

## Russia's Policy on International Interventions

### PRINCIPLE OR *REALPOLITIK*?

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Since the collapse of the USSR, Russia's position on international interventions and sovereignty has appeared ambiguous or incoherent to many observers. With the glaring exception of the Georgia war, Russia tends to pursue a strategy of non-interventionism, respecting the norm of sovereignty at both global and regional levels. Why then did Moscow react the way it did in Georgia in August 2008? Did the Georgia war represent a kind of conflict Russia considered ripe for intervention, or was it the exception that proves the rule?

#### **Responsibility to Protect: Respected Norm or Strategic Justification?**

Among Western states, there is generally a consensus that the international community has a responsibility to protect populations who suffer from abuse at the hands of their governments. Russia says it agrees with this principle but often has issues with Western methods of implementation.

At times, the principle of responsibility to protect is perceived in Russia as nothing more than the efforts by the society of democratic states to reap the benefits of democratic peace theory by means of military intervention. Russia is worried that the West has a pre-established consensus about which side to support in internal conflicts (rebels over non-democratic governments) and that its frequent commitment to regime change leads not to settlement but to the further escalation of conflicts. As a permanent member of the UN Security Council, Russia can influence UN decisions on intervention in any given conflict but not the underlying moral decision about who is right and who is wrong, which is a decision that evokes the ideological competition of the Cold War with regard to Third World revolutions. But now Russia and the West appear to have switched positions: Russia tends to support governments, while the West tends to support rebels regardless of their political views so long as they oppose non-democratic governments. If there are no rebels, the West itself is sometimes ready to change non-democratic regimes to democratic ones in order to realize democratic peace theory.

Syria is the most recent example of the clash of Russian and Western approaches on the responsibility to protect. Contrary even to its own expectations, Russia managed to promote an agenda of conflict settlement based on Russia's preferred normative approach: direct talks between the sides of the conflict without prior international intervention and regime change. At the Geneva II conference on Syria in January 2014, differences between U.S. and Russian views on the role of Syrian President Bashar al-Assad in a transitional government remained, but at least his resignation was no longer a precondition for direct talks between the Syrian opposition and government. This seeming victory of Russian diplomacy, however, is best explained by U.S. "intervention fatigue" than by the triumph of Russian norms.

### **Russian Intervention in Georgia**

Syria has a non-democratic regime, but what happens when there is an internal conflict in a state considered to be in the "democratic" camp? In the case of Georgia in 2008, it was the West that supported the government while Russia intervened to support secessionists. Some Western analysts interpret Russian actions in this case to be a cynical adoption of the responsibility to protect norm. Moscow itself, however, never used this argument; Russian official discourse included only the term "peace enforcement."

Still, the decision to go to war ran counter to Russia's overall attitude toward interventions. Georgian actions against South Ossetia in 2008 were as much an internal matter as were two Russian wars against Chechen separatism. Russian recognition of South Ossetian and Abkhazian independence runs counter to Russia's position on the recognition of Kosovo. For that matter, the establishment of Russian-led peacekeeping operations in Transnistria, South Ossetia, Abkhazia, and Tajikistan in the early 1990s without a UN mandate was followed by Russia's condemnation of NATO's operation in Kosovo in 1999 and the U.S.-led operation in Iraq in 2003.

What accounts for these inconsistencies? Are Russian peacekeeping missions and the Georgia war indicators of Russian neo-imperialism? Does Russia object principally only to "democracy-building" interventions (i.e., Western ones) to avoid creating a precedent for regime-change within a less than fully democratic Russia? Conventional realist logic would suggest positive answers to either or both these questions.

However, there are alternatives to consider. Russia may still have a coherent position on non-intervention—namely, that all internal conflicts should be solved within a state's internationally recognized borders. Indeed, the conflict with Georgia did not lead to a shift in Russian positions on Transnistria, Nagorno-Karabakh, or Kosovo. Recognition of South Ossetian and Abkhazian independence may contradict Russia's foreign policy principles, but it can be considered a step induced by circumstances. It was an exception that other actors have taken for a rule.

