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# briefing paper



*The Means and Ends of Russian Influence Abroad Series*

## The Long Goodbye: Waning Russian Influence in the South Caucasus and Central Asia

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### Summary points

- Russian influence in the independent states of the South Caucasus and Central Asia is weakening. The drift is inexorable but Russia employs multiple instruments to counter this.
- Economic pressure, energy dependence, multilateral groupings, diasporas and the reapplication of a Russian cultural education are all used to sustain the old but recently revived fantasy of a Eurasian Union.
- In the South Caucasus, Armenia has already succumbed to Russia economically, with ramifications for its sovereignty. But Azerbaijan and Georgia, via different paths, have moved away from Russia's embrace.
- In Central Asia, the overall picture is more complex, especially with the relatively new Chinese presence. But Kazakhstan is leading and the other Central Asian states are following in their pursuit of new partners and real autonomy.
- The West's inconsistent and confused engagement with both regions contributes to Russian gains in these areas.
- The South Caucasian and Central Asian states' increasing confidence to act unilaterally and Russian heavy-handedness mean that, for Russia, the battle is already lost.

## Introduction

Russia's influence in the South Caucasus and Central Asia is in decline but it keeps pushing against the tide. Driven by post-imperial ambition it is determined to remain the key external actor in both regions in the short and medium term. This briefing paper considers the political, economic and cultural aspects of Russian influence in the countries of the South Caucasus and Central Asia, and addresses Moscow's efforts to use its 'soft power' resources in these countries to bolster its regional position.

## The South Caucasus

The South Caucasus, with its potential interstate conflict, presents a complex arena for Russian soft power. The levers of Russian influence here vary. They are economic and military in Armenia, scarcely present in Azerbaijan, and essentially related to negative publicity as well as economics with regard to Georgia. How far economic influence translates into political influence is difficult to measure. Russian investment in these countries is not intrinsically illegitimate, of course, but the acquisition of monopolistic stakes in weak ex-state companies is more aggressive than in the West, and implies a strongly political motive.

Russian influence in Armenia is so great that lack of sovereignty should be Armenia's number one concern. The governments in Azerbaijan and especially Georgia, where there is less Russian soft power at work, have more traditional security concerns about Russia. Armenia does not share these concerns (at least openly). But it is also worth noting that while Azerbaijan and Georgia have very different ways of dealing with their former overlord, they also have a common problem: they consider approximately 20% of their territory as occupied.

### Effects of the 2008 Russia–Georgia war

Russia's demonstration of hard power in Georgia in August 2008 was less effective than it initially seemed.

Though Russia achieved most of its objectives from the war (a boost for military morale, a display of power to the West, humiliating the Georgian government and, most crucially, a halt to NATO enlargement), this came at a price – not least increased suspicion of Russia in the international community. The war revealed the weaknesses of the sub-regional structures – the Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS) and the Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO) – that Russia dominates. Other than Russia, no member of these organizations has recognized the breakaway territories of South Ossetia and Abkhazia. Russia generally prefers to avoid full-blown military interventions, but some have suggested that the 2008 war spelled the end for any kind of soft power experiment for Russia.<sup>1</sup> The Duma hearings after the war suggest policy on Georgia and Russia's stance on international affairs were hotly debated.<sup>2</sup> Direct Russian influence in Georgia has diminished considerably since it effectively took control of Abkhazia and South Ossetia – the parts of Georgia where it had previously had the most influence. Although Georgia is more isolated internationally than before the war, Russia now has less influence there than at any time since the fall of the Soviet Union.

Nevertheless, Russia has continued to acquire some Georgian infrastructure, and neither hostility at the political level nor the absence of official relations has made much difference to investment interaction. President Mikheil Saakashvili has asserted that some opposition politicians have been bought, however. He has justified internal crackdowns by charging opposition leaders with conspiracy and subversive activities and used the media to allege their links with Russian espionage.<sup>3</sup> Although one small political party was shown to have received millions of dollars from Russia, for a major party to take money from Russia would be the kiss of death if exposed (except for money taken from Georgians in Russia,

<sup>1</sup> Edward Luttwak, 'Georgia conflict: Moscow has blown away soft power', *The Daily Telegraph*, 16 August 2008, <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/worldnews/europe/georgia/2571274/Georgia-conflict-Moscow-has-blown-away-soft-power.html>.

<sup>2</sup> Vladimir Rukavishnikov, 'The August 2008 Georgian-Russian Incident and Russia's Soft Power', *Review of International Affairs*, Vol. LX, No. 1133–4, January–June 2009.

<sup>3</sup> 'Georgia: Sliding Towards Authoritarianism?', Crisis Group Report, 19 December 2007, [http://www.crisisgroup.org/-/media/Files/europe/189\\_georgia\\_sliding\\_towards\\_authoritarianism.pdf](http://www.crisisgroup.org/-/media/Files/europe/189_georgia_sliding_towards_authoritarianism.pdf). This point was also made by opposition politician Irakli Alasania at the Chatham House Roundtable on 'Georgia's Reforms', 10 February 2011.

which is thought more legitimate). Political opponents of Saakashvili must be careful not to be seen as pro-Russian.

In the only instance of its kind in a post-Soviet state, Vladimir Putin has met opposition politicians from Georgia since the war, although Russia is not likely to reap any political benefit there for the reasons noted above.<sup>4</sup> Russia retains a ‘compatriots policy’ towards its 68,000 citizens living in Georgia, and supports a number of pro-Russian NGOs that have remained active (or been created) since the war.<sup>5</sup>

Russian diplomacy and soft power *vis-à-vis* Georgia has also been used in the West to damage Georgia’s reputation and justify the 2008 Russian invasion. Russia has used its position on the United Nations Security Council (and the General Assembly) and in the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe, and has defended its position at the International Court of Justice and the European Court of Human Rights (ECHR). Georgia’s failings are highlighted and exaggerated, while Russia is portrayed as mediator and peacekeeper. The ECHR has also received thousands of writs against Georgia. Meanwhile, Russia has set up its own Investigation Committee and the Office of the General Prosecutor has been ordered to investigate the causes of the war.

### **South Ossetia and Abkhazia**

By contrast, Russian influence in South Ossetia and Abkhazia has increased. While creeping annexation was the story before August 2008, today it is more direct. The two entities are fully dependent on Russia, whose military presence is backed up by a number of measures: the continued issuing of Russian passports, encouragement of tourism, investment in healthcare and culture promotion, extensive contracts and agreements with the separatist governments, barriers to cross-border travel to Georgia (while access to Abkhazia and South Ossetia is facilitated), Russian purchases of real estate, increased

Russian language-teaching in schools, the provision of legal assistance and the restoration of air, rail and road traffic. That Russians are sent to work in the separatist administrations is an even more blatant exhibition of non-military control. Geological explorations have also been conducted by Russia in deals with both separatist states, and in May 2009 Rosneft signed a deal with Abkhazia’s government to prospect for oil off the Abkhaz coast. The latest ‘president’, Alexander Ankvab, has both a Soviet background and modern-day Siloviki – security and power ministry – connections.

