

# RUSSIAN PERSPECTIVE

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## **Executive Summary**

- The period under review was dramatic for Russia on all fronts. The need to deal with the ongoing medical crisis and search for ways to combat the spread of the Covid-19 virus took place as political and social tensions have grown, reaching their peak in the waves of protest that accompanied the return of Alexei Navalny and his subsequent arrest. The multiple challenges in the interior have forced Vladimir Putin's government to search for "creative way" to diminish the mounting social pressure so that it can strengthen its ability to govern.
- The emerging relations between Russia and the United States under Biden: antagonism is likely to increase, despite the extension of the START Treaty. This tension is liable to affect Israel's freedom of maneuver between Russia and the West.
- Russia calls to return to the nuclear agreement with Iran (JCPOA) without any changes and to deal with the issues of missiles and Iranian regional influence outside the framework of the agreement. Moscow has signaled its concern about possible escalation between Israel and Iran in Syria. Russia and Iran will probably conclude new arms deals in the coming months.
- The Covid-19 vaccines have emerged as a new tool of Russia to exert its influence in foreign policy.
- The election results in Kazakhstan reflected the veteran elite's continued control of power, and the suppression of the opposition. The election of Japarov as president of Kyrgyzstan was accompanied by changes in the constitution and the system of government. The rivalry between Russia and China for dominance in Central Asia could escalate still further if the Biden administration increases its political involvement in the region.

### **This issue features four in-depth articles:**




"Russia–US Relations Seem to be Heading Toward a New Crisis," by Yochai Guisky and Daniel Rakov

"Russian Political Involvement in Moldova: Tactical Successes and Their Strategic Limitations," by Dr. Dima Course

"The Russian Federation and the Central Asian Republics: Between Regional Alliances and Local Interests," by Dr. Zeev Levin

"The Second Karabakh War: The Strategic Balance in the Southern Caucasus and its Significance for Israel," by Daniel Rakov

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## Russia: Domestic Developments Between Covid-19 and Navalny

The early months of the winter are usually a quiet time in Russian domestic politics. With the end of 2020 and the New Year celebrations, the country slips into a political and social slumber. This new year—the first of the new decade—is definitely an exception to this pattern. In addition to the political changes facing Russia in many external theaters, both nearby and distant, the drowsy tranquility in the internal political arena typical of the corresponding period in the past two decades was almost completely absent this year.

Russia has faced a diverse set of problems, both economic and social, that began to emerge in recent months: The [return](#) to Russia of Alexei Navalny—a critic of the regime—his arrest, his trial, and the [prison sentence](#) imposed on him have disturbed public order in the country. Furthermore, since early autumn, Russia has had to deal with the second wave of the Covid-19 pandemic. The volume of infections reported by the authorities were among the highest in the world. The wish to avoid irreversible economic damage has obliged the authorities to maneuver between the need to maintain economic and public activity at a sufficient level and the goals of stopping the spread of the virus. In addition, the administration continued to implement legislative changes aimed at strengthening the status of the federal government while also continuing and facilitating closer supervision of various spheres of life.

### The Alexei Navalny Affair

The public protest in the outlying areas of Russia that began in the summer and fall of 2020—such as the demonstrations in Khabarovsk—lost its momentum, whether due to an inability to influence change or simply because of the arrival of winter. Nevertheless, as we assessed in the previous issue of “The Russian Perspective,” Navalny’s return from Germany, where he was recovering from the attempt to poison him with chemical warfare agents, had the potential to stir things up again. The Kremlin sought to prevent this at all costs, believing that if Navalny remained outside the country, it would detract from his growing popularity, even if this popularity was still not as high as needed.

Russia therefore instituted legal measures to keep him outside of Russia, such as issuing an arrest warrant against him on December 29, 2020 on the grounds of failing to appear for questioning and the announcement on January 11, 2021 that he was “wanted for questioning.” For his part, Navalny continued to challenge the regime and the security services with a series of spectacular revelations, the most prominent of which was a [conversation](#) with the FSB (Russian Federal Security Service) personnel, who, according to Navalny, were involved in his poisoning and even had admitted it.

Navalny’s return to Russia on January 18, 2021 and his arrest at the airport were an obvious step for both Navalny himself and for the Russian authorities. His continued presence abroad would have served Russia’s interests. On the other hand, his smooth entry into the country, despite the arrest warrants, would have demonstrated weakness on the regime’s part, far beyond the damage to its image because of his arrest. Navalny therefore succeeded in drawing a clearly reactive response from the Kremlin, albeit at the expense of his freedom and personal security. The fact that he timed his arrival in Russia to coincide with the inauguration of Joe Biden as US president afforded Navalny complete control over the Russian–Western agenda, and generated substantial international pressure on Moscow from the first moment.

Navalny undoubtedly regarded his arrest, trial, and the prison sentence imposed on him as a calculated risk. His effort to sustain his image as an anticorruption crusader

was strengthened by the [release](#) of a movie alleged to be about Vladimir Putin's palace on the shores of the Black Sea. The film, which attracted over 100 million hits in less than a week, was timed to coincide with the arrival and arrest of Navalny and was designed to help electrify the protest movement and bring masses of people into the streets to demonstrate. While this did not happen, the violent responses by law enforcement agencies, the almost desperate effort to prevent the demonstrations on January 23, 2021 and January 31, 2021, and the violence used against the demonstrators, including after the sentencing on January 2, 2021, highlight the authorities' concern about losing control.

Despite all of the attempts to attract as large a crowd as possible in dozens of sites throughout Russia, the mass demonstrations, as stated by Navalny's campaign headquarters, attracted only a modest number of participants, even when considering the Russian winter weather. This demonstrates either his lack of popularity or the general public's belief that protest demonstrations are ineffective, although the [number of participants in demonstrations](#) has been gradually climbing in recent years. That the protests have included a large proportion of young people, who were targeted by the organizers from the beginning, [indicates](#) a clear change in the patterns of the public demonstrations and in the young people themselves, who until now have refrained from taking to the streets. The surveys conducted around the time of the demonstrations indeed [show](#) a developing shifts in support among different age groups. While the attitude toward Navalny among young people is gradually changing from neutral (uninterested) to supportive, older people are moving in the opposite direction—the percentage of older people with a negative attitude toward his activity has increased. Nevertheless, it should be remembered that as of now, a majority of the population in Russia does not regard Navalny and his activity as a solution to their problems.



Hundreds of policemen surround a few dozen demonstrators in Krasnoyarsk, January 31, 2021

Source: @teamnavalnykrsk, the Twitter account of the Navalny headquarters in Krasnoyarsk

It will soon become evident whether the new strategy adopted by the Russian extraparlimentary (*nesistemnaya*) opposition has yielded results, assuming, of course, that Navalny's standing continues to improve when he is behind bars. This is likely the reason that Leonid Volkov, a close associate of Navalny, [announced](#) on February 4, 2021 that it had been decided to postpone the mass protest to the spring and summer in order to utilize its political success in the upcoming Duma election campaign in the fall, while simultaneously waging a public political campaign for Navalny's release.

Although the authorities have been dragged into a draconian response, they were compelled to do so (in their mind) because any restraint or softer response would have been interpreted as a sign of weakness and would have escalated the power struggles between different reigning groups within the country. It would also have put Russia in an inferior position in its relations with the West at a time when a new US administration has assumed office. For now, it seems a status quo has been achieved enabling the two sides to fortify their positions, while Navalny is likely to become a tool in the negotiations for improving relations between the Kremlin, Washington, and Brussels (in practice, Berlin and Paris).

For now, the [main significance](#) of the recent demonstrations in Russia is that the younger generation is rapidly shedding its public apathy, and has begun to express its opinion openly. Contrary to the older generations, who support the opposition by condemning the regime from a distance, the 20–30 age group feels a personal identification with what is happening, which is likely to affect their decision to participate in protests. All of this has forced the regime to adapt its actions to the language and pace familiar to young people—something that has so far proved beyond its capability. According to a [survey](#) by the Levada Center in late January–early February 2021 (i.e., after the two waves of protest), 46% of those in the 18–24 year-old age group were dissatisfied with the president's functioning compared to 51% who were satisfied. Three years ago, however, only 18% of this group were dissatisfied compared to 80% who were satisfied. These figures portray plunging confidence in the state leaders among young people. On the other hand, the use of repressive means against the protest, both in the preliminary stages and during the protests, has negatively affected both the number of participants and the modest extent of support for Navalny and his movement, which is far less than he had hoped for.

### **The Struggle Against Covid-19**

As in most countries, the second wave of the Covid-19 pandemic in Russia was more forceful and deadly than the first one. In late November, the authorities in Moscow reported a 300% rise in fatalities. Mayor Sergei Sobyanin said that [about half of the city's residents](#) had already developed antibodies to the virus, meaning that they had been infected with it in one way or another. Opposition portal *Meduza* predicted that by the end of 2020, [about one quarter](#) of the population in Russia would contract Covid-19. The [public response](#) was minimal to the beginning of the vaccinations on December 6, 2020; 9% said that they would definitely be willing to be vaccinated, and another 21% said that they would probably accept vaccination.

At the same time, the battle of cognition over the Sputnik V vaccine continued, reaching its peak with accusations exchanged between the European Union and the Russian Ministry of Foreign Affairs. On December 28, 2020, EU High Representative for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy Josep Borrell [accused](#) Russia of spreading fake news about competing vaccines to increase the distribution of the Russian vaccine. In response, the spokesperson of the Russian Foreign Ministry, Maria Zakharova, [blamed](#) the West of "unfair competition." Nevertheless, Russia chose to operate through the

accepted professional channels for obtaining the approval of the World Health Organization for Sputnik V. This indicates that even though Moscow regards the promotion of its vaccine as an important political tool, it still prefers to accomplish this by [adhering](#) to a proper professional procedure that will enhance its standing in the international arena and will signal to the Russian population that its vaccine is effective and safe.

The extensive restrictions imposed on the New Year celebrations showed that the federal government and the local authorities were indeed worried about the state of morbidity. The nationwide vaccination campaign that [began](#) on January 18, 2021 was accompanied by a social advertising campaign encouraging the population to be vaccinated. It is likely that the reasons for encouraging the vaccine were not purely medical, given the low proportion of people wanting to be vaccinated. The government needs to create a critical mass that will enable the economy to function reasonably well and will prevent further economic damage. In general, the consistent efforts by the authorities in Russia to avoid a complete lockdown, as was imposed during the first wave of the pandemic, highlight an objective difficulty in balancing the medical and the economic concerns. Furthermore, the biting [statements](#) by senior government officeholders and Putin himself [against](#) price increases in the economy were designed to prevent economic damage liable to undermine public order and create another internal conflict front, in addition to the social protests and the war against the virus.

The president's [announcement](#) on January 25, 2021 that the restrictions were canceled was designed above all to demonstrate that the situation had improved and that the struggle against the pandemic was achieving positive results. The gradual and differential process of emerging from the pandemic, with a clear distinction between regions, therefore shows that the authorities in Russia are still searching for the optimal medical and economic balance.

In the near future, the Russian administration will persist in an exit strategy balancing the various needs to prevent harm to the population liable to feed the protests. For this purpose, expanding the scope of the vaccinations will be of supreme importance, even if this means getting recognition from the professional agencies around the world. In addition to the internal need, this will also improve Russia's standing in the international arena, especially given the nonsocial business strategies that the other vaccine developers have followed.

### **Legislative Changes**

Since November 2020, Russia has begun gradually, but rapidly, amending its constitution, in accordance to the July 1, 2020 referendum. By the end of the year, the parliament had approved a package of some 100 laws and amendments that fortified the president's status, granted extensive powers to the executive authority, and finally formalized the status of the [State Council](#) and the specification for its members. At the same time, Russia approved a number of laws that further [restricted](#) the right of protest as well as the authorities' supervision over activities by nongovernmental institutions.

The friction with the West and concern about foreign intervention in Russia's internal affairs, as occurred during the Obama administration (and now identified with the new Biden administration), has led the Russian administration to adopt [rigorous legislation](#) aimed at preventing such intervention. This procedure, however, was not aimed merely at warning the West against intervention in events inside Russia; it was also intended to deter the internal opposition groups and to hamper their political activity still further. The protests accompanying the return of Alexei Navalny, his arrest, his trial, and his sentence nevertheless indicate that neither the West nor the core

opposition outside the system operating with Western sponsorship had heeded the warning signs.

Disturbing the public order by protest rallies, despite the massive legislation in late 2020, has forced the Russian administration to restore the order as soon as possible. If it does not do so, internal rivals of President Putin and his team, whom the legislation promoted over the past year, would be liable to regard this as a sign of weakness.

### **Summary**

The recent months proved to be a dramatic and momentous period for the Russian regime and its survival. The need to deal with a series of crises at home, some of them new and other ongoing, has forced President Putin to avoid facing multiple political, diplomatic, and social fronts in order to restore Russia's public order. The growing influence of external parties on the internal situation in Russia requires an immediate response, if only to prevent renewed competition for power at home. All this, of course, comes on top of the political challenges in the international arena, as a result of the possible change in policy toward Russia by the Biden administration.

Currently, it appears that the regime in Russia has managed to stabilize its status. It will face many challenges in 2021, however, beyond the state of morbidity in the country. The elections to the Duma (the lower house of the Russian parliament) scheduled for September 2021 constitute a test for both Navalny's extraparlimentary opposition and for Putin himself. The opposition leaders have proven that a head-on collision with the government no longer deters them, and they are clearly trying to recruit broad support at home and abroad. In contrast, Putin and his associates must not only maintain order in the country but also do it in a way that does not undermine the official standing based on a constitutional majority.

## “Vaccination Diplomacy”—A New Device in Russia’s Toolbox

From the very beginning of the Covid-19 crisis, Russia has treated the development, approval, and overseas distribution of vaccines as a national security issue of the highest importance. President Putin has compared the development of vaccines to the space race between the US and the USSR during the Cold War and has made competition on vaccines an important direction in Russian foreign policy. Russia hurriedly gave regulatory approval to the vaccine it developed even before the Phase III trials customarily used in the pharmaceutical industry had been completed, so that it could [declare](#) victory in this race already in August 2020 and approve the vaccine for use in Russia. The name given to the vaccine, Sputnik V, symbolizes both Sputnik, the USSR’s first satellite in outer space, and the letter [V for victory](#). The process was portrayed in the establishment Russian media in heroic terms and was compared to the USSR victory over the Nazis in WWII.



Source: Russian Ministry of Foreign Affairs site, 1 February, 2021

The three vaccines, approved in Russia so far, were developed by state research institutes, with government officials and the defense establishment “volunteering” to take part in the trials. At the very beginning of the R&D, the Russian Direct Investment Fund (RDIF), which promotes joint investment ventures in Russia, and for which Putin himself has assumed direct [responsibility](#), was leading the commercial side in the vaccine enterprises. In investigative [reports](#) published in recent months, RDIF CEO Dmitriev was portrayed as a friend of the Putin family and a personal friend of Putin’s adult daughter. RDIF has a network of international partnerships, the most prominent of which are sovereign investment funds from the Persian Gulf states, which also helped with the international trials of the vaccine and obtained an option to buy it, pending success in the R&D.

In the initial stage of the vaccine development, the Russian intelligence services were [caught](#) by their rivals in the West conducting cyber surveillance, aimed at collecting information about research institutions conducting vaccine-related R&D. Russia responded to Western criticism of the approval process for the Russian vaccines

and the effort to undermine its reputation with a campaign of public relations and disinformation glorifying the reliability and effectiveness of the Russian vaccine and highlighting negative reports about the Western vaccines. For example, the Russian media gave great prominence to every report about side effects from the Pfizer vaccinations in Israel. This became [one of the broad narratives](#) promoted by the establishment media and government-controlled information warfare channels. The issue became one of the disputes between Russia and the European Union, whose senior officials publicly opposed procurement of the Russian vaccine, while casting doubt on its effectiveness. This merely intensified Russian criticism of the EU and Britain in this matter.

