Mikhail Alexseev began his presentation by examining how a state may use international institutions and norms to assert its sovereignty and create legitimacy when sovereignty is disputed. In the case of Russia and Georgia, both used the issue of WTO accession to do so:

- Russia and Georgia signed the intergovernmental agreement “On the Basic Principles of the Mechanism of Customs Administration and Monitoring of Trade in Goods” in Geneva on November 9, 2011. Georgia, which has been a WTO member since 2000 and possessed the right to veto Russia’s WTO entry, seemingly had the upper-hand in these negotiations. Essentially, this agreement entailed Georgia acquiescing to Russia’s WTO accession.

- Russia sees WTO entry as an opportunity to improve the transparency of its data. With its accession, Russia will provide data on its trade through the appropriate international exchange system of the WTO. Russia and Georgia authorized a “Private Neutral Company” to obtain WTO Electronic Data Exchange System (EDES) data, establish a presence at trade terminals, “manage risks,” and audit reports on trade through these terminals. The two governments also agreed to invite representatives from the designated neutral company to visit the terminals and discuss experiences and best practices to improve operations.

- From Georgia’s standpoint, Russia’s accession to the WTO was an important achievement, as it enabled the resumption of trade between Russia and Georgia and allowed monitoring of movement across the internationally recognized borders of Georgia in South Ossetia and Abkhazia.

- On December 23, 2011, a senior Russian diplomat stated that Russia signed the agreement because it “completely corresponded to the new realities in the Caucasus after August 2008.” The exact nature of these “new realities” is open to debate. The placement of troops in Abkhazia
The location of various “border corridors” between Russia and Georgia, such as the Inguri River crossing (South Ossetia to Georgia) and the Psou River crossing (Abkhazia to Russia) are not well defined. One of these crossings is located on the northern side of the partially recognized states and one on the southern side, separated by states whose sovereignty is disputed.

- Trade flows between these corridors will have to cross Abkhazia and South Ossetia, respectively. This means that Russia will report its trade with Abkhazia and South Ossetia under WTO rules and procedures as international trade, separately and on par with its trade with Georgia.

- Russia’s interpretations of the 2011 customs and trade agreement with Georgia first and foremost mean that Moscow does not see its accession to WTO—including Georgia’s non-use of its veto power to block it—as constraining its right to use military power against Georgia.

- Moreover, these interpretations mean that Moscow, regardless of its stated adherence to the WTO’s free trade ideals, is likely to exploit other WTO rules unilaterally—in particular, to argue that its import ban on Georgian wine and mineral water, Georgia’s big export revenue earners, is legitimate, based on an official Russian determination that these products are unsanitary. Russia could use WTO health exemptions to require Georgia to prove that it meets the environmental standards of other countries from which Russia imports wine and water.

- In conclusion, this position is likely to endure as long as the Russian government is interested in weakening the Georgian economy, perhaps to lure Georgia into the planned Eurasian Union.

Sergey Minasyan began his presentation by discussing how coercive strategies are used in the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict and how the status quo of “no peace, no war” creates space for these coercive strategies.

- According to international relations theory, the two main types of coercive strategies are compellence and deterrence. Deterrence is a defensive strategy used for preserving the status quo, while compellence is an offensive strategy used for changing it.

- After the Cold War ended and the Soviet Union collapsed, strategies of nuclear deterrence seemed to lose their footing, giving rise to both conventional deterrence and compellence.

- One fundamental difference between the two strategies of deterrence and compellence is the time frame. Deterrence advocates a passive approach with no set time frame, the main requirement being that the opponent abstains from a particular step. On the other hand, compellence advocates active political and military action, with the aim of persuading the opponent through the threat of harm. In order to be effective, compellence must have a deadline, after which point harm will be inflicted. Although compellence does not necessarily entail open military violence, the threat must be credible.

- Deterrence only fails when the opponent decides to carry out a specific, undesired step. Conversely, compellence can fail in two ways: when the opponent is unwilling to concede or when the aggressor is forced to use military action.
In the case of Nagorno-Karabakh, Armenia relied mainly on a strategy of compellence prior to the 1994 ceasefire. However, today Armenia relies on deterrent strategies, while Azerbaijan has implemented a compellence strategy. One of the most vulnerable aspects of compellence is its reliance on the credibility of the threat of force. In doing so, it risks misperceiving variation in opponents’ “pain thresholds,” making it impossible to rely solely on quantitative parameters of power. The Azerbaijani military-political leadership appears not to take seriously the high “pain threshold” of Armenia and Nagorno-Karabakh, even if the entire dynamic of the two decade-long conflict should have convinced them of this. This leads to the Azerbaijani government’s illusory belief that compellence can succeed.