The course of Russian control has not been as smooth as might have been expected in nearby South Ossetia. Among the sources of friction between former President Eduard Kokoity and the Russian leadership was an argument over a subsidiary company of Gazprom that built a pipeline to provide the capital, Tskhinvali, with Russian gas. In August 2010, its equipment on South Ossetian territory was impounded over accusations of tax evasion. Irritations such as this partially explain why the Kremlin was not keen to endorse Kokoity for another term. A more reliable candidate could be found. And indeed an overtly pro-Russian candidate, former KGB officer Leonid Tibilov, did win – but only in a fixed second-round run-off, suggesting waning Russian traction even here, and a suspicion that what works north of the Caucasus mountains does not work as well to their south.

The costs and problems associated with these dependencies suggest to some that Abkhazia and South Ossetia are millstones around Russia’s neck. However, the Rs7.7 billion (\$250 million) Russia spends on them each year is a trivial sum when taken as a proportion of the \$1,465 billion state budget (0.016%).<sup>6</sup> Annexation and recognition of ‘independence’ have given Russia control in a part of Eurasia that its great-power nationalists could only have dreamt of after the end of the Soviet Union.

4 I am grateful to Shota Utiashvili, Georgian Ministry of Internal Affairs, for this information. Interview with author, Tbilisi, 4 November 2010.

5 Some 24 apparently pro-Russian NGOs operating in Georgia are extensively listed, but thinly described in Gatis Pelnens, et al. (eds) (2010), *The Humanitarian Dimension of Russian Foreign Policy Toward Georgia, Moldova, Ukraine and the Baltic States* (Riga: The Centre for East European Policy Studies, Konrad-Adenauer-Stiftung and the Soros Foundation Latvia, 2010), pp. 114–17.

6 The Russian government has decided to earmark over Rs10 billion for supporting Abkhazia in 2010–12. See ‘Prime Minister Vladimir Putin meets with First Deputy Prime Minister Igor Shuvalov to discuss progress made on the programme for economic cooperation with South Ossetia and Abkhazia’, Government of the Russian Federation, 6 August 2010, <http://premier.gov.ru/eng/events/news/11659/>.

But even these successes are probably temporary. There is no more grassroots desire in Abkhazia to be part of Russia than there is for it to be part of Georgia. Abkhazia has a long tradition of autonomy, while South Ossetia has always been deeply reliant on Moscow. And though Russia may have halted NATO enlargement, it is not off the table forever.

Russia's relationship with the South Caucasus is generally perceived to be linked to its relationship with the North Caucasus. Russia has long been inclined to see the region as one 'big Caucasus', where trouble in the North must have origins in the South. Stability in the North means control over the South is required. Dmitry Medvedev was explicit that cooperation between Armenia and Azerbaijan, and the Russian military base in Gyumri in Armenia, are to ensure peace in the whole of the Caucasus.<sup>7</sup>

### Nagorno-Karabakh

Russia's support of Armenia in the Nagorno-Karabakh dispute has been based on several interests: limiting Turkish influence, countering a Russophobic Azerbaijan in the early years of independence, and long-standing cultural ties reflected in the large Armenian diaspora in Russia. Russia's positioning has given it a powerful lever of influence over Armenia and Azerbaijan, as well as external parties. However, its backing of Armenia's stance has changed in recent years: during his presidency, Medvedev invested more effort in mediation than his predecessors and the Azerbaijani first family has strong interests in Russia. But there are forces deriving financial profit and political leverage from continued tension and the status quo. Russia sees its mediation over Nagorno-Karabakh in terms of its influence and may not be genuinely interested in a resolution. This is shown by Russian objections to an international peacekeeping force and to changes in the make-up of the Minsk Group, which has been mediating on the conflict since 1992.<sup>8</sup> Russia has proposed deploying

its own troops instead. This would strengthen its position, but seems unlikely to be accepted by Azerbaijan. It is an open question whether Russia would support Armenia militarily should Azerbaijan decide to retake the territory by force. It is conceivable, however, that this uncertainty is a factor in Azerbaijan's restraint so far.

At the trilateral summit in Kazan in June 2011 Azerbaijan expressed scepticism about the latest Russian-led peace initiative. It still considers Russia to be a dishonest broker, perhaps partly owing to the Armenian background of Russian foreign minister and chief negotiator Sergei Lavrov, but probably mostly from fear of a *pax Russica* in Nagorno-Karabakh, which Azerbaijan considers to be its territory.<sup>9</sup>

A full-blown renewal of the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict would jeopardize Russia's position in Azerbaijan and Turkey, particularly if the Armenians required military assistance. Pipeline security would also be affected, and Russia prioritizes energy security and financial profit over conflict manipulation.

Russian direct investment in the South Caucasus is not large, but it is considerable relative to the size of the recipient economies and their overall investment inflow. Moreover, when concentrated in key sectors it has disproportionate political effects. Georgia and Azerbaijan maintain that Russia uses its energy and transport systems to consolidate influence in states' domestic and foreign affairs – and that it has facilitated the creation of more malleable centres of power.

In 2003, the CEO of United Energy Systems (UES), Anatoliy Chubais, outlined plans to integrate the South Caucasus into a Russia-led energy-supply network through ten former Soviet republics, as well as plans to ensure electricity outflows from Armenia to Turkey and Azerbaijan. Chubais denied that UES sought political gains but he has been a leading proponent of the concept of a Eurasian 'liberal empire' and his actions gave Russia almost total control of Armenia's energy market.

<sup>7</sup> President Rossii, 'Sovmestnaya press-konferentsiya po itogam rossysko-armyanskih peregovorov', 20 August 2010, <http://kremlin.ru/transcripts/8695>.

<sup>8</sup> The Minsk Group co-chairs are Russia, the US and France.

<sup>9</sup> Thomas De Waal, 'Can The "Medvedev Moment" Be Saved for Karabakh?', *RFE/RL Commentary*, 28 July 2011, [http://www.rferl.org/content/medvedev\\_moment\\_saved\\_nagorno\\_karabakh\\_kazan/24279692.html](http://www.rferl.org/content/medvedev_moment_saved_nagorno_karabakh_kazan/24279692.html).

It was Robert Kocharyan, Armenia's president from 1998 to 2008, who effectively sold off Armenia to Chubais and other Russian commercial and political interests. Through Gazprom's ownership of its Armenian subsidiary, ArmRosGazprom, 80% of Armenia's energy structure is Russian-controlled, including the majority of the Iran–Armenia gas pipeline, thus ensuring that Armenia cannot become an independent transit country should Iranian gas ever reach European markets. Russia has also bought up all but two of Armenia's hydroelectric and nuclear power stations, in exchange for writing off Armenian debt.<sup>10</sup>

In the non-energy commercial sectors, the Russian airline Sibir owns 70% of the Armenian airline Armavia. The state-controlled Russian bank Vneshtorgbank owns 70% of the Armenian Saving Bank. Russia has effectively bought up Armenia's national railway network with a \$570 million investment. It controls the majority of mining operations in Armenia and has made significant inroads into its telecommunications sector. In 2010 Russia granted Armenia a preferential loan of \$500 million over 15 years to help it pull out of the financial crisis.

The extent to which Russia has acquired concrete political gains from energy and infrastructure ownership is a source of debate within Armenia. Kocharyan's successor, Serzh Sargsyan, is ostensibly less pro-Russian but by the time of his election in 2008 much of his country had already been sold.

