

# THE NORTH CAUCASUS FACTOR IN THE GEORGIAN-ABKHAZ CONFLICT CONTEXT

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## Acronyms

<b>ASSR</b>	Autonomous Soviet Socialist Republic
<b>CIS</b>	Commonwealth of Independent States
<b>EU</b>	European Union
<b>GDP</b>	Gross Domestic Product
<b>GRU</b>	Main Intelligence Directorate (of the General Staff of the Armed Forces of the Russian Federation)
<b>KGNK</b>	Confederation of Mountain Peoples of the Caucasus
<b>NATO</b>	North Atlantic Treaty Organization
<b>NCFT</b>	North-Caucasus Federal Territory
<b>NCMD</b>	North Caucasus Military District
<b>NKVD</b>	People's Commissariat for Internal Affairs
<b>PACE</b>	Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe
<b>PIK</b>	"First Information Caucasus" TV channel
<b>RSFSR</b>	Russian Soviet Federative Socialist Republic
<b>SSR</b>	Soviet Socialist Republic
<b>UN</b>	United Nations
<b>UNA-UNSO</b>	Ukrainian National Assembly–Ukrainian National Self Defence
<b>USSR</b>	Union of Soviet Socialist Republics

Note on spelling: Geographic denominations are always a contentious issue in the Georgian-Abkhaz context. In this publication, the preferred spelling of the individual authors has been retained.

## Preface from International Alert

International Alert is proud to present the latest in the “Dialogue through Research” process, produced by a group of experts from both sides of the Georgian-Abkhaz conflict divide, on the theme of the North Caucasus Factor in the Georgian-Abkhaz conflict.

The experts – prominent public figures who play a role in shaping public debate in their respective societies – selected this topic as one having particular relevance for a number of reasons, a few of which we highlight below.

The role of Russia in the conflict is perceived by Georgian and Abkhaz societies each through the prism of the history of Russia’s involvement in the conflict, and Russia’s image in both Georgian and Abkhaz internal discourse is quite contradictory. This in itself is an obstacle to building understanding between the sides of the different public discourses.

However, when assessing Russia’s role, the sides do not always take into full consideration Russia’s relations with the North Caucasus and related tendencies, both with respect to internal and external Russian processes, inter alia the South Caucasus.

Clearly, official policy analysis and prognoses on the conflicts – in this case the Georgian-Abkhaz conflict – do not fully take into consideration Caucasian commonalities, which many people living in the Caucasus identify with.

At the same time, we can see how, for example, after the 2008 war Georgia stepped up efforts to establish links with the people of the North Caucasus. The aim here was to draw them into mutually beneficial partner relations, based on Georgia’s own vision of partnership and interests.

However, socio-political trends in the North Caucasus are mostly hidden from the outside world for reasons of lack of free access and the close-knit nature of the traditional communities living there. Therefore, we invited new experts into the Georgian-Abkhaz dialogue group who could expand our understanding of this issue.

We hope that this publication will stimulate public debates on the North Caucasus factor in Georgian and Abkhaz societies. This could help to improve understanding of the role this region plays, where internal Russian and South Caucasian interests are intertwined.

## Abkhaz perspective - summary

### Introduction

The policy of *perestroika* in the 1980s and the subsequent collapse of the Soviet Union acted as an impetus to ethnic nationalist movements in the North Caucasus and the resurgence of dormant ethnic conflicts. Since the mid-1990s, these conflicts have led to all-out ethnic or nationalist violence in the North-East of the Caucasus (the Chechen War, the Ossetian-Ingush conflict). Since 2000, hotbeds of instability have also begun to emerge in the North-West of the Caucasus (Kabardino-Balkaria, Karachaevo-Cherkessia). While ethnic/nationalist movements in Chechnya, Ingushetia and Dagestan have over the past decade been transformed for a variety of reasons almost entirely into Islamicist mobilisation, in Kabardino-Balkaria and Karachaevo-Cherkessia the two types of mobilisation – Islamic and ethnic nationalist – co-exist.

