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**Consequences of the Growth of Russian Military Forces in the Caucasus:
Georgia's Perspective**

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In February 2018 plans were reported to seriously strengthen the Russian military forces based in the North Caucasus. According to this information, the process is set to be launched at the end of 2018.

The whole picture of the ongoing transformation in the Russian military forces and the current military and political situation indicate that the main target of the growth of Russia's forces in the Caucasus is probably Ukraine. This process, however, threatens Georgia as well.

The Russian military might in the Caucasus is already much greater than that of Georgia's armed forces. Its additional increase would further change the military balance against Georgia. This situation requires Tbilisi to develop its defense policy accordingly.

Neither the present nor the previous governments have done so in a consistent and satisfactory manner. In order to make Georgia more secure, it is necessary to change this state of affairs and adopt a defense model that is adequate to the threats the country is facing in the present perilous international environment.

Existing Russian Land Forces in the Caucasus

The following Russian land maneuver and artillery/missile units are stationed around Georgia and within its occupied regions:

- **42nd Mechanized¹ Division.** Its maneuver and artillery forces include three mechanized regiments, one artillery regiment, separate tank and reconnaissance battalions and an anti-tank artillery battalion. The units of the 42nd Division are based at various locations in **Chechnya**.
- **7th Air Assault (Mountain) Division.** A unit of the Russian Airborne Troops (VDV). Maneuver and artillery forces include one parachute, one air assault and one artillery regiment, as well as a reconnaissance battalion and a tank company. The division's units are based in the **Krasnodar** and **Stavropol** regions.
- **4th Military Base.** Just like the other two Russian bases in the South Caucasus, the 4th Base is an analogue of a mechanized brigade with additional powerful weaponry. In the case of the 4th Base, such weaponry consists of Iskander short-range ballistic missiles and Smerch heavy multiple rocket launchers. The base is located in the occupied **Tskhinvali Region of Georgia**.
- **7th Military Base.** Besides a mechanized brigade, the base's forces also include S-300 surface-to-air missile systems. It is located in the occupied region of **Abkhazia, Georgia**.
- **102nd Military Base.** Besides a mechanized brigade, the base's forces also include S-300 surface-to-air missile systems and Smerch heavy multiple rocket launchers. Located in **Armenia**.
- **19th Mechanized Brigade.** Located in **Vladikavkaz, North Ossetia**.

¹ In the official Russian terminology such units are called "motor rifle", but in this paper I use the international term, "mechanized."

- **136th Mechanized Brigade.** Located in **Buynaksk, Dagestan.**
- **205th Mechanized Brigade.** Located in **Budyonnovsk, Stavropol region.**
- **34th Mechanized (Mountain) Brigade.** Located in the **Zelenchuk district, Karachay-Cherkessia.**
- **10th Special Forces Brigade.** Located in **Molkino, Krasnodar region.**
- **346th Special Forces Brigade.** Located in **Prokhladny, Kabardino-Balkaria.**
- **100th Reconnaissance Brigade.** The brigade's maneuver force is one reconnaissance battalion. Located in **Mozdok, North Ossetia.**
- **25th Special Forces Regiment.** Located in the city of **Stavropol.**
- **1st Missile Brigade.** Armed with Iskander missiles. Located in **Molkino, Krasnodar region.**
- **12th Missile Brigade.** Armed with Iskander missiles. Located in **Mozdok, North Ossetia.**
- **291st Artillery Brigade.** Located in **Troitskaya, Ingushetia.** A flamethrower battalion is also located in **Troitskaya.**
- **227th Artillery Brigade.** Located in the **Maykop district, Adygea.**



S-300 surface-to-air missile system

Overall, Russia currently has the following maneuver and artillery forces permanently stationed in the Caucasus: one mechanized division, one air assault division, six mechanized brigades, one mechanized mountain brigade, two special forces brigades and a special forces regiment, the reconnaissance battalion belonging to the 100th Brigade, two missile brigades armed with Iskander missiles, two artillery brigades and a flamethrower battalion.

To these we must add the marines of the Black Sea Fleet and the Caspian Flotilla – one brigade and two separate battalions. Additionally, there is the 22nd Special Forces Brigade, located in

the Rostov region, whose troops, along with those of the 10th Special Forces Brigade, were among the first to engage against Georgian troops during the Russo-Georgian War of August 2008.

