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## Analysis

### Russia's "Internal South Caucasus:" The Role and Importance of Caucasus Societies for Russia

By Sergey Markedonov, Moscow

#### Abstract

Large diasporas from the three South Caucasus countries live inside Russia, though estimates vary on their actual size. None of these groups are monolithic and politicians and the media often fail to understand their diversity and the role they play. The diasporas have an impact on the development of relations between Russia and its South Caucasus neighbors, not least through the large money transfers flowing from Russia to the region. The experience of productive ties between Sochi officials and the Georgian community living in the area could serve as a model for improving Georgian-Russian relations. To date, Russia has underestimated the role that its diasporas could play in advancing its interests.

#### A Zone of Special Interest

After the collapse of the Soviet Union, Russia declared the South Caucasus a zone of its priority national interests. At the end of August 2008's "five-day war," Moscow came to see this Eurasian region not only as an important priority, but as a sphere of geopolitical influence. Accordingly, the South Caucasus is important for Russia not only as a foreign policy problem, but as a major influence on the security of the North Caucasus republics, which are part of the Russian Federation. Present-day Russia is a state with numerous diasporas, representing the various ethnic groups of the independent South Caucasus states. Thus, we can speak about "an internal South Caucasus" in Russia, which plays a significant role in the development of Russian business, domestic, and foreign policies.

#### Calculating the Size of the Diasporas

Russia's Armenian community is the largest diaspora from the South Caucasus. According to Russia's 2002 census, there are 1.13 million Armenians living in the country. This ethnic group is the fourth in absolute size, following the Russians, Tatars, and Ukrainians. In some Russian regions, such as Stavropol and Krasnodar, the

Armenians became the second largest ethnic group, after the Russians, in the post-Soviet period. There are 350,200 Armenians in Stavropol, 274,600 in Krasnodar, and 230,000 in Rostov.

In October 2003, the Union of Armenians of Russia helped form the World Armenian Organization, which brings together representatives of Armenian diasporas in 52 countries. Ara Abramian, an influential Russian entrepreneur, was elected its president. Abramian helped renovate the Kremlin in 1994-1999 and served as an official supporter during Putin's 2000 and 2004 presidential campaigns. The Novo-Nakhichevan and Russian diocese of the Armenian Apostolic Church (centered in Moscow) are active in Russia and Moscow Mayor Yury Luzhkov has noted the close ties between the Armenian and Russian Orthodox churches. In recent years, the Russian Orthodox Church has sought to achieve ideological and political dominance in Russia.

Russia's Georgian diaspora numbers about 198,000 and is considered the largest of all Georgian diasporas. However, the Georgian diaspora in Turkey may be larger, but that country does not provide data on the size of its ethnic groups and many Georgian there have assimilated.

Russia's Azerbaijani diaspora is the world's second largest, following the one in Iran. The 2002 census listed 621,840 Azerbaijanis in Russia, spread among 55 regions. The largest groups are in Dagestan (111,700), Moscow (94,542), St. Petersburg (approximately 90,000), Volgograd Oblast (14,000), and Tver Oblast (4,600). Azerbaijani businessmen work at the highest levels in Russia, including Vagit Alekperov, the head of Lukoil, Tel'man Ismailov (AST holding and Moscow's Praga restaurant) and El'man Bairamov (Mosazervinzavod).

According to the leaders of the diaspora organizations and representatives of the law enforcement agencies, the Armenian, Georgian, and Azerbaijani presence inside Russia is significantly higher than the official figures. The leaders of the All Russian Azerbaijani Congress count 1.5 to 2 million Azerbaijanis in Russia. In 2001 Azerbaijani President Heidar Aliiev cited a figure of 1.2 million. Abramian claimed that there were 2 million Armenians living in Russia at the beginning of the 2000s. According to Georgian ethnic associations, there are between 300,000 and 500,000 Georgians in Russia. The differences between the official and unofficial figures reflects the presence of illegal and labor migrants, whose goal is not to integrate into Russian society, but to find temporary work or study in Russian universities.

