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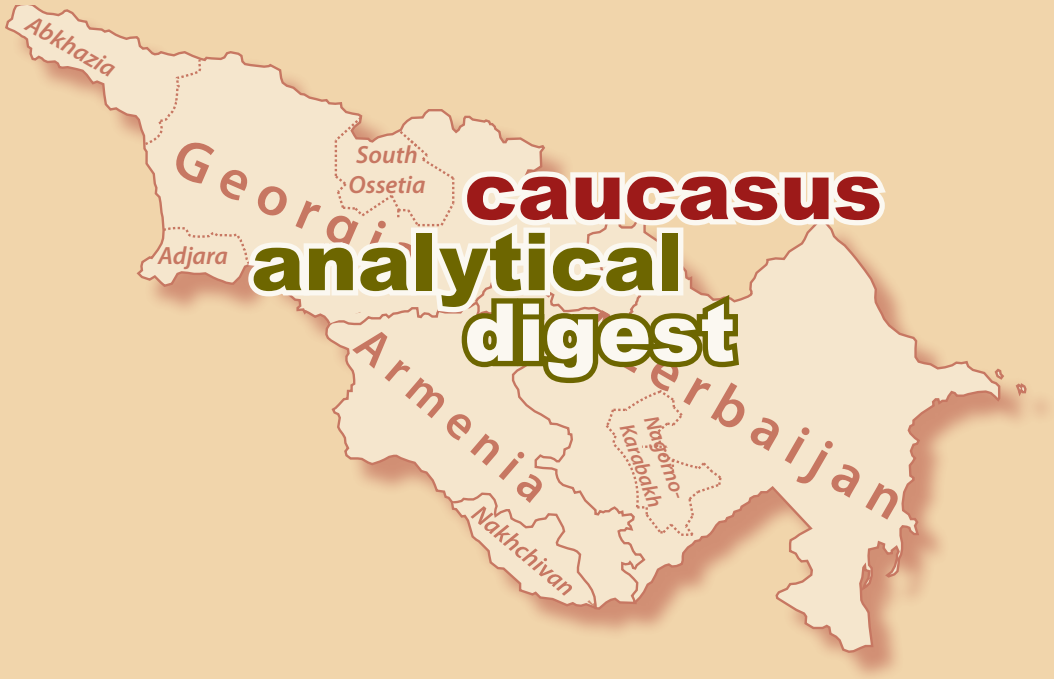

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RELATIONS BETWEEN THE NORTH AND SOUTH CAUCASUS

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Relations Between the North and South Caucasus: Divergent Paths?

By Aude Merlin, Brussels

Abstract

The Caucasus encompasses a large variety of peoples, which were divided into a complex administrative-territorial system. During Soviet times, the main units in the South Caucasus consisted of the three Union Republics: Armenia, Azerbaijan, and Georgia. The North Caucasus, which formed part of the Russian Socialist Federative Soviet Republic, was divided into several "autonomous" regions or republics. Autonomous territories also existed within the South Caucasus Union Republics. While the Caucasus lacked unity during the Soviet period, the region became even more frangible after the USSR's demise because of the ethnic revival and armed conflicts that exploded at the end of the 1980s and at the beginning of the 1990s. Each conflict is unique and has specific origins and developments. Beyond some local attempts to build a united Caucasian entity, the main tendencies show a divided region where loyalties are short-lived. The dominant role that Russia tries to play in the region, whether by war (Chechnya in 1994–1996 and since 1999, Georgia in 2008), or the co-optation of élites, contributes significantly to this fractionalisation.

The Caucasus: An Entity in its Own Right?

Can the Caucasus be seen as a coherent entity? Even if the word represents a specific geographic unit, elements of imperial policy under the Tsars and Soviets have maintained divisions within this region. The Tsarist Empire's reliance on certain peoples conquering others returned during Soviet times when the leaders implemented a genuine "divide and rule" policy. The multiplicity of ethnicities, languages, and religions gave outside manipulators plenty of material to use in drawing contentious lines. The way the authorities designed internal borders and delimited territories did not reinforce commonalities, even though such interconnections existed, especially in the sphere of culture. Under current conditions the Caucasus lacks coherence as an economic unit. The centralized Soviet decision-making process did not favour the development of North–South economic relations as such. Decisions were taken at the top, and horizontal economic links among regions were limited. Typically, workers from the Caucasus, especially the North Caucasus moved to other regions, such as Siberia, in search of work, often as "shabashniki" working in roving construction brigades.

Although various connecting routes exist between North and South—along the Black Sea and the Caspian Sea coasts, through the Darial Pass and the Roki tunnel—the mountain range remains an obstacle, very much as in the past, whether during times of war or peace. Furthermore, the failure to finish construction of the Caucasus Mountain railway, which was revived in the late Soviet period as part of the 1986–1990 Five-Year-Plan, did not enhance North–South relations. In fact, it is hard to consider the Caucasus as a unitary and consistent region, given its numerous internal cleavages, not only in terms of the North–South division, but also within its sub-regions.

Some scholars and intellectuals have cultivated the myth of a "Caucasian unity" by pointing out an array of common trends and traditions. But what was common was mainly to be found in culture and folklore, and people-to-people contacts across the mountains, contacts among dancers, writers, and artists. Yet all this interaction did not lead to tight political relations, as local elites maintained closer ties with Moscow than with their neighbours.

The Impact of the 1990s Georgian Wars

In this framework, it is probably more relevant to scrutinize South-North Caucasus relations through the lens of state-building after the collapse of the Soviet Union. At the same time, this issue cannot be tackled without analysing Russia's attempt to improve its position in its 'near abroad', which has been an explicit foreign policy priority since 2000. Certainly a number of ethnic groups whose members live in different political-administrative units on both sides of the Caucasus mountain range, such as the Ossetians, the Lezghis, or the Adyghe-Abkhaz, tie the North and the South Caucasus together. In this context, the Chechen and Georgian wars were not the key factors leading to profound divisions, although they surely generated significant changes across the region. In many ways the North and the South had already drifted apart; these two conflicts generated changes in balances and unbalances in the context of the emerging new states.

