

# Problem or Solution? Russia's Role in the Nagorno-Karabakh Conflict

Written by Ana Daskalova

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## Problem or Solution? Russia's Role in the Nagorno-Karabakh Conflict

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ANA DASKALOVA, OCT 19 2015

[W]e continue the journey to Stepanakert, capital of the self-proclaimed republic, and then to Agdam, Azeri town destroyed in the last war. Images of destruction, streets where no one walks. The city is empty, gone. We decide to go back to Yerevan. On the [way, all around us,] images of [conflict-torn] Karabakh.[1]

Hardly any piece of academic writing could be more expressive than this letter excerpt in depicting the conflict-torn Nagorno-Karabakh region and in creating a genuine feeling about the impact that decades of war have had on it. Paradoxically enough, the very name of the region already gives a clear idea about the nature of the conflict, a name composed of the Russian attributive adjective “*nagorno*” (highland)[2] and the deriving from Turkish and Persian “*karabakh*”(black garden)[3], which appears symbolic of the two parties involved in the conflict – Armenia, Russia’s only ally in the region, and Azerbaijan, whose relations with Turkey have historically always been so strong that the two are often described as “one nation with two states”. [4]

Unresolved for so many years, the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict has proved a real Gordian knot. Therefore, unlike most of the literature on the topic, this paper will not concentrate on the conflict itself and on hypotheses about its resolution but it will rather take a different point of departure by examining the role played by external actors. Due to time and space constraints, however, the study will only concentrate on one external actor, namely Russia. The choice of this particular focus is determined by the fact that Russia is widely considered to be the most relevant and concerned regional power, as a consequence of its ambitions to retain control over the post-Soviet space, which it boldly classifies as its ‘backyard’.

The objective of this paper is to critically address a two-fold *problématique*, namely “To what extent has Russia instrumentalised the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict as a means to pursue foreign policy ends?” and “To what extent has this instrumentalisation of the conflict affected its resolution?”. The hypotheses proposed here are that the post-Soviet space has always been a region of vital importance for Russia, which sees it as a *condicio sine qua non* for consolidating its status as a regional player and for regaining that of a global power. When it comes the Nagorno-Karabakh, it would be erroneous to argue that there has always been a uniform Russian policy. It has evolved from being inconsistent and lacking an explicit strategy at the beginning of the conflict to becoming more assertive and coherent, largely determined by Russia’s quickly developing interest in instrumentalising the conflict for political and economics gains. Although Moscow has clearly been using Nagorno-Karabakh as a means to achieve its geopolitical ambitions, it would be misleading to suggest that Russia and its foreign policy agenda are to blame for its non-resolution. The key to the resolution rests instead in the hands of Armenia, Azerbaijan and Nagorno-Karabakh itself.

The study commences by a general examination of the Russian policy vis-à-vis the Newly Independent States (NIS) in order to provide a clear image of the regional context. It proceeds to explain briefly the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict by concentrating on its origins and complex nature, which are essential to understand the Russian approach towards the dispute. It then moves to the main analysis, which explores the very policy of Russia towards the conflict and the extent to which it has tried to use Nagorno-Karabakh as an instrument to pursue its foreign policy agenda in the region and to retain its influence over the former Soviet Republics. Since Russia’s policy has not been static but has rather evolved in the time span between the beginning of the conflict and present day, the main section is divided into

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three parts corresponding to three chronologically successive periods, which reflect the aforementioned evolution. The three periods are as follows: **1**) from the beginning of the conflict until the end of the Cold War (1988-1991); **2**) during the Yeltsin era (1991-1999); and finally, **3**) from Putin's first presidential term until present day (2000-2014). The paper concludes by assessing the impact of Russia's policy on the resolution of the conflict and the role of other factors in an attempt to determine to what extent Russia is to be held responsible for the inability to find a stable political solution to the conflict.

Finally, since Nagorno-Karabakh has historically been a very divisive issue, the literature on the topic tends to be highly polarised and biased. This should be borne in mind although the author of this paper has tried to construct a balanced argument and mitigate the negative effect of biased literature by using a wide variety in terms of origin and nature literature sources.