Meanwhile, the *Lancet* medical journal [published](#) evidence (interim results of Phase III trials) showing that Sputnik V was highly (91.6%) effective and European countries have [shown willingness](#) to approve it for use if it passes the required registration proceedings. Russia [has claimed](#) that the second vaccine approved in Russia, EpiVac, which is still in Phase III trials, is 100% effective.

Approval of the Sputnik V vaccine in Russia has exposed the limits of the Russian pharmaceutical industry's production capacity. Only [10 million doses](#) were produced. Although Russia is fourth in the world in terms of [morbidity](#) (more than four million people having been infected), only a limited number of Russian residents have been vaccinated to date, [probably a few million at most](#), and clear official statistics in the matter are conspicuous by their absence. Putin has already [announced](#) on a number of occasions a mass vaccination campaign, but the pace of vaccination is still slow. In recent months, private Russian pharmaceutical companies have been trying to hasten the development of the production infrastructure.

It has been claimed that local production of vaccines will reach 20–30 million doses in February–March, but as of now, the plans have been delayed. The RDIF CEO says that as of December, there were orders from 50 countries totaling 1.2 billion doses, with production contracts in India, Brazil, China, South Korea, and other countries. In February, he stated that [700 million](#) vaccine doses would be produced by the end of the year. The Russians have emphasized the advantages of Sputnik V over the Pfizer and other comparable vaccines of having a relatively low cost (\$10 per dose), ordinary storage conditions, and few side effects. The Russians have also expressed their willingness to transfer technology and production to other countries.

Russia, like China, looks at the Middle East and North Africa region as a [major market](#) for its vaccines. A number of countries in the Persian Gulf and North Africa, plus Turkey, were included in the clinical trials of the Russian vaccines, and Russia has mentioned the possibility of cooperation on the vaccines with all its partners in the region. Of the [37 countries that had already approved](#) the use of the Russian Sputnik V vaccine as of February 28, nine are in the Middle East (Iran, Egypt, Syria, Algeria, Tunisia, the Palestinian Authority (PA), Lebanon, Bahrain, and United Arab Emirates). Dmitriev claimed that production of the vaccine in [Turkey](#) had been approved. Israel held talks with the Russians on the vaccines, but the matter was dropped after it ensured a supply of Western vaccines. The Moscow branch of Hadassah Hospital was involved in the clinical trials, and the Hadassah managers have praised the vaccine's quality in recent months. Hadassah [ordered](#) an option for 1.5 million doses of Sputnik V without having obtained regulatory approval in Israel. As a result, the [possibility](#) of supplying the vaccine from Hadassah to the PA has been raised. The PA agreed on a supply of [110,000 doses](#) (10,000 as a Russian donation, with the source of financing for the rest being unclear), of which 10,000 [have been supplied](#) so far. A further 20,000 doses of Sputnik V have been donated by the UAE to the Gaza Strip. Israel found itself amid

[two controversial issues](#) due to the Russian vaccines: Its obstruction of transferring the vaccines from the PA to Gaza and the Israeli public's questioning of the alleged deal to pay for supplying the vaccine to Syria as a quid pro quo for returning the Israeli woman who had inadvertently crossed the border into Syria. Vaccinations with the Russian vaccine have begun in Algeria and Iran, where the son of the Iranian Minister of Health publicly received the vaccine.

The recent report published in the *Lancet* supports the assessment that the Russian vaccines are indeed effective. Willingness to approve and produce them is evident not only in Third World countries but also in the EU. If the Russians overcome their production and licensing difficulties, Russia will be able to vaccinate the local population, thereby strengthening the image of the Putin regime, which is now being challenged by the Navalny affair, and to increase the reputation of the vaccine. This will also make it possible to render the vaccines an important tool in Russia's "model of influence" worldwide and the Middle East in particular. The financial constraints of the Russian economy mean that only a small proportion of the vaccines will be supplied as aid without payment.

At the same time, as with other Russian projects of influence (arms, gas, atomic energy), Moscow, with help from RDIF, is likely to devise debt financing arrangements that will enable Russia to increase its influence in the Third World. Although the shortage of vaccines in Europe raises the possibility of using the Russian vaccine to expand the positive agenda between Russia and the West, the experience from the past year shows that excessive Russian disinformation efforts to "market" the supply of Russian vaccines to Europe are liable to result in the defeat of the entire campaign.

## **The Elections in Kyrgyzstan and Kazakhstan and the Influence of the United States, Russia, and China in the Central Asian Region**

The presidential elections in Kyrgyzstan and parliamentary elections in Kazakhstan, which both took place on January 10, 2021, came as no surprise. They do, however, raise questions, especially given the change in attitude toward the Central Asian region by the Biden administration and Central Asian countries relations with Russia and China. The enhancement of the American presence in the region highlights the competition between the major powers, and will unquestionably affect the future development of the Central Asian countries.

The [importance of the American involvement in the region](#) (including promotion of human rights, civil society, and economic development) is a result of the region's status as a buffer zone between China and Russia. A few days after President Biden's inauguration, the US government—in cooperation with the governments of Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan—founded a \$1 billion fund for partnerships and investments in Central Asia. The US has increased humanitarian aid for Central Asian countries through USAID, consisting mainly of aid in the struggle against the Covid-19 epidemic. However, Biden's administration is also expected to adopt a tougher line on the issues of human rights and the development of civil society.

### **The Parliamentary Elections in Kazakhstan**

According to the final results of the Kazakh parliamentary elections, only three political parties entered parliament: the ruling Nur Otan Party, which received 71.9% of the vote; the Ak Zhol Party (10.95%), and the People's Party of Kazakhstan (9.1%). 63.3% of the eligible voters cast votes nationwide. At the same time, the percentage of people voting varied widely between the regions. The percentage of eligible voters who cast ballots was 75.5% in northern Kazakhstan, but only 30% in Almaty, the largest city in Kazakhstan. The low voting turnout, especially in the large cities, shows people's disappointment (particularly that of young and educated people) with the country's leadership for failing to make plans for Kazakhstan's exit from the economic crisis, which was greatly aggravated by the Covid-19 pandemic.

Furthermore, there are no great expectations for reforms. Veteran politicians continue to lead the country. Nursultan Nazarbayev, Kazakhstan's first president, is chairman of the ruling Nur Otan Party and, in effect, still leads the nation. People increasingly voice dissatisfaction with Nazarbayev's personality cult. During the Day of the First President celebrations (celebrated since 2011 on December 1), large posters were hung in Almaty with the headline, "47.3 Billion Tenge for a Name [of One Person]." According to various estimates, over 47.3 billion tenge (almost \$111 million) was spent on glorifying Nazarbayev's name.



Protest poster against Nazarbayev, Ayan Kalmurat, RFE/RL

The retention of power by the old elite also ensures that Kazakhstan's foreign policy will remain loyal to Russia. At the same time, Kazakhstan is well aware of the "added value" of China, as reflected in the incentives that are part of the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI)—China's plan for long-term investments, aimed at developing infrastructure and accelerating the economic integration of Central Asian countries. Furthermore, under the security umbrella of the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO), China has stepped up its commitments in security cooperation. Although the enhancement of US influence will unquestionably increase the competition in the region between the major powers, it is liable to constitute a challenge for the Kazakh government in strengthening the autocratic regime in the country.

### **The Presidential Elections in Kyrgyzstan**

Sadyr Japarov was inaugurated as president of Kyrgyzstan on January 28, 2021, after winning the presidential elections with 80% of the votes cast. Japarov called on all of the political groups, including his opponents, to unite and "work together for the nation's sake." The president emphasized that he would adhere to a "multipolar" foreign policy in which Russia, Kazakhstan, and Uzbekistan would be important partners. Japarov also promised to persist in a policy in which "human rights and the rule of law are preserved." He stated that the most significant challenges facing Kyrgyzstan are its external debt, the state budget, and the energy industry. All these issues put Japarov's statements in a very dubious light. It is doubtful that he will be able to keep his promises for the following reasons:

*Illegality of the presidential elections:* When Japarov announced his intention to run in the presidential primaries, he ignored the constitutional ban on an acting president being a candidate for president. As prime minister and acting president, Japarov was therefore ineligible to run in the presidential elections. This issue has aroused criticism among both the Kyrgyzstan public and Western observers.

*Relations between Kyrgyzstan and Russia:* Japarov realizes that Kyrgyzstan's economic dependence on Russia means that any worsening of relations with the Russian Federation will negatively affect Kyrgyzstan's economy. In addition to Russia's economic aid to Kyrgyzstan, about one million Kyrgyzstani citizens permanently reside

in Russia, most of them migrant workers. Migrant workers remitted \$2.4 billion to Kyrgyzstan in 2019, mostly from Russia. Their entry to Russia without visas and the comfortable employment conditions they enjoy are important factors in the livelihood of millions of Kyrgyzstani citizens. Russia also aids Kyrgyzstan by supplying it with arms at no cost. The Collective Security Treaty Organization, led by Russia, guarantees the territorial integrity of Kyrgyzstan and continues military support. It should be noted that the Covid-19 pandemic has greatly diminished Russia's ability to provide direct economic aid to Kyrgyzstan.

*Relations between Kyrgyzstan and China:* Before the elections, it was [reported](#) that Sadyr Japarov had maintained economic relations with China through Adil Zhunus Uulu, his deputy and relative. Adil was born and raised in China, and received Kyrgyzstani citizenship only in 2001. His relatives who remain in China work in Chinese government agencies and have family ties with the current rulers in China. It is also alleged that Chinese entities financed Japarov's election campaign. Kyrgyzstan's debt to China totals \$4.8 billion. In contrast to Kyrgyzstan's other creditors, the Export–Import Bank of China refused to grant another postponement for repayment of this debt. It is likely that the development of lead and iron mines in Kyrgyzstan will be given to Chinese companies as a partial payment of the debt.

Japarov's task as president is to meet the expectations of his fellow citizens—above all—getting Kyrgyzstan out of its economic crisis. In addition, the frequent changes in the country's leadership have undermined the people's confidence in the government and the rule of law. The regime will therefore have to institute economic and social reforms. The Covid-19 pandemic has already brought Kyrgyzstan to the edge of the abyss and deprived it of the economic safety net created by migrant workers, which formerly offset the country's high unemployment rate. It is therefore difficult to believe that Japarov's popularity will last for long. It is likely that demonstrations in Kyrgyzstan will begin in the spring of 2021, around the time of the election for the local authorities and the vote on the constitution. Political instability in the country and the worsening of the economic crisis will undoubtedly increase China's influence in the region. A great deal obviously depends on the dynamic of the relations between China, Russia, and the US.

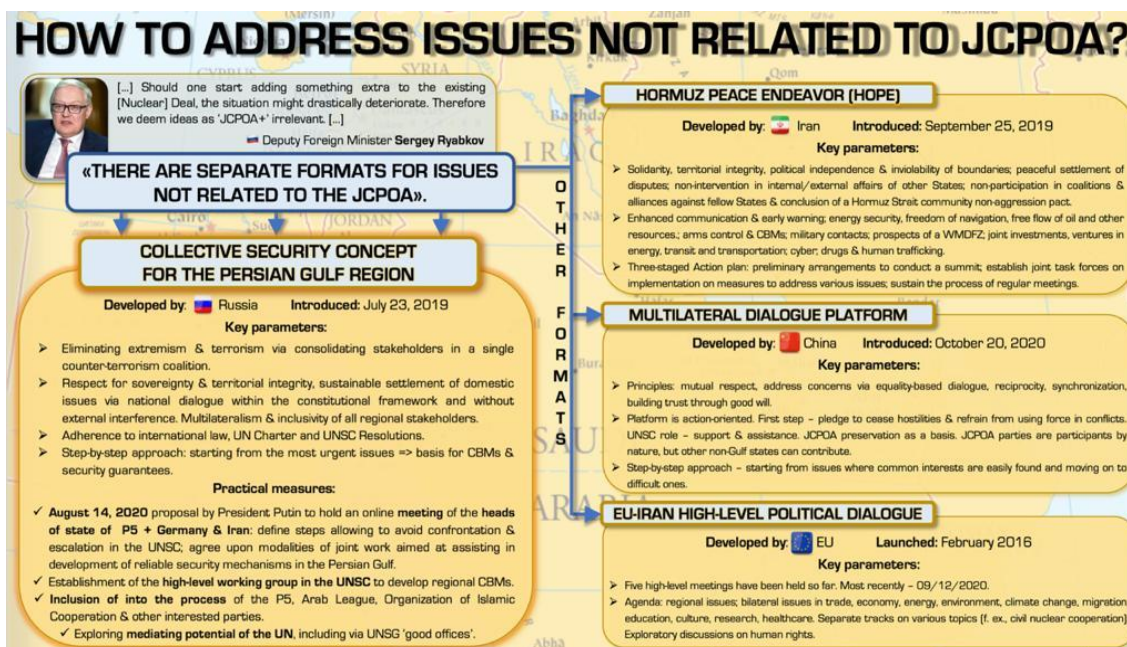
It is reasonable to assume that the US will increase its involvement in the region in the near future, given the Biden administration's interest in building levers of influence to counter China and Russia. Most of this, however, will focus on economic and humanitarian projects. If American actions go no further than this, Russia is expected to refrain from a sharp response and will confine to imply propaganda measures and behind-the-scenes pressure on Central Asian governments. For its part, China will continue—albeit slowly but with determination—to invest in projects for developing infrastructure and natural resources in the region, while at the same time expanding its security cooperation there. The dynamic between the major powers will greatly affect the freedom of action of the countries in the region.

## Russian Policy in the Middle East—Preparing the Set for Biden Administration

### Russia's View on the Renewal of Negotiations Between Iran and the US

During the “between the administrations” period in Washington, Moscow stepped up its activism in the Middle East. Russia accelerated its political coordination with Tehran in anticipation of the Biden administration's possible renewal of talks with Iran on the nuclear agreement. Toward the end of the Trump administration, Russia took a tolerant approach to Iranian violations of the nuclear agreement and put the blame for them on Washington's policy. Official Russian representatives severely [condemned](#) the assassination of Iranian nuclear scientist Fakhrizadeh, and some of them even termed it a [terrorist](#) operation. At the same time, Russia [called on](#) Iran to show responsibility and restraint in its nuclear measures.

The Russians insist that efforts should be made to renew the Iranian and American commitment to the original nuclear agreement, which they say [should not be expanded](#) to deal with the threats resulting from Iran's regional policy and missile capabilities. The Russians assert that this is the most realistic attitude, because opening the agreement will manifest irreconcilable conflicting interests, as shown during the original negotiations on the agreement. Russia has repeated its [proposal](#) that these two issues be handled in frameworks outside the nuclear agreement, such as “the Collective Security Concept for the Persian Gulf Region” promoted by Russia in the past two years. The Saudi Arabian foreign minister [did not accept](#) this idea on his visit to Moscow on January 15.



Infographics about “The Collective Security Concept in the Persian Gulf.”

Source: Twitter account of the Russian embassy in Vienna, January 26, 2021

Russian academics associated with the Russian Ministry of Foreign Affairs recently told researchers at the Institute for National Security Studies (INSS) that Moscow was convinced that Iran would insist that the Russians participate in any future negotiations, due to Iran's distrust of the West. The Russians [envision a role for](#)

[themselves](#) in restoring trust between the two sides and helping to devise practical arrangements for implementing the agreement (as they previously helped by purchasing enriched uranium and by solving the issue of enrichment at the Fordow nuclear facility in Iran).

