russian tourist dollars were deemed critical to the Georgian economy, and it did not impose sanctions. Georgia also reportedly complied with Russian demands not to accept certain anti-war dissidents.²⁵ Only later, seemingly under moral pressure from Ukraine, did the Georgian government reverse its earlier decision on sanctions.²⁶

Much of Georgia's sympathy for Ukraine dates to the Russian-Georgian War of 2008. At the time, Georgia was led by young, Western-educated Mikhail Sakaashvili, who had surged to power through the 2003 Rose Revolution, a popular campaign against corruption, authoritarianism, and falsified election results. The revolution was inspired by a similar event in Serbia in 2000, and it inspired the Orange Revolution in Ukraine the following year. Sakaashvili gave Georgia a pro-European orientation, seeking integration into NATO. At the same time, he struggled to fully integrate three breakaway regions, Adjara, Abkhazia, and South Ossetia, enjoying success only in bringing Adjara's bid for independence to a close. Tensions with South Ossetia and Abkhazia remained high, especially after the Kodori Crisis of 2006, in which Georgia attempted to reassert government authority in Kodori Gorge, adjacent to Abkhaz-controlled territories.

By 2008, NATO was considering a Membership Action Plan for both Ukraine and Georgia, a topic on

the agenda at the April 2008 Bucharest Summit.²⁷

The following summer, however, the Russian government provoked Saakashvili into attacking South Ossetia and Abkhazia, giving Russia an excuse to intervene for ostensibly peacekeeping purposes—namely, the protection of Russian subjects and minorities. Ukrainian observers critiqued Russia's claims of having engaged in legal humanitarian intervention.²⁸ But the war nonetheless met Russian objectives. It severely weakened Georgia, including its standing with NATO member states. Georgia lost *de facto* control over the breakaway regions, to which Russia gave formal recognition (its "punishment" for the Western recognition of Kosovo that same year). This action led to the non-renewal of the OSCE mandate in South Ossetia, ending the OSCE mission in Georgia altogether.²⁹ Roughly 25,000 Georgians from South Ossetia and Abkhazia were displaced, augmenting the number of internally displaced persons (IDPs). (Earlier warfare had displaced more than 200,000 people.)³⁰ Meanwhile, concern about Georgian actions in the lead-up to the war, plus the possibility of being drawn into war with Russia, prompted many European countries to join France and Germany in their opposition to offering NATO membership to Georgia.³¹

Frozen Conflicts in Russian Expansionism

From a Russian imperial perspective, the Russian-Georgian War of 2008 showed how ethnic conflicts and autonomous regions provide leverage for intervention. Not only did Russian action warn NATO member states of the risk of further eastward expansion, but it also humiliated a Western-leaning,

vocally pro-democratic leader, punishing him with the loss of territory. The parallel to the assault on Ukraine and Zelensky's leadership seems clear. Then, as in Ukraine today, Russia falsely claimed to be protecting Russian citizens from genocide.³² Just as it recognized Georgia's breakaway regions, so—as noted above—Russia's current invasion was preceded by the formal recognition of two autonomous regions in Ukraine—in this case, the self-declared and Russia-created Donetsk and Luhansk.

In all this, the Russian playbook of 2022 echoes the war of 2008, but with an eye to the future. South Caucasus states therefore monitor events closely. In addition to vulnerabilities in Karabakh, Azerbaijan has minorities along the Russian border, and it has not yet returned the over 600,000 IDPs from Nagorno Karabakh (victims of war in the late 1980s and 1990s) to their homes.³³ Early in the war, one of Georgia's breakaway republics, South Ossetia, has just announced that it is sending troops to support Russia in this war, even as many ethnic Georgians have volunteered to fight on the Ukrainian side.³⁴

The Russian invasion of Ukraine thus has far-reaching aims with direct consequences for the Southern Caucasus. In Ukraine, Putin was never prepared to limit himself to the introduction of a peacekeeping contingent. As in Georgia, his objective has been to limit the state sovereignty of Ukraine—to cut short any integration into Western or European economic and military systems. Responses from the Southern Caucasus republics reflect their economic and military vulnerability. Across the region, there is significant popular support for Ukraine's bid to throw off Russian intervention. Nonetheless, political leaders find themselves making concessions to Russia: for Azerbaijan, not voting against Russia in the United Nations, and for Georgia, initially

subverting sanctions. The issue is not simply that Russia is a very large and powerful neighbor, economically and militarily; the problem is that each state has disputes either within its territories or with a neighboring state. These limit both autonomy and, for Azerbaijan in particular, possibilities for democracy-building.

The war in Ukraine thus highlights these republics' vulnerabilities: contested territories, aggrieved minorities or displaced persons, and small-state status, with dependency on Russia for security, trade, and good favor in regional geopolitics. Observing events in Ukraine, Ahmad Mammadli, of Azerbaijan's Democracy 18 political party, called for the three countries of the South Caucasus to unite against the threat of Russian imperialism, putting aside their disputes with one another.³⁵ His neighbors across the region would be wise to rally behind this appeal. For while Russia's war in Ukraine may indeed fail, it will fail only insofar as its assumptions with regard to minority grievance and intra-societal division, as well as Western commitment, prove false. For too long, the situation in the South Caucasus has proven Russia's strategic calculations with regard to these inner divisions to be true. To chart their own path, South Caucasus republics need to set aside national grievances vis-à-vis breakaway regions and each other.

* Some portions of this piece have already been published by Baku Research Institute. See Shalala Mammadova, "Ukrainian Resistance Threatens Post-Soviet Authoritarianism," Baku Research Institute, April 4, 2022, <https://bakuresearchinstitute.org/en/ukrainian-resistance-threatens-post-soviet-authoritarianism/>

The opinions expressed in this article are those solely of the authors.

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