Russia's standing and influence in Armenia have meant a commensurately more difficult exercise in terms of its ambitions for Azerbaijan. There have been only small successes and in particular there is less penetration of the energy sphere than one might expect in such a hydro-carbon-rich country. Russia controls only one oil pipeline – Baku–Novorossisk – and nothing in the way of gas. The 2003 opening of the Baku–Tbilisi–Ceyhun (BTC) pipeline, which bypasses Russia, considerably reduced Azerbaijan's energy dependence on Russia. Lukoil is the only Russian oil company present in Azerbaijan but it is not an operator

and holds no majority stakes. Baku, however, imports half of its gas from Russia. All this makes the two countries appear as near equal 'partners'.<sup>11</sup> UES is also a player in Azerbaijan, with a share in Azerenergy, the electricity monopoly.

In the non-energy sphere, Russian aluminium giant RUSAL has invested over \$1 billion in a previously fully Azerbaijani plant and succeeded in brokering a trilateral pact with Azerbaijan and Iran over the construction of a north–south railway corridor. But the overall number of 'promised' cooperation projects vastly exceeds the number of completed projects, further adding to the suspicion that Russia is good at brokering deals but poor at implementation.

Russia has tried to ensure that Georgia under the Saakashvili regime does not flourish financially, with foreign companies and even entire countries being warned off investing, as well as an economic embargo imposed on Georgian exports to Russia in 2006. After the 2008 war, some contracts with Russia, such as in railway building and in the ports of Batumi and Poti, were terminated. But Russian business is not dead in Georgia: some pre-2008 investments have continued and there remains a good deal of cross-border trading.

The dividing line between Russia's use of soft and hard power in Georgia has become more blurred. In January 2005, power lines and pipelines supplying Georgia with electricity and gas were blown up inside Russian territory. When Georgia switched to Azerbaijani and Iranian gas, supplies to the country dropped significantly. Only when Armenia's gas reserves were exhausted did normal service resume. Georgia no longer imports Russian energy for domestic use, only for onward transit. Russia's most notable failure has been in its attempts to buy pipelines crossing Georgia – partly because the Georgians have set tough conditions, just as they did during Russia's World Trade Organization accession negotiations. However, Russia continues to invest in infrastructure and services such as electricity and gas distribution, as well as in

10 My thanks to Stepan Grigorian for much of the information here. Interview with author, Yerevan, 21 February 2011.

11 Maciej Falkowski, 'Russia's Policy in the Southern Caucasus and Central Asia', *CES Studies*, Centre for Eastern Studies, June 2006, p. 58.

mining. UES owns the majority share in the Georgian electricity company and runs the Inguri power station. Many in Georgia believe that some other countries' investments (e.g. Indian investment in hydroelectricity) are fronts for Russian interests.

Russia's greatest economic lever with Azerbaijan and Armenia is in the form of migrant workers and their remittances. For example, Azerbaijan has approximately two million citizens working in Russia, sending \$2.5 billion back home – 10% of GDP.<sup>12</sup> The Azeri population resident in Russia constitutes a particularly strong form of leverage insofar as Russia has threatened to deport illegal workers and impose a visa regime.

Russia's financial interests in the South Caucasus are often economically questionable, although some have suggested that in time Russian-owned businesses in the region will become profitable again.<sup>13</sup> To date, however, there is little evidence of this.

#### **Political influence and multinational organizations**

Russia's influence in the South Caucasus stems from its economic presence, but it is also a means to an end, as in Georgia. In Armenia this can be seen in the visa-free regime with Russia, in an alliance between the ruling political parties, and in intergovernmental committees to 'agree' on simultaneous adoption of identical national laws and foreign policy concepts.

Economic concessions to Russia have provided few guarantees for Armenia's security, which is ostensibly assured through membership of the CSTO. In principle, if Azerbaijan were to instigate military action against Armenia on its internationally recognized territory, the CSTO would be obliged to intercede on Armenia's behalf. Yet no state has recognized Nagorno-Karabakh as a part of Armenia – so Russia and the CSTO have a get-out clause. There is no consensus in Yerevan on what Russia's obligation and reaction would be if Nagorno-Karabakh

were attacked. Military intervention would not be easy – Russia and Armenia do not share a border, being separated by Georgia – and the Central Asian CSTO states would not offer military assistance. Intervention in support of Armenia's rule over an internationally unrecognized territory could greatly damage the CSTO's standing. But equally, perceived impotence might also lead to its death. This would be a considerable loss of face for Russia, especially in Central Asia where the organization is its multilateral tool of choice.

A large portion of Russian equipment withdrawn in southern Georgia after the 2008 war did not go back to Russia, but to Russia's Gyumri base in Armenia. Its lease agreement has been extended until 2044 and now includes guarantees against general threats to Armenian security. Although it is not clear what kind of threat would prompt a Russian response, it certainly gives Russia a foothold in Armenia for years to come.

For Azerbaijan, the political picture mirrors the economic one: Russia has relatively little direct control, but it is satisfied with the current government whose predictable, autocratic style is easier to deal with than a more overtly pro-Western leadership. Putin was the first leader to meet with Ilham Aliyev on his accession to the presidency in 2003 and, unlike the West, backed him from the outset.

Finally, the Non-Aligned Movement, the Economic Cooperation Organization, GUAM (Georgia, Ukraine, Azerbaijan, Moldova) and the organization of Black Sea Economic Cooperation (BSEC – containing all three states in question and nine other littoral and non-littoral members) are relatively meaningless in terms of what they actually do for their South Caucasus members. But they do provide reminders to South Caucasus states of their small but independent place on the world stage.<sup>14</sup> BSEC is the most overtly pro-Russian. GUAM, a more Western-leaning grouping, has been diminished by the

<sup>12</sup> Valery Tishkov et al, *Migration in the Countries of the Former Soviet Union: A Paper Prepared for the Policy Analysis and Research Programme of the Global Commission on International Migration*, Global Commission on International Migration (GCIM), September 2005, <http://www.gcim.org/attachements/RS3.pdf>.

<sup>13</sup> Gregory Gleason, 'Financing Central Asia's Expansion', *CACI Analyst* (Central Asia and the Caucasus Institute Analyst), 11 March 2004, <http://www.cacianalyst.org/?q=node/2535/print>.

<sup>14</sup> Michael B. Bishku, 'The South Caucasus Republics and Russia's Growing Influence: Balancing on a Tightrope', *MERIA Journal*, Vol. 15, No. 1, March 2011.

2008 war in particular; and the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe, of which all three South Caucasus states *plus* Russia are also members, has been weakened by Russia because of disagreements over the institution's democracy promotion agenda. Finally, Putin's 'Eurasian Union' – a concept rather than an organization – introduced shortly after confirming his ambition to be president for a second time, is the latest attempt to hold the ship together. Its aim is homogeneity of political outlook and its desired contours conform to those of the Soviet Union. Any similarity is denied but this latest idea can be expected to be pushed harder as Putin seeks populist ways to distract from failures at home and abroad. If enthusiasm for economic union via the Customs Union Treaty among the other post-Soviet states is weak, then it is all the more so for this next step. The Eurasian Union is Putin's fantasy.