### Political Process in Syria

Russia is still searching for ideas about how to end the deadlock in Syria and sees the presidential elections scheduled there for April–May as a potential opportunity. In preparation, in recent weeks, Russia held another round of the Astana talks in cooperation with Iran and Turkey and closely watched the conference of the UN-sponsored Syrian Constitutional Committee. It appears that as in the past, Russia has been [having trouble](#) extracting concessions from Syria's President Assad. Although Russia has not publicly revealed its concrete ideas in this context, it appears that it plans to persuade Assad to take [symbolic steps](#), which will be portrayed as a gesture to the opposition and will be marketed to the West as a means of enhancing Assad's legitimacy, without weakening his grip on the territories under his control.

At the same time, Russia is strengthening its economic ties—or at least the image of such ties with Damascus. A “joint intergovernmental committee” for economic coordination convened in Moscow, and it was announced that Russian companies, identified with Gennady Timchenko and Yevgeny Prigozhin—Russian businessmen with close connections to the Kremlin and who are subject to American sanctions—[have expanded](#) their investments in Syria. Russia also has expanded its role as a mediator between the various players in the Syrian theater. It is [reinforcing its security influence](#) in the Daraa and Suwayda districts in Syria, where it is serving as a mediator between the regime and the rebel organizations, and it is [mediating](#) between the regime and the Kurds, and between the Kurds, the Turks, and the regime in the various disputes in the Al Hasakah district in northern Syria, as well as by [reinforcing](#) the military police there.

### Deepening Engagement with Other Actors

In early December, Russia and Sudan [completed](#) the approval processes for their agreement on construction of a Russian naval base in Port Sudan (the second such base outside of the post-Soviet area, after Syria). Russian Deputy Minister of Defense Fomin [explained](#) that while the new base would contribute to maritime security in the region, he also emphasized that Africa and the Middle East were key regions for Russia, which was gradually expanding its presence in them. In this context, an [investigative report](#) was published stating that Prigozhin and the shadow agencies that he operates were deeply involved in negotiating the agreement between the Russian Ministry of Defense and the Sudanese government.

The “Comprehensive Partnership and Strategic Cooperation Agreement” between Russia and Egypt signed during President el-Sisi's visit to Moscow in 2018 [went into effect](#) on January 11, 2021. The ten-year agreement oversees the civilian and defense relations between the two countries. The Egyptian parliament ratified the agreement in December, despite [criticism](#) of Russia's refusal to renew direct flights to the tourist sites in Egypt. The two countries have continued the military cooperation between them, as a [naval](#) counterweight to Turkey, such as in the precedent-setting joint maneuver in the Black Sea and in the Libyan arena.

Events in recent days have highlighted Russia's success in consolidating its status as a critical player in Libya for both political sides in the country. On the eve of

the elections to the Libyan temporary Presidential Council, representatives of both the Libyan National Army and Libya's government of national accord [visited](#) Moscow. It is clear that Russia is under no significant pressure to fulfill the demand to remove all the foreign mercenaries from the country. Improvement of Russia's relations with the Libyan government became possible following the [release](#) of two Russian political operatives (identified with Prigozhin) who were imprisoned in Libya for 18 months. Although pro-Russian politicians had not been elected to the new Presidential Council, Moscow still [retains](#) many levers of influence on both political camps in Libya.

The Russian government had issued a [public instruction](#) for the Ministry of Defense to sign a Military Cooperation Agreement with Saudi Arabia. The general language of the agreement does not facilitate major new activities. Yet publishing the instructions in a sensitive timing—three days before airing of the US government's [report](#) on the accountability of the Saudi Crown Prince in the assassination of Jamal Khashoggi, a Saudi opposition figure—helped Riyadh to strengthen its hand vis-à-vis Washington.

In parallel, Russia and Saudi Arabia continue to struggle over the oil price stabilization. In early January, Russia told OPEC that it was [insisted](#) on an increase in oil production, which had been cut back in April 2020, in contrast to the Saudi Arabian view that the market conditions made this impossible. The compromise reached was beneficial to Russia: Saudi Arabia agreed to unilaterally cut its daily production by one million barrels, while the protocol as a whole increased daily production by half a million barrels. This agreement boosted the price of oil to its highest point since the beginning of the Covid-19 crisis (nearly \$70 for a barrel of Brent oil). The March 3–4 ministerial meeting of "OPEC plus" is expected to be tense with Moscow and Riad in renewed disagreement about the future cuts.

A huge Russian delegation of 200 representatives participated in the IDEX 2021 arms fair in Abu-Dhabi. The Russians [published](#) that about 50% of their arms (not less than 6 billion dollars a year) are exported to the Middle East and North Africa market. Yet they [complained](#) that the CAATSA US sanctions make it harder to gain new clients. The Russians were careful not to speak about concrete deals and made almost no new announcements after the fair.

The absence of new Russian major arms contracts with countries in the region stands out, especially with Iran, despite the removal of the embargo in October. One might wonder whether there are no new contracts, or the Russians and their clients prefer to keep those out of the public eye. In 2020, Egypt was afraid to go through with its contract for the procurement of SU-35 warplanes that had already been built for it in Russia, especially following the imposition of sanctions on Turkey for its purchase of the Russian S-400 air defense system. It appears that the widespread reports, which began in November, that Algeria [had ordered](#) 12 to 14 Su-57 stealth warplanes from Russia in a \$2 billion deal are based on sources known to be [generators of fake news](#). The Russian Ministry of Defense [complained](#) that the Covid-19 virus had affected the financial capabilities of its main customers including Egypt and Algeria, and that there would be no return to the pre-pandemic situation in the arms market before 2023.

## **Conclusions and Outlook**

An overall view of Russian policy in the Middle East shows that key players in the region, particularly among the Sunni countries, were making nontrivial gestures toward Moscow on the eve of the Biden administration's taking office, despite expectations that the new administration would take a tougher line toward Russia. It appears that the

Kremlin wanted to complete its gains before the new administration took office and to demonstrate its ability to play a critical role in the region.

Moscow wants to be involved in the dialogue between Iran and the West. It is trying to present a constructive attitude toward all sides and has proposed ideas for bridging the differences between their positions. Moscow, however, is likely to present views that are extremely close to those of Iran, thereby highlighting the gap between it and the Western powers, which share Israel's concerns about the gaps in the nuclear agreement concerning Iran's regional policy and missiles. It is reasonable to assume that Russia will sign arms deals with Iran in the coming year (subject to Iran's interest and ability to pay), due to the urgent need of Russia's defense industries for new contracts (because of the American sanctions and the difficulties facing Russia's regular customers). The limits of Russia's influence with President Assad in Syria and Russia's wish to avoid highlighting any dispute with Iran concerning Iran's regional influence and missile capabilities are also apparent.

## Russian-Israeli Relations Awakened: The Return of the Young Israeli Woman from Syria, the War Between Wars Campaign, and the Palestinian Issue

### Intensification of Russian—Israeli Senior-Level Dialogue

In recent months, and especially in February, the intensity of contacts between Israel and Russia has increased in a variety of channels, following a period of diminished bilateral contact at the senior level beginning with the Covid-19 crisis in early 2020. Since November, there have been four telephone conversations between Prime Minister Netanyahu and President Putin, as well as phone calls between the foreign and the defense ministers. Senior Israeli representatives—the head of the National Security Council, Meir Ben-Shabbat, and the director general of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Alon Ushpiz—conducted two separate visits to Moscow. The visits focused on Russian assistance in returning a young Israeli woman captured in Syria, the Iranian nuclear file, the situation in Syria, the Palestinian Authority elections, and the 30th anniversary of relations between Russia and Israel.



Israeli Director general of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs in Moscow

Source: Russian Ministry of Foreign Affairs website, February 25, 2021

The Russian assistance in returning the young Israeli woman from Syria provoked a [critical discussion](#) in Israel about Israel—Russia relations. First, alongside gratitude to the Russians for resolving this humanitarian case, the media in Israel (and in the international media) has claimed that the high public profile of the affair could make Russia an influencer in the Israeli election campaign. The media presented the current affair as part of a chain of events, which includes the return of the remains of the missing soldier Zechariah Baumel in April 2019 and the pardon of the young Israeli

Naama Issachar in January 2020—both during previous election campaigns. Second, criticism was leveled at Israel's secret agreement to fund the shipment of the Russian Sputnik V vaccines to Syria in exchange for the woman's release from Syria, according to foreign media. The secrecy of the move and the reason why Russia needs limited Israeli funding to fund vaccines for Syria has raised questions. It is possible that Moscow aims to increase the legitimacy of the Assad regime and to present it as a dialogue partner—even if indirectly—with Israel.

### **Has Russia Become More Critical of Israel for its Attacks on Syria and Regarding the Palestinian Issue?**

Russian diplomats have made a series of statements in recent months that have provoked discussion in Israel about whether Russia has changed its attitude toward the freedom of action of the Israel Defense Forces in the war between wars campaign, and whether it has become more critical of Israel regarding the Palestinian issue.

Russian ambassador to Israel, Anatoly Viktorov, [asserted](#) that Israel was the main problem in the Middle East, not Iran and its actions. He said that Israel was attacking Hezbollah, not vice versa, and that the attack tunnels in Lebanon leading to Israel should not necessarily be attributed to Hezbollah. After being summoned to the Israel Foreign Ministry for an exceptional rebuke, Viktorov said that his remarks had been "[taken out of context](#)." A Russian Foreign Ministry spokesperson later published a [special announcement](#) generally backing the ambassador and stating that Russia opposed attacks in Syrian territory. She refrained, however, from commenting on the questionable comparison to Iran and on attributing the tunnels to Hezbollah.

Russian Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov [said](#) on January 18 that Russia was opposed to violations of Syrian sovereignty and to Syrian territory being used for threats against Israel or becoming a theater for conflict between Israel and Iran. Lavrov's statement was in response to a question posed by the Syrian news agency, while the part of the press conference devoted to Israel was minimal.

The Russian president's envoy for Syrian political settlement, Alexander Lavrentiev, [called](#) Israel in February to stop the counterproductive attacks in Syria and to heed Moscow's anxiety about the threat of major escalation on Syrian soil. Lavrentiev warned that "sooner or later a retaliatory strike might be committed, inter alia by the Syrian government" and could lead to a spiral of violence.

Russia also [sharply criticized](#) the US offensive against Iranian targets in northern Syria on February 27, describing the short warning time given to it by the US as insufficient. However, as in previous US attacks, it has not made direct public military moves to prevent this attack.

At the same time, Russia has stepped up its activity in the Israeli-Palestinian context in recent months. While Russia supports the Abraham Accords in principle, it is labeling them a "unilateral diplomatic deal" that cannot solve the deadlock in the process of reaching arrangements between Israel and the Palestinians. On the eve of Biden's inauguration, Russia initiated meetings of the international Quartet (without participation by an American representative) and called for its rejuvenation. At a special UN General Assembly session on the subject, Lavrov announced an initiative to convene a meeting in the coming months led by the Quartet, Egypt, Jordan, UAE, Bahrain, Israel, and the Palestinians to promote dialogue between the parties. Russia continues to promote this idea ever since. Earlier, in November and December, Russia criticized Israel's construction plans in Jewish communities in Judea and Samaria.

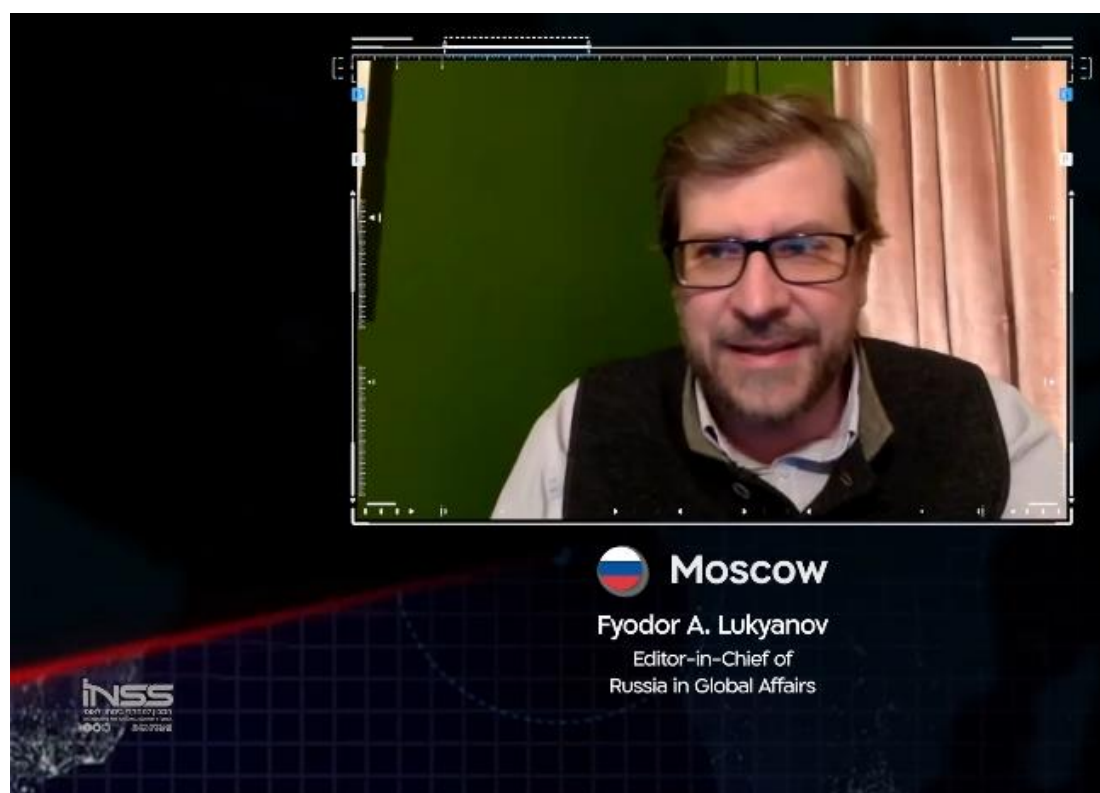
Russia has increased its efforts to influence the Palestinian political system. Following the announcement of elections in the PA, Moscow became a preferred

destination for Palestinian delegations from all factions, including Hamas and Islamic Jihad. Russia has also expressed support for Egypt's [efforts](#) to reconcile the Palestinian factions, following continued Russian efforts in recent years to advance this goal. Russia [increased its pressure](#) to normalize relations between Hamas—which supported the Syrian opposition—and the Assad regime. The PA was the first government in the Middle East to authorize the use of the Russian Sputnik V vaccine.

### Conclusions and Outlook

What is new in the statements voiced by the Russian diplomats? First of all, Russia is afraid that Israel will escalate its activity in Syria to pressure the Biden administration to improve the Iranian nuclear agreement. The Russian Foreign Ministry usually takes a tough line in its formal presentation of Russian policy. In practice, however, Moscow's views are far more flexible. It therefore follows that Russia is still willing to accept Israel's activity in Syria but seeks to warn against major escalation there.

Thus, in a simulation of a crisis in the Middle East conducted at INSS on January 27, Russian commentator Fyodor Lukyanov [argued](#) that Moscow regarded large-scale escalation between Iran and Israel in Syria as a severe threat to Russian interests and that if such escalation takes place, it would be easier for the Russians to talk to Israel than to Iran (because Russian interests in the arena conflict more with Iranian interests than with those of Israel).



Secondly, Russia, which was left on the sidelines in the Abraham Accords, and consistently made clear its opposition to the “Deal of the Century,” regards the Palestinian question as a possible sphere of agreement between it and the Biden administration and as an issue that is likely to gain prominence in the coming years. Lavrov's criticism in the UN Security Council of Trump's unilateral policy on the Palestinians [was answered](#) by the American representative, who confirmed the US commitment to the two-state solution and its willingness to work with the international Quartet. In contrast to the official Russian position backing the Palestinians, Russian

sources closely associated with the diplomatic establishment recently expressed to Israel their frustration with the Palestinian attitude and the feeling of a dead end in their efforts to promote reconciliation between the Palestinian factions, as well as the need to reconsider new practical ways of changing the dynamic between Israel and the Palestinians.

