

## RUSSIA IN THE CAUCASUS

*S. Neil MacFarlane***Introduction**

The Caucasus is significant as a zone where the United States (US), the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) and European Union (EU)'s interests and security preoccupations overlap with those of Russia, and where their worldviews collide (see Chapter 20). For example, the decision at the 2008 Bucharest NATO Summit to promise eventual membership to Georgia and Ukraine was one factor contributing to the Russian decision to invade Georgia, and then to detach Abkhazia and South Ossetia from Georgia by recognising the two breakaway regions as independent states.<sup>1</sup> In 2013, as the EU approached its Vilnius Partnership Summit, Russia convinced Armenia and, abortively, Ukraine<sup>2</sup> to walk away from their near-complete association agreements and to apply to join the Eurasian Economic Union (Dragneva and Wolczuk 2017: 9). Decisions to enhance NATO cooperation with Caucasian states, notably Georgia, are greeted in Moscow with profound hostility.

In the meantime, over the past several years, Russia has steadily modernised and expanded its naval capabilities on the Black Sea, to the point that it enjoys clear preponderance over other littoral states, including Turkey. Russian policy in and around the Caucasus has a significant role in the evolution of the Black Sea region, a major focus of south-eastern NATO and EU member states. The Bulgarian and Romanian EU presidencies in 2018 and 2019 enhanced that focus. The Russian interdiction of Ukrainian naval access to the Sea of Azov in 2018 highlighted the potential for Western confrontation with Russia. Meanwhile, Russian assertion in the Middle East further enhances the strategic importance of the Caucasus.

This chapter considers Russia's role in the Caucasus. It discusses the evolution of Russian governmental and elite perspectives on the Caucasus, arguing that Russia's role there follows from its general perspectives on the nature of international relations and international order, Russian conceptualisation of what the former Soviet Union was, and the threats and opportunities that Russians perceive in the Caucasus. The chapter then considers Russian policy in the region. The chapter concludes with an effort to relate the record of Russian perspectives and policies to contending international theoretical perspectives on the behaviour of great powers in the international system. It concentrates on Russian perspectives on, and policy towards, its southern neighbours: Armenia, Azerbaijan, and Georgia. However, it is not helpful to view the Russian Federation as, somehow, external to the region; it is

physically and historically very much a part of the Caucasus. 'The Caucasus' refers to the northern as well as the southern slopes of the Caucasus mountain range. In that sense, Russia is geophysically *in* the Caucasus – eight jurisdictions<sup>3</sup> of the Russian Federation occupy the northern part of the larger region. Minority ethnic groups in Georgia (the Abkhaz, Ossetians and Kists) and Azerbaijan (the Lezgins) have kin groups in the Russian Federation. Many Russians also believe themselves to be culturally a part of the region, or the region to be part of them.

This cultural legacy reflects a deep historical engagement in the Caucasus as a whole. Peter the Great mounted the first military effort to contest Persian control over the eastern portion of the southern Caucasus in 1722–23. In 1783, the Russian Empire responded to a plea for help from the eastern Georgian king Erekle II, facing an imminent threat from Persia, by signing the Treaty of Georgievsk, which made eastern Georgia (Kartli-Kakheti) a protectorate of the Russian Empire. In 1800–1, Russia annexed Georgia, and began a sustained campaign to establish control over the country. This was followed by a sequence of treaties (Gulistan in 1813, and Turkmenchai in 1828) with Persia, in which Russia gained control of parts of present-day Dagestan, eastern Georgia, as well as what is now Armenia and Azerbaijan. As a result of wars against the Ottoman Empire in the nineteenth century, Russian sovereignty extended into what is now north-eastern Turkey (see Chapters 7 and 8). After a short period of independence towards the end of the First World War, Armenia, Azerbaijan and Georgia were incorporated by force into what in 1922 became the Soviet Union. There they remained until 1991, when they returned to independent statehood.<sup>4</sup>

The mention of the forceful reintegration of the independent states of the Caucasus in 1920–21 reflects a final introductory point, concerning the asymmetry of power between Russia and its Caucasian neighbours. The Russian Federation is much bigger than the Caucasian republics, in geographical size, in population, in GDP and in military capacity. This was true in the early post-Soviet period, but was limited by Russia's diminished state capacity. That capacity has now been substantially restored. As such, Russian policy in the Caucasus falls into the larger comparative context of great power behaviour towards less powerful neighbours (Ebert and Flermes 2018).