#### Culture, education and religion

Unlike in the Central Asian states (see below), ethnic Russians make up a relatively small share of the population in the South Caucasus: 0.5% in Armenia, 1.8% in Azerbaijan and 1.5% in Georgia.<sup>15</sup> Russia's diaspora policy in the South Caucasus emphasizes the cultural as well as the security dimension. Business and economic considerations are barely mentioned. Russian remains the lingua franca of the region; official policy stresses the importance of preserving the language in Eurasia and advocates support for education about Russian life and traditions.

But the policy is failing. Russian is in steep decline across the region, not least as a result of restrictions placed on Russian language broadcasting and increased interest in other languages. The future of Russian as a second language is dependent on the health of Russia's political, economic and social relationships.<sup>16</sup>

South Caucasus ethnic groups living in Russia are potential levers – and mollifiers – of Russian policy in the region. For example, Armenians and Georgians are a more permanent population in Russia than other

ethnic groups that migrate to Russia for employment. Georgians in Russia, unlike any other migrant population, include representatives of virtually all social strata. Many are Russian or dual citizens, and a large number are married to Russians. It has been suggested that this may help Russia to formulate a better-modulated policy towards Georgia, though there is no evidence of this, and the distinction between migrants and Russian citizens has significance to the Kremlin.

In terms of education, Moscow State University has established a branch in Baku where the staff mainly comprise visiting Russian professors. Russian cultural and educational events are held throughout the country, and there are partnerships in science too. The Moscow-based Open University of the CIS is an internet university in the Soviet (i.e. Russian-dominated) 'friendship of peoples' tradition.

As Georgia and Armenia have their own brands of Orthodox Christianity there is, paradoxically, more opportunity for the Russian Orthodox Church (ROC) to wield influence in secular Muslim Azerbaijan where the Russian diaspora is the largest. In Armenia, where 98% of the population are members of the Apostolic Church, there is no real flock to target. There is a Russian church in Yerevan and ROC settlements in the north, but if the religious influence of the church is limited, then its political influence is even more so. Indeed ROC influence in Armenia is more limited than in Georgia, whose brand of Orthodoxy is closer to Russia's.<sup>17</sup> Russian relations with the Georgian Orthodox Church remain complex, however. Plans to visit Georgia by the Russian Patriarch (who visited Azerbaijan and Armenia in 2009) have been frustrated by the political fallout from the 2008 war, although the Georgian and Russian Patriarchs have maintained decent relations. Although all the factions of the Abkhaz Orthodox Church nevertheless desire recognition from Russia, Moscow has not granted it, perhaps because it would undermine ROC claims to the Orthodox Church in Ukraine.<sup>18</sup>

<sup>15</sup> CIA World Factbook.

<sup>16</sup> Aneta Pavlenko, 'Russian in Post-Soviet Countries', *Russian Linguistics*, Vol. 32 (2008), pp. 59–80.

<sup>17</sup> I am grateful to Amalia Khachatryan for some of the ideas in this section.

<sup>18</sup> Alexander Bogomolov and Oleksandr Lytvynenko, *A Ghost in the Mirror: Russian Influence in Ukraine*, Chatham House Briefing Paper, REP RSP BP 2012/01, January 2012.

Medvedev's February 2011 decree that members of the Russian clergy can enter politics suggests that the church's influence in politics – and ultimately in foreign policy – is due to increase. The past two years have seen increasing coordination in the policies of the Russian Ministry of Foreign Affairs and the ROC's outreach in Eurasia. Patriarch Kirill has emphasized the role played by the church in ensuring at least a spiritual unity between Orthodox Christians of Slavic background, and this has at times strayed into the political, with calls for the role of the ROC to be emphasized in public education and the military.<sup>19</sup>

## Central Asia

Central Asia is arguably a more cohesive region than the South Caucasus. None of its states are at war with each other or have major territorial disputes, secular Islam is dominant in all of them, none have any overt Euro-Atlantic orientation, they have similar problems such as corruption and drug-trafficking, and they have authoritarian regimes, albeit of differing severity. This *relative consistency* is reflected in Russian policy towards Central Asia, which is broadly regional rather than highly differentiated.<sup>20</sup> Most importantly, in Central Asia Russia is not competing just with the West, but with a faster-growing China. Russian policy takes account of this – or at least is helped to do so by China's diplomacy in its 'peaceful rise'. China and Russia also share some perspectives about Central Asia, which they display in multilateral organizations and more broadly in relation to a 'declining West'.

After the 9/11 terrorist attacks Vladimir Putin 'granted' America use of military bases and over-flight rights in Central Asia, even though that was not in his gift. But Russian attitudes towards Central Asia would become far less accepting of a US presence there in the decade to

come. Since 2001, Russia has devoted considerable attention to Central Asia but, as in the South Caucasus, with mixed results and in the face of inexorable overall decline.

Russia has reinforced its connections with the states of Central Asia, expanded economic cooperation, backed most of the ruling elites in their rigged elections and 'security operations', and promoted Russian language and culture. At the same time, the US–Russian 'reset' implies a *de facto* American withdrawal from the region – though less so than in the South Caucasus owing to continuing NATO operations in Afghanistan. Russia has another advantage in Central Asia: Western assistance to the regimes there is conditional upon political liberalization. Russia's never is. Indeed, Russia has suggested that parliamentary democracy is incompatible with Central Asia.<sup>21</sup>

Much Russian influence and assistance in Central Asia is legitimate and vital, e.g. over drug-trafficking, illegal migration and some forms of security cooperation. Russia has genuine security interests in Central Asia, but it would be more convincing if it did not play the security card when no such threat exists. Another important factor is China. So far, its engagement has been welcomed in the region as a counterweight to Russia and the West. However, China is also seen as the greater long-term threat. Given a choice between dominion by Russia or by China, most Central Asians would currently choose Russia.

Kazakhstan is the most important regional actor of the five Central Asian states, with the greatest economic and political independence from Russia. But while all the Central Asian countries pursue 'multi-vectored' foreign policies, courting China and the West in almost equal measure, none are (to Russian eyes) overly wayward either, so Russia sees its limited opportunities to exert non-military power as more effective than military force.<sup>22</sup>

<sup>19</sup> Irina Papkova and Dmitry P. Gorenburg, 'The Russian Orthodox Church and Russian Politics: Editors' Introduction', *Russian Politics and Law*, Vol. 49, No. 1, January–February 2011, pp. 3–7.

<sup>20</sup> I stress the term 'relative' (in comparison with the South Caucasus). The five countries are viewed differently: Kazakhstan is regarded as more of a partner in some matters; Tajikistan and Kyrgyzstan are beneficiaries of Russian aid; and Uzbekistan and Turkmenistan are seen as difficult to control.

<sup>21</sup> Dmitry Medvedev speaking after the G20 Summit in Toronto, June 2010.

<sup>22</sup> For a good understanding of 'multi-vectorism' in Central Asia, see Annette Bohr, 'Central Asia: Playing the Multi-vector Game', in Robin Niblett (ed.), *A Question of Leadership: America in a Changed World* (London: Royal Institute of International Affairs/Wiley-Blackwell, 2010).

