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Elizabeth Fuller

The Transcaucasus is an intricate patchwork of ethnic and religious groups, only partially confined within borders that have been arbitrarily drawn and redrawn over the past 70 years and are currently the scene of more actual and potential inter-ethnic conflicts than any other area of the former Soviet Union. Armenia and Azerbaijan are at war over the status of Nagorno-Karabakh; South Ossetia is struggling to secede from Georgia and join the Russian Federation; while Abkhazia wants to negotiate a federal agreement with Georgia.[1] The fact that the regional powers most keenly interested in neutralising these disputes (Turkey, Iran and Russia) have their own, sometimes conflicting strategic and policy aims in the region, continues to obstruct mediation efforts.

Despite the ethnic and religious components, the Transcaucasus conflicts were originally political in nature. In each case, the cause has been perceived discrimination, human-rights violations and/or economic neglect experienced by a minority ethnic group living on territory controlled by an ethnic majority (e.g., the Armenian population of Nagorno-Karabakh; the Abkhaz in Georgia). The minority responded to this perceived discrimination in one of two ways: either by demanding to replace administrative subordination to the majority ethnic group with administrative subordination to another ethnic group with a clearly distinct territorial unit, or by demanding that the ethnic majority grant it territorial autonomy or even sovereignty. Such demands were invariably perceived by the ethnic majority as an attempt by the minority to 'steal' part of its territory. Political conflicts thus evolved into struggles for control over territory. The subsequent development of these conflicts was influenced by a number of factors.

● *The primitive political culture of local leaderships*, which is evidenced by such attitudes as:

a) The conviction that historical evidence, rather than international law, is the ultimate argument in determining which nation's claims to a given territory are valid (the 'we-lived-there-first-therefore-it's-ours' syndrome).

b) Failure to comprehend that there are various intermediate stages between total subservience and total independence (e.g., degrees of autonomy, federal and confederal agreements). This in turn engenders an 'all-or-nothing' approach to negotiations.

c) The inability to foresee the problems which political decisions that contravene international law, such as the unilateral declaration of its independence from Azerbaijan by the parliament of the self-styled Nagorno-Karabakh Republic, create for the international community.

● *The process of 'escalation by inertia'*. Initially, in 1988, the Soviet leadership was reluctant to make any concessions to Armenia over Nagorno-Karabakh for fear of opening a Pandora's box of analogous territorial claims. When other nationalities, nevertheless, followed the Armenians' example in demanding frontier revisions or autonomy, Moscow responded by imposing ad hoc and largely ineffective political solutions. When those failed, it resorted to brute force (as exemplified by the brutal intervention of Soviet troops in Tbilisi in 1989 and Baku in 1990). Consequently, over a period of several years, the spiral of atrocity and counter-atrocity fuelled mutual hatred and distrust to a point where it has become virtually impossible to embark upon a rational debate without becoming bogged down in mutual recriminations and an obsessive need to apportion blame. As Abkhaz Parliament Chairman, Vladislav Ardzinba, recently observed: 'It becomes difficult to negotiate in good faith with a counterpart who has declared and shown his intent to destroy you as a nation.'[2] The division of the assets of the former Soviet army, as a result of which Armenia, Azerbaijan and Georgia have acquired prodigious quantities of sophisticated weapons and military hardware, has likewise contributed to the escalation of hostilities.

● *Growing mistrust of Moscow*. Moscow's heavy-handed approach to damage containment, and its concomitant disinclination to take any but the most tentative steps towards conflict resolution, served both to alienate all parties concerned and to convince them that Moscow favoured the adversary. The present Russian leadership has consequently largely forfeited its credibility to act as a mediator, even if its ability to do so were not circumscribed by the existence of other Russian interest groups (within the Russian parliament and the military high command) with conflicting agendas in the region.[3]

● *The belated involvement of the international community in conflict resolution in the Caucasus has met with only limited success*. While this is partly due to the obduracy of the warring parties, it is also in no small measure a reflection of the inadequacy and inflexibility of those international organisations principally concerned with conflict mediation, specifically the United Nations and the Conference on Security and Cooperation in Europe (CSCE). Both organisations are widely perceived as having been created to address specific historical problems (international peacekeeping, human-rights violations, arms control) and to be struggling to adapt to the realities of the post-Cold War era – a struggle which UN Secretary-General Boutros Ghali compared to 'repairing your car while driving at 120 m.p.h.'.[4]