These processes in the North Caucasus have both a local and a regional or geopolitical dimension onto which both types of mobilisation are grafted. Both Islamicist and ethnic nationalist projects are also attracting the attention of other players keen to promote their own interests; indeed, to some extent, they are nurtured by these interests. These complex multi-actor, multi-level relationships combine to create serious challenges for stability not only for the Russian part of the Caucasus, but also for the countries of the South Caucasus and even outside the region.

In this collection of articles, the authors provide an analysis of the factors influencing the situation in the North Caucasus (mainly the North-Western Caucasus), the North Caucasus factor in the 1992–1993 Georgian-Abkhaz war (Natella Akaba), the evolution and characteristics of Abkhaz-Adyghe relations as well as new trends in light of “the Circassian question” and the potential for positive change (Arda Inal-Ipa), and Georgia’s policy on the North Caucasus (Spartak Zhidkov). Before this, however, it is important to put the articles into context with an overview of the geopolitical and strategic significance of the region.

### The geopolitical (international) dimension of the processes in the North Caucasus

The geopolitical position and strategic significance of the North Caucasus (and indeed the Caucasus as a whole) is one factor of global policy that has remained a constant for at least two centuries. This was traditionally a tussle for influence between three empires – Russian, British and Ottoman – which impacted on the lives, political aspirations and fate of the peoples populating the region.

Today, as over the last two decades, the North Caucasus is intersected by the competing interests of the great powers and regional players. If we add the local and Federation-level elites, civil society organisations and movements, criminal groups and the terrorist underground, the picture becomes even more complex and ambivalent. In the North Caucasus, we are also seeing a clash between pro-fundamentalism and pro-government strands of Islam, radical and moderate, which follow the fault lines of political and ethnic nationalist divisions.

Against the background of the international anti-terrorist agenda, religious insurgency in the North Caucasus is turning the region into a Western and not simply a Russian frontier. The increase in radical Islamicist forces in the region is opening doors for interaction between Russia and the West on a range of issues of common interest. But attempts by the two powers to present

a united front against the Islamicist threat are undermined by differing views on the various “ethnic nationalisms” in the North Caucasus. These views are in many respects a product of the overall state of ideological relations between Russia and the West.

The Chechen factor has eased in recent years to be replaced by the Circassian movement as the “weak link” in relations between Russia and the West regarding the North Caucasus. The Circassian question is becoming internationalised, with the involvement of large and active Circassian communities in many countries around the world – namely, Turkey, Jordan, Syria, Israel, Libya, Egypt, the United States (US), France and Germany (various estimates indicate that the Circassian diaspora comprises up to seven million people).

Mirroring the Russian-Western ideological divide, the Circassian movement is divided into moderates and (geopolitically motivated) radicals. The most radical groups mainly emerge and function outside the Russian Federation – primarily in the US, Israel, Turkey and Jordan. Their aims and ideology are perceived within Russia as hostile and a threat to the unity of the Russian state. The radicals see their principal objective not only as the acknowledgement of historical injustices committed against the Circassians by Tsarist Russia in the 19th century, but also the recognition of Greater Circassia (within its historical borders) as a territory occupied by Russia. These groups receive financial support from special Western funds as well as intellectual backing from think tanks such as, for example, the Jamestown Foundation in the US. Georgia, which is pursuing its own interests in the region, also provides a platform for these groups. The Georgian administration is successfully converting the geopolitical phantoms of the Cold War into foreign and domestic political capital in an attempt to draw the West into the “battle” for the Caucasus, using the North Caucasus as a platform.

Any attempts to destabilise the situation in the North Caucasus, on the other hand, can only be of concern for the current American administration. The latter is keen to prevent its privileged relationship with Russia from being overshadowed by reckless action by Georgia in the North Caucasus. For example, academics close to the US administration from the Center for American Progress and George Washington University, Samuel Charap and Cory Welt, have written an article classing as “provocative” certain actions by Georgia in the North Caucasus which have nothing to do with “engagement” or improving the humanitarian situation of the region’s inhabitants. These actions include propaganda directed at the region via the media, incitement of anti-Russian sentiment, the campaign for the boycott of the Olympic Games in Sochi and initiatives to recognise the Circassian genocide.<sup>1</sup>