### **Russian perspectives on the Caucasus**

Russia's role in the Caucasus is rooted in its particular view of international relations, which is geopolitical and tends towards zero-sum competition. Control over space is significant and international relations is largely about competition for control over space. That rings bells for offensive realists, as is evident, for example, in the work of John Mearsheimer (2001). A second point is how that geopolitical perspective affects Russia's understanding of its environs. There is a geopolitical consensus within the Russian elite on the need to control what is left of the former Soviet region, including the Caucasus, and to limit the engagement of outside powers (and multilateral institutions) there. Russian behaviour is broadly consistent with the policy implications of that consensus.

### ***Elite perspectives on the international system***

Russia takes its principal international challenge to be American unipolarity (Putin 2007: 2; Trenin 2016: 1–2). Since the United States is the principal member of NATO, NATO is part of the problem. It is a threat, not only because Cold War military alliances are deemed obsolete and provocative *per se*, but also because NATO's eastward enlargement purportedly

poses a direct threat to the Russian Federation. As President Putin put it at the 2007 Munich Conference on Security Policy:

I think it is obvious that NATO expansion does not have any relation with the modernization of the Alliance itself or with ensuring security in Europe. On the contrary, it represents a serious provocation that reduces the level of trust. And we have the right to ask: against whom is this expansion intended?

(Putin 2007: 5)

In an article commemorating the tenth anniversary of that speech, one commentator noted that one of Putin's principal problems of the time was 'the fact that the Atlantic alliance tends to expand eastwards ignoring the interests and the protests of Russia' (Akopov 2017: 2). To the extent that the EU's regional engagement is taken to be a proxy for the spread of Western norms and practices, it is also perceived as part of the problem.<sup>5</sup>

Unipolarity has a hard power component (the massive, but diminishing, American superiority in conventional military capability and in power projection), but it is also a matter of soft power (Russia 2016: 3). The United States and its allies seek to transform other states in America's preferred liberal and democratic direction. These activities run counter to dominant Russian conceptions not only of Russia's regional role (see below), but also of its statehood. The 'colour revolutions' of the mid-2000s – Georgia's 'Rose Revolution' (2003) and more importantly Ukraine's 'Orange Revolution' (2004) – raised several concerns in Russia: at the regional level, the possible erosion of Russian influence in the region; at the domestic level, contagion affecting Russian politics. Efforts to reform institutions and to strengthen civil society's capacity to constrain authoritarian rule challenged Putin's approach to rebuilding the Russian state and building his own power structure within the state and political and security elites. These efforts built towards a perception that the threat from the West was not only interstate, but had to do with an external attempt to *change* target states, including Russia, from within (Putin 2007: 7; Surkov 2007: 51). Soft power was seen as the 'ideological superstructure' of American hegemony (MacFarlane 2018: 279).

Several general lines of Russian doctrine and policy followed in global international relations. One was the effort to undermine the structural dominance of the United States and its allies through the advocacy of multipolarity (polycentrism) and to create or strengthen alternative multilateral forums, such as the G20<sup>6</sup> and the BRICS<sup>7</sup> (Russia 2008: 5; Trenin 2016: 2), and bilateral initiatives, for example Sino-Russian military, political and economic cooperation. Another has been the normative effort to contest the universalisation of liberal values. Russia has mounted a robust defence of states' rights to choose their own political systems and domestic norms. At the systemic level, that position is linked to a defence of sovereignty and non-intervention (Karaganov 2016: 1), and a stress on United Nations (UN) Charter principles that embody those norms in international law.

The third relevant aspect of Russia's view of international order is status hierarchy. The Soviet collapse and America's purported quest for hegemony have undermined a status hierarchy in which the system had been dominated by the superpowers (the US and the USSR), which claimed special rights and obligations concerning the maintenance of 'order'. That claim persists in the Russian defence of the role of the UN in world governance (Russia 2008). The UN Security Council operates not only as a weak constraint on the United States, but as an affirmation of Russian status in the system as a whole. Unsurprisingly, in the context of debates about the reform of the Security Council, the Russian government is clear that the status of the five permanent members, and their veto, should be preserved (Russia 2016: 9).

