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Russia's double-edged separatism

An integrated look at Russia's geopolitical ambitions in its neighborhood and the implications on European security

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While there is much focus on the seemingly imminent new escalation of hostilities in Ukraine and on the internal power-struggle that could threaten Putin's leadership, the last months have been marked by other important developments in the Russian Federation's power-projecting strategy.

Russia aims at consolidating its influence in neighboring territories, going even further than in the past few years. As its economic situation worsens, the leadership in Moscow will become even more aggressive and is likely to accelerate its political coercion activities - and even military hostilities - in its immediate proximity, by the end of 2015. Putin's approach will be multidimensional, based on **starting simultaneous "shadow wars" on multiple fronts**, militarily reinforcing his will on neighboring countries that refuse to willingly become its satellites.

Separatism as Weapon

Russia will not stop at Ukraine. Although an important pillar of its influence and self-perceived security, the conflict-torn country is only the beginning of the Russian offensive in the former Soviet territories. Vladimir Putin's plan is creating - and "institutionalizing" - a **security corridor** around its own borders, that would separate it from the "NATO threat" (a "natural buffer zone", which - from Moscow's point of view - the West has unjustly refused to respect).

The corridor would be comprised of **former Soviet countries neighboring Russia** (minus the Baltic states) and **Armenia** as first **line of defense** (although it isn't geographically connected to the Russian Federation, Armenia represents the most important strategic pillar for Kremlin in Transcaucasia). Russia's corridor would be completed by a completely subordinated (and partially militarized) **area of immediate impact** formed by regions in east and south-east Ukraine (**Donetsk, Luhansk, Odessa**, as well as parts of **Zaporizhia** and **Kherson**), south Moldavia (**Transdnister** and **Gagauzia**), north Georgia (**Abkhazia** and **South Ossetia**), as well as by **Belarus** and **Kazakhstan**.

A first step in institutionalizing the corridor would be **integrating countries and separatist regions into political and military Eurasian institutions**, created by Vladimir Putin with the aim of reinstating the former Soviet Union. Consequently, the "membership" (and its restrictions) would be used to block NATO's and EU's advancement towards Russia, and as propaganda tool (to "prove the perfect unity of Eurasian states as opposed to that of NATO/EU").

Russia's objectives and motivations (short and medium term)

- **Denying access to NATO and limiting EU's presence** in its proximity by: **a.** increasing political control in neighboring countries (through pro-Russian leaders, which will act to block all attempts of integration in the two organizations) and turning them away from the reform path, as it is easier for Russia to exercise control over corrupt systems and weak societies; **b.** applying direct pressure on or destabilizing those countries which manifest opposition and refuse to submit to its demands, through the use of the separatist weapon (Russian ethnics/speaking minorities) or even through conventional military means.

- Exercising **control and ownership over the infrastructure** within the security corridor and over the links with „the outside world“. Putin used infrastructure before, as weapon both against Georgia - in 2008 (e.g. the [naval blockade](#) at the Black Sea; the [destruction of military infrastructure](#) during the retreat; the [cyberattacks](#) that preceded military incursions) and in the war in [Ukraine](#) (the annexation of Crimea; the battle for control over strategic infrastructure at the Black Sea - e.g. Mariupol - launched by Moscow-backed insurgents; the fight for the [Donetsk airport](#); the reported destruction of terrestrial infrastructure in East Ukraine by pro-Russian rebels – e.g. in January 2015, [near Mariupol](#); in March 2015, in [Luhansk Oblast](#)). There are rumors that, at present, Georgia’s infrastructure might be used by Russia to [transport military supplies into Armenia](#).

From Russia’s point of view, the infrastructure can be used in two ways: **a.** to facilitate the access of its troops to strategic locations and **b.** restricting the enemy’s access and freedom of movement, while limiting its potential to properly function as an independent country.

Political and Economic Ambitions

The above-mentioned countries will be subject to massive Russian influence in the following months and the territorial disputes that affect them will be a **major obstacle in their path towards EU and NATO integration**. Also, as an important part of their resources and efforts will be redirected towards the ongoing internal conflicts (open or frozen), they will not have time - or money - for the much-needed reforms (rule of law, anti-corruption, fighting organized crime). However, **Russia is likely to stop short of annexing new territories** and will prefer to exercise ***de facto* control over separatist regions**.