The Georgian internal wars of the early 1990s (war in South Ossetia in 1991–1992, in Abkhazia in 1992–1993) had a profound impact on the relations between the North and the South Caucasus from several points of view. Whereas the post-Soviet Georgian authorities were attempting to build a state using their own resources and in the face of great difficulties, the victories of the Abkhaz and Ossetian separatist movements show that

they could rely to some extent on external support. Volunteers of the so-called "Confederation of Caucasus Peoples," a group of fighters from the North Caucasus who volunteered to fight in the South Caucasus, provided substantial help to separatist Abkhazia. Circulation of combatants from the North to the South Caucasus was quite easy. Although Russia's official role in these conflicts remains unclear and ambiguous, Georgian authorities perceived the fighters as representing Russia's leverage in South Caucasus.

While the precise nature of the interaction remains undefined, the Georgian internal wars of the early 1990s showed the inter-dependence between the North and the South Caucasus. Being concomitant to the creation of the Confederation, they gave some justifications to North Caucasus leaders who wanted to unify the Caucasus. However, projects of unification collided with personal ambitions. Most importantly, the national and personal ambitions of the Chechen leaders constantly competed with the ambitions of the Adyghe (Circassian) leaders. At the same time, armed conflicts made a regional and united Caucasian organisation impossible: whereas an anti-Georgian feeling characterised the Confederation, which supported Abkhaz and Ossetian struggles for secession, Ingush representatives maintained a distance, and opposed the Confederation's solidarity vis-à-vis the Ossetians.

The Chechen Wars

The Chechen wars (1994–1996; since 1999) have to be analysed in a different way in the pan-Caucasian context. In particular, the first post-Soviet Chechen war did not have a direct military impact on the whole Caucasus, but rather an indirect one.

The first Chechen war constituted the failure of the political project of the "Confederation of Caucasian Peoples". After the conflict, many North Caucasus representatives expressed their feeling that the Chechen participation in the Confederation had an instrumental connotation, since the Chechens were likely trying to use their alliance with the other peoples to gain their own independence. Also, having seen the brutal force Moscow used against the Chechens, the other North Caucasus republics eased their own demands for autonomy and pledged their loyalty to the Russian federal government. Finally, at the pan-Caucasian level, Georgian authorities tried to capitalize on the apparent Chechen victory over Russia. During the interwar period (1996–1999) some contacts were even established between Maskhadov's Chechen government and Georgia.

The second Chechen war, which began in 1999, occurred during the same period that Russia tried to restore its influence among the former Soviet republics. In parallel to conducting large-scale military operations in Chechnya, Russia tightened its relationship with Azerbaijan and sent some strong signals to the Georgian authorities. Nevertheless, the perception of the Chechen War as a Russian "internal affair" remained predominant; beyond accepting a few thousands refugees, Azerbaijani and Georgian authorities remained very cautious towards Russia during this time.

The Russia–Georgia War of August 2008

In a sense, the 2008 Russia–Georgia war can be viewed as an extension of the Georgian internal wars of the early 1990s, only that the Russian military intervened with great force in the latter case. At the same time, the conflict demonstrates the degree to which the new independent countries, whether Russian or Caucasian, have consolidated their states and their armies. Also, it shows that Russian military intervention in Georgia and the official recognition of the Abkhaz and South Ossetian "independences" by Moscow would have been unthinkable with an ongoing full-scale war in Chechnya and/or at a time when legitimate Chechen national authorities were claiming independence.

The participation of a Chechen battalion (the Yamadaev-led "Vostok") in the operations in South Ossetia in August 2008 deserves mention. Chechnya's President Ramzan Kadyrov and the leaders of the other North Caucasus republics immediately voiced their support for the decision to recognize Abkhaz and South Ossetian independence, while welcoming refugees from Ossetia. Looking back at events, the Russian strategy is clear: Russia has re-established itself as a military power. Its presence is now assured in both entities. As a result of bilateral agreements, Russia has stipulated 49-year contracts for its military bases, which are no longer for maintaining mere "peacekeeping forces," but the stationing of regular forces and equipment. Simultaneously, Moscow achieved political as well as economic control over South Ossetia, which can be seen from the fact that 98 percent of the South Ossetian budget constitutes money from the Russian federal budget; also, South Ossetian elites are basically being appointed by Moscow, as in the past.

This large-scale Russian involvement in both entities (even if Abkhazia is less interested in integrating with Russia) generated a number of insecurities among the leaders of the North Caucasus republics: to what extent would Russia support and sponsor Abkhaz and South Ossetian entities, and would it harm the North's budgetary and political interests? Although a few pan-Circassian spokesmen tried to use the opportunity for voicing their aspirations, as of 2011 not much has changed in the North Caucasus in terms of cooptation of elites and territorial definition.

The Sochi Olympic Games

The 2014 Sochi Winter Olympic Games, which will take place in close proximity to the Abkhaz border, may affect the overall situation in the region. They offer an additional opportunity for tensions between Georgia and Russia, with the North Caucasus a key arena for this conflict. Circassian organizations have asked the Russian authorities to officially recognize as a genocide the mass crimes and exodus of their people during the final stage of the Caucasian wars in the 1860s. These organizations have addressed their appeal to the Georgian authorities, among others, who in turn said in autumn 2010 that they were considering a boycott of the Games. On November 25, 2010, Georgia's Deputy Prime Minister and State Minister for Euro-Atlantic Integration, Giorgi Baramidze, stated: "I understand why (…) Russia does not deserve to be the host of the Olympic Games—because the Olympic movement is something different than Russia demonstrates today."

Of all the south Caucasian states, Georgia is the most concerned about developments in the North Caucasus as demonstrated by its regional policy; yet even for Georgia, the North Caucasus appears to be more of a buffer zone, a bargaining tool or a hostage in Georgian–Russian transactions at a discourse level, rather than a real security concern. This is shown in the example of recent Georgian policy to engage more actively in the North Caucasus via broadcasting or through the establishment of a free-visa regime (see the article in this issue by Paata Zakareishvili).

