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Russia Is Left Out in the Cold by Its Neighbors

By Ivan Sukhov

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The tragedy in Gyumri, Armenia, where Russian soldier Valery Permyakov is suspected to have killed a family of seven, once again demonstrates the sad state of Russia's relations with countries that it considers part of its "sphere of influence." Moscow's high-profile Eurasian integration initiatives — designed to recall, if not partially restore — the past power and scale of the Soviet Union, only thinly veil the failure of Russia's foreign policy in its relations with the countries of the "near abroad."

Only the peculiar thinking of post-Soviet officials can explain the silence of the Russian and Armenian authorities in the first few days after the killings.

Armenian officials have avoided making any comments in an effort to prevent more problems in their relations with Russia, and because they would look ridiculous for allowing Russian law enforcement agencies to control the investigation into a crime committed entirely on Armenian territory.

That would place the country's sovereignty in question in the minds of ordinary Armenians. Silence is therefore the only option the Armenian authorities have for minimizing the negative public fallout.

As for the Russian leadership, it was obvious that the Kremlin wanted to refrain from commenting until they had a clear picture of what happened. "What if we express our condolences," they apparently reasoned, "and thereby assume some of the blame for these events?"

"And worse, what if it turns out that the victims — including the 6-month-old baby who initially survived but later died from his multiple knife wounds — were provocateurs planted by scheming outside forces intent on spoiling Russia's relations with Armenia and casting the contingent of Russian forces in the worst possible light?"

What happened in Gyumri raises many questions, and it is even possible that a foreign agency might decide to investigate this act of mass murder. But the silence of the officials from both countries after the horrific deaths of seven people — even though they might have offered some form of explanation — indicates that relations between Armenia and Russia are not exactly those of close and fraternal allies.

Judging from its reaction to the killings, Yerevan feels an uncomfortable dependence on Russia, and Moscow clearly does not feel confident enough in its relations with Armenia to break out of its habitual "besieged fortress" mentality and take positive action.

After Russia's annexation of Crimea and the war in eastern Ukraine, few outside Russia will believe the findings of FSB investigators or the Russian Investigative Committee — whether they conclude that foreign interests had a hand in the murders or that Permyakov is innocent.

The overall trend is that Russia is losing its credibility and influence in the former Soviet republics — and this is exactly what Kremlin officials are trying not to exacerbate.

But as is often the case when a situation has already spun out of control, the very actions intended to ease the problem only make it worse — in this case, the authorities' decision to maintain silence until all of the facts are clear.

However, the events of 2014 were not the turning point, when it suddenly became clear that Russia has problems with its neighbors, including those whom it had always considered faithful allies. There was the earlier Russia-Georgia War in 2008, when Moscow showed everyone that it no longer considered the 1991 borders inviolable.

The short period of calm and constructive relations with the Baltic states in the early 1990s immediately gave way to tensions when the question of withdrawing the Russian military arose.

Moscow used the alleged inequality of the Russian minorities in Estonia and Latvia as a convenient pretext for the expression of nationalist sentiment in the country.

Those tensions peaked in 2007 when the Tallinn authorities decided to move a Soviet war memorial out of the city center. That happened after all three Baltic states had already joined the European Union and NATO.

This is something the Kremlin might have avoided if it had developed relations with Vilnius, Riga and Tallinn on the foundation laid in 1990-91 by former President Boris Yeltsin, who sympathized with their desire for independence from the Soviet Union.

Belarus — one of Russia's most dependable allies throughout the years of integration schemes — suffered considerably from Russia's ban on European food imports and Russian attempts to unilaterally influence Belarussian political decisions.

The price for such policies is clearly reflected in Belarus' refusal to recognize the independence of Abkhazia and South Ossetia, and in the position of Belarus in relation to the Ukrainian crisis. Meanwhile, the West is increasingly considering Belarus as a country that suddenly seems to be much closer to the West, and to European integration, than seemed possible only a short time ago.

Against the backdrop of events in Ukraine, it is difficult to imagine that Moldova, where Moscow supports the "frozen" conflict over the self-proclaimed republic of Transdnestr, would suddenly do an about-face and become pro-Russia.

It is equally strange to expect that simply electing a new president in Georgia in 2013 would convince that country's people to accept the loss of Abkhazia and South Ossetia and abandon its policy of European integration.

And with regard to Armenia and Azerbaijan, Russia seems to have forgotten about the exciting games of the early 1990s when Moscow, after the decline of the Soviet Union, practically took the side of Yerevan over the conflict in Nagorno-Karabakh.

Having jettisoned the Soviet Union, emerged as its successor and finally concluded that reviving the empire was not a bad plan, Russia tried for 20 years to hold both countries on a leash. However, it failed to notice that Armenia, half blocked in its development, was "growing thinner," and that Azerbaijan was "gaining weight" through greater independence and ambition.

That leaves Kazakhstan and four other Central Asian republics. Kazakhstan is still ruled by President Nursultan Nazarbayev, who has also favored integration all these years.

However, the events of 2014 have apparently shaken Nazarbayev's confidence that he and his country can play the role they had hoped for in that integrative process.

After what happened in Crimea and the Donbass, Astana cannot be certain that Russia will continue to view the sentiment "Let's take back Kazakhstan's Russian north from Nursultan" as an offense punishable by a lengthy jail term, and not something deserving praise and state honors.

Some of Russia's neighbors do not have especially high-functioning government institutions, but contrary to the ambitious predictions that Kremlin bosses made 20 years ago, they have not come crawling humbly back asking to be readmitted into the fold.

The reason is that Moscow never learned that dictating the rudiments of foreign policy and the price of gas to its neighbors does not make them like Russia.

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