

# CAUCASIAN REVIEW OF INTERNATIONAL AFFAIRS

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## NOTE FROM THE EDITOR-IN-CHIEF

It is with great pleasure that I present the Autumn 2008 issue of the *Caucasian Review of International Affairs* (CRIA).

Since the publication of our Summer 2008 issue, the Caucasus has recaptured the consciousness of the international community, most vividly through the Russian invasion of Georgia in August and the subsequent illegal recognition of the so-called independence of Abkhazia and South Ossetia by Russia. As a result, the United States and the European Union are reformulating their policies in and commitment to the region, to say nothing of Russia's new regional policies. Additionally, there have been increased efforts to improve the erstwhile difficult relations between Turkey and Armenia, which could possibly have a lasting impact on the ongoing crisis in the resolution of the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict between Armenia and Azerbaijan. Perhaps now, more than ever, the international attention that has been thrust upon the region will determine whether the Caucasus will rise up and emerge as an important centre and corridor for energy and transport or whether it will be mired in instability and ethnic conflicts.

While providing an all-encompassing analysis of the Caucasus in this issue, a particular emphasis has been placed on Georgia in light of its recent war with Russia, and as an expression of the renewed international attention to the Caucasus, the CRIA is proud to present in this issue two interviews from respected regional experts (from USA and Germany) as well as papers that touch on a wide range of regional issues, such as the impact of the Russian invasion of Georgia on Israel and the Middle East, the 1992-1993 Georgia-Abkhazia war, the role of external forces in abetting ethnic separatism in Azerbaijan, the European Neighborhood Policy in the South Caucasus and geopolitical implications of the Baku-Tbilisi-Kars railroad for the South Caucasus, to name but a few of the points addressed. Additionally, in an attempt to cover the important processes going on in the neighboring region we are publishing a paper on the normative suasion and political change in Central Asia. Two topical book reviews are also published in this issue. I thank all the contributors for both their time and their interesting analyses.

Remaining true to the goal of the CRIA to promote a better understanding of events in the Caucasus by providing relevant background information and analysis, we have started since the beginning of September 2008 the publication of the **Caucasus Update** which analyzes the major events taking place in the region on a weekly basis. The Update can be subscribed free of charge on our webpage [www.cria-online.org](http://www.cria-online.org).

Each issue of the CRIA, which is a free and non-profit online publication, is the result of voluntary and hard work of the affiliated persons. Therefore, I'd like to express my deep gratitude to all the members of the Editorial Board, editorial assistants, other staff members and all online interns of the CRIA for their consistent and profound engagement.

# THE RUSSIAN INVASION OF GEORGIA – ITS IMPACT ON ISRAEL AND THE MIDDLE EAST

**Robert O. Freedman\***

## **Abstract**

*The heavy-handed policy demonstrated by Russian Prime Minister Vladimir Putin in his invasion of Georgia in August 2008 should have come as no surprise to anyone following Putin's foreign policy in the Middle East in the 2005-2008 period, which has clearly displayed the aggressiveness and anti-Americanism so evident in the invasion of Georgia. Putin's cultivation of the anti-American terrorist organizations Hamas and Hizbollah, and his military and diplomatic support for anti-American "Rogue States" like Syria and Iran, indeed set the stage for the invasion of Georgia as Putin sought to spread Russian influence throughout the South Caucasus as well as the Middle East. The invasion of Georgia, however, had a mixed reaction in the Middle East with Syria trying to exploit the invasion to gain access to increased shipments of Russian arms, Israel seeking to prevent such arms shipments, and Turkey and Iran, with long memories of Czarist and Soviet aggression, reacting coldly to Russian efforts to get their support for the invasion.*

**Keywords:** *Russia, Middle East policy, Georgian war, Syria, Iran, Turkey, Israel.*

## **Introduction**

Russia's invasion of Georgia, which came after a long period of tension between the two countries, can be seen as yet another example of Russian Prime Minister Vladimir Putin's aggressive foreign policy which increasingly became evident following his reelection to the Russian Presidency in 2004. This aggressiveness has not only been evident in his pressure against the newly independent states of the Former Soviet Union - especially the Baltic States (Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania), Moldova, Ukraine and Georgia - but also by his cultivation of rogue Middle East states and organizations, such as Syria, Iran, Hamas and Hizbollah. This was in contrast to the policy of his predecessor, Boris Yeltsin, who followed a much more defensive foreign policy.

Under Putin economic embargoes were imposed on Moldova and Georgia, and, allegedly because of a dispute over pricing, Russia cut off natural gas exports to Ukraine in the dead of winter. Georgia, however, was a particular thorn in the side of Putin, for several reasons. First, the democratically elected government of Mikheil Saakashvili, which came to power in the

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first of the "colored revolutions" in the former Soviet Union - an example which very much concerned Putin - provides the only transit route to West for Caspian Sea energy that is not under Russian control. Thus Georgia hosts both the Baku(Azerbaijan)-Tbilisi(Georgia)-Ceyhan(Turkey) oil pipeline and the Baku-Tbilisi-Erzurum gas pipeline from the Shah Deniz natural gas field in Azerbaijan to the West. This natural gas pipeline could become of far greater importance should a Trans-Caspian natural gas pipeline be constructed, one that could move gas from Kazakhstan and Turkmenistan westward by hooking into the natural gas pipeline in Azerbaijan. This is of serious concern to Russia, currently a petro-power, because its own production of oil and natural gas has begun to decline. Consequently, Russia has sought to control Kazakh and Turkmen oil and natural gas production to make up for its own declining production. For this reason Georgia, which has offered itself as a non-Russian route for Kazakh and Turkmen energy exports posed a major challenge for Moscow, and energy politics may well have been one of the causes of the invasion.

Even more of a challenge for Putin was Georgian President Saakhvili's desire to join NATO. Putin, by offering Russian citizenship to people living in Georgia's breakaway regions of South Ossetia and Abkhazia, by moving Russian troops in and out of these regions, and by encouraging the South Ossetians to periodically fire artillery shells at Georgian positions outside of South Ossetia, goaded Saakashvili into a military response against the province, thus providing a pretext for Russian troops to militarily intervene to "protect" Russian citizens living in the breakaway region. Despite a cease-fire negotiated by French President Nicolas Sarkozy, acting in his current capacity as EU President, Russian troops now occupy Abkhazia and South Ossetia and, until early October, occupied significant parts of Georgia, thereby threatening both the regime of Saakashvili and the oil and natural gas pipelines running through Georgia.

This heavy-handed Russian action should not have come as a surprise to anyone following Putin's foreign policy in the Middle East over the last few years, which has also demonstrated the combination of aggressiveness and anti-Americanism so evident in the Russian intervention in Georgia. A brief review of Putin's policy in the Middle East since he was reelected as Russia's President in 2004 will demonstrate his growing aggressiveness.

When Vladimir Putin became Prime Minister in the Fall of 1999 and President of Russia in 2000, a major preoccupation - one that continued during his eight years as Russia's President - was the second war with Chechnya which he had begun as Prime Minister by invading that Caucasian Republic of the Russian Federation in 1999. In addition to seeking to end outside aid to the Chechen rebels, he also moved quickly to improve the coordination of Russian foreign policy and consolidate his domestic power base. Thus he ended the freelancing foreign policy activities of such oil companies as Lukoil whose actions in Azerbaijan had conflicted with Russian policy there, and brought Russian arms sales under the control of one agency, Rosoboronoexport. He also brought the once politically powerful Russian oligarchs under control, forcing Boris Berezovsky and Vladimir Gusinsky into exile and arresting Yukos head Mikhail Khodorkovsky. To ensure that he would not be criticized by the media, he gained control of all of the major Russian TV networks as well as the major newspapers. In addition, he created a ruling political party, United Russia, to control the Duma, so that, unlike the situation during the Yeltsin years when the Duma posed constant challenges to the Russian

President, he would have full support for his policies. Finally, in the face of the challenges of popular revolutions in Georgia and Ukraine, he created a youth group, Nashi (Ours), that was a combination of the Komsomol, the old Soviet youth organization, and the Hitler Jugend, to disperse anti-government demonstrations<sup>1</sup>.

By 2004, with his domestic political opponents under control, overwhelmingly reelected to a second term as Russia's President, the Russian economy improving, and with oil prices rapidly rising, Putin was ready to move ahead with his three major objectives for Russia: (1) restoring Russia's status as a great power, thereby ending American dominance of the post-Cold War world (2) developing the Russian economy, especially in the high tech area, and (3) further limiting foreign aid to the Chechen rebels who were continuing their struggle against Russia. Unfortunately, for Putin, two events in the September-November 2004 period - the Chechen seizure of the school in Beslan that led to the loss of 332 Russian lives in a bungled rescue operation, and the Orange Revolution in Ukraine which brought to power a Ukrainian president whom Putin had publicly opposed - made both Putin, and Russia, look weak. To counter this image Putin decided to formulate a new strategy for Russia in the Middle East, a region where the United States' position was rapidly weakening due to the growing insurgency in Iraq and the revival of the Taliban in Afghanistan. Seeking to exploit the weakened US position, Putin moved first to court the leading anti-American rogue states and movements in the region - Syria, Iran, Hamas and Hizbollah. Subsequently, he was also to court the leading Sunni powers in the Middle East: Saudi Arabia, Jordan, Egypt and the United Arab Emirates.

## **Putin and the Middle East**

Putin's first move was to improve relations with Syria, which was isolated because of its heavy-handed policies in Lebanon. In January 2005, Moscow waived 90% of Syria's debt to the Former Soviet Union, and also sold Damascus surface-to-air missiles, which angered Israel, along with anti-tank missiles, some of which Syria transferred to Hizbollah which used them in its summer 2006 war against Israel. Then, after Syria was accused of involvement in the assassination of former Lebanese President Rafiq Hariri, Moscow did its best to prevent sanctions from being imposed on Syria, something that brought it into conflict with both France and the United States. The next Russian move was to cement relations with Iran, by approving the long-delayed agreement to supply nuclear fuel to the Bushehr reactor. Then, following the decision of the newly elected President of Iran, Mahmoud Ahmadinejad, to break off talks with the European Union over Iran's nuclear program in August 2005, Moscow did its best to delay even a discussion of sanctions against Iran in the UN Security Council even though Iran refused to provide the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) with information about its nuclear programs. Making matters worse, Ahmadinejad called for "wiping Israel off the map", and denied the existence of the Holocaust. Despite such declarations, in November 2005, Moscow, seeing Iran as its key anti-American ally in the

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<sup>1</sup> For an excellent analysis of Putin's domestic policies, see Lilia Shevtsova, "Russia: lost in transition" (Washington, DC: The Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, 2007)

Middle East, signed an agreement with Tehran to provide it with sophisticated short range missiles to protect its nuclear installations against a possible Israeli or American attack<sup>2</sup>.

Then, following the Hamas victory in the Palestine Legislative Council elections in January 2006, Putin called the event "a very serious blow" to American diplomacy in the Middle East. Almost immediately thereafter, noting that Hamas was not on Russia's terrorist list, he invited a Hamas delegation to Moscow, thus breaking the policy line of the Diplomatic Quartet (Russia, the US, the UN and the EU) which had called for isolating Hamas, and giving the terrorist organization a modicum of diplomatic legitimacy<sup>3</sup>. Six months later, when war broke out between Israel and Hizbollah after the kidnapping of two Israeli soldiers, Russia openly opposed sanctions against Hizbollah's main sponsor, Syria, at a meeting of the G-8 and criticized Israel for its overreaction. In the aftermath of the war, Russia sent a group of engineers to Lebanon to rebuild bridges destroyed in the conflict, but did not offer to troops for the expansion of the UNIFIL contingent in Southern Lebanon, whose mission, at least in theory, was to disarm Hizbollah.

Russia's backing for Syria, Hamas, Hizbollah and Iran, however, soon came into conflict with Putin's goal of moving to improve ties with the Sunni states of the Arab world, especially Saudi Arabia and the other Gulf Arab States, Jordan and Egypt, which were deeply suspicious of Iran and its allies. Consequently, as a sop to the Sunni Arabs, prior to visiting Saudi Arabia, Qatar and Jordan in February 2007, Putin finally agreed to limited UN Security Council sanctions against Iran in December 2006, and, in March 2007, following the trip, Moscow also agreed to a few more limited sanctions. During his visit to the Gulf Arabs, Putin sought major investments in Russia's banking and space industries, weapons sales and joint investment projects in oil and natural gas. During the spring and summer of 2007, as part of Putin's plan to court the Sunni Arabs, Russia also conspicuously delayed sending the promised nuclear fuel to Iran, making the dubious claim that the oil-rich Persian Gulf country had not made the necessary payments. Following the ill-conceived United States National Intelligence Estimate on Iran of December 2007, however, which erroneously argued that Iran had given up its nuclear weapons program, and hence was not an immediate threat; Moscow perceived diminished pressure from both the Gulf Arabs and the United States, and went ahead with the sale of the nuclear fuel. The shipments had been completed by February 2008. Ironically, even as Moscow was helping Iran develop its nuclear capability, Putin was offering to build nuclear reactors for the Gulf Arabs and Egypt as well, as the Arab states sought to keep up with their rival, Iran<sup>4</sup>.

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<sup>2</sup>For a detailed analysis of Russian-Iranian relations from 1991-2006, see Robert O. Freedman, "Russia, Iran and the nuclear question: the Putin record" (Carlisle, Pennsylvania: The Strategic Studies Institute of the US Army War College, 2006)

<sup>3</sup> See Freedman, Robert O., "Can Russia Be a Partner for the United States in the Middle East?", in Aurel Braun (ed.) "NATO-American relations" (New York: Routledge, 2008), p.129

<sup>4</sup> See Robert O. Freedman, "The Putin Visit to Saudi Arabia, Qatar and Jordan: Business promotion or Great Power Maneuvering" in: *Johnson's Russia List*, No. 15, 15.02.2007 (available at <http://www.cdi.org/russia/johnson/2007-39-39.cfm>)

Thus, at the time of the Russian invasion of Georgia, Russia was following a policy of encouraging the main anti-American forces in the Middle East - Hamas, Hizbollah, Syria and Iran - while at the same time trying to cultivate the major Sunni Arab states of the Middle East, and seeking to draw them away from their alignment with the United States. The invasion of Georgia, coming as it has in the midst of the Russian diplomatic offensive in the Middle East, is likely to have the most impact on Russia's relations with Syria, Israel, Turkey and Iran.

## Syria

In an almost classic case of political opportunism, Syrian President Bashar Assad seized upon the Russian invasion of Georgia - and the fact that Israel (along with Germany, France, the United States and Turkey), had provided military equipment and training to the Georgian military - to try to convince the Russians to sell Syria the weapons they had long wanted and that the Russians had so far proved unwilling to sell them, especially the short range, solid fuel range Iskander-E ground-to-ground missile that could reach virtually every target in Israel and the SAM 300 anti-aircraft missile system, which if installed in Syria near Damascus, could control most of Israel's airspace. As Assad told the Russian newspaper *Kommersant*, on the eve of his visit to Moscow when Georgian-Russian hostilities were still going on: "I think that in Russia and in the world, everyone is now aware of Israel's role and its military consultants in the Georgia crisis. And if before in Russia there were people who thought these (Israeli) forces can be friendly, now I think no one thinks that way"<sup>5</sup>. It is clear that Assad was referring to Putin who on repeated occasions stated that he had denied the Iskander missiles to Syria, because they could harm Israel.

In backing the Russian intervention in Georgia - one of the few countries in the world to do so - Assad was repeating the policy of his father Hafiz Assad whose Syrian regime was one of the few in the world to support the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan in 1979. While Assad senior was richly rewarded with Soviet military equipment for his support of Soviet policy in Afghanistan, it remains to be seen what Bashar Assad will get. All Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov would say after the Assad visit was that Moscow would "consider" Syria's appeal for new weapons sales, and that in any case Russia would not sell any weapons that would affect the Middle East strategic balance<sup>6</sup>. Since sale of both the Iskander-E and SAM-300 systems would definitely affect the regional military balance, Syria is unlikely to get these weapons; that is, if Lavrov is telling the truth or he is not overruled by his superiors. What may come out of the visit are the sale of short-range anti-aircraft missiles, perhaps to make it more difficult for Israel to conduct raids on suspected Syrian nuclear installations as it did in September 2007, the sale of additional anti-tank missiles, such as the ones Hizbollah used effectively against Israel in their 2006 war, and a more robust agreement between

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<sup>5</sup> Zygur, Mikhail, "Interview with Syrian President Al-Asad", *Kommersant*, August 20, 2008 (translated in the Foreign Broadcast Information Service Daily Report [Hereafter FBIS] the Middle East and South Asia [Hereafter MESA], August 21, 2008

<sup>6</sup> Cited in VESTI TV, "'Russian Foreign Minister on Syrian Ties, NATO and Georgia" [FBIS: RUSSIA 22 August 2008]

Russia and Syria for the Russian use of the Syrian port of Tartus for the expanding Russian Navy<sup>7</sup>.

## Israel

Russian-Israeli relations have had their ups and downs under Putin, but in recent years it is clear that relations have deteriorated. Russian support for Hamas, its turning a blind eye to Syrian transfers of anti-tank missiles to Hizbollah, and its military and diplomatic support for Iran at a time when the Iranian leadership has been calling for the destruction of Israel, have all soured relations. Yet, as a high ranking Israeli diplomat who specializes in Russian-Israeli relations told me in 2007, "Relations are not as bad as they could be"<sup>8</sup>. Indeed, Moscow has a bifurcated, if not schizophrenic relationship with Israel. While on the one hand Russian regional policies vis-à-vis Hamas, Hizbollah, Iran and Syria, have clearly hurt Israel; on the level of bilateral Russian-Israeli relations, the ties between the two countries are developing surprisingly well. Thus, on the eve of the Assad visit to Moscow, Russian President Dmitry Medvedev and Israeli Prime Minister Ehud Olmert had a telephone conversation about Israeli-Syrian relations and about the situation in Georgia; trade between Russia and Israel has exceeded two and a half billion dollars a year, much of it in the high-tech sector which Putin needs to develop the Russian economy so that it is not dependent on dwindling energy exports; cultural ties are thriving, and Moscow has recently established a cultural center in Tel Aviv<sup>9</sup>; the two countries have signed a visa-waiver agreement to facilitate tourism; negotiations are underway for the return to Russia of Czarist property in Jerusalem; Russia and Israel cooperate in the sale of weaponry to third countries, such as an AWACS aircraft to India (Russia supplies the airframe and Israel the avionics) and Israel's ruling Kadima Party has recently signed an agreement with Putin's United Russia Party to establish party-to-party relations<sup>10</sup>. While some in the Russian military such as Russia's Deputy Chief of Staff, Anatoly Nogovitsyn publicly complained about Israeli aid to the Georgian military<sup>11</sup>, Foreign Minister Lavrov went out of his way to praise Israel for stopping arms sales to Georgia<sup>12</sup>.

What then explains Russia's bifurcated policy toward Israel, and how will the Russian invasion of Georgia affect it? It appears clear that Russia has three goals vis-à-vis Israel. First, it is the homeland of more than a million Russian-speaking citizens of the Former Soviet Union, and Russia sees Russian speakers abroad as a source of its world influence. Hence the emphasis on cultural ties between Russia and Israel, in which Israelis of Russian origin play the dominant role. Second, as noted above, Putin is determined to develop the

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<sup>7</sup> According to a report in RIA-Novosti, Russia sailors are already expanding the port of Tartus by rebuilding floating causeways that can be used by Russian ships (RIA Novosti, "Russian Navy Personnel Rebuild Floating Causeway at Syrian Port", 9 September 2008 [FBIS: RUSSIA 10 September 2008])

<sup>8</sup> Interview, Israeli Foreign Ministry, 14 June 2007

<sup>9</sup> Cited in: Anshel Pfeffer, "Out of the Shadows", *Haaretz* (online), 16 August 2008

<sup>10</sup> Galili, Lili, "Russian PM to Open Party Branch in Israel", *Haaretz* (online), 21 August 2008

<sup>11</sup> Cited in: "Russia Accuses Israel of Selling Arms to Georgia", *Jerusalem Post*, 20 August 2008

<sup>12</sup> ITAR-TASS, "Russian FM Lavrov Praises Israeli Decision to Refrain From Assisting Georgia", 19 August 2008 [FBIS: RUSSIA 20 August 2008]

Russian economy, and high-tech trade with Israel is a part of his plan. Third, the Arab-Israeli conflict is a major issue in world politics, and Putin would very much like to play a role in its diplomacy, if not in finding a solution to the conflict. For this reason he has called for an international peace conference in Moscow in November 2008 and he would like Israel to attend, so as to build up the role of Russia as a world mediator.

## Turkey

In the case of Turkey, the Russian invasion of Georgia will awaken past memories of Czarist and Soviet military pressure against both the Ottoman Empire and the Turkish Republic. The Ottoman Empire fought a dozen wars with Czarist Russia, losing the northern shore of the Black Sea, the Crimean Peninsula, and extensive territory in the Balkans. While relations improved after the collapse of both the Ottoman Empire and Czarist Russia, relations chilled again at the end of World War Two, when the Soviet Union exerted pressure on Turkey to grant Moscow bases in the Turkish Straits - a demand that drove Turkey into the arms of the United States and NATO.

Relations improved between the USSR and Turkey in the 1980s as the two countries signed a natural gas agreement, and by the time of the Russian invasion of Georgia, Russia had become Turkey's number one trading partner, with trade exceeding \$25 billion per year, and Turkey now dependent on Russia for more than 60% of its natural gas imports. On the other hand, Turkey had been a major ally of Georgia, and along with Germany, France, Israel and the United States, had cooperated militarily with Georgia. In addition, Turkey's hopes of being a major energy hub rest not only on plans to trans-ship Russian and Iranian natural gas, but also on the Baku-Tbilisi-Ceyhan oil pipeline and on the Baku-Tbilisi-Erzurum natural gas pipeline, both of which, as noted above, cross Georgian territory. In addition, the Turkish leadership will not be pleased over the precedent set by South Ossetian and Abkhaz independence, given the demands of Turkey's Kurdish minority for independence.

Torn by these conflicting pressures, Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan sought to mediate the Russian-Georgian conflict by proposing a "Caucasus Cooperation and Stability Alliance", composed of Turkey, Russia, Georgia, Armenia and Azerbaijan<sup>13</sup>. However, given the fact that Georgia and Russia are still actively hostile to each other, and Armenia and Azerbaijan remain near war over the disputed region of Nagorno-Karabakh - although Turkey and Armenia have begun to improve relations - the Turkish president's proposal seems little more than an attempt to prevent the Georgian-Russian relationship from deteriorating further, a development that would pose significant problems of choice for Turkey. Nonetheless, the Russian move into Georgia may, in the long run, prompt a rethinking of policy in Ankara, something that could reverse the deterioration of Turkish-American relations which was caused by the 2003 Iraq war - especially since Russia demonstrated its displeasure with Turkish policy on the Georgian question by imposing a

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<sup>13</sup> See Fulya Ozerrkan and Mustafa Oguz, "Caucasian Table setting for Five", *Turkish Daily News* (online), 22 August 2008

blockade on Turkish exports to Russia, which reportedly cost the Turks up to a billion dollars<sup>14</sup>.

## Iran

In the short run at least, the Russian invasion of Georgia, with its accompanying diplomatic clash between the United States and Russia, may well work to the benefit of Iran. Any chance of Russia agreeing to further UN Security Council sanctions against Iran seem to have gone by the wayside, although given the very limited sanctions which the Russians had agreed to in the past, this is probably not too important a factor. Indeed, following a damning indictment of Iran by the International Atomic Energy Agency in mid-September, all Russia would agree to was a weakly-worded resolution against Iran, but not to additional sanctions<sup>15</sup>. In addition, Russia may now be more willing to sell Iran the SAM-300 missiles the Iranians have long wanted. On the other hand, with sanctions no longer being seriously considered, the chances of an Israeli attack on Iran's nuclear installations are enhanced.

In the longer term, however, the Iranians may share some of the concerns of Turkey. Iran, like Turkey, has suffered Russian invasions in the past and the cautious Iranian response to the Russian invasion of Georgia may reflect that concern. In addition, Iran, like Turkey, has restive minorities, and the independence of South Ossetia and Abkhazia could set a negative precedent for Iran. Perhaps for this reason the Iranian semi-official Fars News Agency ran a story citing the Georgian Ambassador to Iran who praised Iran for its position in the Russian - Georgian conflict<sup>16</sup>.

## Conclusion

The Russian invasion of Georgia was the culmination of an increasingly aggressive foreign policy on the part of Russian Prime Minister Vladimir Putin in the Middle East and elsewhere. While Syria quickly supported Moscow, most of the rest of the Middle East, including Russia's ally Iran, withheld support, calling only for a quick cease-fire. While there has been a good bit of speculation that the invasion will lead to an improvement of American-European relations in the face of the new Russian threat, despite Europe's reliance on energy imports from Russia, the American position in the Middle East could also improve as a result of the heavy-handed Russian policy in Georgia, although that improvement may have to wait until a new American administration takes office in January 2009.

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<sup>14</sup> Anatolian News Agency, "Turkey Estimates Cost of Russian Trade Dispute 1 Billion by End of September", 14 September 2008 [FBIS: RUSSIA 15 September 2008]

<sup>15</sup> Blitz, James, "Russia Joins UN Move to Condemn Iran", *Financial Times*, 27 September 2008, and Lynch, Colum, "Security Council Pressed on Iran", *Washington Post*, 27 September 2008

<sup>16</sup> FARS News Agency, "Georgia Praises Iran's Stance on Caucasus Conflict", 23 August 2008 [FBIS:MESA 25 August 2008]

# THE 1992-93 GEORGIA-ABKHAZIA WAR: A FORGOTTEN CONFLICT

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## Abstract

*The 1992-93 Georgia-Abkhazia War, in which ethnic Abkhazians effectively extracted northwestern Georgia from Tbilisi's control, is a conflict largely forgotten in the West, despite its high profile re-ignition in August 2008. Historical arguments can be made both for Abkhazia's unity and autonomy from Georgia, but the conflict cannot be solely blamed on Soviet 'ethno-federalism'. It must, however, be understood within the context of Georgian independence. Ethnic tension between Abkhazians and Georgians was a necessary but not sufficient cause for the conflict. It took an unstable transition in Moscow, and chaotic Russian involvement in the run-up to the conflict, to turn tension into violence. Russia's one-sided role in ending hostilities meant that the conflict's causal issues were left frozen, only to be violently thawed fifteen years later.*

**Keywords:** Georgia, Abkhazia, Russia, ethnic conflict, Caucasus

## Introduction

As one of many conflicts precipitated by the breakup of the Soviet Union, the 1992-93 conflict between Georgia and the region of Abkhazia distinguishes itself as one of the bloodiest, most consequential and most unresolved. It caused tens of thousands of casualties and led to the displacement of about 250,000 people.<sup>1</sup> It is a dispute that persisted without major incident as a 'frozen conflict' until 2008, when large-scale Russian military intervention across Georgia re-ignited hostilities and led to Moscow's unilateral recognition of Abkhazia as an independent state.

The following article posits that the 1992-93 Georgia-Abkhazia War is what can be termed as a 'forgotten conflict'. Therefore, the paper will attempt to explain the context surrounding the war, explore the dynamics of the politics and the 'fighting' of the conflict

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<sup>1</sup> Antonenko, Oksana, "Frozen Uncertainty: Russia and the Conflict over Abkhazia", in Bruno Coppieters and Robert Legvold (eds.), "Statehood and Security: Georgia after the Rose Revolution" (London: The MIT Press, 2005), p. 205

by looking at the roles of the three main groups involved: Georgians, Abkhazians and Russians, and craft an argument throughout for why the war took place when it did. Although the Georgian-Abkhazian conflict is still unresolved, this paper will focus on the events leading up to, and the ‘initial violent phase’, namely from August 1992 to October 1993.<sup>2</sup>

According to the Red Cross, the conflict claimed between 10,000 and 15,000 lives and left over 8000 wounded.<sup>3</sup> Other sources, emphasizing ethnic cleansing, cite the figure for deaths as between 25,000 and 30,000.<sup>4</sup> Yet other conflicts during this period, such as the wars in the former Yugoslavia, have received much more attention, popularly and academically, than the 1992-93 Georgia-Abkhazia War. Apart from a handful of specialist works, centered around the same group of scholars, analysis of the war available in English is limited to unprofessional and highly biased accounts from one side or the other. In the United States and Western Europe at least, there is little, if any popular knowledge about the war. Therefore, it would seem appropriate to label the 1992-93 Georgia-Abkhazia conflict a ‘forgotten conflict’.

Two major reasons account for the lack of knowledge and absence of mainstream study of the conflict: there was little coverage of events during the conflict, and there has been little exploration of the conflict since. In contrast, the comparatively brief developments of the August 2008 re-ignition of the war were broadcast as rolling news on the BBC, CNN and other international outlets, while the significance of Russia’s intervention led to a global debate on the limits of Western integration in the Black Sea and Caspian regions. Even then, academic and popular historians largely neglected the initial conflict for a number of reasons. It is seen by many as yet another confusing ethnic conflict in a confusing part of the world. As the noted historian of Georgia Ronald Suny observed, ‘From afar the ethnic and civil warfare in Georgia often looks to casual observers like the latest eruption of “ancient tribal conflicts” or irradicable primordial hatreds’.<sup>5</sup> Others view the 1992-93 war as an internal Georgian issue that never became heinous enough to warrant international concern or as an issue to be discussed only in the context of the ‘Russian orbit’.

Part of the reason for this neglect comes from the conflict occurring at the same time as tumultuous events in Moscow and other parts of the just-broken-up Soviet Union. However, for those involved, the 1992-93 war is far from forgotten, not least because a resolution has not yet been found. A 1999 Red Cross study found that 90 percent of Abkhazians and 42 percent of Georgians say they experienced ‘negative effects’ of the conflict, including the killing or rape of relatives, the looting or destruction of homes, or being taken prisoner.<sup>6</sup> Therefore, the 1992-93

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<sup>2</sup> Antonenko (2005), p. 205

<sup>3</sup> “Country report Georgia/Abkhazia: ICRC worldwide consultation on the rules of war”, (1999) (International Committee of the Red Cross), [http://www.icrc.org/Web/eng/siteeng0.nsf/htmlall/Greenberg\\_reports/\\$File/georgia.pdf](http://www.icrc.org/Web/eng/siteeng0.nsf/htmlall/Greenberg_reports/$File/georgia.pdf), 8 April, 2006.

