1994-02

Intervention in Transcaucusus

Khutsishvili, George
Boston University Center for the Study of Conflict, Ideology, and Policy

http://hdl.handle.net/2144/3502

Boston University
After a period of euphoria in the West, primarily related to hopes concerning Russian reforms, the previously fading image of the Russian threat is becoming visible once again, although the Western media have focused almost exclusively on one aspect—the extremist rhetoric of Vladimir Zhirinovsky and his pro-imperialist compatriots in the recently elected Russian parliament. In fact, Russia has already initiated major actions to ensure a tougher Russian grip on Ukraine and Belarus', two of the more meaningful actors in the CIS, and has made stiffer demands on others to comply with Russian interests.

Assertions of Russian political-military involvement in ethno-political conflicts in the former Soviet republics have been disputed, with the Russian authorities repeatedly explaining away these charges as inspired by the (non-Russian) nationalists' conspiratorial mindset and speculation by the Western press. However, with the accumulation of cogent evidence, a consistent picture of Russia's geostrategic game for domination in—and recently even beyond—the post-Soviet space is becoming clear. The Transcaucasus region of the former Soviet Union, comprising the three republics of Georgia, Armenia and Azerbaijan, has attracted particular attention in this respect.

Moscow's Views Disseminated
Less known is the fact that conventional views of the conflicts in the Caucasus (i.e., secessionist wars in the Georgian regions of Abkhazia and South Ossetia, the Azeri-Armenian war over Nagorno-Karabakh, the situation in the breakaway Chechnia Republic, and ethnic clashes between the Ingush and North Ossetian autonomies in the
south of Russia) mainly have been created and disseminated globally by Russian television, which constitutes a unique, ubiquitous and dominating force in the post-Soviet information space.(2) For many years the Caucasus region had been perceived by the external world as virtually indistinguishable from Russia. Even the Western news reporters on the spot, let alone foreign policy analysts, with no knowledge of the local languages and very little background information, were largely influenced and conditioned by what they saw on television programs from Moscow. They were scarcely capable of imagining the degree of subjectivity both in supposedly factual live reports and in commentary.

The Republic of Georgia, a tiny spot on the post-Soviet political map, came to attract international attention largely because of two circumstances, i.e., almost permanent turmoil since the disintegration of the Soviet Union (following a year of bizarre ethno-nationalist rule by former President Zviad Gamsakhurdia),(3) and the leadership of Eduard Shevardnadze, former Soviet Foreign Minister and principal confederate of Mikhail Gorbachev. Now Georgia seems likely to be viewed as a model of a failed state.

**Renewed Russian Military Presence**

In Soviet times, Georgia was best known for its excellent theater, cinema and fine arts. The Georgians' devotion to the arts apparently had sublimated the negative forces that had accumulated during almost two centuries of imperial Russian domination. However, since the decline of the Soviet empire, Georgians have been so committed to displaying melodramatic apprehension and antagonism in their relationships with the Russians(4) that Georgia became a victim of self-fulfilling prophecy. Russia increased its covert support for rebel and separatist minority groups until it was able to reestablish its military presence and implement a political dictate involving the virtual decomposition of the Caucasian republic.

Shevardnadze had remarked repeatedly that the destiny of Georgia was being decided in Abkhazia, and he was right in his view. This ancient and fertile land has for centuries been settled by various ethnic groups, among which the Abkhazians and Georgians are
both indigenous. Beneath the traditionally tolerant relations between the two peoples (attested by many mixed marriages) glimmered sparks that in a few years blazed up into an incredible degree of anti-Georgian hatred comparable to the ethnic antagonisms in Bosnia. The nationalist "Georgia for the Georgians" hysteria launched by the Zviadists (followers of Gamsakhurdia) played a decisive role in bringing about this process.

The Russians have concentrated on backing the procommunist Abkhaz secessionist leadership of this breakaway Georgian region (with its long stretch of Black Sea shoreline), not least in view of Russia's complicated relationship with Ukraine (which threatens to reduce Russia's control of the Black Sea).

A clumsy attempt by Georgian government troops on August 14-15, 1992, to restore order in the Abkhaz capital Sukhumi gave rise to a bloody year-long war that resulted in over 200,000 refugees and forcibly displaced persons (mainly ethnic Georgians). The secessionist Abkhaz stronghold of Gudauta remained "miraculously" free of the shortages, anarchy and famine that had spread all over Georgia. The government repeatedly appealed to the UN, CSCE, and other international organizations to intervene, while at the same time refusing offers of Russian military assistance. Several UN Security Council resolutions and decisions failed to lead to a de-escalation of the conflict. On July 27, 1993, a Russian brokered trilateral agreement on a cease-fire and principles for the solution of the Georgian-Abkhaz conflict was signed. Complete demilitarization of the region, supervised by Russia, was to follow the separation of the military forces of the two sides. However, the UN failed to implement its long sought decision to send a large group of military observers to Abkhazia. Furthermore, the Russian military observers insisted that Georgians did not participate in the supervision of the withdrawal of heavy weaponry.