## Political influence

The failure of Russia to influence post-revolution governments in Georgia and even Ukraine may be partly responsible for its more nuanced approach towards Central Asia. This even extends to the rare occasions when Russia *wishes* regime change, as in Kyrgyzstan in 2010. Although Russia played no direct role in Kyrgyzstan's violence in April and June of that year, the Kremlin was disenchanted enough with President Kurmanbek Bakiev and his government's policies to do something about it – particularly given the perceived duplicity over the American Manas 'Transit Center',<sup>23</sup> and the fact that Bakiev's son had control over the economy, giving him the ability to block Russian projects.

In early 2010, Russian TV broadcasts in Kyrgyzstan and online news sites produced hard-hitting pieces about top-level corruption. These often truthful (if selective) exposés helped prepare the ground for Bakiev's end. Even before April, Russia had already raised the fuel duty on petrol it exported to Kyrgyzstan (in preparation for the latter's entry into the Customs Union, it claimed) and shut down some bilateral banking transactions, triggering social unrest. Once the fighting stopped and it became clear that Roza Otunbaeva's provisional government was at least partially in charge, Russia backed her quickly with 1.5 million tonnes of Russian grain, an agreement on \$50 million of financial aid, and a tantalizing (if ultimately empty) promise of security assistance.<sup>24</sup>

Just before the previous 'Tulip Revolution' of 2005, Bakiev and Otunbaeva had travelled to Moscow for meetings in the Kremlin. Similarly, the then newly installed Prime Minister (now President), Almazbek Atambayev, visited his Russian counterpart in Moscow a week after assuming his post in December 2010 and Atambayev now describes Russia as his country's main strategic partner. He has spoken of his people's 'love' for

Putin – and has collected the outstanding \$15 million rent on Russia's own base in Kyrgyzstan.<sup>25</sup>

This new Russian relationship with Kyrgyzstan is one of the first of its kind with any of the former Soviet states.<sup>26</sup> It is too early to determine if this is a one-off or a policy shift whereby Russia is willing to support certain regime-toppling revolutions in its self-declared sphere of influence – even if it cannot be sure of the outcome. It appears to have learnt some strategic patience needed to influence events in the slightly longer term. However, that has not stopped GazpromNeft from cutting off oil deliveries to the Kyrgyzstani business supplying US forces in the country. Relations remain unpredictable, and the Russian reaction to the violence in Osh in June 2010 suggested that there was no plan to deal with escalating tensions.

Beyond Kyrgyzstan, it is easy to conclude that political relations between Russia and Central Asian countries are limited to grand but empty statements. However, on occasion, opportunities for renewed influence do occur and Russia is adept at grabbing them. When Turkmenistan's President Saparmurat Niyazov died in 2006, the Russians sent a high-level delegation to the funeral, including Gazprom CEO Alexei Miller, who was there to negotiate the best deal for Russia with the new regime. The true extent of the Russo-Turkmenistani relationship is largely obscured from view. But Turkmenistan's isolation from almost any form of Western contact is slowly changing under President Gurbanguly Berdimuhamedow, as shown by EU Commission President José Manuel Barroso's visit to Turkmenistan in January 2011, primarily to discuss gas exports. The EU is still a marginal actor in terms of influence, but the successful Barroso visit suggests that Russia's greater efforts are not always rewarded, in part because of its unreliability (especially over pricing policy), but also because of the greater attraction of the West.

<sup>23</sup> Former President Bakiev flip-flopped over whether to allow America and its allies continued use of this military installation near Bishkek – a transit point for operations personnel in Afghanistan. His acceptance of a new American offer in mid-2009 is often seen as a catalyst for Russian moves to oust him. Bakiev's successor, Alzambek Atambayev, has said he will attempt to close the base when the lease expires in 2014.

<sup>24</sup> 'Prime Minister Vladimir Putin holds talks with Kyrgyz Prime Minister Almazbek Atambayev', Government of the Russian Federation, 27 December 2010, <http://premier.gov.ru/eng/events/news/13628/>.

<sup>25</sup> Golos Rossii radio interview with Almazbek Atambayev, noted in RFE/RL, 'Visiting President Cites "Love" for Putin', 27 February 2012.

<sup>26</sup> Another example might be Russia's assistance in 1993 in toppling Zviad Gamsakhurdia's regime in Georgia he was replaced by the more overtly pro-Russian Eduard Shevardnadze.

Kazakhstan is one of the most consistently pro-Russian post-Soviet countries. Its leadership is careful to be complimentary about Russia in public, although privately it has concerns. For its part, Russia is happy for President Nursultan Nazarbaev to remain in office indefinitely. The Kremlin has even helped soothe discontent among the Russian diaspora in Kazakhstan in order to maintain good relations.<sup>27</sup> In the 1990s, when some Kazakhstani Russians called for the incorporation of northern Kazakhstan into Russia, Moscow did not back them. Yet Nazarbaev is the master of the multi-vectored foreign policy. He understands that Kazakhstan cannot rely on one partner, and that Russia cannot be fully trusted. Kazakhstan ‘plays’ Russia: its sober, simultaneous courting of and distancing from the Kremlin ensures smooth relations and freedom from dominance. This is a combination other countries in the region have yet to achieve. Kazakhstan suffers from fewer Russia complexes than the other Soviet states. It also knows that Russia is irritated by being ignored. Each knows not to push the other too hard.

Large numbers of Russians in Kazakhstan had a genuine political life in the 1990s. Since independence in 1991, Russian activists had taken part in the ‘democratization’ process, mainly with the political party *Lad* and the group *Russkaya Obshchina*. But as the Kazakhstani regime became consolidated and more confident, these pro-Russian groupings folded and many of their senior figures returned to Russia.<sup>28</sup> These days, the party *For a Fair Kazakhstan* is closest to Russia, although it is closer to the Nazarbaev regime than the old, more overtly pro-Russian parties.

Conditions for Russian minorities in Central Asia have deteriorated considerably since independence but Russia has not wished to risk wrecking political relations with any of the Central Asian countries by defending their rights.<sup>29</sup> This makes an interesting contrast with the Baltic states, and

a wider point: the significance of Russia’s instrumental and selective use of diasporas to achieve political objectives.<sup>30</sup>

Owing to its size and large Russian diaspora, Kazakhstan is at once protected from and affected by Russia. As Central Asia’s most tolerant and multi-ethnic country, it shows little objection to Russian infiltration, yet this is also surprising considering Nazarbaev’s constant underlining of Kazakhstan’s independence. However, Slavic movements – often web-based ones such as [www.russians.kz](http://www.russians.kz) – provide a focus for nationalist sentiments. When the content gets too strong, the Kazakhstani government issues a warning, and things become more moderate. Russia has used these groups as leverage on the Kazakhstani government, although it has not moved to protest against measures imposed by the Nazarbaev government to restrict social economic and political activity by ethnic Russians.<sup>31</sup>

Astana is under no illusion that Russian soft power exists in Kazakhstan.<sup>32</sup> This is accepted as an ‘after-glow’ of Russia’s empire. However, there is also an awareness of the gap between Russian ambition and power.