<sup>4</sup> Derluguian, Georgi M., “The Tale of Two Resorts: Abkhazia and Ajaria Before and Since the Soviet Collapse”, in Beverly Crawford and Ronnie D Lipschutz (eds.), “The Myth of ‘Ethnic Conflict’: Politics, Economics, and Cultural Violence” (Berkeley: University of California, 1998).p. 263

<sup>5</sup> Suny, Ronald Grigor, “The Making of the Georgian Nation”, (Bloomington: Indiana University, 1994). p. 334

<sup>6</sup> Country Report Georgia/Abkhazia (1999), p. 2

Georgia-Abkhazia War can more accurately be described as a ‘forgotten conflict’ for those in the U.S., or more broadly, the ‘West’, but certainly not for those in the region.

## Context

In exploring the 1992-93 Georgia-Abkhazia War, it is important to avoid a common fault of many examinations of obscure conflicts, that is, diving right in and drawing conclusions without having understood the wider context into which the war fits. When considering an ethnic conflict in a region with a history as rich and complex as that of the Caucasus, it is especially necessary to understand the conflict’s background in order to understand the conflict itself. Accordingly, the first section of this paper will focus on the history behind the conflict; the situation, ethnic and otherwise, in the region before the conflict; and the immediate events leading up to the conflict.

For many in the U.S. and Western Europe - even after the events of August 2008 - Georgia, in the South Caucasus, south of Russia and north of Armenia, is an obscure country. Even more obscure for those unfamiliar with the region are Georgia’s breakaway territories: Abkhazia in the northwest, South Ossetia in the north, and until 2004, Ajaria in the southwest. Ethnically distinct, Abkhazia and South Ossetia managed to effectively secede from Georgia through separate wars in the early 1990s. Since then, they existed with most of the governmental trappings of independent state-lets, including parliaments, presidents and militaries, and administrated their own affairs with significant Russian support, divorced from Tbilisi’s control.<sup>7</sup> This situation was maintained largely due to Russian ‘peacekeepers’ on their ‘borders’ with Georgia. After Russia’s military intervention in Georgia in August 2008, the ‘peacekeeping’ contingents in both territories were significantly augmented and, in Moscow’s terminology, shifted to a status of forces hosted by the so-called independent states of Abkhazia and South Ossetia.

Historically, Georgia has had within its borders a number of regionally-tied ethnic minority groups, including Armenians, Avars, Azeris, Greeks, Ossetians, Russians and Abkhazians.<sup>8</sup> It was this situation that led the Soviet physicist and dissident, Andrei Sakharov, to describe Georgia as a ‘little empire’, just before the Abkhaz war.<sup>9</sup> In 1989, ethnic Georgians made up 70.1% of the population of Georgia, or the Georgian Soviet Socialist Republic (SSR), while ethnic Abkhazians made up only 1.8%.<sup>10</sup> In what was then the Abkhaz Autonomous Soviet Socialist Republic (ASSR), ethnic Georgians made up 45.7% of the population, while Abkhazians only numbered 17.8%.<sup>11</sup> The remainder of the population of Abkhazia was largely made up of Armenians, Greeks and Russians.

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<sup>7</sup> Antonenko (2005), p. 206

<sup>8</sup> Jones, Stephen F., “Georgia: a failed democratic transition”, in Ian Bremmer and Ray Taras (eds.), “Nations and Politics in the Soviet Successor States” (Cambridge: Cambridge University, 1993), p. 293

<sup>9</sup> Derluguian (1998), p. 274

<sup>10</sup> Jones (1993), p. 289

<sup>11</sup> Zurcher, Christoph, “Georgia’s Time of Troubles, 1989-1993”, in Bruno Coppieters and Robert Legvold (eds) “Statehood and Security: Georgia after the Rose Revolution” (London: The MIT Press, 2005), p. 87

Abkhazians have historically had a nebulous relationship with Georgians and Russians. Since early Byzantine times, Georgianized Abkhaz princes ruled their region with varying degrees of autonomy.<sup>12</sup> Although the Abkhaz language was linguistically distinct from Georgian, related to the languages of North Caucasian peoples such as the Circassians, Georgian was the official language of governance and the nobility.<sup>13</sup> As Byzantium's control slipped in the 9<sup>th</sup> Century, the rulers of the Abkhaz Kingdom began efforts to unify their dynasty with that of their Georgian neighbours. In 1001 the royal lines were combined, creating what is known as the unified Georgian Kingdom. This entity lasted until the 16<sup>th</sup> Century when the Ottomans established suzerainty over the area that is modern Abkhazia.<sup>14</sup>

Until the late 17<sup>th</sup> Century, however, when the Ottomans began converting the Abkhazians to Islam, the Abkhaz princes remained mostly influenced by Georgian culture and political affinities. As Georgians and Russians fought the Ottomans and their Muslim allies in the North Caucasus in the ensuing centuries, many Abkhazians routinely shifted between Muslim identities and Orthodox Christian identities, as the politics of the day required.<sup>15</sup> Even during the Ottoman period, various Abkhaz princes were either unified with or served as vassals to different Georgian princes.<sup>16</sup> So, as Alexei Zverev puts it, 'both unity with Georgia and autonomy can be argued on historical grounds'.<sup>17</sup>

The Abkhazians became a minority in their own land through waves of mass emigration to the Ottoman Empire in the 19<sup>th</sup> Century, as Russia slowly took control of the Caucasus.<sup>18</sup> After failed anti-Russian rebellions in 1866 and 1878, Abkhazians all but disappeared from the Abkhaz capital, Sukhumi.<sup>19</sup> The majority of Abkhazians still live outside of their homeland, most of them in Turkey and the Middle East.<sup>20</sup> In March 1921, Abkhazia was given the status of an independent Soviet Socialist Republic within the USSR, but was joined with Georgia in a treaty of union later in the year. In 1931, Abkhazia's status was 'demoted' to that of an Autonomous Soviet Socialist Republic within Georgia.<sup>21</sup> Under Stalin's rule, Georgians were forcibly resettled in 'empty' parts of Abkhazia, leading to Abkhaz fears of losing their homeland. Abkhaz leaders petitioned Moscow in 1956, 1967 and 1978 to sever Abkhazia's connection to Georgia and incorporate it into Russia.<sup>22</sup>

Tension between Georgians and Abkhazians simmered in the 1970s as Moscow pressured Tbilisi to push Abkhaz farmers to lower prices for their fruit and wines, famous throughout the Soviet

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<sup>12</sup> Suny (1994), p. 321

<sup>13</sup> Zverev, Alexei, "Ethnic Conflicts in the Caucasus 1988-1994", in: Bruno Coppieters (ed) "Contested Borders in the Caucasus" (Brussels: Vubpress, 1996), p. 37

<sup>14</sup> Derluigian (1998), p. 264

<sup>15</sup> Derluigian (1998), p. 264

<sup>16</sup> Zverev (1996), p. 39

<sup>17</sup> Zverev (1996), p. 39

<sup>18</sup> Derluigian (1998), p. 267

<sup>19</sup> Derluigian (1998), p. 267

<sup>20</sup> Derluigian (1998), p. 267

<sup>21</sup> Zverev (1996), p. 39

<sup>22</sup> Zverev (1996), p. 39

Union.<sup>23</sup> Instead of granting separation from Georgia in response to Abkhaz petitions and complaints, however, Moscow gradually increased preferential policies toward the Abkhazians, so that by 1988, the minority Abkhaz lived better than the average Georgian, held most of the powerful positions in Abkhazia and even had their own television and radio stations, independent of Tbilisi.<sup>24</sup> This situation led to Georgian resentment of Moscow's treatment of the Abkhazians and increased ethnic tension.<sup>25</sup>

It is developments such as these that have led analysts such as Christoph Zurcher to assert that the 'mechanism of Soviet ethno-federalism' is responsible for the Georgia-Abkhazia war, as well as the several other ethnically-based conflicts that broke out in the former Soviet space.<sup>26</sup> Zurcher argues that although the Armenian and Azeri minority populations in Georgia were substantially bigger than the Abkhaz and Ossetian groups, the former two did not seek independence from Tbilisi's control because the Soviet federal system had delineated regional autonomy, and the identity and symbolism that came with it, for only the Abkhaz and Ossetians, not for the other minorities in Georgia.<sup>27</sup> This argument, however, ignores the broader historical picture. The Soviet ethno-federal system, for the most part reflected the ethnic realities of the region, in place centuries before the USSR. Furthermore, the Armenians and Azeris in Georgia could be seen as 'spill-over' populations from their respective neighboring sovereign homelands. Many returned to Armenia and Azerbaijan during the periods of strife in Georgia. Other large minority groups, such as the Avars in north-eastern Georgia were 'traded', under an agreement with Daghestan, for Georgians living in that Russian autonomous region.<sup>28</sup> The Abkhazians, however, had no such option of 'return'. Their historical geographic homeland was entirely within Georgia.

Similarly, in his paper comparing the breakaway areas of Abkhazia and Ajaria, Georgi Derluguian claims that Abkhazia was destined to secede from Georgia, while Ajaria was not, because, due to the Soviet policy of demarcating ethnic distinction based on language rather than religion, Moscow had deemed the former, but not the latter, worthy of a distinct identity.<sup>29</sup> Again, this argument ignores the basic ethnic realities of the Caucasus. The Abkhazians are a distinct ethnicity, linked linguistically and culturally to peoples of the North Caucasus, such as the Chechens.<sup>30</sup> The Ajarians are an ethnic Georgian sub-group (of which there are at least seventeen), their main contemporary distinction being that the majority are Muslim, converted by the Ottomans.<sup>31</sup> As will be discussed below, the Abkhaz link to the North Caucasus played an important part in the events of the 1992-93 conflict.

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<sup>23</sup> Derluguian (1998), p. 272

<sup>24</sup> Zverev (1996), p. 39

<sup>25</sup> Jones (1993), p. 294

<sup>26</sup> Zurcher (2005), pp. 98-101

<sup>27</sup> Zurcher (2005), p. 98

<sup>28</sup> Jones (1993), p. 296

<sup>29</sup> Derluguian (1998), pp. 261-262

<sup>30</sup> Zverev (1996), p. 37

<sup>31</sup> Some Abkhazians are Muslim, also converted by the Ottomans, while the rest are Orthodox Christian, 'reconverted' by the Georgians.

Historically, in fact, it seems that ethnic problems in Georgia, and specifically between the Georgians and Abkhazians, were exacerbated when leadership in Moscow underwent a period of transition or significant policy shift. Ethnic tensions increased in the period immediately following the 1917 Russian Revolution and at times in the 1970s during detente.<sup>32</sup> The break-up of the Soviet Union and the summer of 2008 presented other such periods of transition or policy shift – in the latter case, a full-scale intervention in Georgia not long after Vladimir Putin handed over the Russian presidential reins to Dmitri Medvedev.

The following examination will reveal that the 1992-93 Georgia-Abkhazia war was inextricably tied to the wider political and military events surrounding Georgian independence. Therefore, in order to accurately understand the war in question, this paper examines developments in Georgia during and after the break-up of the Soviet Union, as well as the events of the civil war in Georgia that occurred simultaneously, between January 1992 and November 1993. In an attempt to keep the focus on the Abkhaz war, this paper will not extensively address the events of the Georgian war with South Ossetia, which ended in July 1992, a month before the beginning of the war in Abkhazia.

As the consequences of Gorbachev's policies of perestroika and glasnost tore at its seams, the Soviet Union began to disintegrate in the late 1980s. In 1988, emboldened young lower-level communist officials and intellectuals in both Abkhazia and Georgia began organizing nationalist political campaigns, frequently directed against each other.<sup>33</sup> In June 1988, fifty-eight Abkhaz officials sent a letter to the Nineteenth Party Congress in Moscow, demanding support for secession from Georgia.<sup>34</sup> As the Georgian nationalist movement grew, the Georgian Communist Party, struggling to stay in power, published a series of 'Georgianization' laws beginning in December 1988, including the 'State Program for the Georgian Language', which replaced Russian with Georgian as the public sector language and established a Georgian language test for higher education.<sup>35</sup> This was a direct slight towards Abkhazians, most of whom did not speak Georgian.<sup>36</sup>

On March 18, 1989, a mass assembly of 30,000 Abkhaz separatists, including over 5000 Armenians, Greeks, Russians and some ethnic Georgians met at the village of Lykhny, the historical seat of Abkhazia's princes. Here they signed a declaration demanding the restoration of Abkhazia's 1925 constitution, upgrading its status to a sovereign Soviet Republic, effectively seceding from Georgia.<sup>37</sup> The publication of this declaration in local newspapers immediately sparked furious anti-Abkhazian mass demonstrations in Tbilisi. Many of those who took part were ethnic Georgians living in Abkhazia, but as they continued for weeks, the demonstrations began to take on a wider, pro-independence character.<sup>38</sup> What had initially begun as a rally

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<sup>32</sup> Jones (1993), p. 290

<sup>33</sup> Derluguian (1998), p. 272

<sup>34</sup> Suny (1994), p. 321

<sup>35</sup> Jones (1993), p. 294

<sup>36</sup> Zurcher (2005), p. 90

<sup>37</sup> Zverev (1996), p. 40

<sup>38</sup> Zurcher (2005), p. 89

against Abkhaz secession from Georgia, turned into a rally for Georgian secession from the Soviet Union. This mixture of sentiments would characterize much of the developments to come.

On 9 April, 1989, Soviet troops waded into the mass of demonstrators in Tbilisi, attacking them with sharpened digging tools and toxic gas.<sup>39</sup> Nineteen people were killed, mostly young women, and hundreds were injured. Fearing they would be overthrown, the Georgian Communist leadership had asked Moscow for aid in putting down the demonstrators. The 9 April 'Tbilisi massacre' is viewed as the event that tipped the scales in favour of Georgian independence.<sup>40</sup> Many would contend that from here, the nationalist movement and conflict with Abkhazia were irreversible.

Meanwhile, Abkhaz demonstrations were decidedly pro-Soviet, and Abkhaz leaders tried to 'project an image of loyal Soviet citizens resisting anticommunist Georgian nationalism', by lobbying Moscow for support.<sup>41</sup> In July of 1989, the first inter-ethnic violence erupted in Abkhazia. The Georgian faculty at Sukhumi University refused to work with the Abkhaz and Russian faculties and established a separate branch of Tbilisi State University, which was then attacked by Abkhaz nationalists, resulting in 16 deaths.<sup>42</sup> As what became known as 'Tbilisi syndrome' gripped the Soviet leadership in Moscow, Georgia was left to its own devices, and the so-called 'war of laws' ensued between the Georgian Supreme Soviet and its Abkhaz counterpart.<sup>43</sup>

In concessions following the 9 April massacre, the Georgian Supreme Soviet released Zviad Gamsakhurdia, a longtime Soviet dissident and Georgian nationalist leader, originally from Mingrelia, a Georgian province bordering Abkhazia from which most of the Georgians in Abkhazia also originated.<sup>44</sup> In November 1989, the body officially condemned Soviet Russia's annexation of Georgia in 1921 and announced that it would not recognize any Soviet law that contravened Georgian interests.<sup>45</sup> In March 1990, it declared Georgia a sovereign nation and legalized opposition parties.<sup>46</sup> In response, the Abkhaz Supreme Soviet declared Abkhazia to be a sovereign union republic within the Soviet Union.<sup>47</sup> In turn, a rail blockade led by Gamsakhurdia's nationalist group pressured the Georgian Supreme Soviet to adopt a law outlawing regionally-based parties for the upcoming Georgian parliamentary election, effectively eliminating Abkhazia and South Ossetia from play.<sup>48</sup>

28 October, 1990 saw victory for Gamsakhurdia's nationalist group in Georgia's first parliamentary elections free of Soviet control. Gamsakhurdia was elected chairman of the

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<sup>39</sup> Suny (1994), p. 322

<sup>40</sup> Zurcher (2005), p. 90

<sup>41</sup> 'Sovereignty After Empire', [http://www.usip.org/pubs/peaceworks/pwks19/chap3\\_19.html](http://www.usip.org/pubs/peaceworks/pwks19/chap3_19.html), 10 April, 2006

<sup>42</sup> Zverev (1996), p. 42

<sup>43</sup> Jones (1993), p. 296

<sup>44</sup> Zurcher (2005), p. 90

<sup>45</sup> Zverev (1996), p. 41

<sup>46</sup> Zurcher (2005), pp. 90, 92

<sup>47</sup> Zurcher (2005), p. 92

<sup>48</sup> Suny (1994), p. 325

Supreme Soviet and made it clear that his intention was to lead Georgia to full independence and to deal with Abkhazia and South Ossetia as he saw fit.<sup>49</sup> In December 1990, Vladislav Ardzinba, a hard-line Abkhaz separatist, (who remained ‘president’ of Abkhazia until 2005), was elected chairman of the Abkhaz Supreme Soviet, and the body moved to hold separate parliamentary elections for Abkhazia.<sup>50</sup> In March 1991, with war raging between Georgia and seceding South Ossetia, Gamsakhurdia proclaimed Ardzinba a traitor and tool of Moscow, but had almost no effective control over Abkhazia.<sup>51</sup>

That same month, Abkhazians participated in the Soviet referendum on whether to preserve the unity of the state, while Georgians were forbidden to do so by the Tbilisi government.<sup>52</sup> In response, Gamsakhurdia threatened to abolish Abkhaz autonomy, and by extension its Supreme Soviet, while Ardzinba countered by arranging for a Russian airborne assault battalion to deploy in Sukhumi.<sup>53</sup> The stage was set for violent conflict. On 9 April, 1991, exactly two years after the Tbilisi massacre, the Georgian parliament declared Georgia fully independent. A month later, in an election boycotted by the Abkhazians, Gamsakhurdia became president of the new Georgia, with 86.5 percent of the vote.<sup>54</sup>

Perhaps due to Ardzinba’s new close relationship with Russian commanders in the area, as well as increasing pressure from political rivals in Tbilisi, not to mention war in South Ossetia, Gamsakhurdia decided to attempt a compromise with the Abkhaz separatists. In August 1991, a power-sharing deal was reached for the makeup of the new Abkhaz parliament based on ethnic quotas, where ethnic Abkhaz, 17.8% of the population, were guaranteed 28 of the 65 seats, while ethnic Georgians, 45.7% of Abkhazia’s population, were guaranteed only 26 seats.<sup>55</sup> Tbilisi’s support for this configuration would not last, however, as Gamsakhurdia’s erratic policies led to the mutiny of the Georgian National Guard he had created for the war in South Ossetia. In December 1991, five hundred National Guard soldiers laid siege to the parliament building in Tbilisi, forcing Gamsakhurdia into exile.<sup>56</sup>

To gain legitimacy, the new forces in power invited former Soviet foreign minister and Georgian party boss, Eduard Shevardnadze to lead the transitional State Council.<sup>57</sup> Shortly after, Gamsakhurdia slipped back into Georgia, to Mingrelia, where forces loyal to him, the so-called ‘Zviadists’, began an insurgency in the Georgian province bordering Abkhazia.<sup>58</sup> Expecting war at any moment, Ardzinba and the Abkhaz leadership continued to collect allies wherever they could. In addition to cultivating local Russian commanders, the Abkhaz reached out to the Council of Russian Cossacks and the newly formed ‘Confederation of the Mountain Peoples of the Caucasus’, an unofficial parliament and military organization of various related ethnic groups

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<sup>49</sup> Suny (1994), p. 325

<sup>50</sup> Zverev (1996), p. 42

<sup>51</sup> Zverev (1996), p. 42

<sup>52</sup> ‘Sovereignty After Empire’, [http://www.usip.org/pubs/peaceworks/pwks19/chap3\\_19.html](http://www.usip.org/pubs/peaceworks/pwks19/chap3_19.html), 10 April, 2006

<sup>53</sup> Zverev (1996), pp. 42-43

<sup>54</sup> Zurcher (2005), p. 93

<sup>55</sup> Zurcher (2005), p. 95

<sup>56</sup> Zurcher (2005), p. 94

<sup>57</sup> Suny (1994), p. 328

<sup>58</sup> Suny (1994), p. 329

in the North Caucasus, including Circassians, Ossetians and Chechens.<sup>59</sup> Ardzinba also traveled to Turkey to try to garner support, but returned empty-handed.<sup>60</sup>

In May 1992, Georgian deputies in the Abkhaz parliament began boycotting proceedings, complaining of discrimination. This was followed by a Georgian strike in Sukhumi and an attack by Abkhazia's National Guard on the Abkhaz Ministry of Internal Affairs, the last outpost of Tbilisi's authority in the region.<sup>61</sup> After an increase in Russian support for secessionists in South Ossetia, including Russian helicopter attacks on Georgian villages, Shevardnadze was forced into a cease-fire in July 1992.<sup>62</sup> On 23 July, the Abkhaz Supreme Soviet passed a resolution, without the participation of the Georgian deputies, restoring the 1925 Abkhaz constitution and Abkhazia's status as a sovereign republic within what was then the Soviet Union.<sup>63</sup> Then, on 11 August, a high-ranking delegation from Tbilisi, including the minister of the interior and the national security advisor, was kidnapped by Gamsakhurdia's forces in Mingrelia while trying to negotiate with them.<sup>64</sup> It was alleged that the hostages were taken into Abkhazia. On 14 August, 1992, full-blown violent conflict broke out between the Abkhaz National Guard and the Georgian National Guard, sent to Abkhazia ostensibly to retrieve the hostages.<sup>65</sup>

## War

Instead of looking for hostages, Georgian tanks rolled into Sukhumi and engaged with Abkhaz forces defending the city. It is thought that Abkhaz forces fired on Georgians first at the village of Ilovi, 50 kilometers outside the capital.<sup>66</sup> The Georgian government claimed that it had notified Ardzinba of Georgian plans to enter Abkhazia, but he denied this.<sup>67</sup> Depending on the source, between 2000 and 5000 Georgian National Guard troops crossed the border and headed for Sukhumi, while another 1000 troops landed in Gagra, in northwestern Abkhazia, to seal off the border with Russia.<sup>68</sup> Abkhaz resistance proved much stiffer than anticipated and heavy fighting broke out in and around Sukhumi.

However, a cease-fire was negotiated on 15 August while Russian troops evacuated tourists from the resorts along the Black Sea and Georgian forces withdrew from Sukhumi.<sup>69</sup> On 18 August full hostilities resumed and Georgian forces re-took Sukhumi, forcing Ardzinba and the separatist

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<sup>59</sup> Derlugian (1998), p. 274

<sup>60</sup> Chervonnaya, Svetlana, "Conflict in the Caucasus: Georgia, Abkhazia and the Russian Shadow", tr. Ariane Chanturia (Glastonbury: Gothic Image, 1994) p. 113

<sup>61</sup> Zverev (1996), p. 48

<sup>62</sup> Zurcher (2005), pp. 94-95

<sup>63</sup> Chervonnaya (1994), p. 112

<sup>64</sup> Chervonnaya (1994), pp. 115-116

<sup>65</sup> Zurcher (2005), p. 96

<sup>66</sup> Chervonnaya (1994), p. 159

<sup>67</sup> Zverev (1996), p. 48

<sup>68</sup> Antonenko (2005), p. 212

<sup>69</sup> Zverev (1996), p. 48

Abkhaz leadership to flee to Gudauta, the site of a Russian base in western Abkhazia.<sup>70</sup> Georgian National Guard units occupied the Abkhaz parliament and a military administrative council of 8 officers was set up.<sup>71</sup> Shevardnadze declared on television that, 'Now we can say that Georgian authority has been restored throughout the entire territory of the republic'.<sup>72</sup>

Achieving that goal was to prove slightly more difficult. If any tactical objectives are to be ascribed to the Georgian operation, they seem to have been to secure the main northwest-to-southeast road running through Abkhazia and to seal off the mountain passes to the North Caucasus.<sup>73</sup> These objectives were never met, resulting in a resilient Abkhaz resistance able to move about the territory, as well as a steady stream of North Caucasian fighters moving southwards to supplement it, over 1000 by September 1992.<sup>74</sup> On 3 September, talks between Shevardnadze, Yeltsin and Ardzinba were held in Moscow where the Abkhaz leader signed a document authorizing the presence of Georgian troops in Abkhazia. The talks fell through, however, when Abkhaz forces recaptured Gagra in October 1992.<sup>75</sup>

As hostilities continued, the conduct of undisciplined forces on both sides towards civilians grew worse. Villages were routinely looted and burned, and civilians were slaughtered or taken hostage.<sup>76</sup> Troop numbers swelled, as both sides enacted emergency conscription measures and a host of 'volunteers', from Transnistrian Russians to Islamist terrorist Shamil Basayev's 'Chechen Battalion', joined the Abkhaz cause.<sup>77</sup> Groups of bandits, some tied to one or more of the several sides involved, roamed remote areas with impunity. As another attempted cease-fire fell apart in November 1992, Abkhaz forces began shelling Sukhumi.<sup>78</sup> In February 1993, the situation grew chaotic, as Gamsakhurdia's Zviadist insurgents began raids on the Georgian rear and Russian planes bombed Sukhumi.<sup>79</sup> Early July 1993 saw an amphibious landing of Abkhaz forces near Sukhumi and a renewed attack on the city, prompting Zviadist fighters to come to the aid of regular Georgian forces.<sup>80</sup>

On 27 July, another Russian-brokered cease-fire was signed by the belligerent parties in Sochi, just across the Russian border, that led to the withdrawal of Georgian troops from positions in Abkhazia. Thinking the conflict was over, Georgian civilians returned to Sukhumi, while Georgian troops staggered back into Mingrelia, many of them joining Gamsakhurdia's insurgency.<sup>81</sup> As Zviadist attacks on regular Georgian and Abkhaz forces grew in early September 1993, the Abkhaz forces launched their largest offensive of the war, breaking the terms

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<sup>70</sup> Chervonnaya (1994), p. 160

<sup>71</sup> Zverev (1996), p. 48

<sup>72</sup> Zverev (1996), p. 49

<sup>73</sup> Zverev (1996), p. 50

<sup>74</sup> Antonenko (2005), p. 212

<sup>75</sup> Zverev (1996), p. 53

<sup>76</sup> Chervonnaya (1994), pp. 162-163

<sup>77</sup> Antonenko (2005), p. 212, Zverev (1996), p. 53

<sup>78</sup> Chervonnaya (1994), p. 160

<sup>79</sup> Chervonnaya (1994), p. 163

<sup>80</sup> Chervonnaya (1994), pp. 165-166

<sup>81</sup> Zverev (1996), p. 54

of the cease-fire and capturing Sukhumi on 27 September.<sup>82</sup> Shevardnadze's pleas for Russian help produced only condemnation and nominal sanctions of the Abkhazians, as they routed the remaining Georgian forces and drove some 200,000 Georgian civilians across the Inguri River into Georgia proper.<sup>83</sup>

The Georgian civil war continued through October and November of 1993, as Zviadist forces captured the Black Sea port of Poti and blocked food supplies from reaching Tbilisi. Fearing the complete dismemberment of Georgia, Shevardnadze enlisted Russian support to quell the insurgency.<sup>84</sup> It is thought that around this time, as Georgian forces surrounded a remote hamlet in Mingrelia, Zviad Gamsakhuria died in mysterious circumstances.<sup>85</sup> The consequences of Russian support were that Georgia had to join the Commonwealth of Independent States, effectively re-entering the Russian orbit, and negotiate basing agreements allowing Russian troops to remain on Georgian soil.<sup>86</sup>

## Russia's Role

So far, this article has looked at the entire time period targeted. However, the analysis has focused mainly on the Abkhaz and Georgian roles in the 1992-93 war. As it has been alluded, however, Russia played a significant role in the conflict in a variety of ways. It was mentioned earlier that historically, increased ethnic strife in the Caucasus coincided with periods of transition or policy shift in Moscow. Dmitri Trenin seems to bolster this assertion when he posits that the 1992-93 Georgia-Abkhazia war took place during a period of transition in Russian foreign policy, from a rejection of 'empire-building' and a view towards Western integration in 1991, to a reassertion of geopolitical concerns and a traditional view of control in Russia's 'near abroad' by 1993.<sup>87</sup>

In general, as Trenin observes, during the Abkhaz war, 'Russia's aim appears to have been to try to restore its influence throughout the region, on all sides, in every conflict, in order to prevent developments from slipping out of control and so opening the floodgates to outside interference'.<sup>88</sup> However, although Russian elements were involved on all sides of the conflict, the amount of control Moscow exerted over their actions is unclear. Local Russian military commanders certainly had a personal stake in the war: to protect their sanatoria and dachas in Abkhazia.<sup>89</sup>

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<sup>82</sup> Zverev (1996), p. 54

<sup>83</sup> Chervonnaya (1994), p. 167

<sup>84</sup> Suny (1994), p. 331

<sup>85</sup> Suny (1994), p. 331

<sup>86</sup> Zurcher (2005), pp. 96-97

<sup>87</sup> Trenin, Dmitri, "Russia's Security Interests and Policies in the Caucasus Region", in Bruno Coppieters (ed) "Contested Borders in the Caucasus" (Brussels: Vubpress, 1996), pp. 93-94

<sup>88</sup> Trenin (1996), p. 99

<sup>89</sup> Zverev (1996), p. 53

In her comprehensive examination of Russia's role in the conflict, Oksana Antonenko reveals that before the Georgian National Guard initially moved into Abkhazia in August 1992, Russian units in the region transferred substantial amounts of military hardware to the Georgians, including over 100 tanks.<sup>90</sup> It seems that Yeltsin and the Russian Ministry of Foreign Affairs were sympathetic towards Shevardnadze's efforts, while Defense Ministry officials were split down the middle in their loyalties, and Russian commanders on the ground were almost all sympathetic to the Abkhaz cause.<sup>91</sup> Regional Russian officials even played a part in training and equipping the Abkhaz North Caucasian allies.<sup>92</sup>

As the war grew into a stalemate, official Russian policy aligned more closely with the opinions of Russian forces in the region. It seems that Moscow sanctioned the transfer to the Abkhazians of large amounts of armaments from the Russian base at Gudauta, while Russian commanders continued to supply Abkhaz forces with intelligence and planning support.<sup>93</sup> Interestingly, at one point, when Russian planes and pilots were bombing Sukhumi, other Russian units continued to supply Georgian forces with weaponry.<sup>94</sup> Overall, whatever the strategy Moscow was attempting to implement, it seems that Russian policy during the violent phase of the conflict manifested itself in what Trenin has called 'chaotic involvement'.<sup>95</sup> This gave way to a decidedly anti-Georgian stance in the 'frozen' phase and finally the full re-ignition of the conflict in 2008.

