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Little Wars and a Great Game:  
Local Conflicts and International  
Competition in the Caucasus

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Vicken Cheterian

# Executive Summary

Undoubtedly the conflicts in the Caucasus have deep historic roots. A number of scholars consider that the pre-revolutionary ethnic rivalries surfaced immediately after Soviet pressure against nationalism disappeared. Others argue that the direct reason for recent conflicts in the Caucasus should be traced back to Stalin's policies of divide and rule, while still a third group focuses on political movements that emerged in the late 1980's and the choices taken by their leaders.

Separatism is often seen as the reason for conflict in the Caucasus, although ethnic separatism was a part of the growth of centrifugal trends following the decline of the USSR. In fact, the independence of the three republics (Armenia, Azerbaijan, and Georgia) and the separatist movements (Karabakh, South Ossetia, Abkhazia, and Chechnya) have the same reference, that of a nation's right for self-determination. Yet leaders of the new republics were skeptical towards mobilizing ethnic minorities within their borders, fearing that Moscow was behind these movements in order to limit the drive for genuine sovereignty. This fear, and attempts to repress minorities by force, has led to violent conflicts and failure of the newly independent states to repress separatism. As a result, Armenia became independent only to end up in isolation as the result of a double blockade imposed on it by Azerbaijan and Turkey. Azerbaijan, on the other hand, faces the difficult dilemma of preserving its independence against continuous Russian pressure, regaining territories lost during the Karabakh war, and shipping its oil to international markets. Georgia has shifted from chaotic years of civil and separatist wars (1991-1993) to a period of stability, then back to a rise of regionalist movements in 1998.

On the other hand, while the separatist entities marked military victories, they failed to gain political recognition. Karabakh imposed itself as a regional military factor, and, instead of becoming a tool in the hands of Yerevan politicians, the Karabakh leadership has extended its influence over Armenia. South Ossetia has chosen a conciliatory policy, since North Ossetia (and Moscow) rejected South Osset demands for unification. The southern Abkhaz province of Gali continues to be a battleground between Georgian guerrillas and Abkhaz troops.

Chechnya, after successfully resisting Russian invasion, has failed to create state institutions and become a land dominated by criminal warlords.

A number of potential conflicts could flare up in the future. In the southern Georgian region of Javakheti, local Armenians have demanded autonomy. The Georgian Black Sea region of Ajaria, an autonomous republic, remains beyond the control of the central authorities. The Lezgins are separated by emergence of a new international border between Russia and Azerbaijan. Daghestan, a mosaic of ethnic groups, is going through a severe political crisis and has been influenced by the upheavals in neighboring Chechnya.

As the conflicts in the Caucasus have calmed down, the importance of Caspian oil and pipeline routes have attracted much attention. Oil has introduced a number of great powers into the reign, from the U.S. and E.U. to China and the traditional regional players: Russia, Turkey, and Iran. It remains to be seen what impact oil revenues could have on regional security. While Washington pushes an „East-West“ pipeline policy that excludes Russia and Iran, the E.U. is interested in Caspian oil and construction of pipelines without sharing U.S. geopolitical objectives. Russia is clearly losing its previous dominant position in the Caucasus, following its defeat in Chechnya and its failure to stabilize the rebellious republic. It is unclear whether current military reforms in Russia will cause a definitive Russian military withdrawal from the South Caucasus. Turkey and Iran, both considering the region as strategically vital for their interests, have failed so far to become key players in the region.

The international community has led confusing diplomatic efforts to bring stability to the region. While taking measures against the spread of separatism by recognizing the territorial integrity of states, international organizations have done little to stop repression of minority groups or ethnic movements upon declaring self-determination. The UN and OSCE have been biased toward the states they represent and failed to create a balanced position between the conflict parties to bring them into mutual compromises. The political positions of the international organizations has made humanitarian and development projects difficult to realize in the separatist regions, losing yet another instrument that could help in conflict resolution and increasing suspicion among separatist entities towards the international

communities. On the other hand, efforts of Western states have given some positive impact in respecting human rights, pluralism, and freedom of expression, although much remains before establishing genuine democracies and civilian societies.

# 1 Introduction: Why the Caucasus Matters

Until the end of the 1980's, the Caucasus was a no-place on the map of international relations. Mass movements that erupted first in Karabakh and won various regions of the Caucasus brought the region into the spotlight. Ossets and Abkhaz rebelled against Georgian tutelage over their own „autonomous“ administrations, and declared sovereignty; Armenians, Azeris, and Georgians defied Moscow's hegemony and fought for their own sovereignty against the center of the decomposing Union. Curiously enough, a given political formation, based on an ethnic nationalist movement, struggled for self-determination of its own group, while at the same time repressing the self-determination drive of other minorities within its own borders.

No one was prepared for the conflicts among this mosaic of peoples, languages, and cultures. Leaders of the Soviet Union, including the reformer Gorbachev, were ignorant of the power nationalism could unleash. They had spent seven decades of cultivating a mythical version of national harmony and repressing any autonomous expression of national identity in political or cultural forms. Leaders of the nationalist movements themselves were not ready for such a decade of historic change, from eruption of mass mobilization to the breakdown of the USSR, emergence of independent states, conflicts, and wars. Most nationalist leaders were from the marginal *intelligentsia*, had a vague feeling about the necessity of change, and jumped into movements with the hope of shaping history. While the context in which political objectives were cultivated underwent rapid and sometimes dramatic changes, there were no existing organizational structures, clearly defined ideologies, or programs.

The West and more generally the international community were not ready for the historic events in Eastern Europe and the Soviet Union. Policy makers were suddenly confronted with a great number of names - of peoples, capitals, geographic locations, and individuals about which they had no previous knowledge, they had to propose related policy recommendations under severe time shortage. Several years after the collapse of the Warsaw Pact, clear political objectives have been adopted towards some East European countries. Yet

major Western powers and international institutions have ambiguous and hesitant position towards post-Soviet republics, including such key countries as Russia and Ukraine. Is Russia a future danger? Or should Western institutions try to integrate it? Should Russia be isolated, so that it does not become a menace like the USSR was? Different international organizations or capitals - Washington and Paris, NATO and the G-7 (or G-8?) – propose different policies...

Western attitude, understanding, and policy stand towards the Caucasus is similarly contradictory. Washington first encouraged a Turkish model to be adopted in the Muslim, Turkic-speaking republics in Central Asia as well as in Azerbaijan. The policy goal here was to limit the spread of Iranian influence and the model of the Islamic republic. This policy had two shortcomings. First, it supposed that Russia was definitively abandoning the region. This proved to be wrong. Second, it assumed that the Central Asian republics were looking for a foreign model, which they were not. In fact, the former *nomenklatura* leaders proved to be skillful leaders and could adjust themselves to conditions by becoming rulers of new states with locally created formulas. The Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE), which bears the major weight for conflict mediations in the Caucasus, had difficulties in adopting an approach that facilitates finding realistic solutions to both the security dilemma and the sovereignty question. This continue to be the source of regional instability.

Conflicts in the Caucasus have not gained general public attention. Even at the height of the conflicts, media coverage did not reach levels comparable to, say, the situation in the Middle East. The wars in Karabakh and Abkhazia were never focused on, while the war in Chechnya attracted more attention because it involved a major power, Russia. Since the end of the conflicts, the only topic from this region that attracts media coverage is the oil story. The transition from hopeless warfare to the promise of oil creates an eerie and unreal feeling about the Caucasus, adding to the general incapacity to understand the issues at stake. Thought the war in Kosovo became an issue of internal political debate in Western Europe and a subject for election campaigns, due to potential refugee waves it could cause, the far-away Caucasus has not been seen as a source of „waves of immigrants“ and therefore seems irrelevant for internal



political maneuvering. Hence events in the Caucasus created not direct political impact on political debate in Western Europe.

Yet, for a policy maker, Kosovo and the post-Yugoslav conflicts lack the geopolitical impact of the current situation in the Caucasus. If the conflicts in Bosnia and Kosovo represent an embarrassment to Europe, there is little geopolitical interests there for Washington. The fault line between „East“ and „West“ that ran through the middle of Europe, no longer exists. Rather, such a zone of tension could move more to the East - especially to the region between the Black Sea and the Chinese border, in case of renewed East-West confrontation. „The Transcaspian“, writes U.S. military analyst Stephen Blank, „has become the most important area of direct Western-Russian contention today.“<sup>1</sup> Several high-level Washington figures have described the Caspian, with its potential oil reserves, as part of U.S. national interests. Washington looks at the Caspian basin as an alternative oil source to the unstable Persian Gulf. A number of Western oil giants have signed contracts of up to \$100 billion to invest in the Caspian oil sector. In spite of the continuous fluctuation of oil prices, we are told that oil is not just another commodity but an instrument of power. If this was true in the 20<sup>th</sup> century, the century of hydrocarbon *par excellence*, will it also be true in the new millennium?

The geographic position of the Caucasus itself makes the region important to follow and understand. A number of key regional and international players see in the Caucasus a possible danger for their internal security or an opportunity to further their foreign influence. The three powers neighboring the Caucasus – Russia, Iran and Turkey – conduct delicate power politics there. Russian internal security and its territorial integrity is questioned by the rebellion in Chechnya. The conflict between South Ossetia and Georgia has direct influence on North Ossetia, a republic that comprises part of the Russian Federation. Lezgins and Avars, two peoples who have a fundamental role in North Caucasian Daghestan, are equally spread on the other side of the Russo-Azerbaijani border. Russia watches with anguish at the internationalization of the Caspian Sea and the growing Western influence there. Iran looks at Azerbaijan with similar anguish. Multi-ethnic Iran has a large ethnic Azeri population in its northwest and is sensitive to the official Azeri nationalism now in power in

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<sup>1</sup> Stephen Blank, „American Grand Strategy and the Transcaspian Region“, *World Affairs*, Washington, Fall 2000, page 66.

Baku. Under the previous Azeri president, Abulfaz Elchibey, this nationalism took a pan-Turkic and pan-Azeri form, worrying Tehran. Iran also worries at the growing U.S. influence in the Caspian and Central Asia. Turkey, which has important north Caucasian, Azeri, Armenian, and Georgian minorities as well as a complex history with Armenia and ambitions in the newly independent Turkic republics, has an uneasy policy in the Caucasus.

The Caucasus is important to study in its larger context as well. Situated between the Balkans (which are separated from the Caucasus by the Black Sea), the Middle East, southern Russia, Central Asia, and South Asia, the Caucasus is surrounded by a number of low-security chains, among which it is one of the least stable links. Failure of the new states could lead to a power vacuum and anarchy, transforming into centers of hostage taking, trafficking in drugs and arms, and might serve as a back camp for armed groups and guerrilla organizations. American officials seem worried about the increasing influence of Saudi dissident Ousama bin Laden, from his bases in Afghanistan, over the growing Islamic movement in formerly Soviet Central Asia, with possible over-lapping in both Chechnya and Azerbaijan.<sup>2</sup>

The Caucasus represents a challenge to those studying it. On one hand, it is a newcomer on the scene of international relations and complex with its mosaic of ethnic groups, languages, and conflict zones. On the other, the region has become a subject of study while volatile conditions prevail. What is happening there is unprecedented in history: the transition from Soviet-style economy to primitive capitalism; plus the creation of state structures from the skeleton of the Soviet administrative model; plus ethnic conflicts and border disputes; add to this, the sudden arrival of oil interests and a big-power struggle over the region. Understanding such complex evolution taking place simultaneously in constantly changing political and even historic conditions makes the study subject difficult to grasp, leading to formation of easy stereotypes among both local and international observers. This is why the Caucasus keeps challenging our understanding of it with continuous surprises.

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<sup>2</sup> „Central Asia, Nervous Spring“, *The Economist*, January 27, 2001. See also Douglas Frantz, „Islamic Fervor Has Azerbaijan On Alert For Instability“, *New York Times*, 2 February 2001.

## 2 Explaining the Conflicts

Outside observers have followed the steps of militant nationalists in using history as an explanation or justification of contemporary waves of violence. The question „What caused the wars“ leads directly to the answer to a second question, „Who caused the bloodshed“. Therefore, interpretation of conflicts becomes indirectly a political act. To understand the conflicts, one should also trace the changing context initially shaped at the height of Gorbachev's *Perestroika*, and evolving during the last years of the Soviet existence under conditions of disintegrating state structures up to the era of independent states. The conflicts, starting with internal ones, have therefore evolved into international conflicts. Such a transformation introduced a sudden change in the cadre within which the conflicts occurred; to illustrate, in 1991 Ankara did not even think about intervening in the Karabakh conflict, an internal affair of the Soviet Union, but by 1992 Turkish deputies were urging their government to send their army in support of Azerbaijan.

To explain the conflicts, one should also address a number of difficult questions. Why did violence erupt only in specific instances<sup>3</sup> (out of more than 30 demands for territorial changes in the Caucasus)? Or how is the „Small is victorious“ phenomenon explained, in which minority groups scored remarkable victories against the well-armed and superior armies of nations with larger populations and stronger economies?

### 2.1 History as a Political Instrument

„The situation in Nagorno-Karabakh provides the most extreme example of the inherent dangers when the conflicts contained during the Soviet period become active once again.“<sup>4</sup> The idea expressed here is that the Soviet period was a long

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<sup>3</sup> Five conflicts can be counted in the Caucasus, chronologically these are: the Armeno-Azeri conflict around Karabakh, the Georgian-South Osset and Georgian-Abkhaz conflicts, the North Osset-Ingush conflict, and that between the Russian Federation and Chechnya.

<sup>4</sup> Suzanne Goldenberg, *Pride of Small Nations*, Zed Books, 1994, page 8.

parenthesis during which a pre-existing conflict situation was frozen, but its causes were not addressed. Armenian and Azeri armies, as well as Ottoman troops, fought over Karabakh after the fall of Tsarist Russia from 1918-1920, and fighting ceased only after the arrival of the Soviet army. The Soviet system succeeded in stopping the confrontation but failed to erase the existing antagonism and therefore the potential for confrontation. The responsibility of the conflict here is unclear and mystified; „objective“ forces of history polarized an ethnically mixed region by creating nation-states, causing the painful process of territorial division and population displacement.

The same notion would explain the war in Chechnya as a continuation of the 18<sup>th</sup>- and 19<sup>th</sup>-century North Caucasian resistance against the advancing Russian armies, in which the Chechens played a key role.<sup>5</sup>

Others refer to history to draw other interpretations. „When you are in Georgia, most Georgians will explain the current conflicts as being mainly the inheritance from the Soviet Union.“<sup>6</sup> The common Georgian explanation for the conflicts is that Moscow had created the three autonomous formations within Georgia (Abkhazia, Ajaria, and South Ossetia) to weaken the central Georgian state and to make it dependent on Soviet authorities. Similarly, the Abkhaz accuse the Stalin regime of incorporating Abkhazia within Georgia in 1930 as an autonomous SSR, explaining it by Stalin’s Georgian origins. The Karabakh conflict could be explained in turn as the result of evil political decisions taken during the early 1920’s. „[Karabakh] was cynically attached to Azerbaijan in 1921 by Stalin; since then, the people of the province have yearned for the region’s re-unification to Armenia.“<sup>7</sup> According to this passage, the decision taken by Stalin to place the mainly Armenian-inhabited region within

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<sup>5</sup> „En faite l’origine du présent conflit remonte à la conquête du Caucase du Nord et aux relations qui se sont forgées entre Russes et Caucasiens durant cette période.“ Marie Benningsen Broxup, „Le Caucase du Nord: conflits ethniques ou crise coloniales?“ in Mohammad-Reza Djalili (ed.), *Le Caucase Postsovietique: La Transition Dans le Conflit*, Bruylant, Brussels, 1995, page 10.

<sup>6</sup> John Wright, „The Geopolitics Of Georgia“, in John Wright (ed.), *Transcaucasian Boundaries*, University College London Press, 1996, page 140.

<sup>7</sup> Christopher Walker (ed), *Armenia and Karabagh, The Struggle for Unity*, Minority Rights Publication, 1991, page 70.

Azerbaijan, albeit with the status of „autonomous *oblast*“ (region), caused the Karabakh conflict.

As E. J. Hobsbawm puts it, „nationalism comes before nations. Nations do not make states and nationalism but the other way round.“<sup>8</sup> In the post-Soviet era, this process had to take complex forms. The Soviet system had created the basis of the nation-state but refusing it self-determination, sovereignty. While national states existed on paper, a nationalist ideology had to be improvised under the pressure of post-*Perestroika* events. History had to serve the purpose of shaping the new national ideology as the Soviet state stumbled in its agony. The nation had to become eternal, and history had to justify the desired shape of the new state, the place the borderline supposedly passed. An Azerbaijani historian goes back 16 centuries to affirm Baku's right to dominate over Karabakh: „Thus, over a period of 1600 years, Karabakh as a whole and its upper section (Nagorno) in particular formed part of Azerbaijani state formation or represented of themselves an administrative unit of the Azerbaijani provinces.“<sup>9</sup>

By using history as an explanation (or justification), the Caucasian nations regard themselves as victims and their actions as defensive reactions. They cannot be held responsible for the current situation. Responsibility lies elsewhere: in history, in the nationalism of others, and in the Kremlin.

## 2.2 Fall of the Empire and National Elites

The third attempt to explain conflicts of the Caucasus is to try to see it within the cadre of its historic moment, that is the failure of the Gorbachev reforms. The destabilizing impact of eliminating party control over the political, social, and economic spheres, and ideological revisionism had weakened the position of regional elites including those belonging to various non-Russian ethnic groups. The failure of economic reforms and constant

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<sup>8</sup> E. J. Hobsbawm, *Nations and Nationalism Since 1780*, Cambridge University Press, 1995, page 10.

<sup>9</sup> Sulejman Alijarly, „The Republic of Azerbaijan: Notes on the State Borders in the Past and the Present“, in John Wright (ed), *Transcaucasian Boundaries*, op. cit., page 124.

degradation of economic conditions further weakened the state structure and gave weight to dissent. During the last period of Gorbachev rule it became clear that the reforms were at a dead-end, while the search for alternative group identifications and political systems had become dominant. The alternative to the Soviet system seemed evident to regions administratively under the control of ethnic groups. The only other institution permitted by Soviet rule was a limited national identification that institutionalized forms with all the symbolism of a sovereign state.

