

Relations Between the North and South Caucasus: Divergent Paths?

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Abstract

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

The Caucasus: An Entity in its Own Right?

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

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

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

The Impact of the 1990s Georgian Wars

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

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

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

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

The Chechen Wars

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

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

The second Chechen war, which began in 1999, occurred during the same period that Russia tried to restore its influence among the former Soviet republics.

In parallel to conducting large-scale military operations in Chechnya, Russia tightened its relationship with Azerbaijan and sent some strong signals to the Georgian authorities. Nevertheless, the perception of the Chechen War as a Russian “internal affair” remained predominant; beyond accepting a few thousands refugees, Azerbaijani and Georgian authorities remained very cautious towards Russia during this time.

The Russia–Georgia War of August 2008

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

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

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

The Sochi Olympic Games

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

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

of a free-visa regime (see the article in this issue by Paata Zakareishvili).

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

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

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

About the Author

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