## Russia–US Relations Seem to be Heading Toward a New Crisis

Yochai Guisky and Daniel Rakov\*

Currently, it appears that Russian–American relations under the Biden administration and Putin are taking the form of a classic tragedy. The parties are moving along familiar and predictable lines in a negative and depressing direction without being able to change it. This development, however, is not inevitable in all aspects of the relations between the two powers.

The final months of the Trump administration, especially after the elections, featured a further downturn in relations. Almost no week went by without the US imposing new [sanctions](#) on Russian authorities. It also imposed sanctions on Turkey for procuring the [S-400](#) Russian air defense systems. The US closed its last two American consulates in Russia, leaving the embassy in Moscow as the sole American representation in the country. The exposure of a large-scale [cyberattack](#) attributed to the Russian intelligence services again highlighted Russia's ability to pose a substantial threat to American interests. The Russians also accused the Trump administration of an attempt to undermine US–Russia relations ahead of the entry of the Biden administration.

For its part, ever since November, Russia has constantly expressed pessimism regarding the future of relations with the US during Biden's presidency, [describing](#) him as an Obama clone, and has made a series of negative gestures:

- A. Putin was among the [last](#) world leaders to congratulate Biden on his election victory. He waited for almost six weeks after the elections (until December 15) to do so, while all of the Russian establishment media continued to portray Biden negatively and to take seriously the possibility that Trump would remain president. Russia insultingly refrained from any contact with Biden's team, allegedly to avoid being accused of subverting an administration in office, as it had been accused during the Trump administration transition period.
- B. The acute political dispute in Washington, which reached a peak in the storming of the capital, was exploited in order to conduct a campaign severely criticizing the structure of the American governmental system and elections as being defective, illegitimate, and outdated. [Taking the lead](#) in this respect was former Russian President Medvedev (in his position as deputy chairman of the Security Council of Russia) who published a harshly worded article through the official TASS news agency a few days before Biden's inauguration, in which he depicted the US as a source of global instability and criticized its system of government and elections.
- C. Five days before Biden's inauguration, Russia announced its withdrawal from the Open Skies Treaty, an arms control treaty for aerial intelligence

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monitoring flights over the signatories' territory, from which the US withdrew in 2020.

At the same time, some people in Russia [regard](#) the Biden administration as an improvement over the Trump administration, because it will be more predictable, even if this does not result in better relations. Starting in mid-December, the senior Russian spokespersons, as well as Putin himself, began to express a willingness to work together with the Biden administration if it wishes to do so. The appointment of Anatoly Chubais, who has a liberal image, as President Putin's representative to the international organizations—specifically the UN Framework Convention on Climate Change—could signal that Russia is willing to reach certain compromises with the West. The appointment of former US Ambassador to Russia, William Burns, as director of the CIA and the formation of a special section for Russia in the American National Security Council were greeted with [cautious](#) optimism in Russia.

Looking ahead, the familiarity of the main players on both sides since the Obama administration and the deep scars of the past in Washington and Moscow guarantee that no further attempts will be made to reset relations or to expect Russia to become an ally against China; rather, Moscow's behavior would be viewed and treated with hard-nosed policies.

Russia believes that it faces an administration that is likely to be hostile and that it is responding to aggressive US conduct that utilizes sanctions and deep penetration into Eastern Europe by using nonkinetic but effective cyber and disinformation operations. It is therefore likely that Russia will not abandon these tools and that the friction between the two sides will continue.

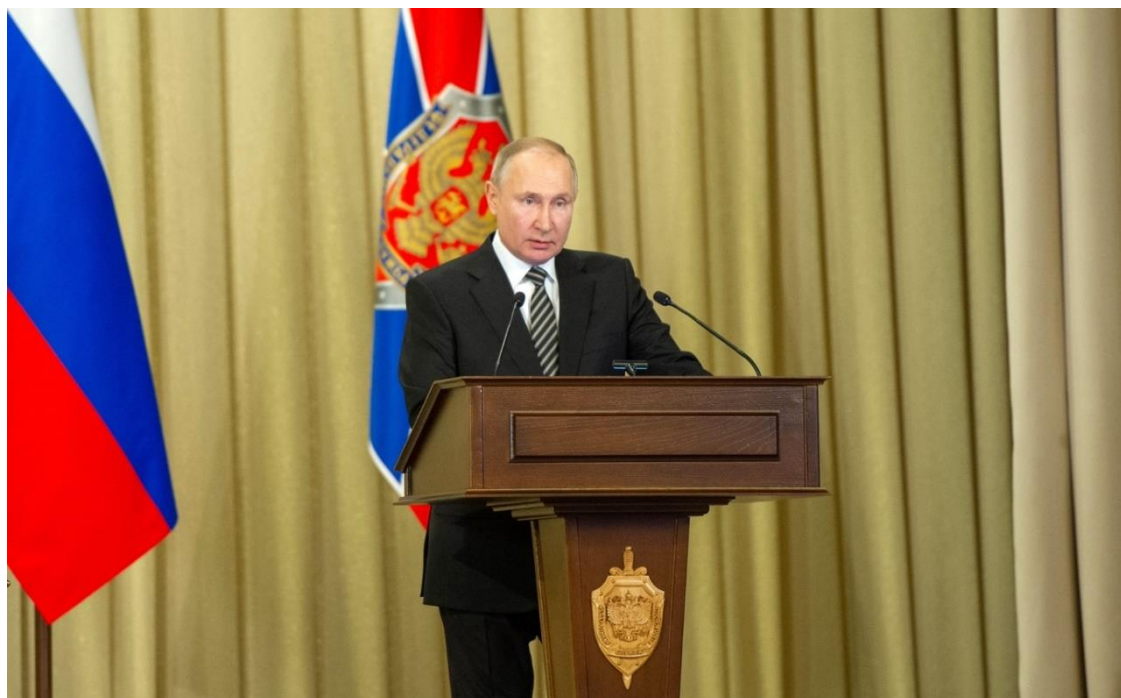
Putin was among the first leaders with whom Biden [spoke](#) after his inauguration, indicating the importance of "acting firmly in response to actions by Russia." The two countries quickly agreed to extend the New START Treaty by five years—a pressing issue (as it was to expire on February 5). This was accompanied, however, by American statements that framed the agreement as part of a need to reduce potential risks at a time of adversarial relations between the two powers.

The Biden administration also announced, that it had charged the intelligence community with examining Russia's involvement in the SolarWinds affair (the deep and disruptive penetration, using sophisticated cyber tools, of governmental and corporate computer networks on a global scale), Russia's involvement in the 2020 elections, the use of chemical warfare agents against opposition leader Alexei Navalny, and alleged payment for killing American soldiers in Afghanistan (an accusation emphatically denied by Moscow). At the same time however, the new administration expressed interest in additional "verifiable arms control arrangements" with Russia that will reduce the risk for the US.

Partial results of this examination had led to the US and the EU sanctions' [imposition](#) on Russian entities and persons involved in chemical weapons poisoning of the opposition leader Navalny and of former Russian spy Skripal (in the UK, 2018). Biden administration [explained](#) that this step showed that it does not seek a new "reset" with Moscow? But doesn't want an escalation either.

Moscow, for its part, has hardened its public stance toward Washington. In a symbolic [speech](#) at the FSB (Russian Federal Security Service) headquarters, President Putin warned of external pressures, sanctions, and interference in 'Russia's internal political affairs (hinting at criticism of Russia in the Navalny affair). Putin has stated that such an attitude will not lead to any achievement with Moscow, but he promised he is ready for an open dialogue based on mutual respect for finding compromises for

the most complex problems. Although not mentioning the US, it was clear that Putin aimed to be heard by the White House.



Putin speaking at FSB headquarters.

*Source: the Kremlin official site, February 24, 2021*

The visit by EU High Representative for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy Josep Borrell to Moscow on February 4–6, intent on maintaining a strategic dialogue at a senior level between the EU and Russia despite the problems of trust between them, ended in abject failure. [As Borrell sees it](#), Russia has taken aggressive steps against the EU. During his meeting with Russian Foreign Minister Lavrov, Borrell learned that three European diplomats had been expelled from Moscow on the grounds of encouraging demonstrations against the Russian government and in support of opposition leader Navalny. Lavrov also expressed harsh criticism of the EU at his joint press conference with Borrell. Borrell summed up by saying that Russia and the EU were growing further apart, but emphasized (in response to criticism of his soft tone toward Russia during his visit) that he saw his role as continuing a dialogue with Moscow.

There is widespread consensus among researchers that relations between Russia and the United States are not expected to improve in the coming years and possibly even not until the change of the current leadership, due to unbridgeable disagreements. In our understanding, the rigidity and forcefulness are likely to be the main characteristics of the dynamics between the two powers in the coming year. In circumstances of distrust, tactical moves by either of them in the realms of cyber and disinformation, in Eastern Europe, or in the post-Soviet space could provoke crises. Neither side seeks escalation, but there is a growing likelihood of miscalculation, as each side takes an aggressive approach to hurting the other side in the most sensitive areas: the stability and legitimacy of Putin's rule on the one hand, and social cohesion in the United States and Western liberal model of support on the other.

At the same time, the following wild cards are liable to accelerate or divert the existing trends: A change in direction by Turkey toward Moscow and the breakup of NATO; a limited kinetic flareup in an area like Syria, with active Russian intervention,

that will pose a serious dilemma for the US about backing its allies in the region; an assertive Russian move in regions such as Transnistria; a change of attitude in (post-Merkel) Germany; or another assassination involving the use of chemical warfare agents attributed to Russia.

Arms control is likely to be a small ray of light, given the interest of both sides in maintaining the nuclear arms limitation frameworks. In the best-case scenario, it will be possible to bring China into the dialogue on the matter, but this is not enough to change the general picture. In such a scenario, a dialogue could develop between the countries in other spheres of arms control, such as outer space and cyberspace. At this stage, however, it appears that the situation is not ripe for agreements in the matter, although a dialogue on the issue may be possible.

The subject of global warming—a possible connection point for all the world's countries—puts Russia in a unique position as having the potential to profit from such phenomena, due to the expansion of Russia's arable land and the creation of a North Sea trading passage via the Arctic Ocean from which Russia can potentially derive strategic and economic value. At the same time, this sphere could serve as a basis for some dialogue or cooperation between the parties.

The significance for Israel is that the maneuvering room between Russia and the West and the ability to create a meeting point are liable to shrink, while Washington's ability to help Israel in the context of Syria is likely to remain as it was before (the return of Brett McGurk to a key position in this area could be important). The potential for a positive outcome or even a dialogue between the major powers about an arrangement in Syria, however, is liable to diminish (Washington has little stomach for providing Russia with a quid pro quo). Potential exists for more aggressive Russian behavior in the Middle East, but there is no reason to assume that it will be directed particularly at Israel. The US and Russia are also liable to find themselves again on opposing sides on the issue of Iran, with the Biden administration striving for a better agreement, while Iran will seek backing from Russia and China for a demand that the US return to the JCPOA and rescind its sanctions, without any additional commitments by Iran. Furthermore, Russia would find it preferable and even enjoyable to watch the US struggle with the Iranian issue, as long as it does not lead to military escalation with Iran (which is highly unlikely under the current administration policies).

## **Russian Political Involvement in Moldova: Tactical Successes and Their Strategic Limitations**

Dr. Dima Course \*

A deep historical connection connects Russia and Moldova, from battles fought together, their shared Orthodox Christian faith, and Russia's role in the liberation from Turkish rule. Contributing to the positive role of the Russians in popular Moldovan folklore is the fact that when the prosperity of the Moldovan principalities reached its height in the 15th and 16th centuries, the threat to Moldovan sovereignty came from the country's western neighbors—Poland and Hungary—in addition to the Ottoman Empire, while Russia was regarded as an important and reliable ally. The negative narratives about Russia stem mainly from the modern period, with the appearance of geopolitical alternatives in the form of a united Romania and the rise of the Soviet regime.

As with other countries that were once part of the Soviet Union, the Soviet period in Moldova is also at the core of the “competing narratives” struggle. Despite all the criticism, however, and despite the empowering of the Romanian language and the Moldovan identity, all the surveys in the post-Soviet period show a large degree of nostalgia for the Soviet period among a considerable part of the population, and consequently also positive sentiment toward Moscow.<sup>1</sup> Given the above, it comes as no surprise that during the term of President Vladimir Putin, Russia has been constantly striving to preserve, and if possible also to increase, its influence on events in Moldova in order to keep the country within its sphere of influence, prevent it from continuing to draw nearer to Romania and the European Union and its accession to NATO, and more.

### **The Background to the Moldovan Parliamentary Elections in 2019**

Local businessman Vladimir Plahotniuc increased his political power throughout the past decade. He became Moldova's almost all-powerful gray eminence, taking control of the Democratic Party of Moldova (PDM), one of the country's largest political parties. Although the PDM won only 19 out of 101 parliamentary seats in the 2014 elections, Plahotniuc managed to almost double its power within a short time by inducing members of parliament from other factions to join his faction. As PDM chairman in 2016, he exercised undisputed control over a government that was led by a representative of his party.

Initially, his standing in the international theater was steady, thanks to his widespread connections in Russia, the EU, and the US. Nevertheless, what became his Achilles' heel and led to his downfall was probably his ambition to achieve absolute control in the political sphere and in the Moldovan economy, while forcing every competitor to bend to his will. It appears that Plahotniuc wanted to be his country's sole representative to foreigners, and to speak with them on equal terms. All the other players, both local and international, objected to these ambitions. In the runup to the

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<sup>1</sup> 50% of the respondents usually express nostalgia for the Soviet period. The proportion rises when minorities are involved—Russians, Gagauzes, Belarussians, gypsies, and others—and is lower among members of the Moldovan ethnic majority. See “Half of Moldovans Regret Losing the Soviet Union—Barometer,” December 5, 2018, INFOTAG, <http://www.infotag.md/populis-en/269992/>.

March 2019 parliamentary elections, Plahotniuc found himself opposed by Russia and the EU, both of which were angry with him, each for its own reasons.

The Russians were offended by incidents such as the participation of Moldovan army personnel in a large-scale NATO military exercise in Western Ukraine in 2017,<sup>2</sup> but especially by Plahotniuc's campaign against the politician whom they regarded as the most loyal to them—Igor Dodon, president of Moldova and chairman of the Party of Socialists of the Republic of Moldova (PSRM).<sup>3</sup>

The PSRM, which is, to a large extent, the heir of the Moldovan Communist Party, is very skeptical about integration in Europe, and clearly prefers Putin's Tamozhennii Soyuz (Eurasian Customs Union or EACU). It is therefore no wonder that Moscow has consistently supported this party and its leader. Plahotniuc, on the other hand, saw the PSRM as his main rival, and missed no opportunity to emphasize the symbolic nature of the president's role, and even to humiliate him publicly. On a number of occasions, when the president's signature on some document was required and Dodon refused to sign, the parliament declared that the president was "temporarily suspended on grounds of incapacity." The speaker of the parliament became acting president and signed the document, after which the president's "incapacity" ended.<sup>4</sup>

The European Union was angry about the lack of progress in the investigation of the "theft of the century," in which a huge portion of a European loan granted to Moldova simply vanished into thin air.<sup>5</sup> The EU's aid and sympathetic attitude to Moldova is mostly contingent on one main criterion: transparency in government and the economy and progress in relevant reforms designed to increase this transparency. The delay in the investigation of the huge embezzlement indicates that the opposite trend has taken place from what should have happened.