Considering the 1985-1991 period to explain the „Why?“ question could focus on different aspects. For some observers, the „reawakening“ of nations and nationalist movements caused the fall of the Soviet Union.<sup>10</sup> Valeri Tishkov, Russian anthropologist and one-time minister of nationalities under Yeltsin, criticizes such an interpretation, denying that the USSR systematically discriminated against non-Russian groups. For him, the major responsibility lies among both the local ruling circles and the intellectual elites in post-Soviet republics who struggled for power between themselves and against the center.<sup>11</sup>

One can also consider the fall of the Soviet state and the rise of national elites as lacking a „cause-and-effect“ relation, but occurring simultaneously with mutually reinforcing features. The openness permitted under *Glasnost* followed by the failure of reforms led to local mobilizations. This led to the rise of nationalism, which in turn further undermined the central power. As the incredibly stable world known to Soviet citizens under Brezhnev started turning upside-down, there was a growing need to turn to a „new history“ and therefore give a sense to the present and future. Under Soviet rule, nationalism was best positioned to dominate the political scene with the fall of the ruling regime.<sup>12</sup>

Therefore, the nationalism that spread in the Caucasus in the 1980's was a child of the moment, although colored by

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<sup>10</sup> See H el ene Carr ere d'Encausse, *La Gloire Des Nations*, Fayard, 1990.

<sup>11</sup> Valery Tishkov, *Ethnicity, Nationalism and Conflict in and After the Soviet Union*, Sage, 1997.

<sup>12</sup> The Soviet ideology was a strange mixture of internationalism and national ideology. Administrative division of the Soviet Union into national territorial regions, entry of „nationality“ in the passport, etc., are some features of officially supported nationalism. See Ronald Suny, *The Revenge of the Past*, Stanford University Press, 1993.

imprints of pre-Soviet history and the controversial borders drawn by Joseph Stalin. It is curious to note that four of the five bloody conflicts in the Caucasus were fought by autonomous regions for the right to be recognized as sovereign states. This proves that the seven-decade long administrative structures created the belief in statehood for its populations. Once the central Soviet authorities disappeared, local authorities clashed with and those of the union republics in determining who had the right to sovereignty over the territories in question.

## 2.3 The Wars as Seen by Conflict Parties

Once the conflict entered its military confrontation stage, past history became secondary. By using violence, the titular nations committed a major error, putting the conflict at a tense level where negotiated solutions became difficult to improvise. After paying the price of war, after thousands of dead, hundreds of destroyed villages, and hundreds of thousands of refugees, compromise solutions become difficult to accept. Once shooting starts, only maximalist positions could justify such sacrifices. It is sometimes surprising to see the absurdity of violence; why did the Georgian forces enter Abkhazia, if they could have ruled peacefully over the region because of their demographic superiority? For several decades, the Soviet Union had prepared itself for war and created a highly militarized society. On the other hand, there was no investment and no experience in peaceful solution of conflicts.

For the Armenians, the war in Karabakh was an end-of-the-century act of revenge against fate and a cry for justice. The first demonstrations in Stepanakert and Yerevan (February 1988), naively saw their movement as part of the reformist age and a call to correct the error committed by Stalin. These demonstrators carried posters of Gorbachev<sup>13</sup> and Leninist slogans for the right to self-determination. As tension with Azerbaijan grew and a chain of anti-Armenian pogroms started (Sumgait in February 1988, Kirovabad in November 1988, Baku in January 1990...), the Armenians turned against their Azerbaijani neighbors, forcefully expelling 160 thousand Azeris and Muslim Kurds living in

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<sup>13</sup> Claire Mouradian, *L'Arménie de Stalin à Gorbachev*, Ramsay, 1990, page 430.

Armenia.<sup>14</sup> At the same time, 350,000 Armenians from Azerbaijan became refugees. After the fall of the USSR, Armenia found itself face-to-face with Azerbaijan in an undeclared war over Karabakh.

Politically Armenia adopted a curious position concerning the status of the Karabakh Mountain Area (or Artsakh in Armenian). On December 1, 1989 Armenia's Supreme Soviet unanimously adopted a resolution for „The Reunion of the Armenian SSR and Nagorno Karabakh“.<sup>15</sup> Yet, after Armenia and Azerbaijan became independent, Yerevan declined to pursue this line because it would have constituted a challenge to the international community that only recognized the 15 union republics of the former USSR as states. Politically the new line in Yerevan was to support the „security“ of Karabakh Armenians and to accept any political agreements that resulted from Baku-Stepanakert negotiations. Nevertheless, Armenia regularly supplied Karabakh with humanitarian aid, as well as arms and volunteers. At the last stage of the conflict, during the Azeri offensive of December 1993, battalions of the Armenian regular army were sent to stop the Azeri advance in Kelbajar region bordering Armenia, as well as near Horadiz on the Iranian border.

Yerevan's policy towards Turkey under the leadership of former president Levon Ter-Petrosyan reflected the state of mind of the independence movement leadership. Although Turkey denied the Armenian genocide of 1915, the leadership in Yerevan sought normal relations with Turkey. The Armenian elite, like ruling circles in all post-Soviet republics, had pro-Western views. They tried to copy Western economic manners and discourse. For Armenia, Turkey was perceived as the gate to the West. There were strong anti-Moscow sentiments in Yerevan in 1990-1991, striving to decrease Armenia's dependence on Russian protection by normalizing a century- old troubled history with Turkey. Yet the war in Karabakh left no choice but to seek Russian support, as Turkey adopted the Azeri side in the conflict, providing both military assistance and diplomatic support to Baku.

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<sup>14</sup> Some 54,000 Yezdi Kurds stayed in Armenia, although several thousand Muslim Kurds were deported with Azeris to Azerbaijan.

<sup>15</sup> *Nagorno Karabakh, A White Paper*, by The Armenian Center for National and International Studies, Yerevan Second Edition, March 1997, page 8.



For Azerbaijan, the conflict did not oppose Karabakh separatism but Armenian expansionist policies. This interpretation not only conditioned Baku's attitude towards negotiations but also its explanation of the conflict's outcome thus far. The Azerbaijani leadership refused to sit down and negotiate with the self-declared Karabakh republic and insisted that it should talk to official Yerevan instead. It promised Karabakh the „widest possible autonomy“ after the Azerbaijani Supreme Soviet abolished the autonomous status of the Karabakh Mountain Area on November 23, 1991.

During the early period of the conflict the ruling circles of Azerbaijan were confident that any confrontation with Karabakh or with Armenia would result in an Azeri victory. Such sentiments were reinforced after the CP member Ayaz Mutalibov came to power (1990), and Azerbaijan received the support of the Soviet military. The Azerbaijani choice of trying to resolve the conflict by force was evident not only by pogroms organized against Armenian communities in Azerbaijani cities, but also by declarations in Baku promising to empty Karabakh of its Armenian inhabitants. Two errors were committed by then. First, Karabakh Armenians were not comparable to the urban Armenian communities of Sumgait or Baku and could not be driven out of their villages by similar pogroms. Moreover, the Karabakhtsis, looking at exactly those examples, concluded that they had two choices: either to pack and flee or to fight until the end. The second mistake involved changing geopolitical conditions in Moscow. If the Soviet regime had supported loyal Azerbaijan against independence-minded Armenia, Yeltsin's Russia sympathized with the Armenians, against the *apparatchik* Mutalibov. Elchibey's pan-Turkic discourse also angered Tehran which saw Armenia to be an obstacle against the spread of Turkic influence in the Caucasus and Central Asia.

Azerbaijan soon found that its role had shifted from that of an aggressor ready to resolve a conflict by pogroms and deportation to that of a victim. Azeri leaders failed to understand Western sympathy with the Karabakh cause, attributing it solely to the role of the Armenian *Diaspora* or the fact that Armenians were Christian. The victim role, as well as the assumption that the war was against Armenia and not Karabakh, was also used to explain the Azeri defeat. How could one otherwise explain that a nation of 7 million people with impressive

quantities of arms left behind by Soviet troops could lose a war against a Karabakh of 150,000 people? Even if one considers that the war was between Azerbaijan and Armenia (3.5 million), the economic potential (the armament each republic inherited from the USSR) still left the balance on Baku's side.

Here, Baku used an explanation common with a number of other states in the region: that superior foreign forces ran the war, those of neo-imperial Russia.<sup>16</sup> Such analyses were reinforced after an arms scandal that exploded in the Russian defense ministry. It revealed that between 1992-1996 Russia had supplied weapons totaling \$1 billion in value to Armenia. Although Russian involvement in the region's conflicts was more than evident, a close look at the „foreign involvement“ theory shows its limits. Russia supplied arms to Armenia, as well as to Azerbaijan. Moreover, Baku received outside support from a number of other sources including Turkey and Ukraine. In 1993-1994 Azerbaijan recruited between 1,500 and 3,000 Afghan *mujahedeens*, supporters of Gulbuddin Hekmetyar,<sup>17</sup> who were used as shock troops for the December 1993 offensive.

The Karabakh question played a complex role in political life within Azerbaijan. During the late 1980's and early 1990's, Karabakh was the main topic concerning the power struggle taking place in Baku. The opposition used the opportunity to mobilize its forces and challenge the *nomenklatura*: „The Front's leaders swiftly found (...) that the Azerbaijani population was largely indifferent to questions of political liberalization. Realizing that the sole issue capable of mobilizing the masses was Nagorno-Karabakh, the Popular Front adopted an increasingly radical stance on this issue.“<sup>18</sup> As public expectations rose around the coming oil boom during the last three years, the Karabakh issue has since receded to a secondary position.

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<sup>16</sup> Authors' notes, a press conference of Vafa Guluzade, then personal consultant to the Azeri president on foreign policy, Baku, June 1999.

<sup>17</sup> *Azerbaijan: Seven Years of Conflict in Nagorno-Karabakh*, Human Rights Watch/Helsinki, December 1994, page 46.

<sup>18</sup> Elizabeth Fuller, *Azerbaijan at the Crossroads*, Royal Institute of International Affairs, 1994, page 3.

In Tbilisi as in Baku, the dominant interpretation for the various conflicts<sup>19</sup> was foreign intervention, more precisely Russian intervention in Georgian internal affairs. Public opinion was traumatized after Soviet troops opened fire on peaceful demonstrators in Tbilisi (9 April, 1990) killing 19 of them. The anti-Soviet and anti-Russian mood that prevailed following the Tbilisi incidents did not let most politicians see the political realities around them.

For the dominant Georgian nationalism, the model to adopt was a centralized state in which autonomous entities ceased to exist and ethnic minorities (over 30% of the total population) would be pushed by assimilatory policies. Under the nationalist president Zviad Gamsakhurdia, minorities were described as treacherous „guests on our soil“.<sup>20</sup> The expected negative reaction from the ethnic groups against this hard-line Georgian nationalism was interpreted as a provocation staged by the KGB. The minority groups had no role other than that of collaborating with Russian imperialism. Although Shevardnadze has done much to stabilize Georgia and Georgian nationalism has undergone evident transformation since the mid-1990s, many Georgian leaders see the geopolitical matters within a Russian-Georgian dichotomy and fail to consider security perceptions of the minority groups. When asked why Georgia sent military troops to Abkhazia, provoking a bloody war with tragic consequences, Irakli Matschavariani, the national security advisor of the Georgian president, replied that „Abkhazia is part of Georgia, and we have the right to send our forces there to guarantee our country’s security.“<sup>21</sup>

Failure to understand minority issues or simply refusal to consider them is the source of the ambivalent Georgian position on the Abkhaz question. Considering declarations coming from high ranking Georgian officials, it is unclear whether they opted for negotiations as a way out of the crisis, or whether they

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<sup>19</sup> Four armed conflicts took place in Georgia, two ethnic wars, in South Ossetia and Abkhazia, and two civil wars among Georgian groups fighting for power: the first was the rebellion against Gamsakhurdia (December 1991-January 1992), the second an attempt by Gamsakhurdia to return by force in October 1993.

<sup>20</sup> Ghia Nodia, „Loyal or Dangerous?“, *Warreport*, London, January/February 1997.

<sup>21</sup> Author interview, Tabakhmela, Georgia, 14 August 1996.

prepared for a second Abkhazia war. Negotiations between Abkhazia and Georgia in Geneva and elsewhere led to no tangible result. Frustrated Georgian officials seem to have decided to accompany their negotiators with military pressure, using Georgian partisan groups composed of refugees displaced from Abkhazia. Operations of the Georgian „White Legion“ and other armed groups provoked a violent reaction from the Abkhaz side in May 1998, leading to a brief war that led to evacuation of 35,000-40,000 Georgians from the southern Abkhaz Gali region. Tbilisi has an immediate aim: repatriation of about 240,000 ethnic Georgians in Abkhazia. These constituted 43% of the total population of Abkhazia before the war. The second aim was to return Abkhazia to Georgian sovereignty in return for giving Abkhazia a large autonomy within Georgia.

## 2.4 „The Hidden Russian Hand“

It was not only in Baku and Tbilisi that KGB plots were seen as the detonator of conflicts. This easy story was also used by Western journalists as well as by diplomats and politicians. According to some analyses, Russia not only profited from the conflicts to strengthen its position in Transcaucasus but provoked the conflicts and shaped them. „There is not a civil war or separatist conflict in the former Soviet Union without them. They fight alongside Armenians against Azeris in Nagorno-Karabakh and fly bombing missions for Abkhaz rebels in the war against Georgia... They are the Russians“, writes the American journalist Thomas Goltz.<sup>22</sup>

To see Russian soldiers fighting in the Caucasian conflicts should not be surprising. Russian soldiers were *already* there when the conflicts started, and it was obvious that their command and discipline was deteriorating rapidly. „Soviet [sic!] and subsequently Russian military equipment, supplies, training, and advice - nominally covert, but barely disguised - have been

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<sup>22</sup> Thomas Goltz, „Letter From Eurasia: The Hidden Russian Hand“, *Foreign Policy*, No. 92, Fall 1993, page 92.

crucial to the Armenian's success over the last eight years".<sup>23</sup> Undoubtedly, Russian arms and military information did help one side or the other, but were they crucial for the outcome of the Karabakh war?

All during the war - and even after - Azerbaijan had superior armor and air force compared with the Karabakh forces and Armenian army combined. „According to TLE [Treaty Limited Equipment] declarations made in December 1992, seizures or transfer of equipment from the CIS/Russia to Azerbaijan had already provided the national forces with tanks, armored combat vehicles (ACVs), and artillery well over the quota levels set for this state. Air power under the national control of Azerbaijan also greatly exceeds Armenian or Georgian national holdings.“<sup>24</sup> More precisely, in December 1992 Azerbaijan possessed „278 tanks, 338 ACVs, 294 artillery pieces, as against 77 tanks, 189 ACVs and 160 artillery pieces for Armenia“.<sup>25</sup> Azerbaijan had a superior air force, with 50 combat aircraft and six combat helicopters, compared with three and 13 for Armenia respectively.<sup>26</sup> This balance did not change much during the conflict and even after. Yet military analysts consider Azerbaijani military reform plans of 1992 as „rudimentary“ and describe the „organizational chaos which plagues its military efforts“.<sup>27</sup> In 1992, when Karabakh was under a complete Azerbaijani siege and any aid including food, medicine, arms and volunteers could have been flown in only by air, Azerbaijani forces initiated limited

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<sup>23</sup> David E. Mark, „Eurasian Letter: Russia and the New Transcaucasus“, *Foreign Policy*, Winter 1996-1997, page 147. It is incorrect that Armenia received military aid from the center under Soviet period, on the contrary, the Soviet Army collaborated with the Azeri interior ministry troops to deport Armenians from Mardunashen, Kedashen, and a number of villages to the north of Karabakh. See *International Herald Tribune*, 2 May 1991, and *Le Monde*, 11 May 1991.

<sup>24</sup> Roy Allison, *Military Forces in the Soviet Successor States*, Adelphi Paper 280, page 67.

<sup>25</sup> *Ibid*, page 68.

<sup>26</sup> *Ibid*, page 86. According to 1996 givens, Armenia had 102 tanks, 218 ACVs, 225 artillery, and six combat aircraft, and seven helicopters; Karabakh had 120 tanks, 200 ACVs and 200 artillery pieces, compared to the Azerbaijani 270 tanks, 301 artillery, 557 ACVs, 36 warplanes and 15 attack helicopters. See *Military Balance 1997-1998*, International Institute for Strategic Studies, pages 74-76.

<sup>27</sup> Roy Allison, *op. cit.*, page 68.

and disorganized attacks against Armenian positions in Karabakh. The most serious problem was the lack of unified Azerbaijani military command formations, since each battalion divided on political as well as regionalist lines.

But Goltz draws a different conclusion on the Russian military participation on the Karabakh and Abkhaz side. He writes that „the Russian policy appears to be based on the tacit threat of dismemberment of those states that wish to leave Moscow’s orbit“<sup>28</sup>. Curiously, at the same time the article was published (autumn 93), Russian troops were sent to save Shevardnadze from a pro-Gamsakhurdia rebellion and actively restructured the Azerbaijani army, enabling it to start a vast offensive in a few months. Russian intervention was crucial to put down the rebellion in western Georgia, but it did not bring about any significant change on the Karabakh warfront.

The second mistake here is the assumption that Moscow wanted to dismember Georgia or Azerbaijan. If that was the policy line in the Kremlin, it was easily possible to break either Georgia or Azerbaijan into pieces, especially in autumn 1993: Georgia had just suffered a major defeat in Abkhazia, and faced a rebellion in Mengrelia; Azerbaijan was continuously losing ground to Karabakh Armenians, the Talish had rebelled in the south, and the Lezgin movement was calling for rebellion in the north. But this did not happen precisely because Moscow pressed the Lezgin militant groups to limit their activities (instead of arming them) and helped Shevardnadze crush the Mengrelian rebellion. Why? Russian rulers feared the wave of chaos that could reach the Russian North Caucasus. Yeltsin advisor Antranik Migranyan said that the Russian elite had been pro-Georgian for decades and could not support a political line that would dismember the country.<sup>29</sup>

Looking back, one could draw different conclusions, as did Evgueni Kozhokin, director of Russia’s Institute for Strategic Studies, a policy think-tank in Moscow. He explains the fall of Gamsakhurdia and Elchibey because their policies were too „ideologized“, unfit for political realities, „they could not manage their country, and the old lions of the *nomenklatura* like Shevardnadze and Aliiev succeeded to return to power by using certain support from my country (...). It was them who used

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<sup>28</sup> Thomas Goltz, *op. cit.*, p. 92.

<sup>29</sup> Author interview, Moscow, 12 May 1998.