## Conclusion

The 1992-93 Georgia-Abkhazia war can best be understood as stemming from parallel movements for national liberation that contradicted one another. The Georgians asserted their independence from Russian control. Simultaneously, the Abkhazians sought closer ties with the Russians in order to assert their independence from Georgian control. Although both sides had attempted these actions in the past, the tumultuous break-up of the Soviet Union, characterized by a significant transition and policy shift in Moscow, tipped historical tensions over the edge, into armed conflict.

Stephen Jones posits that the freedoms of perestroika changed Georgian nationalism, 'from a force for liberation and democratization to one of ethnic hegemonism and anti-pluralism'.<sup>96</sup> Given the outlook of Zviad Gamsakhurdia and the mandate he received in Georgia's first post-Soviet elections, this assertion seems accurate. However, a similar statement can also be made about Abkhaz nationalism at the time. Both ethnic groups gravitated towards increasingly uncompromising positions, as manifested in the 'war of laws' that preceded the war of arms. The ethnic history of the region explains why this move was possible for both sides, but not why it

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<sup>90</sup> Antonenko (2005), p. 209

<sup>91</sup> Antonenko (2005), p. 211

<sup>92</sup> Antonenko (2005), p. 212

<sup>93</sup> Antonenko (2005), p. 214

<sup>94</sup> Zverev (1996), p. 53

<sup>95</sup> Trenin (1996), p. 101

<sup>96</sup> Jones (1993), p. 288

occurred at that moment. Moscow's chaotic involvement during a time of unstable transition, however, provides an explanation for the outbreak of war in August 1992.

# INSPIRED FROM ABROAD: THE EXTERNAL SOURCES OF SEPARATISM IN AZERBAIJAN

Fareed Shafee\*

## Abstract

*This article examines the external sources of separatism in Azerbaijan. The author claims that in the case of Azerbaijan many separatist movements are fed by outside powers rather than caused by inside sources. This article does not intend to review the situation with regard to the political, economic and cultural rights of ethnic minorities. Azerbaijan, like many other post-Soviet republics, went through a transition period characterized by sharp economic decline, dissolution of social institutions, change of values, etc. Quite rightfully, some claims of leaders of ethnic minorities about discrimination might be reasonable and justifiable. In the circumstances of post-Soviet transition, no country escaped from injustices, disorders and social turbulences. However, in many cases separatist movements were used by regional powers and countries concerned, particularly so-called kin-states to advance their political agenda. The author argues that in Azerbaijan most separatist sentiments are instigated and directed mainly from abroad.*

**Keywords:** Azerbaijan, Armenia, Russia, Iran, South Caucasus, Separatism, Irredentism, Ethnic Minority

## Introduction

When Azerbaijan gained independence in 1991 after the dissolution of the Soviet Union, the country had already been drawn into conflict with neighboring Armenia. This conflict later turned into a full scale interstate war around Mountainous (Nagorno)<sup>1</sup> Karabakh region of Azerbaijan. Mountainous Karabakh was an autonomous region with a majority Armenian population, where the ultra-nationalist leadership of Armenia backed a strong separatist movement. In addition to an Armenian irredentist project Azerbaijan faced other separatist movements.

Separatism wrecked havoc in many other post-Soviet states. Ethnic minorities demanded more rights from central governments and their leaders claimed that the authorities conducted a policy of discrimination and oppression. Georgia, Moldova, Russia, Ukraine, and Kyrgyzstan – all these

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<sup>1</sup> "Nagorno" in Russian means Mountainous. In the 1920s, when Nagorno-Karabakh Autonomous Region was established within the USSR, the term "Nagorno" was invented to separate this region from the rest historical Karabakh and put Armenian population in majority position.

former Soviet republics encountered separatism in various forms and to various extents. Azerbaijan was among those republics.

This article does not intend to review whether such claims on the part of ethnic minorities were right or wrong. Azerbaijan, as many other post-Soviet republics, went through a transition period characterized by sharp economic decline, dissolution of social institutions, change of values, etc. Quite rightfully, some claims of leaders of ethnic minorities might be reasonable and justifiable. In the circumstances of post-Soviet transition, no country escaped from injustices, disorders and social turbulences.

However, in many cases separatist movements were used by regional powers and countries concerned, particularly so-called kin-states to advance their political agenda. This article examines the foreign involvement in separatist movements on the territory of Azerbaijan.

## Academic Viewpoint on the Role of External Factors

The importance of the external support of separatism is acknowledged and investigated in the work of several experts.<sup>2</sup> Ostap Odushkin maintained that in case of Ukraine many separatist movements, such as in Crimea and Donbas, had strong foreign support.<sup>3</sup> He stresses:

*“Support (both political and financial) for separatists usually comes either from a kin-state of the national minority (Crimea), or diaspora (Northern Ireland) or from countries which are rivals of the state from which separatists want to secede. It is rarely backed and financed exclusively by locals (either businesses or ordinary people).”<sup>4</sup>*

Odushkin further maintains that separatist movements in Ukraine employed and fictionalized historical rhetoric for ideological purposes and distorted real history. When needed the historical memories and myths are forged. *“Thus, we can state that all history is modern history, since contemporary development and circumstances play the most crucial role.”<sup>5</sup>*

Odushkin opposes the well-accepted viewpoint that separatism is caused by domestic factors.

*“After the dismantling of the Soviet Union and the appearance of weak new states with nascent institutions and authorities, it is obvious that external factors (international factors) are of decisive importance as well. The separatist question became a factor which can be traded off by some*

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<sup>2</sup> Wardhani, Baig, “External Support for Liberation Movements in Aceh and Papua”, Paper presented at the 15th Biennial Conference of the Asian Studies Association of Australia, Canberra, 29 June-2 July 2004. <http://coombs.anu.edu.au/SpecialProj/ASAA/biennial-conference/2004/Wardhani-B-ASAA2004.pdf>; Griffiths, Ryan, “Globalization, Development and Separatism: The Influence of External and Internal Economic Factors on the Strategy of Separatism”, Paper presented at the annual meeting of the ISA's 49th Annual Convention, Bridging Multiple Divides, Hilton San Francisco, San Francisco, 26 March, 2008, [http://www.allacademic.com/meta/p252789\\_index.html](http://www.allacademic.com/meta/p252789_index.html);

<sup>3</sup> Odushkin, Ostap, “Problem of Separatism in the Post-Communist Space: Internal and External Sources. The Case of Ukraine”, in: *Slovak Foreign Policy Affairs*, Issue II, 2003, pp. 30-54.

<sup>4</sup> Odushkin, p. 31.

<sup>5</sup> Odushkin, p. 49.

*governments to get better treatment for those states' diasporas or to expand their geopolitical influence.”<sup>6</sup>*

Separatism can be encouraged in many ways: direct and indirect military assistance, financial contributions, media promotion (which is becoming a more and more important factor), hosting separatist leaders, promising recognition, and some others. The cases illustrated below in subsequent sections fall under these categories.

## Players

In the military campaign of 1992-1994, Armenia was successful in occupying Mountainous Karabakh and seven other adjacent regions of Azerbaijan. Armenia has not been recognized as the occupying power by international organizations<sup>7</sup>, mainly the UN Security Council. As Thomas Ambrosio states, “Armenia encountered a highly permissive or tolerant international environment that allowed its annexation of some 15 percent of Azerbaijani territories.”<sup>8</sup> However, the fact of occupation was reflected in the language of relevant resolutions of the UNSC. Other organizations such as the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe pointed to the occupation of Azerbaijani territories and called for the withdrawal of occupying armed forces.<sup>9</sup>

Armenia and separatists in Mountainous Karabakh, which started the irredentist campaign under the slogan of unification, gradually changed their tactics, and put forward the issue of self-determination. The Armenian population of Mountainous Karabakh claimed that they were successful in getting control of the territories under question, and establishing “government” to rule there. Armenia became a key player in advancing in international fora the issue of self-determination of the Mountainous Karabakh region of Azerbaijan.

While seeking independent status for this region, the Armenian political and security establishments promoted the idea of independence for other regions of Azerbaijan populated by ethnic minorities. As it will be illustrated below, Armenia had a direct interest in propelling inter-ethnic tensions in other parts of Azerbaijan in order to justify self-determination for Mountainous Karabakh.

Other regional powers had a stake in Azerbaijan’s domestic political situation and its foreign policy orientation. Azerbaijan, possessing enormous energy resources and occupying an important geostrategic space at the crossroads of Europe and Asia, was subjected to the struggle between regional and global powers. Therefore, separatist movements received a fair amount of support from neighboring countries. Several political and “academic” conferences and seminars were organized in Yerevan and Moscow. Ethnic minority leaders were invited to Armenia, Russia, and some other countries and were received at an official level. Azerbaijan intelligence agencies claimed that they seized political activists, associated with ethnic minorities’ political movements, who had acknowledged their links with the foreign intelligence services of Armenia, Russia and Iran.

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<sup>6</sup> Odushkin, p. 40.

<sup>7</sup> With the exception of the Organization of Islamic Conference.

<sup>8</sup> Ambrosio, Thomas, “Irredentism. Ethnic Conflict and International Politics”, (Connecticut: Praeger Publisher, 2001), p.146.

<sup>9</sup> Resolution of UNSC 822, 853, 874, 884, CoE PACE resolution 1416.

## Azerbaijani Separatists on the Agenda of Third Countries

### *1. Mountainous Karabakh*

So-called separatism in Mountainous Karabakh is, as a matter of fact, an irredentist movement, and de-facto controlled by Armenia, as it was acknowledged by many international organizations and foreign governments. Therefore, Armenia is not considered in the article as the external source of separatism, as its government is directly and openly involved in administration of the occupied territories. However, separatist leaders from Mountainous Karabakh from time to time are welcomed abroad, and certain circles in third countries actively promote the issue of independence of this region.

Many observers stated that Russia had a direct stake in the conflict over Mountainous Karabakh. In the 1990s a scandal erupted around the alleged transfer of illegal military supplies from Russia to Armenia. During that period the office of the so-called “Nagorno-Karabakh Republic” functioned in Moscow. The relations between Azerbaijan and Russia were characterized as tense. However, after the departure of president Yeltsin and the rise to power of president Putin the relations between the two countries significantly warmed up, and they have resolved many outstanding issues. The office of “NKR” in Moscow was shut down. Currently the “NKR Office” functions within the Armenian Embassy in Moscow, which once more proves the fact of direct control of Armenia over Mountainous Karabakh.

However, certain circles in Moscow maintained and supported separatists in the South Caucasus, including those from Mountainous Karabakh. They inspired leaders of the breakaway regions of Azerbaijan, Georgia and Moldova to combine their efforts in self-promotion. On March 16, 2005 the leaders of Abkhazia, South Ossetia and Mountainous Karabakh met in Moscow “to discuss combining efforts to ensure each region's individual independence.”<sup>10</sup>

Seven months later, on September 13-14, 2005, Russia's CIS Affairs Institute, a government-sponsored think tank, organized a conference entitled “A Parallel CIS: Abkhazia, Transnistria, South Ossetia and Nagorno-Karabakh as Realities of post-Soviet Space”. Delegations from the self-proclaimed republics, Russian parliamentarians, academics, and prominent political scientists attended the conference. Modest Kolerov, head of the Russian Presidential Administration's Directorate for Interregional and External Ties, was the keynote speaker. It is obvious that without official blessing, such a conference would not have been possible in Moscow.

In February 2007, the leader of Mountainous Karabakh Arkady Gukasian was invited to Moscow by a Russian military think tank. He met with “high-ranking diplomats” in Moscow and was also awarded the Peter the Great Medal for promoting Russian-Armenian friendship.<sup>11</sup> Recently,

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<sup>10</sup> Stratfor. “FSU: Mutual Aid Efforts Too Little, Too Late?” March 18, 2005, [http://www.stratfor.com/fsu\\_mutual\\_aid\\_efforts\\_too\\_little\\_too\\_late](http://www.stratfor.com/fsu_mutual_aid_efforts_too_little_too_late). See also: Socor, Vladimir, “Secessionist Leaders Parade in Moscow”, in: *Eurasia Daily Monitor*, Vol. 2, Issue 54, March 18, 2005, [http://www.jamestown.org/publications\\_details.php?volume\\_id=407&issue\\_id=3268&article\\_id=2369447](http://www.jamestown.org/publications_details.php?volume_id=407&issue_id=3268&article_id=2369447)

<sup>11</sup> Socor, Vladimir, “Secessionist Leaders Coordinate Activities in Moscow”, in: *Eurasia Daily Monitor*, Vol. 4, Issue 38, February 23, 2007, [http://www.jamestown.org/edm/article.php?article\\_id=2371943](http://www.jamestown.org/edm/article.php?article_id=2371943)

separatists were invited to a conference dedicated to the problem of Kosovo recognition by the above-mentioned institute in April 2008.

In most cases, separatists from Mountainous Karabakh have no access to officials of foreign countries. Their visits are organized by Armenian diaspora organizations with no linkage to the authorities of host countries. For example, when representatives from Mountainous Karabakh travel to the United States to raise funds for their cause, no American officials will meet with them. However, it should be noted that while US authorities introduced a ban for travel and money transfers for separatist leaders in Transdnestria, Moldova and Abkhazia and South Ossetia, Georgia, no such restriction exists for Armenian separatists. The latter freely conduct donation campaigns across the US. Double standards clearly exhibited in this case show that American authorities regard differently separatist movements which are similar in nature. In the case of Mountainous Karabakh a strong Armenian lobby in the US plays an important role in the country's foreign policy towards the region.

The Armenian government and diaspora make every effort to promote “NKR” abroad, but without much success. However, every small event such as an exhibition, conference participation, etc. is widely promoted in Armenian media. The major players in the conflict – the US, Russia and to a lesser extent the EU - are not inclined to accept separatists from Mountainous Karabakh. As a result, their self-promotion at the moment is basically confined to the Armenian communities abroad.

## 2. *Talysh*

Talyshs represent the Iranian-speaking minority in the south of Azerbaijan. According to official figures of the Republic of Azerbaijan, 76,000 Talyshs live within the country.<sup>12</sup> Talysh nationalists (and interestingly some Armenian scholars<sup>13</sup>) however argue that their number is significantly reduced by the official census, and they reach 400,000 and some even speak about 800,000.<sup>14</sup>

In 1993 the nationalist leaders of the Talyshs, amid the chaos and political turmoil in Baku during the change of power, announced the establishment of the “Talysh-Mughan Autonomous Republic”. This brought the issue of Talysh separatism to the political agenda of Azerbaijan. Local leader Alikram Humbatov seized power in Lankaran, the regional centre in the southern part of the country, but failed to sustain it for more than three months. After the political situation was stabilized in the country and the new president Heydar Aliyev strengthened his position, the “Talysh-Mughan Autonomous Republic”, having no significant public support, fell.<sup>15</sup>

The Talysh issue, unlike Mountainous Karabakh and even the Lezgi one (discussed below), has never had a visible impact on political life in the country despite the creation of a short-lived self-proclaimed autonomous entity. The nationalist leaders failed to recruit more than dozens of

<sup>12</sup> “Azeri Paper Publishes Report on Country's Ethnic Composition”, in: *Azerbaijan Daily Digest*, Eurasianet.org, March 23, 2001, <http://www.eurasianet.org/resource/azerbaijan/hypermail/200103/0062.html>

<sup>13</sup> Astrian, G., “Talyshi”, in G. Astrian, “Etudes on Iranian ethnology”, Yerevan, 1998, pp. 3-11

<sup>14</sup> “Talysh”, in: Ethnologue.com, [http://www.ethnologue.com/show\\_language.asp?code=tly](http://www.ethnologue.com/show_language.asp?code=tly)

<sup>15</sup> Kotecha, Hema, “Islamic and Ethnic Identities in Azerbaijan: Emerging Trends and Tensions”, OSCE Report, Baku, July 2006, [http://www.osce.org/documents/ob/2006/08/23087\\_en.pdf](http://www.osce.org/documents/ob/2006/08/23087_en.pdf)

supporters. As OSCE expert Kotecha notes, “the attitude towards any separatist tendencies seems predominantly negative” among Talyshs. However, Kotecha and some other observers, at the same time, mention that there are some problems with social issues and ethnic identity expression.

According to Asim Oku, “the Talysh movement was Russian-oriented from the beginning of the last century. However, receiving no support from Moscow in 1993, a number of activists of Talysh movement have changed their alliance to Iran.”<sup>16</sup>

Proximity with Iran creates a favorable condition for propaganda through various mediums – TV, radio and newspapers. Kotecha further points to an active Iranian presence in the south. In her view, Iranian state media tries to propagate a religious lifestyle and an Iranian identity. However, most Talyshs prefer secular Azerbaijan to theocratic Iran.<sup>17</sup>

The issue of airing Iranian TV over the territory of Azerbaijan was on the agenda of bilateral negotiations between Azerbaijan and Iran for several years. In February 2007 the two countries’ telecommunication ministries signed a memorandum, which, *inter alia*, envisaged cooperation with the purpose of regulation of TV and radio transmissions in border regions. More specifically the problem was related to Iranian *Sahar TV*, which aired onto the territory of Lankaran and adjacent areas of Azerbaijan. It should be noted that, in general, during past 4-5 years Azerbaijan and Iran managed to settle many disputed issues peacefully.

Azerbaijani national security agencies occasionally report on the illegal activities of Iranian intelligence services in Azerbaijan. In October 2007, 16 members of the so-called Northern Mahdi Army, an underground group, went on trial in Azerbaijan. The media reported that this group was “organized, trained and supplied by Iran’s Republican Guard in order to overthrow the current Azerbaijani government and impose an Islamic state on the Iranian model there.”<sup>18</sup> In July 2008, Novruzali Mamedov, editor of the local newspaper, Talysh Voice, and another top official at the newspaper, Elman Guliyev, were sentenced by an Azerbaijani court. “According to prosecutors, Guliyev said during questioning that he received Iranian funding for the publication of the newspaper and the acquisition of historical and religious books.”<sup>19</sup>

Except for a few incidents, for the most part since 1993 the Talysh issue was dormant in Azerbaijan. In May 2005, Armenia made an attempt to rekindle the Talysh issue by organizing the “First International Conference on Talysh Studies”. The event was hosted by the Yerevan State University’s Iranian Studies Department and the Yerevan-based Center for Iranian Studies. According to Vladimir Socor:

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<sup>16</sup> Oku, Asim, “Iran Can Blow Up Azerbaijan From Within”, Axis Global Challenge Research, June 30, 2006. <http://www.axisglobe.com/article.asp?article=201>

<sup>17</sup> Kotecha, p. 35.

<sup>18</sup> Goble, Paul, “Window on Eurasia: Iranians Said Seeking to Promote Islamic Revolution in Azerbaijan”, October 9, 2007, <http://windowoneurasia.blogspot.com/2007/10/window-on-eurasia-iranians-said-seeking.html>

<sup>19</sup> “Azerbaijan Tries 2 From Ethnic Group Centered Near Iran On Treason Charges”, International Herald Tribune, December 14, 2007, <http://www.ihf.com/articles/ap/2007/12/13/europe/EU-GEN-Azerbaijan-Trial.php>

*“Almost certainly, some political circles in Armenia were behind this initiative. The conference appeared designed at least in part to resurrect the issue of autonomy for the Talysh ethnic group in Azerbaijan. Such intentions draw inspiration from the would-be “Talysh-Mugan Republic”... [T] heir rebellion was correlated with a massive Armenian offensive on the Karabakh front and seizure of territories deep inside western Azerbaijan by Armenian forces. The Talysh rebels proclaimed the independence of a seven-district area in southeastern Azerbaijan, but did not elicit significant support among their own ethnic group.”<sup>20</sup>*

However, this conference did not receive wide support either, even from the Talysh diaspora abroad. While one of its leaders, Fahraddin Abbas-Zoda, chairman of Talysh National Movement and several members arrived from Russia to participate in the conference, another Talysh community group - the Party for Equality of the Peoples of Azerbaijan, chaired by Hilal Mammadov, which operates in Moscow (formerly the Talysh People's Party) - condemned the conference.

Armenia enjoys very close and friendly relations with Iran. Through this connection Armenia also tries to reach out regarding the Talysh issue. After the above-mentioned conference, Armenian academicians organized several undertakings related to Iranian studies. The last one was organized on June 6, 2008 in Yerevan under a title “Iran and the Caucasus: Unity and Diversity”.

### **3. Lezgis**

According to official census of 1999 about 178,000 Lezgis are living in Azerbaijan, mainly in its northern part, though Lezgi nationalists claim that the number is 2-3 times higher.<sup>21</sup> Many experts emphasize that Lezgis, the largest ethnic minority in Azerbaijan, face no discrimination at the personal level and the Lezgi nationalist movement has no wide support among the public.<sup>22</sup> Nevertheless, Lezgi nationalists accuse Azerbaijani authorities of discriminatory practices. Despite such allegation no serious violent incident occurred in the Lezgi populated area between the authorities and nationalists since the declaration of Azerbaijan's independence. Lezgis are well represented in the government, and media. Education in Lezgi language exists in the country.

The lack of public support did not prevent Lezgi nationalists from forming an organized group. Sadval, established in 1989, is an active organization operating mainly from Russia where it is also the subject of concern for Russian security agencies. However, the members of Sadval openly gather in Dagestan, and in Moscow as well.<sup>23</sup> The main goal of Sadval is to unite Lezgis in Russian Dagestan and Azerbaijan. This caused a fear that Sadval can be turned into something similar to the

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<sup>20</sup> Socor, Vladimir, “Talysh Issue, Dormant in Azerbaijan, Reopened in Armenia”, in: *Eurasia Daily Monitor*, May 27, 2005, [http://jamestown.org/edm/article.php?article\\_id=2369811](http://jamestown.org/edm/article.php?article_id=2369811)

<sup>21</sup> Cornell, Svante, “Small Nations and Great Powers : A Study of Ethnopolitical Conflict in the Caucasus” (Richmond: Curzon Press Limited, 2000), p. 262.

<sup>22</sup> “Minorities at Risk: Assessment for Lezgins in Azerbaijan”, University of Maryland Center for International Development and Conflict Management., Online Report, 2004, <http://www.cidcm.umd.edu/mar/assessment.asp?groupId=37302>

<sup>23</sup> Гахраманов, Мухиддин: “Россия считает «Садвал» организацией, ведущей борьбу за права разделенного на две части лезгинского народа” (Gahramanov Muhiddin: “Russia regards “Sadval” as an organization fighting for the rights of the Lezgin people divided into two parts”), Azeri Press Agency, June 22, 2006, [http://southru.info/2006/06/23/mukhiddin\\_gakhramanov\\_rossija\\_schitaet\\_sadval\\_organizaciejj\\_vedushhejj\\_borbu\\_za\\_p\\_rava\\_razdelenogo\\_na\\_dve\\_chasti\\_lezginskogo\\_naroda.html](http://southru.info/2006/06/23/mukhiddin_gakhramanov_rossija_schitaet_sadval_organizaciejj_vedushhejj_borbu_za_p_rava_razdelenogo_na_dve_chasti_lezginskogo_naroda.html)

separatist movement in South Ossetia, which aspires to reunification with North Ossetia under the Russian umbrella or other irredentist claims.

In 1992, the Russian Justice Department registered Sadval; later, for a short period of time in 1993, Sadval's license was suspended, and then again resumed after they removed a territorial claim to Russia. Sadval was split into two factions - radical, demanding full independence, and moderate, advocating cultural autonomy in Russia and Azerbaijan.

In the 1990s, while Azerbaijan faced a series of security challenges, Sadval was active in the country. In April 1996, Azerbaijan's National Security Ministry arrested several members of this organization and accused them of organizing a terrorist act in a Baku subway in May 1994, which claimed the lives of 14 people. The Azerbaijani authorities revealed the linkage between Sadval and Armenian intelligence services.<sup>24</sup> Hema Kotecha reports:

*“It is frequently stated by the media and many local observers that both Armenia and Russia have interests in maintaining Sadval: the organisation is labeled as a ‘game’ used by Russia, Azerbaijan and internal Dagestani politics. It is suggested by local political players that Azerbaijan needs to pay more attention to this game and its mechanics and, indeed, to “play it as ‘Russia’ would”... [T] here is no particular leader for the Lezgins who might head a movement and that only outside organisations and people can channel their interests through Lezgins; Sadval have no particular source of financial support other than through external interests.”<sup>25</sup>*

In May 2008, Lezgis gathered for an academic conference in Moscow dedicated to the history and culture of the Lezgi people. The sponsors of the conference were the Russian Foreign Ministry, the Regional Development Ministry, and the Russian State Duma. Conference participants received a brochure published jointly by the Federal National-Cultural Autonomy of the Lezgis and the State Duma's Committee for Nationality Affairs, in which the author called “for official condemnation of the division and “ethnocide” of the Lezgin people in the 1920s. He further slams the current border between the Russian Federation and Azerbaijan as “illegitimate” and demands it be redrawn to incorporate the northern districts of Azerbaijan into Daghestan.”<sup>26</sup>

Alexander Melikishvili notes in this regard:

*Upon closer examination of the conference proceedings, however, it appears that the event was designed to be a propaganda platform for advocating the creation of an independent Lezgin state or Lezgistan with accompanying territorial claims on the Lezgin-populated areas of northern Azerbaijan, something that Moscow has used many times in the late 1990s, when the Kremlin fomented secessionist sentiment among Azerbaijan’s ethnic minorities.”<sup>27</sup>*

<sup>24</sup> “Armenia and Russia Supporting Separatists in Azerbaijan, Azeri Paper Says”, in: *Azerbaijan Daily Digest*, Eurasianet.org, February 8, 2000, <http://www.eurasianet.org/resource/azerbaijan/hypermail/200002/0017.html>; Fuller, Liz, “Azerbaijan: Baku Implicates Armenian Intelligence In Alleged Coup Bid”, *Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty*, August 5, 2005, <http://www.rferl.org/content/article/1060460.html>

<sup>25</sup> Kotecha, p. 44.

<sup>26</sup> Fuller, Liz, “Analysis: Does Azerbaijan Face A New Irredentist Threat?” *RFE/RL*, May 15, 2008 <http://www.rferl.org/featuresarticle/2008/05/993754A7-DB54-451B-ACAE-C059B6D974B4.html>

<sup>27</sup> Melikishvili, Alexander, “Russia Resurrects The Lezgin Issue In Azerbaijan At Moscow Conference”, in: *Eurasia Daily Monitor*, Vol. 5, Number 135, July 16, 2008, [http://www.jamestown.org/edm/article.php?article\\_id=2373231](http://www.jamestown.org/edm/article.php?article_id=2373231)

Lezgi nationalists maintain several anti-Azerbaijani websites, such as <http://05.moy.su>. One Eldar Beybutov wrote on this website that Iran and Armenia are natural allies of the Lezgi people. He further claimed that the West is strengthening its position in the South Caucasus through Azerbaijan. Therefore, to oppose such advancement, Lezgis should destroy “Western plans by the act of sabotage and military activity on those territories of Azerbaijan which host transportation lines”.<sup>28</sup>

Armenian web forums and Armenia-related websites often feature articles instigating a separatist mood among Lezgis in Azerbaijan. In September 2007, Armenia hosted an “academic” conference dedicated to the history of Caucasian Albania, an ancient state that existed on the territory of the modern day Republic of Azerbaijan.

While mainstream scholars maintain that Caucasian Albania consisted mainly of indigenous ethnic groups, including Udins, Lezgis and others, extreme Lezgi nationalists claim that this was a purely Lezgi state. Contrary to that, some academicians in Azerbaijan opine that Caucasian Albania was a Turkic state. Further, Armenian historians view this ancient state as Armenian-influenced and ruled.

The conference in Armenia advanced the idea of Lezgi nationalists that Caucasian Albania belonged to this ethnic group, and therefore, justified relevant territorial claim to Azerbaijan. No Azerbaijani expert was invited to this conference, while Armenian, Russian, and experts from Dagestan predominated at the meeting.<sup>29</sup>

Besides the Lezgi-related issue, the conference in Yerevan spared space for promoting the idea of autonomy for another ethnic minority in Azerbaijan – Avars. Timur Aytberov, a scholar from Dagestan, stated at the conference that Avars should seek autonomy status in Azerbaijan.<sup>30</sup> Conferences in Yerevan in September 2007, and in Moscow in May 2008, were formally dedicated to purely academic problems but their political agenda was obvious in the light of the conclusions and slogans voiced there.

Fortunately, despite outside attempts to instigate Lezgi separatism, peace has prevailed thus far. However, a potential danger still exists due to a number of factors, mainly external interests. Certainly, much will be dependant on the ability of Azerbaijani authorities to handle the situation in a manner which entails the combination of law enforcement measures and economic incentives. Not least, Azerbaijan should continue to pay attention to the social well-being of Lezgi populated area, as Lezgis will always look at their brethren in the north, in Dagestan, to compare the situation there with their own. Lezgi nationalists refer to economic hardship and corruption to justify their respective claims while overlooking the fact that Dagestan is one of the poorest and corrupt regions in Russia. Overall, Lezgis prefer a peaceful existence within Azerbaijan, particularly in view of the

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<sup>28</sup> Бейбутов, Эльдар, “Естественные союзники лезгин: кто же они?” (Beybudov, Eldar, “Natural allies of the Lezgis: Who are they?”) <http://05.moy.su/news/2007-02-03-23>

<sup>29</sup> Arif Yunusov, an Azerbaijani opposition (I emphasize, opposition, not pro-government) expert, gave his comment on this conference to Armenian News Agency Regnum ([www.regnum.ru/news/882797.html](http://www.regnum.ru/news/882797.html)).

<sup>30</sup> “Аварцы убедились в необходимости своей автономии в составе Азербайджана, - считает дагестанский историк” (Avars were convinced of the importance of seeking an autonomy within Azerbaijan – an historian from Dagestan opines), Alazan-Info, <http://www.alazan.moy.su/news/2007-09-04-140>

many interethnic marriages and their well-integrated status. However if there were external support, violence might erupt on the part of some nationalist elements.<sup>31</sup>

#### 4. Kurds

Kurds are one of the best-integrated ethnic minorities in Azerbaijan. Many Kurds have high positions in the Azerbaijani government. The extent of their integration in Azerbaijani society and elite even leads some opposition parties to accuse them of controlling certain areas of Azerbaijani politics and the economy.<sup>32</sup> Official statistics report that about 13,000 Kurds live in the country, while independent experts estimate their number around 50-60,000<sup>33</sup> and nationalists around 200,000. The geographical areas of concentration of the Kurdish population included Kelbejar, Lachin, Gubadli and Zangilan districts – all currently occupied by Armenia. Perhaps because of this factor the close ties between Kurds and Azerbaijanis have been strengthened.

