

**Conflict in the Caucasus and the black Sea Region:
Causes and prospects for Resolution**

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OP97.1

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CONFLICT IN THE CAUCASUS AND THE BLACK SEA REGION: CAUSES AND PROSPECTS FOR RESOLUTION

Dr. Shireen T. Hunter¹

Introduction

The collapse of the Soviet Union in December 1991 and the ensuing disintegration of its internal and external empires were accompanied by a considerable degree of political upheaval and military conflict within some of its constituent republics. The Caucasus and the Black Sea regions of the former Soviet Union have been, in an especially strong manner, afflicted with political strife and military conflict. Strife in these regions, moreover, began early during the first Soviet Union, but which ironically ended with its disintegration.

While a number of difficult issues and potential areas of friction between Russia and Ukraine remain which, under certain circumstances, could still lead to a serious conflict between the two countries, the main area of instability is the Caucasus region— North and South— and its Southern periphery. The list of conflicts which has plagued the Caucasus region is long and includes: The Georgian- Abkhazian conflict; the Georgian- Ossetian conflict; the Armenian- Azerbaijan conflict; and the Russo- Chechen war. In addition, there have been tensions between the Azerbaijanis and the Lezghis, the Georgians and the Armenians, and the Ingush and the Ossets, just to mention few.

Continued instability and strife in this region will have ramifications which will go far beyond the region itself and its immediate periphery. The exact nature of these ramifications for various adjacent and more distant countries and for regional and international actors, cannot be clearly identified and assessed. What is clear is that they are certain to undermine prospects for economic development and to exacerbate conflictual dimensions of relations among the

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Caucasian countries and peoples, between them and neighboring states, and among the regional and international actors.

Yet despite the significant and mostly negative implications of continued strife in the Caucasus for a whole range of regional and international concerns, international efforts at conflict prevention and resolution have been sadly inadequate. Given the disappointing record of conflict resolution and prevention, any thinking regarding how to resolve existing conflicts- or at least to contain them- and to prevent the development of new sources of dissent and dispute must first start with the following three questions: 1) What have been the real causes of conflict in the Caucasus? 2) Why have international efforts at conflict prevention and resolution fallen of what has been needed? and 3) Why have these efforts failed?

The answers to these questions will also determine the outlook for the resolution—or at least the containment – of these conflicts, as well as for the prospects for more sustained and effective international efforts at conflict resolution and prevention in the future.

The underlying causes of conflict in the Caucasus region can be divided into the following two basic categories, each with sub- divisions: 1) Indigenous factors; 2) Exogenous factors.

1. Indigenous factors

The Caucasus region has one of the longest histories of human habitation. The region has also been at the crossroads of major ethnic migratory waves, and has been an area of great power rivalries since ancient times. These facts have contributed to the patchwork pattern of its ethnic groups and to its cultural diversity.

In addition to those on habitants of the region, whose ethnic provenance is not clear and who are referred to as the indigenous peoples of the Caucasus, the region has witnessed three major waves of ethnic migration.

The first was that of the early Indo- Europeans, who entered the region in the first millennium B.C., and was followed by that of the Iranian branch of the Indo- Europeans, including the Medes, the Persians, and the Cimmerians¹.

Currently, the Armenians, the Ossetians, the Talysh, the Tats, and the Kurds constitute the Indo- European elements in the Caucasus². The Ingush, the Tatars and the Cherkes belong to the Turkic group. The case of the Azerbaijanis is more ambiguous. Before the waves of Turko- Mongol penetration between the 9th and 13th centuries, A.D., the bulk of the population was Indo- European of the Iranian branch. Turkic migration did not eliminate the indigenous peoples, although a considerable number of them were killed or driven out. But over the period of seven centuries, this

development led to their linguistic Turkification, leading the majority of present-day Azerbaijanis to identify themselves as Turks³.

The third wave- which was smaller, but left a deep imprint on the region's evaluation- consisted of the Russians.

From a cultural perspective, in addition to the region's indigenous traditions, the following influences have been most important in shaping the intricate cultural pattern of the region: 1) ancient Iranian; 2) Greco- Roman and ancient Christian; 3) Islamic, both in its Iranian and Turkish versions; and 4) modern Western, including pre- Soviet Russia⁴.