Additionally, the initiation of an arms race, funded by Azeri oil and gas revenues, is an important component of Azerbaijan’s compellence strategy. The course of the conflict will also depend on the involvement of external actors, for example Russia, which tends to support one side over the other.

Despite the difficulties of implementation, compellence should not be considered a fundamentally weaker strategy and does have certain advantages. Since the Nagorno-Karabakh war concluded approximately 20 years, the Azeri government has been unable to reach its goals through compellence. Yet, because Azerbaijan poses a credible threat, it is able to preserve its political reputation both domestically and internationally.

An element of Azerbaijan’s compellence strategy is maintaining a troop presence along the Nagorno-Karabakh border. Despite requests from the international community to withdraw these border guards, Azerbaijan refuses comply, as this would undermine the credibility of its compellence strategy.

Sufian Zhemukhov began his presentation by discussing the current situation in Abkhazia and its role in the Caucasus and the international community.

- Although six states have recognized Abkhazia’s independence, the fledgling state remains completely dependent on Russia. Lacking widespread international recognition, Abkhazia is often discussed as an object, rather than a subject of international relations. It also lacks the resources and methods to pursue its own goals, and cannot act of its own accord.

- Ethnic Abkhazians themselves have been inconsistent about their desire for independence. In fact, Abkhazians applied several times to become a part of other countries; they opted to remain in the USSR when Georgia separated from it two decades ago and have twice applied to join the Russian Federation. While international recognition has been at the forefront of the Abkhaz agenda, deep-seated social and economic interests are equally important motives of the Abkhazians.

- From the start of the secessionist conflict with Georgia, Abkhazia has had the support of the global Circassian community and the Armenian diaspora in over 50 countries. When the war began in 1992, Circassian groups demonstrated in support of Abkhazia and even sent volunteers to fight against Georgia. Despite achieving de facto independence from Georgia, Abkhazia’s victory in 1993 failed to bring the recognition it sought.

- Abkhazia’s present situation involves a number of key issues:
1) The demographic issue: The percentage of ethnic Abkhaz in Abkhazia increased from 18% in 1983 to 50% today, while the percentage of ethnic Georgians decreased from 45% in 1989 to 18%.

2) Abkhaz-Russian relations: Abkhazia is driven toward alignment with Russia since it lacks any alternative, given that Abkhazia enjoys only engagement without recognition with the U.S. and EU. As a result, Abkhazia’s movement towards Russia is not so much a product of its desire to be part of Russia, as an effort to separate from Georgia.

This desire to separate from Georgia has three primary bases: 1) the legacy of the 1992-1993 war; 2) Georgia’s refusal to allow Abkhazia to directly negotiate with other countries; and 3) the problem of Georgian refugees.

There are currently over 10,000 refugees, many of them ethnic Georgians, as a result of the conflicts between Abkhazia and Georgia. Abkhazia fears that returning Georgian refugees would tip the demographic scale and allow Georgian dominance in its domestic policies. A related issue concerns property which was appropriated from refugees, the redistribution of which could result in socio-economic destabilization.

The Abkhaz government is actively searching for ways to protect itself from Georgian demands, and sees Russian investment as an appropriate safeguard. The Abkhaz de facto government therefore sees benefit in letting Russian companies buy former Georgian properties from new Abkhazian proprietors, rather than returning them to their original owners. A possible solution to this issue is the existing Georgian model of repatriation of Meskhetian Turks. The Georgian government allowed the Meskhetian Turks to return and reimbursed them for their property, but provided no guarantees that they would be resettled in the same areas from which they were deported. Abkhazia could potentially implement this model and encourage the settlement of Abkhaz and Circassian diaspora to offset the large influx of Georgian refugees, and thereby avert a demographic crisis. Georgia would be compelled to make concessions as well, and would have to recognize that in the refugees departed from Abkhazia due policies implemented by the Georgian state, and use its own resources to reimburse the refugees.