*Russian conceptualisation of the former Soviet space*

Russian policy towards the Caucasus is embedded in its broader approach to the former Soviet region. Just as with the Russian view of the international system, it took time and much debate<sup>8</sup> for regional policy to crystallise. But, with Vladimir's Putin's consolidation of power, and his restructuring of the state, a reasonably clear and cohesive perspective has emerged. In the agreement that dissolved the USSR, Russia agreed a liberal dispensation for its neighbours, endorsing the principles of equal sovereignty, territorial integrity, and non-intervention (CIS 1991). However, neighbouring states, like Russia itself, were unprepared for sovereign statehood and economic transition. All of the successor states flirted with collapse; several, including Azerbaijan and Georgia, but also Russia itself in the North Caucasus, have experienced protracted civil conflict. The integrated Soviet economic structure collapsed, as did the common currency area. Large numbers of ethnic Russians, particularly in Central Asia, but also in the Caucasus, began a return to a destitute and crumbling Russia. The instability in the neighbourhood generated numerous negative externalities (the vulnerability of Russia to its neighbours' financial decisions, money laundering, criminality and trafficking, illegal migration, the security of nuclear materials, and threats to ethnic Russians living in the other republics). These factors encouraged Russian assertiveness in policy towards its neighbours.

Russian academics and policymakers deployed a justificatory logic for interventionism encapsulated by the concept of the 'near abroad'.<sup>9</sup> The rise of militant Islam in the North Caucasus played into a civilisational narrative around the Islamist threat from the south. That narrative was wrapped into a discourse of threat from terrorism when Russia faced a number of bombings in its central regions in 1999, and in view of the 2001 terrorist attacks in New York and Washington. In other words, Russia had practical reasons to try to manage its periphery, leaving aside its hegemonic aspirations. In this context, many early Russian decisions (for example, the fielding of Russian peace-keeping operations in Georgia's civil wars) were reactive rather than strategic, not least because the Russian state had limited means to concentrate power even in its immediate neighbourhood.

As the Russian economy recovered in the early 2000s and the Russian state re-consolidated, it used the resources available to it to pursue an increasingly hegemonic regional policy. This policy involved investment in neighbouring economies, the modernisation and re-equipping of the Russian military with a focus on regional challenges, the strengthening of military presence in the region, and the manipulation of regional conflict to sustain or enhance influence.<sup>10</sup> This aspiration for dominance in the 'near abroad' essentially boils down to the claim that Russia has special rights and duties in its region, a sphere of influence.<sup>11</sup> The notion of spheres of influence has been frequently evoked in reference to contemporary Russian policy in its region (see, for example, Biden 2009). It proposes in the first instance that the principal state in a sphere of this type exercises some degree of influence over the choices of less powerful states in the area in question. Those states should accept this *droit de regard* and adjust their policies accordingly.

In the international system, such spheres may be contested, they may be accepted informally through the adjustment of the behaviour of major states outside the sphere, or they may be formally recognised in treaty instruments. Russian policy-makers have sought broader international acknowledgement of Russia's regional primacy, tacitly through the avoidance by other states of behaviours challenging its claim,<sup>12</sup> or explicitly through treaty instruments limiting security and economic arrangements that Russia might deem threatening.<sup>13</sup> In short, the Russian view of what it deems to be its 'near abroad' is essentially hegemonic and focused on control – control over economies, and more basically

control of the space, and the denial of that space to competitors such as NATO and the EU. It inherently challenges the right of sovereign states in the region to freedom of choice in international relations.