The current economic difficulties that affect Russia limit the appetite for more territorial annexations, which automatically imply increased expenses (even more so than in the case of so-called “new independent states”). Moreover, most separatist regions that are either controlled or aimed at by Moscow don’t have the same historical value or strategic/military importance and would not be supported by the Russian population to the same extent as the annexation of Crimea.

By simply “cooperating” with the concerned regions, Russia is not directly accountable for developments in those areas and can even play a more efficient “sticks and carrots” strategy with local leaders. Not least, in an extreme scenario, if the situation in controlled separatist territories deteriorates, Russia can abandon them without important repercussions on its own internal stability.

In the near future, Putin will try to **expand and consolidate the Eurasian Economic Union (EAEU)**, as a **counterweight to the EU**. Russia wants to convince its Western-aspiring neighbors that they would be better economically and politically as members of the EAEU rather than in European/Euro-Atlantic structures. Alternatively, Putin could welcome pro-Russian separatist regions in Georgia, Moldavia and even Ukraine in the EAEU, as special-status members/observers, not least in “response” to EU’s Association Agreements signed with Ukraine, Georgia and Moldavia (e.g. Gagauzia could invoke the illegal referendum from February 2014, in which it “chose” to be a part of the EAEU).

Leaders in Russian-controlled separatist regions (and even in some neighboring countries) partly identify themselves with Vladimir Putin, and see the latter as a role-model in terms of mastering absolute power and control. Ideologically, they are much closer to Putin than to EU leaders, which sometimes makes alliances with Russia easier to tolerate than the European integration criteria.

The Military Approach

At the same time, Vladimir Putin is looking for ways to **revive military “alliances”** with countries in its area of interest, both formally - through **the Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO)** - and informally - by **implementing measures to increase troop mobility**.

One example is the recent “**Foreign Legion**” law ([Executive Order](#) on Amending the Regulation on the Military Service approved by Vladimir Putin at the beginning of January 2015), which allows Russian-speaking “volunteers” from foreign countries to serve Russian Armed Forces. In practical terms, the new legislation does little more than legalize the participation of contract personnel from former Soviet Union countries in armed conflicts on the part of the Russian Army. However, this could serve as a crucial tool for Kremlin, as it serves to reduce critics at home (the emotional impact on the population in Russia is lower when it comes to conflict casualties among “foreigners”), and could indicate an extremely dangerous trend in terms of conflict accountability.

As in the case of the EAEU, **separatist regions in Georgia, Moldavia and Ukraine could become members of the CSTO**, thus “legitimizing” Russia’s incursions/military presence in occupied territories. The move is facilitated by the security provisions stated in the two agreements signed by Russia with Abkhazia ([November 24, 2014](#)) and South Ossetia ([February 18, 2015](#) - exactly one year after the annexation of Crimea), which could be followed by an extension of the provisions to include the two Georgian breakaway territories - as well as other separatist regions - in the military alliance.

If carried out, such a decision would be presented by the Kremlin propaganda as a “reassuring measure” against NATO’s presence in its neighborhood (the NATO joint training center in Georgia - a move which Russia has already [condemned](#); the [NATO office in Moldavia](#)).

Separatism from Within

Russia isn’t safe from separatist movements on its own territory - on the contrary. Recent developments in North Caucasus indicate the persistence of simmering ethnic conflicts in the region, with occasional outbursts of violence. Although attacks are not very intense, local/regional factors, together with the provocative actions carried out by Moscow in its immediate vicinity (South Caucasus) increase the risk of escalation.

Fueling Factors

- Disputes in North Caucasus originate in **interethnic divergences** (e.g. Russians against Caucasian-indigenous peoples in different parts of the region; Azerbaijanis *versus* Lezgins and Tabasarans in South Dagestan; Chechens opposed to Laks and Avars in North Dagestan), **political rivalries** (e.g. divergences between the governor of Dagestan, Ramazan Abdulatipov and local leaders in Derbent, like Imam Yarialiev) or **a mix of both**.

The **main “hot spot” is the Dagestan province**, where there is a high risk of escalation of the tensions in the medium term, with significant **implications in terms of stability on the entire region**.

The **situation could worsen in the following months**, as a result of the economic downturn throughout Russia and the fact that Moscow will not be able to provide provinces in the region the needed financial support. The [decline in the number of ethnic Russians](#) throughout North Caucasus republics increase even further the separatist risk.

