



GEORGIAN FOUNDATION FOR
STRATEGIC AND INTERNATIONAL STUDIES

**"THE GREAT WALL OF THE CASPIAN SEA"
THE GEOGRAPHIC NATURE OF RUSSIA'S ATTITUDES TOWARDS
THE POST-SOVIET STATES**

MARIAM MIKIASHVILI

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EXPERT OPINION





საქართველოს სტრატეგიისა და საერთაშორისო ურთიერთობათა კვლევის ფონდი
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As far as the contemporary Russian perspective is concerned, the former Soviet states can be categorized into two geographic groups. The states other than the Baltics, that is. We shall call Belarus, Ukraine, Moldova, Georgia, Armenia and Azerbaijan “the Western Six.” The former Soviet Central Asian countries – Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Uzbekistan, Tajikistan and Turkmenistan – shall be included in “the Eastern Five.” The basis of such a grouping is a country’s geographic location vis-à-vis the Caspian Sea.

It would be no news to claim that the prevention of the color revolutions and the democratization of the post-Soviet space has always been the fundamental aim of Russia.¹ This translates into the objective to preserve the Russia-approved social and political “stability.” However, the specific Russian actions for the maintenance of the “stability” in various post-Soviet states differ fundamentally. In some of them, “stability” is to be ensured by the internal destabilization of a country as well as subversive actions towards a central government, whereas in others the task is implemented through Russia’s constructive approaches towards a central government and state consolidation. So, to what extent are Russia’s attitudes towards a post-Soviet state influenced by the state’s own politics or regime type? What are the places where “central government,” “state” and “regime stability” are synonymous in the eyes of Russia? What does this “stability” even imply and how is it different from simple “authoritarianism,” the most acceptable model of governance to Russia? Would “democratization” be a precise labelling as the alternative to “stability?” Does democratization in every post-Soviet state cause a similar reaction from Russia?

It is tempting to consider that Russia’s constrictiveness depends on the manner of power acquisition of a specific government, pointing to the fact that it maintains mutually beneficial relations with Kazakhstan and Azerbaijan where the authoritarian regimes stem from the Soviet elites. Logically, this does bring comfort to Russia. However, it is not all that easy. Several questions emerge: why are Russia’s relations with Kyrgyzstan not deteriorating significantly? Kyrgyzstan had two revolutions in 2005 and 2010. The country had already been called Central Asia’s “island of democracy” before the revolution.² While Kyrgyzstan is still a “soft authoritarianism,”³ it remains a fact that Russia did not deem the Kyrgyz precedent of utmost importance. Despite Kyrgyzstan’s pleas, Russia also chose not to intervene militarily to resolve the post-revolution ethnic clashes in 2010.⁴ Meanwhile, Russia established its military presence in Nagorno-Karabakh as peacekeepers after the 2020 war.⁵ This happened

even though Armenia is tightly and vitally integrated into the security and economic institutions of the Russian orbit.⁶ The military defeat of Russia's strategic partner is frequently perceived as a Russian punitive measure against Armenia's democratization efforts.⁷ However, Russia had been pushing for its peacekeeper mission in Nagorno-Karabakh under the Armenian *ancien régime*.⁸ Considering these, it is interesting why Russia-approved "stabilization" was to be attained through the Russian military involvement in Nagorno-Karabakh while in case of Kyrgyzstan it was the opposite – Russian non-intervention.

To understand the logic of the Russian actions better, it is necessary that we discuss Central Asia first. "The Eastern Five" is a multi-ethnic region where clans still play an important role.⁹ This is why many experts deem the region to be excessively chaotic and underline the possibility of its "explosion." Despite this, the countries have managed to deal with minority and clan issues relatively well and to maintain good relations with Russia. Russia either chooses not to intervene in "internal" affairs of the states, as in the case of Kyrgyzstan in 2010, or backs governmental forces if necessary and sincerely tries to solve certain conflicting issues. For example, Russia even involved itself militarily on the side of the Tajik government during the rampant Tajik civil war in the 1990s so that peace and stability could be soon restored in a Tajikistan governed by former Soviet elites.¹⁰ On the one hand, the similar ontology, similar essence of the elites (the origins from the Soviet *nomenklatura*, authoritarianism and corruption, etc.) is the reason behind the relatively constructive relations between Russia and the Central Asian states. On the other hand, the similarity also guarantees the peaceful and cooperative relations among the Central Asian states themselves, eliminating the possibilities of inter-state conflicts and support towards separatisms against one another. The Central Asian states are under the Russian "negotiated hegemony," implying certain concessions to the Russian cultural, material and political ambitions of dominance in the region, but not always and not under all circumstances.¹¹ For example, the reason why the Kyrgyz request for the Russian intervention in the 2010 ethnic clashes was condemned by its neighbors was that they deemed it unacceptable for Russia to get too deep into the region's internal matters.¹² There is an unwritten rule uniting all Central Asian authoritarian governments: not to set a precedent of disturbances and violent changes of power in the region as they understand that a successful separatism, rebellion or democratization would sooner or later shake the foundations of their own regimes, too.¹³