The experience of the Russian military attacks against Georgia in 2008 and against Ukraine in 2014 shows that Russian military operations are highly likely to involve the VDV units located in the European part of Russia. These units, besides the aforementioned 7th Air Assault Division, include three other divisions and three brigades, based in Russia's central regions.

It is also possible that, in the case of a future war in the Caucasus, some special forces, mechanized and other units located in Russia's other regions might be sent to the Caucasus to take part in military operations.

The Growth of Russia's Military Forces in the Caucasus

Some of the Caucasus-based units mentioned above have been created or transformed during the last few years as a part of the process of strengthening Russian military forces in this region.

2011-2012: The 25th Special Forces Regiment is created.²

2012: The 346th Special Forces Brigade is created.³

2013: The 1st Missile Brigade, stationed in the Krasnodar region, is rearmed with Iskander missiles.⁴

2015: A new 12th Missile Brigade is created in Mozdok, North Ossetia. It is also armed with Iskander missiles.⁵

2016: Mechanized brigades stationed in Chechnya are combined into the 42nd Mechanized Division.⁶

2016: A tank company is created within the 7th Air Assault Division. Plans are to expand this company into a tank battalion during 2018.⁷

² Various sources name 2011 and 2012 as the years when the 25th Regiment was created:

Irakli Komakhidze, "25th Russian GRU Special Forces Regiment – "The Separatists of South-Eastern Ukraine," *InformNapalm*, 23.04.2014 [in Russian], <https://informnapalm.org/92-25-j-polk-spetsnaznachenyya-gru-rf-separat/> (accessed 12 April 2018);

"25th Separate GRU Special Forces Regiment (City of Stavropol)," *SPECNAZ.ORG: Community of Russia's Special Forces Veterans* [in Russian], http://specnaz.org/dossier/GRU_special_forces/25_y_otdelnyy_polk_spetsialnogo_naznacheniya_gru_g_stavropol/ (accessed 12 April 2018).

³ Irakli Komakhidze, "346th GRU Special Forces Brigade," *InformNapalm*, 23.04.2014 [in Russian], <https://informnapalm.org/97-346-ya-brygada-spetsnaznachenyya-gru-prodol/> (accessed 12 April 2018).

⁴ "The Newest Iskander-M have Begun their Combat Duty in Orenburg," *TV Zvezda*, 19.11.2014 [in Russian], <https://tvzvezda.ru/news/forces/content/201411191213-jq7i.htm> (accessed 12 April 2018).

⁵ Ivan Kapustin, "Missile Brigade in Southern Military District Handed a Battle Flag of a New Type," *RIA Novosti*, 24.11.2016 [in Russian], https://ria.ru/defense_safety/20161124/1482057666.html (accessed 12 April 2018).

⁶ "Military Exercises of the Re-created 42nd Mechanized Division Launched in Chechnya," *RIA Novosti*, 11.01.2017 [in Russian], https://ria.ru/defense_safety/20170111/1485466248.html (accessed 12 April 2018).

2016-2017: The 943rd Reactive Artillery Regiment, located in Adygea, is transformed into a more powerful unit – the 227th Artillery Brigade.⁸



An officer of 227th Artillery Brigade, established in 2016-2017, during a military exercise

Two special forces reconnaissance companies were created by 2017. Their purpose is to locate targets behind enemy lines for Iskander missiles and multiple rocket launchers. It is notable that while there are plans to create such companies in other Russian military districts as well, the first ones have been established in the Southern Military District.⁹

The strengthening of Russia's military forces in the Caucasus still continues. For instance, according to open sources, there are plans to establish another reconnaissance brigade in Korenovsk, Krasnodar region.¹⁰ This will become the second unit of this kind in the Caucasus after the 100th Reconnaissance Brigade.

⁷ "Russian VDV to Establish Three Tank Battalions in Two Divisions and One Brigade," *TASS*, 31 July 2017 [in Russian], <http://tass.ru/armiya-i-opk/4451671> (accessed 12 April 2018).

⁸ Irakli Komakhidze, "Russia Creates a New Artillery Brigade in the Ukrainian Direction," *InformNapalm*, 03.02.2017 [in Russian], <https://informnapalm.org/32804-rossiya-razvorachivaet-artbrigadu/> (accessed 12 April 2018).