Armenians, having occupied Azerbaijani territories, including those where Kurds lived and having expelled all the population from there, later came to the idea of the creation of a “Kurdish state” in Lachin and some other adjacent areas – Gubadli and Kelbejar. Lachin district, located outside Mountainous Karabakh is extremely important for Armenians as a transportation link between Armenia and Mountainous Karabakh. In the framework of peaceful negotiation with Azerbaijan, the Armenians declared several times that they would surrender back neither Lachin, nor Kelbejar.

The idea of a Kurdish state came out of “Red Kurdistan”, or more precisely the Kurdish district (“uyezd” in Russian) which existed in 1923-1929 within Azerbaijan. However, since almost all Kurds fled from these regions because of Armenian offensives, this Armenian propagandist gesture failed, even though it was aimed to gain outside support from Kurdish communities in Turkey, Iran, Russia and Europe.

In 2008, Armenia tried to resurrect this idea by inviting Kurds from Iran and Turkey. Media in Azerbaijan and Turkey reported that Armenian authorities started settling active members of Kurdistan Workers Party (PKK), a nationalist guerrilla movement operating in Turkey which is listed as a terrorist organization by many countries, in the occupied areas of Azerbaijan. However, Armenian authorities denied this allegation as merely a propagandistic campaign on the part of Azerbaijan and Turkey. American military expert Stephen Blank notes in this regard that “dismissing Turkish and Azerbaijani assertions and concerns could prove dangerous. They require further investigation.”<sup>34</sup>

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<sup>31</sup> See also for similar opinion: Kotecha, p. 45; Cornell, p. 262.

<sup>32</sup> Veliyev, Anar, “Kurds In Azerbaijan: A Threat Or A Game That Power Plays?”, in: *Central Asia and the Caucasus*, No. 2 (8), 2001.

<sup>33</sup> Юнусов, Ариф, “Этнический состав Азербайджана (по переписи 1999 г.)” (Yunusov, Arif, “Ethnic composition of Azerbaijan according to the census of 1999”), Сеть этнологического мониторинга и раннего предупреждения конфликтов (Network of Ethnological Monitoring and Early Conflict Prevention), 12 марта 2001.

[http://www.iea.ras.ru/topic/census/mon/yunus\\_mon2001.htm](http://www.iea.ras.ru/topic/census/mon/yunus_mon2001.htm)

<sup>34</sup> Blank, Stephen, “Kurdish Issue and Nagorno Karabakh”, Eurasianet.org, May 28, 2008, <http://www.eurasianet.org/departments/insight/articles/eav052708a.shtml>

## 5. Others

Some other ethnic minorities populate Azerbaijan; however, separatist tendencies among them are even less than observed above. Some incidents occurred in Balaken and Zagatala districts populated by Avars, however, they were caused by the activities of criminal gangs rather than by separatist aspiration.<sup>35</sup> Many Avars refer to Sheikh Shamil as the pride of their ancestry. Shamil was a famous religious leader in the North Caucasus who led the anti-Russian resistance in the nineteenth century. Maybe for this reason, separatist anti-Azerbaijani sentiments had no ground among Avars. Certainly, Russian nationalists would fail to instigate anything serious there since Avar nationalism has two main elements – Islam and Sheikh Shamil, neither of which would work to foster a pro-Russian mood. At the same time, no guarantee can be given with regard to the possibility of minor provocations, which might lead to more serious problems in the future.

Georgians, who live in close proximity with Avars, generally are in good relations with the central authorities. A considerable Russian population in Azerbaijan, mainly in Baku, the small but strong Jewish community in the north of Azerbaijan and some other ethnic groups enjoy stable relations with and fair treatment from the central government of Azerbaijan.

Many international organizations point out that as a whole Azerbaijan provides the necessary conditions for ensuring the rights of ethnic minorities. The UN Committee on Elimination of Racial Discrimination, upon consideration of Azerbaijan's report, concluded that the country ensured anti-discriminatory legislation.<sup>36</sup> The Council of Europe noted "Azerbaijan has made particularly commendable efforts in opening up the personal scope of application of the Framework Convention to a wide range of minorities. In Azerbaijan, the importance of the protection and promotion of cultures of national minorities is recognized and the long history of cultural diversity of the country is largely valued."<sup>37</sup> In 2007, the European Commission Against Racism and Intolerance (ECRI), commented, "ECRI notes the general view that national minorities are well represented in public and political life and particularly in parliament."<sup>38</sup> The NATO Parliamentary Assembly stressed that "overall, minorities in Azerbaijan are relatively well integrated, but some areas offer a mixed picture."<sup>39</sup> Other organizations generally commend the country's policy with regard to national minorities. In the meantime, the same reports indicate that further steps should be taken to improve the well-being of ethnic groups and protect their linguistic and cultural rights.

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<sup>35</sup> Kotecha, p.46-49

<sup>36</sup> "Committee on Elimination of Racial Discrimination Concludes Sixty-Sixth Session", United Nations Information Service Press-Release, March 14, 2005, <http://www.unis.unvienna.org/unis/pressrels/2005/rd987.html>

<sup>37</sup> Council of Europe, Committee of Ministers, "Resolution ResCMN-2004-8 on the Implementation of the Framework Convention for the Protection of National Minorities by Azerbaijan", Adopted by the Committee of Ministers on 13 July 2004 at the 893rd meeting of the Ministers Deputies.

<https://wcd.coe.int/ViewDoc.jsp?id=761919&BackColorInternet=9999CC&BackColorIntranet=&BackColorLogged=FD864>

<sup>38</sup> European Commission Against Racism and Intolerance (ECRI), "Second Report on Azerbaijan", CRI(2007)22, May 24, 2007, [http://www.coe.int/t/e/human\\_rights/ecri/1%2Decri/2%2Dcountry%2Dby%2Dcountry\\_approach/azerbaijan/azerbaijan\\_cbc\\_3.asp](http://www.coe.int/t/e/human_rights/ecri/1%2Decri/2%2Dcountry%2Dby%2Dcountry_approach/azerbaijan/azerbaijan_cbc_3.asp)

<sup>39</sup> NATO Parliamentary Assembly, "Minorities In The South Caucasus: Factor Of Instability?", Rapporteur Bert Middel, 2005. <http://www.nato-pa.int/Default.asp?SHORTCUT=683>

## Conclusion

By no means is Azerbaijan free from problems related to the protection of national minorities<sup>40</sup>; however, the country does provide the necessary conditions for the development of ethnic minorities' culture and identity, as outlined by many international organizations. As I argue and illustrate above, most separatist sentiments are instigated and directed from abroad, mainly from Armenia.

A so-called "kin-State" has a direct interest in the protection of minorities in neighboring states, however, Armenia's open military occupation and also undeniable links with other separatist groups in Azerbaijan went well beyond accepted norms. The OSCE High Commissioner in his statement on protection of minorities and citizens abroad pointed out "the presence of one's citizens or "ethnic kin" abroad must not be used as a justification for undermining the sovereignty and territorial integrity of other States."<sup>41</sup>

Despite a difficult socio-economic situation, good neighborly relations between countries in the region can prevent violence and separatism, which is so frequently observed in the post-Soviet space. For example, Azerbaijanis in Georgia frequently complain about their difficult economic existence; however, Azerbaijanis never rose to demand secession. Azerbaijani and Georgian governments, always in a friendly manner, discussed all issues related to their respective minorities in each others states, as well as border issues. This further proves that separatism in post-Soviet area has at large external sources and is caused by the situation in which a neighboring state tries to stir the domestic situation in another by abetting separatism.

Azerbaijan, thus far, has succeeded in balancing its foreign policy and developing good neighborly relations, particularly with Russia and Iran, which has contributed to the stabilization of internal situation in the country. Successful implementation of economic reforms, oil and transportation projects have improved the lives of peoples in various parts of Azerbaijan. Violent ethnic conflicts in other parts of the Caucasus persuaded people that inter-ethnic clashes have no military solution except the gloomy prospect of destroyed settlements and the emergence of refugees. Yet, many other measures should be undertaken to ensure that the rights of minorities are not neglected, but, on the contrary, ensured and developed in Azerbaijan.

At the same time, as depicted above, the external forces have played a major role in abetting separatism among some ethnic minorities in Azerbaijan. Continuation of such practices against Azerbaijan and other countries of the region could endanger security and stability in the whole region.

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<sup>40</sup> For criticism see: Popjanevski, Johanna, "Minorities and the State in the South Caucasus: Assessing the Protection of National Minorities in Georgia and Azerbaijan", Silk Road Paper, September 2006, <http://www.silkroadstudies.org/new/docs/Silkroadpapers/0609Popjanevski.pdf>

<sup>41</sup> OSCE Press-Release, "OSCE High Commissioner Issues Statement On Protection Of Minorities And Citizens Abroad", August 25, 2008. <http://www.osce.org/item/32663.html>

# THE BAKU-TBILISI-KARS RAILROAD AND ITS GEOPOLITICAL IMPLICATIONS FOR THE SOUTH CAUCASUS

Samuel Lussac\*

## Abstract

*This article aims at evaluating the geopolitical impact of the construction of the Baku-Tbilisi-Kars (BTK) railroad in the South Caucasus. Indeed, after the implementation of the East-West energy corridor, it will contribute to further regional cooperation between Azerbaijan, Georgia and Turkey. On this matter, it reflects the very specificity of this regionalization that is essentially based on economic issues and develops despite opportunistic interests. Furthermore, the BTK railroad will constitute a new stage in the further marginalization of Armenia within the South Caucasus. Not only it will bypass this country but it will also undermine its ethno-political leverages, notably in Georgia. Finally, in spite of the recent political events in the South Caucasus, the BTK railroad could be a new step in the incoming showdown between, on the one hand Azerbaijan, Georgia and Turkey and, on the other hand, Armenia, Iran and Russia.*

**Keywords:** *South Caucasus, Baku-Tbilisi-Kars, Railroad, Geopolitics, Regionalization.*

## Introduction

On November 21, 2007, in Marabda (southern Georgia), the Presidents of Azerbaijan, Georgia and Turkey inaugurated the construction of a new railroad between Kars and Baku, via Tbilisi. This new railroad is supposed to increase the transportation capacity in the South Caucasus and to diversify the nature of the goods that are transported through these three countries. Indeed, after the implementation of the Baku-Tbilisi-Ceyhan (BTC) oil pipeline and of the Baku-Tbilisi-Erzurum (BTE) gas pipeline, the Baku-Tbilisi-Kars railroad, also known as the Kars-Akhalkalaki-Tbilisi-Baku railroad, should be another step in the definition of the South Caucasus, and especially of Azerbaijan, Georgia and Turkey, as a major transit corridor between Europe and Asia.

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The project of a railroad between Azerbaijan and Turkey through Georgia was first discussed in July 1993, after the Kars-Gyumri-Tbilisi railroad, which goes through Armenia, was closed. Because of a lack of funding at this time, this project was more or less abandoned<sup>1</sup>. However, during the inauguration of the BTC pipeline on May 2005, the Presidents of Azerbaijan, of Georgia and of Turkey evoked once again the possibility of building a railroad between their three countries<sup>2</sup>. And 2007 was a crucial year in the implementation of this project: on February in Tbilisi, Azerbaijan, Georgia and Turkey signed a trilateral agreement to launch the construction of the railroad in 2007. It finally started in Marabda in November 2007 for the Georgian part and in Kars in July 2008 for the Turkish part. The railroad is expected to open in late 2011. Its length will be 826 km and it will be able to transport 1 million passengers and 6.5 million tons of freight at the first stage. This capacity will then reach 3 million passengers and over 15 million tons of freight. The total cost of the project will be around \$600 million, including \$422 million dedicated to the construction of a railroad between Kars and Akhalkalaki and to the rehabilitation of the railroad between Akhalkalaki and Marabda.



*Inauguration of construction of the Turkish part of BTK railroad by Presidents of Azerbaijan, Georgia and Turkey in Kars, Turkey, on July 24 2008.*

**Source:** [www.president.az](http://www.president.az)

During the signature of the trilateral agreement on the BTK railroad on February 2007, the Georgian President M. Saakashvili presented the BTK railroad as a “geopolitical revolution”<sup>3</sup>.

<sup>1</sup> Hakobyan, Grigor, “Armenia Responds to Kars-Akhalkalaki Railroad Proposal”, in: *Central Asia Caucasus Analyst*, 09.07.2005 (<http://www.cacianalyst.org/?q=node/3371>).

<sup>2</sup> Ziyadov, Taleh, “Officials Meet to Discuss South Caucasus Rail System”, in: *Eurasia Daily Monitor*, vol. 2:232, December 14, 2005, The Jamestown Foundation, ([http://www.jamestown.org/edm/article.php?article\\_id=2370599](http://www.jamestown.org/edm/article.php?article_id=2370599)).

<sup>3</sup> Akhalzashvili, Malkhaz, “Turkey Announces Start Date for Baku-Tbilisi-Kars Railroad Construction”, *Georgian Daily Independent Voice*, July 09, 2008, Economy section.

After the implementation of the East-West energy corridor<sup>4</sup>, the BTK railroad seems to be another step in the considerable political evolution of the South Caucasus. Thus, this paper aims at evaluating the geopolitical impact of this railroad on the South Caucasian region and at analyzing to what extent it contributes to the emergence of what I may call an informally integrated AGT (Azerbaijan-Georgia-Turkey) region, and to the further marginalization of Armenia in the South Caucasus. Indeed, the construction of the BTK railroad constitutes a new step in the development of particular political ties between Azerbaijan, Georgia and Turkey. It also participates in the further marginalization of Armenia in the South Caucasus. It may finally contribute to the formation of a geopolitical axis in the region, opposing the AGT countries, potentially encompassing Russia, Armenia and Iran.

### **A New Step in the Development of an Informally Integrated AGT Region**

The implementation of the East-West energy corridor has laid the foundations for increased economic and political ties between Azerbaijan, Georgia and Turkey. At the economic level, since the beginning of the 2000s, the trade volume between these three countries has been constantly increasing: between Georgia and Turkey, it increased from \$241 million in 2002 to more than \$830 million in 2007<sup>5</sup>; between Azerbaijan and Turkey, it increased from \$296 million in 2003 to \$1.2 billion in September 2007<sup>6</sup>; and between Azerbaijan and Georgia, it increased from \$76 million in 2000 to \$411 million in 2006<sup>7</sup>. Obviously, the energy corridor has highly contributed to the increase of the trade volume and there is no doubt that the BTK railroad will further contribute to such an increase. At the political level, the signatures of an Intergovernmental Agreement for the BTC pipeline in November 1999, and of a Security Protocol related to the East-West energy corridor in July 2003 between Azerbaijan, Georgia and Turkey show how the necessary political management of these transnational projects has led to increased political ties between these states. Thus, the need to collaborate at the economic level has repercussions on their political relations, leading them to more and more cooperation.

The construction of the BTK railroad represents a new step in the further development of an integrated region involving Azerbaijan, Georgia and Turkey in the South Caucasus. Indeed, when the presidents of these states met in Marabda on November 2007 to inaugurate the construction of the BTK railroad, they signed at the same time a declaration on a “Common Vision for Regional Cooperation”. The Turkish President Abdullah Gül also mentioned during his visit to Azerbaijan in November 2007 the opportunity of setting up a special economic zone between Azerbaijan, Georgia and Turkey<sup>8</sup>. The implementation of transportation infrastructure in the AGT is highly linked to the further integration of these three states, highlighting how AGT transit states perceive transportation projects as tools for regional integration. Thus, even if it remains

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<sup>4</sup> This corridor is constituted of the BTC and the BTE pipelines and of the Baku-Supsa oil pipeline.

<sup>5</sup> Source: Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Republic of Turkey.

<sup>6</sup> Ibid.

<sup>7</sup> Source: Embassy of Georgia in the Republic of Azerbaijan.

<sup>8</sup> Ibrahimov, Rovshan, “Baku-Tbilisi-Kars: Geopolitical Effect on the South Caucasian Region”, *Journal of Turkish Weekly*, November 23, 2007, Opinion section (<http://www.turkishweekly.net/comments.php?id=2763>).

largely informal (no regional organization implementing norms and rules of cooperation exists between Azerbaijan, Georgia and Turkey), a regionalization process seems to be on course in the South Caucasus, leading to the emergence of an informally integrated AGT region<sup>9</sup>.

Furthermore, the BTK railroad may also contribute to change the nature of the regional integration between AGT states. Until recently, such an integration has been essentially based on energy transportation and what is related to it (securitization of pipelines, for instance). The construction of the BTK railroad may enable AGT states to vary the basis of their political cooperation, orientating it towards goods transportation, but also towards higher circulation of people between the three states. In that perspective, the BTK railroad represents a new step in the definition of the AGT territory as a major bridge between Europe and Asia. The BTK railroad falls within the scope of the revival of the Ancient Silk Road. As the BTC and the BTE pipelines have been described as the “new Silk Road”<sup>10</sup>, the BTK railroad is now presented as the “Iron Silk Road”<sup>11</sup>. The transit states have used such an image to deepen the integration of the AGT region into the Western community<sup>12</sup>. For instance, the Azerbaijani Minister of Foreign Affairs Elmar Mammadyarov assumed in January 2007 that the BTK railroad would “create conditions for the revival of the historical Silk Road and [would] develop the Europe-Caucasus-Asia corridor, [deepening] the region’s integration into Europe”<sup>13</sup>. Therefore, the presentation of the BTK railroad as a new Silk Road may both enable transit states to attract foreign investors in the South Caucasus, and to encourage external states and international institutions to invest in such a project.

However, both the United States and the European Union have refused to fund the BTK railroad. Transit states have expected that these two political bodies would have accepted to finance the project, as it offers alternative routes to those that go through Iran and Russia and as they have in the past funded both the BTC and the BTE pipelines<sup>14</sup>. Indeed, the United States has played a huge role in the funding of the BTC pipeline, mobilizing on this occasion its financial government agencies such as the Export-Import Bank or the Overseas Private Investment Corporation<sup>15</sup>. The European Union-backed program INOGATE has also funded the BTE pipeline. Thus, as these two pipelines bypass Armenia, the transit states believed that the fact that

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<sup>9</sup> The expression AGT is taken from the vocabulary of private economic actors. It enables to shed light into the importance of economic issues, here mainly energy transportation, in the development of regionalization between Azerbaijan, Georgia and Turkey.

<sup>10</sup> Boland, Vincent, “The BTC Pipeline: the New Silk Road”, in: *Financial Times*, May 26, 2005, International Economy section, London first edition.

<sup>11</sup> Zeynalov, Mahir, “Iron Silk Road may Become Giant Highway between East and West”, in: *Sunday’s Zaman*, August 10, 2008, Politics section (<http://www.sundayszaman.com/sunday/detaylar.do?load=detay&link=149836>).

<sup>12</sup> By Western community, I refer to the core of states belonging to the West (mainly North America and Europe). States that are not part of such a community perceive it as a conveyor of legitimization on the international scene, notably in international institutions such as the International Monetary Fund or the World Bank.

<sup>13</sup> Ismayilov, Rovshan, “Azerbaijan, Georgia and Turkey: Building a Transportation Triumvirate?”, in: *Eurasianet.org*, July 02, 2007 (<http://www.eurasianet.org/departments/insight/articles/eav020707.shtml>).

<sup>14</sup> Zeylanov.

<sup>15</sup> Morningstar, Richard, “The Baku-Tbilisi-Ceyhan Pipeline: A Retrospective and a Look at the Future”, in: *Central Asia-Caucasus Analyst*, 23.08.2006 (<http://www.cacianalyst.org/?q=node/4113>).

the BTK railroad also bypasses this country would not be a problem for obtaining European and U.S. funding. On the contrary, the European Commission firmly refused, in October 2005, to finance such a project through the TRACECA program, supporting the reopening of the Kars-Gyumri-Tbilisi railroad rather than the construction of a new railroad bypassing Armenia<sup>16</sup>. Regarding the U.S. administration, Armenia used its strong lobbies in Washington like ARMENPAC or the Armenia National Committee in America to pressure the US Congress on the funding of the BTK railroad. Thus, in July 2005, Rep. Frank Pallone and Rep. Joe Knollenberg, both co-chairs of the Congressional Caucus on Armenian Issues, introduced at the Congress the “South Caucasus Integration and Open Railroads Act”<sup>17</sup>. The Act was finally voted as an amendment to the Ex-Im Reauthorization Act of 2006 with the support of the U.S. administration, prohibiting the Export-Import Bank to finance the BTK railroad. Such bans have constrained transit states to assume on their own the funding of this railroad.

On this occasion, Azerbaijan demonstrated its role of leader in the development of the AGT region. Because of the refusal of the European Union and of the United States to finance the BTK railroad, Azerbaijan has used its important energy revenues to fund on its own the project. While Ankara and Baku were able to finance the construction and the modernization of their railroads, it was not the case for Georgia. Thus, in January 2007, Azerbaijan provided a \$220 million loan to Tbilisi, repayable in 25 years, with an annual interest rate of only 1%<sup>18</sup>. For the first time since the end of the Cold War, a transnational project in the South Caucasus is being carried out without any involvement from international organizations or third countries<sup>19</sup>. The implementation of the BTK railroad may be presented as the act of independence of the informally integrated AGT region from external tutors. Indeed, while the United States and the European Union are at the source of the emergence of the AGT region, thanks to their role in the implementation of the BTC and BTE pipelines<sup>20</sup>, the funding of the BTK railroad shed light into the transit states’ capacity to assume the development of the AGT regionalization. Moreover, Azerbaijan now seems to be able to play a leading role in the goal-setting of the integration process of the region. For instance, Baku has insisted that Georgia and Turkey gave up discussions on the construction of a railroad between Kars and Batumi to consider the implementation of the BTK railroad<sup>21</sup>. After the Azerbaijani national oil company SOCAR bought the Kulevi oil terminal in Georgia and Azerbaijan delivered gas to this very same country

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<sup>16</sup> Bocioaca, Stefan, “The Baku-Tbilisi-Kars Railroad: The First Step in a Long Process”, in: *Power and Interest News Report*, December 13, 2007, ([http://www.pnr.com/report.php?ac=view\\_report&report\\_id=733&language\\_id=1](http://www.pnr.com/report.php?ac=view_report&report_id=733&language_id=1)).

<sup>17</sup> Ziyadov.

<sup>18</sup> Socor, Vladimir, “Kars-Tbilisi-Baku Railroad: Azerbaijan as Locomotive for Regional Projects”, in: *Eurasia Daily Monitor*, vol. 4:29, The Jamestown Foundation ([http://www.jamestown.org/edm/article.php?article\\_id=2371901](http://www.jamestown.org/edm/article.php?article_id=2371901)).

<sup>19</sup> Ibrahimov.

<sup>20</sup> Even though the late Azerbaijani President Heydar Aliyev and former Georgian President Eduard Shevardnadze, and also the transnational oil company BP, played a huge role in the development of the East-West energy corridor, the latter would not exist without the deep involvement of the United States in the funding of the project, through its own government agencies or thanks to its power of influence at the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund.

<sup>21</sup> Hakobyan.

during the Russian blockade of winter 2006, this highlights that Baku is really emerging as a new leader in the informally integrated AGT region.

This new position of Azerbaijan within the AGT region may explain its capacity to convince both Georgia and Turkey not to consider any reopening of the Kars-Gyumri-Tbilisi railroad, increasing the isolation of Armenia within the South Caucasus.

## **The Increased Marginalization of Armenia in the South Caucasus**

Since 1992, Armenian forces continue to occupy Azerbaijani territories. In 1993, the United Nations Security Council adopted four resolutions, calling on an immediate and unconditional withdrawal of Armenian armed forces from all occupied regions of Azerbaijan.<sup>22</sup> To express its solidarity with Azerbaijan, Turkey closed its borders with Armenia in April 1993, leading to the almost complete isolation of Armenia within the South Caucasus. Indeed, the only way for Armenian imports and exports towards Europe and Russia goes through Georgia. The implementation of the East-West energy corridor has further increased the isolation of Armenia, as both pipelines bypass this country. Transnational oil companies in charge of the exploitation and the exporting of Azerbaijani oil found difficult to accept that valuable resources would pass through the very uncertain territory of Nagorno-Karabakh. Moreover, Azerbaijan has taken advantage of its position of producer country to refuse any export route that could go through Armenia. Therefore, Georgia enjoys a kind of monopoly in the economic exchanges between Armenia and Russia or Europe. In these conditions, Tbilisi has also taken advantage of the situation to implement high custom tariffs with Armenia<sup>23</sup>. For instance, it costs over \$800 to send a shipment from Europe to the Georgian port of Poti and over \$2,000 to transport the same shipment from Poti to Yerevan<sup>24</sup>. Finally, the Russian-Georgian war of August 2008 has definitely highlighted the Armenia's dependency *vis-à-vis* Georgia. The Armenian economy suffered from the bombing of the Gori-Tbilisi railroad, which then joins Armenia, and from the blockade of the Georgian ports on the Black Sea, as Armenian imports and exports could not reach Yerevan<sup>25</sup>. Consequently, Georgia enjoys a situation of monopoly in the external trade of Armenia, insofar as Yerevan has no choice to trade with Russia or Europe but to pay high customs tariffs to Tbilisi and to suffer from any political turmoil in Georgia.

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<sup>22</sup> See the Security Council Resolutions 822, 853, 874 and 884 at <http://www.state.gov/p/eur/rls/or/13508.htm> For a more detailed approach of the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict, see Cornell, Svante E., "The Nagorno-Karabakh Conflict", (Department of East European Studies, Uppsala, Report n° 46, 1999).

<sup>23</sup> UNDP Georgia, "Study of Economic Relations Between Georgia and Armenia", Tbilisi, May 13, 2008 ([http://undp.org.ge/new/files/24\\_248\\_868263\\_cbc-eng.pdf](http://undp.org.ge/new/files/24_248_868263_cbc-eng.pdf)).

<sup>24</sup> Ohanyan, Anna, "On Money and Memory: Political Economy of Cross-Border Engagement on the Politically Divided Armenia-Turkey Frontier", in: *Conflict, Security & Development*, vol. 7:4, December 2007, pp. 579-604.

<sup>25</sup> Abrahamyan, Gayane, "In Wake of Georgia War, Armenia Faces Hobson's Choice", in: *Eurasia.net*, September 10, 2008, (<http://www.eurasianet.org/departments/insight/articles/eav091008b.shtml>).

The isolation of Armenia in the South Caucasus benefits Georgia, which is against the reopening of the Kars-Gyumri-Tbilisi railroad<sup>26</sup>. Indeed, such a reopening would undermine its status of major transit country for Armenian imports and exports. But Tbilisi is not the only country to be against the reopening of this railroad. As for the construction of the East-West energy corridor, Azerbaijan stands firmly against any railroad that would go through Armenia until the issue of Nagorno-Karabakh is resolved, stating that “until Armenia liberates the occupied Azerbaijani territories, all transportation projects will bypass [this] country”<sup>27</sup>. Turkey adopts the same posture as Baku, even if local Turkish entrepreneurs in the Kars region argue for a reopening of the former Soviet railroad. For instance, the Turkish-Armenian Business Development Council has lobbied Ankara to accept the reopening of the Kars-Gyumri railroad<sup>28</sup>. Such a reopening may have made official all the informal trade that exists at the Turkish-Armenian border, making goods transportation cheaper and safer between these two countries<sup>29</sup>. However, as Turkey has no diplomatic relations with Armenia, such lobbying has not been effective. Therefore, the construction of the BTK railroad highly contributes to the further economic marginalization of Armenia in the South Caucasus, deepening the asymmetry of relations in the region between AGT states and Armenia<sup>30</sup>.

If the BTK railroad plays a role in the further economic marginalization of Armenia, it also constitutes a new step in undermining the Armenian ethno-political leverages in the South Caucasus. The East-West energy corridor has been important in the limitation of ethno-political tensions in the region, especially in Georgia. Indeed, the BTC and BTE pipelines cross both Kvemo-Kartli and Samtskhe-Javakheti – Ethnic Azeris represent 45.5% of the population of the former while Armenians constitute 55% of the population of the latter<sup>31</sup>. Such transportation infrastructure is supposed to bring wealth to these people, who have for a long time complained that Tbilisi had abandoned and marginalised them<sup>32</sup>. But, while pipelines cross parts of the region where ethno-political tensions are rather weak (the district of Borjomi in Samtskhe-Javakheti for instance), the BTK railroad will go through districts that are ethnically dominated by Armenians and Azeris. Even if ethno-political tensions exist in Kvemo-Kartli, it may not be a problem for the railroad, as Baku has on several times encouraged ethnic Azeris not to complain against Tbilisi because of the important cooperation between Azerbaijan and Georgia<sup>33</sup>. But the situation could be more difficult in Samtskhe-Javakheti. Indeed, the BTK railroad will stop in Akhalkalaki where Armenians constitute 94.3% of the population. At the time of the implementation of the BTC pipeline, Georgia labelled this district as a “no go area” for security reasons<sup>34</sup>. Some ethnic Armenians, mainly from local nationalist organizations such as *Virk* or *United Javakhk*, have

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<sup>26</sup> Hakobyan.

<sup>27</sup> Azerbaijani President Ilham Aliyev in: Ismayilov.

<sup>28</sup> Hakobyan.

<sup>29</sup> Ohanyan.

<sup>30</sup> Ibid.

<sup>31</sup> International Crisis Group, “Georgia’s Armenian and Azeri Minorities”, (Europe Report n° 178, November 22, 2006).

<sup>32</sup> Ibid.

<sup>33</sup> Ibid.

<sup>34</sup> European Bank for Reconstruction and Development, “The Baku Tbilisi Ceyhan Pipeline Project”, June 2003 (<http://www.ebrd.com/projects/eias/18806ngo.pdf>).

already expressed their concerns against a railroad that will increase Armenia's isolation in the South Caucasus<sup>35</sup>. Moreover, the construction of the BTK railroad follows the announcement of the future closure in 2009 of Russia's 62<sup>nd</sup> military base in Akhalkalaki<sup>36</sup>. This closure has generated huge protests among ethnic Armenians of the region, since many local jobs depended on the base, and the BTK railroad is supposed to counterbalance the economic losses due to this closure. Consequently, the BTK railroad should bring economic wealth to these regions, attaching them definitely, at least at the economic level, to Georgian central control.