From a mere economic and political point of view, one cannot say that the North Caucasus constitutes a big concern for Azerbaijan, notwithstanding the presence of Chechen refugees, some of whom are former separatist fighters. As for the Lezghin minority, claims for the creation of a unified Lezghistan have eased and the Russian–Azeri border is now secure. The same goes for Armenia, where the North Caucasus is even less of a concern since the country does not share a common border with Russia, and therefore with the North Caucasus.

Armenia and Azerbaijan are more focused on their domestic issues (opposition and recent demonstrations in Armenia, opposition and repression in Azerbaijan) and on the Karabakh issue, which keeps them constantly alert and nurtures tensions between the two states. Through this lens, neither Armenia nor Azerbaijan pays significant attention to the North Caucasus, dealing directly with Moscow. Incidentally, one has to keep in mind the extent of Armenia's extensive economic and energy dependence on Russia.

As a result of all these factors, it is obvious that Russia favours bilateral relations with the states of the South Caucasus over a regional policy towards the Caucasus as a whole. The incoherent or piecemeal nature of its policy, which is more often reactive than strategically determined, continues to dominate.

About the Author

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Azerbaijan and the North Caucasus: A Pragmatic Relationship

By Anar Valiyev, Baku

Abstract

This article provides an overview of relations between Azerbaijan and the North Caucasus. After describing the development of ties since independence, the article examines the main areas of interest that the countries share. Two key factors shape these relations—security concerns and economic ties. The author argues that after years of mutual misunderstanding and suspicions, both Azerbaijan and Russia recognized the importance of the other in providing security in the volatile Caucasus region. Neither Russia nor Azerbaijan can solve the endemic problems of the Caucasus alone and thus they strive to find an appropriate model benefiting both sides.

Developments since 1991

Relations between Azerbaijan and the Northern Caucasus traditionally have been good, friendly, and even brotherly. Sharing a common religion, traditions, culture, and history under Tsarist and Soviet rule allowed the nations and ethnic groups populating this region—usually referred to as *kavkaztsy* by Russia—to share a common identity. Among all Northern Caucasus republics, Azerbaijan traditionally had the tightest contacts and cooperation with Dagestan due to its proximity just across the border. Meanwhile, the presence of an Azerbaijani minority in Dagestan, and Lezgin and Avar minorities in Azerbaijan, combined with close trade relations, made ties with Dagestan much more substantial than with any other North Caucasian republic.

The collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991 severed Azerbaijan's contacts and relations with the republics of the Northern Caucasus, particularly Dagestan. The early years of independence for Azerbaijan were marred by the threat of separatism coming from its Lezgin minority living in the northern part of the country. Several nationalistic organizations, including *Sadval*, freely operating on the territory of Russia, instigated this separatism.[1] Meanwhile, part of the Russian establishment played the separatism card in order to gain political leverage vis-à-vis Azerbaijan. Moreover, the terrorist attack in the Baku subway carried out by *Sadval* members in 1994 antagonized relations between Azerbaijan and Dagestan in particular.

The Russian–Chechen War was another factor that played a negative role in Azerbaijan's contacts with the Northern Caucasus. The Azerbaijani public had an ambiguous view of the war that started in 1994. Although the Azerbaijani government officially endorsed Russia's campaign against the Chechen separatists, public opinion and sympathies were on the Chechen side. Various NGOs and private citizens helped the Chechen cause. Among the Azerbaijani public, the war also reanimated myths of Imam Shamil's resistance to the Russian conquest during the 19th century.[2] Azerbaijani hospitals treated wounded Chechen resistance fighters. Even the late President Heydar Aliyev acknowledged that Baku hospitals were providing aid to the rebels, but denied that his country was involved in terrorist activities. The public support for the Chechen cause came from the fear that if the Russian army destroyed the Chechen resistance quickly, then Azerbaijan could be the next target for the Russian military machine.

Azerbaijan was a key destination for Chechen refugees seeking to avoid the atrocities and persecution taking place in their homeland. Up to 3,000 Chechens, mostly women and children, found refuge in the country during 1994–1996. In the course of the second Russo–Chechen war, the number of refugees reached almost 10,000. Azerbaijan's tacit non-military support to the Chechen cause was justified since the country feared that a successful Russian military operation in the North Caucasus would embolden Russian military circles to exert heavy pressure on Azerbaijan to stop its cooperation with the West and halt projects such as the Baku–Tbilisi–Ceyhan pipeline.

Relations with the Russian Northern Caucasus have significantly improved during the presidency of Vladimir Putin. Having understood that stability in the North Caucasus can not be achieved without Azerbaijan's cooperation, the Russian establishment started actively to seek ways to involve Azerbaijan into the stability process in the Caucasus. Leaders of the Northern Caucasus republics

1 Sadval was primarily concerned with the secession of Lezgin people along the newly internationalized border between Russia and Azerbaijan. This border separated the Lezgin into two unequal parts. During the early years of independence even some circles of the Lezgin intelligentsia in Dagestan and Azerbaijan initially conceived of a combination of all Lezgin territory into a Republic of Lezgistan. Later on, with the beginning of the Chechen war, the Russian authorities understood the danger of playing the separatist card against Azerbaijan since it later was turned against the Russians themselves.

2 Despite the fact that Imam Shamil's war was primarily fought between the Northern Caucasus and Russia, the conflict had a huge impact on Azerbaijanis' perceptions of Russia. Imam Shamil and his resistance were positively portrayed in Azerbaijan.

became frequent guests in Baku. At the same time, cross-border trade and cooperation significantly intensified.

Azerbaijan looks at relations with the Northern Caucasus through the prism of security and economics. In the following sections, we consider the impact of each of these factors.

Security Concerns: The Chechen Factor

Baku recognizes that any instability in the Northern Caucasus would immediately provoke problems in Azerbaijan's north because of the flood of refugees, infiltration of guerrillas, emergence of religious radicals and eventually the spread of conflict into Azerbaijan. The country has already experienced these problems during the second Chechen war. Although the majority of refugees crossing the border during that conflict did not present any danger, some of them were followers of *Salafi* Islam (often referred to as "Wahhabis," which, however, is not an accurate description) and were targets of persecution in Chechnya at that time.

