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Georgia: 'A Far-off Country...'? 

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For the last three years President Eduard Shevardnadze has justified the continued presence of Russian peacekeepers, border guards and military bases on Georgian territory by arguing that only Russia can restore Georgia's territorial integrity with regard to the secessionist autonomies of Abkhazia and South Ossetia. During that time, Russia has not kept its part of the bargain and no progress has been made to facilitate the return of over nearly a quarter of a million Georgian refugees expelled from Abkhazia or to resolve the question of Abkhazia's future status. On the contrary, both South Ossetia and Abkhazia recently held elections in an effort to garner greater legitimacy for their regimes and South Ossetia signed a friendship and cooperation treaty with North Ossetia--a part of the Russian Federation--which would facilitate their integration.

As their patience with this arrangement has grown thin, the Georgian members of parliament have initiated measures to evict the Russian military and resolve the conflicts with Abkhazia and South Ossetia without Russian mediation. Shevardnadze has taken a more cautious line, reaffirming the "special relationship" with Russia, but also has refrained from challenging the increasingly confrontational parliamentary initiatives. His hesitation to take a bolder tone (which would only ingratiate him with his domestic constituency) is a reflection of the near total abandonment of Georgia by the West in general and by the US Administration in particular. If even in a matter as pressing and noncontentious as removing spent nuclear fuel rods from Georgia the White House and State Department were too timid to operate independently in "Russia's sphere," there seems little hope for any support on the more fundamental issue of restoring Georgia from partition and occupation. (1)
Over the same three-year period in which Georgia's population has grown increasingly weary of the Russian garrisons, Georgia's strategic importance for Russia has been enhanced further. As Chechnya emerges from the war as an increasingly independent entity with no Russian forces on its territory (an outcome that no doubt emboldens the Georgian opposition), Russia will be even more reluctant to loosen its stranglehold on the country which constitutes Chechnya's only neighbor outside the Russian Federation. In addition to being again the locale for Russian ports and naval installations on the Black Sea coast (including Batumi, the capital of the Ajarian region (2) ), Georgia is slated to become a transit route for Caspian oil bound for Turkey. That the path projected for Caspian oil would terminate at Supsa just north of Batumi illuminates Ajaria's significance; Russia's desire to retain a monopoly on oil transit is as strong as its desire to maintain hegemony in the Caucasus. In the face of rising passions in Georgia, the Russian military is using the same bullying tactics that served it so well in the past. Two recent incidents in particular--Russia's detention of the Ukrainian ship Almaz in Georgian territorial waters and the threat of Russian-inspired incipient separatism in Ajaria--have placed severe stress on the relationship.

**Georgian Parliament vs. The Occupiers**

On October 2, 1996 a parliamentary resolution called on President Shevardnadze to form a delegation to hold talks with the Russian leadership and report on the entire spectrum of Russian-Georgian relations, including: the continued presence of Russian peacekeepers in Abkhazia after the end of their mandate on January 31, 1997; the existence of Russian military bases in Georgia (governed by a treaty that has not been ratified by either country's parliament); and future border protection arrangements. The parliament also instructed Georgia's security and interior ministries to draw up specific measures in the event that peacekeepers withdraw from the conflict zone.(3) Subsequently, this Georgian delegation's meeting with the Russian foreign minister, Yevgeni Primakov, produced little more than yet another Russian promise to repatriate Georgian refugees to Abkhazia in January of 1997. (4)
A week after the resolution was passed, Russian peacekeepers in Abkhazia and South Ossetia as well as Russian units stationed in Ajaria were placed on high alert. Units of the Black Sea Fleet in the Georgian ports of Poti, Sukhumi, and Batumi were also put on a higher level of readiness. Traffic between Tbilisi and Abkhazia and South Ossetia was "brought to a minimum." Clashes between Abkhaz clans in Sukhumi (in anticipation of the November 23, 1996 Abkhaz elections) may have been the target of the exercise. However, the Georgian media described the Russian actions as a response to the Georgian parliamentary resolution and the parliament's continued resistance to Russian efforts to codify the Russian border guard presence on the external borders of the CIS member states. (5) Whereas the existing border guard arrangements are governed by a series of bilateral agreements, Russia seeks approval of a CIS-wide document; "The Draft Declaration on the Principles of Establishing and Maintaining the Regime Governing the External Borders of the CIS" would obligate each CIS state to control its external borders jointly with the Russian border guards. Signing this document constitutes a precondition for participating in the CIS Customs Union, Russia's other integration initiative. (6)

