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TORNIKE ZURABASHVILI

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EXPERT OPINION





საქართველოს სტრატეგიისა და საერთაშორისო ურთიერთობათა კვლევის ფონდი
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“Russia’s long-term national interests lie in ... consolidating the Russian Federation’s status as a leading world power (derzhava), ... in a polycentric world.” This paragraph of the Russian National Security Strategy very well summarizes the essence of the entire document and echoes the increasing ambitions of modern Russia.

Introduction

On December 31, 2015, the President of the Russian Federation, Vladimir Putin, approved the country’s new national security strategy. Upon the adoption of the new strategy, a similar document dated May 12, 2009, which defined activities until 2020, was declared invalid. Work on updating the strategy commenced in July 2015 and was led by the Russian National Security Council.

The fact that the need to revise the strategy was dictated rather by the requirement to adhere to the law¹ rather than any fundamental changes in Russian foreign and domestic policies repeatedly surfaces throughout the document. The new strategy includes replications of parts of the previous document as well as reiterations of statements frequently made by Russian authorities. Nevertheless, the new document establishes a fairly accurate idea regarding the self-esteem, views and plans of modern Russia, rendering invaluable assistance in ensuring a better perception of the Kremlin’s intentions. This is doubly significant against the background of Russia’s increasing foreign policy ambitions.

The Security Strategy is also noteworthy for Georgia; the document contains several points which may develop into direct or indirect threats both in terms of Georgia’s occupied territories as well as the rest of the country. Thus, analyzing the document through a “Tbilisian lens” is rather an essential deed.

This report serves this precise purpose; it provides an overview of the key points of the Russian National Security Strategy and their possible impact on Georgia. For comparison, the 2009 National Security Strategy of the Russian Federation, as well as the 2014 military doctrine, were analyzed during this research. The author hopes that the study will make its modest contribution to a better perception of the current challenges and threats posed by Russia.

General Overview of the Strategy

According to the document, the strategy “is designed to help develop the national economy, improve the quality of life of citizens, strengthen political stability in society, ensure the defense of the country, the state and public security, and enhance the competitiveness and international prestige of the Russian Federation.” More specifically, Russia’s national interests are as follows:

- “strengthening the country’s defense, ensuring the inviolability of the constitutional order, sovereignty, independence and national and territorial integrity;
- strengthening national accord, political and social stability, developing democratic institutions and refining the mechanisms for cooperation between the state and civil society;
- raising living standards, improving public health and ensuring the country’s stable demographic development;
- preserving and developing culture and traditional Russian spiritual and moral values;
- increasing the competitiveness of the national economy;
- consolidating the Russian Federation’s status as a leading world power (*derzhava*) whose actions are aimed at maintaining strategic stability and mutually beneficial partnerships in a polycentric world.”²

It is noteworthy that compared to the analogous document in 2009, the current strategy is far more focused on domestic issues (especially the economy). The connection with national security and the socio-economic development of the Russian Federation becomes evident at the outset of the strategy and can be traced in the background of the remaining chapters of the document. According to the strategy, the Russian economy has successfully dealt with the unstable global environment and “the application of the restrictive economic measures introduced against the Russian Federation by a number of countries.” Nevertheless, the low level of economic competitiveness, dependency on foreign factors and the unequal development of the regions remain a serious challenge. Russia is particularly concerned with the current situation and sees the principal solution to this problem in the mobilization of internal resources. It should be noted that Russia’s economic plans are somewhat modest: whereas as per the 2009 security strategy, Russia planned to enter the “top five

leading countries” in terms of the gross domestic product (GDP) volume, the incumbent strategy only provides for entry “into the ranks of leading countries.”

Russia is also particularly alarmed at internal instability. In this regard, both the proliferation of terrorism and the activities of other extremist organizations pose a threat aiming to “destroy” Russian statehood and “destabilize the domestic political and social situation” in the country. In this context, the document refers to the “colored revolutions” organized by “radical public associations and groups, foreign and international non-governmental organizations, financial and economic structures, and individuals” and aimed at disrupting Russia’s territorial integrity and inciting disorder.