Handicapped by financial constraints (in the case of the UN) or a bureaucratic structure that requires consensus as a precondition for intervention (in the case of the CSCE), they are singularly ill-equipped either to resolve the inherent contradiction between the right of minorities to self-determination and the inviolability of international frontiers, or to tackle the problems of peacemaking as opposed to peace-keeping. Moreover, the existence of political interest groups (such as the parliaments of the self-proclaimed Nagorno-Karabakh Republic or of South Ossetia) which, by virtue of the fact that they do not represent an internationally recognised state, cannot be easily admitted to negotiations, has greatly complicated efforts to resolve these conflicts.

Nagorno-Karabakh

Nagorno-Karabakh was granted the status of an autonomous *oblast* within the Azerbaijan Soviet Socialist Republic in 1923, despite the fact that its population was overwhelmingly Armenian. In February 1988, the *oblast* soviet appealed to the Supreme Soviets of Armenia, Azerbaijan and the Soviet Union to endorse the *oblast*'s transfer to Armenia. President Gorbachev initially prevaricated and then, in July 1988, ruled that Nagorno-Karabakh should remain a part of Azerbaijan. An attempt to administer the region direct from Moscow failed to stop the bloodshed, and in November 1989 control was handed back to Azerbaijan. The

Armenian Supreme Soviet retaliated by unilaterally declaring Karabakh's annexation to Armenia. In 1990-91, Soviet Army troops reportedly cooperated with Azerbaijan OMON (security troops) detachments in the systematic deportation of Armenians from Karabakh.

In September 1991, following Azerbaijan's declaration of state independence in the wake of the Moscow putsch attempt, the parliament of Nagorno-Karabakh, within which the Dashnak party is the strongest faction, proclaimed the region independent of Azerbaijan. This complicated relations between Nagorno-Karabakh and the Armenian government: under the terms of a ceasefire agreement later that month, mediated by Russian President Boris Yeltsin and his Kazakh counterpart, Nursultan Nazarbaev, Armenia abjured all territorial claims on Nagorno-Karabakh, although it continues to insist that the *oblast*'s Armenian population has the right to autonomy. Azerbaijan, however, refuses to acknowledge either the right of representatives of the Nagorno-Karabakh parliament to participate in negotiations on resolving the conflict, or, apparently, the substantive policy differences between Armenia and Nagorno-Karabakh, and has consistently blamed Armenia for the intransigence of the Nagorno-Karabakh parliament and for the actions of military units subordinate to the government of Nagorno-Karabakh.

During the spring and early summer of 1992, the Armenians enjoyed undisputed military superiority in Nagorno-Karabakh, primarily because of morale and leadership problems within the embryonic Azerbaijani armed forces. After the June presidential election, however, the Azerbaijanis succeeded in regaining some lost territory, although they failed to reestablish control over the Lachin corridor, taken by Armenian forces in May, which links Armenia with Nagorno-Karabakh.

The two sides are now engaged in a war of attrition in which the civilian population of villages on both sides of the Armenian-Azerbaijani frontier is being subjected to systematic air and artillery bombardment. The financial burden of the war is acknowledged by both parties to be enormous. Social tensions resulting from economic hardship pose an increasing problem for the Armenian government. In early February, some 100,000 people demonstrated in Erevan to demand the resignation of President Levon Ter-Petrossyan and new parliamentary elections.

The longest-running of the current Caucasian conflicts, that in Nagorno-Karabakh, can also claim the dubious distinction of being the subject of the most peace initiatives – with notable lack of success. Successive ceasefires brokered by Russia and Kazakhstan (in September 1991 and September 1992) and Iran (in February and May 1992) failed to take effect. The fact that two consecutive Iranian-brokered ceasefires were both followed almost immediately by large-scale Armenian offensives against Azerbaijani towns in Karabakh, in which hundreds of civilians were killed, was a public embarrassment to Iran which is unlikely, given the present Azerbaijani leadership's pro-Turkish orientation, to launch a new mediation attempt. Instead, Iran is supplying aid in the form of oil and food to the Azerbaijani enclave of Nakhichevan whose leader, the former Azerbaijan Communist Party First Secretary Geidar Aliev, is increasingly regarded as a possible challenger to Azerbaijan's President Abulfaz Elchibey. This is not to deny that Iran has a fundamental interest in promoting a peaceful settlement of the Karabakh conflict, if for no other reason than to preclude Turkish military intervention in the region.[5] At the same time, any peace proposal that Iran perceives as enhancing Turkey's prestige is doomed to failure.

