



The Cambridge Security Initiative

BIDEN VICTORY CHALLENGES RUSSIA IN POST-SOVIET SPACE

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In the wake of Joe Biden's victory, US Secretary of State Mike Pompeo made a whistle-stop trip to Georgia, part of a seven-nation visit to US allies including France, Turkey, Israel and several Middle Eastern states. Pompeo's arrival in Tbilisi coincided with on-going protests in Georgia against the results of October's parliamentary elections and Trump's continuing refusal to acknowledge Biden's victory.

Like the US, Georgia is facing a crisis of governance following elections at the end of October, amidst warnings of democratic backsliding. All of the country's major opposition parties refused to recognise the result claiming the election was rigged.

Distrust and disappointment among the country's political elites is not unique to Georgia. In recent months the post-Soviet space has been rocked by a number of pro-democracy protests and popular uprisings. Disputed parliamentary elections in Kyrgyzstan last month triggered widespread demonstrations and political turmoil. Belarus experienced almost daily protests and violent police crackdowns following presidential elections in August, while the incumbent, Alexander Lukashenko, claimed victory amidst widespread allegations of vote-rigging.

During his campaign, Biden pledged to re-introduce a foreign policy grounded in Western democratic values and tackle the rise in authoritarianism around the world. He has been openly critical of Trump's silence about the violence committed by Lukashenko's regime against pro-

democracy activists in Belarus and has promised to support the democratic aspirations of the Belarussian people, as well as expanding sanctions against the regime.

An increase in US support for such movements would antagonise Moscow, which believes this will increase instability and pose a threat to its own regime security.

Putin has promised financial and military support for the Lukashenko regime, raising the risk of the country becoming a flashpoint for confrontation between Washington and Moscow. Ukraine is another potential flashpoint, as Biden has promised to increase US support for the country, including the supply of lethal weapons, whilst also calling on Russia to end its **aggression and occupation**.

Biden's desire to repair the US relationship with NATO poses a further challenge for Russia, both in terms of its perception of its own security and its influence across the post-Soviet space. A reinvigorated Euro-Atlantic alliance poses a significant challenge to Moscow, which considers NATO's enhanced capabilities, global scope and enlargement as a risk to Russian national security. Any attempt to kickstart the enlargement process in states such as Georgia or Ukraine will trigger a strong response from Moscow.

OUTLOOK

Despite Pompeo's highly visible trip to Georgia, the post-Soviet space is unlikely to constitute a foreign policy priority for the incoming Biden administration. However, several of the incoming administration's priorities constitute challenges for Moscow. The inaction of the Trump regime is likely to be replaced by a much more active approach that includes an intensification of American engagement across the region. (Georgian Prime Minister Giorgi Gakharia has already called for an increased US presence in the South Caucasus.) Thus, relations between Moscow and Washington are likely to become more antagonistic and confrontational, as the US increases its involvement in Russia's backyard.