The first *Salafi* missionaries arrived in Azerbaijan from the northern Caucasus in the mid-1990s. The majority of them came from Chechnya and Dagestan where the *Salafis* had some influence, in large measure due to the Russian–Chechen wars. For a short while, *Salafis* made some inroads in Chechnya and were even able to create their own self-ruled area in the Dagestani villages of Karamakhi and Chobanmakhi. However, *Salafis* did not stop in Chechnya and Dagestan, but extended their activities into Azerbaijan. Initially, they did not gain wide support among Azerbaijanis, as nationalism and pan-Turkism were much more popular than Islam. However, later on, the number of *Salafis* began to grow. The government of Azerbaijan became concerned with the expansion of a non-traditional sect of Islam as well as with the growing number of Chechen and Dagestani *Salafis* in the country who were fleeing Russia. In 2001 Azerbaijani authorities started to crack down on *Salafi* cells. Since the majority of the *Salafis* in the country were Chechens, the purge hit Chechens the hardest. At the same time, Azerbaijani officials launched a covert campaign against Chechens, forcing them to leave the country. Some of them were extradited to Russia as terrorists and guerrillas. In May 2001, Aslan Maskhadov, the unrecognized president of the Chechen Republic, called on Chechens to leave Azerbaijan due to the danger they were experiencing there. As a result, up to 5,000 Chechens left the country.

It is not difficult to understand the reasons for the Azerbaijani authorities' exertions in pushing Chechens out of the country. From the point of view of the Azerbaijani government, the Chechen community presented a threat to the country's internal balance. The radical outlooks of many of them, as well as their military background, could easily be used by external or internal forces to destabilize the situation in Azerbaijan. Baku was worried about the Chechen community's active recruitment of young local Azerbaijanis to fight in Chechnya, which they feared could have a detrimental effect for their own country. Azerbaijanis who went to fight in Chechnya could return home with radical ideas combined with the zeal to change the country's regime. Their situation was reminiscent of the situation of the Saudi *mujahedeen* who came back from fighting in Afghanistan at the end of the 1980s and were eager to change the regime in Riyadh.

Despite its sympathies for the Chechen people, the Azerbaijani government came around to the view that Russia played an overall positive role in the Caucasus, even though it caused hardship for the population at the time. The perception was that a weakening of Russia in the region would not necessarily benefit Azerbaijan. To the contrary, Baku feared that a Russian withdrawal from Chechnya and Dagestan would immediately unleash a civil war between the different ethnic groups in the North Caucasus that could eventually spill over to Azerbaijan. In that case, Azerbaijan would face revived Avar or Lezgin separatism. It was against this background that the Azerbaijani ruling establishment came to the view that a Russian success in Chechnya was necessary in order to maintain peace in Dagestan, and Baku thus would need to do everything possible to help Russia in this process.

Despite the fact that Russian-backed Chechen President Ramzan Kadyrov faces heavy criticism in Europe and the U.S. for abusing human rights and repressing opposition to his rule, the Azerbaijani establishment has been helping Kadyrov to establish himself and win legitimization. The Azerbaijan government invited the Chechen president to Azerbaijan several times and Kadyrov visited Baku and met with its president in November 2009. He was recently invited to return to Baku in the near future. Allahshukur Pashazade, Sheikh ul-Islam and Grand Mufti of the Caucasus, who is based in Baku, is also officially backing the current Chechen president, providing crucial support for legitimizing Kadyrov's rule.

The Georgian and Russian Factors

Another security concern high on the list is Georgia, and the recent war between Russia and Georgia. Despite the fact that Azerbaijan supported Georgia during and after the war, this position did not impact the country's relations with the North Caucasus. First of all, Azerbaijan's relations with North Ossetia, the main stakeholder in the war, were never very important. Relations between the two sides were simply not developed enough. Second, and more importantly, the war did not affect Azerbaijan's relations with Dagestan as it did not see Baku's support for Georgia as detrimental to bilateral relations.

The Russian establishment also began to understand that security and stability in Azerbaijan were beneficial to its southern republics, and began to take a more constructive stance in its relations with Baku. For example, border delimitation between the two countries (namely between Dagestan and Azerbaijan) had been creating problems over a long period. In September 2010, both countries signed an agreement on the delimitation of borders that became the first such document concluded between Azerbaijan and any of its neighbors. It is interesting that two villages—Khrakhoba and Uryanoba—populated by Russian citizens were officially transferred to Azerbaijan and recognized by Russia to be under Azerbaijan's sovereignty.[3]

Another important agreement between the two countries addressed water issues. Water intake became an extremely serious problem for Dagestan's southern agricultural regions, whose population considered the practice of giving most local water to Azerbaijan as unfair. According to the previous agreement signed in 1967, 16.7 percent of the water went to Dagestan, 49.6 percent to Azerbaijan, and 33.4 percent was designated as ecological waste water. Under this agreement, Dagestan controlled the river's hydraulic system. In the new agreement, water usage (beyond the 33.4 percent designated as waste) will be shared evenly. Accordingly, Azerbaijan will be entitled to take less water from the Samur River, but, as compensation, Baku received the right to jointly operate the hydraulic system. The Samur River feeds the Ceyranbatan reservoir that provides fresh water to Baku and the Absheron peninsula.

In previous years, it would have been considered harmful to the country's security to sign an agreement that limited its water resources. However, Baku has calculated the risks of such actions. By the end of 2010, the government launched a new water pipeline delivering fresh water from inland Azerbaijan to Baku. Now Baku and its vicinities do not depend solely on the Samur River. Meanwhile, by giving up the right to extract a larger share of water from the Samur, Azerbaijan demonstrated its goodwill toward Dagestan which had experienced difficulties irrigating its lands.

Economic Interests

Trade is one of the most important factors affecting relations between Azerbaijan and the Northern Caucasus. By the end of 2010, approximately 38 Russian republics and regions had signed agreements on economic development and trade with Azerbaijan. Given a common border and historically close ties, Azerbaijan has the largest trade turnover with Dagestan. Around 70 percent of the goods turnover between Azerbaijan and Russia comes from the cross-border cooperation between Dagestan and Azerbaijan. In 2009, the trade turnover between Azerbaijan and Dagestan was $171.5 million; while Moscow city was in second place with $149.6 million.