Tentative offers in November 1991 by the newly elected Turkish government of Suleyman Demirel to mediate in the conflict failed to elicit a formal request for such an intervention from either side. After that Turkey, like Iran, appears to have abandoned the idea of acting as sole mediator and has, instead, been advocating the involvement of the EC and/or the United States to resolve the conflict. Given the aspirations of some Turkish and other regional political figures to expand the Black Sea Economic Cooperation Zone (BSECZ), of which Armenia, Azerbaijan, Russia and Turkey are all members, into a political entity,[6] the BSECZ could theoretically also serve as a forum for negotiations on the Karabakh dispute. (Informal discussions on the Moldova issue took place at the founding congress of the BSECZ in June 1992.) Azerbaijan's Foreign Minister, Tofik Gasymov, stated late last year, however, that Azerbaijan 'would renounce' all further participation in the BSECZ if it starts to turn into a political body.[7]

To date, the most intensive negotiations aimed at resolving the Karabakh conflict, rather than merely achieving a temporary cessation of hostilities, have taken place in Rome under the aegis of the CSCE, of which both Armenia and Azerbaijan (as well as Turkey) are members. Intended to prepare for a fully-fledged peace conference to be convened in Minsk, these talks collapsed in mid-September as a result of Azerbaijan's steadfast refusal to acknowledge the parliament of the self-proclaimed Nagorno-Karabakh Republic as a negotiating partner.

In early January 1993, the Azerbaijani position hardened perceptibly. Azerbaijan's State Secretary, Panakh Huseinov, affirmed that 'the Karabakh question will be solved not in Moscow or in Washington, but on the battlefield',[8] while President Elchibey, in his response to the joint appeal by the Russian President, Boris Yeltsin, and former American President Bush for an end to the war in Karabakh, argued that 'the aggressor must be established' as a precondition for ending hostilities.[9]

Such hardline rhetoric notwithstanding, in late January Azerbaijan's Foreign Minister, Tofik Gasymov, floated three tentative preconditions for resuming the deadlocked CSCE negotiating process, including a 120-day ceasefire to be monitored by international observers. By the time talks reconvened in Rome in late February, however, the Armenian forces in Karabakh had launched a new offensive in the north of the enclave, winning control of a number of strategic villages and thus precipitating the resignation of Azerbaijan's immensely popular Defence Minister.

Whether as a direct consequence of these territorial losses or for other reasons, the Azerbaijani delegation adopted what Armenia's First Deputy Foreign Minister, Zhirair Libaridian, termed 'a new, constructive approach' to negotiations. The end result was a 'modest but significant' agreement on the deployment of international observers for a period of six months to monitor an eventual ceasefire and to oversee the withdrawal of 'foreign troops' from Karabakh and the return of refugees to their homes. Italian diplomats were quoted as predicting that a fully-fledged peace conference in Minsk under the auspices of the CSCE could be convened as early as August 1993.[10]

Parallel to the latest round of Rome talks, the Turkish Foreign Minister, Hikmet Cetin, flew to Moscow to discuss both Bosnia and Karabakh with his Russian counterpart, Andrei Kozyrev. It was subsequently announced that a Russian delegation would travel to Ankara to work with Turkey on drawing up an alternative peace plan for Karabakh in consultation with the American government. No details have been divulged, but it was reported

that both Ter-Petrossyan and Elchibey responded favourably to the new proposal.[11]

While the recent upsurge of diplomatic activity over Karabakh is both laudable and encouraging, the fact that neither the CSCE process nor the Russian-Turkish initiative provides for any role for Iran casts doubts on their respective chances of success. In the final analysis, the most auspicious forum for a Karabakh peace conference is the UN, which would allow for Iranian participation. However, it is unlikely that the United States would welcome Iran's involvement.