At the political level, the construction of the BTK railroad is supposed to undermine Armenian influence in Samtskhe-Javakheti and, in some ways, in the Kars region. Indeed, until recently, Armenia and Georgia have managed issues in Samtskhe-Javakheti like an informal condominium<sup>37</sup>. For instance, in March 2006, some Georgians killed an ethnic Armenian, which provoked huge protests in Akhalkalaki. At this juncture, Tbilisi turned to Armenia to diminish the tensions in the region<sup>38</sup>. The construction of the BTK railroad is aiming to avoid the repetition of this kind of situation, insofar as it would increase political links between Tbilisi and Samtskhe-Javakheti. And this already seems to be working, as most of the Armenian population of the region has welcomed the construction of the BTK railroad, even if it contributes to the further marginalization of Armenia in the South Caucasus<sup>39</sup>. Consequently, Armenia is losing its leverage on Georgian politics, as ethnic Armenians of Samtskhe-Javakheti seem ready to take part in the economic development of their region within Georgia. Furthermore, at the military level, thanks to the BTK railroad, Tbilisi would be more efficient to deal with ethno-political tensions in the region. Indeed, the railroad may facilitate the sending of troops from Tbilisi to this mountainous region. This constitutes a new stage in the integration of these regions ethnically dominated by Armenians and Azeris within Georgia after the construction of a military airport in Marneuli in Kvemo-Kartli and the settling of special Georgian security forces in the district of Borjomi during the constructions of the BTC and BTE pipelines. Finally, the Kars region in Turkey is one of the areas that Armenia claims to be part of its historical territory. Symbolically, with the construction of the BTK railroad, Turkey assumes that the Kars region now belongs to the AGT region and is not anymore part of Armenia. Therefore, the BTK railroad further marginalizes Armenia in the South Caucasus: it establishes asymmetric relations between Armenia and the AGT countries and it greatly diminishes economic and security leverages in ethnically Armenian-dominated regions. Moreover, it undermines, in the long term, potential economic gains for Armenia, as, after the BTK railroad brings into service, the Kars-Gyumri-Tbilisi railroad would not make sense at the economic level.

The BTK railroad seems to contribute to the further division of the South Caucasus between, on the one hand, the AGT states, and, on the other hand, Armenia. However, Yerevan does not stand

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<sup>35</sup> Lohm, Hedvig, "Javakheti After the Rose Revolution: Progress and Regress in the Pursuit of National Unity in Georgia", (European Centre for Minority Issues Working Paper n° 38, April 2007).

<sup>36</sup> Freese, Theresa, "'Diversity Is Our Strength' – Georgian President Mikheil Saakashvili", in: *Eurasia.net*, April 22, 2005, (<http://www.eurasianet.org/departments/insight/articles/eav042205.shtml>).

<sup>37</sup> Serrano, Silvia, "Georgia: Going Away From the Empire" (in French), (Paris: CNRS editions, 2007), pp. 155-166.

<sup>38</sup> International Crisis Group.

<sup>39</sup> Lohm.

alone on the international scene and benefits from the support of both Iran and Russia. This may lead to the formation of new geopolitical axes in the South Caucasian region.

## **A New Contribution to the Formation of Geopolitical Axes in the South Caucasus?**

While the AGT region and Armenia seem to be face to face, the recent political developments in the South Caucasus could challenge the construction of the BTK railroad or, at least, its future success. Since the beginning of the project, Georgia has hesitated to take part in the BTK railroad. Indeed, the latter will compete with the Georgian ports on the Black Sea on the transportation of goods from Asia to Europe<sup>40</sup>. Both Azerbaijan and Turkey strongly lobbied Tbilisi to accept the construction of the railroad: the former provided a very interesting loan to Georgia, discussed above, and reminded Tbilisi of its help during the Russian gas blockade in 2006, while the latter has proposed part of its share in the gas exports from the Shah Deniz field<sup>41</sup>. This lobbying was effective and Georgia finally accepted the construction of the new railroad. But, with the recent political developments in the South Caucasus in summer 2008, hesitation seems now to side with Azerbaijan and Turkey. Since the Russian-Georgian war of August 2008, the Azerbaijani oil company SOCAR has been negotiating with Russia to increase the capacity of the Baku-Novorossiysk oil pipeline in order to prevent any shut down of the pipelines that cross Georgia. Furthermore, even though talks between Armenia and Turkey have existed for a long time, the recent visit of the Turkish President Abdullah Gül to Yerevan on September 6, 2008 may fall within the scope of diminishing Turkish transportation dependency on Georgia. For instance, the Turkish Transport Minister Binali Yildirim has claimed that “the Baku-Tbilisi-Kars railroad is by no means a project excluding Armenia”, considering Yerevan may one day take part in the project<sup>42</sup>. Even if the construction of the BTK railroad may not be challenged, these two examples show that both Azerbaijan and Turkey seem to have lost confidence in their Georgian neighbour. In this perspective, the August 2008 events have had important consequences on the AGT regionalization, and thus on the BTK railroad’s potential geopolitical impact.

However, even if the Russian-Georgian war has had consequences on the confidence between the AGT states, notably among economic actors such as SOCAR, the mutual interests between these three states are too important to undermine regionalization in the AGT region. Actually, this lack of confidence highlights one of the main characteristic of the AGT regionalization: it is based on very opportunistic interests<sup>43</sup>. The dimension of a common identity between AGT states is rather weak; what leads the AGT regionalization is the necessity to cooperate, so that AGT states will reach their own personal national interests. Thus, regarding the implementation of the BTK

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<sup>40</sup> Di Puppò, Lili, “The Baku-Akhalkalaki-Kars Railroad Line: Cement for a Strategic Alliance?”, in: *Caucas.com*, March 01, 2007 ([http://www.caucas.com/home\\_eng/breve\\_contenu.php?id=303](http://www.caucas.com/home_eng/breve_contenu.php?id=303)).

<sup>41</sup> Ibid.

<sup>42</sup> “Turkish Transport Minister: “Baku-Tbilisi-Kars not Meant to Exclude Armenia””, *Today.az*, September 13, 2008 (<http://www.today.az/news/politics/47519.html>).

<sup>43</sup> Interviews with Azerbaijani, Georgian and Turkish officials in Tbilisi in March 2008 and in Baku in June 2008.

railroad, rather than the symbolism of a railroad that may enable citizens from the three states to go from one country to another, the most important aspect is the economic and political effect of the railroad on each state. For Azerbaijan, the BTK railroad may limit dependency on Iran to transport goods through this country to Europe. Moreover, Azerbaijan wants to stand as a major transit hub in trade transportation between Europe and Central Asia. Azerbaijan is also the country that will benefit the most from the BTK railroad since, the railroad being the longest on Azerbaijani territory, it will make greater profit on tariffs<sup>44</sup>. For Georgia, the BTK railroad is a huge necessity to access Europe more or less independently. Indeed, the only railroad that exists going from Tbilisi to Europe crosses Abkhazia and then Russia<sup>45</sup>. Since the so-called independence of Abkhazia in August 2008, the BTK railroad would represent the only rail link between Europe and Georgia. For Turkey, the BTK railroad constitutes a new step in the definition of the country as a hub between Europe and Asia. Turkey also seeks to gain access more easily to Central Asia, in order to increase the Turkish balance of trade. For instance, Turkey has planned to increase trade with Azerbaijan from \$1.2 billion to \$3 billion<sup>46</sup>.

These various interests seem to be rather opportunistic, insofar as the AGT countries may be in competition with each other to reach them. For example, all the three countries are looking to become major transit hubs between Europe and Asia. But it is not sure that there is enough room in the South Caucasus for three important transit countries. Furthermore, the construction of the BTK railroad may increase competition between Georgian and Turkish ports on the Black Sea, such an infrastructure being likely to diminish the amount of shipments in the Black Sea ports<sup>47</sup>. However, in spite of this opportunistic behaviour, AGT states know that the only way to achieve their goals passes through the deepening of the AGT regionalization<sup>48</sup>. This is why the BTK railroad will exist and why it will increase cooperation between Azerbaijan, Georgia and Turkey.

Despite the recent political developments in the South Caucasus and despite the particularity of the AGT regionalization, the BTK is highly contributing to the development of an informally integrated AGT region. It also increases the independence of this region *vis-à-vis* both Iran and Russia. Indeed, the BTK railroad will compete with the Iranian Razi-Sarakhs railroad to link Europe and Asia. It will be a shorter way, and also a safer way if the Georgian political situation is stabilized<sup>49</sup>. Azerbaijan and Central Asian countries will not depend on Iran to export and to import goods to and from Europe. The BTK railroad will also be an alternative to the Trans-Siberian railroad that goes from Russia to China, bypassing both the South Caucasus and Central Asia<sup>50</sup>. With the Nabucco gas pipeline project, which plans to transport Central Asian gas to Europe bypassing Russia, the BTK railroad seems to be another attempt to diminish the Russian influence in Central Asia.

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<sup>44</sup> Ismayilov.

<sup>45</sup> Ibrahimov.

<sup>46</sup> Ibid.

<sup>47</sup> Di Puppò.

<sup>48</sup> Interview with officials from the Georgian Oil and Gas Corporation (GOGC) in Tbilisi in March 2008 and from TPAO in Baku in June 2008.

<sup>49</sup> Bocioaca.

<sup>50</sup> Ismayilov.

In this perspective, the BTK railroad will offer Turkey unimpeded access to this region<sup>51</sup>. It will also offer the opportunity for Central Asian countries to decrease their dependency on Russia to export and import goods to and from Europe. For instance, Kazakhstan has already expressed its deep interest in the BTK railroad, planning to transport over 5 million tons of grain a year to Europe through this railroad<sup>52</sup>. Therefore, the BTK railroad is not only contributing to the further integration of the AGT region, it also participates in bringing Central Asia closer to Europe, and therefore undermines the position of Russia in Eurasia as the main transit country between Europe and China. During the inauguration of the construction of the BTK railroad in Kars, Turkish President Abdullah Gül asserted that the latter will be the missing link between London and China<sup>53</sup>. In the end, thanks to this railroad, the AGT region may appear as the main transportation corridor between Europe and Asia, decreasing importance of Russia in Eurasian trade. However, in addition to the marginalization of Armenia in the South Caucasus, this competition with both Iran and Russia may increase tensions between these countries and the AGT states.

Armenia, Iran and Russia may feel that the BTK railroad is planned to undermine their influence in Eurasia. This may increase the perception among these actors that geopolitical axes are emerging in the South Caucasus. The BTC pipeline has been the first step in the perception of the emergence of potentially rival geopolitical axes<sup>54</sup>. At the time of its implementation, Russia felt the main goal of this project was to undermine its influence in the South Caucasus and in the Caspian region. Iran may also have suffered from this implementation insofar as, according to most of the transnational oil companies, Iran was the shortest and the safest route to export Caspian energy resources<sup>55</sup>. Thus, Armenia, Iran and Russia consider themselves as victims of the AGT regionalization. As the United States has supported the AGT regionalization, the implementation of the AGT transportation corridor lays the foundation for the division of the South Caucasus into two geopolitical axes: on the one hand an axis uniting the AGT states, supported by the United States, and, on the other hand, an axis comprising Armenia, Russia and Iran. The existence of different regional security systems in the South Caucasus and in Central Asia increases such a perception. Indeed, while Turkey is part of NATO and Georgia plans to join this organization, Armenia and Russia are members of the Collective Security Treaty Organization of the CIS. Furthermore, Azerbaijan and Georgia are sometimes presented as the “Caucasian Tandem” of GUAM, which is a regional organization that seeks to contest Russian hegemony in the post-Soviet space<sup>56</sup>. Therefore, competition between these actors in the South Caucasus exists not only at the economic level but also at the political and at the security ones.

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<sup>51</sup> Ibrahimov.

<sup>52</sup> Ibid.

<sup>53</sup> Zeylanov.

<sup>54</sup> Gachechiladze, Revaz, “Geopolitics in the South Caucasus: Local and External Players”, in: *Geopolitics*, vol. 7:1, summer 2002, pp. 113-138.

<sup>55</sup> Jofi, Joseph, “Pipeline Diplomacy: the Clinton’s Administration Fight for Baku-Ceyhan”, (Princeton: Princeton University, Woodrow Wilson of Public and International Affairs, 1999).

<sup>56</sup> Papava, Vladimer, “On the Role of the “Caucasian Tandem” in GUAM”, in: *Central Asia and the Caucasus*, n° 3-4, 2008.

Under these conditions, the construction of the BTK railroad may deepen the formation of geopolitical axes within the South Caucasus. For instance, Armenia, which already enjoys deep ties with Russia, is seeking to increase its already strong cooperation with Iran<sup>57</sup>. However, for the moment, this competition has not turned into rivalry and the actors of the region do not look at each other as enemies, except Armenia and Azerbaijan. It is up to them to avoid a scenario in which such competition transforms into dramatic rivalry, leading to more and more conflicts in the South Caucasus.

If the BTK railroad is likely to diminish the influence of Armenia, Iran and Russia in the South Caucasus, and more generally in Eurasia, this does not mean that it will lead to a dramatic confrontation between these states and the AGT ones in the South Caucasus. The recent tripartite peace talks on the Nagorno-Karabakh between Armenia, Azerbaijan and Turkey shows that there is still room for peaceful dialogue in this region<sup>58</sup>. The geopolitical future of the BTK railroad will depend on the capacity of these states to resolve their issues.

## Conclusion

The BTK railroad is likely to have an important geopolitical impact on the South Caucasian region. Along with the East-West energy corridor, it will contribute to the further integration of the AGT region. It reflects the very specificity of this regionalization that is essentially based on economic issues and develops despite opportunistic interests. Furthermore, the BTK railroad will constitute a new stage in the further marginalization of Armenia within the South Caucasus. Not only it will bypass this country but it will also undermine its ethno-political leverages, notably in Georgia. Finally, in spite of the recent political events in the South Caucasus, the BTK railroad is likely to accelerate the emergence of potentially rival geopolitical axes in this region, although this may not transform into rivalry.

Therefore, the South Caucasus is now coming to a turning point. For more than 15 years, Azerbaijan, Georgia and Turkey implemented transportation projects that have increased their cooperation. At the same time, such projects isolated Armenia within the South Caucasus and undermined Russian, and also Iranian, positions in the region. The BTK railroad represents a new step in this process, pushing for more diversity in the cooperation between AGT states that was until now limited to energy issues. However, the strong Russian reaction to the Georgian attack on South Ossetia in August 2008 shows that Russia will no longer accept any undermining of its influence in the post-Soviet space. The AGT region now faces two options: it can continue to isolate Armenia and undermine Russian influence but prepare for stronger reactions, or it can pursue its regionalization, trying at the same time to involve Armenia in the resolution of regional issues. The visit of the Turkish President Abdullah Gül to Yerevan, as Turkey called for the creation of a Caucasus Stability and Cooperation Platform, seems to mean that the AGT region is

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<sup>57</sup> Ibrahimov.

<sup>58</sup> Jenkins, Gareth, "Turkey Launches Karabakh Peace Initiative", in: *Eurasia Daily Monitor*, vol. 5:175, The Jamestown Foundation ([http://www.jamestown.org/edm/article.php?article\\_id=2373360](http://www.jamestown.org/edm/article.php?article_id=2373360)).

opting for the second solution<sup>59</sup>. This is the only way if the AGT states do not want to sow the seeds of future conflicts in the South Caucasus. At the same time, Armenia also needs to soften its position on the Nagorno-Karabakh question. Recently, Armenian President Sarkisian has offered Turkey's mediation in the settlement of this conflict<sup>60</sup>. This is an important progress, as Yerevan has refused for a long time to discuss Nagorno-Karabakh question with Ankara that it considered a biased actor, due to its friendship with Baku. Therefore, such a change is a good point in the resolution of this long-standing issue. If Armenia continues in this way, the highly sensitive Nagorno-Karabakh issue could be solved and the South Caucasian region could finally experience peace.

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<sup>59</sup> Civil Georgia, "Turkish President Speaks of Caucasus Stability Pact at UN", *Civil Georgia*, September 23, 2008, (<http://civil.ge/eng/article.php?id=19583>).

<sup>60</sup> APA, "Abdullah Gul: Serzh Sarkisian Offered Turkey's Mediation in the Settlement of Nagorno-Karabakh Conflict", *APA*, October 23, 2008 (<http://en.apa.az/news.php?id=90733>).

# THE EU'S NEIGHBORHOOD POLICY AND THE SOUTH CAUCASUS: UNFOLDING NEW PATTERNS OF COOPERATION

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## Abstract

*This paper looks at the European Union (EU) process of engagement in the South Caucasus (Armenia, Azerbaijan and Georgia) in the context of its Neighborhood Policy. It looks at how divergent perceptions of the region, both inwards and outwards-driven, impact on regional policy choices, with an emphasis on regional cooperation. Though these states remark on the outlived usefulness of artificial framings, and regional cooperation among the three is virtually non-existent, when engaged in larger and wide-ranging formats, cooperation might not only be possible, but fruitful. It is therefore argued that regional cooperation should overcome the artificially constructed "South Caucasus" regional label and unfold along different patterns and variable compositions. The paper advances the proposal for a Eurasian/Black Sea security complex, framing in a wider format regional bounds, while maximizing them in new cooperation frames, inverting the tendency for imposed labels and uncooperative stances in the area.*

**Keywords:** *European Neighborhood Policy, South Caucasus, security complexes, regional cooperation, Wider Black Sea*

## Introduction

The three South Caucasian states – Armenia, Azerbaijan and Georgia – have been widely regarded as a single regional group by external actors, including the European Union (EU). However, the argument has been put forward that such a regional perception has outlived its usefulness and can become counterproductive, by not recognizing neither long-standing nor recently renewed differences among these states. In addition, this regional labeling, clearly based on a geographical approach to the area, does not reflect the considerably distinct realities of each country in political, economic and security terms. Therefore, it is argued here that these variations should be taken into consideration by external partners in their interplay and policy formulations towards the area. Nevertheless, and simultaneously, the Caucasian context reveals high levels of interdependence in matters related to regional conflicts,

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migration fluxes, ethnicity, and economic aspects, particularly energy assets and transport routes, as well as a shared past of territorial tearing and occupation. This helps explain why the region is commonly described as a security subcomplex,<sup>1</sup> within the Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS) under the regional preeminence of the Russian Federation. It reveals overlapping issues, shared concerns and inter-related dimensions of actuation, both in equations of cooperation and rivalry, demanding a common regional approach, though one that overcomes currently tight and formatted dealings.

This article argues, therefore, that the artificial labeling of the South Caucasus does not reflect a cohesive regional group with easily identifiable linking ties among the regional players, but that despite this fact, the reasoning for regional cooperation exists. This cannot however involve exclusively Armenia, Azerbaijan and Georgia, but should instead define itself in a multi-dimensional and multi-level format. Here, the Wider Black Sea regional cooperation format emerges as an alternative to rigidity, by introducing flexibility and allowing cross-level inter-relations involving the three Caucasian states in cooperative arrangements.

By taking a varying regional approach, external actors activate ties that range across a wider region encompassing not only these three states, but also Russia, Turkey and Iran, which range across several dimensions, interplaying in instances in opposite directions, be it regarding religious, linguistic and ethnic affinities, energetic and environmental matters, military security or political linkages. The complexities underlying this multitude of factors have demanded a differentiated approach to the promotion of regional cooperation from the EU, which in the face of the current options has made the regional cooperation format rigidified and implying a conditional approach – pending the achievement of simultaneous goals. This implies a rationale for simultaneous action with all three states – hardly possible. Its strict sectioning has led the EU to overlook both the possible destabilizing effects of outside actors, and the destabilizing impact of developments within this security subcomplex in neighboring countries. This might imply not only a slow response and the frustration of expectations, but also the blocking of synergies emerging from developing cross-relation processes in the region. Thus, this analytical framing should encompass in its readings and formulation issues such as Turkey's EU accession, the eventual membership of other Black Sea countries, the difficult partnership with Russia, and above all, the Neighborhood Policy engaging the Middle East and other Black Sea and Caspian basin states.

In addition, this enlarged format for cooperation implies, as an underlining assumption, that the South Caucasus security subcomplex might in fact detangle from the wider security complex where it is included, the CIS, giving place to an independent, though still inter-related, mini security complex in the area or eventually allowing for the establishment of a wider Eurasian/Black Sea security complex, not matching the increasingly disaggregated CIS. This argument reinforces the idea put forward for a wider regional cooperation format, beyond the traditionally devised formats, particularly within the EU framework, to address and respond to the challenges in the area. To this end, the paper analyses the varying patterns of regional affinities and cooperation, along with those of rivalry, in the post-Soviet period, and tracks the most significant changes manifesting in the current securitization context. It

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<sup>1</sup> Buzan, Barry and Waever, Ole, "Regions and Powers: The Structure of International Security", (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005), p. 419. This understanding has been further questioned by Georgia's request to withdraw from the CIS in August 2008.

takes into consideration the possible impact of other actors besides the EU in regional processes and maps the possible obstacles and breakthroughs in regional cooperation engaging the three South Caucasian countries.

## The Dynamic Caucasian Security Complex

The security framework where relations among the three South Caucasus states – Armenia, Azerbaijan and Georgia – take place is a complex one. The regional conflicts, along with the intersection of competing outside interests in the area, make it a relevant case for the analysis of the potential for endogenous inter-regional cooperation among the three, which has been almost inexistent, and certainly for enlarged formats of regional cooperation, allowing innovative dealings engaging all states in the wider Black Sea area.

According to Buzan, Weaver and de Wilde, a “security complex is defined as *a set of states whose major security perceptions and concerns are so interlinked that their national security problems cannot reasonably be analyzed or resolved apart from one another*. The formative dynamics and structure of a security complex are generated by the states within that complex – by their security perceptions of, and interactions with, each other”.<sup>2</sup> Within the CIS, the multifaceted institutional framework allowing competing dynamics renders the relationships among these states difficult. The leading role of the Russian Federation in the complex renders it harsher, when asymmetrical bargaining/concessions relations take place, with close collaboration with Armenia, a wait-and-see-act relationship with Azerbaijan, and very strained relations with Georgia. In addition, the long-standing conflict between Armenia and Azerbaijan over Nagorno-Karabakh adds to difficult relations between these two countries, through constituting the main problem in their mutual security concerns. And the overall instability in the area, demonstrated by the August 2008 war in Georgia, illustrates that the South Caucasus is an unstable playing field. Considering the area, it becomes clear that there are differentiated interplays taking place, not only between the three countries of this subcomplex, but also regarding external players that have effect on its dynamics, and that clearly go well beyond the strong presence of Russia.

However, and despite this scenario of conflicting dynamics, not only is there an urgent need to recognize that interdependence exists among Armenia, Azerbaijan and Georgia (with all difficulties entailed), but also that this is extended in fluid and dynamic patterns to include other state and non-state actors varying according to the issues at stake. Mapping this mutating interdependence is a first step for regional actors to better assess their interests and design strategies accordingly. Furthermore, and since external actors also impact on local and regional dynamics, emerging institutional and ideational elements are important to understand how far local security rationales are changing and adjusting to, for instance, Western views, or if these are incompatible with alternative sources of regional legitimacy. This is why the South Caucasus has been often perceived as a security subcomplex,<sup>3</sup> whose security concerns impact on relational patterns within the region and outside it. According to Buzan’s formulation, these “empirical phenomena” derive as much from interactions among individual

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<sup>2</sup> Buzan, Barry; Weaver, Ole and Wilde, Jaap de, “Security: A New Framework for Analysis”, (Boulder: Lynne-Rienner Publishers, 1998), p. 12. Emphasis in the original.

<sup>3</sup> Buzan, Barry and Waever, Ole, “Regions and Powers: The Structure of International Security”, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005), pp. 419-423

states as they do from the anarchical system: on the one hand, geography links events in one state to the next, whilst security interdependence is shaped by international anarchy.<sup>4</sup> The current challenges arising within Georgia, with the newly-recognized (by Russia) territories of Abkhazia and South Ossetia, along with the instability between Armenia and Azerbaijan, both influence and depend not only on the countries themselves, but also on neighbors, and regional and global powers with identified interests in that particular region. The differentiated approaches to these powers' security, including conflict management, have pressed local actors and decision makers in their security calculations and political choices. Thus, there has been a clear interlinkage between domestic policies and externally-driven inputs in decision-making processes in the area.

For the EU, dialogue and cooperation within a process of increasing regional integration is the most relevant form to address conflicting scenarios. Within the framework of the European Neighborhood Policy (ENP), the EU has sought to stabilize the South Caucasus through economic integration, institutional cooperation and by playing a growing role as a security actor in the region. But the EU has remained an outsider to the region's frozen conflicts, on the basis that other actors are conducting the negotiation processes (the EU has been involved, at most, as an observer and eventual future guarantor of a final settlement agreement), contrary to that of Turkey and Russia who have acted as both supporters and financiers. This is a central aspect the EU must take into consideration when designing its strategies and partnerships, both on conflict resolution and on a broader security level, as regards energy, transport and communication routes.

Moreover, decisions in Ankara and Moscow regarding foreign relations towards the Caucasus do not always match the principles and means advocated by the EU. Turkey is on the path to deeper integration within Euro-Atlantic structures, but Russia has reversed its approximation course towards the West and has moved towards greater autonomy and affirmation in the "near abroad". According to Roeder,<sup>5</sup> relations within the post-Soviet security complex are constrained by "the political metric of survival in office and power" of most regional leaders, and the "disproportionate power of Russia" *vis-à-vis* its "near abroad", granting it a hegemonic feature. Both Turkey and Russia take part in the Caucasian subsecurity complex in different modes, but in both cases maintaining a security relationship with the Caucasian states, with different levels of engagement and demand, particularly connected to conflict resolution and regional integration processes. Due to Iran's international standing as a "pariah state", the EU has been unable and unwilling to include it in its security analysis regarding this security complex. As Coppieters argues "the patterns of interaction among the political actors of the South Caucasian states are too closely linked with Russia, Turkey and Iran for them to be considered as constituting a separate region in security terms".<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> Buzan, Barry, "People, States and Fear. An Agenda for International Security Studies in the Post-Cold War Era", 2<sup>nd</sup> Ed., (London: Harvester Wheatsheaf, 1991), p. 191.

<sup>5</sup> Roeder, Philip G., "From Hierarchy to Hegemony: The Post-Soviet Security Complex", in: David A. Lake and Patrick M. Morgan, (eds) "Regional Orders: Building Security in a New World" (Pennsylvania: The Pennsylvania State University Press, 1997), pp. 220 and 230.

<sup>6</sup> Coppieters, Bruno, "An EU Special Representative to a new periphery", in: Dov Lynch (ed) "The South Caucasus: A Challenge for the EU", *Chaillot Papers*, 65, December 2003, p. 160.

A further example of these fluid and dynamic interactions can be taken from the impact that US support for the Baku-Tbilisi-Ceyhan (BTC) pipeline has had on relations between Armenia and Azerbaijan. The strategic interests of both the United States and the EU in Caspian energy have changed the balance within this security subcomplex and this will certainly have spillover effects into the Black Sea region. This interdependence, and the identification of specific interests in the Wider Black Sea, has pushed regional leaders to deepen cooperation and open up to outside influence. In fact, a multilateral security system complemented by the engagement of transnational institutions such as the Euro-Atlantic Partnership Council, or the Black Sea Economic Cooperation Organization (BSECO), could enhance common perceptions of security and assure the existence of common frameworks of peace enforcement.<sup>7</sup> This is not, however, without problems. The expansion of the Euro-Atlantic structures into the former Soviet space has sparked a great deal of frustration and animosity in Moscow, where this process is viewed as designed to offset Russian influence instead of engaging it in a postmodern cooperative frameworks. The outcome has been a significant security impact in the South Caucasus region.

### **Elements of Distinction and Lines of Approximation**

Placed in a border region, the identities and cultures of the peoples living in Armenia, Azerbaijan and Georgia have been continually redefined, along with their territory and political options. Even during their long inclusion in the Soviet empire, identity differences were kept in line with the nationalities policies of the ruling regime, which latter would become the basis for the nationalists' political movements. The Armenian identity remains shaped by some level of "siege" mentality, since it perceives itself as surrounded by aggressive Turkish and Persian Islamic cultures. This is an illustration of the impact that such a context had in forging a strong sense of ethnic and religious identity in the country.<sup>8</sup> On the other hand, Azerbaijanis, living in their so-called khanates (statelet) established in the South Caucasus and the present-day Iran before the Russian expansion in the 19<sup>th</sup> century into Caucasia, became divided between those included in the Russian and Soviet Empires and those populating the north-western provinces of Iran. Close relations between Moscow and Teheran deepened after the Islamic revolution in Iran in 1979, at which point many Soviet Azerbaijanis crossed the border to meet their ethnic and religious countrymen inside Iran, shortly reviving the idea of Grand-Azerbaijan.<sup>9</sup> Georgia displays a multi-ethnic character close to the North Caucasus and its position on the eastern coast of the Black Sea provides it with an important sea link to the West.

The years of Soviet experience bestowed a common background throughout the South Caucasus and the remaining former-Soviet space. This common inheritance of economic central planning and heavy subsidization left the new independent states poorly prepared to

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<sup>7</sup> Morgan, Patrick M., "Regional Security Complexes and Regional Orders", in: David A. Lake and Patrick M. Morgan, (eds) "Regional Orders: Building Security in a New World" (Pennsylvania: The Pennsylvania State University Press, 1997), pp. 35-38.

<sup>8</sup> Derluguian, Giorgi M., "Bordieu's Secret Admirer in the Caucasus. A World-System Biography", (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2005), pp. 173-87.

