Review of Russia’s Policy in the Post-Soviet Space

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Russia claims regional hegemony in the post-Soviet space and considers that strengthening Western positions in the region poses a threat to its national interests. The purpose of our review is to provide readers with information about important events related to Russia’s policy in the post-Soviet space. The review is a biweekly publication and will be useful for everyone – decision-makers, public employees, media representatives and other people who are interested in the ongoing processes in post-Soviet countries.

Main Events:

- Russia maintains the status of strategic partner and ally under the new National Security Strategy of the Republic of Armenia.
- Russia is ready to mediate peace talks between Azerbaijan and Armenia after fighting escalated along their shared border.
- One of the supervisors of the separatists in the so-called Donetsk People’s Republic was arrested in Ukraine.
- High-ranking Russian officials call on Ukraine to accept the new reality.
- Ukraine’s new language law is considered discrimination against Russian-speaking citizens.
- Following Latvia, Lithuania also bans Russian TV channels.
- US pressure over entities participating in the construction of the Nord Stream 2 project is growing.

Armenia Adopts a New National Security Strategy - Russia’s Status Remains Unchanged

**Event in Details:** This Strategic Document has been updated for the first time since 2007. Fundamental values and threats remain unchanged according to the new strategy. Russia remains a main strategic partner and ally and Azerbaijan remains as Armenia’s main source of threat.

Armenia continues to develop military-political, military and technical military cooperation with Russia in the fields of defense and security in terms of developing both bilateral and multilateral frameworks of cooperation according to the updated Strategic Document. The document further envisages the increased defense capability and permanent strengthening of partner relations. It also states that Armenia is actively involved in the Collective Security Treaty Organization and will continue engagement in activities in order to increase the organization’s efficiency.

Before coming to power in 2018, Nikol Pashinyan, Prime Minister of Armenia, had a pro-Western attitude and proposed Armenia’s withdrawal from pro-Russian organizations. After coming to power, Pashinyan’s rhetoric has changed and, considering the current security environment, close relations and alliance with Russia remains vital for his government.

**Why the Event is Important:** In the security environment created by the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict, when various scales of military confrontations with Azerbaijan are frequent on the conflict line and neighboring Turkey is an ally of Azerbaijan, a strategic partnership and military cooperation with Russia remain the only guarantor of Armenia’s security.

**Russia Calls on Armenia-Azerbaijan to Show Restraint**

**Key Event:** On July 12, 2020, Armenia and Azerbaijan blamed each other for starting fight along their shared border.
**Event in Details:** The military confrontation, which broke out on July 12, continued in the following days. The clashes, involving artillery, mortars and tanks, resulted in deaths on both sides. Reportedly, more than ten Azerbaijani soldiers were killed, including one major general and one colonel. It is noteworthy that the confrontation took place far from the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict zone, about 55 km from the Georgian border, in the Tovuz region of Azerbaijan and the Tavush region of Armenia.

The low-intensity clashes between Armenia and Azerbaijan have not stopped since the end of the conflict in 1994. The border confrontation is permanently ongoing. In 2016, heavy fighting along the Nagorno-Karabakh frontline was called the Four-Day War as a result of which Azerbaijan retook a small part of its occupied territories.

**Russia’s Response**

Russian Foreign Minister, Sergey Lavrov, had phone conversations with both sides. Lavrov called on the sides to show restraint and fulfill their obligations. Interestingly, Russia mediates between the opposing sides while being an ally of Armenia and a partner of the Collective Security Treaty Organization. During the Four-Day War in 2016, Russia's apparent neutrality caused dissatisfaction in Armenia.

**Why the Event is Important:** The current events have once again shown that Russia’s position in the Armenian-Azerbaijani conflict is no longer unambiguously pro-Armenian and is more neutral. For Armenia, the position of Moscow is an indicator that at a critical moment Russia may not support Armenia openly - giving Azerbaijan an advantage in the event of a confrontation.

**Supervisor of the Separatists in the So-called Donetsk People’s Republic was Arrested in Ukraine**

**Main Event:** On July 7, 2020, Ukraine detained a person suspected of being a supervisor of the separatists in Donbass.

Andrey Kunavin (on the right). Source: *The Insider*
Event in Details: The Security Service of Ukraine (SBU) announced that it arrested a non-staff operative of the Main Directorate of the General Staff of the Armed Forces of the Russian Federation (GRU) who had played a crucial role in supervising the military direction of the so-called Donetsk People’s Republic in 2014-2015 and took an active part in the creation of military intelligence in the de facto republic.