Abkhazia

Tensions within Abkhazia between the Abkhaz, who constitute only 17.8 per cent of the half million inhabitants of their autonomous republic, and the Georgians, who account for 45.7 per cent of the total population, have existed for decades, with each ethnic group convinced that it has been victimised and discriminated against by the other. In 1978, and again in 1988-89, the Abkhaz lobbied Moscow, without success, for the secession of their autonomous republic from Georgia. An attempt by the Abkhaz Supreme Soviet in August 1990 to upgrade the status of Abkhazia to that of a full Union republic (which it had enjoyed between 1921-1930) was immediately annulled by the Georgian parliament. An Abkhaz 'Declaration of Sovereignty' adopted four months later was similarly rejected as 'separatist' by the aggressively chauvinistic leadership of Zviad Gamsakhurdia.

Nor did relations improve following Gamsakhurdia's overthrow and Eduard Shevardnadze's return in March 1992, to head the Georgian State Council. In June, the Abkhaz Supreme Soviet submitted to the Georgian Council for debate a draft treaty which provided for federative or confederative relations between Abkhazia and Georgia and the preservation of Georgia's territorial integrity. When no response from Tbilisi was forthcoming, the Abkhaz parliament voted in mid-July to restore the Abkhaz Constitution of 1925, under which Abkhazia was a sovereign republic.

While this move was denounced as tantamount to separatism by the Georgian State Council, the escalation of tensions into armed conflict appears to have happened by accident rather than design. In mid-August, Shevardnadze dispatched the National Guard under the Defence Minister, Tengiz Kitovani, to Abkhazia, ostensibly to secure the release of a group of government ministers kidnapped by Gamsakhurdia supporters. In violation of a promise given to Shevardnadze, Kitovani, a Rambo-type figure who enjoys considerable popularity among the Georgian population, marched into the Abkhaz capital, Sukhumi, and opened fire on the parliament building, thus precipitating virtual civil war. Unofficial armed units from the North Caucasus travelled to Abkhazia to fight on the side of the Abkhaz.

In early October, Abkhaz troops mounted a successful assault on the Georgian-held coastal town of Gagra, effectively splitting the region into an Abkhaz sphere of influence in the north and a Georgian one in the south. For a period of several months, the situation was a virtual military and political stalemate, with sporadic fighting along the river Gumista which marked the demarcation line. The predominantly Abkhaz- and Russian-populated town of Tkvarcheli in the south is under siege by Georgian forces; 20 people reportedly died of cold or starvation before Russian troops began airlifting food and medical supplies in January 1993.

A ceasefire agreement signed in Moscow on 3 September by Yeltsin, Shevardnadze, the Abkhaz Parliament Chairman, Vladislav Ardzinba, and representatives from the North Caucasus, collapsed when Kitovani declined to comply with the requirement that most Georgian troops withdraw from Abkhaz territory. Politically, Ardzinba continued to insist upon the withdrawal of all Georgian troops from Abkhazia as a precondition for resuming negotiations on a federal treaty with Georgia. While moderates within the newly elected Georgian parliament were prepared to accede to these demands, Kitovani adamantly opposed any degree of autonomy whatsoever for Abkhazia, and Shevardnadze, despite his personal triumph in the October elections, was reluctant to risk a confrontation with him.

UN and CSCE observer or fact-finding missions to Georgia and Abkhazia in September-November concluded that although a desperate need existed to induce the warring parties to begin negotiations, it would be inappropriate for either organisation to assume the role of mediator at that time. The UN mission advocated involving the Russian government in negotiations, with the UN participating as an observer and possibly monitoring any resulting ceasefire agreement, and has since sent a humanitarian mission to Abkhazia to assess the need for emergency aid.