The European Union also had a favorite political player in the 2019 Moldovan elections—ACUM, a new party. ACUM was an alliance between two rightwing pro-Western parties, headed by two politicians from the new generation: Maia Sandu and Andrei Năstase. Neither of them had ever been part of the local establishment, and they both had extensive work connections with Western agencies. Sandu worked at the World Bank for over a decade, including two years in the office of its president in the US.

### **The 2019 Parliamentary Election Results and the Russian Stratagem**

Despite the internal and external pressure, Plahotniuc's PDM managed to increase its representation in parliament from 19 to 30 seats out of 101. Dodon's PSRM won 35 seats, and Sandu and Năstase's ACUM won 25 seats, a notable achievement for a new list that that was barely established. Since forming a government requires 51 seats, it was obvious that a coalition had to include at least two of the three largest parties. The two most likely possibilities were a union of the PDM and the PSRM and dispersal of parliament, followed by a new round of elections. In the first case, the PDM would have retained a considerable proportion of its influence and control over the force and depth of the investigation into the "theft of the century." The PSRM and Moscow, its supporter, would have formed a considerable part of the actual government, with a

<sup>2</sup> <https://lenta.ru/news/2017/09/07/moldavane/>.

<sup>3</sup> Keep in mind that Moldova is a parliamentary republic in which the president's authority is mainly symbolic.

<sup>4</sup> <https://jamestown.org/program/moldovan-president-igor-dodon-suspended-constitutional-court/>.

<sup>5</sup> <https://www.bbc.com/news/magazine-33166383>.

relatively flexible partner. As very pragmatic players, to say the least, the parties could have expected to reach an understanding on both foreign policy and economic policy. After all, when you boil it down, the PDM's platform is also inclined to a social democratic view of the economy.

In the event of repeat elections, the PSRM and ACUM would have had better chances of increasing their power, but the PDM would have remained longer in power—a tempting possibility in its difficult situation. Paradoxically, therefore, none of the three parties was strongly opposed to the option of new elections.

For ACUM, the third part of the triangle, the likelihood that it would reach agreement with one of the two other players was slim. Its platform was almost the exact opposite of the PSRM's platform: rightwing economics versus leftwing economics and a strong pro-Western orientation versus a strong pro-Russian orientation. ACUM regarded the period of Soviet rule as a foreign occupation, while the PSRM waxed nostalgic about the Soviet period.

A coalition between the ACUM and the PDM also appeared unlikely, due to ACUM's commitment to the investigation of the "theft of the century." To create such a coalition, either ACUM would have had to completely abandon the key pledge that distinguished it from its rivals, or the PDM would have had to forego even minimal immunity from the investigation for its leadership.

Exhausting negotiations between the parties continued for almost three months after the elections, with all of the options theoretically remaining on the table. As it proved in retrospect, however, Moscow was determined to end Vladimir Plahotniuc's political career and expel him completely from Moldovan politics.

At a certain stage, the local constitutional court ruled that the deadline for assembling a coalition, or dispersing parliament in the absence of a coalition, was June 7, 2019. On June 4, President Dodon kept a poker face, telling the media in interviews that negotiations were taking place between the three parties about a possible coalition. The president left for the St. Petersburg Forum the next day. At the same time, a senior Russian emissary to Moldova, Deputy Prime Minister Dmitry Kozak, stated explicitly that Moscow preferred a coalition between the PSRM and the ACUM.<sup>6</sup> Dodon met with Putin in St. Petersburg, apparently obtained his consent for this, and returned to Moldova to put it into practice. On June 7, representatives of the PSRM and the ACUM announced their decision to form a coalition for "de-oligarchizing" the country. Representatives of the PDM government opposed this, claiming that their rivals had missed the deadline—the period for forming a coalition had expired—and parliament should now disperse and set a date for new elections.

The crisis continued for a week between June 7–14, accompanied, inter alia, by large-scale demonstrations. The two sides could nevertheless take credit for an absence of mass violence—something that cannot be taken for granted within the borders of the former Soviet Union. The Russian president spoke in public on June 13 in support of the PSRM and their ACUM partners and against the "oligarchical government" of Plahotniuc's PDM.<sup>7</sup> The crisis ended the next day, June 14, when the US ambassador to Moldova, Dereck J. Hogan, visited Plahotniuc for a talk, following which the oligarch fled Moldova in his private plane. The PDM government resigned within a few days, making way for the ministers of the new PSRM-ACUM government. ACUM leader Maia Sandu became prime minister and Zinaida Greceanîi, President Dodon's right hand in the PSRM, became speaker of the parliament.

<sup>6</sup> <https://www.kommersant.ru/doc/3991500>.

<sup>7</sup> <https://novayagazeta.ru/articles/2019/06/15/80905-perevorot-na-180-gradusov>.

Political polls showed great public satisfaction with this extraordinary alliance and the removal of Plahotniuc from office. The ACUM's leadership assumed that the PSRM had no interest in new elections that would jeopardize the respectable number of seats that it had won and would not consider combining with a defeated PDM that had lost its leader. Sandu and incoming Minister of the Interior Năstase therefore commenced implementing their agenda with great—and undoubtedly excessive—confidence.

Their first initiatives won tacit consent from the PSRM, but when Sandu decided on November 6, 2019 to cancel the results of a tender for selecting the chief prosecutor and to conduct a repeat tender personally, her coalition partners, together with the opposition PDM, voted the government out of office. She then resigned on short notice, without any real negotiations being conducted.<sup>8</sup>

Instead of new elections, a coalition was quickly formed by the PSRM and the PDM, which was led this time by Pavel Filip, former prime minister. The PDM received no significant representation in the government, but it was granted time to redesign their party and disavow the legacy of the exiled Plahotniuc, as well as control over the investigation of the preceding government's activity.

The actions and timing of the PSRM and Moscow, its backer, were brilliant throughout. The alliance with the ACUM began to fall apart as soon as Sandu's government was formed, and serious personal and professional disagreements emerged between her and Andrei Năstase, her main partner in the ACUM. In retrospect, it appears that ACUM had planned on being in the opposition after the elections in order to continue the process of consolidating and uniting its ranks, with the aim of achieving a crushing victory in the next elections. The unexpected invitation to form a government with the PSRM and select the prime minister were a "bear-hug" for a young political movement that proved simply unable to rise to this challenge. Unsurprisingly, shortly after the coalition with the PSRM fell apart, Andrei Năstase lost the election for mayor of Kishinev to PSRM candidate Ion Ceban. This was the first electoral in the capital city by a socialist in the past 29 years, and the first time in modern Moldovan history that a single pro-Russian leftist political party occupied all three of the most powerful positions in the country: the presidency, the prime minister, and the Kishinev municipality.<sup>9</sup>

### **Analysis: A Successful Chess Game by the Russians?**

One of the recurrent motifs in internal Russian propaganda in recent years is a comparison between Putin's foreign policy and a game by a chess master who plans several moves ahead—*mnogokhodovka*. Considering the complexity of the international order and Russia's unenviable status in this order in recent years, these compliments usually arouse skepticism among scholars.

Nevertheless, this does succeed sometimes. Ostensibly, the chain of events in Moldova related above certainly appears to be an impressive success for Moscow. Within a span of a few months, the Russians' player in Moldova advanced from the status of a president with only nominal authority—with even that being frequently denied him by the parliament—to a strongman with an iron grip on almost all of the power centers in the country. All this was based on impeccable and transparent election results, with no violence or crude intervention and even hand-in-hand with the Western powers in the first stage! Furthermore, the man who appeared to be a super-oligarch and the owner of the country just a few months ago was deposed and driven into exile.

<sup>8</sup> <https://ria.ru/20191112/1560845570.html>.

<sup>9</sup> <https://www.kp.md/daily/27050.1/4116768/>.

As soon as this move had been completed, the PSRM was in effect the only stable party left in the country: ACUM split into its constituent parts, and the PDM knew that if new elections were to be held immediately, it might not win any seats whatsoever in parliament. Ilan Shor, the leader of the fourth largest parliamentary faction, also fled the country for the same reasons as Plahotniuc.

Nevertheless, the analysts who chose not to exaggerate the strategic significance of this tactical success were right. Moldova, which is economically dependent on a number of opposed geopolitical poles, cannot afford unipolar behavior. An intriguing point is that Igor Dodon was the one who stressed this line of reasoning at every opportunity. The map of the country's elites is also unclear and rather chaotic, with more trends toward disunity than unity.

It is therefore no surprise, that the new coalition lasted for less than a year. As early as February 2020, a number of PDM members of parliament, led by former speaker of parliament Andrian Candu, split off and founded a faction named Pro-Moldova. They joined the opposition, disavowed the actions taken by Plahotniuc, and sided with the pro-Western bloc. It makes no difference whether these events resulted from decisions by independent politicians, a vengeful Plahotniuc stirring up trouble from a distance, or counter-intervention by the EU, with an emphasis on Romania. By early July 2020, the PSRM–PDM coalition had lost its parliamentary majority, after additional PDM members of parliament deserted the party and joined Candu's faction. Finally, in the second round of the presidential elections, Dodon was defeated by Maia Sandu and lost the presidency. Sandu's victory cast a heavy shadow on the PSRM's future in the parliamentary elections, the date of which will be set soon.

### **Summary and Conclusions: Whither Moldova?**

The Covid-19 pandemic has exacerbated economic and political instability in the country. Satisfaction with the government's functioning and the president identified with it was high in the early months of the pandemic (March–April 2020). The trend later changed, however, and became more complex. There is no doubt that the Covid-19 crisis affected the voting for president and will also affect the upcoming parliamentary elections.

Electoral changes are also taking place, however. In the second round of the presidential elections, Maia Sandu managed to gain the support of a very diverse group of anti-Dodon voters, including those who not long ago would never have voted for a representative of the pro-Western rightwing. As for the future parliamentary elections, if the PSRM does not succeed in achieving a dominant position, it is paradoxically liable to be unable to find a partner with which it can form a coalition, even if it is still the largest faction in parliament.

The case of Moldova is a good demonstration of the limitations of great power influence in a sovereign nation-state—even a small and economically weak one. While it is relatively easy to achieve the desired turnaround, it is difficult to maintain this success, even in the medium term. Moldova is expected to remain a target for intensive political intervention by the major powers; however, the balance between proximity to Russia and need for Russian aid on one hand and its proximity to Europe and dependence on its financial aid and money sent by hundreds of thousands of Moldovans working in EU countries on the other is likely to persist. In addition, the country's residents are also dissatisfied with living under a dictatorial or semidictatorial regime. Paradoxically, although leaders such as Vladimir Putin and Alexander Lukashenko win high marks in Moldovan public opinion, its citizens prefer to regard their politicians as being subject to replacement through elections, not revolutions.

## **The Russian Federation and the Central Asian Republics: Between Regional Alliances and Local Interests**

Dr. Zeev Levin\*

### **Introduction**

The Russian presence in the Central Asian region dates back more than 150 years. It began with the Russian colonial conquest during the Czarist regime and continued with the formation of the national republics during the Soviet period until their achieving independence in 1991, when the Soviet Union dissolved. Despite their shared past, each of the republics embarked on its own independent path, involving special internal factors that existed in each of them on the eve of the Soviet breakup.<sup>1</sup>

Since the dissolution of the Soviet Union, most of Russia's efforts in Central Asia have been directed at maintaining Russia's physical presence and influence on the agenda in the republics (something that has not been confined to Central Asia).<sup>2</sup> Nevertheless, the extent of these efforts was inconsistent. It was greatly reinforced in the early 2000s, or more precisely, after the massive entry of the US into the region, following 9/11, which resulted in a substantial American military presence in the region and undoubtedly set off quite a few alarm bells in the Kremlin.

In the past decade, most of the Russian Federation's efforts in foreign policy have been aimed at the arena of the major powers and important international organizations and at blocking their infiltration into the area proximate to the Russian Federation's borders. Out of all these considerations, the priority assigned to Central Asia has been quite modest and until recently, Central Asia was not an important political focus in Russia's array of interests. For example, Russia's foreign policy concept, approved by Putin in November 2016, mentioned the region only briefly.<sup>3</sup>

### **From the Soviet Union to a Network of Regional Alliances**

Since the breakup of the Soviet Union, the Russian Federation has managed its affairs with the seceding republics through a network of joint alliances. The initial confederating entity, founded in late 1991, which reconnected the republics that had been part of the Soviet Union, was the Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS). To this day, all of the Central Asian republics are CIS members except for Turkmenistan, which maintains its neutral and nonaligned status. Although the CIS is responsible for an entire series of cooperation and economic coordination agreements, with the exception of the formal framework, this organization has no decisive practical meaning beyond symbolic declarations. The Russian Federation is the leading power in the CIS, and as far as the CIS members are concerned, it is significant that the member countries are part of the special sphere of interests led by the Russian Federation.<sup>4</sup> It is therefore

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<sup>1</sup> For the period of Russian control and influence in Central Asia, see Shoshana Keller, *Russia and Central Asia: Coexistence, Conquest, Convergence* (Toronto University Press, 2019).

<sup>2</sup> Alexey Malashenko, *The Fight for Influence: Russia in Central Asia* (Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, 2013), 9–10.

<sup>3</sup> See Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Russian Federation, "Foreign Policy Concept of the Russian Federation," December 1, 2016, [http://www.mid.ru/en/foreign\\_policy/official\\_documents/-/asset\\_publisher/CptICk6BZ29/content/id/2542248](http://www.mid.ru/en/foreign_policy/official_documents/-/asset_publisher/CptICk6BZ29/content/id/2542248).

<sup>4</sup> For a history of the organization, its founding, and its activity, see [https://iacis.ru/ob\\_organizacii/istoriya](https://iacis.ru/ob_organizacii/istoriya).

no surprise that the republics that did not wish to tie themselves to the Russian Federation—such as the Baltic republics—and those that have direct conflicts with Russia, such as Georgia and Ukraine, withdrew from the CIS.

The international entity with the greatest strategic significance is the Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO), which was also founded soon after the Soviet Union broke up in 1992. This entity was designed to coordinate between the armies and defense establishments of the member countries. Among the Central Asian republics, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, and Tajikistan are members, while Uzbekistan withdrew from it twice in 1999 and again in 2012. Through this organization, Russia seeks to foster close security cooperation that will lead to major dependence on it as the leading force in the CSTO. At the same time, this alliance is also not immune to criticism in times of crisis. In 2010, when a revolution took place in Kyrgyzstan, and President Bakiyev fled to Belarus, it was Belarusian President Lukashenko who strongly criticized the member countries' failure to intervene and suppress the unconstitutional rebellion.<sup>5</sup> Similar criticism of Russia was recently voiced during the war between Azerbaijan and Armenia. In this case also, Russia announced that it would not intervene in favor of Armenia as long as the battles did not spill over into its sovereign territory.<sup>6</sup> At the same time, the alliance's existence enables Russia to maintain a permanent military presence in the Central Asian republics, with permanent bases in Tajikistan and Kyrgyzstan, and to maintain those countries' dependence in procurement and training of the technical personnel and officer corps in their armies.

In the early 2000s, the major powers—China and the United States—began to penetrate into the Central Asian region. Both of them were involved in diverse projects even earlier, but two unrelated events occurred brought the two countries into Central Asia in a far more substantial way. In the summer of 2001, the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) was founded under Chinese sponsorship and with Chinese financing. This organization included both Central Asian republics and the Russian Federation.<sup>7</sup> This alliance combined security and economic aspects and challenged Russia's leading influence in the region. The military entry of the United States into the Central Asian region following 9/11 aroused anxiety on the part of both Russia and China about the expansion of US involvement and consolidation in the region. The SCO member countries expressed concern about the matter and took action to have the American bases closed down.<sup>8</sup> After almost 20 years of activity, the organization became one of the largest and most significant entities in the Euro-Asian region, especially after it gained more members, including India and Pakistan. In 2013, the Chinese president announced an ambitious project for creating an Asian economic region by building an infrastructure network connecting China with Europe via Central Asia—the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI). Since then, China has invested over \$50

<sup>5</sup> Is it possible that Lukashenko had already foreseen what would happen in Belarus under his leadership? See Andrei Makhovsky, "Belarus Leader Raps Russia, May Snub Security Summit," Reuters, April 25, 2010, <https://www.reuters.com/article/idUSTRE63O0PT20100425>.