## The 'Russian bear' and its 'near abroad' – a neo-imperialist explanation

Before commencing with the analysis of the Russian policy towards the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict, it might first prove instructive to situate the question within the broader geopolitical context. In order to explain how Russia acts towards the NIS of Eastern Europe, the Caucasus and Central Asia, this paper will use the notion of 'neo-imperialism'. For the purposes of this study, 'neo-imperialism' is to be understood as, in the words of Münkler, "a disguised form of imperialism by which a country may grant independence to another country, but continue to dominate it by [... exerting] economic, political and cultural control".[5],

Applying the concept to Russia's policy in the region, however, is not deprived of ambiguity since an explicit strategy has proved hard to decipher. To begin with, the roots of the Russian imperialist ambitions are to be found at the beginning of the nineteenth century when the foundations of Russia's expansionist policies were laid, which culminated in the creation of an image of a multi-ethnic empire (known by the term *Derzhava*) that became the leading political ideology in the twentieth century and dominated the Russian mentality for almost a century.[6] In this context, the Caucasus region has historically had a symbolic and geostrategic importance for Russia being the first territorial acquisition in its expansion southward and a gateway to the Middle East.[7]

The nostalgia for Russia's glorious past and especially that of the Soviet Union, whose collapse Putin classifies as "the biggest geopolitical catastrophe of the twentieth century" gave rise to a new *raison d'être* of Russia's post-Cold War foreign policy, namely its aspiration to regain the lost status of a great power.[8] This objective has consequently determined its attempts to restrict the sovereignty of the former Soviet Republics that had been under Russian rule for over 200 years, and to retain them within its sphere of influence. In this context, Russia treats the post-Soviet space as its 'backyard' and quite tactically links it to the questions of national sovereignty, thus perceiving any external actions towards the region as an unwelcome interference within its own affairs.[9] Concerns that the involvement of other international actors might constitute a threat for Russia's great power aspirations has resulted in Russia's application of hard and soft instruments indiscriminately arguing that its foreign policy ends justify the means. This rhetoric is reiterated in the 1992 speech of the Russian Foreign Affairs Minister at the Commission on Security and Cooperation in Europe summit, when he stated that "the former Soviet Republics are in effect a post-imperial space where Russia has to defend its interests by all available means".[10]

## The Nagorno-Karabakh conflict – not that new and not that simple

Having situated the question in its regional geopolitical context, this part intends to examine its history based on the rationale that in order to understand the present and the future of the conflict, it is important to know its past. The section will also briefly explain the nature of the conflict in an attempt to demonstrate its complexity.

First of all, it is important to note that the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict qualifies as the most persistent ethnic violent conflict in a region, characterised by several territorial disputes.[11] The conflict can be symbolically depicted as a clash "between the law of territorial integrity for Azerbaijan and the right to self-determination for Nagorno-Karabakh".[12] The causes of the conflict are often attributed to Stalin's divide-and-rule policy of transferring pieces

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of land to one Soviet Republic while ensuring that these are populated by significant minorities from another one used as its henchmen, in an attempt to keep them divided and hostile towards each other and thus to control the constituent parts of the Soviet Union more easily and make sure that they will not be able to challenge its authority. Indeed, the transfer of a predominantly Armenian-populated area to Soviet Azerbaijan in 1923 after three years of contemplation created further tensions between the two nations.[13] Exacerbating ethnic antagonism was a recipe for conflict since it was clearly intended to amplify disputes rather than to prevent them.[14] This said, it should also be acknowledged that the origins of the conflict are even more deeply rooted dating back to the nineteenth century when fights between Armenia and Azerbaijan over the territory in question already existed.