### What is a Diaspora?

None of the Caucasus societies are monolithic in their origins, make-up, or even language. This is particularly true of the Armenian and Georgian diasporas. For example, the Armenian society of Rostov Oblast can trace its roots to the end of the 18<sup>th</sup> century. Many of its members do not speak Armenian. The Georgian village of Greater Sochi in the Plastunik Raion has been around since the 1880s. Many members of the three diasporas have Russian passports and speak Russian, while many others are citizens of the three South Caucasus states. However, holding a passport or even knowing the language is not a decisive factor. For example, the representation of the unrecognized Nagorno-Karabakh Republic in Moscow (which works out of the Armenian embassy) is staffed with Muscovite-Armenians who barely speak Armenian.

Frequently, the Russian media tries to give the term "diaspora" legal substance. It views the diaspora as some sort of organically-united association, something like an estate, but with an ethnic base. Professor Viktor Dyatlov, the famous Russian expert on migration, was right when he said "this wild primordial discourse is particularly characteristic for bureaucrats and journalists trying to deal with the phenomenon of multiethnic associations." Thus we see such formulations as "The Armenian Diaspora Special-

izes in the Hotel Business" (as the Krasnodar media frequently write), or "the law enforcement agencies agreed with the diasporas" (as I saw in an Irkutsk newspaper) and "Azerbaijanis control the Moscow markets," (as Moscow-based publications frequently write).

In reality, the situation is much more complicated. If we are talking about "agreements or negotiations between the authorities and the diasporas," then we mean meetings of bureaucrats with the leaders of social or cultural organizations of Georgian, Armenians, or Azerbaijanis. But what role do these ethno-cultural non-profit organizations really play? In our view, such social structures cannot represent the interests of an entire ethnic group. First, there is no accepted procedure to legitimize the positions of the leaders (the leaders of one or another social-cultural organization were not elected by all the Armenians or Georgians in Moscow or Krasnodar Krai). Second, what we describe as a "diaspora" is a closer to an "ideal type," useful for describing an ethnic community in theoretical terms. Usually, as noted above, these communities are not monolithic, including citizens of a variety of countries and sub-ethnic groups. In the Armenian diaspora in Rostov Oblast, one can find Armenians who descended from migrants who left the Crimea in the 18<sup>th</sup> century (Russian citizens who speak Russian as their native language), refugees from Azerbaijan (also with a Russian passport and in many cases, Russian-speaking), and labor migrants from Armenia and Georgia (with Armenian and Georgian passports respectively). Among the Azerbaijanis in Moscow, there are native Muscovites (people who were born, grew up, and were educated in the Russian capital) as well as people who emigrated from Azerbaijan and Georgia (the Kvemo Kartli region).

Accordingly, formulations of the type that "the Armenian diaspora controls the banks" and the "Azerbaijani diaspora controls the markets" are incorrect from the academic point of view. From a political perspective, they are simply dangerous because they encourage xenophobia and flagrant racism. Among the Russian Armenians, Georgians, and Azerbaijanis, there are doctors, entrepreneurs, teachers, and naturally criminals. Therefore, designating "spheres of specialization" to the ethnic groups is a great mistake. In particular, researchers face considerable difficulties in finding reliable statistics saying how many people of each group are working in which sphere.

### The Role and Influence of the Caucasus Factor

The role and influence of the "Caucasus factor" inside Russia on determining Russia's foreign policy to the

region deserves much greater attention than it has received to date. It is particularly important for Russia to understand the role that representatives of the Caucasus diaspora play in advancing Russia's interests in Eurasia. Moreover, the diasporas can play a part in regulating the conflicts that shape the region, such as the Armenian-Azerbaijan dispute over Nagorno-Karabakh, and reviving the Russian-Georgian dialogue that was effectively halted by the events of the 2008 "five-day" war.