The provision of economic, social and political “stability” (or at least the illusion of it) is the basis of the popular legitimacy of the Central Asian regimes.¹⁴ To a significant degree, this is enabled because of the lack of an alternative and the mass public hopelessness that a different, better type of government could ever come to power and fundamentally improve the quality of life. It is precisely the lack of hope for a better alternative that Anna Matveeva underlines when speaking about the “hierarchy of disasters” in Central Asia.¹⁵ The “hierarchy of disasters” is a concept that deserves a great deal of attention, especially in that it can be applied to any region. In essence, the “hierarchy of disasters” illustrates that societies think within the framework of constant self-comparison vis-à-vis their neighbors and that they assign the neighbors places they think they deserve within the “hierarchy.” For example, for the Kazakhs not to express a dangerous amount of discontent with their lack of participation in political decision-making, the elites make sure to remind them that they should in fact be thankful for what they have as those living in neighboring Uzbekistan face much worse human rights violations.¹⁶ In all countries of the region, people are being frightened by the Kyrgyz scenario and told that the democratization attempts and revolutions inherently cause poverty and instability, ethnic tensions included.¹⁷ Democracy is equated with chaos, weak and inefficient governance by the Central Asian regimes, while social and political stability and economic development stemming from it is portrayed as the fundamental virtue no person should trade for anything.¹⁸ Unsurprisingly, such a positive normative representation of stability easily acquires the characteristics of the negative “stability” that we are discussing. It is worth noting that for the majority of the population of Central Asia, “true” democracy is associated with peace as well as economic and physical security.¹⁹ Logically, this leads to the equation of “democracy” and authoritarian and corrupt “stability” in addition to the demonization of any form of civic protest.

Kyrgyzstan was the only Central Asian state that did not elect a high-ranking Soviet official as its first president. Instead, Askar Akayev, a compromise candidate among various opposing clans, had been the President of the Kyrgyz Academy of Sciences. Despite his initial liberal and reformist views, clan power dynamics tempted him towards the classical authoritarian path.²⁰ Such authoritarian temptations and clan power struggles have also affected all post-revolution governments in the country²¹ which results in the reality that certain regimes come and go through revolutions but the post-Soviet type of authoritarian and corrupt system lives on in Kyrgyzstan.

Thus, from the Moscow perspective, events unfolding in Kyrgyzstan might not always be easily predictable but at least for now the essence of its political and social order is intact. This is precisely what “stability” means for Russia. It is unafraid of revolutions and relatively free elections if it knows that a Kyrgyz government is not giving a way to an essentially free and economically prosperous “dynamic” society. However, if we discussed the Kyrgyz case irrespective of its geographical context, then we would be prompted to think that Russia gave itself some time and took no extraordinary measures before it got sure of Kyrgyzstan’s continuous “stability.” It is true that Kyrgyzstan joined the Russian-led Eurasian Economic Union, but it would be somewhat wrong to ascribe this to Russia’s punitive measures against the country’s democratization. Kazakhstan is also already a member and Russia is trying to get a membership consent from Uzbekistan as well which now has an observer status.²² Both states are firmly authoritarian.

Thus, Russia knows and has always known that it can be relatively calm until Kyrgyzstan has neither successful democratization examples nor any supporters for its path in the neighborhood. Russia does not really see Kyrgyzstan as the nucleus of successful democratization in Central Asia due to the geography hostile to democratization and possibly also due to the country’s lack of natural resources. Russia refused to solve the Kyrgyzstan issues militarily because of several reasons: the regional states would have disapproved of such a scenario and it was not worth going against the regimes as Uzbekistan was not interested in protecting the ethnic Uzbeks in Kyrgyzstan. The Uzbek government knew that if it intervened in the sovereign affairs of its neighbor state, someday this action could have come back to it as a boomerang;²³ for this reason, the events in Kyrgyzstan would have been perceived as chaos brought upon by “malign” democratization without seriously disrupting the ethnic map of the region and without “exploding” the regional interstate relations. As we can see, it was precisely the military inaction that ensured the continuation of the existing “hierarchy of disasters” in the Kyrgyz case which is itself the basis of the Central Asian “stability” for Russia. It is worth noting that apart from Russia, another important actor in the region is China, but China is just as uninterested in the region’s democratization. Also, at least for now, Russia and China manage to find a common language, especially when it comes to anti-democracy and countering the West.²⁴