## Russian policy in the Caucasus

### *The landscape of threat*

As suggested earlier, Russian policy in the Caucasus is a specific manifestation of Russia's perspective on the former Soviet region as a whole. In addition to the overarching systemic landscape of threat just discussed, there are several specific issues driving policy in the sub-region. One is Russia's own vulnerability in the North Caucasus. This sub-region has experienced severe civil conflict in Chechnya, and deep and possibly growing instability in Dagestan. Lesser tensions are present in another three jurisdictions (Ingushetia, Kabardino-Balkaria, and Karachaevo-Cherkessia) (see Chapters 13 and 14). Militants have travelled to and from the North Caucasus via Georgia, and, in some cases (for example, the Pankisi Gorge in the early 2000s), have used adjoining territory as sanctuary.

A second is enlargement of NATO, and, more recently, the EU. Russia reacted negatively, but relatively benignly, to the first rounds of enlargement. The countries involved were not within the Russian Federation's immediate security perimeter, and it was not in a position to do much to prevent the enlargement anyway. The second round was also viewed negatively, not least because it took in the three Baltic republics, which had been part of the USSR, and bordered the Russian Federation. But the Russian focus was on finishing the ground campaign to retake control of Chechnya and advancing Russia's economic recovery and political consolidation. Its response on this occasion was reluctant acquiescence. As Russia recovered, it had the capacity to act on its preferences, to deny further enlargement into what it deemed to be its neighbourhood. As NATO (and the EU) began to intensify relations with states beyond their new borders, Russia resisted.

Inasmuch as we accept that the Russian power *vertikal'* finds democratising change in the region to be threatening to its own domestic structure of governance (the demonstration effect), then this too may have been a concern in respect of Georgia. Although the Russian government initially viewed Georgia's 'Rose Revolution' with a degree of equanimity<sup>14</sup> this evaporated quickly as President Mikheil Saakashvili shifted definitively in a European and American direction in 2004–5.

Another potential threat concerns the regional powers to the south, Iran and Turkey, both of which had long and troubled relations with both pre-Soviet Russia and the USSR. Iran and Turkey responded to the collapse of the Soviet Union by mounting an active diplomacy in the region directed at expanding influence there and also limiting each other's inroads. Turkey in particular has been a problem for Russia in the region since 1991. It is a NATO member, and provides NATO with a frontier on the Caucasus itself. Turkish economic diplomacy in the Caucasus has also been problematic. For example, Turkish support for pipelines from the Caspian to Turkey bypassing the Russian Federation complicated Russia's own pipeline policy in the 1990s. Turkish support for Azerbaijan in the Armenian–Azerbaijani conflict contradicted Russia's preference for the Armenian side. The extent to which Turkey poses a threat to Russian objectives in the Caucasus has diminished in view of Turkey's increasing ambivalence towards Europe and NATO, and its reorientation towards the Middle East. Iran has been relatively quiescent since 1991. Russia and Turkey have developed their military and political cooperation concerning the crisis in Syria since 2017 (for example, their co-sponsorship of the

Astana format for political settlement in Syria). Turkey is now a recipient of major arms transfers from Russia. Increasing cooperation with Iran is evident not only in Syria, but also in the apparently successful resolution of differences over Caspian seabed issues through the Caspian Sea Convention (see Chapters 21 and 22).

### *The practice of Russian policy in the Caucasus*

How does this understanding of the region work itself out in practice? The analysis below focuses on three aspects: the military and security dimension, the economic dimension, and the institutional dimension.

Russian *military* engagement dates to the collapse of the USSR. Russia inherited significant military capacity in the region; there were large Russian-controlled bases in Armenia and Georgia. The profile of this presence has changed over the years: for example, Russian forces withdrew from several of its military facilities in Georgia.<sup>15</sup> But the Russian military presence has remained and has been strengthened in breakaway regions of Georgia, while in the context of renewal of the Russia-Armenia bilateral defence agreement, its major base in Gyumri has been extensively modernised and upgraded while the two countries concluded a bilateral air defence agreement in 2016. This agreement covers much of the Caucasus, but also areas to the south (eastern Turkey, Syria, western Iran). The southward direction supports evolving Russian military engagement in Syria. Russia also collaborates with Armenia on border control and has agreed on the establishment of joint armed forces.

Another significant element of Russian military capacity extends down the Black Sea littoral of the South Caucasus. Since 2010, Russia has been seeking and has now more or less achieved sea control in the northern tier of the Black Sea and, arguably, in the sea as a whole. It has invested heavily in new vessels, and in the modernisation of old ones, to the extent that its Black Sea fleet dwarfs those of other littoral states.