Towards this end, these groups employ information and communication technologies to promote “fascism, extremism, terrorism and separatism.” In order to tackle the problem, the Kremlin intends to increase the role of the state in combating crime including “mechanisms to counter the participation of Russian citizens in the activities of criminal and terrorist groups abroad” and the protection of the population from the “influence of destructive information.”

For the purpose of ensuring protection for Russian society “against the external expansion of ideologies and values and destructive information and psychological impacts,” “control in the information sphere and prevention of the spread of extremist products, propaganda of violence and racial, religious and interethnic intolerance” will be implemented. In parallel, Russia will foster the development of “information infrastructure” which will ensure “accessibility of information on various issues relating to society’s sociopolitical, economic and spiritual life.”

The inclusion of spiritual and moral values in the list of national interests is striking. Emphasis on traditional values in Russian strategic documents is not a novelty: references to “traditional values” and “spirituality” were also evident in the 2009 security strategy and the 2014 military doctrine. In the 2015 document, however, “spiritual and moral values” are awarded much more significance and are portrayed as a nexus for the unity of the country and the peoples of Russia. These values appear to be under threat from “external cultural and information expansion” and extremist ideology.

Paradoxically, in spite of the emphasis on the unity of the peoples of Russia, an identical paragraph from the 2009 strategy, which calls for the provision

of a “balance of interests of the indigenous population and migrant workers, including foreign citizens with due account being taken of their ethnic, linguistic, cultural and religious differences,” remains unaltered.

Russia’s desire to become one of the leading global superpowers “in a polycentric world” remains unchanged. According to the strategy, Russia has “demonstrated the ability to safeguard sovereignty, independence and state and territorial integrity and to protect the rights of compatriots abroad,” has seen “an increase in its role in resolving the most important international problems ..., and ensuring strategic stability and the supremacy of international law.” Nonetheless, the Russian Federation is unsatisfied with the results attained and is prepared to “enhance [its] competitiveness and international prestige.” The Kremlin plans to achieve all of the above, first and foremost, via boosting its activity in international and regional organizations. Particular emphasis is placed on the formats of multilateral relations with the post-Soviet states and Asian countries. Bilateral relations with China and India are set to enhance and relations with the West will be maintained but on terms convenient for Russia.

At first glance, the document does not properly consider defense issues, the only reason for this being the fact that this segment is covered in detail in the 2014 military doctrine. Noteworthy is also the fact that the development of democratic institutions is once again cited as a national interest. However, as in the 2009 document, this issue is not found in any other sections of the current strategy.

Points Relevant to Georgia

This section of the study report presents an overview of the possible impact that some points of the Russian National Security Strategy may have on Georgia. The sub-chapters compile statements containing direct and indirect threats as well as points that do not constitute a threat but may impact Russia-Georgia relations. It should also be noted that Georgia in itself is not directly mentioned in the strategy. No specific plans are identified in relation to Abkhazia and the Tskhinvali region. The “Republic of Abkhazia” and the “Republic of South Ossetia” are discussed only in the context of bilateral relations (when referring to relations with CIS countries) and even then, without any additional clarification.³

Relations with Western Countries, the European Union and NATO

A fairly significant segment of the strategy is devoted to relations between Russia and the West, placing the focus more on the diversity of opinion and reasons for confrontation rather than the solution. It is also striking that the document covers threats deriving from the so-called “Islamic State” in a much more secondary nature than those originating from the United States or NATO.⁴

The strategy states that Russia’s “independent” foreign and domestic policy is countered by “political, economic, military and informational pressure” from Western countries (and primarily, the United States), “which are seeking to retain their dominance in world affairs.”

According to the strategy, the “bloc” approach to resolving international issues based on NATO and the EU is no longer viable citing the increase in migration flows from African and Near Eastern countries to Europe. As per the document, opportunities for maintaining global and regional stability in Europe, Asia-Pacific and the Near East “are shrinking significantly” against the background of the US missile defense system, the practical implementation of the “global strike” concept and the deployment of strategic non-nuclear high precision weapon systems.

