

Putin losing influence in former Soviet states

NYTI 12.X.2020

YEREVAN, ARMENIA

Pandemic, uprisings and conflict in Caucasus undermine Russian leader

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In Russia's self-proclaimed sphere of influence, Moscow is losing its influence.

Concurrent crises in Belarus, Central Asia and the Caucasus region have blindsided the Kremlin, leaving it scrambling to shore up Russian interests in former Soviet republics and undermining President Vladimir V. Putin's image as a master tactician on the world stage.

"There is nothing good about these conflicts for Moscow," said Konstantin Zatulin, a senior Russian lawmaker and Putin ally who specializes in relations with what Russians call their "near abroad."

Mr. Putin has spent years building up Russia as a global power, with a hand in hot spots in Latin America and the Middle East, and even meddling in presidential elections in the United States. But after working for years to destabilize the West, he suddenly finds himself surrounded by instability; once seen as sure-handed in foreign affairs, he seems to have lost his touch.

In Belarus, Mr. Putin responded to a street uprising in August by propping up the country's unpopular autocrat, President Aleksandr G. Lukashenko, turning public opinion against Russia in what had previously been Europe's most Russia-friendly country.

In Kyrgyzstan in Central Asia, the country's embattled president, Sooronbay Jeenbekov, declared a state of emergency on Friday. The declaration came less than two weeks after Mr. Putin pledged in a rare in-person meeting that "we will do everything to support you as the head of state."

Then on Saturday, a man who had been convicted of kidnapping, Sadyr Japarov, was chosen to be Kyrgyzstan's prime minister after feuding politicians agreed on a new government in an effort to end nearly a week of violent turmoil.

And in the Caucasus, the long-simmering conflict between Armenia and Azerbaijan over the enclave of Nagorno-Karabakh erupted earlier this month into the worst fighting since the 1990s, threatening to undo the balancing act that had allowed Russia to cultivate diverse links to the region.

"Russia was doing all it could to maintain ties both with Azerbaijan and Armenia," Mr. Zatulin said. "Every day of conflict in Karabakh is, effectively, helping zero out Russia's authority."

A cease-fire agreement, reached by Armenia and Azerbaijan in Moscow on Saturday after 10 hours of overnight talks, raised hopes of at least a brief respite in the artillery bombardment, drone strikes and trench warfare. But each side accused the other of mounting new attacks after the cease-fire took effect at noon on Saturday.

The spate of new challenges to Rus-



Antigovernment demonstrators gathered in Minsk, Belarus, after a blatantly falsified election incited the uprising against President Aleksandr G. Lukashenko.



A bomb shelter in Stepanakert, in Nagorno-Karabakh, an Armenian-controlled area in Azerbaijan. A cease-fire agreement has been reached by Armenia and Azerbaijan.

sian influence strikes at the heart of Mr. Putin's yearslong effort to cast himself as the leader who restored the great-power status that the nation lost with the collapse of the Soviet Union. Even as the Kremlin denied Russian interference in the 2016 American presidential election, Russian state television glee-

fully reported on the American allegations of that interference as a sign that Moscow was being reckoned with again on the world stage.

Now, rather than react decisively to emergencies close to home, Mr. Putin sounds ambivalent about Russia's role. "We hope the conflict will end very

soon," he said of Nagorno-Karabakh, in a television interview broadcast last week. Minutes later, referring to Kyrgyzstan, he said, "We hope that everything will be peaceful."

The confluence of crises in Russia's own neighborhood is such that some pro-Kremlin commentators are already accusing the West of an organized campaign to sow discord in the post-Soviet regions.

More balanced analysts, however, have singled out one constant factor in the growing unrest. Both Russia and its neighbors, they say, have been destabilized by the coronavirus pandemic, which has exposed distrust in institutions and in out-of-touch leaders across the region.

It helped undo the fragile truce between Azerbaijan and Armenia, and in Belarus and in Kyrgyzstan, the disease set the stage for public uprisings by exposing the ruling elite as disconnected from people's suffering.