The second aspect of military/security engagement by Russia is peacekeeping and mediation. Russia mediated cease-fires to all three sub-state conflicts in the early 1990s. In two out of three (Abkhazia and South Ossetia), regional peace-keeping forces dominated by Russian contingents followed. The South Ossetia force was agreed bilaterally and lacked an institutional umbrella. The Conference (later Organization) on Security and Co-operation in Europe (CSCE/OSCE) agreed on a mission of long-term duration in Georgia to observe the operation in 1992. The Abkhaz force was mandated by the Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS) and endorsed by the UN Security Council. In this instance, what amounted to a Russian peace-keeping force was complemented by a small UN observer mission. In Nagorny Karabakh, a similar, though larger, deployment was proposed in 1994–95. The multilateral context was the CSCE/OSCE and not the CIS. The Russians demanded a major role and offered the largest troop contribution, but Azerbaijan was unwilling to accept the re-deployment of Russian forces on its national territory. Other OSCE members were not willing to make up the force complement, and the project failed. In the Georgian conflict zones Russian peacekeepers lingered until 2008, when they were superseded by the 2008 war, discussed below. In 2008–9, the UN observer mission and the OSCE mission of long term duration were withdrawn, because the Russian Federation refused to re-authorise them.

The third aspect of military engagement is arms transfers. It is generally accepted that Russian forces provided arms to the secessionist movements in Nagorny Karabakh (Azerbaijan) and Abkhazia and South Ossetia (Georgia) in their early stages, playing a significant role in preventing state authorities from restoring control of breakaway regions (see Chapters 15

and 16). More recently, Russia has been heavily engaged in arms transfers to both Armenia and Azerbaijan. In the latter case, the motive is presumably monetary, and also influence over Azerbaijani policy. In the former, it is to ensure that Armenia cannot be overwhelmed and that a strong Russian military presence be sustained close to Turkey. Its presence also provides easy access to Georgia's southern frontier. Elsewhere, the Russian government has provided weapons and training to Abkhaz and Ossetian forces since the 2008 war in Georgia, and has integrated local forces into joint commands with Russian contingents, within the context of bilateral defence treaties with the two territories, whose sovereignty Russia recognised on 26 August 2008.

The mention of August 2008 brings us to the Russian use of force in the region. Russian participation in the 1992–93 war in Abkhazia is reasonably well documented, given sightings of Russian aircraft bombing Georgian positions in the region in 1993. In an early form of hybrid war, Russian volunteers (mainly of North Caucasian extraction) crossed the border to participate in both Georgia's conflicts on the rebel side. There are reasonably well documented accounts of Russian assistance to the Armenian side in Karabakh, although no evidence of direct participation in combat. When the 1992–93 Abkhaz conflict ended, Russian marines landed in Poti to drive rebel forces out of the city and to restore Georgia's connection to the Black Sea, effectively ending the Zviadist rebellion against Tbilisi.<sup>16</sup>

The culmination of Russian engagement in conflict within the South Caucasus was the Georgia war in 2008. Over the preceding years, the Russians began to exercise tighter control over the regional government in South Ossetia through subsidising government operations, as well as delivering Russian passports to the local Ossetian population. This was accompanied in 2007 and 2008 by increasing military incursions into Georgian-controlled areas (the Kodori Valley/Gorge) and unauthorised entry into Georgian airspace in central Georgia, as well as reinforcement of Russian troops in Abkhazia and possibly in South Ossetia. In July 2008, the security situation in Georgian villages in South Ossetia deteriorated as a result of extensive sniper and mortar fire from the rebel side. The Georgians reacted in August by attacking South Ossetia. The Russians responded with a substantial deployment of troops, armour and artillery into South Ossetia, driving Georgian forces out of the region and extending their lines southwards to Gori and on towards Tbilisi. Russian forces in Abkhazia crossed into Mingrelia and took the port of Poti, where they destroyed a considerable amount of Georgia's coastal naval capability. Russia then recognised and assumed effective control over both regions and embarked on an effort to integrate them more fully into the Russian Federation. Russian forces also control and defend the administrative boundary lines between Abkhazia/South Ossetia and government-controlled Georgia. They have supported the Ossetian side in pushing the line of control farther south into Georgian-controlled territory.