Despite the fact that the share of other North Caucasus republics in trade with Azerbaijan is marginal, the future might see an expansion of cooperation. During his visit to Baku, Ingushetia President Yunusbey Yevkurov expressed interest in attracting investments from Azerbaijan to his republic's economy. Other republics have also invited Azerbaijani businessmen to the southern region of Russia as investors. Knowing that Azerbaijan has considerable oil revenues, the Russian government is trying to create favorable conditions for Azerbaijani investments in order to bring economic opportunities to the region. While Russian businesses fear to invest in the North Caucasus, Azerbaijani business may succeed, especially in Dagestan, taking into consideration the long history of cooperation.

The gas deal between Azerbaijan and Russia is another factor in cementing economic, as well as political, relations. Starting this year, Gazprom is buying around two billion cubic meters of gas per year from Azerbaijan and planning to increase that volume. There are two factors driving gas cooperation between the two countries. First, Russia pursues a policy of trying to decrease the attractiveness of the EU-favored Nabucco-project by demonstrating that the proposed pipeline from Azerbaijan to Europe would not have enough gas to fill it. Second, the Kremlin is trying to secure energy supplies to the North Caucasus. In order to bring gas to this remote area, Russia wants to avoid transporting energy from its own heartland, which would be more expensive. Thus, by buying gas from Azerbaijan, Russia saves money on gas transportation. So, it is not surprising that Russia offers a price for Azerbaijani gas that is similar to the price at which it sells its own gas to Europe. Russia wins economically and politically in any case. For Azerbaijan such cooperation is really beneficial since the country can sell its gas at market prices. At the same time, the gas supply to Dagestan and other republics of the North Caucasus is making Azerbaijan an important player in providing economic security to the region.

Conclusion

The history of relations between Azerbaijan and the Northern Caucasus must be analyzed within the con-

3 Khrakhoba and Uryanoba were transferred to the Dagestan Autonomous republic in May 1954. In 1984 the Council of Ministers of the Azerbaijani Soviet Republic prolonged the agreement for another 20 years until 2004. By 2004, the majority of village residents had adopted Russian citizenship. The September 2010 agreement recognized Azerbaijan's sovereignty over these two villages.

text of relations between Azerbaijan and Russia. Most of the time relations between Azerbaijan and the Russian South were hostage to overall relations between Baku and Moscow. However, recent developments suggest that the roles have changed. Today, with active cross-border cooperation and common security concerns, the Russian establishment is careful not to spoil relations with Azerbaijan, fearing that such actions would negatively affect the Northern Caucasus, and especially Dagestan. Azerbaijan was thus able to link its own interests with those of Russia, ensuring that Moscow is not only interested in maintaining good relations with Azerbaijan, but also in continuing economic and political stability there.

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Anar Valiyev received his Ph.D. in Urban and Public Affairs from the University of Louisville in Kentucky, USA. His interests include the public policies of post-Soviet republics; democracy and governance; and urban development and planning. The statements made and views expressed here are solely the responsibility of the author.

The North Caucasus: Bone of Contention or a Basis for Russian–Georgian Cooperation?

By Paata Zakareishvili, Tbilisi

Abstract
The troublesome situation in the North Caucasus, which after the end of the Chechen wars is in a state of permanent low intensity conflict, affects not only Russia, but the entire Caucasus region. All parties involved, including neighboring Georgia and Azerbaijan, should thus have an interest in contributing to help turn this volatile frontier into a zone of stability and peace. This article examines the Georgian government's current policy vis-à-vis the North Caucasus, showing that it is doing a poor job responding to the North Caucasus challenge.

Not Only Russia's Problem
Russia's "Achilles heel" is its volatile North Caucasus region where simmering ethnic and religious divisions and estrangement from the state have become permanent. One possibility that would pose a grave danger to Russia's national security and call into question its survival is the entire North Caucasus spinning out of control.

The absence of civilized ways for addressing regional problems in the North Caucasus is worsened by the fact that the region borders on Georgia. The August 2008 Russian–Georgian war had a negative impact on regional stability. Instead of cooperating with each other to reduce tensions in the North Caucasus, Russia and Georgia are doing their best to provoke conflict, blaming each other for being the cause of the trouble.

Any reasonable policy would recognize that both countries have a vital interest in making the situation in the North Caucasus stable and predictable. The mounting unresolved problems in the North Caucasus should not be viewed as a challenge to Russia only. Although they do not pose any direct threat to Georgia's national security, they can represent a security risk for both Georgia and another regional player, Azerbaijan, in terms of both regional and internal stability. That is why it is necessary to analyze the Georgian government's current policy toward the North Caucasus and assess how adequately it responds to the growing challenges from this region.

The North Caucasus in Georgian Policy
There is no denying that before August 2008 the North Caucasus was conspicuously absent from Mikheil Saakashvili's agenda. Despite the snowballing antagonism and hostility between Russia and Georgia, which began escalating in June 2004, the problems of the North Caucasus played no role in the Russian–Georgian confrontation. During that period, Georgian foreign policy completely ignored regional concerns, limiting policy to a minimum level of formal relations with neighbors. Few were concerned with the situation in the North Caucasus in post-Shevardnadze Georgia. The country's new leadership announced that Georgia's institutional inte-

gration into NATO was its top foreign policy priority, citing growing tensions with Russia.

However, this *situation changed drastically* after the Russian–Georgian war in August 2008. As a result of the five-day conflict, Russia occupied Abkhazia and South Ossetia and then recognized them as independent states. Since then the North Caucasus has been a dominant theme in Georgian political rhetoric, indicating that the Georgian government was keen to leverage Russia's problems to achieve its goals. Under both Gamsakhurdia and Shevardnadze, the North Caucasus theme appeared only during periods when Russian–Georgian tensions were exacerbated. But Saakashvili's North Caucasus policy is much more sophisticated and complex than that of Shevardnadze or Gamsakhurdia. It is obvious that the main aim of the Georgian government's new strategy is to add fuel to the flames in order to weaken its northern neighbor.