The European Union’s policy on the North Caucasus is more cautious and is limited to humanitarian policy. Since 1999, the European Commission has provided the region with €237 million in emergency humanitarian aid. However, in 2011 the EU announced an abrupt cut in humanitarian programmes in the region due to a significant improvement in the socio-economic situation and the general stabilisation in the North Caucasus.<sup>2</sup> Europe is not interested in being part of the resolution of religious and ethnic antagonisms in the region: it does not want to take sides in the “quiet conflicts” of the North Caucasus. The European Parliament did not give any practical response to a petition by Adyghe (Circassian) organisations on 11th October 2006 which included a highly unflattering assessment of Russia’s policy in the North Caucasus and requested that the European Parliament recognise the 19th century genocide of the Adyghe.<sup>3</sup> On the other hand, the European Parliament has since 2006 held an annual “Circassian Day” – a platform for discussion of issues of ethnicity and development of the [Circassian] people as well as current political problems in Circassian society.

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1 S. Charap and C. Welt (2011). *A More Proactive US Approach to the Georgia Conflicts*, Center for American Progress, pp. 48-49.

2 See news article ‘The EU winds up its mission in the North Caucasus’, 8th April 2011 in *Islam News*. Available in Russian at <http://www.islamnews.ru/news-47791.html>.

3 Petition of Adyghe (Circassian) organisations to the European Parliament, 11th October 2006. Available in Russian at [http://www.elot.ru/main/index.php?option=com\\_content&task=view&id=2546&Itemid=5](http://www.elot.ru/main/index.php?option=com_content&task=view&id=2546&Itemid=5).

## The Circassian question in the present day

Public discussion of the historical past – in particular relations between the peoples of the Caucasus and Russia – tend to become heated depending on the situation in the North Caucasus. Although a century-and-a-half has passed since the end of the Caucasian war, the events of that period continue to have a visibly negative impact on the current situation. As a result, an assessment of the Caucasian war and the reflection of this assessment in Russia's current policy in the Caucasus are particularly significant. On 21st May 1994, the 130th anniversary of the end of the Caucasian war, Boris Yeltsin voiced the idea that Russia is now able to come to an objective interpretation of the events of the Caucasian war 'as the valiant struggle of the peoples of the Caucasus not only for survival in their native land but also for the preservation of a distinctive culture, the best features of the national character'.<sup>4</sup> Unfortunately, this was not picked up by the Russian establishment and thus an opportunity was missed for constructing relations between the central authorities and the peoples of the Caucasus on a new, firmer basis.

In this context, the idea of a resurgence or new version of a unified Circassian nation has resounded with new vigour. Various ways of implementing this are being discussed – from reuniting the people in their historical homeland under a single entity of the Russian Federation, to the creation of a dispersed but spiritually and politically united nation. The majority of Circassians are not demanding secession from the Russian Federation: it is all too evident that the Circassian republics are not economically viable. They also recognise the complex ethnic composition in the North Caucasus and foresee that this would have complex political consequences. For moderate groups, their main aims are the preservation of Adyghe/Circassian identity, strengthening the ethnic base of the people and increasing its numbers. They realise that identifying the Circassian movement as anti-Russia will only marginalise them further. In addition, extreme views are unlikely to be met with understanding by the other peoples of the North Caucasus, as everyone could lose out as a result of an increase in instability. However, radical strands are voicing much more revolutionary projects.<sup>5</sup>

Any rational response by the Russian federal centre would take public attitudes in the North Caucasus into account. However, officials in the capitals and the regions are ignorant of the analysis and recommendations of experts on the modern North Caucasus and are out of touch with what is actually happening on the ground. As a result, policy frameworks used in the North Caucasus are outmoded and ineffective. Attempts at the "pacification" of the region by force simply turn the North Caucasus into an object of policy of other states, whose interest is not always to strengthen ties between the republics of the North Caucasus and the central authorities in Moscow.

For the sake of balance, we should note here that Russian policy in the North Caucasus has appeared to "wake up" to some extent, possibly influenced by the 2014 Sochi Winter Olympic Games. Russia's presence in the North Caucasus is essential for reducing the region's potential for conflict and its geopolitical threat. It needs to be strengthened, but not by glossing over or suppressing the real problems. Instead, this needs to be achieved by building conditions for high-quality education and economic development through respect for the cultural distinctiveness of the peoples of the North Caucasus. The modernisation of the societies in the North Caucasus is an important objective for the Russian government.