The Uzbek–Russian rapprochement predates the Uzbek–Western ‘divorce’ over the killings in Andijan in 2005<sup>33</sup> but there is little doubt that Russia filled part of the vacuum created. Five months after the Andijan incident, Putin and Uzbekistani President Islam Karimov signed a Treaty of Allied Relations, giving Russia the possibility of using a military base in Uzbekistan. In the following months Uzbekistan joined the Russian-led Eurasian Economic Community (EEC or EurAsEc) and the Russian-led CSTO. However, Uzbekistan has proved an unreliable partner for Russia. In December 2006, it began to make overtures towards the West, apparently concerned that Russia’s influence (partly through its dominance of EurAsEc and the CSTO) was becoming

<sup>27</sup> Falkowski, ‘Russia’s Policy in the Southern Caucasus and Central Asia’, p. 65 (see note 11 above).

<sup>28</sup> Sébastien Peyrouse, ‘The Russian Minority in Central Asia: Migration, Politics and Language’, Occasional Paper No. 297, Woodrow Wilson International Centre for Scholars, <http://wilsoncenter.net/topics/pubs/OP297.pdf>.

<sup>29</sup> Ibid.

<sup>30</sup> See Agnė Baraskūnaitė-Grigas, *Russian Influence in the Baltic States*, Chatham House Briefing Paper, forthcoming 2012.

<sup>31</sup> I am grateful to Gani Nygymetov of Nazarbaev University, Astana, for this insight.

<sup>32</sup> Interview with Timur Urazhaev, Head, CIS Section, Kazakhstani Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Astana, January 2011.

<sup>33</sup> Though the details are still much disputed, Uzbek security forces shot dead several hundred protestors in this provincial city’s main square.

overbearing. Uzbekistani analysts admit to some psychological pressure from their ‘great neighbour’, but still argue that Russian influence is declining. They point to disagreements over security and the CSTO in particular, and a stronger national identity, and suggest that Russian policies that worked ten years ago no longer do so. Russia’s priority is to ensure that Karimov’s successor, when that time arrives, is more pliable.

Attempts at Russian political influence in Tajikistan are not dissimilar to those in Uzbekistan. Tajikistan had been courted successfully for foreign investment by the United States and other Western countries in 2001. Positive memories of Russian peacekeeping following the 1992–97 Tajik civil war were short. When the West failed to make good on its investment promises, Tajikistan returned to the arms of Russia. The story is one of Western loss and Russian gain, but it also shows that Russia’s embrace is not a convincing one and that the West, if it could demonstrate greater consistency in its foreign and economic policies, would have far more sway in the region than it currently does. President Emomali Rakhmon has resisted giving Russia full access to his country but, having witnessed Kyrgyzstan’s success in collecting military base rental income, he has followed suit and demands the rent money for Russia’s presence in his country. Russia’s willingness to pay up is still to be seen and could decide the level of overall influence for years to come. Also decisive will be Tajikistan’s own internal situation, bearing in mind the destabilizing effects of its position as a drugs corridor, which presents both Moscow and the West with challenges.

Turkmenistan’s relatively isolationist politics make it a tough arena for Russia, just as it is for the West. Russia is seen as a security guarantor against Iran and Uzbekistan – powers with which the bulk of Turkmenistan’s population is contiguous. But Russia’s greed for Turkmenistan’s gas reserves – or at least for control over the transit of them – has made Ashgabat wary. Relations were considerably more secure and all-encompassing under President Niyazov than under Berdimuhamedow.

### Multilateral institutions

The CSTO is Russia’s instrument of choice when it comes to influencing events in Central Asia with greater ‘legitimacy’. All the post-Soviet countries belonging to the CSTO receive financial aid from Russia. However, the organization’s non-intervention in the violence in Kyrgyzstan in 2010 suggests that its effectiveness is limited and almost entirely dependent on Russian military power.<sup>34</sup> Its achievements are confined to a few joint exercises and its main activity seems to be issuing joint declarations. This may explain Russia’s shift towards softer modes of influence beyond the security sphere.

The Eurasian Economic Community is has been the primary instrument through which Russian so-called ‘anti-crisis subsidies’ are sent to Central Asia. Although sometimes presented as a counterpart to the EU, it works on more overt principles of trade-offs: the recipient gets cash with political and economic conditions attached. Decisions in EurAsEc were to be made by qualified majority voting, based upon financial contributions to the centre. Russia, therefore, would have received a controlling 40% of the votes. But EurAsEc turned out to be too ambitious and Russia has instead promoted an offshoot – a Eurasian Customs Union Treaty (CU), currently with Kazakhstan and Belarus.

Smaller in scope, the Customs Union is, in some ways, more ambitious because it is more constrained by rules. It provides a mechanism for members to harmonize export tariffs and informally coordinate policies towards international energy companies. Kazakhstan concedes that the CU will not benefit it economically but joined to ensure good relations with Russia. However, its decision was also a response to Russian pressure, a calculation about possible Russian retribution, and a judgment that it will not wreck growth.<sup>35</sup> The remaining Central Asian countries are officially considering membership but are privately sceptical. Kyrgyzstan’s WTO membership makes it reliant on Chinese exports, and Moscow has demurred anyway, in the realization that Kyrgyzstan

<sup>34</sup> Though Russia argued that CSTO guarantees do not apply to internal threats – and that it wished to be sensitive to the norms of international conduct that others (i.e. NATO) had disregarded.

<sup>35</sup> Kainar Kozhumov, Agency for Assessing the Economic Efficiency of Investments (AIRI), in conversation with the author, Astana, February 2011.

will be a drain. Tajikistan is particularly worried about Moscow's political weight.

If the CU fails to produce any financial benefit, Russia's plans to turn the rouble once more into the regional currency will be left in tatters. The economic weaknesses of the Central Asian countries (Kazakhstan aside) mean Russia's 'Marshall Plan' for the region is far from functional.

### Energy

Russia still has a dominant energy presence in Central Asia, as in the South Caucasus. But when it announced that it would move towards world energy prices in 2008, its ability to set pricing policies, interrupt supply, make outright threats and use 'debts for influence' became more constrained.

Russia started its Central Asian energy relationships with Kazakhstan and Turkmenistan, and then began to make plays for the hydrocarbons and other forms of energy possessed by all the Central Asian states. When the Soviet Union collapsed, all of Central Asia's pipelines crossed Russia and were subject to its transit regime. Russia acted not simply as a transit state but as a buyer of oil and gas at artificially low prices. Within the past five years, the Central Asian states have succeeded in changing these rules to their own benefit.

Russia's aim is to ensure monopoly of transit of Central Asian oil and gas through its territory to the West. But the Baku–Tbilisi–Ceyhan (BTC), Baku–Tbilisi–Erzurum (BTE) and Turkmenistan–China pipelines have dented these ambitions considerably, as they bypass Russia. Moscow does, however, still control the main pipeline for Kazakhstani oil and by increasing the capacity of the Caspian Pipeline Consortium (CPC) it has induced Kazakhstan to feed more oil into it and give up more control. The Kazakh–Caspian Transportation System (KCTS), a trans-Caspian oil pipeline connecting to the BTC pipeline, has been contested by Russia on the grounds that a Caspian Sea delimitation agreement is lacking, and Russia is offering better inducements for export through the CPC. Downstream, Russia

has taken measures to prevent Kazakhstani companies from entering Western energy markets. For example, in 2005 Transneft broke its contract with KazMunaiGaz because the Kazakhstani company was transporting oil to Lithuania, thus competing against Russia.