According to The Insider and Bellingcat, Andrey Kunavin, who was released from a Ukrainian prison after the invasion of eastern Ukraine in 2014 (Kunavin was sentenced to four years in prison for carjacking and embezzlement), soon became a major figure, collaborating with the Kremlin’s high-officials. He reportedly had working relations with the head of the Russian Special Services, Vladislav Surkov, who was also the Presidential Aide, overseeing the Kremlin’s policy in Donbass until 2020. Kunavin was a well-networked “problem-solver” for his Donetsk-based counterparts. What remains unclear is how Kunavin, a mid-range criminal, managed to attain the confidence of Russian political figures and became supervisor of the separatists in eastern Ukraine.

Why the Event is Important: The arrest of the one of the supervisors of the separatists in eastern Ukraine amid ongoing conflict is further evidence for Kiev and the international community of Russia’s involvement in the conflict.

Russia Calls on Ukraine to Accept the New Reality

Main Event: On July 9, 2020, an interview with two Russian high-ranking officials was published in the Russian media with important messages concerning relations with Ukraine.

Event in Details: Two leading Russian media agencies (TASS and Komsomolskaya Pravda) have published interviews with Dmitry Medvedev, Deputy Chairman of the Russian Security Council, and Dmitry Kozak, Deputy Head of the Presidential Administration, overseeing the Kremlin’s policy in Ukraine. In the interviews, the Russian officials also spoke about Ukraine, saying that the hope for a constructive dialogue with Kiev was "rapidly dissipating" as the Ukrainian authorities draw "red lines" instead of "coming to terms with the realities that exist."

The key message from the Russian officials is that Kiev should accept the reality that emerged after the annexation of Crimea by Russia, respond less to the nationalist protests and begin to "bridge the gap" with the uncontrolled territories in Donbass. According to Kozak, the way forward to peaceful solutions was the March 11 meeting of the Trilateral Contact Group where the parties almost decided on establishing an Advisory Board. Under the Board, Kiev, Donetsk and Luhansks should have started a direct dialogue. However, "the next day Ukraine radically changed its position as a result of pressure."

Why the Event is Important: Russia rules out the possibility of peace talks with Ukraine on Crimea and calls for internal Ukrainian dialogue to discuss the ongoing confrontation in eastern Ukraine. Thus, Russia will constantly exert pressure on Ukraine and control the situation.
Fight for State Language Continues in Ukraine

**Main Event:** On July 8, 2020, the Constitutional Court of Ukraine began debating the constitutionality of the language law. Opponents of the law claim that it discriminates against national minorities, especially Russian-speaking citizens.

**Event in Details:** The Constitutional Court began debating the constitutionality of the language law at the request of 51 members of the Parliament of the previous convocation, mainly all from the pro-Russian Opposition Bloc. One of the main claims against the law is that it "actually discriminates against Russian-speaking citizens." The Law on the Provision of the Functioning of the Ukrainian Language as the State language entered into force on July 16, 2019. The constitution of Ukraine states that Ukrainian is the only state language and it is the obligatory medium of communication throughout the entire territory of Ukraine. From July 16, 2020, a provision of the law that makes the use of the state language mandatory in the fields of science and healthcare will enter into force. From 2021, customer service should be conducted in the state language. From 2024, the commitment is to increase the use of the Ukrainian language in radio and television from 75% to 90%. The law does not apply to the sphere of private communication and religious rites.

The most pressing issue is the use of the Ukrainian language in the education system. From September 2020, education in public schools should be in the state language. First of all, this applies to the Russian-language schools. For those schools where education is in the language of an EU member state, the law will come into force in 2023.

In addition to pro-Russian lawmakers, the law has been criticized by the ruling party, Servant of the People, and the Council of Europe which seek to protect the interests of national minorities. During the election campaign, President Volodymyr Zelensky, whose winning Ukraine’s presidential election was conditioned by the support of the Russian-speaking population, also promised to revise the law. However due to the pressure from nationalist groups, Zelensky, after his election, was unable to make changes to the law in favor of the interests of the Russian-speaking population.

**Why the Event is Important for Ukraine:** Strengthening the positions of the state language will contribute to strengthening Ukrainian identity which is a crucial factor for the formation of Ukrainian state - free from Russian influence.

**Why the Event is Important for Russia:** In the long run, the enactment of the law, especially in the field of education, will weaken the influence of the Russian language in Ukraine which equates to the loss of cultural and political influences in Ukraine. At this stage, the ongoing processes allow Moscow to present the Ukrainian government as pursuing a policy of discrimination against national minorities.