This clear desire on the part of the international community for Russia to take the initiative in mediating the Abkhaz deadlock failed to take into account the fact that both Abkhazia and Georgia were profoundly suspicious of Russia's long-term intention. Abkhazia feared Russia would acknowledge Abkhazia's status as an autonomous entity within Georgia, thus abdicating all responsibility for the situation, in return for an agreement on the continued stationing of Russian troops in Georgia, while the Georgian parliament insisted that the Abkhaz issue should be resolved independently of the talks on a Russian-Georgian bilateral treaty of friendship and cooperation and a separate agreement on the continued stationing of Russian troops in Georgia. In the case of the Georgians, these misgivings soon proved to be entirely justified: in mid-February, the head of the Russian delegation to the talks, Feliks Kovalyov, told the Russian parliament that the signing of the bilateral treaty was conditional on a peaceful settlement of the conflict in Abkhazia.[12]

In addition, over the past six months it has become increasingly obvious that different interest groups within Russia have separate, indeed conflicting objectives in Georgia. While Yeltsin supports Shevardnadze's efforts to preserve Georgia's territorial integrity at all costs, the Russian parliament has on several occasions condemned Georgia's use of force in Abkhazia. More ominously, the Russian army leadership is pursuing its own interests in Georgia. During the autumn months of 1992, Russian military spokesmen consistently rebutted Georgian allegations that Russian troops were fighting on the Abkhaz side. (The CSCE mission to Abkhazia in October likewise found no evidence to support the Georgian claims.)

At the same time, however, the Russian Ministry of Defence issued a series of increasingly tough statements, warning of its intent to take whatever measures proved necessary to protect Russian military personnel and facilities in Georgia, including mining the approaches to Russian bases and authorising Russian troops to 'shoot to kill' if attacked. Moreover, the assertion that Russia has strategic interests on the Black Sea littoral, made by the Russian Defence Minister, Pavel Grachev, during his tour of inspection to Abkhazia and Adzharia in February, was interpreted by Shevardnadze as calling into question the sincerity of Russia's commitment to the recently concluded agreement to withdraw its troops from Georgia by the end of 1995.

It was against this background of rising tensions that Abkhaz forces launched a massive air and ground offensive against

Sukhumi in mid-March. Georgian spokesmen claimed that 'thousands' of Russian troops participated in the assault; the Russian and Abkhaz defence ministries both denied any involvement. The Georgian parliament protested to the Russian parliament and the UN that Russia was waging 'an undeclared war' against Georgia with the aim of detaching Abkhazia from Georgia; Shevardnadze called for a summit meeting with Yeltsin to avert an all-out Russian-Georgian war.

Whatever the truth behind the Georgian allegations of Russian military complicity, Russia's credibility as an honest broker in the Abkhaz conflict is effectively in shreds. The onus of bringing Abkhaz and Georgians to the negotiating table is thus likely ultimately to revert to the CSCE and/or the UN.

South Ossetia

South Ossetia has since 1989 been engaged in a legislative battle with Georgia in an attempt to unite with the North Ossetian Autonomous Soviet Socialist Region within the Russian Federation. The abolition by Gamsakhurdia in late 1990 of the region's autonomous status within Georgia sparked off fierce fighting between Ossetians and informal Georgian paramilitaries in which up to 600 people were killed; hundreds of families fled the conflict zone.

In June 1992, in one of the very few successful attempts at defusing a conflict situation within the former Soviet Union, President Boris Yeltsin and Georgia's State Council Chairman, Eduard Shevardnadze, signed an agreement on a ceasefire, the withdrawal of all armed units from the conflict zone, and the subsequent deployment of a 1,500-strong tripartite Russian-Georgian-Ossetian peace-keeping force. Despite the cessation of hostilities, however, both Ossetian and Georgian refugees proved reluctant to return to their homes; subsequent talks on the future status of South Ossetia within Georgia failed to make any progress.

The South Ossetian political leadership is divided: the radicals continue to insist on the region's incorporation into the Russian Federation, despite protests from more moderate figures that this demand is unrealistic, given that Russia as a CSCE signatory has recognised the inviolability of Georgia's frontiers, and that an agreement on federal relations with Georgia would constitute an acceptable compromise. Like the Abkhaz, the Ossetians are increasingly apprehensive at the prospect of being sacrificed by Russia in the interests of that country's relations with Georgia. If, as announced in mid-January, Russia decides to withdraw its contingent from the tripartite peace-keeping force in the near future, despite protests from the local population, sole responsibility for maintaining stability would devolve to the CSCE. A CSCE mission which travelled to the region in December 1992 created three Georgian-Ossetian commissions: for resolving economic problems, for strengthening law and order and for facilitating the return of refugees.