Mr. Lukashenko angered Belarusians by playing down the danger of the virus, joking that vodka would cure it; in Kyrgyzstan, critics blamed officials for using coronavirus aid money to enrich themselves.

Within Russia, the economic hardship caused by the pandemic has helped deepen public anger against Mr. Putin.

In the far eastern city of Khabarovsk, for example, thousands of protesters angry over the arrest of a popular governor spilled into the streets recently for the 13th week in a row.

Some analysts say that public discontent within Russia means that Mr. Putin needs to turn more of his focus to domestic issues such as economic hardship, pollution and poor health care, rather than delving into global geopolitics. But developments in recent weeks have given Mr. Putin more reason to focus on the latter.

Putin has spent years building up Russia as a global power.

"For Putin, practically his entire mission and his vision of Russian greatness and success revolve around his foreign policy agenda," said Tatiana Stanovaya, a nonresident scholar at the Carnegie Moscow Center, a research organization focused on politics and policy. The new series of crises, she went on, "will very much distract Putin from domestic problems."

The centrality of the former Soviet lands to Mr. Putin's foreign policy was evident in the Kremlin's list of world leaders who called Mr. Putin to wish him

a happy birthday on Wednesday, when he turned 68. Of the 12 who called, only three leaders — those of Israel, India and Cuba — head countries outside the former Soviet Union.

In Armenia, which hosts a Russian military base, some hope for a more forceful stance by Russia in the conflict, which has already killed at least 250 people, according to official reports. But Russia's ability to influence events in the Caucasus now appears limited, despite its past role as a mediator in the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict. Turkey, Azerbaijan's most important ally, has taken on a more assertive regional stance.

"Turkey, indeed, in this current situation probably should be considered as a balance to unilateral Russian interference," said Farid Shafiyev, chairman of the Center of Analysis of International Relations in the Azerbaijani capital, Baku. In the Caucasus, he added, "the Russian role is probably diminishing."

Across the former Soviet Union, Russian remains the lingua franca, and the proliferation of mostly uncensored internet access means that protests in one country can easily inspire a disenchanted populace in another.

Some protesters in Belarus carried signs supporting the demonstrations in Khabarovsk, over 4,000 miles away. And ahead of Kyrgyzstan's parliamentary elections, government critics were keeping an eye on Belarus, where a blatantly falsified election in August incited the uprising against Mr. Lukashenko.

"In Kyrgyzstan, it was often said that we will copy the Belarusians," said Aybek Sultangaziyev, director of a news agency in Kyrgyzstan, K-News. "In fact, we surpassed the Belarusians in effectiveness and precision."

Mr. Sultangaziyev said Kyrgyzstan's new leadership would seek to maintain close ties with Moscow. In Armenia, too, the government of Prime Minister Nikol Pashinyan retained its alliance with Russia after the prime minister came to power in a popular uprising in 2018.

"We have never been pro-Western or pro-Eastern," said Ruben Rubinyan, head of the foreign affairs committee in the Armenian Parliament. "Russia has been and is an ally of Armenia, a very important ally."

But for Moscow, recent events in Belarus offer a cautionary tale that illustrates the fragility of Russia's standing among its neighbors — carrying echoes of Ukraine's more violent departure from Russia's orbit in 2014.

Mr. Zatulin, the Russian lawmaker, said officials "at the highest levels of the Russian Federation" believed that Mr. Lukashenko would need to step down "sooner or later." But Mr. Lukashenko has said that his stepping down in the face of street protests could set a dangerous precedent for what might happen to Mr. Putin himself.

"We are creating a problem for ourselves," Mr. Zatulin said, "with the other Belarusian politicians and public figures, who are increasingly forced to seek sympathy in the West. Russia wants that least of all."

Andrew E. Kramer contributed reporting from Moscow.

For Johnson, Covid as a metaphor is hard to shake