

“THERE HAS NEVER BEEN AN UNBIASED RUSSIAN MEDIATION IN SOUTH CAUCASIAN CONFLICTS”

Interview with Dr. Martin Malek*

Conducted by Jan Künzler, Editorial Assistant of CRIA



Question: Last year Armenia and Azerbaijan held talks and ended up signing the Moscow Declaration - the first joint document since the beginning of a cease-fire in 1994. What do you think are the prospects for a peace process tackling the conflict over Nagorno-Karabakh? Will the news concerning the new Russian military deliveries to Armenia amounting to \$800 million negatively affect Russia's mediation?

Malek: There has never been an unbiased, non-partisan “Russian mediation” in South Caucasian “hot” and then “frozen conflicts”. Moscow is certainly no honest broker, but a party in all of these conflicts and tries to manipulate them in order to promote what it calls its interests in the region. It is impossible not to realize that Moscow's allies in the South Caucasus so far have never been defeated – and this unites Armenia, South Ossetia, and Abkhazia.

I do not expect any significant changes in the peace process over Nagorno-Karabakh in 2009. The positions of the two sides are clear and well-known for a very long time, and there are no changes in Baku's and/or Yerevan's views on the horizon. The shipments of Russian military hardware will reinforce Armenia's conviction that there is no necessity to compromise on Karabakh.

Question: In 2008 the security situation in the Russian provinces of the North Caucasus, particularly in Ingushetia deteriorated. Is this development likely to continue and is there a threat of a Chechnya-style escalation?

Malek: The security situation in Ingushetia as well as in parts of Dagestan could further deteriorate, albeit the reasons in the two republics are different. As to Ingushetia, it is obvious that large parts of the population do not trust the new, Moscow-appointed leadership of the Republic under President Yunus-Bek Yevkurov, not to mention the previous Zyazikov Administration. Nevertheless, there are almost no chance for former President Ruslan Aushev (an outspoken Kremlin critic), who is still very popular among his countrymen, to return to office.

* **Dr. Martin Malek** is a (civilian) researcher at the Institute for Peace Support and Conflict Management of the National Defense Academy (Vienna) since 1997. Several internships in research institutes in Germany, Russia, Ukraine and the U.S. Areas of expertise: State failing theories, theories of ethnic conflicts, security and military policy in the Commonwealth of Independent States (especially Russia, Ukraine, South Caucasus). Author of two books and some 250 publications in thirteen countries.

Tiny Ingushetia has (at least) two territorial problems – one with Chechnya (Sunzha district) and another, which is much more serious, with North Ossetia – the Prigorodny district. There are still Ingush refugees who cannot return to their homes in this region after they were driven out in 1992 by Ossetian militants. Chechen President Ramzan Kadyrov's intention to merge Chechnya with Ingushetia (of course, under his rule) could provoke further protests and unrest in Ingushetia. And the Kremlin has not changed its strategy in the North Caucasus since the 19th Century – “divide and rule”. Nevertheless, I do not expect a large-scale, Chechnya-like military escalation in other republics of the North Caucasus: The central authorities in Moscow have proven their decisiveness to scotch any significant resistance to their rule by force.

***Question:** Abkhazia and South Ossetia de facto seceded from Georgia. What could the future for these territories look like? Is it likely that South Ossetia will join the Russian Federation?*

Malek: Abkhazia and South Ossetia *de facto* seceded from Georgia not only in August 2008, but already at the beginning of the nineties. This is an obvious example of the change of internationally recognised borders by force and a gross violation of international law which the international community and the UN must not tolerate.

At least for a “transitional period”, Abkhazia and South Ossetia will remain “independent”, but as a matter of fact, they are already now Russian provinces: the rouble is legal tender, the border with Russia is open, about 90% of the population hold (from the point of view of Georgia's legislation, illegally) Russian citizenship, Moscow is going to establish military bases in the two entities, many senior officials in politics and the security bodies have been recruited in Russia, etc.

***Question:** At the NATO summit in December, NATO refused to grant a Membership Action Plan to Georgia once again and the prospects for such a step to happen in the medium-term are low. Could this be seen as an outcome of the August war between Russia and Georgia? And how does this decision affect the stability in the region?*

Malek: Independent Russian media outlets left no doubt that Moscow was very satisfied by NATO's refusal to grant a MAP to Georgia at the Bucharest Summit in April 2008 and that the Kremlin felt its hands “untied”: Prime Minister Vladimir Putin, obviously, wanted to seize the opportunity to “discipline” Georgia once and for all and to demonstrate to NATO that it is better to stay out of the South Caucasus, which (like the entire CIS) Moscow claims as its exclusive “sphere of special interests”. Russian senior officials, among them Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov, have repeatedly warned NATO that Georgia's membership could drag the Alliance into a war with Russia. This has certainly affected NATO's decision to deny Georgia a concrete membership perspective again in December 2008. You won't find any politician in Western Europe or North America who is delighted by a scenario like the deployment of soldiers to a Georgian-Russian front running through South Ossetia.

But anyway it is be difficult to imagine a country as a member of a military alliance whose government does not control two of its provinces which have been recognised by a powerful neighbour as “independent states”.

Question: *The opposition to Georgia's president Saakashvili in Georgia is increasing. What are the prospects for Saakashvili to survive politically? What could be the political alternatives?*

Malek: First of all it has to be emphasised that opposition is one of the most important features of a democratic political system, and if it wins a majority in free and fair elections, it has to replace the incumbent leadership. However, the post-Soviet South Caucasus has seen a lot of *coup d'états*, rigged elections, and political violence, separate from the ethno-territorial conflicts. It is a matter of common knowledge that the first two presidents of Georgia, Sviad Gamsakhurdia and Eduard Shevardnadze, were ousted in 1992 and 2003, respectively. Therefore and due to his declining popularity it is possible that Saakashvili, too, will not be able to complete his current term. Russia wants to get rid of Saakashvili at any cost. There are already several would-be-presidents like, for example, Irakli Alazania and Nino Burdzhanadze. Let the Georgian people decide!

Last but not least it has to be mentioned that it is sometimes a little bit astonishing to see that some of Saakashvili's critics both in Georgia and abroad accuse him of "authoritarianism" while remaining silent on the ethnocratic and authoritarian regimes in the breakaway provinces of Abkhazia and South Ossetia.

Question: *What policy could be expected from the new Obama Administration towards the Caucasus region?*

Malek: It is highly unlikely that the Caucasus will become one of the priorities of the Obama Administration, which faces a lot of other challenges: above all, the financial crisis. In the realm of foreign policy, its attention will be focused on the war in Afghanistan, the withdrawal from Iraq, the Middle East, the Iranian nuclear program, the hunt for Usama bin Laden and the difficult relations with China and Russia. It has to be expected that the new Secretary of State Hillary Clinton will not advocate Georgia's NATO membership with the emphasis of the Bush Administration.