Russia also has significant energy agreements with Uzbekistan. The latter is rich in natural gas and Western countries are either wary of operating there or relations have soured too far. In spite of Moscow's current desire to get out of long-term energy contracts, from the Russian perspective Uzbekistan remains inadequately exploited.

In Uzbekistan and Turkmenistan, Russia has secured long-term – though not monopolistic – contracts, purchased critical energy infrastructure and negotiated production-sharing agreements (PSAs). But its ability to deny access to other states is wearing thin, as is its capacity to re-export the oil and gas it receives from Central Asia to the West for vastly higher prices than it pays. Kazakhstan and Turkmenistan – the two major energy players – are now diversifying customers and transport routes.<sup>36</sup> China is generally regarded as the more reliable partner following too many vacillations in Russian energy policy and failure to reach purchase agreements for most hydrocarbon production. Moreover, China, along with Japan, Singapore, Malaysia and South Korea, not to mention the West, can provide advanced extraction technology, which Russia cannot.

Russia does not ignore Tajikistan and Kyrgyzstan, the two Central Asian countries with poorer hydrocarbon endowments. It can consider them more of an outright success story than the richer and more independently-minded oil- and gas-rich states. Gazprom is the major company undertaking the exploration of Tajikistan's Sariqamish gas reserves,<sup>37</sup> and it has acquired stakes in Kyrgyzgaz and Kyrgyzneftegaz. A 25-year agreement for the development and production of gas fields in Kyrgyzstan concluded under President Akaev remains in place.

Significant Russian investments have also been made in the hydroelectric sectors of Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan.

<sup>36</sup> See John Roberts, *Pipeline Politics: The Caspian and Global Energy Security* (London: Chatham House, forthcoming 2012).

<sup>37</sup> Reported by BBC Monitoring, 27 January 2011.

This has had a negative effect on relations with Uzbekistan. Russia's investment in Kyrgyzstan's hydroelectric projects has further isolated Uzbekistan and diminished its supply of water. However, Russia's position has not been consistent. It has sought to maintain its leverage over both states by lending Kyrgyzstan the money for the dam, while also warning that it would support Uzbekistan's position if it were to object after further consultation.

#### Economic influence in non-energy sectors

Russia is no longer the number one trading partner of the five Central Asian states as a whole. In Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan and Turkmenistan, it has already been overtaken by China, whose trade with the region, less than a billion dollars in 1998, is now over \$24 billion – more than Russia's \$22 billion in 2010.<sup>38</sup> However, Russia's economic penetration of Central Asia is more multi-dimensional, encompassing sectors such as mining, construction, the military-industrial complex, telecommunications, transport and agriculture. Kazakhstan aside, the business environment in most of Central Asia is poor, partly because of corruption. While this may discourage some Western investors, it does not deter Russians. Kazakhstan demands greater independence in some sectors (e.g. oil production and services) while compromises are struck in others (e.g. agriculture) in which Russian influence is greater. But more than that, most of Kazakhstan's infrastructure is linked to Russia, which sees the country as the gateway to all the other countries in Central Asia. Turkmenistan is a good example of the undoing of previously cooperative economic relations with Russia because of Russia's desire for total control. A recent dispute with dominant Russian telecoms provider MTS over market control has led Russia to suspend its operations in the country.

Most Central Asian countries are burdened by Soviet-era debt to Russia. Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan have had their debts restructured. The fact that Uzbekistan's

\$700 million debt is not commonly mentioned when partnership and cooperation agreements are discussed suggests that Russia would prefer to keep it for leverage. Good relations, as Russia defines them, appear to be more important. Although \$900 million of Russian investment was scheduled for 2011, Uzbekistani trade with Russia is on the wane.<sup>39</sup> Even Russian businesses fare badly in the struggle against Uzbekistani bureaucracy, corruption and unwillingness to make long-term commitments.

Kazakhstan remains the main bread basket for its Central Asian neighbours (in spite of regional tariffs), but this is dependent on repeated bumper harvests. Therefore Central Asia's dependence on food imports from Russia still provides the latter with influence. Because of domestic shortages, Russia banned grain exports to the region from August 2010 to July 2011, but this temporary measure has only sharpened Russia's leverage. In order to secure domestic demand, Central Asian states have to acquire grain at a price – financial or otherwise – determined by Russia.

As with the South Caucasus countries, the reliance of Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan on remittances from their migrants in Russia adds another level of dependency. As a share of GDP, remittances to the two countries stood at almost 29% and 50% respectively in 2011.<sup>40</sup> Russia could block these crucial financial flows (as it did with Georgia well before the 2008 war) by strict enforcement of taxation, employment and visa regulations; but it has not done so. Indeed, its relaxed attitude towards economic migrants from Central Asia has arguably strengthened the region's stability, because of the economic benefits that these remittances bring to recipient countries, partially alleviating the poverty and unemployment that remain the greatest cause of social unrest and revolution. However, recent evidence suggests that the financial rewards of migrant work in Russia are not as great as they once were, not least as a result of the global financial crisis.<sup>41</sup> Moreover, Russia's changes to visa and passport rules – CIS 'internal'

<sup>38</sup> WTO and Asian Investment Bank combined figures.

<sup>39</sup> 'Rossiyskiye kompanii v 2011 godu vlozhat v Uzbekistan oko \$900 mln investiciy', IA Regnum, 10 January 2011, <http://www.regnum.ru/news/1362968.html>.

<sup>40</sup> For Tajikistan: Russian Central Bank statistics, reported in ASIA-plus at <http://news.tj/ru/news/denezhnye-perevody-iz-rossii-v-2011-godu-sostavili-50-vvp-tadzhikistana>. For Kyrgyzstan: World Bank statistics, reported in <http://www.rosbalt.ru/exussr/2012/04/13/969386.html>.

<sup>41</sup> Hilary Hemmings, 'Remittances, Recession ... Returning Home? The Effects of the 2008 Economic Crisis on Tajik Migrant Labor in Moscow', *Eurasian Migration Papers* No. 4, Woodrow Wilson International Centre for Scholars, 2010, [http://www.wilsoncenter.org/sites/default/files/No4\\_TajikLab2008FinCris.pdf](http://www.wilsoncenter.org/sites/default/files/No4_TajikLab2008FinCris.pdf).

passports were no longer deemed valid from mid-2005 – creates considerable bureaucratic and financial obstacles for migrants. However, it is unlikely that many will return to Central Asia in large numbers owing to the lack of domestic job prospects and the stigma of failure. This is economically important for Russia too. Many analysts believe that its medium- to long-term demographic need for migrant workers is even greater than Tajikistan's or Kyrgyzstan's need for remittances.<sup>42</sup> But even here the picture is confused as Russia still deports some 3,000 Tajik citizens a year and is willing to further pressure and subsequently alienate Tajikistan, as it has done in its 2011 protest over the arrest in Tajikistan of Russian-employed pilots accused of drug-running.