Conclusions

Preoccupied by the search for an acceptable peace plan for Bosnia, the international community has to date been reluctant to assume a leading role in mediating in the Caucasus, particularly given the unwillingness of some of the parties involved to modify their negotiating positions. It is indeed ironic that the ongoing carnage in former Yugoslavia has not made it transparently clear how desperately such mediation is needed, if for no other reason than to demonstrate Western support for the democratically elected but weak governments of the three Transcaucasus states.

If these governments are overthrown, they will inevitably be replaced by more authoritarian and radical regimes. Such a development would destabilise the region even further. Turkey, widely regarded in the West as a stable counterweight to Iran's attempts to expand its influence in the Central Asian successor states to the Soviet Union, would be particularly vulnerable. Should the Dashnak Party come to power in Armenia, for example, it would not only intensify military operations in Nagorno-Karabakh, thus increasing the pressure on the Turkish government to intervene militarily on the side of Azerbaijan, but it might also revive Armenia's territorial claims on Turkey.

Similarly, a militantly pan-Turkist regime in Azerbaijan might attempt to generate separatist sentiment among the Azerbaijani population of Iran (which is estimated at anything between 12m and 20m) in the name of the 'unification' of the Azerbaijani-populated territory divided between Russia and Persia in 1828. In addition to angering Tehran, such a move could also affect Iranian-Turkish relations, which are already rapidly deteriorating as a result of recent Turkish press allegations of Iranian complicity in political killings in Turkey.

While the CSCE has undoubtedly made some headway towards resolving the conflict in South Ossetia and is valiantly trying to lay the groundwork for the Karabakh peace conference in Minsk, its mills grind with agonising slowness: any long-term settlement it achieves in either area will be contingent on the deployment of significant numbers of international observers and peace-keeping troops. Moreover, Russia's commitment to peace-keeping in either or both areas could crumble overnight in the event of a conservative victory in the ongoing power struggle in Moscow. What is urgently needed is more effective coordination between Western governments, international organisations and non-governmental organisations (International Alert and the Unrepresented Nations' and People's Organisation both recently sent missions to Abkhazia) in an attempt to persuade the warring parties to discard the psychological legacy of their Soviet past and adopt a more realistic approach to compromise solutions.

NOTES

1. Other territorial disputes also threaten to escalate into violence. The Lezgins of Daghestan and Azerbaijan are campaigning for unification; the Kurdish minority in Azerbaijan has demanded territorial autonomy; alleged discrimination of the Azerbaijani population in Georgia is clouding relations between Baku and Tbilisi; and Azerbaijan may at some point make irredentist claims on north-western Iran.
2. Draft report on the Unrepresented Nations' and People's Organisation (UNPO) mission to Abkhazia, Georgia and the North Caucasus, October-November 1992.
3. The conservative faction within the Russian leadership is interested in promoting instability within the Caucasus as a pretext for intervention and the restoration of Russian control in the region. Some figures within the Russian armed forces argue that Georgia constitutes a vital part of Russia's southern defences, and should therefore remain within the Russian sphere of influence.
4. *Time*, 18 January 1993.
5. See William Ward Maggs, 'Armenia and Azerbaijan: Looking Towards the Middle East', in *Current History*, January 1993, pp.6-11.
6. See, for example, the interview with Onur Oymen in *Europa*, September-October 1992, and Eduard Shevardnadze's speech at the opening session of the BSECZ summit (Ankara TRT, 25 June 1992). In a recent interview in *Le Monde* of 16 January 1993, the Romanian Foreign Minister, Teodor Melescanu, argued eloquently for a political – and possibly even a regional – security dimension for the BSECZ.
7. Turan News Agency, 24 December 1992. Bulgaria has expressed similar reservations (RFE/RL Daily Report, 2 February 1993).
8. *The Los Angeles Times*, 5 January 1993.
9. Radio Baku, 7 January 1993.
10. *Reuters*, 2 March 1993.
11. *Reuters*, 10 March 1993.
12. *Interfax*, 19 February 1993.