The socio-economic influence of representatives of the diaspora on their "historic homelands" also deserves serious attention. In conditions of the global financial crisis, this influence takes on great importance. The most intense monetary flows go from Russia to Azerbaijan. Annual remissions make up \$1.8 to \$2.4 billion, according to Ruslan Grinberg, director of the Institute of the Economy of the Russian Academy of Sciences. In 2006, Russian Finance Minister Alexei Kudrin claimed the flows were \$2 billion a year. Somewhat less intensive flows go from Russia to Georgia and Armenia. According to the Bank of Russia, during the first quarter of 2008, flows from Russia to Georgia were \$142 million. The National Bank of Georgia claimed that from January to May 2008, Georgia's commercial banks received from abroad \$378 million, of which \$223.7 million came from Russia. Thus almost 60 percent of foreign money sent to Georgia comes from Russia. According to the Central Bank of Armenia, 70 percent of "foreign transfers" to Armenia come from Russia. Of course, these official figures are only the tip of the iceberg since many Azerbaijanis, Georgians, and Armenians transfer money by hand.

The entire post-Soviet period is replete with examples of how the diasporas shape bilateral Russian-Armenian, Russian-Georgian, and Russian-Azerbaijani relations. The anti-Armenian policy pursued by Krasnodar Krai governor Aleksandr Tkachev significantly affected relations between Moscow and Yerevan. In 2003, the presidents of Russia and Armenia discussed the statements of the Krasnodar governor. Subsequently, he had to explain himself to the Armenian president and then the anti-Armenian rhetoric stopped. However, even today xenophobia (along with the Kremlin's ambiguous position toward Karabakh, the intense pressure exerted by the Russian oligarchs on business in Armenia, and Moscow's displeasure at Yerevan's contacts with the USA and the EU) remains one of the key points of discord between Russia and Armenia.

The Azerbaijani diaspora played an active intermediary role in improving Russian-Azerbaijani relations in 2000-2001. These relations had soured in the beginning of the 1990s, during and after the Karabakh conflict. President Heidar Aliyev initiated the creation of the

influential diaspora organization, the All-Russian Azerbaijani Congress, in 2001. He made it a state priority to maximally unite all Azerbaijanis living outside of their "historic homeland." During the years of its activity, the Congress sought to play the role of an exclusive intermediary between the authorities, law-enforcement agencies, and ordinary Azerbaijanis, particularly migrants.

The most complicated Caucasus relationship is between Russia and Georgia. After Mikheil Saakashvili came to power through the Rose Revolution, the ethno-political conflicts in South Ossetia and Abkhazia began to thaw. The Georgian community living in Russia became a hostage of the countries' bilateral relationship. Most importantly, it became difficult to travel between Georgia and Russia. In December 2000, ostensibly as part of its battle with terrorism, Russia introduced an entry visa requirement for Georgian citizens seeking to visit Russia even though this policy violated the agreements establishing the Commonwealth of Independent States, which set up a visa-free zone. In March 2001, the so-called "adaptation period" ended and it was no longer possible to cross the border with a Soviet passport in the absence of a foreign passport with an entry visa. Although these conditions created extra hardships for Georgians visiting Russia and Russian Federation citizens visiting Georgia, the hope remained that the two countries would eventually return to the pre-2001 order. Moreover, during periods of thaw between the two states, such as the spring of 2008, Russian and Georgian diplomats discussed the possibility of canceling the visa regime. Generally, before the 2008 war, the process of securing a visa in either direction was not difficult, and there were easier procedures for some categories of citizens, such as Georgian citizens who worked and lived in the Russian Federation and were registered in a Russian city or town.

During the Fall 2006 downturn in Georgian-Russian relations, Russia forcibly deported Georgians from its territory. This fact helped bolster the popularity of the Georgian leader, who employed nationalist rhetoric and presented himself as the "president of all Georgians." It also dealt a blow to Russia's international prestige, increasing xenophobia in day-to-day life as well as at the official level. However, the Kremlin learned lessons from the experience of 2006. In the first day of the "five-day war" President Dmitry Medvedev publicly emphasized that the tragedy in South Ossetia in no way should affect the fate of Georgians who were citizens of Russia or any other country.