Moscow as an instrument of power, rather than Moscow using Aliev and Shevardnadze as their local men.”<sup>30</sup>

The argument of foreign intervention holds the least weight in the Russo-Chechen war. Russian officials also tried to explain their defeat by saying that the Chechen resistance received massive support from Islamic organizations in the form of finances, arms, and volunteers. There is some evidence revealing solidarity action from Islamic groups (the Jordanian field commander Khattab is a vivid example) and from North Caucasian regions, or arms being smuggled through Azerbaijan and Georgia. Yet even such outside support could not repair the military imbalance between the Russian Federal forces and the Chechen resistance.

Therefore, another set of explanations should be sought to explain the Caucasus conflicts.

### 3 The Actual Power Balance

Representatives of minority groups who led victorious separatist wars have another curious interpretation of the wars. For them, they attribute their victory to having fought for their own land and were therefore morally right. This made their cause honorable, and their fighters fought with conviction. On the other hand, the central government's armed forces were not fighting to defend their land, and that explains why they lost the war.

Such interpretations help to understand the separatist groups' mentality, but it fails to explain how the Abkhaz, who made up only 17% of the total population in Abkhazia, defeated the Georgians, who were not only superior in total numbers but also made up to 45% of the population of Abkhazia itself. Again, it fails to explain how the Karabakh Armenians could not only control Karabakh itself but an area twice the size of Karabakh in Azerbaijan proper, where Armenians were a small minority. According to such theories, Azerbaijanis in Aghdam or Kelbajar should have fought until the end „for their own land“ instead of evacuating it and ending up as refugees.

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<sup>30</sup> Author interview, Moscow, 18 May 1998.

### 3.1 Separatism, Victorious but...

The common mistake made in analyzing the Caucasian wars is the assumption that central authorities fought against separatist ethno-nationalism. In the Georgian-South Osset war, there was no central Georgian state beyond a central Osset state. Both existed only on maps and in the heads of certain political movements. The only state that existed in 1991 was the Soviet Union, which was rapidly heading toward its collapse. Therefore, the Georgian state started constructing its institutions. In 1991-1992 these included army, police, state bureaucracy, political leadership, tax system, foreign ministry, etc. This process is far from complete even a decade later. The Georgian forces that started a war in Abkhazia were no more than irregular volunteer fighters, lacking proper training, discipline, and military leadership. Their motivation blended patriotism, a taste for adventure, and a desire to plunder.

Nor did centralized states exist on the territories and within the borders attributed to them on newly printed 1992 maps. Until 1994 the Georgian state could not even exercise its power in downtown Tbilisi, where various illegal armed groups made their own law. The same was true with Azerbaijan, where the central government had no control over the regions well after Aliev's rise to power in mid-1993. The Georgian or Azerbaijani states did not exercise their sovereignty on the territories of Abkhazia or Karabakh, and therefore they did not „lose“ them. Rather, they tried and failed to bring these territories under a centralized state structure. The Caucasus conflicts were not between state structures and rebel troops but clashes of various, newly forming nationalist movements.

The second feature that helps explain the outcome of conflicts is the power struggle that took place in the new state centers. Karabakh Armenian victories were closely linked with the elite struggle between the old communist *nomenklatura* (with its Brezhnevite wing represented by Aliev and Gorbachevite group headed by Mutalibov) and nationalist forces of the Azerbaijani Popular Front led by Elchibey. This idea can be confirmed by the following interview given by Azerbaijani President Aliev: „In pursuing their own ends the opposition leaders are prepared to sacrifice the national interests of Azerbaijan. In this lies the cause



of our setbacks in the past. This explains why Armenia could occupy part of our territory. Instead of banding together and defending their land, they squabbled with one another.<sup>31</sup> Whenever the Azerbaijani political elite was consolidated behind a leader it scored important victories, or at least mounted military pressure against the Karabakh-Armenian forces. This happened twice; first, when Elchibey came to power, after which Azeri forces started an offensive and occupied a quarter of Karabakh proper (summer 1992); the second instance occurred after Aliiev took hold of power in Baku, when Azeri troops mounted their winter offensive in December 1993. The rapidly changing front line proved the warring parties' military weakness.

The Abkhaz victories could be explained in part by the power struggle and lack of clear military objectives on the Georgian side. After invading Abkhazia, and failing to occupy the entire territory, Georgian forces lost the initiative and simply defended their positions against daring Abkhaz attacks.<sup>32</sup> The positions held by the 5,000 Georgian soldiers were vulnerable. They had occupied the coastal line up to Sukhumi, and from Gagra to the Russian border, leaving both the central coast at Gudauta and the mountain villages under Abkhaz forces., Organizing attacks on the Georgian troops situated between the Abkhaz-held mountains and the sea was relatively easy for these forces. Moreover, the Shevardnadze-Gamsakhurdia rivalry complicated the Georgian military positions; pro-Gamsakhurdia forces dominated Mengrelia, the obligatory passage from central Georgia to Abkhazia. They regularly hindered reinforcements from reaching the Shevardnadze loyalist troops in Sukhumi.

Lack of military planning and clear orders also characterized the Russian invasion of Chechnya. The best example was the Christmas invasion of Grozny, when tank columns were ordered to drive to the Chechen capital without artillery preparation or accompanying artillery. This turned the tanks into „moving coffins“, and 2,000 Russian soldiers perished during the next 48 hours.<sup>33</sup>

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<sup>31</sup> *New Times*, Moscow, January 1997.

<sup>32</sup> See Svetlana Chervonnaya, „The technology of the Abkhazian war“, *Moscow News*, 15 October 1993.

<sup>33</sup> Carlotta Gall and Thomas De Waal, *Chechnya, Chechnya, A Small Victorious War*, Pan Books, London, 1997, pages 12-13.

The third element is the separatist leadership success in concentrating much of the human and economic resources of the regions controlled for the war effort. Both the nationalist leadership of minorities and a large part of the population considered the war as a threat to their group existence. Their mobilization created a centralized, unified political and military effort which had one purpose: to win the war. Even the Chechens, who revealed being divided among themselves along interest and clan lines when an outside threat was not imminent, showed a unified will to fight the invading Russian troops. This occurred because of the popular perception of the war as a repetition of the 1944 deportation trauma. If the war could determine political careers in Moscow, it became a question of Chechen survival in Grozny.

Yet, the outcome of the conflicts was an uncomfortable balance. Separatist forces ultimately dominated certain territory from which members of the titular nation were deported while the titular nation imposed a blockade over these unrecognized states. On one hand, the separatist forces scored military victories, but on the other, the new republican capitals scored political victories by getting international recognition to their rights to the seceding territories.

### 3.2 Armenia in Isolation

Armenia acceded to independence under austere conditions. The difficulties seemed so gigantic from the perspective of 1991-1992 that the survival of an independent Armenia was in doubt. The conflict in Karabakh threatened to erupt into a large-scale regional conflict by causing clashes at the Armenia-Nakhichevan border. Nakhichevan, an Azeri enclave bordering Iran and Turkey, could have had a spillover effect, causing Turkish intervention in a region where Russian forces remained present.

Armenia's difficulties were not limited to security questions.<sup>34</sup> The conflict with Azerbaijan led to a double blockade against this mountainous, land-locked country. Azerbaijan in the east cut off 85% of land communications with the outside world (according to the late 1980's situation), and Turkey in the west hindered creation of any alternative transport possibilities with the industrialized world. Iran, in the south had friendly relations with Armenia, but there were neither efficient roads nor functioning railways in 1992. The only window of connection with the outside world was Georgia, itself plunged into chaos (during 1991-1994). As a result, Armenia GDP was cut by half during 1992-1993. Social problems were already serious, because the 1988 earthquake partially destroyed the second and third largest cities, leaving thousands homeless beside the 350,000 refugees from Azerbaijan.

Nevertheless, Armenia had advantages over its neighbors. The power transfer between the CP *nomenklatura* and the newly emerging nationalist movement headed by the Karabakh Committee took place swiftly and without an elite struggle. The country was ethnically homogeneous and did not have autonomous entities within its territories. This made Armenia both stable and unified internally, unlike Georgia and Azerbaijan, suffering from constant power struggles and civil wars. Moreover, Armenia was unanimous in its support for the Karabakh struggle. Another Armenian success was to create favorable international support in its early years of independence. A number of geopolitical givens and subjective elements developed international sympathy towards Armenia. Armenian communities in Europe and North America could advocate the Karabakh cause in various ways. Democratic Russia, in power after 1991, sympathized with the Karabakh cause, while Russian generals saw Armenia as an obstacle against the spread of Turkish influence eastward. Iran, curiously, sympathized more with Christian Armenia than Shiite Azerbaijan, fearing unrest in its northwestern regions from the rise of Azeri nationalism. So,

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<sup>34</sup> See by the author, „Armenien von der Umwelt abgeschnitten“, *Neue Zürcher Zeitung*, 19 January 1993. A description about living conditions under blockade, see by the author, „Ein weiterer schwerer Winter in Armenien“, *Neue Zürcher Zeitung*, 28 January 1994.

Armenia secured important financial support from the U.S.,<sup>35</sup> humanitarian aid from the E.U., military aid from Russia, and a commercial window through Iran. By contrast the Azeris failed (during the 1991-1994 period) to have any important support outside Turkey.

Armenian internal political life started degenerating after signing of the Karabakh cease-fire. In December 1994, President Ter-Petrossian outlawed a major opposition party and the most influential political current in the Diaspora, the Tashnaksutiun (or Armenian Revolutionary Federation - ARF). The 1995 parliamentary elections took place with popular indifference and officially organized fraud. The Ter-Petrossian victory in the 1996 presidential elections was considered unfair by the opposition and a large part of the population. Demonstrations turned into riots in Yerevan, repressed by army intervention. As an attempt to regain his lost legitimacy, Ter-Petrossian appointed Robert Kocharian to the post of prime minister, then the president of Mountainous Karabakh. Therefore, the post-1996 Ter-Petrossian's regime depended heavily on the army and Karabakh political weight for its survival. Yet he insisted surprisingly on major concessions with vague returns in negotiations with Baku to settle the Karabakh conflict. The population could trust a president it did not elect, nor could those who saved Ter-Petrossian's regime continue supporting him. Ter-Petrossian's policy was confusing and his downfall inevitable. The person who led the opposition to Ter-Petrossian's Karabakh policy, Robert Kocharian himself, replaced him.

Internal political life had hardly stabilized in Armenia by the alliance between Kocharian, Vazgen Sarkissian (prime minister), and the popular Brezhnev-era Communist chief Garen Demirjian as parliament speaker when a terror attack in parliament

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<sup>35</sup> Without US and European humanitarian and financial aid, land-locked and isolated Armenia would have failed to support Karabakh. A U.S. aid official working in the Caucasus has commented: „When Nagorno-Karabakh is encircled and starving... there is no clear-cut delineation between purely humanitarian assistance and direct military aid.“ (...) „A U.S. official went even further, asserting that the level of aid from Washington too closely approximated that of Armenian military expenditure to be coincidental.“ See S. Neil MacFarlane and Larry Minear, *Humanitarian Action and Politics: The Case of Nagorno-Karabakh*, Thomas J. Watson Jr. Institute for International Studies, Brown University, Occasional Paper 25, 1997, pages 98-99.

destabilized the country. On 27 October 1999 a commando of five assaulted the sitting parliament killing six leading politicians including the prime minister and speaker of the parliament. While the international media speculated about the implication of Russia in the killings,<sup>36</sup> the real motives of the terrorist group remain unknown.

„After the parliament killings, we succeeded in preserving the basis of state institutions, and to protect our society from generalized chaos,“ claimed Hmayak Hovannisyan, a Yerevan-based political scientist.<sup>37</sup> Yet, the killings created a power vacuum in the top leadership that paralyzed the state and ignited a dangerous power struggle. As a result, President Kocharyan has been under heavy pressure from a political formation called Yergrabah, an association of Karabakh war veterans who were close supporters of Vazgen Sarkisian. The killings paralyzed the republic’s political life for more than a year and halted economic reforms as well as foreign investments.

### 3.3 Aliev’s Success in Oil Diplomacy

The Karabakh issue is the reference question for the Azerbaijani national movement during the 1980’s and therefore the cornerstone of independent Azerbaijan. The military defeats and the 700,000-800,000 refugees created charged emotions complicating a realistic debate on the issue. It is difficult to imagine transition of power from one dominant group to another through free elections in Azerbaijan or in either Armenia or Georgia. Therefore, any change in the power structure needs heavy pressure from the streets. During recent years, only aggressive nationalist mobilization or fear of an outside threat could create such a pressure.

Azerbaijani politicians had difficulties defining their concept of citizenship. Former President Elchibey had a pan-Azeri position in his larger political framework of pan-Turkism. This policy not only irritated Iran, where several million ethnic Azeris live, but was also viewed with mistrust by Iranian Azeris who saw this act as a

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<sup>36</sup> Sophie Shihab, «Tchéchénie, Arménie, Géorgie: Moscou manœuvre contre l’indépendance transcaucasienne», *Le Monde*, 1 November 1999.

<sup>37</sup> Author’s notes, Yerevan, February 2000.

sign of paternalistic behavior of Baku intellectuals.<sup>38</sup> Such a policy irritated the ethnic minorities of Azerbaijan who saw themselves becoming second-class citizens. It is not by chance that Lezgin unrest in the north and Talish rebellion in the south happened during or just after Elchibey's rule. Aliev revised his predecessor's policy applying a Kemalist notion of citizenship, that is, all those who live in Azerbaijan are Azeris. On the other hand, one could notice another trend in forming political elites and popular mobilization based on clan-regionalist identities. Aliev brought the Nakhichevan clan to power in Baku; Suret Huseynov's uprising represented the revolt of Ganja (second major city) against Baku; Mutalibov was in turn the representative of the Baku elite.<sup>39</sup>

Azerbaijan faced a complex geopolitical puzzle as it acceded to independence. The three major issues the country faced simultaneously demanded a series of contradictory alliances. These three challenges were:

- Independence from Russia. To strengthen its detachment from Moscow and deprive Moscow of an opportunity to intervene, Baku had to enter a non-violent dialogue with Karabakh as well as cooperate with other newly independent states, including Armenia.
- To capture Karabakh: by the end of 1991, as the Soviet troops started evacuating the conflict zone, Karabakh Armenian forces controlled zones inhabited by ethnic Armenians, and Azeri brigades controlled Azeri villages. Baku could either have opted to tolerate this situation and start a dialogue with a political representative of Karabakh or to organize an army and send it to conquer Karabakh. Russia was the only side which could have helped structure military forces, since Russian forces and bases were still present in the Transcaucasus. Such a choice would have increased Azeri dependence *vis à vis* Moscow.
- To export oil: hydrocarbon mono-export is seen as the basis of future Azerbaijani prosperity. Azerbaijan needs Western

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<sup>38</sup> See Shireen Hunter, „Greater Azerbaijan: Myth or Reality?“ in Mohammad-Reza Djalili (ed.), *Le Caucase Postsovietique... op. cit.*

<sup>39</sup> Elizabeth Fuller, „Between Neo-Stalinism and Democratization“, *Transition*, Prague, 6 September 1996.

investments, Western technologies, and Western markets for this. Azerbaijan has signed contracts with Western oil companies for investments reaching \$40 billion.<sup>40</sup> On one hand, the presence of Western oil would strengthen Baku's independence from Russia. But such investments would also be perturbed in case of clashes and offensives continuing on its western front.

Azerbaijani political life was haunted until 1994 by the Karabakh problem. From September 1994 on, it was dominated by the oil contracts. Karabakh has now become a side issue of the oil promises. Baku hopes that the prominence it is increasingly occupying on the world scene will isolate Armenia and force it to abandon its claims on Karabakh.

Aliiev succeeded where his predecessors had failed. When he took power, the Azeri armies were abandoning territory all around Karabakh. Talish groups in Lenkoran had declared a separatist government, and Lezgins in the north were close to rebellion. The Azerbaijani economy was collapsing, and it had a negative international image. In a few months Aliiev managed to reverse the military situation when the Azeri army mounted a counter-attack, repressed all private armies, and stabilized the economy. Thanks to the oil interests, Azerbaijan is taken seriously from Tokyo and Paris to Washington. Aliiev was able to stabilize explosive Azerbaijan by a mixture of iron fist and oil promises.

Yet, at the end of the 1990's, international interest in Caspian oil dramatically decreased. At a time of low oil prices (less than \$15 a barrel in 1999), the Western oil companies digging for oil off the Caspian shores, did not get the expected results. Most wells produced either no hydrocarbon, or gas and condensate instead of oil.<sup>41</sup> As a result, many oil companies established in Baku closed down their offices and left the city. Curiously, summer of 1999 also marked the beginning of face-to-face talks between Armenian and Azerbaijani presidents to find a solution to the Karabakh conflict.

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<sup>40</sup> Reuters, Baku, 15 July 1998.

<sup>41</sup> Carlotta Gall, «Reality may yet burst Baku's oil expectations», *Financial Times*, 5 August 1998.

### 3.4 Georgia's Geo-Economic Dilemma

The dream of the Georgian elite is to make their country a transit hub between „the north and the south, the east and the west“. True, Georgia is well-placed geographically not only to transit Caspian oil and Central Asian raw materials to the open waters through its Black Sea ports, but also industrial products from the West to the land-locked republics to its East. Georgia also expects to become a major route for commerce between Russia to its north and with Turkey, Armenia and Iran to its south. Yet instability has perturbed these plans. Instead of it having a persuasive geo-economic role, Georgia has become a victim of regional geopolitics. The vulnerability of Georgia lies in a contradiction between the nation-state project on one hand and the reality of Georgian heterogeneity on the other. „For Georgia, the main problem is to create a viable state. Key forces for Georgian security are internal.“<sup>42</sup>

Although Georgia has normal relations with all of its neighbors, its weak point is internal: relations between the center and the regions. Georgian nationalist leaders Zviad Gamsakhurdia and Merab Kostava mobilized the population around the idea of a centralized Georgian national state, which irritated ethnic minorities. Even among ethnic Georgians, major differences can be noticed based on regionalism, expressed by differences in dialects as well as religion (Ajars are Muslim Georgians). Moreover, by the time Shevardnadze returned to power in Tbilisi, Georgia faced a double conflict between Georgian nationalist movements and minority groups in the regions and among Georgian political formations themselves. Shevardnadze was invited to return as ruler of Georgia by two warlords, Tengiz Kitovani and Jaba Iosseliani, who had overthrown the first post-independence president, Zviad Gamsakhurdia.