- The **creation of „private” armies** and the **increased autonomy of the local security structures** (as it is the case in Chechenia, according to some [reports](#)) heighten the **risk of a rebellion in North Caucasus**, especially in the context of growing tensions among Chechen leader Ramzan Kadyrov and some security officials in Moscow (e.g. Putin’s chief of staff, [Sergei Ivanov](#), or high-ranking [FSB officers](#)).

Kadyrov is already promoting a semi-isolation of Chechenia from Moscow, while increasingly aiming at consolidating his influence over other republics in North Caucasus (ex. Dagestan). Although [projected to assist Vladimir Putin](#) in “shadow conflicts”, highly trained Chechen special services that operate under the control of Kadyrov could move to fuel separatist movements in the region.

- A threat no less important is the **possible transfer of terrorist elements from the MENA region in North Caucasus**, especially in [Dagestan](#) and Chechenia. The jihadist threat is heightened by the recent split between the Caucasus Emirate's leadership and fighters who pledged alliance to ISIL, as well as by the high-ranking positions in ISIL held by some of the Chechen fighters who joined the war in Iraq and Syria.

Wild card: Given Kadyrov's strong grip on developments in Chechenia (and in other parts of North Caucasus), it cannot be completely excluded that he has access and even exerts a certain control over some terrorist/radicalized elements in the region, which he could make use of, should his power and political future be threatened by leaders in Moscow.

- On the other hand, central authorities' decisions that are aimed at **increasing Kremlin's control** - like establishing a [special commission to review history books](#) to the detriment of non-Russian ethnics in North Caucasus (March 2015), or [removing part of certain areas](#) from under the control of the local governors, with the alleged aim of increasing socio-economic development (December 2014) - could determine some North Caucasus republics to seek separation.

- **Local territorial reorganization** on the basis of ethnic criteria - there are signals that the authorities in Dagestan intend to speed up the [restoration of the Aukhov district](#) (former Chechen district), which could trigger major negative reactions from other ethnic groups in Dagestan (Laks and Avars) and possibly lead to confrontations throughout other North Caucasus provinces (e.g. territorial conflict between Ingushetia and North Ossetia), or even in the greater Transcaucasia region (especially given the growing discontent of Azerbaijan in light of the recent [escalation of tensions](#) between ethnic Azerbaijanis and indigenous ethnic groups - Lezgins, Tabasarans - in Derbent/Dagestan).

- An important **risk for Russia's internal stability** stems from **its own actions in South Caucasus**. They could have significant repercussions over the extended region, which is a web of external influences and strategic interests. The political alliances in both South and North Caucasus are anything but straightforward, marked by blurred lines when it comes to the actions and interactions of relevant regional - or even more distant - powers (Russia makes no exception, the best example being its conduct in the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict¹). As a consequence, further deterioration of the political and security situation in South Caucasus could lead to the **involvement of other regional players** (also in North Caucasus) and - possibly - even **create a link with conflict areas in MENA**.

While largely seen a region torn between the West and Russia, South Caucasus gathers strong interests from other relevant countries:

- **Iran** has influence and interests over certain parts of Azerbaijan, as well as in communities throughout North Caucasus that are associated with the Persian culture (e.g. North Ossetia). In what concerns the Iran-Russia relationship, [as one journal wrote](#), it could be explained by "compelled adversaries, pragmatic pals". Although cooperating on certain subjects, the two countries have had their differences over time and are certainly not friends (the differences could widen even further should the framework agreement on the Iranian nuclear deal be put into practice).

- **Israel** has long searched for ways to project its influence and consolidate its ties with countries in South Caucasus, especially Georgia and Azerbaijan (in the case of the latter, to the discontent of Iran and, to a lesser extent, of Turkey).

- **Turkey** maintains close relations with Azerbaijan and economic ties with Georgia. The cooperation with Russia is pragmatic and limited to subjects of common interest to the two countries, especially in the energy field.

¹ Although Moscow has long been Armenia's main ally and military supplier, it is also the main weapons provider for the „other side“ of the conflict, Azerbaijan.

- **China's** influence in the region is starting to slowly increase, mainly on the basis of economic investments (in the framework of the Silk Road Economic Belt initiative). It is relevant to note the recent [visit of the president of Armenia](#), Serzh Sargsyan, in Beijing (marked by the negotiation of several agreements in various economic sectors and by the expressed intentions of Chinese officials to treat Armenia as a bridge towards the EAEU), as well as the [increase of Chinese investments in Georgia](#) (including in important infrastructure projects).