⁹ Yevgeny Dmitriev, Alexey Ramm, "Iskanders to Get 'Eyes' behind Enemy Lines," *Izvestiya*, 22 May 2017 [in Russian], <https://iz.ru/news/711110> (accessed 12 April 2018).

¹⁰ "Southern Military District," *Milkvaz.com*, July 7, 2017 [in Russian], <http://milkvaz.com/index.php/voorujonnie-cili-racii/vo-cv/u-vo> (accessed 12 April 2018).

The most significant news in this regard, however, was reported in February 2018 by the *Izvestiya* newspaper.¹¹ Journalists were told at the Russian Ministry of Defense that **there are plans to launch the transformation of the 19th and 136th Mechanized Brigades into two divisions in late 2018.**

Unlike the 42nd Mechanized Division, which was established through the unification of the three existing mechanized brigades, in this case the plan, reportedly, is to transform each of the two brigades into a division by creating new regiments and battalions. If such a transformation does occur, the Russian military forces in the North Caucasus will grow by thousands of troops as well as significant numbers of armored vehicles, artillery and other assets.

Strategic Context of the Growth of Russian Military Forces

The increase of the Russian military might in the Caucasus should be viewed in the context of the wider military transformation taking place in Russia.

The establishment of the 42nd Division and plans to transform the two brigades in the eastern Caucasus into divisions are parts of a larger process. Beyond the Caucasus, Russia established six other divisions in other regions of its European part in 2013-2017.

Importantly, it is believed in Russia that divisions are better suited for large-scale frontal combat than unit structure based on brigades only.

Two of these six divisions – the 2nd Mechanized and the 4th Tank Divisions – were created in 2013 and are located south-west of Moscow. The rest were established in 2016-2017. One – the 90th Tank Division – was created in the Ural region while the other three – the 3rd, 144th and 150th Mechanized Divisions – were created near the border with Ukraine.

Russia had no permanently based maneuver units on its border with Ukraine prior to 2016. The creation of three new divisions on that border indicates that new aggressive actions against Ukraine are being seriously considered in Moscow.

There is a lot of information about regular Russian troops taking part in the war in Donbass. This includes the troops from the Russian units based in the Caucasus.¹² It is highly probable that forces stationed in the Caucasus would participate in any new Russian aggression against Ukraine.

It is Ukraine that currently presents the gravest problem for Russia's imperial ambitions in the former Soviet space. Meanwhile, the war in Donbass goes on with some fighting taking place every single day. Most importantly, today Ukraine is quite strong militarily, differing in this regard from Russia's other potential victim, Georgia. Unlike the latter, Ukraine would be able to offer very

¹¹ Nikolai Surkov, Alexey Ramm, Yevgeny Andreev, "Northern Caucasus Strengthened with Divisions," *Izvestiya*, 16 February 2018 [in Russian], <https://iz.ru/705714/nikolai-surkov-aleksei-ramm-evgenii-andreev/severnyi-kavkaz-ukrepili-diviziami> (accessed 12 April 2018).

¹² For a sample of such data see: "Proofs of the Russian Aggression: InformNapalm Releases Extensive Database of Evidence," *InformNapalm*, 04/12/2018, <https://informnapalm.org/en/proofs-of-the-russian-aggression-informnapalm-releases-extensive-database-of-evidence/> (accessed 13 April 2018).

serious resistance to a potential new aggression. Therefore, it is reasonable to presume that it is Ukraine that is the main target of the ongoing Russian military transformation, including the growth of forces stationed in the Caucasus. Still, this growth is a threat for Georgia too.

Russian Military Threat for Georgia

Russia is engaged in a consistent effort, employing a variety of methods, to undermine Georgia's sovereignty and include it within its sphere of influence. Moscow's present geostrategic objectives are absolutely incompatible with Georgia's national interests and security. Therefore, Russia's military might constitutes a permanent threat for Georgia.

The existence of Russian military forces in the occupied regions signifies that in the case of another aggression against Georgia, the Russians will be able to quickly attack the depth of the Georgian territory and its main cities. The units in Abkhazia and Tskhinvali Region mean that Russia has crossed the primary geographic barrier in the form of the Greater Caucasus Mountains. While these two mechanized brigades are not enough to defeat the Georgian armed forces, they are bridgeheads on the Georgian side of the Caucasus mountain range that allow the Russians to quickly send large forces from the north into Georgia.