Broadcasting "The First Caucasus News"

The creation of a Russian-language TV station "The First Information Caucasus," which began broadcasting on January 4, 2010, was one of the Georgian government's first moves against Russia after the war. The idea was to provide residents of the North Caucasus with information that they would not receive from Russian state-controlled media sources. However, this effort quickly came to a halt. Eutelsat, the French-owned satellite operator that carried the station, soon stopped its broadcasts of the new channel without providing any plausible explanation. Georgia immediately claimed that Russia was behind the suspension, arguing that Eutelsat had come under strong Russian pressure. Allegedly, Russia threatened to cancel "a lucrative contract" between Eutelsat and a media unit of the state-controlled Russian energy giant Gazprom if broadcasts of the Georgian channel were not halted.[1] It was only a year later, on January 25, 2011, that the First Caucasus News resumed its broadcasts with the help of another European satellite operator.

In principle, the creation of a new television station providing more information to the residents of the North Caucasus serves humanitarian goals. However, after the end of the Cold War, state radio and TV broadcasts beamed into other countries became more civilized and legitimate in the territories of their target states. All the leading radio stations that formerly broadcasted into the Soviet Union sought to acquire the legal right to broadcast, entering into agreements with the governments of the states for whose citizens they sought to provide more information. Against this background, the actions of the new channel that is funded from Georgia's state budget are expressly provocative. Especially as the station management does not deny the purpose of the broadcasts. As stated by Ekaterine Kotrikadze, the cofounder of the TV channel and the director of the information service of the First Information Caucasus (FIC), "We will certainly focus on the North Caucasus. We want to fill the information gap that somehow exists in the North Caucasus."[2] And Oleg Panfilov, the director of the Center for Journalism in Extreme Situations and the leading journalist of the FIC channel, confirms the statement: "I think the First Caucasus is a station intended for a foreign audience, since there are very few Russian-speaking channels, which can provide information that differs from Russian propaganda. That's exactly why the First Caucasus was created."[3] However, in July 2010, Yulia Latinina, one of the leading Russian liberal journalists, welcomed the initial suppression of the First Caucasus channel during her broadcast on the radio station Eko Moskvy: "The First Caucasus channel, whose establishment was an obvious mistake of Saakishvili, has ceased its broadcasting. Rectifying errors is definitely more important than not committing them."[4] Clearly such initiatives will not contribute to improving relations between Georgia and Russia, as the Russian government did not agree to the broadcasts.

The Issue of "Genocide" and the Sochi Olympic Games

Georgia's second confrontational step to keep up the pressure on Russia involved organizing in Tbilisi a series of international conferences under the common title "Hidden Nations, Enduring Crimes: The Circassian and the People of the North Caucasus Between Past and Future". Two conferences were held on this theme (March 19–21 and November 19–21, 2010). In a follow-up to the March conference, the delegates adopted an appeal addressed to the Parliament of Georgia calling on the members to declare tsarist policy in the 19th century vis-à-vis the Circassians and Soviet policy vis-à-vis the Chechens in the 20th century as genocides. In response, the leader of the parliamentary group for friendship with the North Caucasus nations stated that "a group of deputies from Georgia's Parliament are willing to start bilateral discussions on the facts of genocide and deportation committed by the Russian empire in the North Caucasus in the second half of the 19th century."[5] On May 20, 2011, the Georgian parliament unanimously adopted a resolution declaring the Russian Empire's actions between 1763 and 1864 a "genocide."

1 http://azerbaijan.kavkaz-uzel.ru/articles/164796/

2 http://www.georgiatimes.info/news/49282.html

3 http://www.svobodanews.ru/content/transcript/2105603.html

4 http://www.svobodanews.ru/content/transcript/2105603.html

5 http://www.civil.ge/rus/article.php?id=20688&search

The formal organizers of the conferences were academic institutions, such as Ilia State University (Tbilisi) and the Jamestown Foundation (Washington). However, audio recordings of Georgian politicians published a month after the first conference clearly showed that the real clients and organizers of the conferences were not the academic community, but high ranking Georgian politicians. One of the videos depicted a conversation between Georgia's Minister of Interior Vano Merabishvili and the Ambassador of Georgia to the USA, Batu Kutelia.[6] The stars of another recording are the Chairman of the Parliamentary Committee on Defense and Security, Givi Targamadze, and the Ambassador of Georgia to Egypt and Syria, Gocha Japaridze. Targamadze directly tells his companion that "to be quite honest about it, we intend to recognize their genocide in the parliament…that's why we are now engaged in a very intensive search for these nations everywhere, including in Turkey and Jordan; and I already informed the ambassadors there…now I am with Vano [Merabishvili] and we are going through this situation."[7]

Genocide in the Caucasus, particularly in the North Caucasus, is a relevant and sensitive issue. Every year, on April 23, on the eve of the anniversary of mass killings of the Armenians in the Ottoman Empire, the Armenian community in Georgia requests that the government recognize the genocide committed against the Armenian people during World War I. And every time, Georgian officials and members of the community request that the Armenians treat with understanding the fact that Georgia is the only country in the world that borders both Armenia and Turkey and maintains good neighborly relations with both nations. Hence, starting discussions on this sensitive issue may lead to a destabilization of the situation in the region. Therefore, while a dozen countries already have recognized the genocide of the Armenians in the Ottoman Empire, Georgia is no hurry to join them. Yet strangely enough, in the case of another neighboring state, Russia, the Georgian authorities intentionally instigated the issue of a genocide dated, in the case of the Circassians, from a much earlier period. It should be noted that no government anywhere in the world has ever taken a formal interest in this sensitive matter.

Whether the issue of the Circassians, who were driven out of Russia *en masse* after their defeat in 1864, should be labeled genocide is not an idle or abstract topic. The Georgians raised this issue to achieve specific results. At the November conference, the speakers gave special consideration to linking the Circassian genocide to the 2014 Sochi winter Olympic Games. According to the Ilia University rector, one of the official organizers of the conference, "Sochi is a place where the Circassian genocide was committed. We all have come to the conclusion that this is not a suitable place for conducting the Olympics."[8]

In December, Georgian Interior Minister Vano Merabishvili quite sincerely answered the questions of a Russian journalist:

Is recognition of the Circassian genocide being prepared in the parliament?