In mid-October the Georgian police broke up a rally demanding the withdrawal of Russian troops that was staged in front of the Russian embassy. Still, about 20 protesters managed to get to the embassy and several others were detained. (7) At the end of October, the parliament unanimously rejected an amendment to the Bill on the State Border regulating the presence of Russian border guards on Georgian territory. That amendment would have changed the current text, namely, that the protection of Georgia's borders is the exclusive prerogative of Georgian border guards. However, the deputies agreed that the president can regularize Russian troop presence on Georgia's border with Turkey by signing a decree to that effect. (8) At the same time a parliamentary committee uniting 17 opposition parties formed to "end Russian occupation" and vowed to work until the last Russian soldier leaves. (9)

In December of 1996, a committee of three political parties circulated a statement calling for the removal of Russian peacekeepers and asking the Georgian government
to bar Russia from participating in talks with Abkhazia, since the authors have "always deemed the war in Abkhazia a political conflict, instigated with Russia's direct participation." The deputies suggested that OSCE/UN mediation and international peacekeepers should replace the Russian presence. (10) In January, with the peacekeeping mandate running out and the CIS summit which was expected to consider and extend the mandate delayed due to President Yel'tsin's ill health, Georgia's air traffic controllers stopped Russian cargo planes from flying over Georgian airspace to make deliveries to the peacekeepers in Abkhazia. (11)

Direct talks between Georgian and Abkhaz representatives were initiated in the fall of 1996. On his return from Abkhazia on January 9, 1997 the Georgian foreign minister, Irakli Menagharashvili, spoke of a "dramatic step forward" while Shevardnadze announced his willingness to meet with the Abkhaz leader Vladislav Ardzinba if "specific decisions," presumably on repatriation of ethnic Georgian refugees, could be prepared. (12) Similarly the speaker of the Georgian parliament, Zurab Zhvania, returned from the first high-level visit to South Ossetia in five years on January 20. (13)

**Russian Border Guards Respond**

On December 4, Russian border guards detained a Ukrainian ship, Almaz, in Georgia's territorial waters near Batumi and removed its captain and eleven-person crew to Russia, where they were held for several days. The Russian border guards failed even to notify the Georgian government of their action. This incident--characterized by Georgian President Eduard Shevardnadze as piracy and by the deputy foreign minister, Malkaz Kakabadze, as a move just short of a declaration of war--constitutes one response to early signs of Georgia's growing assertiveness. (14) The other comes in the form of actions calculated to threaten separatism in Ajaria.

This region on the Black Sea coast hosts a Russian naval base near its capital Batumi and Russian border guards on the border with Turkey. A small Russian minority resides there but, unlike Abkhazia or South Ossetia, Ajarians do not represent a separate nationality. The 1989 census did not list Ajar as a nationality; the region is inhabited
mainly by Georgians, some of whom profess Islam. Headed by the chairman of the Supreme Soviet, Aslan Abashidze, who was appointed in 1991 by former Georgian President Zviad Gamsakhurdia, Ajaria until recently had remained loyal to Georgia. However, due to his close ties to the Russian military, Abashidze has been able to assert Ajarian interests against the central government. In mid-October 1996, while the parliament was working to remove the Russian presence, Abashidze declared that the Russian troops in his republic "were and remain a guarantor of stability."(15)

Shortly after the Almaz was detained, a visit to Batumi by the director of the Russian Border Service, General Andrei Nikolayev, was canceled abruptly because it had not been coordinated with the Georgian border troops. Instead, Nikolayev's deputy held talks with the Ajarian leadership on December 7.(16) A few days later Nikolayev ordered the border linking Georgia's South Ossetian Autonomous Oblast' with Russia's North Ossetian Autonomous Republic closed to all movement of goods and people. He supported the action by citing a 1994 moratorium on border traffic in connection with the war in Chechnya which had never been implemented: "It is being implemented now because the Russian government deems it necessary." (17)