An important consequence of this ethno-cultural legacy has been the region's religious and sectarian heterogeneity, which has both undermined the internal cohesion of the Caucasian states and non-independent communities and has contributed to inter-states and inter-communal strife. To illustrate, most of the Caucasian people are Muslims, with the exception of Georgians, Armenians, and North-Ossetians, who are Christian. Georgia, however, has a Muslim minority, concentrated in Adzharia. Its Azerbaijani minority, which is concentrated in the Marneuli region, is also Muslim. Because of their Muslim faith, the Adzhars are viewed with suspicion by other Georgians, their loyalty to Georgia is questioned, and they are suspected of having separatist and pro-Turkish and pro-Islam sympathies⁵.

Religious differences among the Ossetians divide this small community, making the creation of a coherent Osset entity highly problematic. Most Azerbaijanis are Shi'as, although there is also a substantial Sunni minority in the country. A considerable portion of the Azerbaijani Shi'as feel a degree of kinship with Iran.

Historically, sectarian and religious characteristics have affected the orientation of Caucasian peoples toward outside forces and powers. Thus the region's Christians have traditionally gravitated towards Russia and see it as a natural ally and protector against their Muslim neighbors. The Muslims, meanwhile, have gravitated toward either Iran or Turkey.

Historical legacy

Aspects of the region's historical experience have left deep imprints on the collective psychology of its nations and communities and thus are a major part of the diverse dynamics affecting their recent and future evolution. In this context, the impact of the encounter with Russia, in both its Czarist and Soviet versions, has been particularly significant. But other influences have also been important, notably the Turkic migrations, which inevitably have created a divide between the Turkic and non-Turkic peoples. The Armenian encounter with the Ottoman Turks has left an especially deep imprint on their collective psyche. By contrast, Iranian-Armenian relations have historically

been mostly –although not always—cordial. Certainly, the Armenians have no harsh memories of Iran, and consequently most Armenians have positive feelings toward Iran.⁶ These experiences still affect the region's peoples relate to their immediate surroundings and the rest of the world.

The Russian/Soviet legacy for the region has been largely negative. Soviet nationality policies have greatly contributed to the exacerbation of inter-ethnic tensions, which are a principal cause of conflict in the region. Among Soviet practices, the following have been particularly damaging in terms of exacerbating the conflictual dynamics of the region:

- 1) Territorial gerrymandering, with the consequent outcome of placing pockets of ethnic minorities in individual republics or autonomous regions. Two examples of this policy's having caused inter-ethnic violence are the Armenian enclave of Nagorno-Karabakh and the Ossetian enclave in Georgia;
- 2) Massive transfers of populations from their places of birth to other regions. This was done in the case of Abkhazia; and
- 3) The conscious playing off- of one ethnic group against others as part of a strategy of divide and rule.⁷

Strategic Significance

The strategic significance of the Black Sea- Caucasus region attracts the attention of regional and international actors and thus sets off competition for influence in these areas among them; this has also strengthened the conflictual forces in the region.

The proximity of the Caucasus to other such strategically important regions as the Middle East and the Persian Gulf – coupled with cultural, religious, and historical ties between them – has meant that the Middle Eastern states' rivalries and disputes have been extended to the region, where various Middle Eastern countries have been vying for influence and where each has been trying to undermine the prospects of its competitors.⁸

The Process of the USSR's Disintegration

The nature of the process through which the Soviet Union disintegrated has been one of the more important causes of conflict in the Caucasus region. Unlike other empires, the Soviet Union's disintegration was not the consequence of war or challenge from the periphery in the form of anti-colonial and national liberation movements. Rather, it was the unintended consequence both of a process of reform, which was supposed to revive and strengthen the Soviet Union, and of the fragmentation and power struggles that reform unleashed within the central leadership of the USSR.

As early as 1987, the divergences and power struggles within central leaderships were also reflected in the ranks of the republican and other local leaderships. To put it simply, during the first stage, between 1987-1990, the competition was between the reformists, represented by Mikhael Gorbachev, and the conservatives, represented by Igor Ligachev. From mid-1990 to mid-1991, the competition was shifted to that between Mikhael Gorbachev and his supporters on the one hand, and Boris Yeltsin and his followers on the other, advocating more fundamental and sweeping reforms. Each of the above-noted factions had its own supporters within the republican and regional leaderships.