Since 2008, Russia has not generally changed its position on international interventions. Russia still insists that parties should try to solve conflicts themselves. If in 2008 Russia really intended to create a precedent that was more accepting of interventions, then it ought to have met the West's efforts to undermine sovereignty elsewhere (Libya, Syria) with greater understanding (if not full agreement). But Russia's

position continues to contradict its own strategy in 2008. Its position on international interventions is coherent; it is the 2008 Georgia war that needs to be analyzed as an exception.

### **Russian Regional Non-Interventions**

We see evidence in support of this argument elsewhere in the post-Soviet space. One common argument in the West is that Russia sympathizes with authoritarian regimes and that is why it protests against Western interventions aimed at changing those regimes. This logic suggests that Russia should go further and directly support authoritarian regimes in their fight against internal opposition forces. Direct support of authoritarianism at the global level might harm Russia's international image, but at the regional level it ought to have greater freedom of action. However, Russia has not supported friendly regimes by way of interventions.

Two sets of cases illustrate the point. The first of these are the so-called color revolutions in Georgia in 2003 and Ukraine in 2004-5 (some would add Moldova in 2009). Although Moscow was more or less disappointed with the outcomes of color revolutions and feared revolution as a method of regime change, it never tried to undermine the sovereignty of these states during or after unrest to help the governments that Russia supported.

The second set of cases includes situations that could have become a precedent for collective regional intervention due to a certain degree of violence in the course of public unrest. The first case is Kyrgyzstan's pair of regime changes. Russia and the Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO) did not intervene in the Kyrgyz revolution in 2005 to save the rather soft authoritarian regime of President Askar Akaev, nor did they intervene in the course of the 2010 revolution. The CSTO explained its non-intervention by claiming that the organization was not designed to react to such internal crises; by its statutes, the CSTO is a collective defense organization. Its position has been that any kind of revolution or social unrest is the internal affair of member-states and does not justify CSTO interference (especially without a formal request for intervention on the part of a member-state). Thus, the CSTO did not intervene when protests occurred in Belarus in 2011, in Zhanaozen in Kazakhstan in 2011, or during extremist attacks in Gorno-Badakhshan in Tajikistan in 2012. Any of the above might have become precedents for CSTO intervention, but CSTO members consider these cases to be exclusively within national jurisdiction.

More questions arise about the ethnic clashes in southern Kyrgyzstan in June 2010, when the CSTO and other regional organizations did not intervene despite an official request by Kyrgyzstan to Russia. The official explanation for non-intervention is that this request was sent to Russia, not the CSTO. Moreover, there was no legal basis for such a reaction. An intervention would have been reasonable only after the end of clashes, more akin to classical UN peacekeeping when peacekeepers monitor or enforce a cease-fire.

One more potential case for CSTO intervention could eventually be Nagorno-Karabakh, if a military conflict were again to flare up. But the CSTO has the legal right to

intervene only if there is an attack on the territory of a member-state—in other words, if Azerbaijan directly attacks the territory of Armenia. If military actions occur against Nagorno-Karabakh, this will not justify CSTO intervention.

### **Beyond Intervention?**

Russia's overall strategy of non-interventionism goes against the current state of global affairs when the international community pays increasing attention to internal conflicts.

What may account for Russia's differing position is its experience of state- and nation-building. Newly independent and recently democratized countries tend to suffer from various types of internal conflicts. Russia's own experience fighting separatism has likely persuaded it that international interventions that support rebels or separatists (in the name of the responsibility to protect) more often than not impedes processes of state- and nation-building that are already not so smooth. We might add to this the impact of Russia's own revolutionary history; after the collapse of the USSR, not many Russians consider revolution to be such a "progressive" way for a state to develop.

But even if Russia is opposed to intervention on principle, it can still contribute to realizing the principle of responsibility to protect. Russia has a unique experience to share with troubled states. Recent international interventions have established that major problems arise at the stage of post-conflict state-building, a long-term process that does not offer a clear exit strategy for intervening actors. Western states have been democratic and with established state structures for such a long period that it is difficult for them to share their own challenges, only best practices that are difficult to implement effectively without decades of trial and error. Russia, on the other hand, is still undergoing its own processes of state- and nation-building. It can share the challenges it has experienced while building working state structures, settling separatist conflicts, and participating in peacekeeping operations. One of the best "interventions" Russia can offer others may be its own experiences and lessons learned.

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