Additionally, it is worth noting that there are examples of successful cooperation between the Georgian com-

munity in Russia and the local authorities. Most illustrative is the experience of the Georgian community in Sochi, which will be the site of the 2014 Olympics. After the tragic events in Abkhazia of 1992-3, many Georgian refugees fled to the Plastunka Raion near Sochi. In 1999 the Sochi city authorities estimated that 12,000 refugees had arrived. Two years earlier, employees of the Georgian embassy in Moscow estimated that the number of Georgians living in Krasnodar Krai was 17,000 individuals, including 11,000 in the greater Sochi area. Despite some difficulties between the kraï and local authorities, there is no evidence of any conflict between local Georgians (including refugees from Abkhazia) and the local population (including ethnic Abkhaz)! According to the Russian human rights organization Memorial, "the good relations between the Sochi administration and the national-cultural organizations have a positive impact on the situation of the forced migrants. In greater Sochi there are 14 national-cultural associations (societies, diasporas) whose main goal is preserving and developing national cultures, languages, and customs. Representatives of the city administration are also in touch with the cultural center Iveria and provide aid in opening Georgian language classes and holding folklore festivals."

The experience of Moscow, home to many from the South Caucasus, is also useful. It is well known that during the Russian-Georgian crisis of 2006, the city authorities refused to provide lists of Georgian students in middle schools and universities, blocking attempts to create problems for these students.

Thus in drawing up possible scenarios for the development of a Russian-Georgian dialogue, the "Sochi experience" can be used as a positive model of potential "small steps." A similarly positive model is the contacts between the Russian and Georgian autocephalous Orthodox churches. The visit of the Georgian Patriarch Ilia II (according to all Georgian polls, one of the most popular and trusted public figures in the country) to Moscow during the burial of Patriarch Aleksei II in December 2008 was a signal for the Russian and Georgian intelligentsia, including the diaspora. Ilia II brought many authoritative figures of Georgian culture on his trip. In Moscow, members of the local Georgian community met with him. Additionally, in contrast to representatives of official Tbilisi, the Georgian patriarch was able to meet with leaders of the Russian state.

Nevertheless, after Georgia and Russia severed diplomatic relations in August 2008, crossing the Russian bor-

der became much more difficult. Following the war, citizens cannot get visas directly from the other country's embassy, but have to appeal to Swiss intermediaries who look after each side's interests. Thus Georgian citizens have to obtain a visa from the Russian section of the Swiss embassy's consulate. For Russian citizens, the situation is a little easier, since they can obtain a single-entry visa for Georgia upon landing at the airport, though multi-entry visas can only be obtained through the Swiss intermediaries. These procedures create significant problems since the number of visas for Georgian citizens seeking to visit Russia is limited, as is the number of multi-entry visas for Russian citizens entering Georgia.

### **Russia's Official Policy toward Migrants**

Russia's official policy toward migrants and diasporas never supported discriminatory measures and the events of 2006 and 2008 were an exception to this rule. A separate article would be required to examine the migration policies of individual regions. At this level, in some cases, individual governors attempted to impose restrictions on migrants, for example in Krasnodar and Stavropol kraï. Krasnodar Kraï represents a special case. There the peak of xenophobia was the events of 2002, when the governor declared the need to defend the "Kuban's Cossack land" and restrain migrants. However, today in anticipation of the 2014 Olympics and the need to preserve strategic relations with Yerevan, the kraï authorities have effectively reduced their tough xenophobic propaganda. Nevertheless, at the same time, Russia's law enforcement agencies and the general procurator (including its regional branches) are not very active in investigating cases of xenophobia and prosecuting the perpetrators. As a rule, they classify the attacks of various nationalist groups (from the skinheads in Moscow to the neo-Cossack formations in the south) as "ordinary conflicts" that are not driven by ethno-political motivations.

In any case, Russia can use the diasporas (in all their complexity) to advance Russian interests in the South Caucasus more actively. Moscow should have long ago given up its practice of reducing all contacts to the official level and questions of status. There are many channels for influence, not only on the political elites, but on intellectuals, businessmen, and ordinary citizens. In this "unofficial" work, the diaspora is one of the most important, and unfortunately until now, most underestimated, resources.

#### *About the author*

Sergey Markedonov is the head of the Interethnic Relations Department of the Institute of Political and Military Analysis in Moscow.