The so-called nationalities question and the problem of inter-ethnic tensions early-on became inextricably mixed with intra-leadership rivalries and power struggles within the central and peripheral leaderships. The rival groups manipulated these issues in order to advance their own goals and agendas. To illustrate, during the period 1988-89, Gorbachev used inter-ethnic tensions and the desire for independence within a number of former Soviet republics as a tool to remove their conservative leaderships, who opposed his reform agenda. Meanwhile, the hard-liners, represented by Ligachev, fanned the flames of inter-ethnic disputes in order to demonstrate the dangers involved in Gorbachev's strategy of glasnost.⁹

Boris Yeltsin, meanwhile, appealed to nationalist sentiments within the republics and within Russia's own ethnic minorities, and he promised them greater freedoms and even independence. For example, it is ironic that it was Boris Yeltsin who in 1991 promised the Chechen leader, Dzugakar Dudayev, independence for Chechnya, a promise which he forgot once he was in power.

Post-Soviet Dissension and Power Struggle

The collapse of the Soviet Union did not end power struggles and dissension over policy either in Moscow or in the Republics. Quite the contrary, power struggles and policy disputes among various factions continued unabated.

Both in Georgia and in Azerbaijan, these power struggles exacerbated the Nagorno-Karabakh and the Abkhaz conflicts, respectively. Disagreement between Russia's military and civilian leaders regarding the handling of ethnic conflicts, either in the republics or within the Russian federation itself – such as the Chechen conflict – has contributed to their prolongation and exacerbation. The fate of the recent peace between Russia and the Chechens, negotiated by General Alexander Lebed, will also be largely determined by the dynamics of intra-Moscow power-struggles¹⁰.

2. External factors

External factors – largely related to the policies pursued by Russia, the West, and regional actors, such as Iran and Turkey, along with the emergence of a new range of rivalries over export routes for the energy resources of the Caucasus and Central Asia – have also tended to exacerbate and prolong conflicts in the region and to make resolving them more difficult. A detailed analysis of these issues is beyond the scope of this paper. Therefore, only the most salient aspects of the problems will be noted here, along with some examples of how these external factors have exacerbated regional conflicts.

Russia: Recovering the Loss

Even after the disintegration of its empire, Russia had not abandoned its aspiration to become a great power, although there were differences of opinion within the Russian leadership about what constitutes the greatness of a power. For example, Andrei Kozyrev, the former Russian foreign minister, believed that "...Russia's greatness at the threshold of the twenty- first century is determined not by the scale of its empire, but by the level of its peoples' well- being..."¹¹

Others, however, believed that, if Russia wants to remain a great power and an important voice on the international scene, it should retain the old Soviet space as its special sphere of influence. Some went even further and considered it especially important for Russia to station its troops along the external borders of these republics.

In order to achieve these goals, Russia has considered it necessary that it should be the principal mediator of inter- ethnic and other regional conflicts in the former Soviet space, and it has used various republics' ethnic problems to force them into accepting its demands. This has been the case in Georgia, for example, where Russia manipulated the Abkhaz problem in order to force the Shevardnadze government to agree to the stationing of Russian troops in Georgia. Some observers suspect Russia of not favoring a final solution of these conflicts, but merely wanting them to be contained, so as to maintain influence over various republics.

However, not all of Russia's policies can be attributed to imperial impulses and nostalgia for the Soviet Union. Rather, security concerns, notably fear of territorial disintegration and potential enrichment, are also strong motives of Russian behavior.

Having lost its influence in the Baltics and in the former Warsaw pact regions, while facing China to the East, Russia is concerned that the loss of its influence in the Black Sea region would once more turn it into a semi-landlocked country. In the Caucasus, Russia is worried about the emergence of a Turko- Islamic group and the potential fragmentation of the Russian

Federation. These factors have been important in regard to the Chechen problem.

New Regional Actors

Already by 1990, the politics pursued by Mikhail Gorbachev had opened up the Caucasus region to external influences, notably those emanating from neighboring regions. Two sets of considerations on the part of neighboring countries and those farther afield- notably in the Middle East- were responsible for their growing interest and involvement.

1) First, concern over the potential implications of developments in these regions on these countries' own security and other interests. For example, the nature of the internal political development of these regions and the pattern of their external ties would have deeply affected other regional balances of power, and in the process would have favored some countries and damaged others. Consequently, regional actors have been anxious to prevent trends potentially damaging to their interests from gathering strength.

2) The second set of considerations has related to the desire of regional actors to expand their zones of influence in this region and to prevent the consolidation of their rival's influence.