**Russian Arms for Abkhazia**

At the end of August 1993, S. Shoigu, chairman of the Russian Emergency State Committee, declared on Russian television that demilitarization had reached a stage at which resumption of the war would be impossible. Large numbers of hopeful refugees
returned to their ruined homes and began rebuilding. Then on September 17, a surprise attack by Abkhaz tanks and artillery, supported by their Russian North Caucasian and Cossack allies, forced the remaining disarmed Georgian troops, together with tens of thousands of civilians, to flee in panic. Many of these victims later starved or froze to death in the Svaneti mountains. Shevardnadze himself, who was besieged along with the defenders of Sukhumi, had a narrow escape. The sudden clandestine Abkhaz rearmament remains a mystery only for the extremely naive.(8)

The war ended in late September 1993 with Abkhazia's virtual secession from Georgia through a radical ethnic cleansing of its multi-ethnic population and the destruction of its cities, including Sukhumi. After this, facing a new insurgency in Western Georgia led by deposed president Gamsakhurdia (who was trying to profit from the desperate situation in the country), Shevardnadze was obliged to trade Georgia's independence (by joining the Russian-controlled CIS) for Russian military assistance. Included in Russia's price was the establishment of three Russian military bases on Georgian territory.

**Moscow Manipulates N-K Conflict**

Self-sustainability and outside manipulation have been the features of the oldest (since 1989) and bloodiest (over 15,000 casualties and almost 1.5 million refugees) ethnopolitical conflict over the ethnically Armenian Nagorno-Karabakh region in Azerbaijan. The futility of international efforts to deal with the conflict has been evident in this case also.(9) Azerbaijan's pro-Turkish president Abulfaz Elchibey was deposed in a military coup in June 1993, a couple of days before he was due to sign a major treaty opening the door for Western investors to Azerbaijan's large oil deposits. Elchibey was replaced by Geidar Aliev, the former communist ruler of Azerbaijan, who immediately suspended the Western investments and signed a treaty with Russia instead.

The natural question arises why the Russian Federation should be interested in manipulating and aggravating ethnic conflicts in neighboring newly independent republics in view of the contagious character of such conflicts and the instability already existing in what is still the largest country in the world. In order to respond to this
question, one needs to distinguish between the forces that formally define and those that actually determine Russian strategies. It is not necessary to assume a single rational actor behind the whole complex picture. Rather, one may assume that a statistically sufficient synergy between the Russian military, the security apparatus, the legislature and voter sentiment "hath done this deed."

Could the process whereby former Soviet republics tried to obtain independence have been more successful politically and less disastrous in its consequences for their populations? As it turned out, ethnic nationalism was the only force on the political palette, both in the Baltic region and the Caucasus-- the foremost regions in terms of the desire to be free of Soviet rule--that animated the politically active sections of society. (The Baltic nations, however, were fortunate enough to enjoy the support of the West.) Soviet totalitarian rule was unable to produce anything but its own disguised and distorted reflections in the social consciousness of the various peoples. Democratically minded movements and parties lacked the fervor and ruthlessness to satisfy mass expectations. The revival of democratic organizations is essential for the future of the Caucasus--if there is to be any acceptable future for this tormented part of the globe.

Notes:
1 Insightful comments can be found in S. Neil MacFarlane, "Russia, the West and European Security," *Survival*, vol. 35, no. 3, Autumn 1993.
2 Remarkably, while cutting energy and fuel supplies to Belarus', Ukraine and other debtor republics, the Russian government has repeatedly shown a readiness to forgive arrears of payment for relaying the Russian TV channels.
4 The sessions of the Georgian parliament and the press controlled by the political parties had exploited a mythic picture of Russia as Georgia's only eternal and formidable enemy, which tightened its grip every time that Georgia gathered forces for a breakthrough to independence. Remarkably, the answer to this was found not in wise
policies, but rather in self-sacrificial actions capable of impressing the decision-making and aid-providing West: "We prefer to die than to live in slavery." The people, though, were not properly asked about what they would prefer: there was a successful referendum for independence, but there could not be a referendum for collective suicide.

5 According to the 1989 census, out of Abkhazia's total population of 524,000, fewer than 91,000--17 percent--were ethnic Abkhazians, 46 percent being Georgians (prior to the recent "ethnic cleansing" that expelled most Georgians), 15 percent being Armenians, 14 percent Russians, and 8 percent others. (ed.)


7 Russian support for the Abkhaz secessionists is well illustrated in Sergei Mostovshchikov 's article "State of War," Izvestia, July 2728, 1993.

8 Fewer than 91,000 Abkhaz secessionists suddenly had a modern airforce, including Russian SU-25 attack planes that bombed the port of Sukhumi while it was still held by Georgian forces. (ed.)

9 In 1992-93 alone there were 10 failed international initiatives over Nagorno-Karabakh (see Moscow News, No. 23, 1993).