<sup>6</sup> See "Russia's Security Guarantees for Armenia Don't Extend to Karabakh, Putin Says," *Moscow Times*, October 7, 2020, <https://www.themoscowtimes.com/2020/10/07/russias-security-guarantees-for-armenia-dont-extend-to-karabakh-putin-says-a71687>.

<sup>7</sup> Turkmenistan is the only Central Asian republic that is not a member in the organization. See [http://eng.sectsco.org/about\\_sco/](http://eng.sectsco.org/about_sco/).

<sup>8</sup> Joshua Kucera, "Shanghai Cooperation Organization Summiteers Take Shots at US Presence in Central Asia," *Eurasianet*, August 20, 2007, <https://eurasianet.org/shanghai-cooperation-organization-summiteers-take-shots-at-us-presence-in-central-asia>.

billion in the project.<sup>9</sup> Russia had to join the initiative and recognize China's economic supremacy and leadership, while receiving guarantees from China that Russian interests in the region would be preserved.

Given China's growing involvement in Central Asia, the Russian Federation sought to strengthen its hold in the region by creating the Eurasian Economic Union (EAEU) in 2014. The EAEU is an economic association designed to mold the economies of the member countries into a cohesive economic area.<sup>10</sup> To date, of the Central Asian republics, only Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan have become members. Although Tajikistan and Uzbekistan were also offered membership in the organization and had initially declared their intention to join, they still, however, have not joined. Membership in the organization gives the members important benefits (especially the weak members), such as eliminating customs borders, which facilitates movement and passage of goods between many markets in the region. Migrant workers from the member republics (today mostly from Kyrgyzstan) are entitled to receive work permits and residency in an abbreviated procedure. After accepting membership, Kyrgyzstan received \$200 million in economic aid, and \$500 million more was deposited in an aid fund for businesses, from which 1,816 projects have been financed to date. In addition, Kyrgyzstan benefits from a supply of Russian oil at a subsidized price.<sup>11</sup> At the same time, however, the economic union also constricts the member countries during a crisis. This happened when the collapse of the oil markets had a negative impact on the Russian economy; Kyrgyzstan's economy was also affected. The same thing occurred when economic sanctions were imposed on Russia; the foreign trade of the EAEU member countries also suffered as a result.<sup>12</sup>

Beyond the frameworks of Russia's official economic influence, it is also important to take note of the existence of an unofficial network of economic influence of Russian oligarchs and Russian companies as a result of their investments, especially in the energy and communications sectors. In effect, these oligarchs and companies control some of the markets in the Central Asian republics. At the same time, it appears that these investments are linked above all to a specific economic interest (even it is linked to the ruling elite in the republics), and do not constitute a direct and sustained means of influence.<sup>13</sup> Nevertheless, taking into account the official Russian investments, which are believed to exceed \$20 billion transferred as aid to the republics as part of financing for development projects, there are over 10,000 Russian-owned or jointly owned enterprises employing tens of thousands of workers in Central Asia, and these constitute a significant factor in the economies of the region.<sup>14</sup>

### **The Soft Power Policy**

In addition to leading regional alliances designed to perpetuate Russian hegemony in Central Asia, the Russian Federation is also very active in the social/cultural sphere.

<sup>9</sup> See statistical information about the initiative on the Chinese government website:

<https://eng.yidaiyilu.gov.cn/qwyw/rdxw/105854.htm>.

<sup>10</sup> For general information about the organization and statistical figures, see the website of the Eurasian Economic Union, <http://www.eaeunion.org/?lang=en#about>.

<sup>11</sup> See information about the aid on the Russian Ministry of Foreign Affairs website: <https://www.mid.ru/rossia-i-problemy-central-noj-azii>.

<sup>12</sup> See criticism by Kazakhstan President Nazarbayev on the matter: "Nazarbayev Calls U.S., EU Sanctions on Russia Barbaric," *RFERL*, February 11, 2015, <https://www.refworld.org/docid/5509407312.html>.

<sup>13</sup> Maximilian Hess, "Russia and Central Asia: Putin's Most Stable Region?", *Orbis*, 64, no. 3, (2020): 421–433.

<sup>14</sup> See Russian Ministry of Foreign Affairs website (note 11).

One of the important organizations for promoting Russian public diplomacy, the Russian language, and Russian culture throughout the world, and especially in the CIS countries, is ROSSOTRUDNICHESTVO. Founded (in its new form) in 2008, it is now directly subordinate to the Russian president.<sup>15</sup> The organization conducts widespread activities in the Central Asian republics. In the past year alone, it sent tens of thousands of textbooks to Russian schools operating in the republics. Under a special agreement signed by the presidents of the countries, dozens of Russian teachers were sent to teach in recently opened Russian schools in Tajikistan.<sup>16</sup> In addition, Russia allows citizens of the Central Asian republics to be accepted in its institutions of higher learning. According to figures from the Ministry of Foreign Affairs website (the figures are probably from before the Covid-19 epidemic), 172,000 students from the Central Asian republics are studying at institutions of higher learning in Russia, of whom 59,000 (a third) are funded by the Russian federal budget.<sup>17</sup> Furthermore, a number of branches of Russian universities in the Central Asian republics grant degrees that are recognized in Russia. The first branch of the prestigious Moscow State Institute of International Relations (MGIMO) (which operates in the framework of the Russian Ministry of Foreign Affairs) in any CIS country opened in May 2020 in Tashkent.<sup>18</sup>

The development of Russian language teaching frameworks in the Central Asian republics is not linked solely to the cultural aspect; it also has broader economic significance. According to figures from the Russian Ministry of Foreign Affairs, over four million citizens of the Central Asian republics currently work in Russia. In 2013–2018, these workers sent wages totaling over \$55 billion to their homeland (cumulatively for the entire period). The Foreign Ministry's figures (based on official data) also show that these foreign workers account for approximately 10% of Russia's GDP.<sup>19</sup> At the same time, remittances by the foreign workers to their native countries account for 30% of the GDP of Tajikistan and Kyrgyzstan and 15% of Uzbekistan's GDP. This creates a great deal of mutual economic dependence between the countries (this was highlighted when many foreign workers from Central Asian countries lost their jobs and forced to return during the pandemic).<sup>20</sup> It therefore follows that the Russian investment in teaching Russian language and opening educational institutions in the Central Asian republics is directly tied to the training of skilled workers for the Russian labor market.

<sup>15</sup> For the history of the organization, see <https://rs.gov.ru/en/about>.

<sup>16</sup> For a list of actions in education, see Евгений Шестаков, "Деньги решают не все: Чем и как Россия помогает Центральной Азии," Российская газета, № 37(8091), February 19, 2020, <https://rg.ru/2020/02/19/chem-i-kak-rossiia-pomogaet-centralnoj-azii.html>.

<sup>17</sup> Ministry of Foreign Affairs website (note 11). The Russian internal security service shows slightly different figures. See "ФСБ впервые раскрыла данные о приезжающих на учебу в Россию," РБК, August 19, 2019, <https://www.rbc.ru/society/19/08/2019/5d5694d89a79471a151e5e5f>.

<sup>18</sup> For the agreements that led to the opening of the branch, see <https://uzb.mgimo.ru/university/about>.

<sup>19</sup> See Russian Ministry of Foreign Affairs website (note 11).

<sup>20</sup> See figures from the World Bank, <https://data.worldbank.org/indicator/BX.TRF.PWKR.DT.GD.ZS?locations=TJ>, and an analysis of the influence of migrant workers from Tajikistan on the country's economy in Edward Lemon, "Dependent on Remittances, Tajikistan's Long-Term Prospects for Economic Growth and Poverty Reduction Remain Dim," *Migration Information Source*, November 14, 2019, <https://www.migrationpolicy.org/about/copyright-policy>. For the effect of the Covid-19 epidemic on the migrant labor market, see "Central Asian Migrants Worst Hit by Coronavirus Job Losses in Russia," *Moscow Times*, July 8, 2020, <https://www.themoscowtimes.com/2020/07/08/central-asian-migrants-worst-hit-by-coronavirus-job-losses-in-russia-a70818>.

## Cooperation and Clashes of Interests

Up to this point, the main actions of the Russian Federation have been presented in the context of the regional organizations under its leadership (CIS, EAEU, CSTO) or in which it is a partner (BRI, SCO). The web of relations between the Russian Federation and the Central Asian republics cannot be complete, however, without including the special positions of the republics themselves. Their positions have shifted in recent years, whether because their leadership changed or as a result of their response to Russian policy, especially Russia's annexation of the Crimean Peninsula and its support (open or indirect) for the Donetsk-Luhansk rebel area in eastern Ukraine.

Kazakhstan is the economically strongest Central Asian republic, the only one to share a land border with the Russian Federation and the only one with a significant Russian ethnic minority. Kazakhstan reacted with alarm to the violation of Ukrainian territorial sovereignty and expressed concern over possible Russian expansion to its territory in the future. These concerns were exacerbated by statements about Kazakhstan's historical connection to Russia following the annexation of the Crimean Peninsula, not only by nationalistic Russian politicians, but also by President Putin himself.<sup>21</sup> This anxiety moved Kazakhstan to amend its constitution to assert Kazakhstan's territorial integrity within its borders.<sup>22</sup> Even if there was no explicit link, Nazarbayev's decision to implement the switch to the Latin alphabet around the time of these events (a reform that had been discussed for the past decade, but which had not been carried out before then) definitely symbolizes an intention to strengthen Kazakhstan's national foundations and to differentiate them from the republic's Soviet past.<sup>23</sup> In addition, Kazakhstan made efforts to reinforce and maintain military ties with the West and the NATO alliance, thereby bypassing Russia, despite being a member of CSTO, from which it meanwhile did not seek to withdraw.<sup>24</sup> As a member of the economic union, the economic sanctions imposed on Russia also harmed Kazakhstan.<sup>25</sup> As a result, Kazakhstan sought to continue developing existing and new projects for exporting its raw materials to both the West and China, while bypassing Russia. In foreign policy, Kazakhstan was successful in positioning itself as an agreed sponsor of the peace talks between the warring factions in Syria—an achievement that raised its prestige and put it on the same footing as the large powers.<sup>26</sup>

Uzbekistan, the second most important and most populous Central Asian republic, has traditionally been wary of regional alliances and excessive involvement

<sup>21</sup> See Farangis Najibullah, "Putin Downplays Kazakh Independence, Sparks Angry Reaction," *RFERL*, September 3, 2014, <https://www.rferl.org/a/kazakhstan-putin-history-reaction-nation/26565141.html>.

<sup>22</sup> Malika Orazgaliyeva, "Kazakh President Signs Amendments to Constitution into Law," *Astana Times*, March 13, 2017, <https://astanatimes.com/2017/03/kazakh-president-signs-amendments-to-constitution-into-law/>.

<sup>23</sup> For the alphabet reform and its problems, see Maria Blackwood, "Kazakhstan: New Latin Alphabet Criticized as Apostrophe Catastrophe," *Eurasianet*, November 15, 2017, <https://eurasianet.org/kazakhstan-new-latin-alphabet-criticized-as-apostrophe-catastrophe>.

<sup>24</sup> Rachel Vanderhill, Sandra F Joireman, and Roza Tulepbayeva, "Between the Bear and the Dragon: Multivectorism in Kazakhstan as a Model Strategy for Secondary Powers," *International Affairs* 96, no. 4 (July 2020): 975–993.

<sup>25</sup> Erlan Idrissov, "The Great Gain Not the Great Game: How Kazakhstan Is Charting Its Own Course in the World," *Diplomatic Courier*, November 13, 2015, <https://www.diplomaticcourier.com/the-great-gain-not-the-great-game-how-kazakhstan-is-charting-its-own-course-in-the-world/>.

<sup>26</sup> See Jamestown Foundation, "With Tensions High, Kazakhstan Plays Mediator in Syria Peace Talks," *Eurasia Daily Monitor* 14, no. 37 (March 20, 2017), <https://www.refworld.org/docid/58d4f1ff0.html>.

in its affairs by the major powers. Following the changes of government in Uzbekistan, President Mirziyoyev formulated a new foreign policy doctrine based on spheres of influence. According to this doctrine, Uzbekistan will direct its main attention from now on to Central Asia itself, and only afterwards to the proximate and remote major powers.<sup>27</sup> While the president of Uzbekistan signed a long list of economic agreements following his first visit to Russia, and statements were made about Uzbekistan's imminent accession to the EAEU, Uzbekistan subsequently decided to reconsider the matter. Currently, Uzbekistan appears to be in no hurry to join the EAEU, even as an observer. Putting Uzbekistan's interests first is a clear signal to Russia, and also to China.

Shortly after gaining independence, Turkmenistan declared its neutrality and is not a member of any regional alliances. At the same time, over the years, Turkmenistan has developed close economic relations with Russia, based primarily on sales of natural gas. Following a crisis in relations in 2010, gas sales to Russia were greatly reduced and later completely discontinued. Turkmenistan then began marketing its gas to Iran and China. Following the signing of an agreement in the summer of 2018 for dividing the Caspian Sea and the economic conference of Caspian Sea countries hosted by Turkmenistan in 2019, new agreements were signed and natural gas sales to Russia were resumed.<sup>28</sup> Turkmenistan also announced that it was planning to build a new gas pipeline in the direction of Russia.<sup>29</sup> In late October 2020, Turkmenistan signed a defense treaty with the Russian Federation. Although Turkmenistan had laid the foundations for the signing of this treaty in 2003, it had refrained from ratifying it up until now.<sup>30</sup> Accelerated progress in cooperation with the Russian Federation in both the economic and defense spheres highlights Turkmenistan's economic crisis and its anxiety about being unable to defend itself on its long border with Afghanistan.

The case of Kyrgyzstan is an example of economic dependence being unable to meet all of the expectations. Kyrgyzstan is the Central Asian republic most closely associated with Russian patronage, both as a member of all of the regional alliances led by Russia and in its great economic dependence on Russia. This dependence consists of both direct aid and the very large proportion of Kyrgyzstan's citizens who are migrant workers in Russia and whose monthly remittances account for a substantial proportion of Kyrgyzstan's GDP. At the same time, however, both the social diversity and division in the republic, which are also reflected in the internal political sphere, have caused governmental instability and have led to three regime-changing revolutions (in 2005, 2010, and 2020). The mass demonstrations and unseating of elected presidents, who sought asylum in Russia, are disturbing to the Russian authorities. The Russian authorities see them as not only setting a dangerous precedent of mass postelection demonstrations culminating in the ousting of an elected president, which could provide a model for imitation in Russia itself, but also as raising concern that extremist groups could penetrate Kyrgyzstan coupled with economic collapse, which

<sup>27</sup> See a change in the Uzbekistan president's priorities in foreign relations, Richard Weitz, *Uzbekistan's New Foreign Policy: Change and Continuity Under New Leadership*, (Washington DC: Central Asia-Caucasus Institute and Silk Road Studies, 2018), <https://silkroadstudies.org/resources/pdf/SilkRoadPapers/1801Weitz.pdf>.

<sup>28</sup> For the importance and significance of the agreement for the Caspian Basin countries, see Zeev Levin, "Land for Peace, Iranian Style," *Forum for Regional Thinking*, September 21, 2020, <https://www.regthink.org/articles/caspian-sea>.

<sup>29</sup> Bruce Pannier, "Is Turkmenistan Being Pulled into Russia's Orbit?", *RFERL*, January 16, 2019, <https://www.rferl.org/a/iqshloq-ovozi-turkmenistan-pulled-into-russia-s-orbit/29713898.html>.