Shevardnadze's policy towards key issues (relations with Georgian political/military formations, his position towards ethnic minorities, and relations with Moscow) had been pragmatic to the verge of being confusing. Shevardnadze the pragmatist could declare someone his „best friend“ and shortly afterward

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<sup>42</sup> Author interview with Alexander Rondeli, Foreign Policy Research and Analysis Center, Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Georgia, Tbilisi, 25 May 1998.



accuse him of being responsible for assassination attempt against the president. Shevardnadze's internal policy has been not to avoid dependence on a single political formation but to stay above a number of power groups and play each off against the other.

When Shevardnadze returned to Tbilisi in March 1992, he was invited by the leader of the Georgian National Guard Kitovani, the leader of the Mkhedrioni (horsemen) troops Iosseliani, and the National Democratic Party of Giorgi Chanturia. During the next three years, Shevardnadze strengthened the police forces led by the head of the Georgian secret service, Igor Georgadze. Defense Minister Kitovani was the first to fall, following his failure to deploy Georgian troops in Abkhazia. His invasion of Abkhazia turned into a catastrophe. Iosseliani's star shined during the war in Abkhazia and later in the fight against the pro-Gamsakhurdia forces (autumn 1993). Yet as the various little wars calmed down, the influence of Iosseliani waned accordingly. Both Iosseliani and Georgadze were accused of the first assassination attempt against the president (August 1995). Iosseliani and Kitovani are in prison, while Georgadze is in exile in Moscow.

Shevardnadze's dependence on irregular armed forces to solve basic issues related to Georgian security remains ambivalent. To increase pressure on the Abkhaz side, for example, Tbilisi has depended on paramilitary formations such as the „White Legion“, the „Forest Brothers“, etc. Official Tbilisi claims that the guerrillas are frustrated Georgian refugees from Abkhazia who have lost hope on the negotiations process. A number of foreign diplomats and NGO members as well as Abkhaz officials have noted a direct link between the guerrillas and the Georgian interior ministry<sup>43</sup>, insisting that the guerrillas are financed, trained, and equipped by the Georgian national security structures. Moreover, certain sources claim that the assassination attempt against Shevardnadze was carried out by

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<sup>43</sup> Author interview with Abkhaz foreign minister Sergei Shamba, in Sukhumi, May 1997; and with Georgian journalists and foreign NGO workers in Tbilisi, May 1998. Information from various sources confirmed direct involvement of Georgian authorities in both arming and commanding guerilla forces.

elements trained by the Georgian government to conduct raids against Abkhaz targets.<sup>44</sup>

Georgian leadership had a similarly ambivalent position concerning minority groups and especially the autonomous republics. Although Shevardnadze pacified the South Osset front (July 1992) soon after returning to power, 5,000 Georgian troops entered and occupied parts of Abkhazia under his rule.<sup>45</sup> It is not clear whether the Georgian leader knew, agreed to, or ordered the operation led by Kitovani. In any case, all during the war in Abkhazia his position oscillated between calls for mediations and threats of a military solution to the conflict.

After the Georgian defeat in Abkhazia, Tbilisi initially hoped to regain Abkhazia with Russian help. Shevardnadze returned to his age-old policy of the „The sun for Georgia rises in the North“<sup>46</sup>, agreeing to join the CIS and to stationing of 3,000 Russian peacekeepers in the conflict region. Yet Russia proved unable (and unwilling) to solve Georgia's Abkhazia knot. Therefore, since 1996, Georgia again increased again military pressure on Abkhazia. As Georgian partisan troops confronted the full weight of the Abkhaz forces in May 1998, the Georgian defense ministry refused to send in regular troops. Shevardnadze explained the decision not to defend the Georgian population in the Gali region with Georgian troops, declaring that „the army is not combat ready yet“.<sup>47</sup> As a result, 40,000 Georgian refugees who had returned to Gali were displaced once again, and their villages ruined.

During 1998, as in 1992-1993, tension rose again between the central authorities and the western Georgian region of Mengrelia. A number of events could be interpreted under this

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<sup>44</sup> Dodge Billingsley, „Truce Means Nothing in Western Georgia“, *Jane's Intelligence Review*, London, June 1998, and Besik Kurtanidze, „Guerillas Keep on Fighting“ in *The Army and Society in Georgia*, Tbilisi, June 1998.

<sup>45</sup> Georgian troops advanced from the Inguri river marking the Georgian-Abkhaz border up to the Gumista river to the north of Sukhumi. They landed by sea and occupied from Gagra until the Russian border. The coastal region around Gudauta and most of the mountainous regions stayed under Abkhaz control.

<sup>46</sup> *Moscow News*, No. 24, 17-23 June 1994.

<sup>47</sup> *Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty Newsline*, Prague, 3 June 1998. Yet, it seems that various regular Georgian battalions from both the Interior Ministry and Ministry of Defense took part in the fighting: Georgian casualties in Gali included six guerillas and 17 servicemen.

light. An armed group had kidnapped a number of people including three UN observers near Zugdidi. Their leader initially demanded the release of seven people arrested after the failed assassination attempts against the Georgian president. Yet, after releasing the hostages, the commando member was shot dead by Georgian police. A Georgian army lieutenant-colonel, Akaki Eliava, rebelled in Mengrelia during October, and moved toward Kutaisi with a dozen stolen tanks and 200 supporters.<sup>48</sup> After short skirmishes with loyal troops, the rebellion failed. The Mengrels are bitter towards Tbilisi for having overthrown the first president after independence, Zviad Gamsakhurdia, himself a Mengrel. They also lost the Abkhazia war, since most Georgian refugees from Abkhazia are in fact Mengrels. They are now used in the undeclared war Tbilisi is leading against Abkhazia. Another explanation for the army rebellion is the poor material conditions, as soldiers were not paid for several months.

Shevardnadze's attitude towards Russia also followed a zig-zag course. More than once he declared Russia to be responsible for the loss of Sukhumi. Yet, shortly after this defeat, he agreed to join the CIS and legalize the Russian military bases in Georgia. This change of policy was conditioned with Gamsakhurdia attempt to return to Georgia and the success of his supporters in approaching Kutaisi, the second major Georgian city. As a result, Russian troops landed in Poti, while military bases in Georgia supplied loyalist troops, enabling them to crush the Gamsakhurdia rebellion. Without this Russian military support, Shevardnadze either risked a prolonged civil war or loss of the west Georgian province of Mengrelia. During the next years Georgia depended on close cooperation with Russia in security and military matters. Defense Minister Vardiko Nadibaidze was considered the most pro-Russian in the cabinet. His dismissal in April 1998 and the appointment of David Tevsadze was interpreted as a shift of Georgian military orientation from Russian to Western.<sup>49</sup> The Georgian side tried to limit its dependence on the Russian military; the external borders of Georgia passed from CIS to Georgian control in July 1998. On the other hand,

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<sup>48</sup> *Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty*, 20 October 1998.

<sup>49</sup> *Sevodnya*, 29 April 1998, translated into English in *Current Digest of Post-Soviet Press* (CDPSP), Vol. 50, No. 17, 1998.

controversy between the two sides persists concerning the future status of Russian military bases in Georgia.<sup>50</sup>

The prerogatives of leading a country from chaos to stabilization demands much maneuvering and rapid changes in alliances and orientation. Shevardnadze proved to be the ideal man to lead Georgia out of its fragmentation and to create respectable state institutions from those dominated by Mafia-like structures. Shevardnadze succeeded in weakening a number of warlords, while his rule still depended on them. He returned to a Georgia plagued by nationalism and separatist sentiments, and in few years could stabilize the situation to a degree to start attracting foreign economic interests. Yet the price of this pragmatic policy was high. The years of chaos led to two wars with ethnic minorities, and it will be difficult to bring the two regions concerned (South Ossetia and Abkhazia) under Tbilisi's rule. Similarly, a number of regions inhabited by minorities (namely Ajaria and Javakheti) are beyond the control of the central authorities. The existence of Russian military bases in these two regions, as well as Russian peacekeepers in Abkhazia and South Ossetia, complicates the situation even further. Georgia remains a fragile state, the weakest point in the regional security chain. The growing super-power competition over the Caucasus and Central Asia makes Georgia an easy target.

## 4 „Black Holes“: Independent and Unrecognized

Four state-like structures emerged in the aftermath of the Soviet collapse. Karabakh, Abkhazia, South Ossetia, and Chechnya are *de facto*, although unrecognized states. These four „self-declared“ republics have certain characteristics in common which suggest the existence of a regional problem in the Caucasus. These separatist forces control territory, have armed forces proven in battle, refer to ethnic and national traits different from those of their supposed titular nation, and have experienced the trauma of near annihilation during a conflict.

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<sup>50</sup> Military News Agency, Moscow, 28 March 2001.

The four separatist entities also shared an „autonomous“ status under USSR. Although these attributes were not enough to guarantee international recognition, it seemed strong enough to mobilize a large number of the population behind the idea of sovereignty. For example, Armenians living in the southern Georgian Javakheti region or Azeris in Marneuli did not demand unification with Armenia or Azerbaijan. Karabakh had the status of an autonomous region, while Javakheti had no self-rule. A similar remark can be made by comparing two peoples threatened by separation after creation of new state borders between the Russian Federation on one side and Georgia and Azerbaijan on the other, namely the Ossets and the Lezgins. In the first case, South Ossetia rebelled against Georgia, while the Lezgin radical movement did not reach violent confrontation. Once again we remark that the Ossets had two state formations (the South Osset Autonomous Region within the Georgian SSR and the North Osset Autonomous Republic within the Russian SFSR), while the Lezgins had no recognized administrative status.

During the conflict years, religion played no significant role. Ethnic groups clashed under nationalist ideology to redefine the political space. One could cite numerous examples, e.g, Orthodox Georgians fighting against Orthodox Ossets or Shiite Muslim Iran suspicious of the nationalism of Shiite Muslim Azerbaijanis but friendly towards Christian Apostolic Armenians.

Nevertheless, one should not underestimate the mobilizing power of religion, especially when societies become disillusioned with nationalism. This is especially true among Muslim populations and already obvious in Chechnya. Chechen radical Islam often described in the Russian press as „Wahabism“, could record more success where Chechen nationalism failed, namely in creating a pan-North Caucasian movement under the banner of Islam. Islam could also become a force of opposition in neighboring Azerbaijan directed against both Russia and the West, in case a majority of the population is disappointed with the promises of the oil boom. Although this is not the case now, the recent evolution among Middle Eastern Arab states, in Iran as well as Turkey, leads one to take the possible political role of Islam into account.

Despite the fact that the four separatist entities claim the national right of self-determination against the claim of territorial integrity, we have witnessed little cooperation, not to say the

emergence of a common front. Chechens do not feel any solidarity with Karabakh Armenians, for example. On the contrary, during the early days of the Karabakh war, a number of Chechen fighters participated in the war on the Azeri side. The only explanation here is that despite certain similarities the existing political conditions in which each force operates are completely different. For Chechens, Armenians represent a pro-Russian force, and they need to cooperate with Azerbaijan to contact the outside world. This concludes a different set of alliances, perceptions of antagonisms, and potential friends. Nationalism led to fragmentation along national lines, and each group struggled for survival as a political force.

## 4.1 Karabakh

After nearly three years of violent battles, the Karabakh Armenian forces emerged as both a political and military force in the South Caucasus. Karabakh military units occupy seven Azerbaijani *rayons* (regions), five of them completely, and two partially.<sup>51</sup> As a result, Karabakh is free from Azerbaijani rule, succeeded in creating direct physical link with Armenia, and, through occupation of Azerbaijani regions, gained a more favorable military position that would help it repulse future attacks. Karabakh has not only shortened the front line but also dominates mountainous positions against Azeri forces stationed in the lowlands.

At the height of the war Karabakh could unite various fighting brigades to create an organized army (September 1992), headed by Samvel Babayan, the commander-in-chief. This was done under the pressure of advancing Azerbaijani forces that occupied a quarter of Karabakh. A centralized command allowed concentrating a large number of fighting units in the north and stopping the Azeri advance. Starting from September 1992, all economic and human resources were concentrated on the war effort.

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<sup>51</sup> The Aghdam and Fizuli *rayons* are occupied in part, including their regional centers, while the other five *rayons* are: Lachin, Kelbajar, Zankelan, Ghoubatli, and Jebrayil.

Up to four fifths of the male population has combat experience.<sup>52</sup> Karabakh troops, unlike the Chechen resistance, for example, are not based on loose brigades or guerrilla formations but on the model of an army. Although the cease-fire has been largely respected since May 1994, soldiers from both sides regularly become victims of land mines<sup>53</sup> or sniper fire. The political and military leadership of Karabakh continues to live with the supposition that another round of war with Azerbaijan is „inevitable“. „Unfortunately, we prepare for war. There is no guarantee that war will not restart tomorrow,“ the president of the Nagorno Karabakh Republic, Arkadi Ghougasian, declared recently.<sup>54</sup>

Stepanakert's number one political aim is not to be subordinated (again) to Baku. All other legal options, including unification with Armenia, an independent state, or any other formula could be acceptable. Now, a new generation of Karabakhtsis has evolved which does not remember the Soviet era and used the self-rule acquired by Karabakh since the early 1990's. The second strategic aim is not to return to the enclave situation prior to 1992. This position has a security dimension, since Karabakh sees its survival linked to direct contacts with Armenia. It also fears probable Azeri aggression in the future. Stepanakert wants to exchange the Azeri territories in return for Baku's recognition of Karabakh self-determination. Karabakh forces today occupy 9% of Azerbaijan's territory.<sup>55</sup> Finally, Karabakh insists on having international security guarantees, mainly from Russia and the USA, before any redeployment. In the past Stepanakert has refused any Turkish participation in possible peacekeeping missions, considering Ankara disqualified for its support of Azerbaijan.

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<sup>52</sup> See Ara Tatevosyan, „Nagorno-Karabakh's New Army of Iron Will and Discipline“, *Transition*, Prague, 9 August 1996.

<sup>53</sup> Up to 50,000 landmines are believed to have been laid at the Karabakh warfronts. See Anthony Richter, „Frozen Hostility“, *Warreport*, London, September 1996.

<sup>54</sup> Author's notes from press conference, Stepanakert, 31 August 1998.

<sup>55</sup> Azerbaijan officially claims that Armenian troops occupy 20% of Azerbaijani territory. More precisely, the total territories occupied by ethnic Armenian forces are 15% of Azerbaijani territory including the Karabakh Mountain Area. If one excludes Karabakh, then the percentage is 9%. See C. W. Blandy, *The Impact of Baku Oil On Nagorny Karabakh*, Conflict Studies Research Center, December 1997, page 14.

How much does Karabakh depend on Armenia, and, therefore, to what extent could Yerevan impose its will on Karabakh? The question is mainly relevant to understand what kind of diplomatic intervention could occur from outside. „Karabakh is in reality a district of Armenia“, a high-level Karabakh politician told me in 1996. Karabakh depends heavily on Armenia for everything from contact with the external world to use of the Armenian national currency (the dram). What distinguishes Karabakh from Abkhazia or Chechnya is that it could eventually count on solid support from an internationally recognized state, a state that provides it with a voice in international forums, along with material support. Yet, from another standpoint, Karabakh has developed its own proper identity. The war experience unites the inhabitants of Karabakh and distinguishes them from other Armenians. Moreover, Karabakh had a special history of its own, underscored by the Karabakh dialect - incomprehensible for inhabitants of Yerevan. And last but not least, developments in recent years have shown that it is not only Yerevan that has the means to influence Karabakh policy, but also the other way around. Former Karabakh Defense Minister Serzh Sarkissian was appointed defense minister of Armenia in 1994 to rebuild the Armenian army. Karabakh President Robert Kocharian was appointed prime minister of Armenia (1997). He led the opposition against the compromising position of Ter-Petrossian on the Karabakh issue, leading to the fall of the later in January 1998. Kocharian was elected president of Armenia in March 1998. The risk here is that Karabakh's security preoccupation hijacks the political agenda and future development of Armenia.

## 4.2 South Osset-Georgian Conflict

The general fear in the late 1980's in Georgia was the explosion of a conflict in Abkhazia. There were already clashes between Georgians and Abkhaz in Sukhumi during 1978, and in 1989 riots claimed 18 lives and wounded hundreds. Abkhazia was always seen as both the „hot spot“ and, because of its position on the Black Sea, a region of strategic importance. Compared to Abkhazia, South Ossetia is a rural region on the southern slopes of



the Caucasus, which represents little significance in either a strategic or economic sense.

In case of Abkhazia the reasons for the conflict were geopolitical; in South Ossetia it was rather underdevelopment. An economic malaise existed behind the political rhetoric of Osset nationalism. „In 1989 the reason for the first explosion of national dissatisfaction was not a national problem but a social one - the absence of piped water in Tskhinvali.“<sup>56</sup> As Georgian public opinion turned towards nationalist rhetoric, the Ossets raised demands for re-unification with North Ossetia, an autonomous republic within the Russian Federation.<sup>57</sup> Georgian President Gamsakhurdia (elected head of the Georgian Supreme Soviet in October 1990) passed language and citizenship laws that threatened the position of ethnic minorities. As relations became tenser, the Georgian parliament abolished the „autonomous region“ status of South Ossetia. Clashes between Georgian and Osset irregular troops turned into large-scale fighting when Gamsakhurdia tried to crush the Osset secession movement by force. Yet the Georgian National Guard failed to occupy Tskhinvali.

The result of the conflict was population displacement on both sides, and at the height of the conflict up to 70,000 Ossets found refuge in North Ossetia. Fighting continued until a cease-fire was arranged under Russian auspices in July 1992. Peacekeeping troops organized by Russian, Osset, and Georgian forces are trusted to guard the relative calm. Although initially South Osset leaders insisted on their demand of unification with North Ossetia, their position now seems ambivalent. Both Moscow and the North Osset leadership have refused to consider South Osset demands. Agreeing to unification of the two Ossetias would be counter to Moscow's recognition of the territorial integrity of Georgia and would risk provoking international pressure on itself. Moreover, Moscow does not have an interest in encouraging the right of self-determination, regarding the ethnic mosaic in the North Caucasus and the threat of both Chechen

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<sup>56</sup> Mikhail Shevelov, „South Ossetia, Mirror for Self-determination“, *Moscow News*, 25 September – 1 October 1996.

<sup>57</sup> „Back in the USSR“, *Russia's Intervention in the Internal Affairs of the Former Soviet Republics and the Implications for United States Policy Towards Russia*, Strengthening Democratic Institutions Project, Harvard University, January 1994, page 45.

rebellion and the pan-Caucasian movement of the Confederation of Caucasian Peoples (KNK). It is more suitable for Russian strategic interests to have South Ossetia as a gray zone through which Moscow could threaten Tbilisi and use it as leverage to keep Georgia under control.