From 1989 to 1994, Turkey was the main contender to fill the space left vacant by the erosion of Russian control. Even today, in the Black Sea and the Caucasus region, Russo- Turkish competition forms a principal component of the region's geopolitical landscape. Despite the earlier focus by international observers on Turkish- Iranian rivalry, Iran has remained a relative minor player in the region and has pursued a defensive policy. Indeed, as far as the inter- ethnic conflicts are concerned, both Iran and Turkey have behaved cautiously. As result, earlier fears that the Nagorno- Karabakh conflict could degenerate into wider regional conflict involving Turkey and Iran have not materialized.

Nevertheless, these competitions have contributed to the exacerbation of regional conflicts and at times have scuttled efforts to resolve them. Nothing better illustrates this fact than the history of efforts to resolve the Nagorno- Karabakh dispute.

From the beginning of the processes of glasnost and perestroika, the Nagorno- Karabakh conflict had become linked with power struggles in Moscow and in Azerbaijan and Armenia. From early 1990 through June 1993, competition for influence in Azerbaijan, among Russia, Turkey, and Iran, was added to the internal rivalries and divisions which plagued the republic. The combination of these two sets of rivalries has been a major factor in the failure so far of various bilateral and multilateral efforts to devise a plan which would be acceptable to all players¹².

Policies followed by other regional actors, notably in the Middle East, have also had a negative impact, by linking Caucasus issues with broader Middle East politics and rivalries.

Among Middle East actors, Israel has been especially active in the region, in particular in Azerbaijan, because of that republic's close cultural, historical, and religious links to Iran and Israeli- Iranian animosity.

International Actors: The West

Western policies toward the Black Sea region and the Caucasus have also played an important role in the evolution of their political dynamics. Three stages so far can be identified in the development of Western policy towards these regions.

Before discussing these stages, however, it must be noted that there has been a marked distinction between Western policy toward parts of the Black Sea region – such as Ukraine- and the Caucasus.

Regarding the former, the West has tried to minimize the risks of conflict, especially between Ukraine and Russia. By contrast, the West's attitude toward the Caucasus have been more ambiguous, partly because the West has tried to achieve at times contradictory goals and interests.

The first stage of the Western policy, during 1988-91, was dominated by a desire not to endanger the continuation of the process of reform in the Soviet Union and the relaxation of tensions with the West. Consequently, the West did not particularly encourage pro- independence movements within the Soviet Union and reacted mildly when Soviet troops were used to suppress nationalist movements in Georgia in 1988 and in Azerbaijan in 1990. Consequently, Western approach towards the Soviet Union.

During the second stage, during 1992-94, Western policy toward the entire Southern part of the former Soviet Union was Russo-centric and allowed a degree of free hand for Russia in this area¹³. The only exception was Azerbaijan, where the West actively promoted a role for Turkey. In fact, two other basic aspects of Western policy, both during the reform period and after the disintegration of the Soviet Union, were the containment and isolation of Iran and the promotion of a leadership role for Turkey. Yet it is not difficult to see that a policy characterized by Russo- centeredness and the promotion of a leadership role for Turkey is inherently contradictory.

Moreover the isolation and exclusion of Iran is bound to increase its security concerns.

The third stage of Western policy, from 1994 to the present, has been characterized by less Russo- centric and more pro- active policy toward the various former Soviet republics.

Nevertheless, even at this stage the desire not to antagonize Russia or to weaken the more pro- Western forces in that country has acted as a restraint on Western willingness to act more forcefully in regard to regional conflicts. Western policy toward the Chechen republic is a case in point.

Energy and Pipelines: Another Complicating Factor

Competition over access to the energy resources of the Caucasus and the Central Asia and over their export routes has further complicated regional politics and Turkey's efforts to become the hub of export for these resources has exacerbated Russo- Turkish disagreements regarding shipping in the black Sea.

Energy- related disputes have also become linked with the Armenian- Azerbaijan dispute, and they could create serious competition between Armenia and Georgia in the efforts of each to become a transit point for the export of the region's energy.

The causes of the failure of Conflict resolution efforts

The main reasons for the failure of efforts at conflict resolution in the Caucasus, which flow from the foregoing discussion, are the following:

- 1) The intermingling of domestic, regional, and international politics with the questions directly related to a given conflict;
- 2) The deep historical, ethnic, and cultural roots of Caucasus conflicts;
- 3) The high strategic stakes involved in the outcome of present conflicts for the Caucasian countries and peoples, and for principal regional and international players;
- 4) The limited resources dedicated to conflict resolution in the Caucasus; and
- 5) Ironically, the relative success in containing conflicts and preventing their extension to neighboring areas, by reducing incentives to resolve them.