Worse still for Russia, immigrants, diasporas and remittances do not in themselves generate loyalty to Russia. Russia's missteps, its lack of anything to give other than money, and the different backgrounds and aspirations of a Muslim immigrant population all mean the relationship is conducted strictly on a business footing and not underpinned by warmth or respect.<sup>43</sup>

### Culture, religion and language

The proportion of ethnic Russians in the populations of the Central Asian states varies considerably. It is largest in Kazakhstan (23.7%), followed by Kyrgyzstan (12.5%), Uzbekistan (5.5%), Turkmenistan (4%) and Tajikistan (1.1%).<sup>44</sup> While there are few alternatives to Russia's cultural influence in Central Asia at present, this will not last. The Russian language – the core of its culture – is losing ground in most of the region and is being replaced by English among the younger generation. The exceptions are Kyrgyzstan and, to a lesser extent, Kazakhstan. The number and percentage of ethnic Russians in Kazakhstan are higher than in the other four Central Asian states combined. By sheer weight of numbers Russia remains a force in Kazakhstan, linguistically and culturally. Yet both Kazakh and Russian are

languages of government and administration in Astana, whereas ten years ago it was Russian only. Uzbekistan and Turkmenistan have replaced Cyrillic with a Latin script in an attempt to de-Russify their national identity, and others may follow. However, fluency in Russian is still regarded as a mark of education and culture, and Russian remains the lingua franca of regional groupings. Even the Chinese-led Shanghai Cooperation Organization conducts its proceedings primarily in Russian.

Russia's National Security Strategy, released in 2009, put a renewed emphasis on Russian language in Central Asia, but so far this has been largely rhetorical. Small projects have been implemented to support the Russian language and its speakers, such as the cultural and educational programmes in Tajikistan's northern Sughd region. Russia's CTC television is expanding into Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan, although the latter, a more strictly Muslim state, has banned some of Russia's racier programmes.<sup>45</sup> In Tajikistan, despite a decline in Russian language use (the number of schools teaching Russian has fallen by two-thirds in ten years<sup>46</sup>), Russian TV is thought of as a welcome antidote to bland home-produced offerings. In Kyrgyzstan, most media activity is conducted in Russian. More than 10 Russian TV channels available in Bishkek come directly from Russia. Russian channels can be received throughout Central Asia, but the region's other governments place restrictions on quantity or attempt to block them on terrestrial and cable TV. In Turkmenistan, for instance, they are available by satellite only, but they are still widely watched. The media therefore constitute a powerful source of influence and of promotion for the Russo-centric worldview. For example, Russian media outlets did not just expose Bakiev's corruption in the run-up to the 2010 Kyrgyzstani elections, as noted earlier; they also whipped up anti-American sentiment to push for the closure of the US airbase at Manas.

<sup>42</sup> 'Central Asia: Migrants and the Economic Crisis', *Asia Report* No. 183, International Crisis Group, 5 January 2010, <http://www.crisisgroup.org/~/media/Files/asia/central-asia/183%20Central%20Asia%20Migrants%20and%20the%20Economic%20Crisis.pdf>.

<sup>43</sup> Evgeniy Shestakov, 'Centralnaya Aziya obrechena na stabil'nyi zastoy', *Rossiiskaya Gazeta*, 17 June 2011, <http://www.rg.ru/2011/06/17/malashenko-site.html>.

<sup>44</sup> CIA World Factbook.

<sup>45</sup> BBC Monitoring Report, 10 February 2011.

<sup>46</sup> Natasha Kuhr, 'Soft Power? The Means and Ends of Russian Influence Abroad', paper presented at Chatham House seminar, 31 March 2011.

## Conclusion

Russia's 19th-century expansion into the South Caucasus and Central Asia remains an important legacy for its 21st-century foreign policy decision-makers. It sustains a belief that Russia has a natural right to pre-eminence in both regions: one 'legitimized' by tradition as well as present-day mutual interest. The Kremlin reluctantly accepts that things will never be as they were in the Soviet Union and is at times aware of its own limitations, but it retains the ambition to arrest the decline of its influence and to reconstruct it in more modern and acceptable terms.

The South Caucasus and Central Asia are regions where different factors of political influence jostle for supremacy. Great powers hover with strategic and commercial interests, while local economic and social factors are acquiring increasing importance. Perhaps most importantly, the governments of all eight states have varying degrees of latitude in plotting their own domestic and foreign policies and are asserting themselves more as the Soviet era recedes. Yet none are fully confident or in control of their destiny.

For both China and the West, influence in the South Caucasus and Central Asia is a means to achieve other domestic and foreign policy objectives such as securing energy resources. But for Russia, influence is, at least in part, an end in itself. What also sets Russia apart is that ambition is not matched by capability. After all, it saw the coloured revolutions as threats to its core interests, but it was not able to prevent them. However, the West's disinclination to invest substantially in the region has facilitated the rise in China's influence and afforded Russia some opportunities to reassert its position. While the West may not approve of Russia's behaviour, it often sees no compelling interest in opposing it either.<sup>47</sup>

There is more in play for Russia in both regions than a desire to retain cultural links, secure hydrocarbon resources and preserve security. Considerable Russian influence can be found in countries where there are few or no such

resources or obvious security interests, including Armenia and Kyrgyzstan, where economic and cultural penetration are at their greatest.

The key difficulty lies in distinguishing between Russia's valid interests and its more contentious aspirations to 'liberal empire' or 'pan-Eurasianism' where this conflicts with the orientations and security interests of its neighbours.

Russia is employing new, 'softer' ways of preserving what it has. Subtler modes of influence, despite their limitations, have achieved some quiet successes and tend to fall below the radar of Western governments and international organizations.

Despite this, throughout the South Caucasus and Central Asia, especially among the younger generation, Russia is no longer equated with modernity and security. It finds itself at a disadvantage in competition with Western culture, education and technology, and the attraction of the West is likely to increase. Were Russia to adopt a liberalizing, reformist and genuinely post-imperial (as opposed to neo-imperial) approach, it might regain the initiative. But would such a change produce an 'alternative' policy or would it simply be a clone of the Western model?

Russian soft power does not in itself translate into greater Russian influence. It is an expedient to slow its decline. The ebb of the tide appears irreversible: Russia is depopulating, especially in Siberia; its ties in Central Asia are built on inequalities and dependencies; its presence in the South Caucasus is partisan and its methods are often cynical. Russian culture, while familiar, is not always congenial. Its expertise on both regions is diminishing and its judgment often flawed. The term 'Russia's near abroad' (or worse still, 'backyard') is demeaning when applied to either region or indeed to any of their eight states, and they are without question no longer simply 'Russia's'.

For all this, Russia maintains a more multi-dimensional presence in the South Caucasus and Central Asia than any other country, and this may be its greatest asset in the more complex and pluralistic international order that is emerging. But it is now just one of a handful of

<sup>47</sup> This was already argued almost a decade ago in Steven J. Main and James Sherr, 'The Pattern of Russian Influence in the Caucasus and Central Asia', Occasional Brief No. 101, Conflict Studies Research Centre, December 2003.

powers in both regions. Only a less ‘zero-sum’ mentality, an acceptance of the reality of the Western and Chinese presence, and most of all a full admission of the rights of the sovereign countries in these areas to choose their own destinies will lead to Russia’s realization of its potential as a constructive power in both regions – one that is less anachronistic, with more limited but better defined influence.

Moscow suffers painful defeats in its attempts to keep the South Caucasus and Central Asia ‘on board’. But thinking of them as defeats – and as painful – is the problem. The empire is long gone. And the evidence in this paper suggests that Vladimir Putin’s fantasy of a political Eurasian Union is unlikely to replace it.

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