<sup>30</sup> For the reasons for ratification at this time, see "Turkmenistan: Feeling Insecure," *Akhal-Teke: A Turkmenistan Bulletin*, October 27, 2020, <https://eurasianet.org/turkmenistan-feeling-insecure>.

would certainly affect the companies investing in the republic and allow Chinese companies to freely enter the Kyrgyzstani market.

In 2017, with the presidential elections in the background, and following tension between the presidents of the Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan republics, the EAEU treaty was on the brink of collapse when the Kazakh customs officials reinstituted the customs regime on the Kazakh–Kyrgyzstani border—a matter that Russia could not ignore.<sup>31</sup> The Kremlin expressed its dissatisfaction with what happened in Kyrgyzstan’s recent revolution by suspending the \$100 million in aid promised to Kyrgyzstan and delaying the formation of direct connections with the new leadership until it became clear how matters would be settled in the republic and in what direction Kyrgyzstan’s new leadership would move.<sup>32</sup>

In contrast to Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan is a stellar example and the epitome of stable government. Since Tajikistan’s traumatic civil war ended in 1997, the government has been concentrated in the hands of a single ruler. Like Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan is also greatly dependent on remittances from its citizens working in the Russian Federation. Furthermore, Tajikistan’s security depends to a large extent on the military aid it receives from soldiers of the Russian 201st Division stationed in Tajikistan since the civil war. Among other things, the division is responsible for securing the border with Afghanistan. At the same time, Tajikistan has so far refrained from joining the EAEU; instead, it is maintaining its economic ties with neighboring China, thereby balancing the influence of the two powers that regard it as a strategic asset. Meanwhile, half of Tajikistan’s national debt belongs to China.<sup>33</sup>

### **The Israeli Angle**

The State of Israel has a history of cooperation with all the Central Asian republics, all of them maintain full diplomatic relations with Israel. Israel has permanent ambassadors in three of them: Kazakhstan, Uzbekistan, and Turkmenistan. The ambassador in Kazakhstan represents Israel in Kyrgyzstan, and the ambassador in Uzbekistan is in charge of Tajikistan.

Recently, when the peace agreement was signed with the United Arab Emirates, many media outlets were enthusiastic about the new Israeli presence on the Persian Gulf coast and its proximity to the Islamic Republic of Iran in a glaring disregard for the fact that for the past thirty years, Israel has maintained close diplomatic relations with the Muslim republics of Turkmenistan and Azerbaijan, sharing hundreds of kilometers long borders with Iran. This disregard is just one of the manifestations of the lack of awareness of the strategic importance of the region to the State of Israel. In the eyes of the leaders of the Muslim republics of Central Asia, however, the State of Israel has a unique importance. It is perceived both as a close partner of the Russian Federation and as a close ally of the US, having a preferential relationship with it.

<sup>31</sup> Kanat Shaku, “Atambayev Fueled Kazakh-Kyrgyz Border ‘Fire’ With Nazarbayev Jibe,” *Intellinews*, November 16, 2017, <http://www.intellinews.com/atambayev-fuels-kazakh-kyrgyz-border-fire-with-nazarbayev-jibe-132595/>.

<sup>32</sup> For an analysis of the events in the recent revolution, see Zeev Levin, “The Election in Tajikistan and Kyrgyzstan: Between Centralized Stability and Unstable Democracy,” *Sikha Mekomit*, October 20, 2020, <https://www.mekomit.co.il>. For a report on the Kremlin’s attitude to the new government, see Bruce Pannier, “New Kyrgyz Leadership Gets a Cold Reception from The Kremlin,” *RFERL*, November 2, 2020, <https://www.rferl.org/a/new-kyrgyz-leadership-gets-a-cold-reception-from-the-kremlin/30926407.html>.

<sup>33</sup> Fuad Shahbazov, “China’s Economic and Military Expansion in Tajikistan,” *The Diplomat*, November 23, 2016, <https://thediplomat.com/2016/11/chinas-economic-and-military-expansion-in-tajikistan/>.

Therefore, the Muslim republics expect Israel to help open doors for them and to promote their interests in the US. For Israel, close ties with the Central Asian republics can meet strategic needs and serve as a basis for economic opportunities and even as a gateway for developing ties with the Russian Federation (through membership in the Eurasian Economic Union) and with China. Unfortunately, to this day, Israel doesn't give neither the region as a whole nor each of its republics the appropriate attention that they deserve.

### Summary

In the conclusion of his book on Russian policy in Central Asia, Alexey Malashenko presented three main challenges facing Russia: China, the US, and Islam.<sup>34</sup> The book, which was published in 2013, has meanwhile lost some of its relevance. The United States has since withdrawn from Central Asia, and is not believed likely to return to it or take an interest in it, even after the change in administrations in Washington. This noninvolvement is pushing the Central Asian republics into a bipolar game between Russia and China.<sup>35</sup> As a result, the coming years will probably see the policies of Russia and China in Central Asia focused on expanding their involvement and economic influence in the region. Their success will depend, inter alia, on their ability to differentiate between the republics, to adapt themselves and to fulfill the specific needs of each republic.<sup>36</sup> Currently, while China is more powerful economically, Russia enjoys an advantage in public opinion and cultural influence that can also affect its economic ties. A recent public opinion survey published by the Kennan Institute in Washington found that most of the respondents in the Central Asian republics identify more with Russia, while their identification (their anxiety) with China or the US was significantly much less. It was also found that anxiety about China was greater in Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan, which have long borders with China. People in these two countries are increasingly worried about a Chinese "invasion." This absence of sympathy is affected, inter alia, by the persecution of the Muslim minorities, including ethnic Kazakhs in Chinese territory.<sup>37</sup>

The question of dealing with radical Islam is still on the table. It can be assumed that extremist Islamic groups will continue their efforts to penetrate the Central Asian republics and influence their people and regimes and will attempt to use them to penetrate the Russian Federation. According to a number of reports, several thousand people from the Central Asian republics fought on the side of the Islamic State in Syria and could constitute a dangerous core upon returning to their countries. At the same time, the security services of the Central Asian republics have so far proved capable of thwarting a large number of attempts to form organizations of this type, and it can be

<sup>34</sup> Alexey Malashenko, *The Fight for Influence: Russia in Central Asia* (Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, 2013), p. 217.

<sup>35</sup> Paul Stronski, "What Will the Next U.S. Administration Mean for the Caucasus and Central Asia?," *Inside Central Asia*, November 2, 2020, [https://carnegie.ru/commentary/83091?fbclid=IwAR0M5gEfpINWSP0X0qK2pbWfJqPq9Z4jI6nPt4k6eCLJPqXncQCA\\_cBsHkE](https://carnegie.ru/commentary/83091?fbclid=IwAR0M5gEfpINWSP0X0qK2pbWfJqPq9Z4jI6nPt4k6eCLJPqXncQCA_cBsHkE).

<sup>36</sup> For an analysis of the complexity of the relations between Russia and China in Central Asia, see Varshini Sridhar, "Sino-Russian Economic Cooperation in Central Asia is Not What It Seems to Be," *The Diplomat*, September 23, 2020, <https://thediplomat.com/2020/09/sino-russian-economic-cooperation-in-central-asia-is-not-what-it-seems-to-be/>.

<sup>37</sup> Marlene Laruelle and Dylan Royce, "No Great Game: Central Asia's Public Opinions on Russia, China, and the U.S.," *Kennan Cable*, No. 56, August 2020, <https://www.wilsoncenter.org/publication/kennan-cable-no-56-no-great-game-central-asias-public-opinions-russia-china-and-us>.

assumed that they will continue to do so in the future.<sup>38</sup> In many cases, however, it has been asserted that the rulers in Central Asia and Russia have exaggerated the “Islamic threat” in order to justify supervision and persecution of opposition groups that pose no real threat to the existing order.<sup>39</sup>

The great difference presented in the stances of the various Central Asian republics on their relations with the major powers and in their foreign policy considerations leads to the conclusion that it is almost impossible for Russia to sustain a uniform attitude toward them. The Covid-19 crisis has intensified the need for coordination as well as keeping a close watch over the borders between the republics. Furthermore, the republics are experiencing a severe economic and social crisis, and it is still premature to predict the state in which they will emerge when it ends and whether they will manage to recover afterwards. What is clear is that most of the republics will need substantial financial aid that no one source can provide. It is possible that in this situation, the very countries that have not yet joined restrictive economic alliances will enjoy more flexibility in implementing a decentralized and multichannel economic policy.

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<sup>38</sup> Christian Bleuer, “The Exaggerated Threat of Islamist Militancy in Central Asia,” *World Politics Review*, February 25, 2020, <https://www.worldpoliticsreview.com/articles/28559/the-exaggerated-threat-of-islamist-militancy-in-central-asia>.

<sup>39</sup> Edward Lemon, “Talking Up Terrorism in Central Asia,” *Kennan Cable*, No. 38, December, 2018, <https://www.wilsoncenter.org/publication/kennan-cable-no-38-talking-terrorism-central-asia>.

## **The Second Karabakh War: The Strategic Balance in the Southern Caucasus and its Significance for Israel**

Daniel Rakov\*

### **Introduction**

The reasons for the Second Karabagh War lie in the rivalry between Russia and Turkey in bringing natural gas to the European market, as well as Azerbaijan's huge military superiority that developed over the past 30 years. At the conclusion of the war, Moscow emerged with enhanced status as a guarantor of the ceasefire between Baku and Yerevan, with Armenia becoming more dependent on Russia, after it had previously sought to move closer to the West. At the same time, Russia had to accept a greater political and military role for Turkey in the region. The stronger positions of Russia and Turkey came at the expense of the political role of the US, the EU, and Iran. For Israel, the new balance of power poses a mixture of challenges and opportunities. From a broader perspective, the war should be studied and possible lessons should be drawn from it (with all of the necessary caution) about potential clashes that are liable to emerge between the interests of Russia and Israel.

### **Origins of the Conflict**

The war (September–November 2020) between Armenia and Azerbaijan in the Nagorno-Karabakh region<sup>1</sup> (hereafter Karabakh) and the surrounding districts was the second major war between the two countries in this region since 1994. The roots of the conflict lie in the late Soviet period. The borders of the region, which were set in the 1920s, made this region, in which a majority of the population was Armenian, an enclave within Azerbaijan. In 1988, violence began between the Armenians, who demanded that the region be annexed to Armenia, and the Azeris. Moscow was unable to completely control the events, and the dissolution of the Soviet Union and the founding of Armenia and Azerbaijan as independent states caused the conflict to escalate into a war between them.

The First Karabakh War, which lasted from 1991 until 1994, ended in a ceasefire. The war, in which Armenia was aided by Russia, culminated in Armenia's occupation of the Karabakh region, in addition to over 15% of Azerbaijan's territory, which was originally not a matter of dispute between the two countries. Azerbaijan managed to have the UN Security Council pass a resolution during the war that recognized its territorial integrity. Armenia has exercised de facto control over the Karabakh region and the Azeri territory that it occupied ever since.

With the breakup of the Soviet Union in December 1991, the principle was established that administrative borders of the republics that were part of the Soviet Union would become the political borders of the newly independent countries. Largely, this decision contributed to preventing chaos in the area of the former Soviet Union. These borders were recognized by the entire international community. At the same time, in the context of the Azeri–Armenian dispute, this division made it difficult to find a

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<sup>1</sup> The Armenians call the region Artzakh. The Azerbaijani term is used because it is more common and accepted internationally. It does not express an opinion about the conflict.

solution to the conflict. The Azeris, who were defeated in the war, enjoyed international recognition of their sovereignty in the region, while the Armenian side, which controlled the territory, was at a disadvantage with respect to international legitimacy.

In the 30 years preceding the Second Karabakh War, contact between the two countries was not peaceful. Violent provocations between Azeris and Armenians took place occasionally along the Karabakh border or in the Azeri districts under Armenian control. A four-day war occurred in 2016. Throughout this period, the “Minsk Group,” led by Russia, the US, and France and organized in the framework of the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE) mediated between the two sides. The various initiatives proposed over the years, however, failed to yield agreements between the parties.

In the last two decades, the balance of power changed. Azerbaijan, which was battered and defeated in the early 1990s, developed its economy using oil and gas resources in the Caspian Sea and the international investments that flowed into the country. The country became wealthy, its army became stronger, and its population grew. In contrast, Armenia remained a weak and poor country. Lacking resources and having a small population, it was locked between Azerbaijan and Turkey, its hostile neighbors. While the Azeri leadership always expressed unwillingness to accept the historical defeat, until 2018, Armenia was controlled by a “Karabakh Clan”—political forces identified with the Karabakh region, who were opposed to any compromise.

### **The Fighting in July 2020 that Preceded the Second Karabakh War**

In July 2020, another intensive round of fighting between the Armenians and Azeris took place, lasting for four days. The July battles differed from the violent events between the two countries over the years. Unlike previous fighting, the battles began in the Tovuz region near the meeting place of the borders of Armenia, Azerbaijan, and Georgia, far to the north of Karabakh and the occupied Azeri territories. This incident showed the intensity of the involvement by Russia and Turkey and the indirect conflict between them and was a harbinger of the Second Karabakh War, which began two months later.

The region where the incidence took place is important because of its proximity to the pipelines for exporting oil, the main destination of which is Turkey. These pipelines, which stretch from Azerbaijan through Georgia, supply oil to Turkey for local consumption while Turkey also serves as a transit country for oil sent to Europe. The Baku–Tbilisi–Ceyhan pipeline, which starts at the Caspian Sea and transcends the Tovuz region in Azerbaijan and southern Georgia, reaches its final destination at Ceyhan Port on the Mediterranean shore in Turkey. From there, the oil is exported to international markets. A parallel channel, the “Southern Gas Corridor,” carries natural gas from the Caspian Sea in Azerbaijan via Georgia and Turkey, a key country in channeling the gas to Europe. Construction of the Trans-Anatolian pipeline (TANAP) has already been completed, while construction of the entire Southern Gas Corridor is nearly completed, with the start of the operations of the Trans-Adriatic Pipeline (TAP) (November 2020) stretching from Turkey to Italy.<sup>2</sup> The Southern Gas Corridor competes with the Russian gas pipelines to Europe, some of which also pass through Turkey—a matter of strategic importance to Moscow.

The fighting in July 2020 reflected an indirect conflict between Russia and Turkey, in which Russia used Armenia as a means of exerting pressure on Turkey. The Armenians and Azeris accused each other of responsibility for the outbreak of

<sup>2</sup> “TAP Starts Transporting First Gas,” *Trans Adriatic Pipeline*, December 31, 2020, <https://www.tap-ag.com/news/news-stories/tap-starts-transporting-first-gas>.

hostilities. Nevertheless, the area in which the flareup took place makes it more likely that Armenia had provoked Azerbaijan close to the gas pipeline that runs from Azerbaijan to Turkey on behalf of Moscow. During this round of fighting, the Russian news agency TASS quoted a source at Gazprom Armenia, a subsidiary of the Russian gas giant Gazprom, as saying that a number of its pipelines had been damaged during the event.<sup>3</sup> This was enough to trigger Russian intervention, and Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov duly called his counterparts on the two sides in the conflict, to demand a ceasefire.<sup>4</sup> To the Azeris' dismay, the Russians dispatched several military transportation aircrafts during the fighting carrying Russian aid to Armenia.