Turning to the *economic* dimension of Russian engagement, Russia for many years subsidised<sup>17</sup> the supply of energy to Armenia and Georgia, although the latter has declined since the 2008 war. Investment is also an important element of Russian engagement in the region. One price that Armenia has paid for access to the Russian market, and, in particular, for access to low-cost Russian gas, is the sale of many parts of its critical infrastructure to Russian state and semi-state enterprises, often in return for new loans or debt forgiveness. In Georgia, likewise, there is substantial Russian engagement in electricity and gas distribution, minerals production, and banking and financial services. Much of this flow persisted after Russia's war with Georgia.

A third area of Russian economic power in the region is remittance income. Large numbers of citizens of all three countries work in Russia. They send a significant portion of their income to their home countries. Remittance income to Armenia and Georgia made

up around 10 per cent of GDP in 2015. In Azerbaijan, it was 5–7 per cent in the same year. Most remittances come from Russia (World Bank, n.d). Squeezing the flow of remittance income can have a significant impact on the recipient economies, as Georgia found in 2006–8 when Russian authorities cracked down on Georgian migrants. Also, remittance income depends on the health of the source economy. This has been a problem for destination economies since the Russian economic contraction in 2014.

The final economic dimension is trade. Historically, Russia has been a key destination for exports from the region, with the exception of Azerbaijan, where the export of oil and gas towards Turkey dwarfs exports to Russia. Russia remains Armenia's principal export customer, taking around 15–20 per cent of total exports. In the case of Georgia, the share has dropped because of deliberate efforts at diversification of export destinations. In addition, Russia's influence on regional trade balances is diluted by the growing involvement of China, particularly in Georgia (Avdaliani 2018). Trade with Russia has a downside in creating local vulnerability to changes in the bilateral relationships. Price subsidies on hydrocarbons, and the provision of technical support in the management of critical infrastructure, can be manipulated for political purpose. The agricultural sector in Georgia was deeply dependent on export to Russia. In 2006, Russia embargoed trade in wine and produce from Georgia as their relations deteriorated. The effect on the sector was deeply damaging. The embargo continued until the end of the Russia–Georgia war in 2008. Russian supply of gas and electricity to Georgia was interrupted at the same time, ostensibly owing to terrorist attacks on Russian infrastructure in the North Caucasus. The risk of sanctions appears to have played a role in Armenia's sudden withdrawal from the negotiation of an association agreement with the EU in 2013.

Trade and remittances are linked to the *institutional* dimension of Russian behaviour. The Russian government has promoted regional multilateral institutions since the collapse of the USSR, principally the CIS and the Collective Security Treaty Organisation (CSTO). Neither amounted to much (Garnett and Olcott 1999). For much of the post-Soviet period, Russia has experimented with other variants of economic multilateralism without much success, either because of low levels of commitment, or inadequate capacity. In 2010–11, in some measure in response to the perceived threat of the EU's Eastern Partnership, a much more ambitious project emerged: the Eurasian Customs Union, soon followed by the Eurasian Economic Union (EAEU). This institutional development is seen by some as 'Putin's attempt to remedy the collapse of the Soviet Union and reassert Russia's role as a geopolitical leader and status as a great power' (Dragneva and Wolczuk 2017). How that project evolves and how successful it is remains to be seen.<sup>18</sup>

Uptake of Russian-sponsored initiatives in the Caucasus has been partial and sporadic. Armenia has been a steady participant in the CIS and the CSTO and entered the EAEU in 2015. Azerbaijan has remained in the CIS throughout, and joined and then left the CSTO (in 1999). Georgia refused membership of the CIS upon its creation, but joined in 1993, as part of an arrangement with Russia to stabilise the situation in Abkhazia. As one high level Georgian official told me at the time, 'we were told it was joining the CIS or meeting the bulldozers [meaning that Georgia would be economically and politically destroyed – S.N.M.]'. Although Georgia signed the Tashkent Treaty in 1992, it withdrew in 1999. Neither Azerbaijan nor Georgia has joined the EAEU.