Although the South Ossetian leadership seems open to develop relations with Tbilisi, few practical steps have been taken on the ground beside resumption of transport between Tskhinvali and the neighboring Georgian town of Gori. South Ossetia does not receive any funding from the Georgian national budget and depends on Russia for financial support.<sup>58</sup> Georgian officials blame this on the weakness of the Georgian state and the fact that it has no funds available to re-integrate South Ossetia. Foreign observers have a different view, considering that Georgia concentrates its efforts on Abkhazia and considers the South Osset issue will be resolved automatically once a formula is found to the Abkhaz crisis. These foreign observers consider this a wrong approach, since a break-through in Georgian-South Osset relations could have a positive impact on the more complex Abkhaz conflict.

The South Osset position has become milder since a power struggle eliminated most of the militant leadership engaged in the national struggle earlier. Alan Chochiev, the former head of the South Osset Popular Front and the symbol of Osset nationalism in Tskhinvali, was imprisoned in 1996 on corruption charges and released in July 1998.<sup>59</sup>

### 4.3 North Osset-Ingush Conflict

The North Osset position not to seek unification with South Ossetia seems strange in a region plagued with nationalism. The only explanation is that North Ossetia was distracted by another conflict, caused by Ingush territorial claims on the Prigorodny Region. The region formed part of the Checheno-Ingush ASSR and was inhabited by an Ingush majority until Stalin disbanded it and deported both Chechens and Ingush to exile in February

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<sup>58</sup> See *Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty*, Prague, 27 July 1998.

<sup>59</sup> See *RFE/RL*, 17 June 1998, quoted in *Covcas Bulletin*, June 1998, Volume 7-No. 5.

1944. After Khrushchev's revision of the Stalinist order, both Chechens and Ingush were rehabilitated and received permission to return. The Checheno-Ingush Autonomous Republic was re-formed, but without the Prigorodny Rayon, already inhabited by Ossets and part of North Ossetia. Nor were the Ingush permitted to return to their homes. The Ingush did not accept the loss of their villages, and although the authorities complicated delivery of permits of establishment, many returned without authorization.

The Russian Supreme Soviet passed the „Law on the Rehabilitation of the Repressed Peoples“ in April 1991 which tried to correct Stalinist crimes against entire peoples. The promises the law made included territorial compensation to the repressed peoples. A number of high-ranking Russian officials including Yeltsin made vague declarations in favor of the Ingush concerning the Prigorodny dispute. The Ingush population interpreted these signs as central authorities' support for their cause.

The situation in Chechnya itself had a great impact on the evolution of political perspectives among the Ingush. Until the arrival of the Tsarist armies, the Chechens and Ingush were various groups of tribes of the same people, sharing the common name Vaynakh.<sup>60</sup> The Russians distinguished the Ingush from the other tribes, since they did not take part in the Caucasian rebellion against Russian rule in the 19<sup>th</sup> century. Political developments among the Chechens on one hand and the Ingush on the other once again developed in different directions. The Ingush felt progressively isolated within the Checheno-Ingush republic's leadership; „real political power in the republic was concentrated more and more among the ethnic Chechens, with Ingush representation increasingly symbolic.“<sup>61</sup> Political objectives and strategy likewise diverted; while the Ingush priority was to regain Prigorodny and hope for Russian support, the Chechens tried to play a dominant role in the North Caucasus by challenging the existing order and therefore confronted the

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<sup>60</sup> The name „Ingush“ is derived from the village „Angusht“ which is found in the Prigorodny region. It was the Russian conquerors who gave these names in order to distinguish the rebellious eastern Vaynakh tribes (the „Chechens“, called after another village now south of Grozny) from the western tribes which did not resist Russian forces.

<sup>61</sup> Valery Tishkov, *op. cit.*, page 160.

central authorities. By proclaiming Chechen independence, Djokhar Dudayev and the National Congress of the Chechen People gave „little attention to the concerns of the Ingush.“<sup>62</sup> With the rise of Chechen nationalism, the Ingush were completely isolated from the decision-making process in Grozny. As a result, the idea of creating an Ingush autonomous republic within the Russian Federation became the aim of Ingush intellectuals, a republic to be created by unifying Ingush-inhabited lands in both the Checheno-Ingush ASSR and North Ossetia. The Russian Supreme Soviet voted in June 1992 to create an Ingush republic. The problem left was to delimit the borders of this new creation.

Clashes became increasingly frequent in the Prigorodny region, and the two sides started arming. Weapons from South Ossetia and Russian military formations were distributed to North Osset Interior Ministry forces and paramilitary groups.<sup>63</sup> Large-scale attacks on one another villages started on 31 October 1992, continuing for a week. The Osset forces, which had heavy weapons like armored personal carriers (APCs) and artillery, broke the Ingush resistance in a matter of days. Between 35,000-60,000 Ingush sought refuge in the neighboring Ingushetia and elsewhere in the Russian Federation. Over 500 people were killed and several hundred were reported missing.

The Russian military formations that intervened clearly sided with the Ossets. According to eye-witnesses, Russian tanks often spearheaded attacks against armed positions in Ingush villages but later did nothing to stop armed Ossets from entering these same villages, looting and torching the houses. According to some analysts the aim of the Russian military intervention was to provoke the Chechens and create a pretext for marching over to Grozny. According to Max Bliev, history professor at Vladikavkaz University, these incidents were „instigated by Russia, to provide a pretext to intervene in the region and capture Chechnya.“<sup>64</sup>

Yet the Dudayev regime kept neutral in the Osset-Ingush conflict, condemning the bloodshed among Caucasian peoples.

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<sup>62</sup> Jane Ormrod, „The North Caucasus: fragmentation or federation?“, in Ian Bremmer and Ray Taras (eds.) *Nations and Politics in the Soviet Successor States*, Cambridge University Press, 1993, page 457.

<sup>63</sup> *The Ingush-Osset Conflict in the Prigorodnyi Region*, Human Rights Watch/Helsinki, May 1996, page 30.

<sup>64</sup> Author interview, Vladikavkaz, 19 January 1994.

So did the Caucasian Peoples' Confederation (KNK). After Russian troops entered both North Ossetia and Ingushetia, Chechen forces declared an alert, while the KNK threatened Moscow that in case of military intervention in Chechnya 5,000 to 10,000 Caucasian volunteers could be sent to help the Chechens.<sup>65</sup> After several weeks of high tension, Russian troops evacuated regions in Chechnya they had entered and postponed the bloodshed that was to occur later.

The North Ossets blamed refugees from South Ossetia for committing atrocities against Ingush civilians. In fact, exploiting refugees for further violence is not unique in the Osset case. As early as January 1990, Azeri refugees from Armenia were said to be behind the anti-Armenian pogroms in Baku. Armenians have tried to populate Shushi and Lachin with refugees from Azerbaijan. The more recent Georgian guerrilla troops that carried out attacks against both Abkhaz targets and Russian peacekeepers are mainly composed of ethnic Georgian refugees from Abkhazia. The socially marginal refugee populations could easily be mobilized for future conflicts. Considering the 2 million refugees and displaced population in the entire Caucasus, the issue constitutes a serious threat for regional stability.

Despite efforts by both North Osset leadership and the Ingush president to find a negotiated way out to the situation, progress on the ground has been slow. Former North Osset President Galazov and Ingush President Aushev signed an agreement according to which the Ingush dropped their territorial claims in return for facilitating the refugees' return. A number of refugees have returned, yet an overall solution is not yet at hand. The first reason for the continuing tension is mutual distrust between Ossets and Ingush, because six years after the conflict criminals are not brought to justice nor are those who suffered compensated. The second reason is the economic crisis facing both North Ossetia and Ingushetia. Therefore they have no financial means to address the refugee issue or support any confidence-building program. The third and the most important issue is that the Osset-Ingush confrontation is a side effect of the Russian-Chechen conflict. As long as the situation in Chechnya is

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<sup>65</sup> *Report on Ethnic Conflict in the Russian Federation and Transcaucasia*, Strengthening Democratic Institutions Project, Harvard University, July 1993, page 56.

not clarified, it will be difficult to see stability in the neighboring regions. Thus, the North Osset authorities are preoccupied by their own conflict with the Ingush. Yet certain popular forces in North Ossetia call for unification of the Osset people. According to Khatagov Akhsar, the head of Stir Nikhas (All-Osset Popular Council), „our leadership depends heavily on Moscow and is forced to apply Moscow decisions here. We diverge from the authorities on South Osset policy. There is an agreement between Tbilisi and Moscow about territorial integrity. But we, as one people, are divided between two states. This question is not addressed by either Georgia or Russia. Vladikavkaz follows Moscow policy and has no independent position towards unification of the Osset people.“<sup>66</sup>

#### 4.4 Abkhaz-Georgian War

The Abkhazian discourse about the right to land is similar to that of the Georgians: they consider themselves the rightful owners of Abkhazia. All other groups are „guests“. The fact that the ethnic Abkhaz population is just 17% of the total inhabitants of Abkhazia (1989) does not influence this opinion.<sup>67</sup> When the war started, the Abkhaz considered that the Georgian-Mengrel „guests“ had mistreated their hospitality. Although ethnic Abkhaz were a small minority, they dominated the mountainous villages but were few in coastal towns except Gudauta. Therefore, when Georgian troops entered the province (14 August 1992), they could not penetrate to the mountainous villages. Nor could they take the Gudauta region. This meant the beginning of a long-term conflict, since conquering mountainous regions poses complications, even for the best-equipped armies.

From 1990 on, the Abkhaz leadership played an important role in forming the Caucasian Peoples Confederation (KNK), a movement that regrouped the North Caucasian ethnic groups. The movement's headquarters was based in Sukhumi, but it was transferred to Grozny when the town was occupied by Georgian troops. Hence, when the war started, KNK militants comprised the

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<sup>66</sup> Author interview, Vladikavkaz, 23 August 1996.

<sup>67</sup> On Abkhaz history see George Hewitt (ed.), *The Abkhazians: A Handbook*, St. Martin's Press, New York, 1998.

first group to aid the Abkhaz. During the war several thousand volunteers from Kabardai, Adygei, North Ossetia, Daghestan, and most importantly Chechnya, fought in Abkhazia. Shamil Basayev, who later became one of the most popular field commanders and prime minister in Chechnya, headed a battalion of shock troops known as the „Chechen Abkhaz“. Some fighters of Abkhaz origin from Turkey, Syria, and Jordan also joined the struggle.<sup>68</sup>

The KNK volunteers' role was instrumental in the war's outcome. They played a major role in the first Abkhaz victory, *i.e.*, occupation of Gagra, which opened access to the Russian frontier. According to a high-ranking Abkhaz politician, Russia started assisting the Abkhaz only after this victory, when the Abkhaz proved to be a fighting force. Nevertheless, Russian military aid in the form of heavy weapons and even air cover was essential for later Abkhaz victories, mainly for storming Sukhumi. Without such aid, the war front that divided Abkhazia at the river of Gumista between an Abkhaz-dominated section in the north and a Georgian-dominated division in the south could have turned into a long-term confrontation front.

Abkhazia was in a precarious situation at the start of Russia's military intervention in Chechnya. Its two major allies were at war with each other. They were exposed in the case of yet another Georgian military action. In fact, less than two months after the Russian intervention in Chechnya, former Georgian Defense Minister Kitovani collected several hundred supporters and marched towards Abkhazia to start a second war. But Georgian police stopped this column, disarmed it, and imprisoned Kitovani. The reason why Shevardnadze did not risk another war in Abkhazia is obvious: Georgia lacked a regular army, and any new military adventure could have turned into another debacle.

All during the war the Abkhaz leadership maintained a discourse on multi-culturalism, saying that Abkhazia was the country for all those ethnic groups who were loyal towards it including Georgians. An „Abkhazians only“ political line was impossible for a number of reasons. The first was the composition of the Abkhaz leadership, who were mainly ex-party officials. Their background was often Sukhumi or even Moscow, and not the Abkhaz mountains. Second, their war-effort sought to mobilize other ethnic groups in Abkhazia against the Georgian forces, and to some degree they succeeded. The third is that the

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<sup>68</sup> Author's notes, Gudauta, March 1993.

Abkhaz Diaspora in Turkey as well as Syria and Jordan did not rush back to its „homeland“ although it showed certain signs of solidarity. And fourth, (as during the Soviet period) the future Abkhazia economy would depend heavily on massive tourism. therefore, intermingling of peoples and cultures was inevitable.

Yet despite such a discourse, the war emptied Abkhazia of most of its minorities. Only half of the 500,000 inhabitants stayed behind after the war. An air bridge took the Jews to Israel, and ships evacuated the Pontus Greeks. Most young Russians and Armenians left for Russia, leaving the old generation behind to guard their apartments and citrus trees. Most dramatically, after their victory, the Abkhaz forces chased away most Georgians-Mengrels. Those who returned to the Gali region after the war were deported once again after the six days war in May 1998. Since then the Abkhaz troops have constructed trenches, and other fortifications and are being dug on the bank of the Inguri river.<sup>69</sup> These would not only keep Georgian fighters out of Abkhazia, but also prevent the Mengrels from returning to their homes in the Gali region.

The political situation in Abkhazia is at a dead-end. For the first time since 1864 defeat of the Caucasian rebellion against the tsarist armies, the Abkhaz form the majority in Abkhazia. And they insist on keeping it that way. They might be ready to take in refugees in limited numbers only and at a price: Georgian recognition of their sovereignty. Such a policy will assure the Abkhaz enemies in Georgia for a long time, with unreliable Russia to their north and Turkey across the Black Sea cooperating increasingly with Georgia. Abkhazia is now isolated more than ever before.

## 4.5 The First Chechnya War

In the days of chaos between the abortive putsch of August 1991 and the official death of the USSR, Chechnya emerged as the only space within the newly independent Russian Federation beyond the control of Moscow. Although a number of autonomous republics had declared their „sovereignty“, events in Chechnya went further. A radical nationalist movement headed

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<sup>69</sup> RFE/RL, 19 August 1998.



by a charismatic air force general, Jokhar Dudayev, chased away the conservative republican leadership that took an ambiguous stand on the putsch.

To restore its authority over Grozny, Moscow had three possible approaches:

1. To negotiate with Dudayev on the basis of granting Chechnya a special status within the constitution of the Russian Federation;
2. To manipulate the inter-elite power-struggle in Grozny and bring about Dudayev's downfall, trying to replace him with a more favorable candidate;
3. To bring Chechnya under Russian rule by military intervention.

Moscow had a confusing and personalized policy in handling the Chechen situation.<sup>70</sup> Twice before the massive military intervention (December 1994), the military option was tried. After Dudayev imposed his power on Grozny and expelled the Soviet-era local authorities, 2,000 airborne troops were sent to Grozny. This act led to popular mobilization around Dudayev and arming of a Chechen national guard. The Federal troops were then withdrawn, leaving behind their heavy weapons. Moreover, this badly planned adventure further complicated eventual Moscow-Grozny negotiations. The second attempt to intervene militarily in Chechnya followed the Osset-Ingush conflict in November 1992. Once again, Moscow decided wisely not to send in the army.

Direct negotiations between Yeltsin and Dudayev did not take place. Yeltsin seemed inclined to talk to the Chechen general, but strong policy makers in the Kremlin advised him not to. Dudayev was a charismatic personality, capable of mobilizing masses around him, but had no political experience. He failed in building state institutions, and in 1994 his authority did not extend further than the presidential palace in the center of Grozny. Meanwhile the Chechen economy, social infrastructure, and public services were in free fall. The few economic activities booming were illegal ones: trafficking in weapons, stolen cars,

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<sup>70</sup> Gail Lapidus, „Contested Sovereignty: The Tragedy of Chechnya“, *International Security*, Vol. 23, No. 1 (Summer 1998).

and drugs, money laundering (mostly for Moscow banks), and illegal oil exports.

Dudayev was so isolated internally that he was ready to compromise with Moscow. This would have boosted his internal prestige. But his major demand was a direct encounter with Yeltsin. He lost this opportunity when Yeltsin decided not to meet Dudayev in spring 1994 and opted instead to increase military pressure on Grozny. Parliamentary elections in December 1993 had changed the political atmosphere towards nationalist positions in Russia, while the February 1994 treaty between the Kremlin and Tatarstan left Grozny as the only rebellious republic. Signing the first major oil deal in Baku (September 1994) increased the strategic importance of Chechnya, through which the Baku-Novorossisk pipeline crossed. A number of assassination attempts against the general failed, after which Russian military structures directly armed and led Chechen opposition troops. An opposition attack against Grozny failed on 26 November 1994, and a large number of Russian soldiers were taken prisoner. Following this failure, the Russian leadership decided to abandon „covered“ operations and invaded Chechnya.

The Chechens revealed an incredible will and military genius in their resistance. Whether Russian generals, politicians, or intellectuals admit it or not, Russia lost the Chechen war militarily as well as politically. It was the successful Chechen attack of 6 August 1996, during which Chechen fighters chased Russian troops out of their capital, which led to signing the Khasavyurt agreement. Yet, as before the war, the Chechens failed to create a unified leadership, institutions, or legal framework that would reflect their claim to an independent state. Even during the war, Chechen fighters had no centralized command but only loosely coordinated units led by field commanders.<sup>71</sup>

The president of Chechnya, Aslan Maskhadov, adopted a political line to consolidate Chechnya's fragile state structures. The booming hostage trade shows that his efforts to fight criminality had failed so far. Maskhadov was the president of a country without an economy, without employment opportunities, and without any means to reconstruct the shell left behind by the war's destruction. An alternative policy would have been to export the Chechen revolution under the banner of Islam. A

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<sup>71</sup> Karabakh created centralized armed forces during the war (September 1992), while Abkhazia created regular armed forces after the war ended.

number of Chechen leaders, including a former president, Zelimkhan Yandarbiev, the current foreign minister Movladi Udugov, and a former prime minister. Shamil Basayev, supported creation of a unified North Caucasian state that would include Daghestan and Ingushetia. The political ideology of such a regional project could only be Islam, after the Caucasian Peoples' Confederation's dramatic failure, based on alliances between the ethnic groups. A number of clashes did take place between supporters of the presidential guard and now-disbanded Islamic Special Forces Regiment.<sup>72</sup>

#### 4.6 The Second Chechnya War: No Lessons from History

It has a feeling of *déjà vu*; Russian tanks entering destroyed Chechen towns and villages; Chechen fighters attacking from the rear, surprising the Russian forces, and even taking back lost territory; Russian soldiers despite their numerical and firepower superiority, proving unready for urban fighting or unable to break the back-bone of Chechen resistance deep in the mountains.