The next day, Turkey's President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan made an aggressive statement promising that Turkey would support Azerbaijan in its military conflict with Armenia.<sup>5</sup> This time, the Turkish statement of support for Azerbaijan was aimed not just at Armenia but also at Moscow because of its support for Yerevan during and after the incident. Ten days after the fighting ended, Russia's President Vladimir Putin and President Erdoğan discussed the escalation along the Armenia–Azerbaijan border in a telephone call. Putin expressed willingness to coordinate efforts aimed at stabilizing the region, and the two presidents commenced a direct dialogue over the heads of the leaders of Armenia and Azerbaijan. Putin and Erdoğan focused on stability in the Caucasus and opened the door to discussing issues beyond the Armenian–Azeri conflict.<sup>6</sup>

### **The Second Karabakh War**

The Second Karabakh War between Armenia and Azerbaijan began on September 27, 2020, with massive military forces being deployed by both sides. The Armenians and Azeris accused each other of being responsible for starting the fighting. This time, however, it is more likely that it was the Azeris who were eager for a fight. The Azerbaijan army used the time between the July round of fighting and the end of September for intensive maneuvers with the Turkish army and procurement of Turkish arms, especially the Bayraktar offensive drones.<sup>7</sup>

The Azeris kept the upper hand throughout the entire 44-day war. The Azeri army was clearly technologically superior to the Armenian army, which was equipped with mostly out-of-date Soviet and Russian weapons and had no way of overcoming the Azeri air supremacy. The Azeri army used Turkish and Israeli-made attack drones to destroy a great deal of the Armenian army's equipment. During the battles, in which each of the sides lost thousands of soldiers, the Azeris conquered large parts of the territories under Armenian control (both in Karabakh itself and in the occupied Azeri territories). The peak of the Azeri offensive was the capture of the historic and strategic

<sup>3</sup> "Gazprom Armenia Report Damaged Pipeline Near Border with Azerbaijan," TASS, July 14, 2020, <https://tass.com/world/1178433>.

<sup>4</sup> "Press Release on Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov's Telephone Conversations with Armenian Foreign Minister Zohrab Mnatsakanyan and Azerbaijani Foreign Minister Elmar Mammadyarov," Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Russian Federation, July 13, 2020, [https://www.mid.ru/en/foreign\\_policy/news/-/asset\\_publisher/cKNonkJE02Bw/content/id/4229316](https://www.mid.ru/en/foreign_policy/news/-/asset_publisher/cKNonkJE02Bw/content/id/4229316).

<sup>5</sup> Fehim Tastekin, "Is Erdogan After a Caucasus Adventure?," *Al-Monitor*, July 17, 2020, <https://www.al-monitor.com/pulse/originals/2020/07/turkey-russia-armenia-azerbaijan-clashes-erdogan-adventure.html>.

<sup>6</sup> Avinoam Idan, "Russia and Turkey: Behind the Armenia-Azerbaijan Clashes?," *Central Asia-Caucasus Analyst*, August 31, 2020, <https://www.cacianalyst.org/publications/analytical-articles/item/13636-russia-and-turkey-behind-the-armenia-azerbaijan-clashes?.html>.

<sup>7</sup> Ece Toksabay, "Turkish Arms Sales to Azerbaijan Surged Before Nagorno-Karabakh Fighting," Reuters, October 14, 2020, <https://www.reuters.com/article/armenia-azerbaijan-turkey-arms-int-idUSKBN26Z230>.

fortified city of Susa (Shushi). Control of Susa by Azerbaijan put Stepanakert, the capital of Karabakh, and the Lachin Corridor—the mountain passage connecting Armenia and Karabakh—at the mercy of Azeri guns.

This crushing military defeat forced Armenia to accept a ceasefire on November



9 under humiliating conditions. Armenia agreed to withdraw its forces from all the Azeri territories that it had occupied in the First Karabakh War (except for Karabakh); to leave large parts of southern Karabakh that had been conquered in the war, including Susa, in Azeri hands; to allow a Russian peacekeeping force composed of 2,000 soldiers

to enter Karabakh to guarantee the ceasefire; and to provide a transportation corridor between Azerbaijan and the Azeri enclave of Nakhchivan between Armenia and Turkey. In return, a large part of Karabakh that had not been conquered by the Azeris remained under Armenian control, and the Russians guaranteed its safety and access to it from Armenia through the Lachin Corridor.

Turkey completely supported Azerbaijan throughout the fighting and provided political backing for its demands from Armenia (which were eventually granted). In contrast, Russia—Armenia’s main ally—refrained from giving Armenia large-scale aid, and the aid that it provided informally was apparently inadequate. Since the fighting took place in Azeri territory under Armenian occupation, according to international law, Moscow was able to argue that there was no threat to Armenia, which would have required Russia to come to Yerevan’s aid under the Russian–Armenian defense treaty.

From the outset of the fighting, the mediation efforts by important parties, among them Russia, the US, France, and the EU within the framework of the Minsk Group were of no avail. The intermediaries put pressure on both sides to agree to an immediate ceasefire. As a condition for a ceasefire, Azerbaijan’s President Aliyev demanded that Armenia withdraw from all of the occupied Azeri territories, refused to renew the discussion of Karabakh’s status, and demanded a new framework for mediation between the two sides that would give Turkey the same status as Russia. The Armenians believed in the endurance of their soldiers, in the hope that mountain warfare tactics would enable them to handle the Azeri offensive, and therefore refused the Azeri terms. Moscow endorsed the Azeri demands but was unwilling to grant Turkey a formal role equal to its own. The Armenian defeat and Azerbaijan’s willingness to compromise on the formal Turkish role paved the way for the ceasefire, for which President Putin was the sole formal guarantor.

In the months following the ceasefire, the Russian soldiers deployed immediately in Karabakh in exemplary fashion between the two sides and have been helping the Armenians rebuild. In particular, they oversaw the withdrawal of the Armenian forces from the Azeri territories. Since the war ended, Armenia has undergone a prolonged political crisis. Prime Minister Pashinyan is being accused by the opposition, specifically by the Karabakh group, of being responsible for the defeat, and pressure is being exerted on him to resign. The possibility of new elections is on the agenda.<sup>8</sup>

In contrast, Azerbaijan and Aliyev, its leader, are satisfied with their military, political, and territorial achievements. The Azeris organized a huge military parade in Baku featuring a large quantity of captured Armenian weapons and are preparing to invest in reconstruction in the territories that they have regained. Turkish soldiers and Turkish president Erdoğan participated in the Baku parade as a full partner in the victory. The Turks and Azeris insisted that Turkey be given a supplementary role to that of the Russians in overseeing the ceasefire; thus, in late January, a joint Russian–Turkish center was opened in Azerbaijan.

### **The Geo-Strategic Repercussions of the War on the Balance of Power in the Southern Caucasus**

Azerbaijan and Turkey utilized the round of fighting in July 2020, which highlighted the Armenian military threat to Azerbaijan’s gas pipelines, to fundamentally change the status quo that had emerged in the region over the past 30 years. Azerbaijan took advantage of its decisive military superiority, which it had achieved over the years,

<sup>8</sup> “Armenia: Thousands Rally Against PM Nikol Pashinyan,” DW, February 20, 2021, <https://p.dw.com/p/3peIB>.

primarily as a result of having purchased arms from both Israel and Turkey. Azerbaijan realized that it had solid support from Turkey, while Moscow was put in a delicate situation and Europe had become dependent on Azeri gas. This enabled Azerbaijan to rebuff pressure to end the fighting before achieving its goals. Azerbaijan also had a comfortable window of opportunity during the US presidential election campaign, which limited the involvement of the influential Armenian–American diaspora in the conflict, while the Covid-19 pandemic also helped to divert the attention of international leaders.

Armenia found itself unprepared for war. Although the widening gap in military power between it and Azerbaijan had been obvious to everyone for years, and Azerbaijan had been threatening to regain its lost territories by force of arms for a long time, the leadership in Yerevan did not make proper military preparations. The Azeri force buildup with attack drones in recent years was also no secret. In addition to Armenia's fundamental problems—military, economic, demographic, and political inferiority to Azerbaijan and Armenia's geographic remoteness from Russia—the Armenian defeat can also be attributed to a worsening of relations between Moscow and Yerevan in the years prior to the war. Since coming to power in a popular revolution in 2018, Armenia's Prime Minister Nikol Pashinyan has sought closer relations with the West at the expense of Armenia's traditional close relations with Russia since Armenia's independence. Armenia's defeat has now pushed the country toward even deeper dependency on Russia, and has left Russian soldiers in control of Karabakh. The political changes in Yerevan are liable to put the faction of Moscow loyalists back in power.

As for Russia, together with its close relations with Armenia, Russia has always taken care to maintain a friendly dialogue with Azerbaijan. Russia also is among its largest arms suppliers. During the crisis, Russia took a formal position of a neutral mediator and emerged as a key player in achieving an agreement to end the fighting. Russia managed the crisis according to its own interests. What initially seemed to be a passive stance turned out to be something else entirely. Russia achieved its goals of strengthening its grip in the southern Caucasus (the Russian soldiers in Karabakh are also a means for exerting pressure on the Azeris)—its back door—and created an essential framework for an extensive dialogue between it and Turkey in circumstances comfortable for Russia. The Kremlin also regards the exclusion of the Minsk Group, in effect the US and France, from sponsoring the ceasefire as an achievement.

Another possible regional gain by Russia might be vis-à-vis neighboring Georgia. The development of a transportation corridor from Azerbaijan to Turkey through Armenia—a component in a ceasefire agreement—might weaken in the long run Georgia's standing as a vital part of regional energy transportation projects, thus making Tbilisi more vulnerable to Moscow's pressure.<sup>9</sup>

At the same time, Russia also paid a substantial price in terms of its image. First, it is being portrayed as failing to come to the aid of Armenia, its closest ally in the area of the former Soviet Union. Second, the Russian arms with which the Armenian army was equipped were reputedly inferior to the Western technology in the hands of the Azeris. This moved Russia's media and cognitive influence apparatus to explain that the Russian army has better arms than the Armenians have. Third, Moscow had to swallow the bitter pill of stronger Turkish influence in the southern Caucasus. In the

<sup>9</sup> Thomas De Waal, "In Georgia, a New Crisis That No One Needs", *Carnegie-Europe*, February 25, 2021. <https://carnegieeurope.eu/strategieurope/83935>

months since the ceasefire, Russia has attempted to limit Turkey's achievements, with the rivalry between the two in the region continuing to be dynamic.

As for Turkey, it gave Azerbaijan absolute backing in the war. There is evidence that Turkey pushed Azerbaijan into the war, that Turkish commanders help the Azeris conduct the war, and that mercenaries from Syria were used on the Azeri side. Turkey is perceived as the big winner in the conflict. In addition to strengthening its status in Azerbaijan, the war gave the impression of being a victory for Turkey's military and technological capability, especially its attack drones. The war in Karabakh was the third conflict in 2020 in which Turkey found itself opposing Russia via its satellites. Earlier, in March, Turkey and Russia exchanged blows via the Assad regime and pro-Turkish militias in the Idlib region in Syria. During the summer, escalation took place in the war in Libya, in which Moscow and Ankara supported rival factions.

The many bones of contention between Russia and Turkey make it clear that the two countries have many conflicting interests. Ankara is using these conflicts with Russia to market itself to Europe and the US as an important barrier to Russian influence in the Caucasus, the Middle East, and the Eastern Mediterranean Basin. This is particularly important to Turkey with the beginning of the Biden administration, which is liable to be critical of Erdoğan. In an attempt to improve its image, Turkey has even raised the possibility of a historic reconciliation with Armenia.<sup>10</sup>

At the same time, Russia and Turkey have a complicated reciprocal dependency. Although their two leaders, Putin and Erdoğan, are not afraid of brinkmanship, it appears that they have an interest in continuing their cooperation and avoiding a rift. In any case, the conflict in Karabakh is part of this tangled relationship, which combines rivalry with Russian–Turkish cooperation in supplying energy to Europe. Thus, Russia is building gas pipelines for Turkey so that it can export gas to Southern Europe via Turkey, and bypass Ukraine. At the same time, however, the interests of Russia and Turkey clash with respect to the gas pipelines from Azerbaijan and the various potential projects for transporting energy to Europe from the Eastern Mediterranean Basin and Libya.

The land-based corridor between Azerbaijan and Turkey through Armenian territory and the Nakhchivan region, which was agreed as part of the ceasefire, is likely to further enhance Turkish influence in Central Asia and the Caucasus. At the same time, Russian sponsorship for implementing this arrangement also serves as a balancing mechanism.<sup>11</sup>

Although Iran tried to portray itself as neutral in the conflict, it is closer to Russia and Armenia, as it has a permanent tension with Azerbaijan, which prefers close relations with the United States and Israel. During the crisis in Karabakh, the Iranian leadership combined neutral statements calling for a ceasefire (and even proposed an independent diplomatic plan for one) while it concentrated its forces on its border with Karabakh to deter the Azeri forces. Iran also allowed the passage of Russian military aid through its territory, to Azerbaijan's dismay. The results of the war strengthened Turkish and Russian influence in the region in a way that will restrict Iran's freedom of action there. At the same time, the results of the war have currently limited the

<sup>10</sup> Zaman Amberin, "Turkey's Talk of Peace with Armenia Rings Hollow," *Al Monitor*, February 4, 2021, <https://www.al-monitor.com/pulse/originals/2021/02/erdogan-turkey-normalize-united-states-azerbaijan.html>.

<sup>11</sup> Lior Bruker, "The Return of the Land Corridors to the Caucasus—Significance for the Region and for Israel," Chaikin Chair for Geostrategy at Haifa University, December 2020, <https://ch-strategy.hevra.haifa.ac.il/index.php/the-return-of-the-land-corridors-to-the-caucasus-meanings-to-the-region-and-israel>.

American, French, and European influence in the region, a development that Iran is likely to regard as positive.<sup>12</sup>

### **The Israeli Angle**

Israel was officially neutral during the war. At the same time, in recent years Israel has become one of Azerbaijan's main arms suppliers, and strategic cooperation has developed between the two countries. Israel was in the spotlight during the war, following reports about the accomplishments of Israeli arms, especially drones, and reports that it continued to provide aid to Azerbaijan during the fighting. Armenia returned its ambassador to Yerevan at the beginning of the war for this reason, and the Russian media increased its criticism of Israel, sometimes with an antisemitic tinge.

Looking ahead from the Israeli perspective, the Azeri success in the war is likely to help consolidate the close relations between Baku and Jerusalem. In Baku, Israel is regarded as a close partner that contributed substantially to Azerbaijan's achievements in the war. Israeli flags were visible in the streets of Baku, together with Azeri and Turkish flags. The expansion of Turkish influence in Azerbaijan, however, is liable to come at the expense of Israel's influence. Yet it is also likely that the Azeris will seek to avoid dependence on a single player, and Israel is likely to prove useful in this respect. Azeri–Israeli cooperation is regarded as one of the catalysts for Turkish–Israeli rapprochement in recent months. Israel has nothing against the Armenians and would like to rebuild its relations with them. At the same time, however, it is likely that the atmosphere in Yerevan will not be conducive to this in the near future. It is reasonable to assume that Armenia will again seek closer ties with Iran following the conflict.

From a broader perspective, despite the many differences, Israel should make an effort to study the Russian diplomatic and military involvement in this war in view of a possible campaign on its northern front, in which Russia is also liable to be involved. Russia's strategic tolerance stood out in this war, with Russia being willing to pay a short-term reputational price for the sake of a long-term strategic achievement. Russia showed no interest in jeopardizing the lives of Russian soldiers in the conflict for purposes that do not directly serve its national interests. The conflict also reflects the strategic importance that Russia gives to the pipelines carrying gas to the European market. These considerations are liable to bring to the fore the conflicting interests of Moscow and Jerusalem in the project for transporting Israeli gas to Europe.

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<sup>12</sup> Emil Avdaliani, "After the Karabakh War, Iran Faces Stiff Competition in the Caucasus," BESA, Bar-Ilan University, February 1, 2021, <https://besacenter.org/perspectives-papers/caucasus-iran-influence/>.