Of particular interest to Georgia is the fact that the expansion of the military potential of the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO), its “endowment with global functions,” the amplification of NATO countries’ military activity, the further expansion of the alliance and the deployment of its military infrastructure in close proximity to Russian borders are considered by the Kremlin as a threat to the country’s national security. It is significant to note that in the 2014 military doctrine, the latter was assigned a much less severe qualification – that of a “military danger” while the 2009 national security strategy dubbed the notion as simply “unacceptable.”

Despite the controversy, the Russian Federation does not rule out extensive cooperation with the West in various areas. Russia favors the enhancement of mutually beneficial cooperation with European states and the European Union and supports the “harmonization” of integration processes in Europe and the post-Soviet territory.

For the purposes of establishing an open security system in the Euro-Atlantic region, the Kremlin stands ready to develop relations with NATO “based on equality” and considers “the readiness of the alliance to take

account of the interests of the Russian Federation when conducting military-political planning” as a prerequisite to the above.

Russia is interested in pursuing a “full-fledged partnership” with the United States and sees this relationship as being based on “coincident interests” including in the economic sphere. However, the military sector is perceived as the principal angle of Russia-US relations; namely, the non-proliferation of weapons of mass destruction, the expansion of the fight against terrorism and the resolution of regional conflicts.

It should be noted that in referring to the danger of the proliferation of nuclear and biological weapons, the strategy emphasizes the expansion of US “military-biological” laboratories on the territory of states adjacent to Russia. In all likelihood, these laboratories imply the biological safety research laboratories located in Ukraine, Kazakhstan and Georgia. While the document refrains from a detailed review of this issue or any type of assessment, its appearance in the context of the proliferation of nuclear and biological weapons is still notable.

Overall, the United States and its allies are portrayed as the primary violators of global security, attempting to reduce Russia’s influence and serve as roadblocks on its path to becoming a global superpower. In spite of all of the above, Russia does not exclude cooperation with these states in various fields, although a prerequisite to this is the recognition of Russia’s leading role and, in some cases, exclusive rights in international politics; especially, in its neighborhood.

Russia’s Plans in the Post-Soviet Space

The national security strategy affords special emphasis to the post-Soviet space which is distinguished from the Euro-Atlantic and Asia-Pacific regions and refers to it as the Eurasian “region” or “space.” The intent of the Russian Federation to expand its exclusive rights into post-Soviet countries is not new, although it should be noted that such a geographic division is not found in the 2009 security strategy.

In the section reviewing the current situation, Russia openly states that “in response to the growth of international instability, states are increasingly frequently assuming responsibility for matters in their regions.” The strategy goes on to add that the West’s stance “aimed at countering [Eurasian] integration processes” exerts a negative influence on Russian national interests and proclaims that the “anti-constitutional coup d’état”

supported by the United States and the European Union has led Ukrainian society to an armed conflict and caused a “deep split.” Reference to Ukraine in the Eurasian context is not an unusual phenomenon; Russia considers post-Soviet states as its “own” region and is bound to continue ignoring the Western choice of these countries.

The strategy clarifies that bilateral and multilateral relations with CIS countries, the “Republic of Abkhazia and the Republic of South Ossetia” constitute one of the key areas of foreign policy for the Russian Federation. Russia maintains that the ongoing integration within the Commonwealth of Independent States, the Collective Security Treaty Organization, the Eurasian Economic Union and the Union State of Russia and Belarus play a stabilizing role “on the territory” of the CIS and will continue to “develop the potential of regional and sub-regional integration and coordination.”

The strategy highlights the “quality development” of the Collective Security Treaty Organization. According to the strategy, the entity should be converted into a “universal international organization capable of confronting ... military-political and military-strategic threats (including international terrorism and extremism, the illicit traffic of narcotics and psychotropic substances, and illegal immigration) and also threats in the information sphere.” It is noteworthy that in the 2009 security strategy, the CSTO is mentioned only in the capacity of a “main interstate instrument” and the intent to transform it into a “universal international organization” points to the Kremlin’s rather ambitious plans.