The Nagorno-Karabakh conflict in its present form dates back to 1988, when the not-yet-forgotten dispute reemerged given impetus by the independence movement established by the mainly Armenian population of the area that demanded unification with Soviet Armenia the same year.[15] These ambitious aspirations gained momentum in the Gorbachev era within the context of the perestroika and glasnost reforms that allowed for this to take place.[16] Thus, the dispute evolved into a violent conflict and not long after, into a full-fledged war between Armenia and Azerbaijan.[17] Eventually in 1994, ceasefire was signed in Bishkek under the brokering of Russia. This nevertheless, did not resolve the conflict but froze it for years to come. A declaration of independence of Nagorno-Karabakh followed in 1997. The self-proclaimed republic, however, remains internationally unrecognised until today.[18]

This historical overview, although predominantly descriptive is need in order to fully grasp the complexity of the conflict and the obstacles that have for decades impeded its successful resolution. This complexity derives not solely from its deep historical roots and the fact that up-to-date, the two main parties involved, namely Armenia and Azerbaijan, continue to regard the conflict as a zero-sum game but also from the many external actors directly and indirectly engaged each of which pursuing their own agenda.[19] According to their geographical positions and policies, these actors can be classified into three large groups, namely, **1)** actors that are well-placed but unwilling to bring change (such as Russia and the United States); **2)** actors willing to bring change but not well-placed (such as Turkey and Iran); and **3)** actors neither committed, nor able to bring change (such as the European Union and Georgia).[20] The next part of the study will concentrate exclusively on what is considered to be the most important external actor involved in Nagorno-Karabakh, that is, Russia.

## The hidden Russian hand in the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict

When it comes to Russia's policy towards the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict, it would be erroneous to content that there has been a uniform Russian position towards the conflict that has determined the trajectory of its foreign policy. Indeed, the Russian policy in that domain has evolved since the beginning of the conflict and has been characterised by various tendencies throughout its post-Cold War history. The following section intends to conduct a comparative analysis of the evolving Russian policy towards the conflict by using as an analytical framework three distinctive periods, namely, the beginning of the conflict to the end of the Cold War, the Yeltsin era, and Putin's presidency to present day. These three periods have been selected because by studying them, one can easily identify the different foreign policy patterns of the Russian policy towards the conflict.

### *Period I: The beginning of the conflict – The end of the Cold War 1988-1991*

As Abushov perceptively maintains, the Russian policy towards Nagorno-Karabakh at the beginning of the conflict can be best described as inconsistent and lacking an explicit strategy.[21] This might be explained by referring to the fact that in the Cold War context, the conflict was purely internal for the Soviet Union and the concerns that it could escalate and threaten the security of the Union were of a limited magnitude since the two parties to the conflict were both within the direct control of the USSR and it was therefore, easier to exert pressure on them or keep them closely within its sphere of influence and thus contain the conflict.

The initial Russian position when Russia's foreign policy interests were not yet clearly elaborated was to provide assistance to the Armenian side; a position as much based on identity, cultural, religious and linguistic proximity

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grounds as on strategic considerations.[22] This perspective, however, remains contested since, as mentioned in the introduction, the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict has been such a divisive issue that the positions of political scientists are often prejudiced against one or the other side to the dispute, which makes it difficult to determine their plausibility. In this relation, it should be noted that there are also analysts, such as Panossian, who suggest that the Soviet Union, which until its dissolution had the tendency to side with the authorities of the Republics that had to deal with 'unruly' regions, like Nagorno-Karabakh, supported Azerbaijan.[23] Irrespective of these contrasting views, what remains certain, nonetheless, is that towards the end of the Cold War, one could observe what would for the purposes of this analysis be defined as the first discernible evolution in the Russian foreign policy approach, namely when Russia started defining a clear strategy for the South Caucasus region that in turn laid down the foundations of a continuous strategy towards the conflict.[24]

The demise and subsequent break-up of the USSR in the autumn of 1991 resulted in the independence of the Union Republics, *inter alia* Armenia and Azerbaijan, which in turn transformed the conflict from an internal Soviet problem into an interstate one.[25] This leads the study to the next period, namely, the Yeltsin era.