<sup>9</sup> Maleki, Abbas, "What Iran is looking for in Central Asia and the Caucasus", in: *Heartland – Eurasian Review of Geopolitics*, 4, 2005, p. 70.

provide for economic assurances to their citizens or for economic integration into a globalized world economy. Moreover, a “dual transition” was imposed on these states, demanding a (re)creation of the functions of the state.<sup>10</sup> From central economic planning and one party politics, the expectation was for the new independent countries to become multiparty democracies with viable and integrated market economies. In the Caucasus, this scenario gave place to economic decline heightened by the escalation of violent armed conflicts,<sup>11</sup> while in the political spectrum, early democratization trends were subverted by the radicalization of national movements in the face of armed conflicts, and the lack of positive economic redistribution.<sup>12</sup>

Historically interdependent, the region later known as Transcaucasia would arrive at independence in the 1990s with significant differences in the level of economic and human development, which together with relevant differences in their natural geographical characteristics (territorial relief, natural resources, access to sea) would shape the modern development of these societies.<sup>13</sup> Faced with the challenge of assuring economic and social welfare to their populations and the challenge of consolidating the political transitions to democratic forms of government, the states of the South Caucasus face distinct paths and stand at different points in their transition processes. Although all three had reached economic stability and steady economic growth by the end of the 1990s,<sup>14</sup> their prospects vary considerably. Azerbaijan, sticking to a strong-hand-style of ruling, has grasped the benefits of high energy prices, making it a leading regional investor. However, its economy is highly dependent on energy exports. Armenia, also in an authoritarian mood, has managed some level of specialization to overcome the geographical isolation it suffers from closed borders with Azerbaijan and Turkey. Nevertheless, its economy still relies heavily on diaspora remittances, conveying to these groups substantial political leverage, especially as far as regional relations and conflict resolution issues are concerned. As for Georgia, the early reforms brought by the 2003 “Rose Revolution” pro-democratization government curbed corruption and improved stability facilitating foreign investment, while tariffs from energy transit ensure higher revenues for the government. Nonetheless, relations with Russia have escalated into armed conflict, jeopardizing both economic and political reforms. These are fragile achievements that rely on the need for a stable regional environment and could be reinforced by deepening political reforms and engaging in wider regional cooperation frameworks, a challenge in need of analysis.

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<sup>10</sup> Graham, Norman A., “Introduction and Overview”, in Norman A. Graham and Folke Lindahl (eds), “The Political Economy of Transition in Eurasia. Democratization and Economic Liberalization in a Global Economy”, (Michigan: Michigan State University Press, 2006), pp. 1-41.

<sup>11</sup> Cornell, Svante E. and Starr, S. Frederick, “The Caucasus: A challenge for Europe”, in: *Silk Road Paper*, June 2006, p. 35.

<sup>12</sup> Parrott, Bruce, “Perspectives on Postcommunist Democratization”, in Karen Dawisha and Bruce Parrott (eds), “Conflict, cleavage, and change in Central Asia and the Caucasus”, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997), pp. 1-39.

<sup>13</sup> Ismailov, Eldar and Esenov, Murad, “Central Asia in the New Geopolitical and Geo-economic Dimensions”, in “Central Eurasia 2005 Analytical Annual” (Sweden: CA&CC Press, 2006), pp. 11-12.

<sup>14</sup> European Commission, “Armenia Country Report” SEC(2005) 285/3, Brussels, 2005; European Commission “Azerbaijan Country Report” SEC(2005) 286/3, Brussels, 2005; European Commission, “Georgia Country Report”, SEC(2005) 288/3, Brussels, 2005.

A major point to remember while dealing with the South Caucasian states is their strategic location and geo-strategic potential. The region stands at a crossroads between Europe and Asia and between Russia and the Middle East, squeezed between the Black and the Caspian Seas. After the events of 9/11 the South Caucasus was brought back to mainstream politics in the West, with the region playing a crucial role in logistical support to allied operations in Afghanistan. This increased geopolitical competition among foreign powers for gaining influence in the region, providing new opportunities for the governments in Tbilisi, Baku and Yerevan. Their choices were constrained by the security environment inherited from the collapse of the Soviet Union, namely the ethno-political conflicts and the action of external powers by proxy, particularly Russia, Iran and Turkey.

However, as security alignments shifted after the end of the Cold War and after 9/11, each South Caucasian state perceived its security differently. As Svante Cornell argues “international interest in the region tended to increase polarisation of regional politics”.<sup>15</sup> The rivalry between the United States and Russia is here a good example, clearly endowing the foreign policy decisions of regional leaders with strategic calculations about their security. “This US-Russian pattern of cooperative/competitive relationship creates a very precarious stability in the South Caucasus, because neither the strategic alliances are durable, nor do they create dividing lines along which a balance of power situation could be consolidated. While all three countries, and to some extent the autonomous units, do have some space for strategic maneuverings, it is the global US-Russian interplay that strongly conditions the decision-making process for each actor in the complex”.<sup>16</sup>

Turkey – a long time Western ally and member of the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) – has also been showing signs of growing awareness regarding its security needs, particularly after the 2003 war in Iraq.<sup>17</sup> Pragmatism and a growing role in regional affairs have driven its external relations, at a time of dramatic changes and dilemmas at home. Either through cultural, linguistic and ethnic affinities shared with countries in the Caucasus and Central Asia, or the geographical importance of its territory, Ankara has assumed a leading regional role. BSECO, a Turkish initiative, has become the most important forum of regional cooperation in the Black Sea. This is recognized by the EU (the European Commission is in the process of becoming an observer to BSECO) and the United States, which is already an observer. The most recent Turkish-led initiative for the South Caucasus followed the Russian military intervention in Georgia, with Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdoğan putting forward a revived idea of a Stability Pact for the Caucasus.<sup>18</sup> This pro-active Turkish stance in its vicinity has been particularly welcomed and supported by both the EU and the United States, while Moscow has retained a wait-and-see stance.

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<sup>15</sup> Cornell, Svante, “NATO’s Role in South Caucasus Regional Security”, in: *Turkish Foreign Policy Quarterly*, vol. 3:2, 2004, p. 126.

<sup>16</sup> Derghoukassian, Khatchik, “Balance of Power, Democracy and Development: Armenia in the South Caucasian Regional Security Complex”, in: *AIPRG Working Paper*, vol. 10, January 2006, p. 10.

<sup>17</sup> Katik, Mevlut, “Geopolitical competition heats up in Black Sea”, in: *Eurasia Daily Monitor*, March 10 2006, [www.eurasianet.org](http://www.eurasianet.org), accessed on March 14 2006; Torbakov, Igor, “Turkey's strategic outlook making significant shift”, in: *Eurasia Daily Monitor*, March 7 2006, [www.eurasianet.org](http://www.eurasianet.org), accessed on March 14 2006.

<sup>18</sup> Kanbolat, Hasan, “What is Caucasian stability and cooperation? What can Turkey do in the Caucasus?”, in: *Today's Zaman*, August 20 2008, <http://www.todayszaman.com/>, accessed on August 22 2008.

Iran is fundamentally perceived as a security threat for the Wider Black Sea region. Despite early unilateral attempts to play a mediating role in the Nagorno Karabakh conflict,<sup>19</sup> Iran was left out of the main negotiation format – the Minsk Group –, since it is not a member of the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE). Furthermore, although Iran has considerable energy reserves, its strained international position and the development of its nuclear program have made it a non-reliable partner for the South Caucasus states. Despite the religious differences, friendly relations between Yerevan and Teheran have provided both countries with alternatives to isolation, and Moscow's blessing of Iranian engagement in the South Caucasus and Central Asia, in the early 1990s, was meant to act as a balance to increasing Turkish influence.<sup>20</sup> Today, relations between the two countries have improved. On July 14, 2007, Iran and Turkey signed a Memorandum of Understanding on oil and gas transit and joint investments, which was widely praised as a fundamental move to diversify supplies to Europe.<sup>21</sup>

In this complex scenario of wide external involvement, competing interests and cooperation opportunities, the EU role and contribution for stability building and enhanced collaboration at the regional level is here the focus of analysis. The following section looks at the European Union approach to the South Caucasus, with a focus on the regional dimensions of the European Neighborhood Policy, identifying limits and possibilities in a turbulent context.

### **Integrating the South Caucasus through the Neighborhood Policy?**

The EU has regarded the South Caucasus as a compact and interdependent area demanding a regional approach. Since their independence in 1991, and following this rationale, the EU engaged with Armenia, Georgia and Azerbaijan in a highly coordinated way, looking at involvement with these countries in simultaneous terms. All three states signed a Partnership and Cooperation Agreement (PCA), which entered into force in July 1999, and the EU established a regional delegation of the European Commission in Tbilisi, dealing with all relevant regional issues.<sup>22</sup> The post of a Special Representative for the South Caucasus was created in 2003, envisaging a coordinated implementation of EU policy objectives in the region. Moreover, the European Parliament established, in the framework of the PCA, a

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<sup>19</sup> Ter-Gabrielian, Gevrok and Nedolian, Ara, "Armenia: crossroads or fault line of civilizations?", in: *The International Spectator*, XXXII:2, April-June 1997, pp. 109-10.

<sup>20</sup> Rashid, Ahmed, "The Resurgence of Central Asia: Islam or Nationalism?", (London: Zed Books, 1994), pp. 212-213.

<sup>21</sup> This agreement could place Turkey as a central energy transit and trading country, while it also allows Iran to escape isolation imposed by the United States sanctions. It provides an important alternative energy supply for Europe, away from Russian dominated routes, and makes Caspian export routes more viable allowing Turkmenistan's energy to flow directly to Europe without using Russian controlled pipelines. Finally, it represents an important reinforcement of the EU-sponsored Nabucco project. See among others, Socor, Vladimir, "Turkey Offers Route to Europe for Iranian and Turkmen Gas", in: *Eurasia Daily Monitor*, vol. 4:140, July 19 2007 and Daily, John C. K., "Turkey Moves to Position Itself as a Strategic Transit Corridor for Caspian Hydrocarbons", in: *Eurasia Daily Monitor*, vol. 4:161, August 17 2007.

<sup>22</sup> Only in 2008 did the European Commission establish two permanent delegations in Yerevan and Baku, also in a coordinated way.

Parliamentary Cooperation Committee dealing with the three countries simultaneously.<sup>23</sup> The ENP, despite its differentiated approach, once again reinforced a regional perspective of the South Caucasus. This approach was maintained throughout negotiations for the bilateral ENP Action Plans and, to the detriment of the countries' expectations, the three were adopted simultaneously in November 2006.<sup>24</sup> The reasoning underlying this similitude approach shows the concern in Brussels to avoid accusations of discrimination as much as it tried to underline the advantages of the regional cooperation format, where confidence-building measures could develop and thus facilitate conflict resolution processes.<sup>25</sup>

Among the European member-states, however, consensus as to what sort of approach should be designed towards the region has been difficult. As Damien Helly argues, different understandings of the South Caucasus have informed the EU's attempts to devise a strategy of engagement.<sup>26</sup> Further constraints on the EU's action include its foreign policy system and disagreement over decision-making competencies and priorities; the integration of EU policies in the context of Western institutions, namely NATO and the OSCE, where great discrepancies reside; as well as the difficulty of creating a common space of understanding between the EU, Russia, the United States and the countries in the region. Despite the fact that the ENP represents an attempt to render greater autonomy to EU actions in the regions surrounding its enlarged borders, it remains prey to these constraints.

The ENP is based on the principle of shared values, differentiation and ownership, making the EU's partner states the major actor responsible for the pace of integration with the Union.<sup>27</sup> The classical dilemma of maintaining a viable regional approach, while differentiating enough to allow partners to introduce their own rhythms of reform, has made the EU subject to criticism. Underlying the obvious differences and the obstacles to regional cooperation (most of all the Nagorno Karabakh conflict), leaders in the South Caucasus have pointed to the inefficiencies of linking developments in one country, to the pace of reforms in the other, since it does not respond to their short-term needs.<sup>28</sup> On the eve of the conclusion of the negotiations on the ENP Action Plans for the three South Caucasian states, an Azerbaijani commercial airline flew to the Turkish Cypriot republic, in violation of the EU's non-recognition policy. As a reprisal, negotiations on the Action Plans for Armenia and Georgia were suspended along with the one for Azerbaijan. This was denounced by authorities in Yerevan and Tbilisi as an unjustified and counterproductive conditioning of the EU's

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<sup>23</sup> This Committee was established in 1994, during negotiations for the Partnership and Cooperation Agreement. In 2004, bilateral EU-Armenia, EU-Azerbaijan and EU-Georgia Parliamentary Cooperation Committees were created, reflecting the principle of differentiation underlying the ENP.

<sup>24</sup> EU-Armenia ENP Action Plan; EU-Azerbaijan ENP Action Plan; EU-Georgia ENP Action Plan, available at [http://ec.europa.eu/world/enp/index\\_en.htm](http://ec.europa.eu/world/enp/index_en.htm).

<sup>25</sup> Interviews with European Commission officials at the European Commission Delegation in Tbilisi, May 2006; with Ambassador Per Eklund, Head of the European Commission Delegation to Georgia, Tbilisi, May 7 2007, and with Giuseppe Busini, Desk Officer for Azerbaijan, European Commission, Brussels, July 10 2007.

<sup>26</sup> Helly, Damien "EU policies in the South Caucasus", paper presented at the conference "*L'Europe et le Caucase du Sud/Europe and the South Caucasus*", Baku, July 11 2001, pp. 3-4.

<sup>27</sup> European Commission, "Communication from the Commission on the European Neighbourhood Policy Strategy Paper", COM(2004)373 final, Brussels, May 12 2004.

<sup>28</sup> Lobjakas, Ahto, "South Caucasus: Prospects for Regional Stability Pact Recede", in: *Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty (RFE/RL)*, May 12 2006, <http://www.rferl.org>, accessed on June 19 2006.

relations with the two partners.<sup>29</sup> Similarly, the European Commission decided that the opening of a full-fledged delegation in Baku would also be coordinated with the opening of a delegation in Yerevan.<sup>30</sup> These instances demonstrate the EU's awareness of the constraints imposed on cooperation efforts by the current regional situation, and its wish to be perceived as a balanced and neutral partner.

From a Euro-Atlantic integration perspective, forcing some level of regional cooperation among Georgians, Armenians and Azerbaijanis was a priority for the EU,<sup>31</sup> in an attempt to avoid a new "Cyprus scenario".<sup>32</sup> This was seen as a necessary step to stimulate confidence among actors, searching for common values and objectives that the entrance into a new "ENP family" could help forge. The EU had established by then that good neighborly relations would be at the heart of any attempt to integrate the South Caucasus countries, and that regional cooperation would certainly precede any future attempts at regional integration.<sup>33</sup> Furthermore, the EU reasoned that by presenting an attractive offer to the Caucasian partners, and having Georgia as a frontrunner, some level of peer competition could develop that would help sustain efforts towards regional dialogue and mutual commitments.<sup>34</sup> However, the national conditions, and the fact that Georgia's revolutionary model was not welcomed by the current Armenian and Azerbaijani leaderships, soon toned down any level of open competition, and allowed instead some level of free riding.

During negotiations for the Action Plans, issues of regional cooperation arose from the three Caucasian partners, but naturally pointing in divergent directions, reflecting the fragmented nature of regional relations. For Azerbaijan, the insistence of the European Commission in having them cooperate with Armenia was seen as unwanted interference in domestic issues. Baku's reply was to indicate a different format of this "region" to include neighbors such as Iran, with whom the EU has very limited and difficult relations. The EU's alternative was therefore to maintain a "constructive ambiguity" in the definition of the scope for regional cooperation.<sup>35</sup> For Georgia, a similar position developed, pointing out that because Armenia and Azerbaijan did not cooperate, any attempt to link integration into Euro-Atlantic structures to regional South Caucasian cooperation would be unfair to Georgian efforts. A Georgian official noted that "the [European] Commission is very comfortable with regional formal structures, but the political issues end up being sacrificed over technical ones".<sup>36</sup> As far as

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<sup>29</sup> Freire, Maria Raquel and Simão, Lúcia "The EU's Neighbourhood Policy towards the Southern Caucasus: Searching for Commonality in a Patchy Scenario", in: *Comparative Constitutional Review Journal*, vol. 4:57, 2006, pp. 36-44 (in Russian).

<sup>30</sup> "Office of European Commission inaugurated in Baku, Azerbaijan", in: *Today.Az*, February 5 2008, <http://www.today.az/news/politics/42880.html>, accessed on February 5 2008.

<sup>31</sup> Interview with Giuseppe Busini, Desk officer for Azerbaijan, European Commission, Brussels, July 10, 2007.

<sup>32</sup> Interview with Kestutis Jankauskas, Lithuanian Ambassador to COPS, Brussels, July 19, 2007.

<sup>33</sup> The development of a Stability Pact for the South Caucasus has been on the European agenda since 1999, through the European Parliament. In 2000 the Brussels-based think tank Centre for European Policy Studies released a publication on the Stability Pact for the South Caucasus, where regional integration was included though with limited political backing. See Celac, Sergiu, et al., "A Stability Pact for the South Caucasus", (Brussels: Centre for European policy Studies, 2000).

<sup>34</sup> Interview with Gunnar Viegand, acting responsible for Eastern Europe, Russia, South Caucasus and Central Asia at the European Commission, July 20, 2007.

<sup>35</sup> Interview with Giuseppe Busini, Desk officer for Azerbaijan, European Commission, Brussels, July 10, 2007.

<sup>36</sup> Interview with Archil Karaulashvili, Head of Euro-Integration Department at the Georgian State Ministry for Euro and Euro-Atlantic Integration, Tbilisi, May 4, 2006.

Armenia was concerned, the engagement of the EU was the perfect opportunity to lobby for inclusion in regional projects and limit, to some extent, its isolation.<sup>37</sup>

Alternatively, Armenia, Azerbaijan and Georgia put forward different regional cooperation frameworks that represented their interests better. These formats reflect the strategic calculations informing domestic and foreign policy in the South Caucasus. Georgia was extremely active in pushing for a format where its European identity would be underlined. With the 2004 enlargement the EU became a Black Sea power and after the “revolutionary” events in Georgia, in 2003, and in Ukraine, in 2004, the EU was compelled to define a strategy for its eastern neighborhood to be developed in a multilateral framework. Turkish and Russian participation within BSECO turned this forum into a wider regional initiative for cooperation, and one where the United States has an observer status and the European Commission is also engaged. Georgia pressed the EU during ENP Action Plan negotiations to include a reference to the Black Sea cooperation, making the argument that the EU has strategic interests in the region and that Georgia and the South Caucasus are part and parcel of those interests. With time, Azerbaijan and Armenia both regarded the Black Sea regional cooperation, hosted within BSECO, as the most viable alternative for constructive regional dialogue. This was also a necessary step to appease the European partners who were eager to promote regional dialogue. Azerbaijan, despite not being a Black Sea country, understood the gains it could derive from such an enlarged regional format, stretching from the Caspian to the Mediterranean, and therefore with large strategic potential. BSECO, being a Turkish-led initiative, also provided authorities in Baku with an added layer of comfort for regional cooperation, and it would prove Azerbaijani dedication to supporting its strategic ally in Ankara.<sup>38</sup> Finally, for Armenia, BSECO represents the most important regional format in which it participates, despite Turkish influence.<sup>39</sup> Nevertheless, due to Russian participation and US and EU engagement, Armenia feels more reassured of a balanced format. For the European Commission, the Wider Black Sea encapsulates the potential for diluting regional pressures and provides the necessary venues for dialogue. This meant streamlining its own instruments designed for the region, ranging from membership, accession, ENP, stability pacts, environmental and trafficking control – what its communication of 11 April 2007 calls a Black Sea Synergy.<sup>40</sup>

## **The Wider Black Sea Regional Cooperation: Current Dynamics and Future Prospects**

Euro-Atlantic integration processes represent today the most important challenge to the *status quo* in the Black Sea region, providing the impetus for regional cooperation and the formation of a regional identity.<sup>41</sup> Regional cooperation initiatives which derived from exogenous

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<sup>37</sup> Interview with Silvia Maria Zehe, Desk Officer for Armenia, European Commission, Brussels, July 10, 2007.

<sup>38</sup> Interview with Azerbaijani officials, Brussels, March 27, 2007.

<sup>39</sup> Interview with Paruyr Hovhannisyán, Counselor at the Armenian Embassy, Brussels, March 21, 2007.

<sup>40</sup> European Commission, “Communication from the Commission to the Council and to the European Parliament: Black Sea Synergy – a new regional cooperation initiative”, COM(2007) 160 final, Brussels, April 11, 2007.

<sup>41</sup> Aydin, M., “Europe’s next shore: The Black Sea region after EU enlargement”, in: *EU Institute for Strategic Studies Occasional Papers*, 53, June 20, 2004.

factors can now be sustained by local actors, building on their overlapping membership within the EU, NATO and BSECO. Established under Turkish initiative in 1992, BSECO was modeled after EU institutional cooperation templates, looking at economic cooperation as a stepping stone for institutionalized dialogue and common perceptions to develop. The process was strongly influenced by Turkish accession negotiations with the EU, and reinforced by the presence of Greece, an EU member-state, as well as several potential candidates. This momentum for Western influence in the Wider Black Sea region, initiated after the fall of the USSR, focused on several axes of action, ranging from the development of democratic institutions, good governance and rule of law practices – extending the political and economic systems established in Western Europe to the former Warsaw Pact states - to the energy and transportation interests that this hub region represents. A notable exception, both in BSECO and in bilateral cooperation between the EU and regional states, has been hard security concerns linked to the “frozen” conflicts in Moldova, Georgia and Azerbaijan. Nevertheless, after 9/11, the rigid positions of some BSECO members in having the organization deal with hard security issues changed, as the Istanbul Summit of 2002 testifies.<sup>42</sup>

The reconfiguration of power relations in the Black Sea region has favored an entrenchment of European and North-American interests to the detriment of Russian influence. The process of collapse of the USSR and the endemic insecurity that followed this collapse was matched by the expansion of Euro-Atlantic structures, as an answer to growing interdependence. Simultaneously, domestic changes in the countries of the region, notably in Georgia and Ukraine following the electoral processes in 2003 and 2004, as well as in Bulgaria, Romania and Turkey, accentuated a rupture with previous methods of government and established a firm Euro-Atlantic foreign policy orientation.<sup>43</sup> With the launching of the ENP, the EU took wider responsibilities in the Black Sea region, pledging to support reforms and integration into its market and institutional structures. For the South Caucasus countries, uncomfortable with a strict regional approach, consolidating the process of Euro-Atlantic integration in the context of the Black Sea cooperation was a sensible choice for different reasons. The European Commission’s April 2007 communication on “Black Sea Synergy: A new regional cooperation initiative” underlines the potential for increased cooperation with the EU in a series of matters, underlining the need for regional efforts to deal with the challenges posed by weak institutional structures and governance procedures in the region, organized crime and illegal migration, the “frozen” conflicts, energy security, transportation networks, and environmental distress, among other priorities.<sup>44</sup> This structural foreign policy, embedded in the EU’s domestic processes, creates the promise of replication of its own prosperity and stability beyond its borders, and alters the current security configurations in the region. This is strategically reinforced by the twin enlargement of NATO to Eastern Europe and potential membership negotiations with Ukraine and Georgia, among others, extending security guarantees to the region that the EU is unable and/or unwilling to provide.

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<sup>42</sup> BSECO, “Istanbul Decennial Summit Declaration – Looking Beyond Ten Years of Cooperation and Progress”, <http://www.bsec-organization.org/documents/declaration/summit/Reports/Istanbul2002.pdf>.

<sup>43</sup> Cornell, Svante, et al., “The Wider Black Sea Region: An Emerging Hub in European Security”, in: *Silk Road Paper*, December 20 2006.

<sup>44</sup> European Commission, “Communication from the Commission to the Council and to the European Parliament: Black Sea Synergy – A New Regional Cooperation Initiative”, COM(2007) 160 final, Brussels, 2007.

As far as Russia is concerned, this is a hazardous process, both due to its lack of transparency and because Moscow does not participate in the decision making structures. Under President Putin, Russia sought to improve its relations with NATO and the US in an attempt to redesign the balance of power around the Black Sea and within the CIS. The military cooperation that followed the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001, nevertheless, represented a pragmatic assessment of the current interests and possibilities more than a long-term prospect of solid partnership between the West and Russia. Even the EU was unable to fully associate Russia to its process of enlargement in 2004, following a failed and embarrassing attempt to give substance to the “four common spaces”.<sup>45</sup> A growing ideological gap developed as Russia centralized its political and economic structures in the Kremlin, following a “petro-state” model,<sup>46</sup> and as the EU insisted in extending its “fuzzy” politics to what Moscow perceives as its sphere of influence<sup>47</sup> – all together, a common language was missing from which a strategic partnership could emerge. The latest development in this strategic gap came in August 2008 with the Russian incursion into South Ossetia and Georgia. The official views of this short conflict diverge. Russian President Dmitri Medvedev and Prime Minister Vladimir Putin described the war with Georgia and the recognition of Abkhazia and South Ossetia as a need, a last resort option, and a response to a provocation from the Georgian side.<sup>48</sup> The Bush administration and some of the EU member states like the United Kingdom, Sweden, Poland and the Baltic states have seen Russian intervention outside its borders as a return to imperialist policies; actions with fundamental consequences for Moscow.<sup>49</sup> For the EU, however, the attempt has been to maintain open venues for dialogue throughout the turmoil, as the mediation efforts by French President Nicholas Sarkozy indicate.<sup>50</sup> Whatever the intended results of this conflict, it seems neither to have slowed or dampened the Euro-

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<sup>45</sup> “EU-Russia: Road Map for the 4 Common Spaces”, Working Document, 15<sup>th</sup> EU-Russia Summit, Moscow, May 10 2005, [http://www.eu2005.lu/en/actualites/documents\\_travail/2005/05/10-4spaces/index.html](http://www.eu2005.lu/en/actualites/documents_travail/2005/05/10-4spaces/index.html), accessed on August 20 2008.

<sup>46</sup> Alexandrova-Arbatova, Nadia, “Troubled Strategic Partnership: The Black Sea Dimension of Russia’s relations with the West”, in: Daniel Hamilton and Gerhard Mangott (eds), *The Wider Black Sea Region in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century. Strategic, Economic and Energy Perspectives*, (Washington, D.C.: Centre for Transatlantic Relations, 2008), p. 298.

<sup>47</sup> Allison, Roy, et al., “Putin’s Russia and the Enlarged Europe”, (London: Blackwell Publishing, 2006), p. 85.

<sup>48</sup> Medvedev, Dmitri, “Why I had to recognise Georgia’s breakaway regions”, in: *Financial Times*, August 26 2008. Putin, Vladimir, “Nicholas Sarkozy a joué un grand rôle de pacification”, in: *Le Figaro*, September 13 2008.

<sup>49</sup> David Milband, United Kingdom Foreign Secretary, stated that “The sight of Russian tanks rolling into part of a sovereign country on its neighbouring borders will have brought a chill to the spine of many people, rightly, because that is a reversion to – it’s not just Cold War politics, it’s a 19<sup>th</sup> Century way of doing politics.” See “Russia warned over ‘Soviet past’”, in: *BBC News*, August 13 2008, [http://news.bbc.co.uk/go/pr/fr/-/2/hi/uk\\_news/politics/7557887.stm](http://news.bbc.co.uk/go/pr/fr/-/2/hi/uk_news/politics/7557887.stm), accessed on August 20, 2008. A joint statement by Poland and the three Baltic states reads “The EU and NATO must take the initiative and stand up against the spread of imperialist and revisionist policy in the east of Europe... The Russian Federation has overstepped a red line.” See “EU preparing snap summit on Russia-Georgia war”, in: *EUObserver*, August 10 2008. US Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice made the following statements at a meeting with EU foreign ministers at the United Nations: “We needed to work together so that Russia’s attack on Georgia does not succeed in destroying Georgia’s sovereignty and that Russia comes to realize sooner or later – hopefully sooner – that attempts to change international borders through force is a grave mistake.” See “Russian Neighbors Urge U.N. to Stand against Kremlin Aggression”, in: *The New York Times*, September 24 2008, <http://www.nytimes.com/2008/09/25/world/europe/25nations.html>, accessed on September 25 2008.

<sup>50</sup> “Europe taking a diplomatic approach to Caucasus conflict”, in: *International Herald Tribune*, August 11 2008, [www.iht.com](http://www.iht.com), accessed on August 20 2008.

Atlantic aspirations of both Ukraine and Georgia nor to sprout the alignment of the CIS and Shanghai Cooperation Organization member-states with Russia.<sup>51</sup>

The security concerns of the South Caucasian states have become more acute in this process, but they have not necessarily become more reliant on Russia. Maintaining the CIS security complex through military intervention might yield results in the short-term, as Azerbaijan's revised policy of support for the Nabucco pipeline suggests.<sup>52</sup> Nevertheless, the ongoing processes of integration and alignment with the EU and its institutions will be very hard to revert or avoid, as long as the EU is seen as a coherent and reliable partner. Even Armenia, a long time Russian ally, has taken the opportunity presented by the ENP to come closer to the EU, opening new possibilities for strategic cooperation. Improving relations with Turkey is another Armenian priority, with important security implications, and it is in the framework of Turkish EU-accession that a diversification of relations – away from Moscow – will naturally come about for Yerevan. Despite the heavy consequences for the Azerbaijani economy of the stoppage of the oil export because of the explosion in the Turkish part of the BTC oil pipeline shortly before the Georgian war and bombing by Russian armed forces of the railroad linking Baku to Tbilisi during the conflict, authorities in Baku still regard this western route as a strategic asset in their independence from Moscow, and cooperation with the EU, the United States and Turkey will certainly follow. Baku has become an important asset in EU attempts to reach oil and gas in Central Asia, making Azerbaijan's territory a central element in the development of a new Trans-Caspian Trans-Black Sea energy corridor.

All these elements reinforce the argument for the detachment of the South Caucasus states from the CIS security complex towards a broader Eurasian/Black Sea security complex. Energy security seems, at this point, to be the main rationale for cooperation both at the regional level (between Turkey, Georgia, Azerbaijan, Kazakhstan and Turkmenistan), and including the EU, the United States, Russia and China. Because energy development is a long-term endeavor, it can be expected that the security links among these actors will be reinforced, further shaping the Eurasian security complex. Conflict resolution and separatist trends are also a crucial element bringing the Eurasian states such as Georgia, Ukraine, Azerbaijan and Moldova (GUAM) together. To the extent that these concerns overlap with energy issues, we might expect the security complex to be reinforced. A further aspect of this security complex is the democratization process associated with the expansion of Euro-Atlantic structures. A problem might arise to the extent that states throughout the Eurasian security complex can see their efforts and ambitions frustrated by the weak flexibility of these structures, and this will certainly have its own internal consequences for the EU and NATO. Insofar as these issues overlap, the configuration of this security complex will change accordingly. However, the South Caucasus stands at the heart of all these issues and will be crucial for cohesion of the security complex as well as regarding attempts to diffuse tensions within it.