The document also emphasizes the significance of the Eurasian Economic Union and states that the establishment of the EEU ushered in “a new stage of integration in the Eurasian space.” The Russian Federation is thus planning to expand integration efforts in this area. Whereas the 2009 strategy viewed the Eurasian Economic Union as a means to implement joint energy, infrastructure and industrial projects only, the current document constructs far more ambitious plans. According to the strategy, along with infrastructure and investment projects, the movement of the so-called “four freedoms” – goods, services, capital and labor resources, should be guaranteed.

Given all of the above, it can be concluded that Russia strives for the establishment of military and economic unions in the post-Soviet space, not unlike NATO and the EU, preventing the Western structures from getting close to Russia and legitimizing the Kremlin’s unequivocal dominance in the region.

Against this background, the threat to Georgia is evident as to a country seeking integration into Western structures but at the same time being considered by Russia as an integral part of the “Eurasian space.” It can be safely stated that Russia will spare no effort to counter Georgia’s Western integration and will make every attempt to “adjust” Tbilisi to Eurasian time.

Russia’s Spiritual and Traditional Values and the Eurasian Integration

Notions relevant to Georgia are also expressed in the section of the strategy focusing on culture. The document repeatedly mentions the key significance of the preservation and development of Russia’s traditional moral values. “Spiritual and moral” values are viewed as a basis for the foundations of the country’s statehood and a unifying factor among the peoples of Russia.

These values include “the priority of the spiritual over the material, protection of human life and of human rights and freedoms, the family, creative labor, service to the homeland, the norms of morals and morality, humanism, charity, fairness, mutual assistance, collectivism, the historical unity of the peoples of Russia and the continuity of our motherland’s history.”

While the primary objective of Russia’s “spiritual and moral” values is domestic – “the preservation and development of the common Russian identity of the Russian Federation’s peoples and of the country’s unified cultural area,” the strategy places considerable emphasis on their role in the implementation of Russia’s foreign policy objectives. This is evidenced by the fact that Russia considers the “development of a common humanitarian and information-telecommunications medium on the territories of the CIS member states and in contiguous regions” as one of the means for enhancing national security in the field of culture.

The Russian language issue is also worth mentioning. “The decline in the role of the Russian language in the world and in the quality of its teaching in Russia and abroad” is seen as a threat to national security in the area of culture while the study of the Russian language is perceived as “the basis for the integration processes in the post-Soviet area and a means of meeting the language and cultural requirements of compatriots abroad.” Moreover, “in order to accelerate the processes of Eurasian integration,” Russia plans to implement “programs to support the study of the Russian language and culture” as well as “the buildup of exports of good-quality educational services” in CIS member states. The Kremlin also intends to

enhance the “attractiveness” of Russian-language education on the world market for educational services.

The objective of instituting the “common humanitarian and information-telecommunications medium” and “programs [aiming] to support the study of the Russian language and culture” is inherently clear: to forge ideological preconditions for the Eurasian Economic Union to pave the way for the latter to develop into a union based on common ideas as a counterweight to the EU.

With this in mind, the challenge for Georgia is as follows – the already growing information expansion is likely to increase further and, along with anti-Western messages, the Russian “spiritual-moral” values will take precedence as its main feature. In parallel, attempts to engage Georgia in cultural and academic activities, as well as those promoting the study of the Russian language, will be strengthened.

Protection of the Interests of Compatriots and Citizens

According to the strategy, “increasing the efficacy of protection for the rights and legal interests of Russian citizens abroad” constitutes one of the main areas of focus for ensuring state and public security. As per the document, Russia has “demonstrated the ability to safeguard ... the rights of compatriots abroad” which, most likely, implies the annexation of Crimea and the military campaign carried out in Ukraine. By raising this question, Russia has once again confirmed its intent to continue the employment of the matter of its citizens and “compatriots” in foreign relations and that it will not refrain from resorting to rigid measures in order to attain the desired result. This is especially noteworthy for countries neighboring Russia, including Georgia.