Another portent of Russian intentions came on December 12 when Russia's Duma Speaker, Gennadi Seleznev, in his address to Georgian parliamentarians, included a plea for establishing a Russian Consulate General in Batumi. (18) In this highly controversial speech, Seleznev also called for easing the economic sanctions on Abkhazia and voiced his concern over "the organized campaign to drive out the Russian-speaking community."(19) Not surprisingly, these remarks struck a very raw nerve in the parliament--the People's National Democratic Party staged a walkout and two other parties, the Georgian Democratic Party and the Christian Democratic Union, joined it in calling for Shevardnadze not to "make the same mistake in the future and allow a representative of the country with which Georgia has no clear prospects for normal relations to take the rostrum of Georgia's supreme legislative body." (20)
On December 16 Georgian newspapers carried a report that Russian armored vehicles besieged the Supreme Council of Ajaria, government buildings, the post office, telegraph, and television center. Accounts of the incident varied, with some sources claiming that the Russians were apprehending saboteurs who had penetrated the city. The Transcaucasus group of Russian forces explained that this was a regular military exercise. (21) For his part, Abashidze stated that the republican law enforcement agencies held a preventive exercise in which they took control of Ajaria's administrative border with Georgia in order to "stop armed groups wearing Georgian Ministry of Internal Affairs uniforms from entering Ajaria." (22)

In its press release, the Georgian Ministry of Internal Affairs stated that there was no attempt by armed formations to penetrate Ajaria and pointed out that the Ajarian Ministry of Internal Affairs could hardly have been responsible for the incident since it has no armored vehicles of its own. The Georgian ministry offered assistance to Ajaria's law enforcement organs and was told that the situation was normal and no help was necessary. The statement emphasized that relations between the ministries of Internal Affairs of Ajaria and Georgia are built on the principle of subordination. (23)

For the time being the Georgian government defused the situation by holding joint meetings with the Ajar government in late December. As a result of these sessions, Ajaria was allowed to retain customs duties which were originally bound for the central budget. At the same time Shevardnadze stressed that the arrangement will have to be approved by the Georgian parliament. (24)

Abazhidze's attempt to turn a purely administrative border into a guarded frontier, only days after Seleznev made a bid for Russian diplomatic representation, constitutes a blatant and calculated threat. These maneuvers lead to the conclusion that the Russian side has once again threatened Georgia's territorial integrity in order to keep military bases and border guards in place.

Notes:
1 Although concerned about nuclear fuel which could be used to make a bomb and perfectly capable of removing the substance, the US Administration "with an eye on the broad relationship with the Russians" invited them to remove the material, causing interminable delay; see The New York Times, 5 January 1997.

2 The Ajarian Autonomous Republic constitutes a curious anomaly created during the Soviet period. All other autonomous republics in the USSR represented ethnic minorities within the union republics in which they were situated. This is the case in Abkhazia (although ethnic Georgians --46.2%--outnumbered the Abkhaz--17.3%--there prior to secession). Soviet censuses, however, showed that there were no ethnic Ajars, and most of the Ajarian Autonomous Republic's population consisted of ethnic Georgians (82.8%) followed by Russians, Armenians, Greeks, etc.

3 Iprinda, 3 October 1996 (FBIS-SOV-96-193).
4 TASS, 6 December 1996 (FBIS-SOV-96-237).
5 Iprinda, 9 October 1996 (FBIS-SOV-96-198).
7 Iprinda, 16 October 1996 (FBIS-SOV-96-203).
8 Interfax, 30 October 1996 (FBIS-SOV-96-211).
9 Interfax, 31 October 1996 (FBIS-SOV-96-213).
11 Reuters, 21 January 1996.
15 Interfax, 14 October 1996 (FBIS-SOV-96-201).
16 TASS, 8 December 1996 (FBIS-SOV-96-237).
17 Iberia, 12 December 1996 (FBIS-SOV-96-241).
18 Interfax, 12 December 1996 (FBIS-SOV-96-240).
20 Iprinda, 12 December 1996 (FBIS-SOV-96-241).
21 Radio Tbilisi Network, 18 December 1996 (FBIS-SOV-96-244).


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