Before we move on to discuss “the Western Six,” recent developments in Kazakhstan-Russia relations should also be briefly addressed. This is because many could assume that the dynamic of this relationship is inconsistent with our views. In 2014, Vladimir Putin publicly questioned the historical legitimacy of the existence of a Kazakh state which caused outrage in Kazakh society and prompted then President Nursultan Nazarbayev to threaten withdrawal from the Eurasian Economic Union.²⁵ In a 2020 documentary “Russia. The Kremlin. Putin,” Vladimir Putin stated that the former Soviet republics got their independence together with the historically Russian lands that had been “gifted” to them.²⁶ Considering that northern and eastern parts of Kazakhstan are largely populated by ethnic Russians, it is not surprising that the statement greatly alerted the country.²⁷ Nursultan Nazarbayev never gave Russia a reason to think that Kazakhstani Russians are persecuted but in the meantime the percentage of ethnic Kazakhs in previously Russian-majority areas increased (the transfer of the national capital to then Astana served largely the same goal). In addition to this, the spread of the Kazakh culture, language and worldview among the local Russians who had opted for remaining in Kazakhstan rather than emigrating to Russia after the fall of the USSR has been successful to a significant degree.²⁸ It would be naïve to assume that these developments went unnoticed in Russia. Russia simply allowed this to happen and did not “defend the interests of the Russians,” unlike Ukraine. This sheds light on the fact that despite occasional demonstrations of powers and threatful messages that serve the purpose of reminding everyone who the key power is in the region, the violation of Kazakh sovereignty never fit Russian interests at least up until contemporary times. The reason behind this should precisely be the geography; namely, the fact that actions taken against Kazakhstan could completely undermine the “stability” of the entire region and doom Russia’s “negotiated hegemony” with it. The inviolability of Kazakhstan’s territorial integrity, however, would have likely not been as solid if Kazakhstan were located west of the Caspian Sea.

The “hierarchy of disasters” is an important concept for understanding why Russian actions differ towards “the Western Six.” Ukraine, Belarus, Moldova and the South Caucasus states are geographically located near those whose democratization is a successful and inspiring example in virtually every sphere of life. A cultural-historical dimension could be added to the “hierarchy of disasters” described by Anna Matveeva. It is true that

all neighbors can influence our worldview, but the cultural and historical experiences of certain states are more familiar to ours and it is only logical that events unfolding there have even greater effects on our own societies. Apart from obvious examples such as Moldova, Ukraine and Belarus, all of the South Caucasian states have sufficient basis for self-association with democratic values and Europe, culturally and historically speaking. For this reason, they might all sooner or later become integral parts of the concept of Europe under suitable political circumstances because the contemporary concept of Europe is first and foremost associated with democracy and freedom (even if the democratic backslide of the past few years has affected certain European states). All of this exacerbates the main factor of Russia's discomfort – the geographic location of the three countries. Through the access to the Black Sea and the immediate neighborhood to NATO member Turkey, the South Caucasus is simply “dangerously” close to the EU and NATO states for democratization there not to acquire the Euro-Atlantic shade, not to mention Ukraine, Belarus and Moldova. Consequently, it is problematic to equate democracy to chaos in “the Western Six.” Thus, it takes Russia extraordinary measures to manage to keep “the Western Six” on the orbit of post-Soviet “stability.”

Liberal democracy was believed to be the globally victorious social and political order back in the 1990s (Francis Fukuyama's “The End of History” thesis). Naturally, this did not make the Soviet-made high-ranking officials in the Russian security and military structures happy. It was precisely due to the various degree of their active encouragement or passive backing of separatist entities that enabled the emergence of four de facto states in the South Caucasus and Moldova in total.²⁹ We are underlining this because various experts consider it a factual mistake to discuss 1990s Russia in a manner that implies that the Russian governance was a closely coordinated monolithic mechanism. However, for the sake of smooth narration, we still opt to refer to “Russia” as the political actor of the era. Soon, the former KGB officer would come to power and the relatively widespread liberal views on Russia's new political identity during the 1990s would slowly but surely get marginalized.³⁰ Some might say that post-Soviet Russia chose to support the separatists in all conflicts in the “the Western Six” because initially it were anti-Russian/anti-Soviet leaders that ascended to power in Georgia, Azerbaijan and Moldova; and that separatism would have been less potent if only Soviet era officials had taken power in “the Western Six” as happened in Central Asia. According to Samuel P. Huntington,