The 2014 Sochi Olympics could be a symbol of the harmonisation of relations in the Caucasus. The forthcoming Olympics have led to vigorous debates over the tragic events connected with the 60-year long Caucasian war in the 19th century. The Russian state needs to find a way of issuing a more just moral and historical assessment of that period in history.

4 Address to the peoples of the Caucasus by the Russian President, Boris N. Yeltsin, on the occasion of the 130th anniversary of the end of the Caucasian war, Moscow, 18th May 1994 (ITAR-TASS).

5 R. Keshev. 'Abkhazo-cherkesskie otnosheniya' [Abkhaz-Circassian relations], Interview, 10th December 2010.

Its current policy of ignoring rather than recognising historical grievances and injustices is not helping towards a rapprochement of all interested parties.

## The North Caucasus in contemporary Georgian politics

The North Caucasus is of interest to Georgia from two perspectives. On the one hand, some parts of the North Caucasus are ethnically homogenous with two countries on which Georgia always has felt and probably always will feel it has a claim: Abkhazia and South Ossetia. At the same time, the North Caucasus forms a natural barrier between Georgia and the Russian Federation proper (i.e. the portion of Russia inhabited by ethnic Russians), which is the power seen by most Georgian politicians as posing the greatest threat to Georgia. Tbilisi is thus constantly weighing up the possible consequences of conflict with the North Caucasus and also the possible advantages of an alliance with these countries.

The late 1980s and early 1990s were marked for Georgia by increasing enmity with most of the peoples of the North Caucasus who united around Abkhazia against the threat of Georgian aggression. During the Soviet-era “age of stagnation”, Moscow and Tbilisi had tried not to encourage too much rapprochement between the Abkhaz and the Adyghe, given the “problems” that the Abkhaz were already causing the central authorities from time to time.<sup>6</sup> Of course, it was not that there had been no contact between these related peoples during the Soviet era. However, the policy of *perestroika* itself had given the Abkhaz the opportunity to “re-discover” for themselves their ethnically and culturally close relatives the Adyghe as well as other peoples living in the North Caucasus. Exchange visits, arts festivals and youth campaigns all had an enormous moral and political impact on the peoples of both Abkhazia and the North Caucasus. This rapprochement had been instigated by national movements: in Abkhazia, the Popular Front “Aydgylara”; in the republics of the North Caucasus, the International Circassian Association, the Kabardinian National Congress, the Adyghe Khase, etc.

A popular cause in the North Caucasus at the time was the idea of reinstating the Mountain Republic (or the Republic of the Union of Mountain Peoples of the Caucasus), which had been proclaimed in 1918–1919. After the collapse of the USSR, radical politicians did not exclude the possibility of the Russian Federation collapsing from within. The Mountain Republic was conceived as a federal entity (this project had only partially been realised in the Confederation of the Peoples of the Caucasus, which was an active political force from 1991 to 1994); secondly, it would have to have its own corridor to the outside world. Abkhazia (which at that time was in a state of conflict with Georgia) was not the only “window” but was definitely the best possible route available to the North Caucasus peoples. In August 1989, shortly after the tragic events of July in Abkhazia – the first time a Georgian-Abkhaz clash led to bloodshed – the Assembly of the Mountain Peoples of the Caucasus was created in Sukhum, proclaiming itself the historical successor to the Republic of the North Caucasus.<sup>7</sup> It had in fact become clear following the first Georgian-Abkhaz clashes that further escalation of violence in Abkhazia was a distinct possibility. Logically, this led Abkhazia to start looking around for allies in the North Caucasus.

By 1st–2nd November 1991, the Confederation of Mountain Peoples of the Caucasus (KGNK) had been announced at the Third Assembly of the Mountain Peoples of the Caucasus. However, it was as “peoples” rather than “republics” that its founders were proclaimed members of the KGNK.

<sup>6</sup> I am referring here to a number of mass popular outbursts that flared up in Abkhazia as a sign of protest against Georgia’s policy of assimilation.