## *Period II: The Yeltsin era 1991-1999*

The Yeltsin era saw a major shift in the Russian policy towards the region. The change became noticeable after the definition of the foreign policy strategy in 1992 when Russia developed a strategic interest in instrumentalising the dispute, that is to say, utilising it as a foreign policy tool.[26] The important question is, however, what provoked this shift? Once having lost its Soviet glory, Russia immediately felt concerned about its ability to influence the political and economic processes in its former Republics and to ensure that there would be no interference of other interested external actors in what it has historically always considered its 'backyard'. Diligently pursuing its strategic interests in the region at all means became priority number one for Russia. Yet, despite the formulation of a foreign policy strategy in 1992, as some analysts perceptively observe, in the first years after the fall of communism, Russia's external policy remained chaotic, "with various bits of the state apparatus pursuing their own agendas"[27], which resulted in an inability of Russia's Foreign and Defence ministries to agree on a unified position as to its engagement in negotiations on the issue.[28]

Irrespective of that, by manipulating the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict, Russia saw an opportunity to pursue its political objectives. Quite cunningly, it started using the dispute as a lever against both parties involved in an intention to retain control over them after independence by exerting pressure and imposing conditions that would favour its own policy. In this context, as Abushov correctly observes, Nagorno-Karabakh was used as a bargaining chip to drive Azerbaijan to enter the Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS) and to deploy military basis to the border with Turkey and Iran and thus to ensure that Azerbaijan would be kept within its sphere of influence and to avoid unwanted external intervention.[29] In the words of Maresca, Russia regarded it as its duty to assume the role of the sole responsible for the resolution of the conflict and as a means to this end, it tried to keep the international community out of it by limiting the role of international organisations and other relevant players.[30]

In order to guarantee its leadership position in the management of the conflict, Russia came up with a smart tactic – it made a unilateral proposal to the conflicting parties for a ceasefire, which was in direct competition with the international proposal of the Commission on Security and Cooperation in Europe, a strategy deliberately designed to give the conflicting parties the opportunity to 'shop' for the best offer.[31] Russian, nevertheless, ensured that its proposal would be preferred to the alternative offer and thus that in the very words of Yeltsin, it would be granted "special powers as guarantor of peace and stability in regions of the former USSR".[32] Energy considerations were yet another important interest that Russia tried to protect by using the conflict as a lever vis-à-vis Baku in order to prevent the construction of a pipeline intended to link the Caspian Sea with Mediterranean ports, which however proved a miscalculated attempt.[33] Russia also intensified its relations with the more vulnerable and economically badly affected by the war side in the conflict, Armenia, by supplying it with weapons. It could thus keep it dependent, as a result of which Armenia increasingly started perceiving Russia as "a guarantor of its very existence".[34]

Undoubtedly, Russia had contributed strongly to the resumption of direct hostilities and the signing of a ceasefire 1994. Paradoxically enough, it was at the same time unwilling to see a long-term political resolution of the conflict.[35]

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Therefore, it could be argued that these are two sides of the same coin – whereas on the one hand, a ‘hot’ conflict in Russia’s ‘near abroad’ might lead to spillover and thus potentially pose a direct threat for its security, on the other hand, maintaining a ‘frozen’ conflict in the region in which Russia would act as the key mediator is of a strategic importance for its foreign policy interests.[36] A stable peaceful resolution of the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict did not seem to be a desired by Russia outcome in the Yeltsin era since it would deprive it of its political levers and would most likely weaken its position as the primary regional player and consequently its ability to influence future developments in the region.

The conducted in this subsection analysis has clearly demonstrated that Russia had successfully managed to utilise the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict as a foreign policy asset that had served its short-term interests in the region during the Yeltsin era. Whether it is also in Russia’s long-term interests to keep the conflict unresolved will be assessed by examining how its policy towards the dispute has evolved in the last decade since Putin’s first presidential term, which will be the subject of the following subsection.