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<sup>51</sup> "Former Soviet Sphere Shocked into Silence by Conflict in Georgia", in: *RFE/RL*, August 11 2008, [www.rferl.org](http://www.rferl.org), accessed on August 20, 2008; "China fails to support Kremlin", in: *The Financial Times*, August 29 2008.

<sup>52</sup> "Dick Cheney Mistakenly Staked on Caspian", in: *Kommersant*, September 5 2008, [http://www.kommersant.com/p1020720/Ilham\\_Aliyev\\_reluctant\\_to\\_fully\\_support\\_America/](http://www.kommersant.com/p1020720/Ilham_Aliyev_reluctant_to_fully_support_America/), accessed on September 6 2008.

## Conclusion

The future of regional stability in the South Caucasus depends on the delicate balance of interests and perceptions among different levels of interaction. Stable and strong central state institutions must accommodate the wishes and historical memories of the autonomous regions (South Ossetia, Abkhazia and Nagorno Karabakh, to name the most unstable). These same institutions must lay the ground for regional dialogue and cooperation, based on mutual understandings. This would reinforce the region's global position vis-à-vis external players.<sup>53</sup> In the absence of these conditions, frail and often undemocratic institutions and political processes have jeopardized the construction of a common framework for development and stability where citizens, sub-regional and national leaders could build a common future that could overcome competing interests, both at home and abroad. The reliance on strategic alliances that has so far kept a balance of power in the South Caucasus is a dangerous game, delivering only *Potemkin*-like stability. It is therefore essential for the region's stability to frame it in a wider security complex that corresponds and responds to the area's interlinked problems and opportunities, by allowing wider formats of cooperation, that despite asymmetries better address the regional challenges. The proposal advanced here for an Eurasian/Black Sea security complex could fit well the region's multifaceted dealings, while overcoming the mounting difficulties associated with the CIS as an aggregator of security perceptions, concerns and needs of the very different states involved, and which to a great extent surpass the Commonwealth boundaries.

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<sup>53</sup> Suleymanov, Elin, "Emergence of new Political Identity in the South Caucasus. Energy, Security, Strategic Location and Pragmatism", Master of Arts in Law and Diplomacy Thesis, The Fletcher School, May 21 2004.

# NORMATIVE SUASION AND POLITICAL CHANGE IN CENTRAL ASIA

Alexander Warkotsch \*

## Abstract

*This article examines the adequacy of the EU's tool-kit and overall strategy for socializing Central Asia into human rights and democracy. First, the analysis will show that several interrelated conditions, above all cultural idiosyncrasies, properties of interaction between socializees and socializing agents, as well as the nature of the political system, are not sufficiently allowed for by the EU's policy approach. This renders the prospects for moving the region towards a democratic trajectory bleak. Second, building on identified problems in the EU's socialization efforts, the paper presents policy recommendations, above all a concentration on certain aspects of human rights and government accountability that should help to improve the EU's democratizing impact.*

*Keywords: European Union, Central Asia, democratization, normative suasion*

## Introduction

In Central Asia, conformance with democracy principles has deteriorated since the late 1990s. None of the five Central Asian states has fulfilled the democratic aspirations that were held by their citizens some fifteen years ago, not to mention the aspirations held by the international community. In most states, presidents, individuals who come from the upper echelons of the communist establishment, have gained wide powers to rule by decree. Parliaments and courts are weak and are routinely ignored. Opposition has been circumscribed, co-opted, and/or repressed. Almost all elections have had dubious legitimacy and the emergence of independent mass media has been hindered; in short, substantive democracy is either absent or falls short of the mark.<sup>1</sup> Accordingly, talk of democratization in Central Asia represents the “triumph of hope over experience”<sup>2</sup>. Of course, within each of these states political conditions vary. Thus, it might be more accurate to divide the region into a more semi-authoritarian north-eastern tier and an authoritarian or even dictatorial governed south-western tier; the former consisting of Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan the latter of Uzbekistan and Turkmenistan.

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<sup>1</sup> Freedom House, “Freedom in the World 2007. The Annual Survey of Political Rights and Civil Liberties” (New York: Rowman & Littlefield, 2006).

<sup>2</sup> Blank, Stephen, “Democratic Prospects in Central Asia”, in: *World Affairs*, vol. 166:3 (2004), pp. 133-147, at p. 133.

Building on the international socialization mechanism of normative suasion, this article offers some preliminary thoughts on major obstacles of European Union (EU) democracy promotion in Central Asia. Though the article chooses an EU perspective, most of the identified difficulties are faced by any other Western actor active in promoting democracy in the region. Simply put, socialization can be defined as the “induction of new members [...] into the ways of behaviour that are preferred in a society”.<sup>3</sup> As far as this article is concerned ‘preferred behaviour’ is understood as compliance with human rights and democracy standards. The literature on international socialization usually distinguishes two mechanisms for the projection of liberal democratic norms onto a target country: strategic calculation and normative suasion. While strategic calculation uses a rational, cost-benefit approach to explain international socialization<sup>4</sup>, normative suasion works differently. The parties engaged in the socialization process present arguments and try to persuade and convince each other; in the end, the socializees accept the new norms as ‘the right thing to do’ and not because of material or social incentives promised by socializing agents from the West.<sup>5</sup>

This article examines major impediments for the EU’s democratization efforts in Central Asia through the normative suasion mechanism. The reason for choosing normative suasion over strategic calculation as the framework of analysis is that this approach much better depicts the difficulties of Western-led democratization in the region. The analysis proceeds as follows. The section following this introduction outlines the theoretical framework by introducing the normative suasion mechanism. The third section briefly examines the EU’s current socialization tool-kit. The fourth part then looks at the major impediments for setting off a trajectory of liberal democracy through normative suasion. Finally, the fifth part offers some ideas on how to improve the EU’s current socialization approach to the region.

## The Theoretical Framework: Normative Suasion

Drawing on Habermasian social theory as well as on insights from social psychology, normative suasion claims that socializees do not so much calculate cost and benefits when considering democratic change. Rather, they engage in argumentation with the socializers, with the latter trying to persuade and convince the socializees of their interests and preferences as ‘correct’ interpretations of the world.<sup>6</sup> The establishment of these interpretations is the result of socialization processes involving the dissemination of a particular set of conceptual categories and behavioural dispositions (in Bourdieu’s terminology, a *habitus*)<sup>7</sup>, which shape the ways in which people think about and act in the world.<sup>8</sup> Thanks to the ‘power of the better argument’, the socializees are persuaded by the legitimacy of the validity of the socializers’ claims and change their identity and interests accordingly. In contrast to strategic calculation and its logic of consequences, this approach implies a switch to one of appropriateness in terms of ‘doing the

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<sup>3</sup> Barnes, James F., Skidmore, Marx J. and Tripp, Marshall C., “The World of Politics: A Concise Introduction”, (New York: St. Martins Press, 1980), p. 35.

<sup>4</sup> For an overview on strategic calculation see Schimmelfennig, Frank, “Strategic Calculation and International Socialization”, in: *International Organization*, vol. 59:4, 2005, pp. 827-860.

<sup>5</sup> Checkel, Jeffrey T., “International Socialization and Socialization in Europe. Introduction and Framework”, *International Organization*, vol. 59:4, 2005, pp. 801-26., at p. 812.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 812.

<sup>7</sup> Bourdieu, Pierre, “Language and Symbolic Power” (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1991).

<sup>8</sup> Gheciu, Alexandra, “Security Institutions as Agents of Socialization. NATO and the ‘New Europe’”, *International Organization*, vol. 59:4, 2005, pp. 973-12, at p. 980.

right thing'. Accordingly, the process of rule transfer and rule adoption is characterized by arguing about the legitimacy of rules and appropriateness of behaviour (rather than bargaining about incentives and rewards), persuasion (rather than coercion), and 'complex' learning (rather than behavioural adaptation).<sup>9</sup> Because behaviour can be re-changed once incentive structures change and rewards are paid, socialization through suasion is likely to be more enduring than socialization through strategic calculation, as actors have begun to truly internalize new values.<sup>10</sup> It is important to note that the chances for the process of normative suasion to be successful are higher when certain conditions are fulfilled.<sup>11</sup> Such scope conditions include not only that educational practices have to be carried out consistently, over a reasonably long period of time. The socializing agency also should not lecture or demand but, instead, act out principles of serious deliberative argument. Moreover, socialization is more likely to be successful if the target has few prior, ingrained beliefs that are inconsistent with the overall socialization message.

### The EU's Suasion Tool-Kit

In November 1991, the Development Council in its landmark Resolution on 'Human Rights, Democracy and Development' explicitly linked democracy, human rights and development and made the promotion of human rights and democracy both an objective and a condition of development assistance.<sup>12</sup> The Maastricht treaty widened this approach and made the development and consolidating of democracy not only an objective of development cooperation but also of the EU's Common Foreign and Security Policy (CFSP) in general. They are now considered to be complementary and fundamental to other EU foreign and security policy goals, as reinforced in major EU statements and strategy documents.<sup>13</sup> As far as normative *suasion* is concerned, various forms of political and human rights dialogues build the cornerstone to achieve the above objectives. Until recently the Partnership and Cooperation Agreements (PCAs) - which build the legal framework for the EU's relations with the Central Asian states - were the only platform for political dialogue.<sup>14</sup> Pursuant to the PCAs, political dialogue rests mainly with the Cooperation Council which meets annually at ministerial level and at senior civil servant level in an annual Cooperation Committee, with the latter preparing Cooperation Council meetings.<sup>15</sup> While the EU's *Regional Strategy Paper 2002-06* only envisaged strengthen dialogue more generally on regional and technical cooperation, basically through existing PCA consultation mechanism, a more promising source for dialogue on democracy and human rights rests on the

<sup>9</sup> Risse, T. and Sikkink, K., "The Socialization of International Human Rights Norms into Domestic Practices", in: Thomas Risse, Stephen C. Ropp, and Kathryn Sikkink (eds.), "The Power of Human Rights. International Norms and Domestic Change" (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999), pp. 6-11.

<sup>10</sup> Checkel, fn. 5, p. 813.

<sup>11</sup> See, for example, Checkel, fn. 5, p. 813 and Gheciu, fn. 8, p. 982.

<sup>12</sup> European Commission, "Human Rights, Democracy and Development Cooperation Policy", SEC(91) 61 final, March 1999.

<sup>13</sup> For example, highlighted in the *European Consensus on Development* or the *European Security Strategy*.

<sup>14</sup> The EU has signed PCAs with all five Central Asian republics. With Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, and Uzbekistan they were signed in 1995 and entered into force for ten years in 1999. Due to the Tajik civil war, PCA negotiations with Dushanbe began only in 2003; ratification is still pending in some EU member states. Though the Commission signed a PCA with Turkmenistan in 1998, human rights violations prevented ratification in the European Parliament (EP) and most EU member states. PCA texts can be found online at URL (consulted February 2008):

[http://europa.eu.int/comm/external\\_relations/ceeca/pca/index.htm](http://europa.eu.int/comm/external_relations/ceeca/pca/index.htm)

<sup>15</sup> Cutler, Robert M., "The European Union Reaches Out to The Caucasus and Central Asia", in: *Eurasianet Q&A*, May, 1 2001, URL (consulted February 2008):

<http://www.eurasianet.org/departments/qanda/articles/eav050101.shtml>.

EU's new Central Asia Strategy, adopted by the European Council in June 2007.<sup>16</sup> This document calls for both a 'regular' regional political dialogue at foreign minister level with the EU Troika and a bilateral human rights dialogue with each of the Central Asian states.<sup>17</sup> The creation, in July 2005, of the post of European Union Special Representative (EUSR) for Central Asia is a further component of the EU's capacity for dialogue. Though not explicitly mentioned in the EUSR mandate, among his duties is also "to develop appropriate contacts and cooperation with the main interested actors in the region"<sup>18</sup>.

## Impediments to Successful Socialization through Normative Suasion

As far as the condition of consistent, long-term interaction is concerned, the aspect of socialisation through dialogue is only somewhat embodied in the EU's various cooperation schemes. The PCAs are documents of some 60 pages, but there is only a brief section (one page) that relates to political dialogue. The rest of the document deals with functional aspects of economic cooperation and the pursuit of structural and legal changes that might foster it. MacFarlane is right; this brevity is somewhat odd, given that political issues are given pride of place in the PCAs declaration of principles.<sup>19</sup> Moreover, the goals of the political dialogue are outlined only in very vague terms (Art. 4): "A regular political dialogue [...] shall support the political and economic changes underway [...] and contribute to the establishment of new forms of cooperation". Only the Uzbek PCA adds that "The political dialogue [...] shall foresee that the Parties endeavour to cooperate on matters pertaining to the observance of the principles of democracy, and the respect, protection and promotion of human rights, particularly those of persons belonging to minorities and shall hold consultations, if necessary, on relevant matters". In addition, the Cooperation Council only meets annually; therefore, high ranking dialogue is anything but intensive. By way of comparison, the Euro-Mediterranean Committee for the Barcelona Process, composed of senior (foreign ministry) officials of the EU and the Mediterranean Partners, meets on average every two to three months. When their PCAs were signed in 1995, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan and Uzbekistan were keen to advance cooperation, but their enthusiasm was not reciprocated. This is especially true for the more senior official levels in Europe. It has always been a struggle to find high-level EU officials to attend Cooperation Council meetings, while the Central Asia delegation would easily be composed of the Prime Minister or the Foreign Minister.<sup>20</sup> Regarding the properties of interaction, Cooperation Council talks are usually conducted in a reserved, high-hat manner; sensitive subjects are seldom discussed in detail.<sup>21</sup> In addition, communication between the EU and the Central Asian

<sup>16</sup> Human rights dialogue is a feature of the CFSP that has been highlighted in recent years, notably after the EU's adoption of 'Guidelines on Human Rights Dialogues' (December 2001), pledging to raise the issue of human rights and democracy in all meetings with third countries, URL (consulted May 2008): [http://ec.europa.eu/external\\_relations/human\\_rights/doc/ghd12\\_01.htm](http://ec.europa.eu/external_relations/human_rights/doc/ghd12_01.htm).

<sup>17</sup> European Council, *The EU and Central Asia: Strategy for a New Partnership* (Adopted on 21-22 June 2007), p. 3, URL (consulted May 2008): <http://register.consilium.europa.eu/pdf/en/07/st10/st10113.en07.pdf>.

<sup>18</sup> Council Joint Action 2005/588/CFSP of 28 July, 2005 appointing a Special Representative of the European Union for Central Asia.

<sup>19</sup> MacFarlane, Neil, "European Strategy toward Kazakhstan", in Robert Legvold (ed.), "Thinking Strategically. The Major Powers, Kazakhstan, and the Central Asian Nexus" (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2003), p. 149.

<sup>20</sup> International Crisis Group, *Central Asia: What Role for the European Union?*, Asia Report, No. 113 (2006), p. 12, URL (consulted September 2007):

[http://www.crisisgroup.org/library/documents/asia/central\\_asia/113\\_central\\_asia\\_what\\_role\\_for\\_the\\_eu.pdf](http://www.crisisgroup.org/library/documents/asia/central_asia/113_central_asia_what_role_for_the_eu.pdf), p. 18.

<sup>21</sup> Gumpfenberg, Marie C., „Usbekistan. FES-Studie zur länderbezogenen Konfliktanalyse“, 2002, p. 39, URL (consulted March 2005): <http://library.fes.de/pdf-files/iez/01934.pdf>; Schmitz, Andrea, „Interessen, Instrumente,

governments is far from being consistent. The EU is a multi-level system of governance with complex decision-making structures and different levels of authority. As regards the latter, member-states and the Commission often have different interests and policy priorities. According to an EU diplomat stationed in Central Asia, relations between the EU delegations and member-state missions are sometimes tense, with occasional “sparring over turf, particularly on political issues: They make their own demarches, which are very confusing for our partners, who don’t know who is speaking for the EU. It gives the impression that Europe is a very amorphous entity and not united.”<sup>22</sup>

Probably the most important impediments to successful socialization via normative suasion are Central Asia’s socio-cultural idiosyncrasies. It is more likely to be successful in the socialization process if the target society has only a few prior beliefs and cultural traits that are inconsistent with the socialization message; i.e. the parties involved act within the framework of a Habermasian ‘common lifeworld’,<sup>23</sup> consisting of collective interpretations of the world and a common system of rules perceived as legitimate.<sup>24</sup> Although present in all Central Asian countries, Uzbekistan is probably the best showcase to illustrate the most important aspects of ‘Central Asianness’: authoritarianism and personalism.<sup>25</sup> Authoritarianism is especially apparent among the settled Uzbek peoples. Some scholars have sought explanations for this by noting that the functions of regimentation and centralization required by the nature of the irrigated oasis society produced an effect on public psychology. Karl Wittfogel argued that unlike the individualistic political culture in many water-rich agrarian societies, semi-arid agricultural societies often require a high level of centralized decision-making, resulting in the formation of a ‘managerial state’. Furthermore, Uzbek authoritarianism is not merely a political value, but an ensconced social value. An everyday example is the great importance associated with ‘hurmat’, the idea of ‘obedience’ and ‘respect’. In present day Central Asia, the origins of hurmat are not hard to find. Hurmat starts in the family, where social relations are characterized by great respect for older family members and the dominance of male heads of households.<sup>26</sup> In part, the authoritarian hierarchies of political life are merely a natural extension of corresponding structures of the family.

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Einflussgrenzen. Die Europäische Union und Zentralasien“, *Osteuropa*, Vol. 57, No 8-9 (2007), pp. 327-338, at p. 337.

<sup>22</sup> International Crisis Group, fn. 20, p. 19.

<sup>23</sup> Risse and Sikking, fn. 9, pp. 10-11.

<sup>24</sup> There has been much debate about whether Islamic and Western values are inherently in conflict, and especially whether Islam is inherently hostile to democracy. Some scholars argue, that the absence of recognition in Islamic thought for the legitimacy of an independent political and public sphere separate from the sacred realm of God’s dominion, as well as the supposed predominance in Islam of a corporatist spirit make Islamic societies inhospitable places for the emergence of democracy (see, for example, Lipset, S. M., “The Centrality of Political Culture”, in Larry Diamond and Marc F. Plattner (eds.) “The Global Resurgence of Democracy” (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1996); Gellner, Ernest “Conditions of Liberty: Civil Society and Its Rival” (New York: Penguin, 1994); Fish, Steven M., “Islam and Authoritarianism”, in: *World Politics*, vol. 55:1, 2002, pp. 4-37; Bernard, Lewis “Islam and Liberal Democracy. A Historical Overview”, in: *Journal of Democracy*, vol. 7:2, 1996, pp. 52-63. For a different perspective see Seleny, Anna, “Tradition, Modernity, and Democracy: The Many Promises of Islam”, in: *Perspectives on Politics*, vol. 4:3, 2006, pp. 481-94). It is also noteworthy here that in Central Asia – to a large extent as a consequence of Soviet-style modernization – there is only a weak correlation between religion and political attitudes and/or values.

<sup>25</sup> Gleason, Gregory, “Asian Values and the Democratic Transition in Central Asia”, in: *Harvard Asia Quarterly*, vol. 5:1, 2001, URL (consulted March 2003): <http://www.asiaquarterly.com/content/view/91/40/>.

<sup>26</sup> Ibid.

Personalism is a feature which can be traced back to the feudal era of Khanates and Tsarist control.<sup>27</sup> While Westerners, steeped in liberal democratic traditions, tend to automatically distinguish between the post and the person who fills it, Central Asians find this distinction difficult to draw. Personalism is strongly connected with patrimonialism. Leaders create personality-based patron-client networks that consolidate power through the dispensing and withholding of political and material incentives to followers. To Westerners this may appear to be corruption, but to those engaged in the practice as serving the needs of their community. Those and other customs have been very persistent in Central Asia; they even permeated Soviet institutions due to the policy of ‘korenizatsiya’, the Soviet leadership’s reliance on local cadre members and their adherence to traditionalism. Just like in Soviet times, today traditionalism has created a two-level political culture: on the one hand an appearance of conformity with the ‘social project’ imposed by the upper authorities; on the other hand, a subversion of the project by practices of factionalism and clientism.<sup>28</sup>

Patrimonial-authoritarian features can also be found in the societal organization of clans in the formerly nomadic countries of Kyrgyzstan, Kazakhstan and Turkmenistan. Simply put, a clan is a network of allegiance, an informal organization comprising a network of individuals linked by kin-based bonds. They are governed by informal councils of patriarchs and elders, whereas an extensive network of poorer relatives and kinsmen, close friends, women etc. constitute the non-elite members. Elite and non-elite members feature a relationship of reciprocal dependency. Elites need the support of their networks to maintain their status, protect their group, and make gains within an overarching political or economic system. Non-elites need clan elders and patrons to assist them in improving their social status (e.g. finding a job, accessing education, getting loans) or even secure their survival in an economy of shortages.<sup>29</sup> The existence of clan-based societies has severe implications for the EU’s socialization efforts. Without trying to lay down an exhaustive set of obstacles for successful democratization in clan marked societies, two factors need to be mentioned.<sup>30</sup> First, clans undermine the EU’s aim of contestation through elections, the most basic element of democracy. In Central Asia, political leaders mobilize voters through hierarchical networks of clan patronage. According to prior arranged clan pacts, they put kinsmen or allied clan members in positions of power, for example, as regional or local governors (akims). In exchange for their appointment, the local officials wage support for the leader. First and foremost they put pressure on the clan elders or respected persons with influence in the local community to make their people vote in support of the official’s patron. Second, clans weaken the constitutional separation of powers and impede parliamentary and court independence. Parliaments are riddled with clan politics. Regardless of their party affiliation, clan cronies in the legislature support high-ranking members of government and win benefits in exchange. As Collins puts it, “their main objective as deputies is to direct state resources to the particularistic interests of their networks, not to pass legislation aimed at broader interests”<sup>31</sup>.

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<sup>27</sup> The concept of the ‘patrimonial authority’ goes back to Max Weber’s political sociology and describes a form of despotism based on the “sanctity of age-old rules and powers”. Weber, Max, “Economy and Society. An Outline of Interpretative Sociology”, ed. by Guenther Roth and Claus Wittich (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1978) p. 226.

<sup>28</sup> Roy, Olivier, “The New Central Asia. The Creation of Nations” (New York: New York University Press, 2000), p. 85.

<sup>29</sup> Collins, Kathleen, “The Logic of Clan Politics. Evidence from the Central Asian Trajectories”, in: *World Politics*, vol. 56:2, 2004, pp. 224-61, at p. 231.

<sup>30</sup> For a more security related analysis of clan politics see Matveeva, Anna, “Democratization, Legitimacy and Political Change in Central Asia”, in: *International Affairs*, vol. 75:1, 1999, pp. 23-44, at p. 32-33.

<sup>31</sup> Collins, fn. 29, p. 249.

Moreover, also members of the jurisdiction are pushed by their kinsmen to make critical decisions that favour and/or even keep their clan in power. In Kyrgyzstan, for example, the chair of the Constitutional Court, Cholpon Baekova, successfully pushed for a constitutional reform that allowed her kinsmen, former president Akayev, to run for another presidential term in 1998.<sup>32</sup>

## Policy Prescriptions

The above analysis has shown that the EU's 'socialization through dialogue' approach faces major obstacles, above all because of unfavourable properties of target/sender interaction and the lack of a shared normative framework between the EU and the Central Asian elites. So what do we do? Firstly, a most obvious policy prescription would be to increase the EU's capacity for political dialogue with Central Asia. In the very recent past there has already been some remarkable progress in this regard. It cannot be denied that following the adoption of the EU's Central Asia strategy in June 2007 dialogue has indeed intensified. Until late April 2008 the European Union foreign ministers' troika has set up three regional meetings with their Central Asian counterparts.<sup>33</sup> However, dialogue on the regional level is focusing on political cooperation in general, including areas like education, the rule of law and security; according to the EU issues of human rights and democracy will be raised bilaterally through the human rights dialogue.<sup>34</sup> With the exception of an EU-Uzbekistan Human Rights Dialogue which was established in the post-Andijan context, such dialogues do not yet exist.<sup>35</sup> In addition, even if EU officials are publicly enthusiastic about the institutionalization of a human rights dialogue, insiders of the human rights dialogue with Uzbekistan report that members of the Uzbek delegation – somewhat unsurprisingly – only developed an interest in such meetings just before the EU sanctions reviews.<sup>36</sup> The latter point leads to a second, more fundamental policy prescription: the socialization message itself. So, far the EU promoted a Western-style democracy in the region and gives only little attention to socio-cultural idiosyncrasies and the larger question of "what is actually possible" with regard to democracy in the region.

This article argues for a change in the EU's socialization message by concentrating on certain human rights dimensions and government accountability instead of democracy in the narrower sense. The reason for this is twofold. First, I have mentioned above that the success of dialogue within the normative suasion approach depends on whether projected norms are part of a collective interpretation of the world and therefore regarded as legitimate. When looking at the

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<sup>32</sup> Ibid, p. 249. The general importance of clans within the political process can also be gathered from the way of regime change in Kyrgyzstan in March 2005. Current president Bakiev did not try to mobilize support among party or parliament members. Instead, he largely relied on his southern clan affiliation and set out a convoy of buses carrying his kinsmen from the southern region of Osh to Bishkek to successfully push for a changeover of power.

<sup>33</sup> EU Press Release, "Commissioner Ferrero-Waldner to attend EU-Central Asia Ministerial Troika 9/10 April in Ashgabat", IP/08/541 (12 May 2008), URL (consulted May 2008): <http://europa.eu/rapid/pressReleasesAction.do?reference=IP/08/541&format=HTML&aged=0&language=EN&guiLanguage=en>.

<sup>34</sup> Council of the European Union/European Commission, "EU Annual Report on Human Rights 2007" (12 June 2008), URL (consulted: June 2008) [http://consilium.europa.eu/uedocs/cmsUpload/2007\\_5997-EN-EU\\_annual\\_report\\_on\\_human\\_rights\\_2007.pdf](http://consilium.europa.eu/uedocs/cmsUpload/2007_5997-EN-EU_annual_report_on_human_rights_2007.pdf), p. 73.

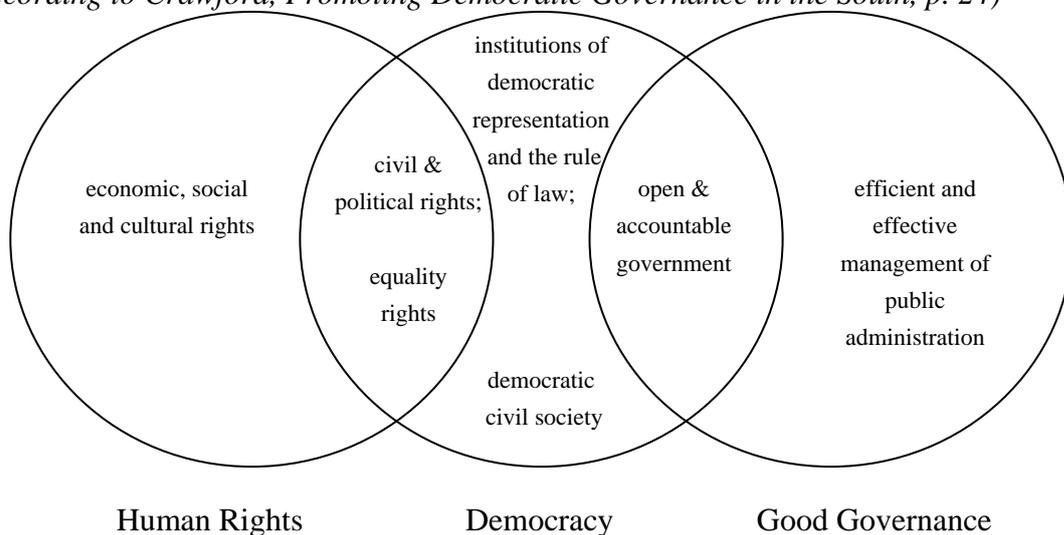
<sup>35</sup> Crawford, Gordon, "Human Rights and Democracy Promotion in Central Asia. From Lofty Principles to Lowly Self-Interests", in: *Perspectives on European Policy and Society*, vol. 9:2, 2008, pp. 172-191, at p. 178.

<sup>36</sup> Ibid, p. 178. Graubner, Cornelius, "EU Strategy on Central Asia: Realpolitik after All", in: *Central Asia – Caucasus Analyst*, May 14, 2008, URL (consulted May 2008): <http://www.cacianalyst.org/?q=node/4859>.

political and social characteristics of tribal Central Asia we find that in most of the Inner Asian Khanates a normative order and legal tradition was in place that showed appreciation of certain aspects of administrative and legal accountability that is similar to our understanding of the notion.<sup>37</sup> A socialization message that builds on such a link is probably viewed less alien and therefore appreciated more than the tough sell of party competition or the separation of powers. Second, by concentrating dialogue on issues that don't directly challenge a regime's political survival (like, for example, arguing permanently for free and fair elections) EU representatives are likely to increase their trustworthiness for one side of the Central Asian elites. This in turn would increase dialogue effectiveness. In addition, an approach of supporting genuine democracy issues may have worked in Eastern Europe where authoritarian structures were already broken up and elite commitment to democratic reform was strong. In Central Asia, however, projects targeted at redistributing power are thwarted by the fact that power is still locked in place.

How can such an inevitably long-term strategy that does not directly address genuine democracy issues contribute to the democratization of the region? Of course, human rights and government accountability are necessary but not in themselves sufficient for democratic government. In the long run, however, they are likely to contribute to the break up of authoritarian regimes. At this point it is helpful to remember that democracy is an overarching concept to which the concepts of human rights and good governance are closely interrelated, though less so to each other. This can be illustrated diagrammatically as three intersecting circles, with democracy in the middle, and areas of overlap between democracy and human rights as well as between democracy and good governance left and right to the centre circle (see figure 1). It is assumed that those elements within the central circle amount to an overall objective of promoting democratization.<sup>38</sup>

**Figure 1: Conceptual Linkages of Human Rights, Democratization and Good Governance** (according to Crawford, *Promoting Democratic Governance in the South*, p. 24)



<sup>37</sup> See also Geiss, Paul-Georg, "Pre-Tsarist and Tsarist Central Asia" (Routledge: London, 2003), pp. 238-254.