<sup>7</sup> This consisted in 1918 of seven “autonomous states” – Dagestan, Chechen-Ingushetia, Ossetia, Karachaevo-Balkaria, Kabardia, Adygheya and Abkhazia. However, the Republic did not last long. It was replaced in 1920 by the Autonomous Mountain Republic, which only extended from Kabardia to Chechnya, but this also turned out to be infeasible and was abolished in 1924. [For more details, see V. Berezovsky and V. Chervyakov. ‘Konfederatsiya gorskikh narodov Kavkaza’ [The Confederation of Mountain Peoples of the Caucasus]. Available in Russian at [http://www.rau.su/observer/N03\\_92/3\\_06.HTM](http://www.rau.su/observer/N03_92/3_06.HTM).]

The city of Sukhum was proclaimed as the headquarters of the organisation. The KGNK initially focused mainly on ethnic and cultural objectives, but later turned its attention to political claims. In response to instability in the North Caucasus and armed conflicts in the South Caucasus, the KGNK set up its own armed forces, which were originally intended to maintain peace and stability in the North Caucasus.

After Georgia's first president Zviad Gamsakhurdia was toppled and Eduard Shevardnadze came to power in 1992, there was an almost complete rift between Georgia and the North Caucasus community. On the one hand, the Chechens had attempted to restore Gamsakhurdia to power in Georgia right up to his death. On the other hand, in a new twist the war in South Ossetia in May–June 1992 made the Confederation of the Peoples of the Caucasus (as it was later renamed) spring to the military defence of the Ossetians. And when war then began in Abkhazia, Georgia became the irrevocable public enemy for the peoples of the North Caucasus.

Georgia's military aggression against Abkhazia in 1992 and the flood of volunteers from the North Caucasus coming to the aid of the Abkhaz led in no small part to the radicalisation of the objectives and slogans of the KGNK. This was bound to be a source of concern to Moscow. Although the Russian centre may perhaps have welcomed the fact that the Georgian-Abkhaz conflict to some extent drew the attention of the most fervent forces in the North Caucasus republics away from their own political projects, it was still a concern that the war in the south was inevitably fomenting unrest in the ethnically and religiously complex North Caucasus. The protests against Georgia's actions were often extended to encompass Moscow's at times erratic Caucasus policy and its ambivalent stance during Georgian aggression. A number of factors provided an opportunity for representatives of the North Caucasus to organise a fairly serious volunteer movement in support of Abkhazia, notably: internal differences within the Russian administration in the early 1990s, which expressed themselves in the fact that the sympathies of several Russian agencies were shared between the Abkhaz and the Georgians; and the fear of senior officials at central and republican level of causing mass public protests in the North Caucasus if the volunteers were persecuted.

Shifts in relations between Georgia and certain republics of the North Caucasus were noted during Moscow's second Chechen campaign, when Shevardnadze refused to provide assistance as before to Russia against the Ichkerian insurgents. After the Chechen divisions were defeated, Georgia to all intents and purposes provided them with a base in the Pankisi Gorge, which became a pretext for a decisive cooling in Georgia-Russia relations and a source of warming in Georgia-Chechnya relations.

The accession of Mikheil Saakashvili in 2003 opened up new prospects for Georgia in its search for allies on the other side of the Caucasus mountain range. The lynchpin of Georgia's ideology became active opposition to Moscow, alliance with NATO and support for all anti-Russian forces in the Caucasus. For the Georgian administration, the main concern remained regaining control of Abkhazia and South Ossetia. Since both countries by this time had proclaimed their full independence, this would inevitably have to be achieved by force. Even so, before August 2008 Georgia did not need very complex political arrangements: counting on a *blitzkrieg*, the Georgian leaders did not attempt to neutralise politically potential allies of Abkhazia or South Ossetia, in particular the peoples of the North Caucasus. In any case, although Georgian politicians did remember the Circassian genocide, they did so only in passing without attempting to turn this issue into a political argument.

The events of August 2008 provided the answer to many questions: in particular, that the Caucasus remained extremely important to Moscow, and the Russian administration was not only not about to cede it but was ready to conduct full-scale military action in order to reinforce its positions; secondly, that Caucasian solidarity had not weakened (as was shown by joint actions by the Abkhaz and the Ossetians as well as Chechen participation in operations against Georgian military units). It also emerged that it was premature for the Georgians to count on the West's active intervention.