Impact on European security and interests

By and large, the current situation can be summarized in two general scenarios, each with huge implications for the West - especially for European stability, in terms of both security and economic interests:

Scenario A. Russia has its way in the long term, by creating a *de facto* security corridor and expanding its control over neighboring countries, while fueling instability in the region.

- Kremlin's aggressive rhetoric against NATO/EU member states has, essentially, a deterrence role and it is unlikely that Vladimir Putin would launch an offensive against Allied territory in the absence of perceived direct threats. However, as it approaches the brink of economic collapse, Russia will become increasingly hostile. Thus, in the event that NATO settles militarily in Russia's "comfort zone" or tries to take the separatist regions away from Moscow, the latter will react aggressively, **possibly even staging a hybrid attack in a NATO country** (e.g. Russia could launch direct or indirect **assaults aimed at disrupting critical communications infrastructure** - be it virtual or physical - in one or more member states).

Such an attack would be limited (in time and scope) and would be used only in the event of a perceived (imminent) threat on Russian territory or that of a direct Western involvement in its proximity (e.g. putting "boots on the ground" in Ukraine). The move would be aimed at **forcing member states to focus on the protection of their own territories**.

A hybrid attack would also seek to **underline the lack of unity among member states**, as Russia relies on a slow consensus between member states - not necessarily in what concerns the intervention to eliminate the direct threat(s), but rather in terms of future actions to be taken against the aggressor and the crisis. Moreover, opening multiple "battle fronts" will create even more confusion among Western countries, and affect their cohesion in the process of finding the appropriate counter-reactions.

- Under the *divide et impera* impetus, Kremlin seeks to reinforce its relations with some EU member states or high-ranking officials in those countries (e.g. [Greece](#); [Hungary](#); [Spain](#); [Czech Republic](#)). Russia will also make use of the ideological tool, tightening links with far-right political movements (e.g. Jobbik/Hungary, Attaka/Bulgaria, Front National/France, Freedom Party/Netherlands) and even stimulate separatist trends in EU member states.

- In terms of **informational warfare**, the Kremlin propaganda includes **multiple vectors** (most of them with links in the West) that increase its capacity to get the desired message across groups/populations, as well as readjust its moves once some of the vectors are subjected to economic sanctions.

- Another weakness that Russia will exploit is the **absence of medium-term realistic options in the energy security field** for European countries. The new [proposal](#) to create a European Energy Union, unveiled on February 25, is a step forward for the EU, but it still is years away from being implemented and even from being transformed into enforceable legislation. Beyond financial and time deficiencies, there could also be market-related downsides - e.g. in the case of LNG, the exporters in both USA or Africa/Middle East will be more interested to transport the gas towards more lucrative

markets, like Asia. Moreover, it remains to be seen to which extent the demand of the European Commission to speak on a single voice will be put into practice and how member states will react when time comes to grant more powers to the EU.

In the long term, Moscow's actions will include: tightening its grip and even blackmailing potential source-countries in **Central Asia (Kazakhstan, Turkmenistan)**, to **deny EU's access to energy resources** in the region; exercising a certain degree of **control over Azerbaijan** (through Moscow's strong involvement in the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict) and - in a more extreme scenario - even **disrupting supply routes that cross South Caucasus**. Other possible alternative sources for European energy - like Iran, Turkmenistan - are a few good years away from being transformed into feasible projects, due to **political obstacles** (e.g. remaining uncertainties in the Iranian nuclear deal; unresolved maritime disputes in the Caspian Sea) or **security threats** (instability in the wider MENA region).

Scenario B. Russia collapses - economically and/or politically - under the pressure of economic sanctions or internal separatist tensions and struggles for power. A possible implosion of the Russian Federation would have **major consequences on economic stability within the EU** (not least because Russia's fall would lead to the default of other countries in Central Asia and South Caucasus), as well as **on European security**.

Wild card: In the (improbable) event that the worsening economic situation in Russia and the internal political struggles result in the **removal of Vladimir Putin from power** in the following months, it is possible that those who will replace him will act in an even more aggressive manner or that they will not have sufficient authority to keep internal tensions under control. What is even more worrying is **the EU doesn't seem prepared in any way to deal with such a situation**, should it occur.

