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Between Liberal Peacebuilding and Militarization in “Post-Soviet” Conflicts in
Eurasia: the Case of the Nagorno-Karabakh Conflict

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Since the Soviet collapse, Europe and Russia have remained [unable](#) to construct a common framework for security cooperation. The Kremlin has consistently pushed for grand security bargains in order to stabilize and assert its control over swathes of the Eurasian landmass. Indeed, Russian political elites, since the Gorbachev era, have always lamented that the end of the Cold War failed to amend existing European security institutions to accommodate [Russian](#) interests and concerns. Europe, on the other hand, has advocated for rights and rules-based security architectures that derive from the principles of the 1975 Helsinki Final Act, but has done so inconsistently. Russia-Europe relations since have settled into periods of “cold [peace](#)” and [confrontation](#).

Within the Eurasian space that emerged from the Cold War, Russia’s conceptions of security and order were largely territorial in nature: they were expressed in the Kremlin’s perceptions of the post-Soviet space as a sphere of privileged interest, as articulated by President [Medvedev](#) in 2008. This is exemplified by Russia’s recognition of Abkhazia and South Ossetia as independence states, which effectively turned them into Russian [protectorates](#). Combined with the annexation of Crimea, Russia’s territorial conception of its [privileged](#) spheres of influence has been notable.

In contrast, the EU’s normative preferences for market economy and liberal democracy have favored a very different approach, one based on rules and rights, in order to advance security and order in the emergent post-Soviet space. Unevenly applied, however, the EU’s approach has often been diluted by bilateral trade and energy deals between Russia and major European powers (such as France, Germany and Italy). In short, Russia has often appeared as the stronger geopolitical player, in part due to its greater willingness and capability to deploy military and security power, but also due to Europe’s inconsistencies in engaging the post-Soviet space.

This contradiction at a strategic level of geopolitics has played out in each “small war” in the post-Soviet space. Involved in all of these wars in some capacity, Russia’s playbook has stayed the same. In the absence of a grand security agreement between Europe and Russia, a preference for ‘*controlled chaos*’ in those conflicts has emerged as a strategic choice for the Kremlin: Russia’s involvement in various post-Soviet wars around its borders has served to stabilize the conflicts but

short of full resolution, endowing the Kremlin with extensive political [leverage](#) over these regional spaces. The most recent 44-day long Russia-condoned war between Turkey-backed Azerbaijan and Armenian forces, however, has revealed the limits of both the Russian and the European approaches to Eurasian security, and exposed Russia's shortcomings in controlling local actors. The Russian strategy of *controlled chaos* now appears outdated for several reasons. Russia and the West are no longer the sole outside powers with aspirations and capability to influence the region. Turkey's active military and political patronage of Azerbaijan in the war was perhaps the most graphic example of how regional dynamics are changing. Long critical of the OSCE Minsk Group process, the negotiation framework through which Russia and the West had addressed the conflict, Ankara's explicit backing of Baku represented an aggressive attempt to alter facts on the ground and insert itself into the conflict. The Kremlin struggled to fend off the Turkish incursion in its erstwhile privileged area, but with great difficulty.

In the end, in halting the hostilities and achieving a ceasefire, the Kremlin succeeded where the meager European and American attempts had badly failed. After numerous attempts at brokering a ceasefire, the Kremlin sealed an agreement that confirmed Azerbaijan's Turkish-enabled battlefield successes, forcing painful concessions on the Armenians and inserting Russian peacekeepers, but not European or Turkish ones, on the ground. Analysts will debate whether the 44-day war was a political loss for the Kremlin, or whether it heralds a new regional order, one opportunistically shared between Ankara and the Kremlin. What is clear however is that Moscow, which long pushed back on outside encroachment in the South Caucasus, now confronts a potentially ascendant Turkey in the region.

This war has shown that treating Russia simply as a geopolitical villain or a victim obscures the complexity of post-Soviet wars and ignores the local agency driving them. With or without a grand geopolitical bargain between Europe and Russia, any sustainable security architecture in the South Caucasus will remain deeply local in nature, dependent on participatory institutions that can emerge only when states in the region liberalize. Conflict-ridden regions have historically [pacified](#) through a combination of sustained great power [engagement](#) and the emergence of liberal

political [systems](#) — both of which contribute to a favorable environment for conflict resolution and integration. The Russian brokered ceasefire agreement in Karabakh may offer near-term geopolitical stability and an opening for European regional institutions to influence the trajectory of the South Caucasus. Europe’s capacity in, and commitment to, rules-based liberal norms of politics can move the region towards a more sustainable peace and help advance much needed reforms in states willing to do so.

Putin the Peacemaker?

Politically left out of the ceasefire agreement in Nagorno-Karabakh, European powers will likely remain lukewarm to and suspicious of the “Russian peace” — hastily brokered post-war arrangement. Given Russia’s track record of opportunism and intervention in Eurasian regional conflicts, Russia appears now more deeply wedged in the region, raising concerns about whether it can be an honest broker toward a final political solution to the Azerbaijani-Armenian conflict. Such a solution would ultimately entail a determination of Nagorno-Karabakh’s final political status. The current agreement stopped the fighting, enshrined battlefield gains, and committed the warring sides to a mutual exchange of all captives and a reopening of transportation corridors. However, the political status of Nagorno-Karabakh itself was by design left [unresolved](#), an exclusion that Moscow is in no rush to address at [present](#). The status issue, if left unaddressed and unresolved, would likely deepen fundamental security concerns of ethnic Armenians across the region. The status quo likewise provides the main political rationale for Russian peacekeepers in the region.