Lithuania Bans Russian Television Channels

**Main Event:** Lithuania bans five Russian television channels, said Mantas Martisius, the Chairman of the Radio and Television Commission of Lithuania, on July 8, 2020.
Event in Details: In Lithuania, the ban of TV channels affiliated with Russia’s propaganda media outlet RT is linked to Dmitry Kiselyov. Kiselyov has been on the EU sanctions list for his alleged role in promoting Kremlin propaganda in support of Russia's 2014 annexation of Crimea from Ukraine. Dmitry Kiselyov is the Director General of the international news agency Rossiya Segodnya. In 2018-2020, state funding allocated for the media holding amounted to RUB 20.4 billion.

A similar decision was recently made in Latvia where on June 30, 2020 the Latvian National Electronic Media Council banned seven Russian television channels. RT-affiliated TV channels are the most influential channels of the Kremlin's propaganda in the West, attempting to present the Baltics as failed states.

Why the Event is Important: During Vladimir Putin's rule, Russian television channels became an influential tool in the Kremlin's foreign policy which the Kremlin has used for propaganda purposes against the West, including pro-Western countries in the post-Soviet space. Consequently, the Baltic states plan to weaken Russian information influence within the country by banning the broadcasting of Russian state channels.

Washington Threatens to Expand Sanctions on Participants of the Nord Stream 2 Project

Main Event: “Get out now - or risk the consequences,” US Secretary of State, Mike Pompeo said on July 15, 2020 during a press conference in Washington, warning individuals or companies involved in the construction of the Nord Stream 2.

**Event in Details:** Entities participating in the construction of the Nord Stream 2 will be affected by the law adopted in 2017 imposing sanctions against those who oppose US interests, said Pompeo. Additional sanctions will partially target contractors working on the TurkStream project. The TurkStream is a new export gas pipeline stretching from Russia to Turkey across the Black Sea, delivering Russian gas to southeastern European countries.

US sanctions will directly affect five European companies (Shell, Engie, Uniper, Wintershall and OMV) involved in the financing of the project. In total, the sanctions could affect more than 120 companies from over 12 European countries and block the investment of EUR 700 million in the final phase of the project as well as endanger billions of dollars invested directly in the construction of the pipeline and the development of the gas transportation infrastructure in Germany and the Czech Republic.

In 2019, the US imposed sanctions on foreign companies that participated in the project. On December 21, the Swiss company (Allseas) suspended its activities following the US sanctions. Reportedly, the North Stream 2 project is 94% complete. On June 4, 2020, five US senators, spearheaded by Senators Ted Cruz (Republican) and Jeanne Shaheen (Democratic), introduced legislation expanding the sanctions to block the Nord Stream 2 project’s completion. The new legislation clarifies that the US sanctions related to the Nord Stream 2 apply to vessels engaged in all pipelaying activities as well as to those which facilitate those vessels in their pipelaying activities as well as to those who provide insurance, port facilities or tethering services for those vessels and ultimately to any company that provides certification for the Nord Stream 2 pipeline to begin operations. Pompeo's threat is another warning.

Upon the project’s completion, as anticipated by the Russian side in 2021, the Nord Stream 1’s productivity will be doubled to 110 billion cubic meters per year which is more than a quarter of the...
EU’s gas consumption. The Nord Stream 2 will stretch across the Baltic Sea and directly connect Russia to Germany, bypassing Ukraine. Nord Stream 2 will be the longest offshore pipeline (1,230 km) in the world.

The project’s supporters criticize the sanctions:

- Washington is using political pressure "for the sake of unfair competition," said Spokeswoman of the Russian Foreign Ministry, Maria Zakharova.
- Imposing sanctions against NATO allies during the economic downturn is "an attack on the European economy and a breach of EU sovereignty and energy security of Western Europe," said former Chancellor of Germany and the Chairman of the Shareholder’s Committee of the Nord Stream AG, Gerhard Schroeder.

**Why US is against the Project Implementation:** Washington considers the project a threat to the national interests of the United States, targeted towards eliminating Ukraine from the European gas transit network and increasing Russia’s influence in the European energy sector.

**Why the Project Implementation is Important for Russia:** The Nord Stream 2 project’s completion will enable Russia to minimize its reliance on Ukraine’s pipeline network for transiting gas to Europe in the nearest future and establish direct ties with Germany – the main consumer of Russian gas. Russia believes that US sanctions are also aimed at replacing Russian gas on the European market with US liquefied natural gas.