The surprising thing is that the second Chechnya war started exactly three years after generals Alexander Lebed and Aslan Maskhadov signed the end of the first war in the town of Khasavyurt. Something went very wrong during those three years, and considering the war simply a piece of theater to help an unknown intelligence general take power is simply not enough. If one leaves aside Russian accusations that Chechen Muslims were behind the bombing campaign of summer 1999 in Moscow and other Russian towns, one must still explain the July and August attempts by Chechen fighters under orders of Shamil Basayev and Emir Khattab to invade Daghestan.<sup>73</sup> Surely someone in Moscow found the war in Chechnya profitable during this election season. Yet the occasion of this new Russo-

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<sup>72</sup> Dmitry Balburov, „Chechnya: Just a Little Civil War“, *Moscow News*, N0. 29, 6-12 August 1998.

<sup>73</sup> For an excellent analysis of the Chechen revolution and the inter-war period, see Georgi M. Derluguian, „Che Guevaras in Turban“, *New Left Review*, London, September/October 1999.

Chechen clash had deeper roots than a simple campaign to manipulate Russian public opinion and the election outcome.

#### 4.6.1 *On the Russian Side...*

Several hundred Chechen fighters infiltrated Grozny in August 1996, and in a matter of two days they took control of the town. The Russian military delivered an ultimatum to the Chechen fighters, but there were rumors in the area that the Chechen resistance was preparing to take the war outside the borders of its homeland and to attack Mozdok in North Ossetia, where the biggest Russian military base was located. In fact, after two years of heavy fighting, the Russian army was back to square one, exhausted and demoralized.

Unable to subdue the fierce Chechens, the Russian political leadership wanted to make the best out of a difficult situation. Russia wanted to treat Chechnya as its neighboring Transcaucasian republics treated other separatist entities. Both Georgia and Azerbaijan on its southern borders had similar problems and had learned to live with a relatively stable warfront while persisting not to recognize rebellious Abkhazia, South Ossetia, or the Karabakh Mountain Area. Russia too could have found a *modus vivendi* with an unrecognized but *de facto* independent Chechnya. In fact, this was the situation between Grozny and Moscow for three years before the first war, until President Yeltsin ordered his troops to „restore constitutional order“ on December 1994.

Many analysts in the West have found links between Russia's war in Chechnya and the new „Great Game“, *i.e.*, recent struggle for control of Caspian oil resources and their transportation routes. Yet few have noted that both Russia and Chechnya are in fact on the same side in this „game“; Russia and Chechnya have the same interest in seeing Caspian oil flow through the Baku-Novorosiisk pipeline that crosses through Chechen territory. Both sides will lose hard-currency revenues and political dividends if Caspian oil is transported through the southern route (from Baku through Georgia to the Turkish Mediterranean terminals). At the height of international attention towards the Caspian hydrocarbon resources in summer 1996, Russia and Chechnya had a common cause to defend. In fact,

during this inter-war period, from all its promises Russia transferred money to Chechnya only to secure the safety of the Baku-Novorosiisk pipeline.

The other good news for Moscow was that during the war it succeeded in assassinating the unreliable Chechen leader, Djokhar Dudayev. General Maskhadov, the man with whom Russia considered cooperation possible, won the presidential elections of January 1997. Moscow did not want much from Maskhadov: he had to control the situation in Chechnya, deliver on the oil issue, and simply postpone the embarrassing and unnecessary dispute over the „legal“ status of Chechnya. Now that Yeltsin was elected to his second term, the Kremlin wanted to turn the page on this embarrassing affair.

#### 4.6.2 *On the Chechen Side:*

The Chechens fought against the Russian invasion under the slogan of Chechen national independence. Although this was also the slogan under which Djokhar Dudayev led his Chechen national revolution in autumn 1991, the Chechen national resistance differed dramatically from the aims of Dudayev's revolution. Dudayev had seen himself as the first link in a revolutionary chain that would expel the Russians from the entire North Caucasus. From the shores of the Black Sea to the beaches of the Caspian there would be a new federation of Caucasian states. This was the rationale behind creation of the „Confederation of Caucasian Peoples“ (KNK), with a parliament, military units, and envoys in various towns of the North Caucasus. This was the reason behind hundreds of voluntary fighters from Adygei to Daghestan joining the Abkhaz resistance against Georgia's invading troops. Among these volunteers were the notorious Basaev and his close friends, the „Abkhazian Battalion“ which later became the nucleus of the Chechen resistance forces.

But when Russian troops invaded Chechnya, few volunteers came to the province's aid, marking the end of the romantic dream. The Chechens were left alone, and they fought for their national independence, not for creation of a Caucasian Federation. The election of Aslan Maskhadov as Chechen president expressed that wish exactly. After the war, the

Chechen public wanted a leadership that could rebuild destroyed and collapsed institutions, restore public services, and bring the economy back to life. In a word, Maskhadov's mission was to create a Chechen state.

During the next two years Maskhadov clearly failed to take any concrete steps in this direction. Not only did the Chechen resistance not have a unified command structure during the war, but Maskhadov could not – or did not want – to impose one after becoming president. The two other ethnic rebellions in the Caucasus (Karabakh and Abkhazia) imposed unified command structures during the war period. This was both to increase efficiency and to send more men to the front lines. The Chechen fighters did not need orders from higher up to take up their arms and fight the invading troops. Chechen fighters were highly efficient, not only in guerilla tactics but even in such massive operations as attacking and retaking Grozny, Gudermes, and Argun simultaneously without a coercive military command. Chechens fight without orders, somehow naturally. What has characterized the Chechens for at least the last three centuries is resistance against a state being imposed on Chechen tribes from the outside. And Maskhadov did not or could not fight the hardened field commanders to impose a central-authority military command on them, the first step in any state-building process.

An interesting comparison here is with Georgia at the moment Shevardnadze returned to power. Georgia too was divided among warlords, where kidnappings and racketeering had become major trades, with state authority absent and the economy in free fall. Over the years Shevardnadze succeeded in eliminating the warlords (now both Kitovani and Ioseliani, the most notorious among them, are in prison), recreating state institutions, and stabilizing the economy. Clearly, Shevardnadze had many important assets, starting from his experience as Georgian interior minister under the Soviets and his international fame as Gorbachev's foreign minister. Maskhadov lacked such qualities. Another capital difference was that the Georgians had known one sort of authority or another over the last 2,000 years, while the Chechens have been a coalition of clans and tribes without an overall authority ruling them. The only indigenous rule over them was the Islamic emirate imposed by Imam Shamil during the Caucasian Wars of the 19<sup>th</sup> century.

The war of 1994-96 destroyed the last institution respected in the Chechen society, that of the clan elders. Advancing Russian troops often negotiated with the elders in villages and towns to force Chechen resistance fighters out of urban centers, in order not to bring their wrath on them and destroy the villages by heavy artillery fire. After the fighters re-took these regions in the summer of 1996, they no longer respected the elders, because they had negotiated with the Russian enemy.

The result was that Chechnya became a failed state, similar to Lebanon in the 1980's and Afghanistan in the 1990's. The basic characteristics of these states is the collapse of any legitimate authority, the rule of warlords over parts of the territory, continuous rivalry and clashes among them, the collapse of the economy, and popular discontent *vis à vis* forces previously considered as „freedom fighters“, and criminalization of the economy. In Lebanon it was arms trade, drugs transit, and hostage taking, in Afghanistan it is an explosion of heroin production, and in Chechnya it was illegal siphoning of oil from the pipeline and development of a hostage-taking industry to a level seen hardly anywhere in the 20<sup>th</sup> century<sup>74</sup>. The last characteristic of the Chechen failure in establishing legitimate state institutions was that it became a haven to all kinds of radical forces, from the Wahabis of Khattab, a Saudi Muslim with fighting records in Afghanistan and Tajikistan, to Nadir Khachilaev, a mafia type Daghestani leader who failed in a coup attempt there<sup>75</sup>. These radical forces created alliances with local warlords, and their ideology, money, and connections further radicalized the Chechen forces. The alliance between Basaev and Khattab would be crucial in triggering the second Chechen war.

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<sup>74</sup> Chechen President Aslan Maskhadov accuses Russia of having encouraged development of the „slave trade“ by paying huge sums to liberate a number of hostages. See „Open letter by President of the Chechen Republic of Ichkeria to all international human rights organizations regarding the appearance of the propagandistic film 'Slave Market'“, published in *Turkestan Newsletter*, electronic distribution, 3 August 2000.

<sup>75</sup> See Sanobar Shermatova, „The Near Coup in Daghestan“, *Moscow News*, Moscow, 4-10 June 1998, and Vadim Dubnov, „A Mass Telekinesis Séance n Makhachkala“, in *New Times*, Moscow, July 1998.

### 4.6.3 *The Causes of the Second Chechnya War*

If one sets aside Russian accusations that Chechen groups were behind the bombing campaign that hit Moscow and other Russian cities and caused the death of 300 people, one must still deal with the two attempts to invade Dagestan. Why did Chechen forces provoke the Russian bear?<sup>76</sup>

The Chechen political ideology witnessed a number of radical alterations during the 1990's. We have already discussed how Dudaev represented the old Caucasian idea of anti-Russian rebellion, while Maskhadov represented the notion of Chechen statehood. The Maskhadov's failure in giving shape to this Chechen *de facto* independence led to erosion of this idea too. The Chechen people were fed up with nearly a decade of upheavals, from the collapse of the Soviet Union to the Dudayev's chaotic rule, to the Russian invasion, during which they not only witnessed a dramatic decline in their standards of living, but every family also had several dead and wounded. The idea of freedom cherished during the years of exile to Siberia and Kazakhstan looked progressively more like a big prison; independence looked like a dead-end.

The failure of the Maskhadov regime to take any steps toward stabilizing the situation and providing some basic services led to a new polarization among the population. One part plunged into hopelessness and became critical of the former fighters-turned warlords, while a minority replaced the idea of Chechen nationalism with radical Islam. This second group attracted a minority of former fighters, for whom fighting had become a profession and not an act of resistance. In the words of Sergei Arutyunov, a Caucasus specialist at the Russian Academy of Sciences, it also included „de-tribalized, de-institutionalized, unemployed, and hopeless youth“.<sup>77</sup> Cornered between the heavy sacrifices of the decade and the grim memory of a Chechen, this generation could expect nothing from the „really existing independence“. They needed a supra-natural interpretation, and the radical form of Islam called

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<sup>76</sup> See the interview given by Maskhadov to *Deutsche Welle* radio station (10 April 2000) in which he considers Shamil Basaev and Movladi Udugov responsible from the Chechen side for the resumption of hostilities.

<sup>77</sup> Author interview, Moscow, 26 January 2000.



„Wahabism“ could do exactly that.<sup>78</sup> In a word, Wahabism in Chechnya was a way to escape the reality of the failure of Chechen statehood.

But Islam has only shallow roots in Chechnya. Islam entered Chechnya relatively late, around the 16<sup>th</sup> century, and initially recorded only limited success. Chechens accepted Islam as Sufi brotherhoods from Daghestan led the anti-Russian struggle in the 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> centuries, a fact common to most North Caucasian peoples from the Abkhaz to the Cherkess (Adigeys), Ossets and Ingush. The Ingush, who are closely related to the Chechens, were only half Muslim in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, the other half being Christian and animists. The only exception is Daghestan. This „country of mountains“ came into contact with Islam directly from Arab invasions. By the 9<sup>th</sup> century, Islam had spread in Daghestan, with the historic city of Derbent becoming a center of Islamic schools. Therefore, claiming an Islamic emirate in Chechnya without Daghestan made no sense.

The reason why hundreds of Chechen fighters, supported by some Daghestani radicals and Islamists coming from several countries, owes to a combination of ideological choices (replacing Chechen nationalism with Islamic radicalism) and a *fuite en avant* from the failure of Chechen statehood. In case the Chechen fighters had not assumed the task of „liberating“ Daghestan, they could have fallen into a cycle of violence leading to an open-end civil war in Chechnya itself.

#### 4.6.4 *Time for Russia to Think about a Chechen Policy*

By now, there are several studies available to the Western reader revealing how the Kremlin failed to handle the Chechen crisis from 1991 to 1994, leading to a war catastrophic for both Chechnya's population and the Russian army. If one observes how Russia dealt with the situation in the North Caucasus, the repeating pattern repeating is over-reaction to events or leaving

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<sup>78</sup> The collaboration of the former Mufti of Chechnya, Akhmed-hadji Kadiriov, with Russian authorities was conditioned by his traditional Sufism and his antagonism toward field commanders supporting the new Wahabi Islam, such as Shamil Basaev. Kadiriov dominates over Gudermes, the second major urban center in Chechnya, which offered no resistance to the Russian troops.

the region and its problems to fate. Russia needs to decide its aims in the North Caucasus and how it can achieve them?

Following its humiliating withdrawal from Chechnya, Russia could opt for one of the following policies: One was to agree that Chechnya would become *de facto* independent and try to have a good partner in Grozny, who could eventually sign a formal treaty between Moscow and Grozny. There was such a person, Maskhadov, who badly needed help from outside to create state structures from the debris left in Chechnya. Moscow ignored Maskhadov, leaving him to his fate. Maskhadov has hardly survived the near civil-war situation, dodging four assassination attempts.

The second choice was to count on weakening the Chechen fighters and reinforcing pro-Moscow tendencies. The Chechen fighters turned warlords had discredited themselves in front of their own people. Russia should have worked on capitalizing this point, cultivating its image as the only possible savior, the only force that could bring stability and therefore prosperity to the Chechen people. Then, it should have avoided engagement in any battles directly while cultivating Chechen forces that would prepare the terrain for the Russian army. Such a policy was applied by Syria in a very successful manner when pacifying radical and hostile Lebanese and Palestinian militias between 1984-1989. The Russian side needed to develop a sophisticated, long-term policy bringing together military, intelligence, and economic factors. But Moscow proved itself unfit for the task.

Once again the Kremlin chose a policy in the North Caucasus which, instead of addressing the security challenges in that complex region, was adapted to conditions of power transition in Moscow. The Russian leaders stubbornly insisted on ignoring their own history in the North Caucasus. The much-needed military reform would be postponed once again, since the scarce resources would be thrown into the Chechnya war. Although the war in Chechnya would not directly cause revolts elsewhere, one could detect continuous tension in each of the numerous North Caucasian autonomies, be it in Daghestan (between Ossetia and Ingushetia), between the two titular ethnic groups in Karachayevo-Cherkessia, or in various hot spots in the Transcaucasus. Russia could not afford military solutions to all of

these problems.<sup>79</sup> Will Moscow think out a more sophisticated approach after this Second Chechnya War?

#### 4.6.5 *Potential Conflicts*

##### *Javakheti*

Tension rose in southern Georgia on 13 August 1998 as army units heading to Akhalkalaki were stopped by a local Armenian group. The movement of troops had given rise to rumors that Tbilisi intended to deport all ethnic Armenians from the region.<sup>80</sup> The incident reveals the fundamental security dilemma in Georgia: authorities do not control vast regions of the country and lack resources for slow and peaceful integration of these regions, hence the temptation to use military force.

Javakheti is a mountainous agrarian region bordering Armenia. It was long neglected by the central authorities, both during the Soviet period and following independence. To express their dissatisfaction, a number of local organizations have called for self-rule, as a reaction to administrative changes Tbilisi introduced. This changed the ethnic nature of Javakheti. A local organization called „Javakhk“ is reported to be close to the nationalist Armenian Tashnaktsoutiun party. After the August incident, calls for autonomy in Akhalkalaki increased once again.<sup>81</sup> Such demands have fueled a wave of fear among Georgians. Many in Georgia fear that any activism from ethnic minorities could be manipulated by foreign powers and end up in a new Abkhazia conflict. Neither Tbilisi nor Yerevan have an interest in additional conflicts, and especially a conflict that could lead to an interstate war. The Georgian president has also promised investments to upgrade the infrastructure and social services in the region, but considering the state of the Georgian

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<sup>79</sup> According to Pavel Baev, a Russian military expert, a military solution in the entire North Caucasus Russian would require stationing a force of 250,000 troops in the region, a contradiction to the CFE Treaty, see *Johnson's Russia List*, (electronic distribution), 22 December 1999.

<sup>80</sup> *RFE/RL Caucasus Report*, Vol. 1, No. 26, 25 August 1998.

<sup>81</sup> „Our main goal is to achieve autonomy of the Akhalkalaki region“, declared a leader of the Armenian People's Movement „Javakhk“ Ervand Sherinian, adding that „no unification with Armenia is planned“. See *Noyan Tapan*, Yerevan, 24 August 1998.

treasury, it is difficult to imagine such promises leading to tangible results.<sup>82</sup> The economy of Akhalkalaki depends on the Russian military base situated near the town, where a number of Javakheti Armenians serve.<sup>83</sup> This fuels Georgian fears of a Russian plot to use the Javakheti population for anti-Georgian activities.

### *Ajaria Defies Tbilisi*

Ajaria is another region the Georgian authorities do not control. An autonomous region in the Soviet times (curiously on a religious basis, since Ajars are Georgians of Muslim religion), Ajaria has jealously preserved its self-rule. Tension was high during the early 1990's when the Georgian nationalist president, Zviad Gamsakhurdia, sent missionaries to Ajaria to convert the local population into Orthodoxy.<sup>84</sup> Although the region does not have any separatist aspirations, it has kept itself safe from the chaotic times in Georgia by preventing penetration by the Georgian National Guard into Batumi (the capital of Ajaria). The local strongman, Aslan Abashidze, has developed positive relations with neighboring Turkey, but even more with the Russian military, who have a military base in Batumi. As in Akhalkalaki, Ajaria too has an important number of servicemen recruited from the local population. The local Ajar police forces have established a check-point between the autonomous region and the rest of Georgia. Tbilisi regards this as a sort of border within the Georgian state.

Abashidze claimed that he was once again the target of an assassination attempt in summer 1998 and accused Tbilisi of being behind the act. „The leadership is trying to reduce the freedom of the regions, freedoms which even existed under the old regime“, he declared.<sup>85</sup> In another sign of defiance against Tbilisi, Abashidze offered the region of Javakheti the option of

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<sup>82</sup> Georgian state budget for the fiscal year 2000 was the equivalent of \$430 million. See: <http://www.barents-fiscal-georgia.com.ge/budget.htm>

<sup>83</sup> Khatchik Der Ghoukassian and Richard Giragosian, „Javakhk: Stability Through Autonomy“, email distribution by *Armenian News Network* ([groong-request@usc.edu](mailto:groong-request@usc.edu)), 26 March 2001.

