



BESA Post-Soviet Conflicts Research Digest No. 1 (September-October 2023)

The Post-Soviet Conflicts Research Program at the BESA Center has started its activities at a highly turbulent time, and this turbulence is unlikely to fade away any time soon. In September and October 2023, since the launch of the PSCR, all sub-regions of the (conventionally understood) post-Soviet space have received our authors' attention.

The first conflict escalation that our experts had to deal with was the developments in Karabakh. Petr Oskolkov analyzed the role of this breakaway region of Azerbaijan, historically populated by both Azerbaijanis and Armenians, as a symbolic figure in [Armenian political discourse](#). He concluded that “*Armenian politics now has a chance, at least partially, to return to the situation before 1988 and start from tabula rasa,*” and that the loss of the enclave, however painful it may be for public emotions, can “*reduce the vulnerability of Armenia's foreign policy positions*” and lead to a significant reconfiguration of domestic elites.

Elina Bardach-Yalov reviewed some contradictory points in the rhetoric surrounding the September escalation in the region, particularly the potential role of [external actors](#). According to her analysis, “*a successful anti-terrorist operation in Karabakh will benefit primarily the Armenian government, which claims to have chosen the West over Russia*” — unless “*there is a coup that removes Pashinyan and his team from power.*” Andrei Kazantsev-Vaisman identified the main elements in the Armenian antisemitism, which has received a new impetus against the background of the [post-war resentment](#). He concludes that “*dislike towards Israel, stemming from Israel's support for the modernization of the Azerbaijani army,*” “*active use by Armenian authorities and political organizations of the rhetoric of 'genocide,'*” and “*sympathy towards Iran in its confrontation with Israel, based on the idea of 'Aryan unity' between Armenians and Iranians*” could potentially hinder the Armenian leadership's attempts to establish “*closer ties with the US and EU.*”

PSCR's focus on Central Asian states has been less reactive and generally aimed at understanding the short- and long-term impact of other conflicts on political dynamics in the sub-region. Andrei Kazantsev-Vaisman's analysis of how the states of Central Asia are shaping their policies toward the conflict in Ukraine shows that they are trying to strengthen their sovereignty “*in a high-risk environment.*” At the same time, these countries are trying to “*resist Russia's pressure and maintain official neutrality in the Russia-Ukraine war,*” to “*maintain dialogue with the Russian leadership to avoid provoking further pressure,*” and to “*receive maximum economic benefits from trade and other forms of cooperation with Russia.*” What Moscow is trying to [achieve now in the region](#), may be reduced the attempts to use local markets to “*circumvent sanctions and meet the needs of the Russian military industry,*” to

establish exports and transit of gas,” to “*secure symbolic and ideological support for both external and domestic propaganda purposes,*” and to “*gain support in international organizations.*” Also, we should not forget about the attempts of the Russian authorities attempts to “use migrant labor in combat operations.”

The situation in Russia itself has come under scrutiny as a reaction to the death of [Yevgeny Prigozhin](#), head of the private military company “Wagner”, who who made a failed coup attempt in June. The consequences of the mysterious crash of his plane for Russian politics were analyzed by Konstantin Pakhaliuk. The author points to the persistent but unstable elite consensus around Vladimir Putin and the use of Prigozhin’s death as a warning to those who criticize the ruling regime from pro-war position, as well as an attempt to ensure the loyalty of the “power bloc.”

The attention of our experts toward some of the European post-Soviet countries was triggered by electoral dynamics. Petr Oskolkov scrutinized the political process in Moldova, agitated by the election as head of the [Gagauz region](#) of a pro-Russian candidate strongly disliked by the country’s establishment. The author shows the instrumental character of the separatist threat, explains the long-lasting anti-European orientation of Gagauzia through miscommunication, and points out that Russian influence is counterbalanced by Turkish “soft power.” Petr Oskolkov also analyzed the consequences of the KOOS party/movement activities in Estonia. [KOOS](#) (“Together”) is a pro-Russian, Eurosceptic political force that capitalizes on the narrative of “neutrality.” Its leaders openly support the actions of Vladimir Putin’s government in Ukraine. While not yet registered as a political party, the KOOS movement managed to secure a significant number of votes in the capital and in the Ida-Virumaa region bordering Russia. This case shows that Russian voters are “*disappointed by the dubious policies*” of the ruling coalition, which has not bothered to “*formulate a clear and targeted policy towards the Russian-speaking citizens.*” Such a protest vote “*might potentially have grave consequences for Estonian democracy.*” The author also draws parallels with the Israeli situation and points out the importance of “*building a successful strategy of attracting Arab voters to the nationwide Israeli parties.*”

The brutal and unprovoked invasion of Israeli by Hamas, launched in October 2023, could not escape the attention of our experts regarding its implications for the post-Soviet space. Analyzing [the possible implications](#) of this terrorist invasion for Ukraine, Ze’ev Khanin concludes that “*in the long-term, or at least from a medium-term perspective, Western allies are unlikely to forget about Ukraine because of Israel.*” The problem “*might arise in operational terms, which would compel Kyiv to seek alternative sources of military supplies (...) for at least a few months*”; however, “*a willingness of the United States and the West to support Israel in its fight against the Hamas, Hezbollah, and their Iranian patrons is unlikely to affect negatively Ukrainian interests.*” Dmitry Petrov highlights and explains the anti-Israeli stance widespread in the Russian and Armenian [mass media](#). He believes that “*the current campaign is one of the Kremlin’s political weapons targeting Israel and its allies*” and warns that “*this campaign could become anti-Semitic and threaten Jews in the Russian Federation.*” As for the Armenian media, “*their anti-Israeli and anti-Semitic rhetoric resonates with the statements made by the leadership of Turkey, as well as Iranian and Arab media.*”

Finally, Andrei Kazantsev-Vaisman broadly outlined five scenarios for the development of [post-Soviet conflicts](#). “*In the first three scenarios, the main events reshaping the conflicts in the post-Soviet space will take place in relation to the dynamics of the Russian-Ukrainian war, while in the other two scenarios, Central Asia and the South Caucasus will take center stage.*”

These scenarios can be summarized as “Cold War 2.0,” the “Collapse of the USSR 2.0. Fragmentation of Russia and Regional Conflicts in the Territories of Its Former Dominance,” “‘Perestroika’ 2.0: Reforms in Russia, Mutually Beneficial Peace with Ukraine,” “Central Asian Explosion,” and “Networked Self-Organization of Central Asian and Caucasian Countries or the Turkic World.” All the scenarios have implications for Israel.

Whatever further developments in the conflicts in the post-Soviet states, it is unlikely that the PSCRIP will lack the empirics for further analysis, and we intend to follow the events in the coming months. Stay tuned.

Digest prepared by Petr Oskolkov