The Georgian administration realised that it needed a new strategy on Russia in which the North Caucasus would occupy a leading role. Thus, the main purpose underlying Georgia's new initiative was to ignite anti-Russian sentiment in the North Caucasus and among the Caucasus diaspora and to neutralise Abkhazia's most consistent allies. The Adyghe, Circassians, Kabardinians, Abaza and Shapsugs are the ethnic groups most closely related to the Abkhaz. They are the ones who might spur Russia into decisive action if it takes time for Moscow to respond to one or other hostile actions by Georgia in relation to Abkhazia.

Tbilisi's new "Circassian" policy is being pursued incrementally and at a sedate pace: December 2009 marked the creation in the Georgian Parliament of a Group of Friendship with the Parliaments of the North Caucasus; on 4th January 2010, the "First Information Caucasus" TV channel (PIK) was broadcast; 13th October 2010 saw the introduction of a visa-free regime for residents of the republics of the North Caucasus entering Georgia; in February 2011, a decision was taken to create a special committee on Caucasus issues under the State Minister of Georgia on Diaspora Issues; 20th May 2011 marked the passing by the Georgian Parliament of the aforementioned Resolution on recognising the genocide of the Circassian people during the Russia-Caucasian war. It is particularly emphasised that Georgia was the first country in the world to recognise the genocide of the Circassian people. The moral implications of the fact that an initiative to recognise the genocide of the Circassians is being proclaimed by a country which itself has committed aggression against Abkhazia (1992) and South Ossetia (2008) is naturally not mentioned.

The tragedy of the Circassian people was selected quite deliberately by the politicians in Tbilisi to start their initiative. Such a narrow geographical focus of the recognition of genocide is dictated by political concepts. The Vainakh peoples suffered no less than the Circassians from the Caucasian war. Although the Georgian Parliament recently expressed its intention to examine the question of the recognition of the genocide of the Ingush people, there is still no mention of the Chechens. Recognition of the Chechen genocide would impose certain political obligations on Tbilisi, and in the event of a new anti-Russian uprising in Chechnya, the Georgian administration would logically be obliged to support the insurgents, at least politically. On the one hand, this could lead to a new military conflict with Russia; on the other hand, such a statement would imply political support for the Chechen resistance which has gone underground. This would, in turn, lead to conflict with the current administration in Chechnya headed by Ramzan Kadyrov.

In 2006, when the question of the recognition of the Circassian genocide was raised without success by Circassian organisations in the European Parliament, Georgia was not interested. The topic began to acquire geopolitical significance from the summer of 2007, when it was announced that Sochi would be the capital of the 2014 Winter Olympics. It must be noted that this event immediately raised hopes in Georgia itself and in the republics that had seceded from it: the Georgians believed it would give them leverage over Moscow on the Abkhaz question; their opponents hoped that Russia would now be interested in stabilising the situation in their southern borders and thus might decide to recognise both Abkhazia, which borders directly on the Sochi district, and South Ossetia.

After the August 2008 war, it became clear that whatever position the peoples of the North Caucasus might assume in the event of a renewed attempt by Georgia to regain Abkhazia by force, they would now be unable to play a defining role in this hypothetical war. Of course, their position remains important both in terms of military strategy and politically, but they would no longer have the significance they had had in the early 1990s. This is understood both in the North Caucasus and in Georgia. Tbilisi no longer needs an irreconcilable fight with the North Caucasus: the need to conduct a bitter propaganda war against the political movements supporting Abkhazia beyond the Caucasus mountains is fading. On the other hand, the hope has emerged of convincing the Caucasians softly and unobtrusively that the Abkhaz question, although it affects the interests of the Circassian peoples, is still not a vital matter of kinship for them. Now, the existence of Abkhazia and South Ossetia no longer depends directly on the North

Caucasian community: Russia has vouched for these republics. As for the Adyghe peoples, even if they do not feel entirely superfluous in this scenario, they understand that since 2008 their role in the conflict has been reduced to one of rhetoric. Of course, the Caucasus leaders from time to time come out with statements of support for Abkhazia, but now they are more likely to be tagging along at Moscow's bidding.