<sup>84</sup> Jean Radvani, „La liberté adjare irrite la Géorgie“, *Manière de Voir*, no. 33, February 1997.

<sup>85</sup> *Reuters*, 22 June 1998.

becoming part of Ajaria.<sup>86</sup> This could be Abashidze's answer to attempts by Tbilisi to isolate Ajaria. The planned oil terminal in Supsa near Poti and the rail link between Turkey and Georgia through Vale are both under the control of Tbilisi and would end Batumi's role as a center of commerce and transit.

### *The Lezgin Question*

Officially, 240,000 Lezgins live in the southern parts of Daghestan (an autonomous republic that makes part of the Russian Federation), and 170,000 in the northeastern part of Azerbaijan. Lezgin activists claim that the number of Lezgins living in Azerbaijan is much higher (some claim the real number is 700,000) and that Lezgins were victims of forced assimilation in Azerbaijan during the Soviet period and afterwards.

The Lezgin problem has similarities with the Osset question. While the Soviet Union existed, it did not matter much whether one Lezgin village was to the north or south of the Samur river. This river that formed the border between Russia and Azerbaijan did not have any practical meaning. But after 1991 things changed suddenly, and the Lezgins found themselves divided in two. This led to the rise of a national movement calling for unification of the Lezgins either within Daghestan (*i.e.*, the Russian Federation) or to creation of an autonomous Lezgistan within Russia.

Both Baku and Moscow have been suspicious of the Lezgin national movement Sadval („Unity“). Baku accuses Sadval of being behind a number of bomb attacks and has persecuted Lezgin nationalists as terrorists. Azerbaijan also accuses both the Russian and Armenian secret services of training and arming Sadval. Moscow fears that agitation within the Lezgins could lead to an explosion in multi-ethnic Daghestan. This is why Moscow has constantly tried to pressure Sadval and other Lezgin groups to keep them under check. Lezgin activism in Azerbaijan was high between 1992-1996 with its peak in 1993, when young men refused to serve in the army or go to the Karabakh front.<sup>87</sup> Since then, the movement seems to have faded away, similar to

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<sup>86</sup> *Resonance*, No. 259, 22 September 1998, English digest distributed by the Caucasian Institute for Peace, Democracy and Development (CIPDD) e-mail: Bruno.Coppieters@vub.ac.be.

<sup>87</sup> Svante E. Cornell, „Conflicts in the North Caucasus“, *Central Asia Survey* (1998), 17(3), page 426.

nationalist mobilization elsewhere in the Caucasus. In May 1996 11 members of Sadval were convicted for the Baku metro explosion of 1994, a trial conducted behind closed doors.<sup>88</sup>

The first step towards normalizing the Lezgin question is to find a special arrangement to enable Lezgins on either side of the border to communicate freely with each other. With Russia's grip on Chechnya and Daghestan under question, it is hard to see Moscow able to formulate any concrete approach for the Lezgin problem. The second challenge is for Baku to understand the Lezgins' special character and permit them cultural rights similar to what they enjoy in Daghestan. It might be worth mentioning that the Baku-Novorosiisk pipeline crosses through Lezgin regions, and a conflict there could involve broader interests and forces.

### *Explosive Daghestan*

Daghestan, which can be translated as the „country of mountains“, is also a patchwork of languages and ethnic groups. The official Soviet number of Daghestani ethnic groups was 32, while some specialists distinguish over 40 distinct ethnic groups living in this land. Both modernization brought about by the Soviet regime and the rise of nationalism during the age of post-Soviet state building have created a number of potential conflict lines. The war in Chechnya has led to isolation of Daghestan from the rest of the world for two years. This in turn exacerbated the situation in the republic, considered to be the least developed in the Caucasus. All communication between Daghestan and the rest of the Russian Federation pass through Chechen territory. This includes railway lines and telephone communications. The socio-economic situation has declined enormously in Daghestan, increasing crime and the domination of aggressive Mafiosi groups over scarce resources (caviar, drugs, and arms smuggling, etc.).

A number of ethnic problems fester in Daghestan the neglect of which could lead to acts of violence in the future. The first among them is that of the Kumyk. This Turkic-speaking people, the third most numerous ethnic group, traditionally living in the coastal plain. As a result of modernization, industrialization,

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<sup>88</sup> A. Matveeva and C. McCartney, „The Lezgins: A Situation Assessment, Report of a Fact Finding Mission“, *International Alert*, May 1997, pages 15 and 32.

and urbanization, villages were emptied, and their populations went in coastal cities. As a result, the Kumyk represent only 20% in their ancestral territories and feel their existence threatened. A number of Kumyk national activists were victims of assassination during recent years. The second point of tension is between Akins (Daghestani Chechens) on one hand and Laks and Avars on the other. The point of dispute goes back to 1944, when Chechens were deported to Siberia and their villages given to others in what is called Novolakski Rayon. An additional source of tension resulted from the war period, when armed Chechen groups crossed the border to carry out raids against federal forces stationed in Daghestan.

These developments have perturbed the power-sharing balance between elites of the major ethnic groups (Avars, Dargins, and Kumyks). The shrinking economy and struggle over illegal trade has further poisoned political life. During the last five years, 58 people have been killed for political motives in this republic of 1.9 million.<sup>89</sup> Moreover, government pressure against new religious movements labeled as „Wahabism“ could introduce another dimension in the current power struggle. The assassination of the republic's mufti, Saidmuhammed Abubakarov, by a car bomb in Makhachkala (21 August 1998), and the car explosion that killed 17 people (September 4, 1998)<sup>90</sup> means that provocations continue that could lead Daghestan to explosion.

A war in Daghestan would be a long-term destabilization, a conflict on the Lebanese model: internal fragmentation would be nourished by outside intervention. Shamil Basayev has already declared that he would intervene in case Muslims are repressed by governmental troops.<sup>91</sup> Although Basayev is far from „radical Islam“, his real aim is to intervene in Daghestan to create a closer Chechen-Daghestani union, which would further weaken the Russian influence in the North Caucasus. Azerbaijan would be forced to intervene, because an important Azeri community lives in Derbent, and Lezgins, Avars, and other groups live in northern Azerbaijan. Russia, unable to impose a unilateral peace, would be forced to adopt a policy of supporting one group against

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<sup>89</sup> Vakhtang Shelia, „Daghestan: What Groups Hold Real Power“, *New Times*, Moscow, October 1997.

<sup>90</sup> *RFE/RL*, 21 August 1998, and *RFE/RL*, 7 September 1998.

<sup>91</sup> *Reuters*, 1 September 1998.

another. At this stage, little can be done by outside forces to prevent such a pessimistic development beside hoping that local actors will refrain from adventurous policies that would destroy their fragile homeland.

## 5 Oil, Pipelines and Regional Security

The multi-billion oil deals signed between Western oil giants and Caspian states have reshaped the regional balance of forces, outside interest in the region, and risk perceptions.<sup>92</sup> The oil factor has also created a new motive for American and European interests in both the Caucasus and Central Asia as well as a policy formulation that did not exist up to 1994. Russian attempts to create a sphere of influence based on the energy sector failed, exactly as did their attempts to integrate the southern ex-union members through military cooperation. On the other hand, the energy sector will play a hegemonic role for Azerbaijan, as well as for Turkmenistan and Kazakhstan. No other sector could attract so much attention by Western investors, and no other sector will be able to compete in bringing hard currency to the empty coffers of these states. The oil interests have placed the Caspian states on the map of international relations.

The problem with the Caspian „oil rush“ is not only the „Great Game“ effect it has introduced to the region but that the oil interests have masked the real problems of the newly independent and deeply weakened states. The policy debate in the West has been concentrated since 1994-1995 on the importance of Caspian oil and the best way to transport it to open seas. Little attention has been given to the impact that mass investment in the oil sector could have on the regional balance of power. Limited efforts by U.S. diplomats towards a „peace-pipeline“ idea that would create common interests between Baku and Yerevan was rapidly abandoned in 1995. Most important is that little is known on the impact of oil on the

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<sup>92</sup> On the discussion of oil and regional security, see the author's *Dialectics of Ethnic Conflicts and Oil Projects in the Caucasus*, PSIS Occasional Paper Number 1/1997, Geneva, and „Grand jeu pétrolier en Transcaucasie“, *Le Monde diplomatique*, October 1997.



social fabric in Azerbaijan, Kazakhstan, and Turkmenistan, where little else beside a rich and powerful energy sector is attractive. Next to oil, the only other booming sector in recent years is corruption. „A generation from now, will the resource-rich Caspian states look more like Norway or like Nigeria?“ asks *The Economist*.<sup>93</sup> Oil-based economies have failed to develop democracy and civil societies, and the risk of concentration of wealth among a handful in power is great. Moreover, it risks creating discrepancies between sectors profiting from foreign investments (basically services and real estate) while further marginalizing traditional sectors thanks to petrodollars. The impact of the oil rush has been catastrophic for neighboring Iran, and one should follow carefully the form a possible back-lash could take in the post-Soviet states.

## 5.1 The U.S. and the Caspian:

A number of forces are competing to form U.S. policy in the Caspian region. The policy of the State Department will be under a heavy pressure from both of ethnic lobbies and commercial ones, mainly oil interests. Yet behind these apparent struggles, the U.S. official line could be driven by long-term, strategic aims to reshape the regional balance. The key question here is whether the driving force of U.S. Caspian policy is commercial or geopolitical?

U.S. officials would argue that they peruse a goal of democratization and market reforms that will integrate the region in the international community. Strobe Talbott, former U.S. Deputy Secretary of State and a basic figure in forming US Caspian policy during the Clinton Administration, rejects comparison of the current situation in the region with the 19<sup>th</sup>-century Great Game, a race of regional domination between the tsarist and British empires. „Our goal is to avoid, and actively discourage that atavistic outcome. In pondering and practicing the geopolitics of

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<sup>93</sup> *The Economist*, Survey Central Asia, page 4, 7 February 1998. Concerning corruption, the same number, page 14, it writes: „In Azerbaijan, virtually all public positions that involve collection of money must be bought. The job of a tax inspector, for instance, might cost about \$50,000 up front. In Uzbekistan the going rate for an import license is 10% of the value of the goods.“

oil, let's make sure that we are thinking in terms appropriate to the 21<sup>st</sup> century and not the 19<sup>th</sup>.<sup>94</sup> Even behind these commercially driven interests, one could argue, lies a more profound, strategic interest. After all, oil is not just another commodity but a power leverage. Dependence of the markets on Middle Eastern oil will increase in the next two decades. Since the oil shocks of the 1970's, a major foreign-policy aim of the U.S. is to avoid similar repetitions by diversifying energy sources. Therefore, even with the depressed oil prices, investing in the Caspian region aims to reduce dependence on Arab-Persian oil supplies.

Two considerations would have a major impact on emergence of the Caspian as a key region for energy production: one is the importance of oil reserves beneath the water, and the second is the building of secure pipelines to export this oil. Talbott talks about „200 billion barrels of oil“ but the exact volume of oil and gas under the Caspian remains unclear. While the proven reserves total only 17 billion barrels,<sup>95</sup> the potential reserves are a subject of speculation. In the last two years, the oil companies were optimistic about the potential reserves of the Caspian, but by 1998 a more skeptic mood had come to dominate. Exploration wells revealed that a number of oil fields in the Azerbaijani sector proved to hold no exploitable amounts of oil.<sup>96</sup> After two wells proved dry at the offshore Karabakh field, the second exploratory well at Dan Ulduz offshore structure did not uncover commercially viable petroleum reserves.<sup>97</sup>

The quantity of oil discovered will eventually shape the choice of pipelines. In case the Azerbaijani sector of the Caspian does not hold large quantities of oil, construction of a new major

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<sup>94</sup> Strobe Talbott, „A Farewell to Flashman: American Policy in the Caucasus and Central Asia“, speech delivered at The Central Asia Institute, Johns Hopkins University, 21 July 1997: <http://www.sais-jhu.edu/pubs/speeches/talbott.html>. See also Strobe Talbott, „The Great Game is over“, *Financial Times*, 1 September 1997.

<sup>95</sup> In *BP Statistical Review of World Energy 1997*, the total proven oil of Azerbaijan is put at 7.0 billion barrels, of Kazakhstan 8.0 billion barrels, and of the Russian Federation at 48.7 billion barrels.

<sup>96</sup> Carlotta Gall, „Reality may yet burst Baku's oil expectations“, *Financial Times*, 5 August 1998.

<sup>97</sup> *Turan News Agency* (Baku), 26 August 1998; *Asbarez-on-Line*, (by e-mail: [Asbarez@aol.com](mailto:Asbarez@aol.com)), 21 September 1998.

pipeline to the Turkish Mediterranean port of Ceyhan, costing nearly \$3 billion, would not be commercially justified. Yet Washington has an answer to that, insisting on a trans-Caspian underwater pipeline that would link Kazakh and eventually Turkmen oil fields to Baku and therefore make a Baku-Ceyhan pipeline viable. „The U.S. government began pressuring the oil companies to back the east-west route“,<sup>98</sup> that is the route that would link Caspian shores, through Georgia, to the Turkish Mediterranean port of Ceyhan. Private companies seem to be worried about the investments necessary at a time of oil oversupply and fall in prices, and might be satisfied with a half-way pipe ending at the Georgian Black Sea terminal at Supsa.<sup>99</sup>

The East-West pipeline excludes two major regional players, Russia and Iran. In fact, a clear but undeclared American aim in the region is to hinder emergence of a new and strongly integrated union on the territories of the ex-USSR. In other words, it should reduce Russian influence over republics of the South Caucasus and Central Asia. Zbigniew Brzezinski advocates a policy of creating „a loosely confederate Russia - composed of a European Russia, a Siberian Republic, and a Far Eastern Republic.“<sup>100</sup> Brzezinski proposes to dismantle the centralized Russian state, an extreme view which is not the current policy guideline in Washington. A further U.S. aim is to link Caspian energy-rich sources to Ukrainian energy-poor markets. „Washington has (...) told Georgia that any oil shipped out of the Caspian through its ports should go, in part, to Ukraine to alleviate its energy dependence on Russia.“<sup>101</sup> By doing so, it would succeed in diminishing Central Asian dependence on Russian pipeline and transport systems, while it would free Ukraine from its dependence on Russian energy sources. This would put an effective end to any practical hope of CIS integration.

The wars in the Caucasus gave Russia leverage over political decisions in the Caucasus as well as Central Asia. The oil projects have changed the rules of the game, making Washington and the major oil producers take strategic decisions that will shape

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<sup>98</sup> „Caspian Black Gold“, *TIME*, 29 June 1998.

<sup>99</sup> Stephen Kinzer, „U.S. Bid to Build Caspian Pipeline Appears to Fail“, *New York Times*, 11 October 1998.

<sup>100</sup> Zbigniew Brzezinski, *The Grand Chessboard, American Primacy and Its Geostrategic Imperatives*, Basic Books, 1997, page 202.

<sup>101</sup> Stephen Blank, „Instability in the Caucasus: new trends, old traits - Part One“, *Janes Intelligence Review*, April 1998, page 17.

the fate of the region for decades to come. Following telephone consultation with the American president, the Azerbaijani president chose a double pipeline to transport early Azerbaijani oil (Baku-Novorossisk and Baku-Suspa pipelines). Similarly, to resolve the Azeri-Turkmen dispute over ownership of a number of Caspian offshore fields, U.S. former energy secretary Bill Richardson declared an American mediation move.<sup>102</sup> It is Washington - and not Moscow - that arbitrates regional conflicts, and takes strategic decisions.

How will the growing U.S. interests and strategic choices fit into the complex Caucasian background? Evidently the growing US influence in the Caspian region is hurting „national interests“ of Russia and Iran. What form this confrontation could take in the future is far from clear. It is also unclear how far Washington is ready to go in defending its newly established interests in the region. In the Caucasus, Washington should either be capable of resolving existing conflicts or to be ready for military intervention to ensure the security of pipelines it is imposing on the region. A number of military exercises within the cadre of NATO's Partnership for Peace Program have brought U.S. troops to Central Asia, like the one that took place in Uzbekistan and Kazakhstan during the summer of 1997. But it is doubtful whether U.S. troops could be deployed in the backdoor of Russia and Iran for more than just a training operation. Another problem for the State Department's Caspian policy is that an important segment of the American public opposes the American administration's views. These segments include both Diaspora organizations (Armenian, Greek), and human-rights groups,<sup>103</sup> which oppose oil projects leading to collaboration with dictatorial regimes, such as those in Central Asia. The fact that a Senate resolution of 17 September 1998 maintained Section 907 of the Freedom Support Act<sup>104</sup> (which prohibits any U.S. aid to Azerbaijan until it lifts its

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<sup>102</sup> Christopher Parkes, „US to mediate in conflicts over Caspian oil“, *Financial Times*, 16 September 1998.

<sup>103</sup> Dan Morgan and David B. Ottaway, „Afghans' Treatment of Women Leaks Into Pipeline Deal“, *International Herald Tribune*, 12 January 1998. UNOCAL, the US company engaged in the Turkmenistan-Afghanistan-Pakistan pipeline, declared that it suspends its activities related to the pipeline following the US bombing of a guerilla training camp in Afghanistan. See *RFE/RL Newsline*, 21 August 1998.

<sup>104</sup> Armenian National Committee of America, press release, 17 September 1998.

blockade on Armenia) indicates that U.S. Caspian policy, at least in the short term, will remain contradictory, presenting various interests rather than a coherent policy.

It was oil companies that drew the State Department into elaborating direct attention to the Caspian region.<sup>105</sup> Yet the administration seems to have gone too far in its enthusiasm, tracing pipelines that would make geopolitical sense but not necessarily be viable commercially. Will lack of enthusiasm among the major producers for a mega pipeline cut U.S. Caspian policy down to size?

## 5.2 E.U., Policy without Strategy:

The European Union (E.U.) is equally active in the Caucasus and Caspian regions. It has provided substantial humanitarian aid to the three Transcaucasian republics, up to a third of all E.U. food aid during 1995-1996<sup>106</sup>. The E.U. has embarked on developing the regional infrastructure capacity within the framework of Transport Corridor Europe-Caucasus-Asia (TRACECA). The E.U. has expressed its interest in developing commercial possibilities with the new independent states as well as Caspian energy resources to diversify energy sources.