Question and Answer

The discussion began with a two-part question addressed to Sufian Zhemukhov. The first question was about the number of Circassians who would want to return to Abkhazia and whether return is a realistic proposition at all. The second part of the question addressed the extent to which ethnic Abkhaz would view ethnic Circassians as a foreign element, and why diaspora Circassians would want to leave countries like Turkey voluntarily. There are an estimated 500,000 Abkhaz in Turkey, but they would be reluctant to leave since the Abkhaz in Abkhazia are Christian and those in Turkey are Muslim. The Circassian population in Turkey would also generally be reluctant to leave. In Syria, however, there are 50,000 to 150,000 Circassians who want to return to the Caucasus and Abkhazia, a number large enough to balance the return of Georgian refugees.

The next question asked Sufian Zhemukhov why the Abkhaz authorities do not utilize more instruments to assert their sovereignty, like lobbying in the U.S. Russia has a very strong hold on Abkhazia and dominates both its internal and external affairs. In September 2012, there was a meeting between Abkhaz de facto President Alexander Ankvab and Russian President Vladimir Putin. The details of their
discussions are unknown, but rumors indicate that Ankvb came out of the meeting disappointed. Abkhazia does not have much choice but to follow Russia. Ankvb lacks international legitimacy, making it harder to get out from under Russian influence.

The subsequent question asked Sufian Zhemukhov to address what changed in Abkhaz relations with Circassians to make them more positive. In reality, relations between the two today are not positive. During the 1992-1993 war, Abkhaz and Circassians fought side by side, but Abkhazia did not take active steps to incorporate Circassians. Moreover, problems between Abkhazia and Circassians have arisen as a side effect of Abkhazian demographic policy. Abkhazia did not include Circassians in the list of peoples given favorable opportunities to immigrate and obtain citizenship. Additionally, outside the region the Abkhaz diaspora and the Circassian diaspora do not cooperate with one another.

The following question was addressed to Sufian Zhemukhov and raised the issue of what role the Russian and Armenian minority populations play in Abkhazia. According to the last census, Armenians comprise 17% of Abkhazia’s population and ethnic Russians 9%. The ethnic Russian population has decreased from 74,000 in 1989 to 22,000 today, excluding the 1,500 Russian military personnel stationed there. Russia is not as worried about their population as Armenians are. Instead, Russia is more focused on economic and financial investment in Abkhazia, as well as security.

The next question asked Sergey Minasyan to discuss the ideologies of military offensive and how they can become self-fulfilling. There is a technical balance between offensive and defensive forces. In the last 10 years we have witnessed a dramatic increase in the Azeri military budget. However, while military balance is important, it is only one of many elements of an effective deterrence or compellence strategy. A balance of motivations and interests plays a more significant role. Azerbaijan’s primary interest lies in permanent maintenance of tension along the front line. Azerbaijan therefore has little incentive to reduce tensions, as its compellence strategy would then lose credibility. Recent sniper shootings on the border in June were one manifestation of this reality. Long, drawn-out tensions as a result of border clashes demonstrate the high price of war. This is precisely the reason why a war has not started and why it is unlikely to start.

The following question asked if the Azeri government were to offer a reward system or pursue a softer position toward Armenian Karabakhis, would this be interpreted as a sign of Azeri weakness by Armenian society. Sergey Minasyan explained that Armenian society at large would view any positive steps as a symbol of good will. The political elite, however, may interpret it as a sign of weakness.

The next question concerned the morale in Armenia after the Safarov case. The case certainly impacted morale domestically. At the level of the political elite, however, the incident provides Armenia with political leverage. The Safarov case will be used by political elite on both sides as propaganda; for the Azerbaijanis, Safarov will be portrayed as a hero, while for the Armenian side the Safarov case will serve as an example of Azeri disrespect for Armenian lives.

This was followed by another question asking whether Russia would intervene on behalf of Armenia if Azerbaijan took military action to reclaim territories. A 2010 protocol provided Armenia with guarantees that Russia would use force if necessary should the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict escalate.
However, Russia has no obligations to Nagorno-Karabakh. At the same time, Russia has expressed its dedication to solving the issue. No one truly knows how Russia would react; any reaction would ultimately depend on the political context.

The discussion closed with a final question addressing Sergey Minasyan about the Safarov case and whether it will be civil society or the state that will be less willing to move forward. The main obstacle will come from civil society. Armenian society will need to recover, which will take time due to the lack of financial and political support from international and multilateral organizations.