Ultimately, however, the one underlying fact behind the failure to resolve Caucasian conflicts- as indeed other conflicts- has been that resolving them has not been seen as the highest good, either by those directly involved or by external actors. Everyone wants conflicts to be resolved, provided that the outcome favors their own interests.

Prospects for Conflict Resolution

Many of the factors which have been at the root of conflicts in the Caucasus still remain unchanged. These include the historical and ethno- cultural roots of these disputes. There have also not been major changes in the geopolitical dynamics of the region which could improve prospects for conflict resolution.

By contrast, the internal conditions of some Caucasian countries have become somewhat more stable, although potential for the resumption of power struggles in the republics remains high. In one important respect- namely Russia's case- internal power struggles and differences over policy continue. As in the past, this factor will continue to complicate conflict resolution efforts, unless Russia's internal preoccupations lead in to disengage itself from the region, which is unlikely.

Middle East- related complications are also unlikely to be resolved soon. In fact, recent changes in the internal politics of certain countries, notably Turkey, as well as regional politics, could add new complexities to the pattern of interconnections between the Caucasus and the Middle East region.

Nor is it likely that a major international effort will be launched to resolve Caucasian conflicts. However, because of a relatively more stable situation in a number of Caucasian states and the unwillingness of external actors to risk a rekindling of conflicts, the risk of renewed large- scale military hostilities is less than in the past. The only exception is the Chechen problem. Where, despite recent peace moves, the risk of military conflict has not yet disappeared.

NOTES

¹ See; Charles Allen Burney & David Marshall Long, *The Peoples of the Hills; Ancient Ararat and Caucasus*, New York: Praeger, 1971.

² The Armenians, according to Strabo and Herodotus belong to the Thraco- Phrygian branch of Indo- European. However, linguistically, the Armenian language is closer to the Eastern branch of Indo- European, including the Iranian languages. The Ossetians call themselves "Irooni" and their country "Iroonistan". Abbas Ghuli Agha Bakikhanov, a native of baku and the region notes that the colloquial appellation of the Iranians for themselves is also "Irooni", and adds that the Osset language still contains old Persian words.

³ For details about the ethno- genesis of the Azerbaijanis and list of references, see: Shireen T. Hunter. "Greater Azerbaijan: Myth or Reality?" in Mohammad- Rexa Djalili (ed.), *Le Caucase Post- Sovietique: La Transition dans le Conflict*, Bruxelles: Bruylant, 1995, pp. 115- 142.

⁴ For a full analysis of these issues, see: Shireen T. Hunter, *The Transcaucasus in Transition: Nation- Building and Conflict*, Washington D.C.: CSIS/ Westview Press, 1994, ppp.6- 12.

⁵ See: *Ibid.*, p. 112, & Elizabeth Fuller, "Aslan Abashidze: georgia's Next Leader" RFE/RL Research Report, 5 November 1993, pp.24- 25. Abasihidze was accused of having pan- Turkist and Islamophile tendencies.

⁶ See: Richard C. Hovannissian, "Historical memory and Foreign Relations", in S. Frederick Starr (ed.), *The Legacy of History in Russia and the New States of Eurasia*.

⁷ See: Ronald Grigor Suny, "The Revenge of the Past: Socialism and Ethnic conflict in Transcaucasia" ,New Left Review, no.184, November/ December 1990.

⁸ For a discussion of the impact of Middle East- related factors, see: Shireen T. Hunter, "Trans- Caucasia and the Middle East: Patterns of Mutual Impact", Armenian review, vol.46, no.12 Spring/ Summer 1993.

⁹ For a detailed analysis of these interconnections, see: Shireen T. Hunter, The Trancaucasus in Transition, op. cit.

¹⁰ Steve Liesman, "Russia Approval of Treaty with Rebels Remains Murky", The Wall Street Journal Europe, 3 September 1996.

¹¹ See: Mohaidin Mesbahi, "Russian Foreign Policy and Security in Central Asia and the Caucasus", Central Asian Survey, vol.112, no.2, 1993.

¹² For details, see: Shireen T. Hunter, The Trans- Caucasus in transition, Op. cit.

¹³ See: Paul Goble, "Ten Issues in Search of a policy: America's Failed Approach to the Post-Soviet States", Current History, vol.92, no.576, October 1993.