The preceding discussion focused on military, economic, and institutional dimensions of Russian practice in the Caucasus. One further aspect should be noted, if briefly. That is the Russian use of soft power capacities, including the co-optation of local political figures and movements, the dissemination of disinformation through local media, penetration of both

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## Conclus

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### Conclusion: understanding Russian behaviour in the Caucasus

The record makes it reasonably clear that Russia seeks primacy in the Caucasus. In particular, it seeks to prevent further inroads by Western states. As Russia recovered and its capacity for more robust policy in its near abroad grew in the 2000s, that direction of policy became more persistent. Russian policy has involved both coercive and cooperative behaviour, but the objective is fairly clear. The comparative historical record of behaviour of regionally dominant powers in their environs ranges along a spectrum from coercion to cooperation. Russian behaviour in the Caucasus is towards the coercive end of that spectrum, using regional economic and military preponderance in an attempt to enforce its preferences.

Much analysis of international relations in and around the Caucasus addresses specific questions in a specific environment. It tends to be empirical and problem-oriented, and does not engage larger theoretical questions. Yet theory impinges in a number of important ways on our topic. In thinking about the application of international relations theory to the Caucasus, several general hypotheses arise. One is the structural realist proposition that geopolitics, anarchy and the distribution of power explain patterns in great power behaviour (Waltz 1979). Some have applied this logic directly to Russian behaviour in its western and Caucasian neighbourhood, seeing the growth in Russian assertiveness to be a product of the enlargement and greater engagement of Western institutions (NATO and the EU) and the United States in the region (Mearsheimer 2014).

The liberal counterpoint is that states are not analytically uniform rational entities, reacting in predictable ways to the distribution of power in a systemic condition of anarchy. The structure of the international system may constrain, but does not determine, the policy choices of states. Systemic variables are complemented by domestic ones: historical and cultural heritage and ethnic makeup; national economic composition and the challenges to the state's capacity to exert power; and domestic political variables. The last category includes regime type and constitutional structure, the distribution of power and modes of governance (for example, authoritarian versus democratic) within the state, leadership and intra-elite dynamics, and public opinion. Going back to Russia, some take the view that Russia's engagement with the Caucasus and other post-Soviet neighbours is determined by its authoritarian quality of governance. External assertiveness seems to correlate well with popular support for the regime.

Finally, cognitive frames (socially learned understanding of the world in which societies exist and their place in that world), and elites' constructed perceptions of their environment weigh heavily. Here, we encounter the proposition that Russia's policy in the neighbourhood is influenced by its socially constructed understanding of a fundamental tension with the West, and of NATO as an institution designed to contain and weaken Russia. After all, why would the Russian government consider greater NATO and EU engagement in this region to be an existential threat to national security? There was no significant forward deployment of NATO forces outside its original area of operations until Russia attacked Ukraine. And that NATO deployment remains significantly inferior to in-area Russian capability. The suggestion is that Russia is not responding to what NATO actually does, but more to how Russian elites frame NATO.

We also encounter a broad literature on the significance of status in Russian understandings of Russia's rightful place in the international system. This literature often links Russian assertion in its neighbourhood to a concern to re-establish and to defend Russian status as a co-equal great power (Clunan 2009; Paul, Larson and Wohlforth 2014).

Finally, what does this case have to say about theories of regionalism, and in particular, the tension between international systemic perspectives and regional ones? To what extent are structures and practices at the level of the system as a whole overridden by regional specificities? Much recent work on regionalism in the international system suggests a world in which different regions are modifying supposedly universal norms and institutional practices to local conditions, and that the international system is being provincialised or 'localised' (Acharya 2004, 2014). We see in the Russian relationship with its neighbours a specific and local modification of universal norms and law regarding sovereignty, equality, and non-intervention. Russian diplomacy defends these norms outside its space and violates them inside its neighbourhood.