## *Period III: Putin’s first presidential term – Present day 2000-2014*

Russia’s engagement in the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict is part of the legacy left from Yeltsin to Putin. Some analysts confidently contend that as a result of Putin policy of centralisation of the state administration, the Russian foreign policy towards the South Caucasus region has become more coherent and uniform without the characteristic of the proceeding period internal divisions between the Foreign and Defence ministries.[37] This cohesion of the Russian policy towards the region derives from the fact that, in the words of Nygren, Putin is one of the very few people in Russia who have a clear perspective on his country’s past and future and a clear vision of the direction of its foreign policy towards the CIS.[38]

In the post-Yeltsin era, Russia continues to be a regional power able to influence the dynamics of the process. Under the presidency of Putin and especially after he started utilising Russia’s energy resources as a means to conduct foreign policy, Russia has become more confident in its policy towards the post-Soviet space.[39] Indeed, the desire to re-build Greater Russia that would be strong and self-confident domestically and a more assertive leader of the former Soviet Republics[40] has explicitly become the driving force behind Russia’s policy vis-à-vis its ‘near abroad’, as clear exemplified by Popescu’s statement, “....it is time to re-establish a great power and [...] the CIS is the space where Russian economic, political, and informational dominance should be established”.[41]

It is often argued that Putin has taken a more neutral stand towards to conflicting parties in comparison with his predecessor as a result of which Russia has started to act as a real mediator as opposed to a party to the conflict.[42] Nevertheless, such alleged shifts in Russia’s policy direction should be treated with scepticism. As Goragosian sagaciously observes, it has always been clear that Russia’s approach towards the South Caucasus has never been either imperiled or impartial.[43] In reality, it is argued, this claimed impartiality of President Putin’s policy vis-à-vis the region is nothing more than a well-camouflaged comfortable middle-ground strategy of sitting on two chairs, that is to say treating equally the two conflicting parties.[44] Indeed, this assumption is proven valid in practical terms by the fact that since 2007, Moscow has been the main arms supplier to both parties and the statistics demonstrate that between 2007 and 2011, it had been responsible for 55 percent of Azerbaijan’s arms imports and 96 percent of those of Armenia.[45]

It thus seems that, as was the case in the period preceding Putin’s first presidential term, an eventual resolution of the conflict is neither in Russia’s political, nor in its strategic economic interests in the region and therefore, the most favourable option for Russia would be the preservation of the status quo. A potential political solution to the Nagorno-Karabakh dispute might well result in future economic cooperation between Armenia and Azerbaijan, which would in turn decrease Armenia’s (Russia’s only ally in the region) strong dependence on Russia and thus weaken its foothold in the region. This would allow assuming that today’s Russian policy vis-à-vis the South Caucasus is still driven by the aforementioned old Soviet logic that by juxtaposing two conflicting parties, thus ensuring that hostilities between them remain, Russia can easily keep them in control and guarantee its monopoly over certain industries in the region and especially energy supply in this case; otherwise said, it allows it to manipulate the situation to its own advantage.[46]

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With regards to the direction that Russia's policy towards the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict might take in the future, such remains difficult to predict. The annexation of Crimea, a clear indication that the "Russian bear is waking up after a long period of hibernation"[47], has unambiguously proved that Russia's foreign policy cannot be subject to any limits or restrained by any factors and that it can suddenly alter course irrespective of the circumstances.[48] This has led to predictions that the hidden Russian hand in the conflict might at some point become a grip on it but these remain nothing more than speculations. Certainly, the nature of the peace process might change since it seems that in the post-Crimean context, Russia is becoming increasingly isolated by the international community, which is likely to make diplomatic cooperation and coordination between Russia and other external actors engaged in the conflict more difficult.[49] Some analysts, bolder in their assumptions, even suggest that as Nagorno-Karabakh offers an attractive avenue for deeper consolidation of Russia's influence in the region, Moscow might seek greater leverage by transforming the 'frozen' conflict back into a 'hot' war, thus making Crimea only "the prelude to the onset of a much broader campaign of a resurgent Russia throughout the former Soviet space".[50] A sober analysis of such an extreme interpretation however seriously questions its plausibility at least for the time being since triggering insecurity and tension right at its doorstep might not be a very sensible foreign policy move for Russia, especially in times of increasing international isolation.