<sup>38</sup> Crawford, Gordon, "Promoting Democratic Governance in the South", in: *European Journal of Development Research*, vol. 12:1, 2000, pp. 23-57, at p. 24. See also Beetham, David and Boyle, Kevin, "Introducing Democracy: Eighty Questions and Answer" (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1995).

The notion of good governance is subject to a number of definitions with either relatively narrow or broad interpretations. While a narrow type focuses on public administration, with the goal to increase the capacity and efficiency of executive institutions, a broader approach stresses the normative dimension of the openness, accountability and transparency of government institutions. Promoting a competent public administration may have little to do with democracy whereas the broader type tends to support the same values as democratic government.<sup>39</sup> Of course, strengthening certain lines of government openness and accountability (for example, increasing financial accountability through an independent auditor or introducing ethics statutes and codes of conduct for public officials that outline unacceptable practices) reduces a regime's room for political manoeuvre. However, those measures are significantly less challenging to regime survival than, for example, pushing for free and fair elections or the strengthening of opposition movements. This should increase the Central Asian governments' willingness to engage in dialogue.

A further promising focus for the EU's socialization efforts is the promotion of certain equality rights. Democracy is less based on voters than on citizens who are allowed to participate in their polity regardless of gender, religion, or ethnic identity. From a democracy promotion perspective, gender equality is a particular good starting point.<sup>40</sup> First, it can be argued that the repressiveness and unquestioned dominance of the male over women tend to replicate in broader society, creating a culture of domination, intolerance, and dependency in social and political life.<sup>41</sup> Second, individuals who are more accustomed to such rigidly hierarchical relations in their personal lives may be less prone to resist patterns of authority in politics. Third, authors have shown that men hold attitudes that are more conducive to authoritarianism. While men tend to have a strong 'social dominance' orientation, women are generally less comfortable with hierarchy and inequality.<sup>42</sup> Women also seem to be more successful in some aspects of building consensus which again is conducive to democratic development.<sup>43</sup> Of course, teaching Central Asia's patriarchal societies aspects of gender equality is no easy task. It is achievable only by directly engaging with local structures. Here, USAID funded programmes in the field of community development might help as a general blueprint for further EU action. USAID, in order to mitigate the potential for powerful elements (mostly elders or aksakals) to take over assistance projects, successfully advocated the use of participatory techniques, referred to as Participatory Rural Appraisal (PRA).<sup>44</sup> PRA especially aims to facilitate the input of women and marginal groups to development projects.

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<sup>39</sup> Crawford, fn. 38, p. 24.

<sup>40</sup> Especially in Uzbekistan regime legitimacy builds on combating radical Islamism and on ethnic traditions of the titular nation. The promotion of religious and ethnic equality rights would therefore be a difficult endeavour.

<sup>41</sup> Fish, fn. 24, p. 30.

<sup>42</sup> Pratto, Felicia, Stalworth, Lisa M. and Sidanius, Jim, "The Gender Gap: Differences in Political Attitudes and Social Dominance Orientation", in: *British Journal of Social Psychology*, vol. 36:1, 1997, pp. 49-68.

<sup>43</sup> McDermott, Rose and Cowden, Jonathan A., "The Effects of Uncertainty and Sex in a Crisis Simulation Game", in: *International Interactions*, vol. 27:4, 2001, pp.353-80.

<sup>44</sup> For further details on PRA and analysis on how Central Asian traditional institutions can help facilitate international donors' development programmes see Earle, Lucy (2005), "Community Development, 'Tradition' and the Civil Society Strengthening Agenda in Central Asia", in: *Central Asian Survey*, vol. 24:3, pp. 245-260.

## Conclusion

This article presented some preliminary thoughts on the impediments for democratization in Central Asia from the perspective of the international socialization mechanism of normative suasion. The EU's 'socialization through dialogue' approach exhibits major weaknesses, above all unfavourable properties of target/sender interaction and the lack of a shared normative framework between socializee and sender. Dialogue – contrary to the EU's official rhetoric – is only partly embodied in the EU-Central Asian cooperation schemes; regarding the properties of interaction, meetings are usually conducted in a reserved, high-hat manner with communication from the various EU institutions being far from consistent. In addition, EU normative suasion efforts are exposed to traditional institutions that build on authoritarian/neo-patrimonial values which undermine the EU's socialization message.

So, what to do? The EU has already been trying to intensify its political dialogue with the Central Asian regimes by adding to it a separate human rights dimension. However, we have also learnt from the above analysis that the Central Asian counterparts are far from being enthusiastic about this. This does not come as a surprise given a socialization message that presses for the redistribution of power at the expense of the ruling elite. It was therefore argued to change the current socialization message towards a focus on certain dimension of government accountability and human rights. The reason for this is twofold. First, concentrating dialogue on issues that don't directly challenge the socializees' political survival is likely to increase the trustworthiness of EU representatives on the side of the Central Asian governments, thereby rendering the dialogue process more effective. Second, particular aspects of government accountability can look back on a normative and legal tradition in Central Asia. Incorporating familiar elements into the EU's socialization message enhances the chance of increased receptiveness among the socializees. Of course, such a strategy is inevitably long-term. However, there is good reason to believe that it is well suited to contribute more effectively to democratic ferment than the EU's current socialization approach.

# “GEORGIA COULD BECOME A NATO MEMBER, ONLY IF IT ACCEPTED RUSSIA'S TAKEOVER OF ABKHAZIA AND SOUTH OSSETIA”

## Interview with Dr. Cory Welt\*

*Conducted by Sean Alexander for CRIA*

**Question:** *Will Russia ever be able to live next door to a Saakashvili-run government in Georgia or one that is equally western-oriented?*

**Welt:** Well, the way things have been going, it looks like it will have to. The question is whether Georgia is fated to be Russia's Cuba, and unfortunately the signs point in that direction. Prior to the war, it looked like there might be a chance to put their relations on a new footing, but that has again been spoiled.

To flip your question around, we can ask whether Georgia will be able to survive as a western-oriented state living next door to Russia. Can it build a sustainable economy, can it orient itself more closely on Europe without a hasty road to NATO membership? With open Russian military occupation of Abkhazia and South Ossetia, Georgian security is diminished even if Russia has pulled its troops entirely out of the rest of Georgia. This looming threat, if it remains in place, will cast a shadow on Georgia's future development.

**Question:** *How does Russia reconcile its recent recognition of Abkhazia and South Ossetia with its steadfast refusal to accept independence for Kosovo?*

**Welt:** It's simple. The United States and the European countries that recognized Kosovo's independence insisted that it wasn't a precedent for other unrecognized states. Russia just turns that around and insists that the independence of Abkhazia and South Ossetia is also not a precedent for other unrecognized states. (Incidentally, it's the same logic that allows Turkey to recognize Northern Cyprus but reject the independence of Nagorno-Karabakh). It was fairly clear that this could become a problem once the U.S. and others unilaterally recognized Kosovo's independence without United Nations sanction or Serbian consent. At least in the Kosovo case, however, there had been a genuine international effort to achieve resolution. In the case of Abkhazia and South Ossetia, Russia had done all it could to block multilateral efforts at resolution prior to asserting the independence of these two regions.

**Question:** *Is there an economic benefit for either Georgia or Russia to have Abkhazia and South Ossetia in their camp, or is the issue simply a nationalist one?*

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**Welt:** There are some economic and strategic benefits, to be sure – the Abkhazian coastline makes up a good half of Georgia's Black Sea coast, while South Ossetia sits astride what would be the central north-south highway and is an enclave indistinguishable from the Georgian territory that surrounds it and extremely close to Tbilisi and the country's east-west artery to boot. Add to this the issue of internally displaced Georgians from Abkhazia that made up almost a majority of the population before the 1992-1993 war, and Georgia's firm belief that these regions are as "Georgian" as they are "Abkhazian" and "Ossetian," and you can easily understand the level of Georgia's commitment.

For Russia, Abkhazia is also of appeal both as a sizeable extension of Russia's own Black Sea coastline, for its real estate and tourism potential, and even as a source of construction materials and spillover accommodation for the 2014 Sochi Olympics. South Ossetia is of little value in and of itself, but it does provide a useful way to exercise military power to the south of the Caucasus mountain range and might also be a useful site for "shadow" economic activity tucked away from notice. Also, by supporting both regions, Russia has raised its stock among several of the peoples of the North Caucasus – both among the already staunchly loyal North Ossetians and the various Circassian/Kabardian ethnic kin of the Abkhaz in the west.

Finally, for Russia, it provides a continued hedge against Georgia's NATO membership. As long as there is a prospect of renewed conflict, it will be difficult for Georgia to secure membership, at least on the basis of the alliance commitments as they now are written. Georgia may get a NATO Membership Action Plan, either in December or later down the road, but there will be plenty of hesitation among NATO members to commit to Georgia's security as a full-fledged NATO ally. Hence, Russia has put Georgia in what it knows is, for now, an untenable situation – Georgia might be able to readily become a NATO member, but only if it peacefully and formally accepted Russia's takeover of Abkhazia and South Ossetia. As long as it is not willing to do so, the question of NATO membership will continue to be delayed.

*Question: What effect will the proposed US assistance package of \$1 billion have on stabilizing Georgia?*

**Welt:** The package was important, first of all, as a signal of strong US support for Georgia, even if the US was not interested in defending Georgia militarily. That said, \$1 billion is a lot of money to serve only as a symbol. There's a lot of work to be done on thinking about the most effective use of the money, combined with the already significant aid flows that have been coming into Georgia in the last years.

*Question: Could the US or EU have done more at the outset to prevent the crisis in South Ossetia, or at least to prevent its rapid escalation?*

**Welt:** To take a longer view on the crisis, certainly the US and EU could have jointly decided to make it a priority to internationalize the South Ossetian and Abkhazian conflicts, and to pressure and/or persuade Russia to go along with the transformation of the peacekeeping missions into international forces and even possibly to establish an international administration. But the will wasn't there to make this a priority, and there were doubts that such a plan would even succeed. That would have been the surest way to prevent a recurrence of conflict.

Ultimately, the US and EU were relying on Georgia to accept its weak military position vis-à-vis Russia, and for Russia to restrain from going overboard in its role as a revitalized regional power. There were limits to what Western countries were willing or able to make Russia do, and

though the US could tell Georgia (as it did) that if it were to fight Russia, it would fight it alone, Georgia's leadership could still convince itself that it might still be able to achieve its objectives or, at least, that it was better to try and defend its position than to watch its attrition as Russia consolidated control of both regions.

***Question:** President Medvedev recently reiterated Russia's intention to protect its sphere of influence. Is this likely to redraw the map in the Caucasus, or otherwise produce significant change in the region?*

**Welt:** It's a question of fulcrums, really. Georgia and Ukraine have been viewed as the possible tipping countries that could lead to a fundamental shift in the post-Soviet space, with Azerbaijan, Moldova, and conceivably even Armenia and Belarus joining Eastern "Europe." Outside Russia this has not really been seen as a zero-sum game, but Russia has perceived that such shifts would come mainly at its expense. Now we will see if such movement slows down or, conceivably, accelerates. The problem with interpreting the import of the conflict, of course, is that it is still difficult to determine what would have happened in its absence. The geopolitics of the entire region was uncertain.

***Question:** Switching to Turkey and Armenia, can their relationship truly improve without a resolution on the genocide issue?*

**Welt:** Yes. It has been a consistent point of Armenian state policy that Yerevan does not at all require genocide recognition in order to normalize relations with Turkey. For its part, though Turkey would like Armenia to publicly renounce territorial claims (a rather peculiar demand given that such claims do not formally exist), it would be hard-pressed to maintain this as the obstacle to normalization. The challenge really lies in the Karabakh conflict, and whether Turkey is prepared to normalize relations with Armenia given the status-quo. This will deeply alienate Azerbaijan, unless there is a context to this normalization that would make it in Azerbaijan's favor to at least tolerate normalization. Otherwise, Turkey will have to decide whether it can mollify Azerbaijan in other ways.

# “THE CAUCASUS NEEDS A REST AFTER THE WAR”

## Interview with Alexander Rahr\*

*Conducted by Jan Künzler for CRIA*

**Question:** Six weeks ago, the war between Russia and Georgia over the secessionist Georgian provinces Abkhazia and South Ossetia ended. What is the current situation, especially concerning the withdrawal of the Russian troops from Georgian territory?

**Rahr:** The current situation is quite different from the status quo which existed in the region between 1992 and 2008. The Russian troops will be withdrawn from the Georgian mainland, but they will stay in Abkhazia and South Ossetia. These secessionist regions have been recognized as independent states by Russia. I think that Abkhazia and South Ossetia will join the collective security pact of the CIS countries in the next months. They may even become members of the so-called Russian and Belarusian Union State which would give Russia the legal fundament to keep its troops in both republics. The broader picture will be like the following: the Russian troops will leave Georgian main territory and the former Russian peacekeeping missions in the secessionist provinces will be recognized by observers from the EU which will get an OSCE mandate to monitor the borders between Georgia and South Ossetia and Abkhazia. This will not take place without conflict and harsh rhetoric on either side, but is the most likely scenario for the upcoming weeks and months.

**Question:** As reasons for the massive Russian intervention - even in the Georgian heartland- foremost two reasons are frequently stated: The geopolitical importance of Georgia as a transit route for resources to the West as well as the will of the Russian Administration to stop the expansion of western interests in the post-Soviet area. What is your explanation?

**Rahr:** The Russian intervention in Georgia served four main goals:

First: Russia wanted to protect its peacekeepers and the inhabitants with Russian passports. If Russia had failed to protect its interests and safeguard its peacekeepers, the Russian Great Power status would have been badly damaged.

Second: Russia clearly drew a red line to the West; much like the West did 50 years ago in the Cuba Crisis. Russia is not going to accept a further expansion of the NATO in the heartland of the post-Soviet territories, which are regarded as specific and historic zones of influence of Russia.

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Therefore, the response was very harsh, including the destruction of Georgian infrastructure and the humiliation of Georgia and also that of the USA and the West.

Third: another aim was, of course, to regain its sphere of interest in the big energy game which is conducted in the Caucasus, maybe even to weaken Georgia as a future transit state for energy flows from east to west. Russia sent a clear signal to western investors that investments in Georgia are not safe and the Nabucco Pipeline is dead.

Fourth: Russia destroyed the infrastructure of the Georgian army in order to make the Georgian side less capable of making a new effort at a military solution in South Ossetia in the future. This makes clear that it was also a military task.

***Question:** In the Caucasus crisis, Russian aggressiveness and Western cautiousness were peculiar. What are the implications for the other hotspots like Nagorno-Karabakh and Transnistria?*

**Rahr:** The Russian aggressiveness was peculiar, but the role of the Georgian aggressiveness should not be underestimated. It provoked the Russian response. The issue of the Georgian intervention will be the subject of a very intense discussion inside the Georgian elite and President Saakashvili will probably not survive this internal debate politically.

You can compare the Transnistrian issue with South Ossetia and Abkhazia because most of the citizens of Transnistria have Russian passports. At the same time we see that the situation in Moldova itself is less tense. The President of Moldova, Voronin, is not Saakashvili - he is not willing to solve the problem by force and he is not presenting Moldova - like, for example, Yushchenko in Ukraine does - as another victim of Russia. On the contrary, he is willing to solve the Transnistrian issue in the framework of a kind of (con)federation for Moldova in return to the Kozak-Plan. This plan was developed by Russia in 2003 and was partly accepted by Moldova by this time, but was fully rejected by NATO and EU. I think it is now possible to return to the Kozak-Plan in Moldova. Before the developments of the 8<sup>th</sup> of August, this could have been a very interesting concept for Georgia as well.

My feeling about Nagorno-Karabakh is that the Russian influence over this conflict is much smaller than that over Abkhazia, South Ossetia and Transnistria. Nagorno-Karabakh is an issue which is being dealt with much more seriously on an international level. There is a strong involvement of the USA and of France, which has a considerable Armenian diaspora. This is much more crucial in this context than the Russian involvement. Of course Russia is playing its game in Nagorno-Karabakh, but it is not the ultimate force which can do what it wants in that part of the Caucasus. The Turkish influence is an important factor as well. The Nagorno-Karabakh issue is much more complex and much more difficult to resolve. But anyway, I think the EU has heard the recent wakeup call and is beginning to engage in this region. The resolution of the frozen conflict in Nagorno-Karabakh is one of the key tasks of the EU in the region.

***Question:** The EU and the NATO have vital interests in the South Caucasus which currently seem to clash with those of Russia. What kind of strategy could prove successful to protect them? Isolation of and confrontation with Russia or rather an engagement-oriented approach?*

**Rahr:** I do not think that one can say that the interests of the EU really clash with those of Russia. The EU has not fully positioned itself in the Caucasus yet. So we will see whether there will be common interests with Russia or a clash of interests in the future. NATO is also not positioned in the South Caucasus and it is split about the topic of its enlargement in the Caucasus. Considering this, I do not see NATO interests clashing with those of Russia, either. They may clash soon, but there is still a possibility that the expansion of NATO to Georgia will be postponed. Furthermore, a country like Azerbaijan is not ready to join NATO not only because of its problems with Armenia which, in turn, is a member of a different military organisation [*author's note:* The Collective Security Treaty Organisation]. The Caucasus needs a rest after the war. And Georgia alone in NATO is not making the region any safer.

But that does not mean that the West will relinquish its influence in the South Caucasus to Russia. What I predict is a stronger development of the EU security and defence policy in the region. Maybe the EU soft power along with NATO power could find the political will to do more than they have done before, including a new mission on Nagorno-Karabakh to try to solve this conflict in an attempt to bring Turkish and Armenian interests together. Although the current US Administration favours a containment policy towards Russia, I still think an engagement-oriented approach is possible.

*Question:* Russia sent a clear signal that it is willing to secure its interests in the so called 'near abroad' even by military means if needed. Ukraine is a country seeking membership in the EU which includes with the Crimea a territory of great geopolitical importance where the majority of the population is constituted by ethnic Russians. What are the implications for Ukraine?

**Rahr:** The Crimea is indeed a region with a huge population of ethnic Russians, but according to my knowledge this fact is changing. The ethnic group of Tatars is growing quickly and could become the biggest minority, a fact that should not be underestimated. Another aspect is that the Ukrainian constitution prohibits double citizenship. Russian citizenship - if it is really offered to Russians on a large scale, as is stated by the Ukrainian foreign minister and disputed by the Russian Foreign Ministry - confronts the people with a very difficult dilemma. The situation is very different to what we have in Abkhazia and South Ossetia, where the inhabitants had no connection to the Georgian state, the Georgian police or the Georgian authorities. I do not believe that the majority of the population of ethnic Russians in Ukraine or the Crimea wants to be part of Russia as is the case in Abkhazia and South Ossetia. What could happen is that a conflict will develop over the Black Sea Fleet. For example in the case that the Russians want to demonstrate is that they are not willing to leave Sevastopol in 2017, when the agreement over the use of the naval base will expire. On the other hand this situation could be worsened by the Ukrainian side, when they try to push the Russians out of Sevastopol earlier than 2017 in order to promote its ambitions for the NATO membership. This is a dangerous moment which should be watched closely.

*Question:* In November the USA is electing a new president. What type of policy towards the Caucasus region could be expected of the candidates?

**Rahr:** To be honest, I do not think the Caucasus will play a major role. The financial crisis is by far the most important issue. In general one can say that McCain will probably be more favourable to a containment policy towards Russia and that Obama will be more reluctant.

He will look for opportunities for cooperation, but he will probably not be doing it by himself, but by listening to the European attitude towards Russia more closely.

***Question:** The rhetoric in the West and Russia in the aftermath of the conflict resembled that of the Cold War era. Is there a threat of a new Cold War? And does Russia want to restore its empire?*

**Rahr:** It is true, the rhetoric resembled that of the Cold War. But I do not see an upcoming confrontation like in the Cold War era. There might be an attempt of Russia to restore its empire, but not in a classical sense of warfare and of occupying territories. Russia does not have the military means and is not in the economic situation to do that. What Russia could probably try to do is to develop mechanisms for the reintegration of post-Soviet areas, which could under the circumstances become neo-imperialistic. The reintegration process could go hand in hand with pressuring states through energy policy to the subordination to Russian influence. Russia could make attempts to replace pro-American regimes with more Russian friendly regimes, but the Russian capability for such a policy is very restrained.

But it could also be possible that this will not happen. There will be a process of integration in the post-Soviet area, because almost everywhere states are coming together and trying to integrate in regional alliances in order to become economically more efficient; but this process does not necessarily have to take place under a Russian flag. It is also thinkable partly under a Chinese flag, or partly under some kind of Kazakh flag. Also the idea of the GUAM [Organization consisting of Georgia, Ukraine, Azerbaijan and Moldova] could be revived in a certain way. With such integration, the West could not only live with it, but it should even support it. The EU-membership brings the promise of prosperity and financial support. If we close the door of the EU to countries like Ukraine or the South Caucasian states, because we are frightened to overstretch the Union, then we should not be alarmed if these countries will seek other forms of integration with the Islamic world, with Asia or again with Russia.

## BOOK REVIEW

### *THE GHOST OF FREEDOM - A HISTORY OF THE CAUCASUS*

BY CHARLES KING

(Oxford University Press; 2008; ISBN13: 9780195177756; 291 pp; \$29.95)

#### *This Book Review was written by Jan Künzl\**

The Caucasus, an impressive mountain range of about 1100km length, stuck between the Black - and Caspian Seas, has always been home to an astonishing variety of different ethnic, religious and linguistic groups. At all times, the interests of the neighbouring great powers clashed in the Caucasus. For a long time the Russian, Ottoman and Persian Empires struggled for influence and hegemony in the region. Now, at the beginning of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, a clash of interests between a resurrecting Russia and NATO seems to emerge.

With his newest book “The Ghost of Freedom - A History of the Caucasus” Professor Charles King from the Georgetown University presents a broad history of this region, from the expansion of the Russian Empire into the Caucasus at the beginning of the 19<sup>th</sup> century to the politically unstable present.

The book deals mainly with two key aspects, which initially seem somewhat unrelated, but soon turn out to be two sides of the same coin.

At the geopolitical level King draws a picture of the Caucasus as a region, which could never be fully controlled by any hegemonic power. At least some of the countless ethnic groups of the region were always rebellious in the face of the dominance of the Russian Empire, of the Soviet-Union and now of Russia and the post-Soviet nation-states in the South Caucasus. Even long lasting and brutally conducted low intensity wars and large scale demographic engineering, i.e. the deportation of whole people, had not changed that.

The title of the volume “The Ghost of Freedom” is borrowed from Alexander Pushkin’s famous novel “Captive of the Caucasus”. The motif of the Ghost of Freedom runs like a thread through the whole book. Freedom is thereby not only to be understood as the political freedom of certain groups, but as an image of freedom that is projected onto the Caucasus from outside, as well. With the second key aspect King makes an effort on a psychological and cultural level to show how the Caucasus and its dwellers are seen from the outside, and how those outside perceptions are affecting the self-perception of the inhabitants of the Caucasus. To illustrate this, King draws on rather unusual, but still quite enlightening examples for the naïve transfiguration of the Caucasus as a room of wild beauty, populated by

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noble-minded, freedom-loving and fierce warriors. The legendary beauty, especially of the female Caucasians, which even led to the exposition of fake Caucasian maidens in American sideshows, falls into this category as well. The view of the Caucasus from the perspectives of King's various examples is affected by the strong myth of a place where the escape of the limitedness and narrowness of the own existence and thereby true freedom lures.

Finally, both stated aspects interact. Both the violence, in all its forms which took place in the Caucasus, and the romanticization of the region and its inhabitants contributed to the construction of collective identities in the Caucasus itself.

King presents a book which is well researched, inventive and remarkably readable. The rather unusual perspectives he proposes from time to time are entertaining and highlight his theses. The publisher describes "The Ghost of Freedom" as the first general history of the modern Caucasus. This claim is somewhat exaggerated, however, as such a task is barely achievable in some 300 pages. Instead, King's volume is better suited as an introduction for readers who want to get a general idea of the confusing heterogeneity of the Caucasus and its turbulent history.

A rather weak part of the book is the last chapter, which describes the Caucasus after the collapse of the Soviet Union. The view at the central set of the problems, concerning nation-building, secession and territorial integrity is somewhat shallow. King writes:

*"There would have been no post-Soviet wars in the Caucasus if elites at the republican level had not tried to prevent their regional counterparts from claiming rights to secession and sovereignty - the very rights, of course, that the republican elites were claiming vis-à-vis Moscow".*

This statement is certainly right, but not sophisticated enough. Considering the magnitude of collective identities in the Caucasus and the relatively easy process of the construction of national identity - as King so vividly describes it - it becomes clear that the Caucasus needs to establish ways of dealing with collective identities which embrace mechanisms of autonomy rather than secession.

Another aspect, which is barely covered, is the recent revival of Russia's geopolitical ambitions. Those have an increasingly important impact on the perpetuation of the so-called 'frozen conflicts' in the Caucasus, even before the bang of Russia's invasion in Georgia this August.

Nevertheless, "The Ghost of Freedom" is a recommendable introduction to a region which increasingly (re)gains global importance. It does not only deliver the background information for a better understanding of the recent regional developments, but encourages one to think about the construction of collective identities and (national) myths in a general way.

**About the Author:** *Dr. Charles King is Professor of International Affairs and Professor of Government at Georgetown University, USA. His previous books include [Nations Abroad: Diaspora Politics and International Relations in the Former Soviet Union](#) (1998) and [The Moldovans: Romania, Russia, and the Politics of Culture](#) (2000) and [The Black Sea: A History](#) (2004). Dr. King's research interests include ethnicity and nationalism in the former Soviet Union and eastern Europe. His articles on the postcommunist world have appeared in*

*World Politics, Foreign Policy, International Security, Slavic Review, and other journals, and he has contributed opinion pieces to such newspapers as The Los Angeles Times, The Wall Street Journal and The Christian Science Monitor.*

## BOOK REVIEW

### ***THE PEASANT VENTURE: TRADITION MIGRATION, AND CHANGE AMONG GEORGIAN PEASANTS IN TURKEY***

BY PAUL J. MAGNARELLA

(Schenkman Publishing Company: Cambridge, MA, 1979; 175 pp)

*This Book Review was written by Aaron Elrich\**

Often researchers and reviewers, in the search for new materials and books, neglect older works that are vitally important to our understanding the present. One of these books is Paul Magnarella's *The Peasant Venture: Tradition, Migration and Change among Georgian Peasants in Turkey*, published in 1979 by Schenkman Publishing. Magnarella, an anthropologist by training, lived in the Georgian village of Hayriye in Turkey at a pivotal historical moment – a moment where the more salient signifiers of ethnic Georgianness in a village far away from its ethnic-kin state were being lost. The loss of Georgian uniqueness has been further fueled by the well-documented large scale out-migration of agrarian Turkish citizens to Germany, which further changed the social balance of the town.

The story of Hayriye is an age old story of war and exodus. During the 1877-1878 Russo-Turkish war, Georgian Muslims, who had sided with the Ottomans, were exiled *en masse* into Turkey. Many of them did not stay close to the Georgian border but fled significant distances. Hayriye is located near Bursa to the south of Istanbul, a long way from the province of Artvin from which Hayriye's Georgians were originally from. Beyond the physical distance from Georgian lands, the long years of the Cold War further separated Hayriye's Georgians from their ethnic kin.

So how did an isolated Georgian village in Turkey develop? Magnarella seeks to answer this question on social, political and economic levels. The most fascinating part of the book, however, is Magnarella's explanation of the decline and fall of the social hierarchy in Hayriye as a result of migration. In addition to close anthropological study, the book benefits greatly from rich survey data collected from the Hayriye Village Research study, part of a comprehensive community survey of villages carried out by the Middle East Technical University.

As in many agricultural communities, social hierarchy was intimately tied to wealth. Wealth, in turn, was based on the size and quality of agricultural land holdings of households. In a village of

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178 households, less than 10% composed the highest strata of the society in Hayriye and most of the households possessed between 25 and 47 decares of land. Traditionally, the village *agas*, or elders, were respected members of the community drawn from the agricultural elite. Migration, however drastically changed social norms and hierarchy in the village. Indeed, Hayriye's denizens soon had a different reference group – German factory workers. Women, who had often fulfilled traditional social roles in Hayriye, began to work in Germany, after they joined their husbands who had originally migrated by themselves. Those migrants who returned to Turkey from urbanized Germany no longer wanted to live in their village and instead of investing in their decaying Georgian style houses, built concrete blocks in neighboring cities, leading to the depopulation of Hayriye and forced grandmothers and grandfathers to do much more heavy agricultural labor. Most importantly, perhaps, was that wealth became totally unhinged from land tenure. Indeed, many of the poorest of the village's households, who had most wanted to migrate because of their relative economic deprivation, suddenly became some of the wealthiest.

While the study provides many rich insights into the history of Turkish Georgians, it lacks some context because Magnarella could only speak Turkish and not Georgian; furthermore, he could not go to Georgia (because of the Cold War) and witness Georgian practices within Georgia. One fascinating insight is the inability of development workers to develop communal self-help organizations - a phenomenon witnessed across modern Georgia and not present in Armenia. This lends tantalizing evidence to the idea that the Georgian's inability to create coherent social movements, may pre-date Soviet intervention. While Stephen Jones' work, *Socialism in Georgian Colors*, provides convincing evidence of Georgian social mobilization and organization in the late 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> centuries, this social organization may have remained superficial and not deeply ingrained into individual Georgian's patterns of behavior. These organizations then may have quickly unraveled with Soviet rule and further deteriorated as Georgians returned to a more subsistence-based society after the collapse of the Soviet Union, since such social organizations had shallow roots.

Unfortunately, returning to examine the question of communal cooperation in Turkey may no longer be possible since migration and urbanization have taken its toll on the able-bodied population of Hayriye, but could still be interesting to compare to other ethnic Turkish villages in the vicinity. Other questions, however, remain pertinent. Magnarella writes that young children were unlikely to speak Georgian before going to school. Likely, returning to the village today most in this community would be monolingual and parents would speak Turkish at home. As the author notes himself, gauging language knowledge among ethnic minorities in Turkey is difficult, since there is strong social pressure from above to speak Turkish and many survey respondents, fearing negative repercussions of speaking Georgian, may not answer. Despite the difficulty at getting at some of the issues of identity and change in Turkey, it would be fascinating to do a follow up study in Hayriye. Unfortunately, not enough of this academic work is done, since it is not theoretically groundbreaking or sufficiently unique for the world of academia in constant pursuit of Kantian originality.