What do we make of this? Theories of international relations and state behaviour provide selective and more or less parsimonious causal chains that claim to explain behaviour or systemic patterns. All of the theoretical perspectives discussed above are useful in understanding Russia's relations with the Caucasian region. None provides a sufficient account. International relations theory may be useful in explaining patterns at the level of the system as a whole and also in proposing structural constraints on agency. But at the levels of both regional specificity (in this case the former Soviet Union and in particular the Caucasus) and state policy and choice in that context (in this case Russia), it cannot deliver adequate explanations or predictions regarding specific contextualised behaviours on the part of either Russia and its Caucasian neighbours: 'local knowledge that makes sense in particular contexts' (Pouliot 2010: 2).

Instead, the issues arising under the rubric of 'Russia and the Caucasus' are the result of a conjuncture of cognitive and psychological factors, domestic political process and structure, history and legacy, including deeply embedded post-imperial cultural characteristics, and the variable constraints imposed by, and opportunities present in, the international system as a whole. As such, understanding Russian policy in the region requires attention to the regional context and to how Russian officials understand themselves, the Caucasus and also the nature of the international system.

### Notes

- 1 For a detailed account of the circumstances around this decision, and of its consequences see Asmus (2010: 111–39).
- 2 The post-Maidan government reversed the decision and completed its association in 2014.
- 3 They are Krasnodar *krai*, Adygea, Karachaevo-Cherkessia, Kabardino-Balkaria, North Ossetia, Ingushetia, Chechnya and Dagestan. Since 2010 in political-administrative terms, Krasnodar *krai* and Adygea have been part of the Southern Federal District, while Karachaevo-Cherkessia, Kabardino-Balkaria, North Ossetia, Ingushetia, Chechnya, Dagestan, as well as Stavropol' *krai*, have constituted the North Caucasian Federal District of the Russian Federation.
- 4 For an extensive treatment of the role of history and legacy in Russia's approach to foreign policy, see Legvold (2007).
- 5 The latest Russian foreign policy concept (2016: 25) refers to both NATO and the EU as reflecting geopolitical expansion and an unwillingness to accept the creation of a Europe-wide system of security and cooperation.
- 6 G20 is an international forum for the governments and central bank governors from 19 economically significant countries and the EU.
- 7 BRICS is an acronym for an association of five major emerging national economies: Brazil, Russia, India, China and South Africa.
- 8 See Arbatov (1993), Lukin (1992) and Stankevich (1992) for background.

- 9 Discussion of the 'near abroad' dates to the early 1990s. The logic was that the collapse of the USSR and the absence of a tradition of sovereign statehood among the successor states created distinctive security challenges, in particular for Russia. These created 'legitimate' rights for Russia in its immediate neighbourhood that qualified the sovereignty of its neighbours and also constrained the flexibility of policy for actors outside the region to intrude into it. These rights generated a corresponding duty to maintain stability in the neighbourhood (see MacFarlane 1994; Migranyan 1994; RAU 1993).
- 10 For a recent example of Russia's concern to control events along its regional periphery, see Silayev and Shushentsov (2017: 3).
- 11 The major work on the subject is that of Paul Keal (1983).
- 12 It is plausible, for example, that United States and NATO inaction in response to Russia's 2008 invasion of Georgia constituted evidence of tacit acceptance of the existence of a Russian sphere of influence.
- 13 See President of Russia (2009). In that context, Sergei Karaganov and colleagues noted in 2009 that a reset of United States-Russian relations required Western renunciation of efforts to encourage former Soviet states to distance themselves from Russia in political and security terms. (Karaganov, Bordachev and Suslov 2009).
- 14 Russian mediation facilitated Eduard Shevardnadze's exit from office in 2003, and assisted in the resumption of Georgian control over Adjara which had been outside the Georgian government's de facto jurisdiction since 1992.
- 15 The withdrawal was finally agreed at the 1999 OSCE summit in Istanbul and took several years to implement. The withdrawal from facilities in Abkhazia turned out to be temporary.
- 16 The Zviadists were supporters of former President Zviad Gamsakhurdia, mainly in the Mingrelian region adjacent to Abkhazia in western Georgia.
- 17 That is to say, in the case of oil, delivery at below prices in the global market, and, in the case of gas, below prices on delivery to customers outside the region.
- 18 For a balanced view see Dragneva and Wolczuk (2017).

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