

# Russia's Interests in the Transcaucasus

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I shall allow myself a number of irresponsible remarks about Russian policy in the Transcaucasus. I say 'irresponsible' because as the head of a non-governmental organisation I bear no responsibility for Russian policy in the Transcaucasus.

Russia forms part of the security environment of the Transcaucasus, but similarly the countries of the region are also part of Russia's security environment and pretty much the most disturbed part of it. Compare all countries and regions with borders to Russia and you will see that it is the Caucasus that presents the most problems: Chechnya, the problems in Georgia and Karabakh. It is the hottest of hot-spots in Russia's environment.

What are Russia's interests in the Transcaucasus? It is not as though they were set out in any document – at least none that I have ever seen. Let me try to state them. My take on the Russian interest runs to fifteen points.

1. Making the Caucasus a region of peace and stability – which requires no further amplification.
2. Creating a belt of Russia-friendly states – reliable partners for bilateral cooperation and also for multilateral cooperation in the framework of European structures such as the CIS, the Collective Security Treaty, etc. However, the formation of nation states in the Caucasus is turning out to be far from straightforward and the ruling elites feel obliged to advertise their own difficulties – for which Russia usually serves as a great natural scapegoat. Relations between Russia and the south Caucasian states are marked by great asymmetry: relations are very good with Armenia, mixed but ever-improving with Azerbaijan and very difficult with Georgia. The last is the only country in the world to have chosen the way of an anti-Russian policy. A very thorny path it is too. Our attitude towards some of them may rather better than theirs towards us, but not by much.
3. Preventing the territory of Caucasus states being used to support the activities of Chechen and international terrorists.
4. Preventing further armed conflicts in the Caucasus which might spill over into or destabilise Russian territory. We have no interest in new ethnic slaughter in Georgia or Karabakh and thus see Russian peacekeeping in the region as a stabilising factor. Public opinion in Russia has been able, so far, to cope with the deaths of tens of Russian servicemen in Abkhazia, though no-one has thanked us.
5. Cutting off illegal migration into Russian territory from countries of the region and to combat drugs trafficking. Unfortunately Azerbaijan is a centre of drugs supply to Russia. Hence the interest in sorting out the border services. In the case of Georgia any such cooperation has proved impossible, with the result that a visa regime had to be introduced.

6. Ensuring the territorial status quo in the region. Here is a highly interesting fact I myself was unaware of until recently. Under a little-remarked Russo-Turkish treaty of 1921 Russia guarantees the southern borders of the three Transcaucasian states and also the autonomous status of Ajaria in Georgia and Nakhichevan in Azerbaijan.
7. Is it in Russia's interest for there to be an American military presence in the region? There is no unambiguous answer. It would be a remarkable thing if the Americans could help clear the Pankisi Gorge of Chechen and other terrorists. It would be remarkable if the Americans undertook even partial responsibility for the normalisation of the situation in Georgia and calmed down the leaders in Tbilisi who have been displaying extraordinary agitation recently. It would be good if the Americans took responsibility for stabilising the situation across the entire unquiet region. On the other hand, the American presence is far from completely in accord with Russian interests. Take for example routes we might be interested in for the transport of Caspian oil. Or the short-term prospects for Russia-Georgia relations: in letting American military experts in, the leaders of Georgia are acting according to the principle that what is allowed Jupiter is not allowed the ox, with Russia here being the ox. There is the unpleasant possibility of Georgia and Azerbaijan being used as staging posts for an attack against Iraq. In principle, Russia is interested in the *designation* of a Western military presence in the region, but not really in a massive presence.
8. Ensuring favourable conditions for the extraction and transport of Caspian oil. Two things here. First, it seems likely that there actually is not much oil there and so all the excitement is for nothing. Even if there is some oil, then it's on the Russian and Kazakh shelf. Second, the interest of the Russian Federation as a state (disregarding the interests of individual Russian companies) is objectively not the same as the interests of many other players in this great game. Russia is not much interested in the oil. And, thirdly, we are not about to try to stop anyone transporting anything.
9. Providing possibilities for economic cooperation and joint development in an increasingly globalised world. Cooperation with the countries of the region is currently minimal. The creation of a single customs space could help promote its development. Yet not all the countries of the region are ready for it. And with Armenia - which is - we have no common border. Then there is also the very great role played by local clans with relations to government circles, which leave the prospects for Russian business in the region far worse than those for Armenian or Azerbaijani business in Russia.
10. Ensuring freedom of navigation in the Black and Caspian Seas.
11. Maintaining the internal stability of the Caucasus states. There are countries which do not control a significant portion of their territory and their weakness is a threat to the entire Caucasus region. Russia is frequently suspected of not having an interest in the stability of the southern Caucasus, but if Russia in fact did want to destabilise the situation then it could do so inside about fifteen minutes.
12. Supporting the countries of the region in their democratic development. Russia's own development in this regard is not wholly satisfactory, but still better than that of the Caucasus region. As many states where the democratic institutions are not in full function the region has problems with continuity of government and the passage of power to a new generation of leaders.
13. Seeing to it that Russians living in the Transcaucasus can enjoy their civil rights and liberties. In fact this is not a large problem, given that there are not many Russians in the Transcaucasus. Even so, I would like to draw attention to the fact that the CIS convention on human rights guarantees has still not been ratified by all these countries.

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14. Facilitating solutions to the problems of divided peoples. It is obvious that Lezgins and Osetians are never going to regard their brothers living in different states as foreigners.
15. Regulating migration – flows of refugees and other migrants – into Russia. Millions of people have moved into Russia as a result of the economic situation and ethnic conflicts. Russia has enough problems of its own and is not prepared to absorb these waves of emigrants. Unfortunately – in Russia as everywhere else in the world – that creates problems of domestic nationalism, as we saw in Krasnodar Region.

It is often said Russia's policy in the Transcaucasus is inconsistent. I have to agree: the right hand does not know what the left hand is doing. There is no clear mechanism for producing and coordinating foreign policy. But I assure you that that is a problem for more than just the Caucasus. There is no discrimination here against Georgia, Armenia and Azerbaijan.

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