Russia intervened militarily on the side of separatists in Georgia precisely to ensure a loyal government in Tbilisi.³¹ This logic is arguable but if the hypothesis is true that the Russian aversion towards democratization and Europeanization in the post-Soviet space is of a geographic nature, then it should not be surprising that it would try to undermine a country of “the Western Six” even if it is governed by authoritarian, corrupt “pro-Russian” elites. One could look at Serzh Sargsyan’s Armenia and Lukashenko’s Belarus as examples.

In 2013, Armenia already was a member of the Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO), its borders with Iran and Turkey had been guarded by Russian border guards since the Soviet times (which still is the case), the country had already signed a treaty with Russia prolonging the 102nd Russian base in Gyumri until 2044,³² etc. However, in the autumn of 2013, then President Serzh Sargsyan was to sign the EU Association Agreement that also encompassed the Deep and Comprehensive Free Trade Agreement (DCFTA). But Sargsyan went on a visit to Russia and, unexpectedly to numerous Western experts, opted for membership of the Eurasian Economic Union instead.³³ In 2017, when Armenia was already an EAEU member state, it signed the Comprehensive and Enhanced Partnership Agreement with the EU. The agreement obliged Armenia to implement certain political reforms. Journalist Joshua Kucera even described it as some hope for Western-leaning Armenians.³⁴ Armenia has been vitally attached to Russia and the regime of Sargsyan and his predecessors (“the Karabakh clan”) was not democratic. But despite all of this, Russia still saw the possibility of Armenia “slipping away.” This is most likely why Russia still actively considered deploying Russian peacekeepers in Nagorno-Karabakh.³⁵ Surely Russia did not feel pressing urgency of the issue and there was no need at the time for Russia to spare no efforts to have the peacekeepers deployed in Nagorno-Karabakh. But the very fact that Russia deemed it necessary to have any additional leverage to control Armenia indicates the geographic nature of Russia’s fears. As for Belarus, it is the most Russified post-Soviet republic but unlike other states of “the Western Six,” it has no regional basis of potential pro-Russian separatism. Russia can only “lose” the country if Belarus succeeds in developing democracy and the rule of law and if Belarusians subsequently feel the fundamental differences between the Kremlin and the West. This process is likely currently underway amid the protests against Lukashenko.³⁶ Naturally, Russia finds it vital to prevent this. Thus, Russia has been trying

in varying degrees over time to essentially (if not legally) integrate Belarus into Russia through some desirable façade for Belarus.³⁷

Since preemptive demonization of democratization is futile in “the Western Six,” its post factum discreditation acquires utmost importance. Four of these states - Georgia, Ukraine, Moldova and Armenia - have opted for a democratizing path. It is noteworthy that Moldova shares no border with Russia. The sharply confrontational relations with Georgia have unsurprisingly been blamed by Russia on the persona of Mikheil Saakashvili. In the case of Armenia’s democratization, Russia has not publicly expressed its concerns as the leader of the Armenian Revolution, Nikol Pashinyan, made sure to distinguish the revolution, democratization and “Westernization” in his rhetoric.³⁸ As for Ukraine, Russia claimed that it was merely defending the rights of ethnic Russians from “the fascists” or that it was the Russian-speaking population itself that decided to secede from Ukraine.³⁹ However, the puzzle becomes a clear picture in retrospect that revolutionary changes were followed by wars in all three states: Georgia, Ukraine and Armenia.⁴⁰ This is how Russia tries to portray democratization as chaos, bloodshed and misfortunes in the eyes of the population of these countries, too. They are expected to reach the conclusion that even if democracy were “good,” it still has no place in the region as it is not worth irritating Russia. During the November 2020 protests in Armenia following the country’s defeat in Nagorno-Karabakh, some Armenian demonstrators voiced precisely these thoughts.⁴¹

However, since democratization in these countries has already been partially implemented, it is quite difficult to establish a classic authoritarian governance there. For this reason, it is fundamental to slowdown democratization and reforms and “freezing” them somewhere in the limbo is how Russia tries to maintain its desirable “stability” in these societies. Naturally for Russia, the commencement of democratization is bad but it is still better to have it stuck somewhere in the hybrid stage than to let it reach a developed level. This façade democracy is ensured by the existence of the threshold of free elections coupled with an anti-democratic, corrupt political spectrum.⁴² If it proves impossible to have the entire political spectrum like this, Russia needs to at least maintain such a kind of a government. A great way to guarantee this outcome has been the local dominance of Russian wealthy oligarchs with a Russian worldview.⁴³ But Georgia is the proof that even “stabilization” after democratization does not change Russia’s attitudes towards “the Western Six.” Since

2012, the Georgian government rhetoric towards Russia has significantly softened. In the latest years, a substantial stagnation of the country's democratization can be observed (which is increasingly deemed a state capture).⁴⁴ Despite this, Russia never stopped the creeping occupation of the Georgian territories. Instead, it has logically been profiting from the "stabilization" period for expanding its economic influence and soft power.