But the Kremlin’s relative control of geopolitics on the ground may well create enough stability to allow Europe to turn the Kremlin’s brokered agreement into a venue for multilateral cooperation. Russia has a daunting task ahead of it in keeping the peace, particularly one that enables a sustainable framework for the future, and Europe’s normative power of rights-based and governance-focused peacebuilding has an important place here.

The current post-war conditions in Nagorno-Karabakh also give the Kremlin leverage over domestic politics in both Armenia and Azerbaijan. With its peacekeeping force, Russia has militarily entered Azerbaijan for the first time since the closure of its Cold-War era [Gabala radar station](#) in 2012. Some have described Azerbaijan's acquiescence to the Russia-backed agreement as a [Faustian](#) bargain rather than a victory: while Azerbaijan regained previously occupied territories, it now may well have to accept Russian constraints on its foreign policy and security doctrines. Still, [since](#) succeeding his father, Azerbaijani President Ilham Aliyev has often proved capable of playing-off big powers to his advantage. Leveraging its oil and gas for "energy [diplomacy](#)" with Europe, Azerbaijan for years successfully fended off Western calls for reform and liberalization. And [now](#) with Turkish patronage, Aliyev is pushing back against domestic opposition, however meager, that is critical of the return of the Russian military onto Azerbaijani soil. Whether playing off Russia and the West, or Russia and Turkey, Aliyev has applied the quintessential strategy of regime [survival](#) that is characteristic of regimes in many of the "in-[between](#)" states in post-Communist Eurasia.

In Armenia, the levers of Russian influence over that nation's nascent [democracy](#) have significantly deepened. The coordination between Azerbaijan and Turkey against Armenia during the war profoundly increased the sense of physical insecurity among Armenians both in Armenia and in Karabakh, and the Russian peacekeeping presence on the ground appears to be intensifying an already largely pro-Moscow orientation across the political spectrum. Popular anger over the country's military losses under the leadership of Prime Minister Nikol Pashinyan raise questions about the sustainability of [Armenia's democratic](#) gains that emerged from the 2018 [Velvet](#) revolution. Given the simmering political tension now in Armenia, the perceived 'security-versus-democracy' (and 'stability-versus-democracy') trade-offs have reappeared in Armenia's political discourse, challenging the political prospects of democratic consolidation in the country.

European Rewards from the Russian Peace in the NK

But Europe has a role to play in rebuilding the region and promoting a sustainable future should it chose to support and advance the current “Russian peace” in Karabakh. One important dividend would be democracy promotion in the South Caucasus. A Russian-enforced peace, perhaps ironically, can be remarkably conducive to that end.

The increased commercial [connectivity](#) that is promised by Moscow’s interest in unblocking transport and trade routes in the [region](#) would yield economic dividends for Armenia’s struggling democracy, possibly eventually reducing threat perceptions and enabling the country to look forward. Stronger democracy in Armenia also would be only good news for neighboring Georgia’s reform efforts, which have stagnated in recent years. Democracies have historically shown a tendency to consolidate [regionally](#), as they mutually reinforce one another in otherwise authoritarian neighborhoods. Sandwiched among authoritarian Turkey, Iran, Azerbaijan, and Russia, democratic consolidation in Georgia and Armenia may well prove to be mutually reinforcing. Sustained European political and economic engagement in the South Caucasus, under Russian peacekeeping cover, would likely yield a disproportionate windfall for democratic consolidation in a region, one that may well, in turn, seed it further afield.

Building regional security orders in Europe’s neighborhoods could prove easier to achieve if pursued from the bottom up. This would mean providing targeted and principled support to democratic aspirants and pushing for more accountable and responsible governance in authoritarian states, approaches Europe has pursued only inconsistently in this region and elsewhere. Unresolved conflicts such as that in Nagorno-Karabakh remain the frontlines of [authoritarian](#) consolidation, and as such will continue to threaten and derail democratic breakthroughs. These unresolved regional conflicts have been a political boon to the autocrats who leverage such conflicts to silence their domestic oppositions.

Lastly, while enhanced European support for reconciliation, reconstruction and reform efforts in the South Caucasus may help stabilize the region, such support should be conditional and principled, driven by the norms of human rights and minority protections. Unequivocal European support for the sovereignty of the new post-Soviet states in the 1990s offered only rhetorical support for these issues. Since independence, concerns of minority rights and protections were turned into political wedge issues across Azerbaijan, Armenia and Georgia, creating the political conditions for the illiberalism that continues to stymie political reform. A reckoning with this failure is overdue in European capitals. An unapologetic and determined advocacy of minority and human rights is indispensable as a core basis for engagement with the region. Absent this, European ambitions of sustainable regional security orders in its neighborhoods will not succeed.

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