

text of relations between Azerbaijan and Russia. Most of the time relations between Azerbaijan and the Russian South were hostage to overall relations between Baku and Moscow. However, recent developments suggest that the roles have changed. Today, with active cross-border cooperation and common security concerns, the Russian establishment is careful not to spoil relations

with Azerbaijan, fearing that such actions would negatively affect the Northern Caucasus, and especially Dagestan. Azerbaijan was thus able to link its own interests with those of Russia, ensuring that Moscow is not only interested in maintaining good relations with Azerbaijan, but also in continuing economic and political stability there.

About the Author

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

By Paata Zakareishvili, Tbilisi

Abstract

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

Not Only Russia's Problem

Russia's "Achilles heel" is its volatile North Caucasus region where simmering ethnic and religious divisions and estrangement from the state have become permanent. One possibility that would pose a grave danger to Russia's national security and call into question its survival is the entire North Caucasus spinning out of control.

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

Any reasonable policy would recognize that both countries have a vital interest in making the situation in the North Caucasus stable and predictable. The mounting unresolved problems in the North Caucasus should not be viewed as a challenge to Russia only. Although they do not pose any direct threat to Georgia's national

security, they can represent a security risk for both Georgia and another regional player, Azerbaijan, in terms of both regional and internal stability. That is why it is necessary to analyze the Georgian government's current policy toward the North Caucasus and assess how adequately it responds to the growing challenges from this region.

The North Caucasus in Georgian Policy

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

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

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

Broadcasting “The First Caucasus News”

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

In principle, the creation of a new television station providing more information to the residents of the North Caucasus serves humanitarian goals. However, after the end of the Cold War, state radio and TV broadcasts beamed into other countries became more civilized and legitimate in the territories of their target states. All the leading radio stations that formerly broadcasted into the Soviet Union sought to acquire the legal right to broadcast, entering into agreements with the governments of the states for whose citizens they sought to provide more information. Against this background, the actions of the new channel that is funded from Geor-

gia’s state budget are expressly provocative. Especially as the station management does not deny the purpose of the broadcasts. As stated by Ekaterine Kotrikadze, the cofounder of the TV channel and the director of the information service of the First Information Caucasus (FIC), “We will certainly focus on the North Caucasus. We want to fill the information gap that somehow exists in the North Caucasus.”² And Oleg Panfilov, the director of the Center for Journalism in Extreme Situations and the leading journalist of the FIC channel, confirms the statement: “I think the First Caucasus is a station intended for a foreign audience, since there are very few Russian-speaking channels, which can provide information that differs from Russian propaganda. That’s exactly why the First Caucasus was created.”³ However, in July 2010, Yulia Latinina, one of the leading Russian liberal journalists, welcomed the initial suppression of the First Caucasus channel during her broadcast on the radio station Eko Moskvu: “The First Caucasus channel, whose establishment was an obvious mistake of Saakashvili, has ceased its broadcasting. Rectifying errors is definitely more important than not committing them.”⁴ Clearly such initiatives will not contribute to improving relations between Georgia and Russia, as the Russian government did not agree to the broadcasts.

The Issue of “Genocide” and the Sochi Olympic Games

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Whether the issue of the Circassians, who were driven out of Russia *en masse* after their defeat in 1864, should be labeled genocide is not an idle or abstract topic. The Georgians raised this issue to achieve specific results. At the November conference, the speakers gave special consideration to linking the Circassian genocide

to the 2014 Sochi winter Olympic Games. According to the Ilia University rector, one of the official organizers of the conference, "Sochi is a place where the Circassian genocide was committed. We all have come to the conclusion that this is not a suitable place for conducting the Olympics."⁸

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

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

Yes, it is.

So, will it take place?

Yes, it will. Why?

But it will further complicate relations with Russia.

Why, is there any "further"?⁹

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

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

Relaxed Visa Regulations for North Caucasians

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

In response to Lavrov's statement that a decision should have been taken on the basis of bilateral agree-

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

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

A Possible Way Forward: Some Recommendations

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

13 <http://news.day.az/georgia/232938.html>

14 <http://www.rian.ru/politics/20101014/285472838.html>

15 <http://www.rian.ru/politics/20101012/284693656.html>

16 <http://www.rian.ru/politics/20101015/285932216.html>

17 <http://www.civil.ge/rus/article.php?id=21265&search> Russia introduced the visa regime with Georgia in December 2000. But the decision did not apply to the residents of Abkhazia and North Ossetia, although then Russia formally recognized Abkhazia and North Ossetia as parts of Georgia. In December 2003, Russia unilaterally introduced a facilitated visa regime for the residents of Adjara. Moscow then called the decision "temporary measure", while Tbilisi responded with a protest.

18 <http://www.interpressnews.ge/ru/2010-05-25-09-32-40/23963-2010-10-12-17-20-08.html>

19 <http://www.civil.ge/rus/article.php?id=21698&search>

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

despite the absence of diplomatic relations between the two countries and notwithstanding the occupation of the Georgian territories by Russia, for the sake of stability in the region. Proposals of such an initiative could be made through, or with the participation of, the EU or OSCE.

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

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