Long term risks

- The **proliferation of private armies and mercenary battalions of unknown origin and little accountability** in Ukraine, who fight for financial reasons and for the experience the conflict brings them, have the potential to complicate the war in the east of the country even further and could throw Ukraine into complete chaos, with serious implications over EU stability.

There are reports of groups of Chechen ethnics fighting in east Ukraine on the side of [pro-Russian separatists](#) (on the orders of Ramzan Kadyrov), as well as on the side of the [Ukrainian Army](#) (under the guidance of Adam Osmaev; most of them have come from EU countries to join the fight).

- The other long-term risk could materialize in the event of intense separatist fighting in North Caucasus and the spreading out of the conflict in the larger Transcaucasia area and beyond (with the implication of various regional powers). A possible consequence is the **creation of a "bridge" between the conflict in Ukraine and the instability in MENA** (facilitating factors: transfer of Chechens towards both conflict areas; the border volatility in east Ukraine; the blurring of the lines of conflict in Caucasus, should Russia lose its capacity to control the southern border). An even greater threat would be the **possible transfer of terrorist elements from the MENA region over the resulted "instability route"**.

European Action and Reaction

Since it is highly unlikely for the situation to change for the better in the following months (or even years), a change in attitude and strategy is needed on the part of West, especially in what concerns the "soft" approach of relations with Russia and the extended European Eastern Neighborhood (i.e. including countries from Central Asia).

- The member states should work more to move beyond the usual rhetoric and design coherent, more **pragmatic mechanisms and “contingency plans”** to face Moscow’s aggressive behavior, as well as survive a possible disintegration of Russia. The first step would be increasing cohesion, internal through identifying common interests and avoiding an “informational conflict” with each other, as it has sometimes been the case during the past few months (e.g. [differences in declarations](#) over developments in Ukraine; disagreements over EU sanctions against Russia). Not least, it should be clearly established which are the institutions and countries who take the lead role in specific crisis management mechanisms (with the support of all other member states).

It is important for member states to identify (and agree upon) ways to support Ukraine and the other affected countries with more than political rhetoric. Otherwise, they risk losing EU’s credibility and - as a consequence - the appetite of local elites and populations to implement much-needed reforms.

Also, the EU needs to **become more proactive** (instead of reactive) and **increase its capacity to act simultaneously on multiple fronts** (what Russia does at present is speculate the slow-pace in EU’s decision-making process and the lack of consensus between member states over what is the most appropriate strategy in the unfolding crisis).

- Beyond certain political “conversations” and the rigid Association Agreements signed with Moldavia, Georgia and Ukraine, the **EU has very little influence in its eastern neighborhood and South Caucasus**. The situation is even worse **in Central Asia, where the EU is almost completely absent**. The European Commission’s [initiative](#) to **reform the Neighborhood Policy** (including the Eastern Partnership) is more than welcomed given the current state of affairs. However, the timeframe foreseen (!) for its projection and implementation is extremely long, given the fast-pace and volatility of the crisis (consultations on the initiative will extend until the end of June).

The EU should focus more on developing a multidisciplinary and multilayer strategy, adapting its approach and expectations to the internal specificities of each country, while harmonizing them with European interests. It should transform the Eastern Partnership into a more attractive, more realistic and less demanding tool (the end-goal doesn’t necessarily need to be EU integration for each partner country). Even more important is **showing interest for the process**, with all member states and institutions working towards the same goal (and speaking on the same voice) - this is crucial for the EU, in order to become relevant in the international arena, and **could be the Union’s last chance to prove it is more than a “collection of countries”**.

EU’s presence and activities in South Caucasus and Central Asia are important, in spite of the lack of real chances that the region will be steered anytime soon from under Russia’s influence or that countries will be cleared of the corruption and authoritarianism that affects them. **A scaled-down presence in each country of the region is better than no presence at all** and it could serve as a counter-balance to Kremlin’s political games (including a way to encourage the countries to fight their way out of Moscow’s grip) or even as “life-vest”, should the Russian Federation collapse.

By focusing most of its resources on developments in Ukraine (understandable, up to a point, given the geographical proximity), **EU risks losing contact with regions of extreme importance**, not least from the point of view of its **energy security interests**, in terms of both sources and routes.