The direct aims of the E.U. and the U.S. converge; but the E.U. has significant differences with Washington regarding its declared strategic aims. Europe does not intend to isolate either Russia or Iran from Caspian economic opportunities. An E.U. representative in the Caucasus declared that TRACECA is not aimed against Russia.<sup>107</sup> On the contrary, the E.U. has positive relations with both states. Another difference between the E.U. and the U.S. is their relationship with Turkey. For Washington, Turkey is a strategic partner, and Ankara is designed to play a

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<sup>105</sup> See David Ottaway and Dan Morgan, „Azerbaijani Oil Gathers Clout in U.S.“, *International Herald Tribune (IHT)*, 7 July 1997, and by the same authors, „Power Play in the Caspian“, *IHT*, 5 October 1998.

<sup>106</sup> Author interview with Ambassador Bernard Fassier, French ambassador to Georgia, Tbilisi, 2 April 1997.

<sup>107</sup> Denis Cowboy, quoted by *Noyan Tapan* (Yerevan), 25 August 1998.

major role in the Caspian region, while „for Europe (...) Turkey is increasingly seen as a problem - as odd man out ...“<sup>108</sup>

Yet, considering the impact of E.U. projects being realized on the ground, they seem to be in the same rhythm as that of Washington. TRACECA, INOGATE (pipeline projects), and the Southern Ring Air Route eventually isolate Russia and Iran from the new transportation system of the Eurasian Corridor.<sup>109</sup> Either the E.U. is insincere in its political declarations and seeks to reinforce the new republics of the ex-Soviet south without Russia and Iran, or due to lack of a strategic objective and an E.U. foreign policy, projects funded by the E.U. would eventually serve American political aims. An indication of Russian dissatisfaction with E.U. projects at its southern borders is Russian refusal to sign the Baku Declaration of the TRACECA summit held in early September 1998.<sup>110</sup>

### 5.3 The Fading Russian Star:

Following the fall of the Soviet Union, Moscow had two major means of preserving influence over the former southern republics of the USSR:

- through military means, including its military bases, arms supplies, and an attempt to create a CIS security pact;
- through its energy and transport network, necessary for the enclaved republics for most of their contact with the „outside world“.

Russia has exhausted its military means, although in 1992-1994 the Russian military played a major role in increasing Russian

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<sup>108</sup> Stephen Larrabee, „United States and European policy toward Turkey and the Caspian basin: Convergence or divergence?“ in Robert D. Blackwill, Michael Stürmer, (eds.), *Allies Divided: Transatlantic Policies for the Greater Middle East*, Cambridge, MA, MIT Press, 1997.

<sup>109</sup> Jean Radvani, „Transports et géostratégie au sud de la Russie“, *Le Monde diplomatique*, June 1998.

<sup>110</sup> *Reuters*, (Baku), 7 September 1998; *Asbarez-on-line*, 9 September 1998, distributed by e-mail: [Asbarez@aol.com](mailto:Asbarez@aol.com).

influence in the Caucasus. Even if the conflicts initially gave an impression of Russian strength and capacity to intervene in the Caucasus, they also had negative effects. The war in Abkhazia, for example, blocked one of the two major railways linking Russia with the Transcaucasus, the second one passing through Grozny-Makhachkala to Baku. Blocking existing communication lines has limited Russian economic influence on the Transcaucasus and hindered development of Russian economic interests further to the south with Turkey and Iran. Moreover, Russian manipulation of the conflicts and its incapacity to offer any kind of resolution has redirected the attention of a number of regional political forces. Even Armenia and Abkhazia, which cooperate with Russia, do so because they are threatened by a third force (Turkey and Georgia) and not because Moscow can offer them a way out. The end of conflicts in the South Caucasus and the Russian defeat in Chechnya have practically neutralized the Russian military threat.

During the mid-1990's the energy sector began to dominate both economic and foreign policies. Some believed that the energy sector would be the basis of the „new Russian idea“ and would play an essential role in the success (or failure) of the new Russian state.<sup>111</sup> Former Russian Prime Minister Viktor Chernomyrdin tried to use the powerful Russian energy sector and its possession of the pipeline networks as the backbone of CIS integration. At a Moscow conference with CIS heads of states, Chernomyrdin warned that Western companies were trying to win control of the region's energy reserves and considered this to pose a threat to CIS security.<sup>112</sup> The Russian prime minister tried to lobby CIS representatives to cooperate closely on their energy policies.

Russian efforts to use energy as an integrating factor for the CIS also failed. Russia and the energy-rich CIS countries had diverging interests, since all competed for Western investments, technologies, and markets. Russia had no leverage on the Caspian states beyond its pipeline network. Development of alternative pipeline systems (through Georgia and eventually

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<sup>111</sup> Peter Rutland, „Russia's Energy Empire Under Strain“, *Transition*, Prague, 3 May 1996.

<sup>112</sup> *Open Media Research Institute (OMRI) Daily Digest*, 15 May 1996. See also by the author: „Russia and the Caspian Lake“, *CEMOTI*, No. 23, 1997, pages 109-110.

Turkey in the West, through Iran in the south via the Turkmen-Iran pipeline, and the project to transport Kazakh oil eastward to China) would lose Russia its last means of influencing the Caspian region. The idea of using oil to replace Soviet ideology as the pillar of new integration proved to be no more than a passing illusion.

Russia is the biggest enigma concerning future developments in the Caucasus. Given the pressure of anti-Russian trends in the North Caucasus and if the economic downfall continues, Russia could suddenly be forced evacuate from the Caucasus and Central Asia. Recent reports claim that „Russian officials are pulling out of Daghestan“, evacuating everything of value from this unstable republic.<sup>113</sup> Such a move could trigger a power vacuum, reshuffling the regional power balance and could lead to a number of new „little wars“. Russian withdrawal from Central Asia would not only expose the weak armies of the five republics to outside pressures, but it would also modify power relations within the region and encourage Uzbekistan to play a more dominant role. Russian withdrawal from the Caucasus could expose Armenia to Turkish pressures and could have a negative impact on the internal security situation in Georgia. The problem is that there is no single power willing to fill the security gap left behind by declining Russian influence – or capable of doing so.

If the Russian economy succeeds in reorienting itself, and attempts by Vladimir Putin to redress the Russian state's performance give results, Russia would try to play a more active role in the Caucasus and Central Asia.

If a Russian evacuation were to trigger regional conflicts, a Russian comeback could also lead to clashes and waves of violence. First, the republics concerned would resist Moscow's influence after a decade of managing their affairs themselves. Russia would also face the growing presence of a number of regional countries and Western powers. It would need great diplomatic skill to orchestrate a possible Russian return to its south without confrontations.

Yet another possibility is Russia to remain weak over the long term but still insisting on a continued military presence in the Caucasus. Would Moscow agree to watch how it is losing the Caucasus? Would it become desperate and try to sabotage

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<sup>113</sup> *Global Intelligence Update*, 27 October 1998, electronic version.



pipeline projects at its „backdoor garden“? Russian policy in the Caucasus (as in many other domains) has yet to be clarified.

## 5.4 Turkey and Iran?

The collapse of the USSR opened the doors for the return of the Caucasus and Central Asia to the Middle East, and Turkey and Iran to the Caucasus/Central Asia.<sup>114</sup> Although neither Turkey nor Iran claimed territories in the newly independent republics,<sup>115</sup> both Ankara and Tehran have turned to the region in search of a new geopolitical role. Turkey is trying to compensate for its lost strategic importance to the West during the Cold War era (as NATO's front post on the Soviet border) by a new role in the East - the Middle East, the Gulf, and the Caspian region.<sup>116</sup> Iran, on the other hand, has tried to end its international isolation by looking northward. Turkey initiated the Black Sea Economic Cooperation (BSEC), while Iran led the Caspian Sea Cooperation Council (CSCC). Despite their rivalry, both Turkey and even more Iran are worried about the negative impact of ethnic nationalism on themselves.<sup>117</sup> A Turkish role in the „new East“ is not an aim or a geopolitical orientation in itself but should be considered within the context of the Turkish interest in playing an important role for Europe/USA. Turkish orientation remains Westward, and its role in Central Asia does not replace it. As Iran has no presence in any European institution and borders both Caucasian and Central

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<sup>114</sup> Mohammad-Reza Djalili, „Emergence du Caucase et de l'Aie centrale: recomposition du paysage régional et interrogations géopolitique“, in Riccardo Bocco and Mohammad-Reza Djalili (eds.), *Moyen-Orient: Migrations, Démocratisation, Médiations*, Presses Universitaires de France, 1994, page 344.

<sup>115</sup> In the Versaille conference (1919), Iran had claimed what is now Armenia and Azerbaijan, conquered by Russia from the Persian Empire in the first quarter of the 19th century.

<sup>116</sup> Stephen Larrabee, *op. cit.*

<sup>117</sup> Iran is worried about the spread of Azeri nationalism across the border towards its own 12-20 million ethnic Azeries. In Turkey, the collapse of the USSR brought about a national revival among the Laz, the Azeries, and the various groups of North Caucasian origins. Yet if Turkish public opinion led to modifying Ankara's policy towards Armenia, we did not observe a similar shift in its position *vis-à-vis* the Abkhaz-Georgian confrontation.

Asian republics, having a decisive role in the region is of higher importance.

Iran and Turkey are not simply in direct competition over influence but also represent a complex set of alliances similar to those in Europe in the 19<sup>th</sup> century. While Turkey is the strategic partner of Washington, Iran and Moscow not only collaborate in the military sphere but also in the political realm in their attempt to resist growing U.S. and Turkish influence in the Caspian basin. Turkey has chosen Azerbaijan as its strategic partner behind the former „iron curtain“, and Iran collaborates closely with Turkmenistan and Armenia, two rivals of Azerbaijan. Iran is also involved in regular meetings at the foreign ministerial level with Armenia and Greece to coordinate economic and political interests. The only common denominator between Iran, Armenia, and Greece is their mutual hostility towards Turkey.

It was not so evident in 1991 that such a mosaic of alliances would follow. Initially, Turkey did not hurry to fill in the vacuum left by Russia. Nor did it adopt an anti-Armenian position because of the 1915 genocide. In February 1992 Süleyman Demirel, then the prime minister, declared in Washington that: „A conflict similar to that in the Middle East might develop in the region (...) Turkey is therefore impartial on the Azerbaijan-Armenian conflict“.<sup>118</sup> On the Armenian side, there was a similar readiness to turn the page and cooperate with Turkey. In its double struggle for independence and unification with Karabakh, the Armenian National Movement had clashed with Moscow and looked for alternatives. The ruling Armenian elite at the time was one of the most reform-minded and pro-Western. Turkey was Armenia's window to the Western world. The Karabakh war polarized Ankara's position and pushed Armenian *rapprochement* with Tehran and Moscow. Although Ankara initially recognized Armenia's independence, it refuses to establish diplomatic relations or open the border linking it with resolution of the Karabakh conflict.

When Kocharyan came to power in Armenia (1998), Yerevan's policy towards Ankara changed. Now international recognition of the Armenian genocide became part of the new foreign policy. This shift encouraged Diasporan political formations to demand more actively international recognition

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<sup>118</sup> Quoted in William Hale, „Turkey, the Black Sea and Transcaucasia“, in *Transcaucasian Boundaries, op. cit.*, page 62.

with remarkable success. France has officially recognized the Armenian genocide (2001), while a similar bill in the US House of Representatives the year before was scuttled at the last minute by the intervention of President Clinton. This campaign and international debate surrounding it have increased pressure on Ankara and will surely have a negative impact on its Caucasian policy.

As with Turkey, Iranian success in the Caucasus and Central Asia remains limited. In the long run, Iran has fewer possibilities to play a leading role in the Sunni Muslim communities of Central Asia, as events in Afghanistan with the Taliban victory make clear.<sup>119</sup> Will the U.S. strikes against Afghanistan and Iran-Taliban tensions create an additional reason for U.S.-Iran cooperation? For more than two years a number of U.S. policy analysts have suggested the futility of continuing a „containment“ policy against Iran.<sup>120</sup> Iran is considered the most economical and the most secure country for the Caspian pipeline routes. Moreover, with increasing U.S. interest in Central Asia, Washington must either cooperate with Russia or Iran to guarantee the security of its oil investments, since it is hard to see direct U.S. implication there similar to the Gulf area. Therefore, within this context, U.S.-Iranian cooperation in the middle term is a serious possibility. Such cooperation would cause a total re-shuffling of the regional cards. Washington seems to have sent the necessary signals, and the rest depends on the outcome of the power struggle between the conservative clergy and the reformist wing in Tehran. Such a change would further decrease Russian influence. Turkish hopes of an „Eastern role“ would also suffer. Such a major change in US policy would redraw the geopolitical map of the Caucasus and Central Asia.

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<sup>119</sup> See Olivier Roy, „Un fondamentalisme sunnite en panne de projet politique“, *Le Monde Diplomatique*, October 1998.

<sup>120</sup> See S. Frederick Starr, „Power Failure, American Policy in the Caspian“, *The National Interest*, Spring 1997; Zbigniew Brzezinski, „A Geostrategy for Eurasia“, *Foreign Affairs*, September-October 1997.

## 6 Conclusion: Old Conflicts and New Dangers

The Caucasus is the region where the collapse of the Soviet Empire caused the most damage. The current cease-fires are the result of a certain balance of forces in the field rather than any kind of political agreement. Even when political leadership shows will and courage, a comprehensive solution seems difficult to achieve. During the last two years Presidents Aliiev and Kocharyan have met 16 times, yet there are no signs that a peace accord will be signed soon.

Yet, the five „little wars“ has caused up to two million refugees and internally displaced people (IDPs). The various conflicts have cut the region's life-lines, isolating neighboring countries from each other, and suffocating their economies. Georgia, considered one of the more prosperous countries economically and culturally under Soviet rule, is an example of post-Soviet transition difficulties. Heavily dependent on foreign aid, Georgia has a foreign debt totaling \$2.39 billion.<sup>121</sup> According to one estimate, economic activities in Georgia had declined to „less than a third of its level in 1990“, and real wages had „declined by about 90 per cent since the end of 1991“.<sup>122</sup> According to one estimate, the population of Armenia dropped by 40% as a result of mass migration,<sup>123</sup> while the population of Chechnya has halved.<sup>124</sup> During the winter of 2000-2001, the Georgian capital had to do with four hours of electricity daily, while oil-rich Azerbaijan has estimated unemployment of 30-40%.<sup>125</sup>

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<sup>121</sup> RFE/RL, Caucasus Report, 25 February 2000.

<sup>122</sup> „Republic of Georgia: Policy Framework Paper, 1996-1998“ (Washington, World Bank, 1996), Quoted in Neil MacFarlane, *Western Engagement in the Caucasus and Central Asia*, The Royal Institute of International Affairs, 1999, page 8.

<sup>123</sup> Jean Gueyeras, «Impossible troc entre Arménie et Azerbaïdjan», *Le Monde Diplomatique*, Mars 2001.

<sup>124</sup> *The Economist*, 10 February 2001.

<sup>125</sup> Arnaud Troussel, „Azerbaïdjan 1999-2000, L'émancipation remise en question?“, *Le Courrier des Pays de l'Est*, November-December 2000.

In a word, a decade of political disintegration, economic collapse, and a series of wars has thrown the region into a pre-industrial conditions.

It is improbable that the Caucasian conflicts that flared up following the collapse of the Soviet state will be reactivated along the same division lines as in the first half of the past decade. At the time, the wars were caused by loss of a legitimate political reference with the demise of the ruling party and the need to search for alternatives, the sudden security vacuum left behind by disintegration of Soviet military forces (army, OMON, and KGB) and the struggle between ethnic groups and regional elites to ensure control over decision making and over resources. Those conflicts were manned by popular mobilizations under the flag of nationalism.

The dominant discourse among the ruling elite and many of their opposition parties continues to be political and economic reforms toward becoming part of the Western world. The three Transcaucasian republics and Russia before them have joined the Council of Europe, while Armenia, Azerbaijan, and Georgia have on different occasions declared their intent to join the European Union in an ill-defined future.

The current stalemates remain a major obstacle to normalizing the situation in the Caucasus and developing stable political and economic systems in those post-Soviet societies. Following the lack of progress after talks between Presidents Aliev and Kocharyan in Paris with mediation by the French president, the Azerbaijani president declared „we have to be ready for a war,“<sup>126</sup> saying that the military option was never excluded to solve the Karabakh conflict. In Chechnya, both Russian federal troops and Chechen rebels seem determined to wage a long, low-intensity war.<sup>127</sup>

The stability of the region is also questioned because of the advanced age of its rulers. Heydar Aliev and Edward Shevardnadze are in their 70's, with reported health problems. In Azerbaijan, the ruling elite has tried to bring Ilham Aliev, the 39-year-old son of the president, to the front-line of the political scene, as a potential presidential successor. Still, it is not clear how a „ruling dynasty“ could be created legally and whether the

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<sup>126</sup> *Azerbaijani News Service*, Baku, 12 March 2001.

<sup>127</sup> Dodge Billingsley, „Chechen rebels hone tactics for long haul“, *Jane's Intelligence Review*, February 2001, and *The Economist*, 10 February 2001.

international community or the Azerbaijani population would accept such a succession.<sup>128</sup>

What is striking, while talking to high-level officials, university professors, or journalists, is a general lack of knowledge about rules of international relations, the international system in general, and the rich literature on North-South relationships. The paradox is that the Caucasian nations have inherited a rich and developed social system, economic infrastructure, and educated populations from the Soviet Union, but their economies are at the level of the poorest nations of the planet. According to Hobsbawm, „the post-communist structures of the ex-Soviet Union are still so provisional and unstable that we can't predict in what direction they are likely to develop, except that the direction of Western liberal democracy is among the least likely outcomes.“<sup>129</sup>

The Caucasian nations lack the necessary resources to obtain a peaceful solution to the conflicts. Not only international mediation is necessary, with guarantees to respect the accords, and protect minorities and the vulnerable. Massive international engagement is also necessary to rebuild destroyed villages and shattered economies. During the past decade the West viewed the Caucasus through the prism of nationalist conflicts and later through its geopolitical interests in oil and pipelines. The discourse of democracy, civilian society building, and economic reforms has been overshadowed by *Realpolitik*, self-interest, and limited allocation of resources. Will international mediation in conflict resolution, coupled with promises for massive reconstruction aid, become specific and propose a new foundation of stability and cooperation for the Caucasus?

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<sup>128</sup> Douglas Frantz, „Ruling Dynasties Sprout in Capitals of Ex-Soviet Republics“, *International Herald Tribune*, 21 February 2001.

<sup>129</sup> E.J. Hobsbawm, „The End of Empires“, in Karen Barkey and Mark von Hagen (eds.), *After Empire: Multiethnic Societies and Nation-Building*, Westview, 1997, page 16.

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