Russian troops of the 7th Military Base, in the occupied region of Abkhazia, during a military exercise

The Russians do their best to keep their forces in the occupied regions in a state of high battle readiness. Frequent military exercises, periodic rearmament with better weapons and the

development of military infrastructure are common for the Russian bases in Abkhazia and Tskhinvali Region.

Georgian standing land maneuver and artillery forces consist of four infantry and two artillery brigades along with Special Forces and a reconnaissance battalion.¹³ These forces are, probably, insufficient for a strong enough resistance to a potential Russian attack. And the military transformation in Russia further alters the balance against Georgia.

Georgia's Defense Policy in the Context of the Russian Threat

In the period since the war of 2008, Georgian authorities have not done enough for the improvement of Georgia's military security.

While Georgia alone cannot ultimately defeat a full-scale Russian aggression, the Georgian armed forces still have a perfectly realistic goal by achieving which it is possible to protect Georgia's sovereignty. This goal is to offer a serious and sufficiently prolonged resistance to the invaders, giving Georgia's foreign partners the time necessary to stop the Russian aggression.

This is what happened during the war of August 2008. It is possible that in the case of a new aggression Russia might have more time for achieving its objectives than it did in 2008 but this time still is going to be limited. Georgia's task, in such circumstances, will be to prevent Russia from achieving its military and political objectives within this limited time.



Georgian troops

¹³ *Strategic Defence Review 2017-2020*, Ministry of Defense of Georgia, p. 65, <https://mod.gov.ge/uploads/2018/pdf/SDR-ENG.pdf> (accessed 13 April 2018).

There is a serious risk that with the defense potential it has at present, Georgia would fail to accomplish this task. Such a state of affairs is unacceptable, forcing, as it does, Georgian citizens to live under a constant threat of losing their sovereignty. It is necessary to rectify this situation.

Due to its limited financial resources, Georgia cannot have a much larger standing armed forces than it does now. But it is entirely possible to increase its defensive potential through a correctly organized reserve system. Georgia certainly has the resources to do so. In the case of a foreign aggression, such a system provides for a fast and organized mobilization. As a result, the professional units are supplemented by an additional defensive resource which makes it much more difficult for an invader to achieve its objectives. A combination of relatively small standing armed forces and a well-organized reserve exists in a number of other small nations. Georgia needs to introduce it too.

The previous government improved the standing Georgian armed forces drastically. At the same time, however, it failed to create an effective reserve, even after the Russian invasion of 2008, when two things became crystal clear: 1) The main task of the Georgian armed forces is to defend the country against the Russian military rather than to conduct expeditionary and small-scale operations for which a “small and mobile” force would be enough; 2) The vastly outnumbered Georgian standing armed forces alone are unable to offer a sufficient resistance in the case of a full-scale Russian offensive.

The failure to create a well-organized reserve must be considered as a grave mistake of the previous government of Georgia.

The situation did not improve after the new government came to power in 2012. In sum, during the ten years since the Russian aggression in August 2008, the Georgian state has not taken measures that were necessary for improvement of its security and, at the same time, were realistic and affordable.

Recently, the Ministry of Defense of Georgia has begun to work on adopting the total defense approach which includes a project for a new reserve system.¹⁴ This is laudable and, if accomplished, would strengthen Georgia’s defensive potential. However, the present plans envision a very slow tempo for establishing the new reserve. For instance, the training of only 260 reservists is planned in 2018.

After ten lost years, and in the present dynamic and perilous international environment, a more intense effort is required to give Georgia a wartime mobilization capability as soon as possible. To protract the creation of a reserve system for several years would be another mistake.

At the same time, a new reserve should not be an initiative of the Ministry of Defense alone. Political parties and active segments of society need to convey a strong and frequently articulated

¹⁴ Georgian Law on the Military Forces Reserve and the Military Reserve Service (project), Parliament of Georgia, [in Georgian] <https://info.parliament.ge/file/1/BillReviewContent/174056> (accessed 13 April 2018).

request for the improvement of the defense system and a timely creation of the reserve. The past mistakes belong not just to the political elite but also to society which does not express sufficient interest towards the matter of its own physical protection. Changing this state of affairs would greatly contribute to the cause of Georgia's national security.