Occupied Territories, Border and Cross-Border Cooperation

The strategy mentions “the deployment on the Russian Federation state border of high-tech and multifunctional border complexes and systems,⁵ ... increasing the effectiveness of border protection.” The document also refers to “stepping up the process of international legal formalization of the state border.” This, in all likelihood, implies the administrative border lines between Abkhazia and the Tskhinvali region and the rest of Georgia as well as the sections of the Georgia-Russia state border in Abkhazia and the Tskhinvali region. The latter is confirmed by the fact that April 26, 2016 saw

the approval of the Agreement between the Russian Federation and “the Republic of South Ossetia” which also envisions the demarcation of the “Russia-South Ossetia border.” It can be presumed that the “formalization” of the border will take place on the Abkhazian section of the Georgia-Russia state border as well. The “borderization” process will also be maintained.

Noteworthy is also the fact that, in discussing natural and technogenic disasters, the strategy emphasizes Russia’s intent to continue its participation in liquidation efforts carried out under the auspices of the United Nations and other international organizations and provide humanitarian assistance to affected countries. This point is significant in terms of the non-recognition policy of Georgia’s occupied territories. Given that there have been numerous occasions in the past where Russia has exploited humanitarian aid for political purposes (including in the Caribbean and Pacific countries with the intent of eliciting the recognition of Abkhazia and the Tskhinvali region), this point should be taken into consideration.

The document also indicates that international cooperation will increase in order to reduce environmental risks in the border areas. Taking account of the fact that environmental risks in the Kazbegi region of the Russia-Georgia border are fairly high, Russia may raise the issue of cooperation in this regard. This point is too broad and vague to become a matter of concern. However, the issue still needs to be taken into account from the Georgian side.

Summary

Anticipating state plans with high accuracy is quite challenging, especially of such an unpredictable player as Putin’s Russia. Nevertheless, one thing is clear – the Kremlin, gripped with the desire to attain hegemony in the post-Soviet space, will proceed to arbitrarily pursue its own interests and impose them on neighboring countries. In order to obtain the desired result, Russia will spare no effort in relation to Georgia, in particular:

- Activities directed against Georgia’s integration into NATO and the European Union will be maintained. At the same time, economic and political attempts to rope Georgia into the Eurasian Economic Union will be strengthened;
- Informational influence will increase and emphasis on the Russian “spiritual-moral” values will become its key feature, along with anti-Western messages;

- Attempts will be amplified to engage Georgia in programs promoting the study of the Russian language as well as other cultural and education activities;
- The “process of international legal formalization” of the occupied sections of the Russia-Georgia state border as well as the “borderization” along the administrative border line will be maintained;
- The reinforcement and technical equipment of the borders of the Russian Federation will continue, including the deployment of high-tech and multifunctional complexes and systems;
- The employment of the matter of its citizens and “compatriots” in foreign relations, including with Georgia, will be pursued further;
- The practice of exploiting humanitarian assistance for political purposes will also be maintained, including with the intent to garner the international recognition of Abkhazia and the Tskhinvali region.

References

1. According to the Federal Law on Strategic Planning in the Russian Federation, the National Security Strategy is subject to review every six years.
2. See: *Russian National Security Strategy, December 2015 – Full-text Translation*, www.ieee.es/Galerias/fichero/OtrasPublicaciones/Internacional/2016/Russian-National-Security-Strategy-31Dec2015.pdf
3. It is noteworthy that the 2009 strategy makes no mention of the occupied territories of Georgia.
4. The so-called “Islamic State” is mentioned only once, stating that “the strengthening of its influence is the result of the policy of double standards to which some states adhere.”
5. The 2009 strategy also makes a reference to border complexes; in particular, along the borders with Kazakhstan, Ukraine, Georgia and Azerbaijan.