## Is Russia really to blame?

So far, this study has examined the Russian policy towards the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict during three different periods since the beginning of the conflict. This final section intends to concentrate more consistently on the second part of the research question, namely, the extent to which the above-mentioned Russian policy has influenced the resolution of the conflict. While, as already discussed earlier, Russia contributed significantly to ending hostilities and brokering a ceasefire in 1994, it is often accused of bearing the lion's share for the keeping the conflict unresolved as a way to extend its control to the region.[51] Attributing such a crucial role to Russia in hindering the resolution of the Nagorno-Karabakh dispute might however be a simplified and exaggerated interpretation of the situation since there have also been other factors that have prevented its resolution.[52] In this context, it is important to comprehend that the fact that it is in Russia's interest to support the status quo as opposed to a permanent resolution does not automatically mean that it is to blame for the current stalemate.

A realistic assessment of the situation demonstrates that even through Russia remains the crucial regional player in the post-Soviet space, a region which is still one of the most important considerations in its foreign policy calculations, resolving such a complex conflict without any commitment or investment coming from the conflicting parties would clearly be a mission impossible for Moscow just as it would be impossible to keep it 'frozen' if there was willingness on the sides of the conflicting parties to resolve it. Indeed, it seems that similarly to Russia, Armenia and Azerbaijan are not interested in a resolution as they have also tried to instrumentalise it in order to acquire political gains. Rationally thinking, the more important question is, could there be, at least under the current circumstances, a viable and feasible solution to such a complex, 'frozen' for years conflict that would be satisfactory and acceptable to both conflicting parties? It instead appears that the *status quo* is a Pareto optimal situation since any deviation from it is likely to tip the balance in favour of one party to the conflict to the detriment of the other, which would most likely lead to irreversible consequences. In this train of thought, can there be a real alternative to the *status quo* or at least one different from a return to hostilities?

## Conclusion

The conducted analysis has clearly demonstrated that the post-Soviet space has historically always constituted an integral part of Russia's calculations and has been the primary focus of its foreign policy since the end of the Cold War. This has led many analysts to define Russia's policy towards the region as neo-imperialist determined by what has been the *raison d'être* of its foreign policy since the collapse of the Soviet Union, namely, to regain its great power status and retain its control over a region, which had been within its grip for a couple of centuries and which it now treats as its 'backyard'.

Moscow's approach towards the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict is part of its broader approach towards the region. Nevertheless, it is essential to note that Russia has not had a coherent and clearly defined policy either *vis-à-vis* the

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region or the conflict since the beginning. Rather than being uniform, its policy has evolved and shifted throughout the years. This paper has examined three different periods that give a clear idea of the aforementioned evolution. During the first period, that is, between the beginning of the conflict and the end of the Cold War, the Soviet Union did not seem to have a clear strategy towards the conflict and given that at that time, it was a purely internal matter within the Soviet control, it understandably did not try to utilise it as a tool to achieve foreign policy ends. By contrast, once the Soviet Union ceased to exist and the former Soviet Republics became independent, Russia started developing a clear interest in instrumentalising the conflict for political and economic gains. Although its policy remained chaotic in the first years of the Yeltsin era, Russia quickly commenced seeing the conflict as an opportunity to exert control over the region and as a lever against the two parties involved. This tendency continued under Putin, who has given even further prominence to the return-to-a-great-power-status rhetoric. Since his first presidential term, Russia has undoubtedly become more confident and assertive in its policy towards its 'near abroad' and respectively, the conflict.

It has proved difficult to predict how Russia's policy might evolve in the future. The recent events in Crimea have demonstrated that if Moscow is determined to pursue a foreign policy goal, there can be no limits to how far it is ready to go to achieve it since it seems that in the thinking of the Russian political elite the end justifies the means. From this perspective, it would be difficult to deny that the position of Russia and its policy towards the region matter and depending on the direction they take, Russia can either be part of the problem or part of the solution to the conflict. What is important, nonetheless, is that however significant, it remains only a part, that is to say, part of the problem or part of the solution rather than the problem or the solution itself. Russia's hidden hand can reach out to the region but the key to the conflict resolution lies neither in its hands nor in those of any other relevant external actor. The key rests instead in the hands of Armenia, Azerbaijan and Nagorno-Karabakh itself and only a genuine and consistent commitment on their side can guarantee a resolution to the conflict. For the time being, however, such seems hard to imagine.

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*Written by: Ana Daskalova  
Written at: Sciences Po Paris  
Written for: Patrice Dabos  
Date written: April 2014*