Yes, it is.

So, will it take place?

Yes, it will. Why?

But it will further complicate relations with Russia.

Why, is there any "further"?[9]

It did not take long for Russia to answer. At a meeting of the Russian Federation Security Council in February 2011, Russian President Dmitry Medvedev noted that there are "certain problems" relating to Georgia and requiring the attention of security agencies, diplomats, as well as law enforcement bodies. "We must reveal and hold responsible the forces that interfere with the organization of the Olympic Games."[10] The threats to the Olympic Games were similarly rated by Alexander Khloponin, the President's Plenipotentiary Envoy to the North Caucasus Federal District. He stated that the responsibility for the strained situation in the region ahead of the Olympics lies with foreign provocateurs and special services, though he did not specify which foreign countries he meant.[11] The on-going disputes demonstrate that the sides are confident in their rightness, and that they have not yet exhausted all confrontation resources for gaining decisive victory over each other.

By recognizing the Circassian genocide, the Georgian authorities may count on some destabilization in the North Caucasus, particularly in the areas inhabited by the Adyg peoples. Such processes could possibly commence, although there is no evidence of that so far, beyond a measure of excitement in the blogosphere.[12]

Relaxed Visa Regulations for North Caucasians

Another point of confrontation is the Georgian Government's Decree of October 11, 2010, on the introduction of new regulations for Russian citizens visiting

6 http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=kGNqFaJ1n40

7 http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ZxJsn5x6icY; http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ZxJsn5x6icY&feature=related

8 http://www.kommersant.ru/Doc/1544753

9 http://www.kommersant.ru/Doc/1549013

10 http://lenta.ru/news/2011/02/18/save/

11 http://lenta.ru/news/2011/02/18/save/

12 http://inosmi.ru//history/20100328/158834264.html; http://ingushetiya-ru.livejournal.com/827516.html; http://circassia.forumieren.de/t808-topic; http://slon.ru/blogs/gzegenidze/post/496265/

Georgia. It has made entry into Georgia for the residents of the Russian Federation's seven North Caucasian autonomous republics (Adygea, Karachai-Cherkessia, Kabardino-Balkaria, North Ossetia, Ingushetia, Chechnya and Dagestan) significantly easier. They may stay in Georgia for 90 days without a visa. As stated by Georgia's Deputy Minister of External Affairs Nino Kalandadze, "the noted Decree is being introduced as part of the Georgian government's liberalization policy and based on continuous traditional relations with the north Caucasus nations."[13] Kalandadze noted that the residents of these North Caucasus republics used to face cumbersome requirements. For example, to cross the Kazbegi-Upper Larsi checkpoint on the Georgian–Russian border, they had to obtain a Georgian entry visa in Moscow.

This explanation is strange insofar as prior to passing the new decree, the residents of the North Caucasus republics encountered the most difficulties in obtaining visas and resident permits when entering Georgia. Such mistrust was explained by the fact that during the military conflicts in Abkhazia and North Ossetia in the 1990s, volunteer fighters from the Russian side arrived from the North Caucasus in order to support the separatists.

As could be predicted, the Russian authorities both in Moscow and the North Caucasus region sharply reacted to this unilateral Georgian initiative. A statement issued by the information and press department of the Russian Foreign Ministry claimed that the "decision of the Georgian authorities to announce unilaterally the introduction of a visa-free regime for Russian citizens residing in a number of North Caucasian republics cannot be qualified other than as a provocation. The attempt to divide the population of Russia into different categories is in conflict with the norms of civil interstate relations.[14] Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov stated that his ministry did not see any official resolution on the matter beyond media reports. "In the framework of relations between civilized partners [such an issue] should be discussed on a reciprocal basis," added Lavrov.[15] Ingushetia President Yunus-bek Yevkurov noted: "The fact that the Georgian authorities waived visas only for the residents of certain Caucasus republics is additional evidence that it is simply a political game, yet another attempt to send a certain provocative message. And nothing else."[16]

In response to Lavrov's statement that a decision should have been taken on the basis of bilateral agreements, the Georgian Minister of Foreign Affairs, Grigol Vashadze, replied that the Russians did not consult the Georgians when they unilaterally introduced a visa regime for Georgian citizens.[17] With this, Tbilisi indirectly confirmed that the Georgian move is to be interpreted as retaliation against Russia. Georgia repays in kind Russia's past hostile actions. But, regrettably, it does not in any way make Georgia look better than Russia. Minister Vashadze also said that Georgia has no intention of talking to the Kremlin unless two principal problems—the occupation of Georgia and return of internally displaced people to their own homes—have been resolved.[18]

On this point, however, the Georgian Minister of Foreign Affairs fibbed a little. He was well aware that Georgia and Russia had held numerous talks with each other after August 2008. In fact, the reopening of the Kazbegi-Upper Larsi checkpoint on the Georgian–Russian border had been agreed upon during the Georgian–Russian talks in Yerevan. At the time this article is being written, Georgian–Russian talks on Russia's membership in the World Trade Organization are underway in Bern (Switzerland). Hence, should the two sides show interest, they could also in their negotiations take up the issue of addressing the visa regime for Russian citizens residing in the North Caucasus. The Georgian government's unilateral decision of October 11, 2010, was rated as a step toward exacerbating tensions by US Director of National Intelligence James Clapper. In his report to a US Senate Committee on February 16, 2011, he stated that in addition to Russia's military presence in Abkhazia and North Ossetia, tensions in the region are also due to the recent steps taken by Georgia in relation to the North Caucasus republics. "Georgia's public attempts to establish ties with different ethnic groups in Russia's North Caucasus contribute to the tensions."[19]

A Possible Way Forward: Some Recommendations

If this analysis is correct and Georgia is purposefully seeking to exacerbate the situation in the North Caucasus, then such a policy will definitely aggravate the already complicated and hopeless Georgian–Russian