* * *

Democratization of a post-Soviet state is alarming for Russia inasmuch as the state can become a Western style liberal democracy and join NATO and the EU. Russia constantly feels this threat in the case of Ukraine, Moldova, Belarus, Georgia, Armenia and Azerbaijan ("the Western Six"), albeit in varying degrees. The reason is that these states either belong in the geographic definition of Europe or, at the very least, it is possible for them to become an indivisible part of Europe over time as the very concept of Europe and its borders are flexible within reasonable scopes. For the South Caucasus, the geographic key to NATO and the EU is its access to the Black Sea as well as its immediate neighborhood with Turkey. The geographic nature of Russia's fears is evident through the fact that Russia takes practical measures to keep "the Western Six" in its orbit even when these states are under authoritarian and corrupt governments as demonstrated by pre-revolution Armenia and Belarus. It is difficult to preemptively equate democracy to chaos in "the Western Six" thanks to its regional "hierarchy of disasters" or a society's self-reflection vis-à-vis nearby states. Therefore, Russia finds it necessary to demonize democracy post factum for which it does not shy away from waging wars or inflicting the pressure of an imminent future war (either directly or indirectly as was the case of Armenia). "Stability" encompasses "non-dynamic" elective democracies on both sides of the Caspian Sea. However, due to the geographic location, the post-Soviet type of "stability" acceptable for Russia (authoritarianism, corruption) and consequently Russia's social and political influence in "the Western Six" is quite fragile. A period of post-democratization "stabilization" ameliorates relations with Russia only on the surface while in essence it gives Russia the opportunity to spread its influence relatively calmly. Consequently, it is possible for Russia's relations vis-à-vis certain *governments* and their interests to be constructive but Russia's attitudes towards their *statehood* is inherently destructive. This is demonstrated best as soon as these countries attempt to democratize.

The post-Soviet states west of the Caspian Sea must have no illusion that they can simultaneously ensure fundamental democratization and good relations with Russia. They must *especially* not have the illusion that authoritarian or “stable” hybrid regimes can protect them from Russian subversive actions fully or in the long term. We underline “especially” as it is easier to fall prey to this illusion than to consider it possible to have good relations with Russia amid democratization.

As for Central Asia, there the post-Soviet regimes effectively discredit democracy thanks to a disadvantageous “hierarchy of disasters” for democratization which translates into a democracy-hostile geographic environment. In Central Asia, democracy cannot turn into a Euro-Atlantic integration even simply for the geographic reason. Kyrgyzstan, the only nation in the region that struggles for democracy, is still unable to transform fundamentally and remains an example of an undesirable life for the populations of neighboring countries. Relations with Russia are a lot more dependent on a country’s “stability” in this region and thanks to the continuous “stability” of the central governments, the concepts of state consolidation and specific regime consolidation overlap almost fully. Thus, despite Vladimir Putin considering the collapse of the USSR as the biggest geopolitical catastrophe of the XX century, contemporary Russia is not inherently hostile towards the Central Asian states.

Although, if there ever is a political reality that one of the Central Asian states has successfully secured public welfare amid having built uncorrupt democratic institutions, then it is possible for the regional “hierarchy of disasters” to change completely and for democratization to spread to the whole region. If by this time Russia has remained what it is today, it would most probably change its attitude towards the regional states. One should not expect this phenomenon without Euro-Atlantic guidance but, of course, nothing is impossible in theory.

As of today, the Caspian Sea is the crossroad that determines what kind of attitudes Russia has towards a post-Soviet state. The “Great Wall” of the Caspian Sea is the easternmost border of Europeanization. For this reason, the states west of “the Wall” are at the very least part of “potential Europe” in the eyes of Russia and consequently their statehood is unacceptable for Russia whether they are democratic or authoritarian. Those on the east, however, are “stable” which makes it more possible for Russia to find a common language with these *states* (rather than with certain governments only).

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