13 http://news.day.az/georgia/232938.html
14 http://www.rian.ru/politics/20101014/285472838.html
15 http://www.rian.ru/politics/20101012/284693656.html
16 http://www.rian.ru/politics/20101015/285932216.html

17 http://www.civil.ge/rus/article.php?id=21265&search Russia introduced the visa regime with Georgia in December 2000. But the decision did not apply to the residents of Abkhazia and North Ossetia, although then Russia formally recognized Abkhazia and North Ossetia as parts of Georgia. In December 2003, Russia unilaterally introduced a facilitated visa regime for the residents of Adjaria. Moscow then called the decision "temporary measure", while Tbilisi responded with a protest.
18 http://www.interpressnews.ge/ru/2010-05-25-09-32-40/23963-2010-10-12-17-20-08.html
19 http://www.civil.ge/rus/article.php?id=21698&search

relations. The policy will be unlikely to win the support of the international community. The more helpless and provocative the policy of the Georgian authorities appears to be, the more detrimental and irrevocable will be the consequences of the policy for Georgian statehood. The problem for Georgia is not the situation in the North Caucasus, but its inadequate reaction to the processes taking place there, as well as its unilateral involvement in the processes without Russia's consent. Consequently, such obsessional involvement will lead to a relentless counter reaction from Russia, which, as is common knowledge, is not restrained by international law or obligations. What the international community expects from Georgia is that it moves towards improving relations with Russia. To this end, the North Caucasus could become a point of contact for the two irreconcilable neighbor states. Georgia could maintain that the uncertain situation in the North Caucasus is a double threat to both Russia and Georgia. Such a stance could allow the Georgian government to propose to Russia peaceful plans for North Caucasus development, despite the absence of diplomatic relations between the two countries and notwithstanding the occupation of the Georgian territories by Russia, for the sake of stability in the region. Proposals of such an initiative could be made through, or with the participation of, the EU or OSCE.

Apart from making such offers, Georgia could take unilateral actions to undo the steps it made earlier. In particular, it could stop the broadcasts of the FIC TV channel; it could stop politicizing the Circassian and Chechen genocide issue; it could stop discrediting the Sochi Olympic Games; and it could propose that Russia start talks on legalizing visa-free travel for Russian citizens residing in the North Caucasus into Georgia. I believe that the above steps could find the support of the international community, and could instill confidence in it to persuade Russia to take a counter step, and with support from the European institutions to engage Georgia in creating stability zones around the Olympic Games, as well as across the entire North Caucasus.

About the Author
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CHRONICLE

From 11 April to 17 May 2011

11 April 2011	Deputy Communications and Information Technology Minister Iltimas Mammadov says that Azerbaijan will launch a communications satellite in 2012
12 April 2011	The Armenian Parliament ratifies an agreement to prolong Russia's military presence in Armenia and deepen Armenian–Russian defense ties
14 April 2011	The founder of the Israeli security firm Global CST Israel Ziv meets with officials in the breakaway region of Abkhazia
15 April 2011	The NATO–Georgia Commission is held on the sideline of the NATO foreign ministers' summit in Berlin
18 April 2011	The Hague-based company APM Terminals announces its acquisition of 80% of the shares in Georgia's Black Sea port of Poti from the investment fund RAKIA in the UAE's emirate of Ras Al Khaimah
19 April 2011	The Georgian Parliament annuls a five-year agreement with Russia on procedures for the transit of Russian military personnel and equipment to Armenia via Georgian territory
23 April 2011	Georgian President Mikheil Saakashvili pardons 266 prison inmates
26 April 2011	Georgian Foreign Minister Grigol Vashadze meets with Armenian Foreign Minister Edward Nalbandian in Yerevan to discuss regional security issues
26 April 2011	Russian Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov meets with the leader of the breakaway region of South Ossetia Eduard Kokoity in Tskhinvali
26 April 2011	The Yerevan's Mayor's Office allows the opposition Armenian National Congress (HAK) to hold a rally on Liberty Square in Armenia's capital
26 April 2011	The Baku offices of the Azerbaijan opposition Musavat party are raided by police and investigators
26 April 2011	The European Court of Human Rights in Strasbourg says that the official investigation into the murder of Georgian banker Sandro Girgvliani in 2006, which is alleged to have covered up the role of Ministry of Interior officials in the murder, "lacked the requisite independence, impartiality, objectivity and thoroughness."
28 April 2011	At least 4,000 opposition protesters rally in Armenia's capital of Yerevan on Liberty Square to demand new presidential and parliamentary elections
3 May 2011	Lithuanian President Dalia Grybauskaitė visits Georgia
3 May 2011	Iranian Deputy Defense Minister Reza Mozafari Nia discusses military ties between Armenia and Iran with Armenian Defense Minister Seyran Ohanian in Yerevan
4 May 2011	Jabbar Savalanli, a member of the youth wing of the Azerbaijan Popular Front Party, is jailed for alleged drug possession
5 May 2011	The Georgian Parliament passes legislative amendments allowing the government to issue permits to create "free tourist zones" in the country, where foreign investors willing to invest at least 1 million Georgian lari in the construction of hotels will be exempt from property and profit taxes.
5 May 2011	The French senate rejects a bill that would make it a crime to publicly say that the World War I mass killings of Armenians in Ottoman Turkey is not a genocide
6 May 2011	The International Trade Union Confederation (ICTU) highlights the lack of labor rights in Georgia during a conference in Brussels
7 May 2011	The Georgian police arrests a group of opposition activists in the town of Rustavi
6 May 2011	Police in Azerbaijan's capital of Baku break up a protest against the hijab ban in schools
12 May 2011	Czech Foreign Minister Karel Schwarzenberg visits Georgia
14 May 2011	Azerbaijan wins the Eurovision song contest
16 May 2011	Georgian Foreign Minister Grigol Vashadze meets with Swedish Foreign Minister Carl Bildt on an official visit to Sweden
17 May 2011	The Georgian Parliament launches legal procedures for a constitutional amendment to relocate the next Parliament from the capital Tbilisi to Georgia's second largest town of Kutaisi
17 May 2011	Georgian Prime Minister Nika Gilauri visits Singapore

ABOUT THE CAUCASUS ANALYTICAL DIGEST

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