Georgia is clearly counting on the fact that tensions will arise between the Abkhaz and the Circassians as a result of the need to assess Russia's historical role in the Caucasus. Nonetheless, a decision to recognise the Circassian genocide could also create difficulties for Georgia. Armenia, for example, has been attempting to gain recognition of the Armenian genocide for many years (1915). For Georgia, this recognition is fraught with difficulties in relations with Turkey and Azerbaijan.

Of course, everyone in the North Caucasus understands what Tbilisi's aims are in promoting the "Circassian question". Clearly, Tbilisi's current plan to revive relations with the Circassians is political in nature. However, it is clear that behind all these measures aimed at improving relations with the peoples of the North Caucasus there are objectives that are hostile to Russia: that is, weakening Moscow's influence in the North Caucasus – in other words, virtually every action to improve Georgia's relations with the peoples of the North Caucasus is undertaken to ensure that these countries' relations with their central authorities deteriorate. Taking the wider view, however, it is clear to everyone that Tbilisi is unlikely to be in a position to provoke a new Caucasian war. Moreover, the national movement of the Adyghe peoples has always acted within the law and in accordance with international standards. Extremist methods of struggle which alone could undermine the Olympic Games in Sochi are simply not in their nature. But a change in attitudes in the national republics of the North-Western Caucasus, which have so far been totally loyal to Russia, would in itself be no bad result for Georgia. It could help the Georgian administration, if not in a military conflict, then in one of the countless rounds of the diplomatic game. And even if they do not succeed in weakening Russia's position in the North Caucasus, the Georgians will also be satisfied that enmity with the Adyghe peoples is replaced by mutual sympathy. This will provide an opportunity to restore (even if only in part) the lost influence to the North of the Caucasus mountains, which for modern Georgia is not at all negligible.

## The emergence of thorny issues in Circassian-Abkhaz relations

For virtually the entire period of its existence, the Circassian question has been connected with Abkhazia. The Abkhaz and Adyghe peoples have interacted closely at various historical periods, as a result mainly of their genetic kinship and thousands of years of living together in close proximity. But today, in peacetime, new and not always positive aspects of relations between the Abkhaz and Adyghe peoples are emerging.

Georgia's active policy towards the Circassians, as stated earlier, will contribute negatively to Abkhaz-Circassian relations. The Abkhaz take a jaundiced view of any improvement in Circassian-Georgian relations resulting from Georgia's demonstrative actions on recognising the historical trauma of the Circassian people. In the absence of a resolution of the Georgian-Abkhaz conflict, any improvement in relations between the republics of the North Caucasus and Georgia is taken by them as evidence of a weakening of the Circassian-Abkhaz brotherhood consolidated in their shared struggle with the Georgians. On the other hand, the Abkhaz, who are highly dependent on Russia, do not support debates initiated by US and Georgian think tanks with an anti-Russian slant – for example, on the inadmissibility of holding the Olympics in Sochi, etc., which is met by blank incomprehension by some in the Circassian community.

We should note here that Abkhazia's position on this does not mean it is non-critical of the dramatic aspects of the Caucasus's past and present. On the contrary, criticism of Russia's Caucasian policy

is commonly heard in Abkhaz public discourse. Even in 1997, the Abkhaz parliament passed a Resolution on the deportation of Abkhaz and Abaza as a result of the Caucasian war (incidentally, the failure of the Abkhaz resolution to mention the Adyghe peoples is currently a contentious issue for the Circassians). However, a clear distinction is made in Abkhazia between the Russian Tsarist policy and the present, as well as between the mistakes and omissions of Russia's current policy in the North-Western Caucasus and the positive steps. Whilst understanding and sharing all the problems and concerns of the Adyghe people, the Abkhaz will never be able to change their views on the Russian Federation's 2008 recognition of the independence of the Abkhaz state. However, it should be borne in mind that it is not just its high regard for this recognition and gratitude for the enormous economic and financial assistance from Russia that prevent Abkhazia from joining in anti-Russia information campaigns. People in Abkhazia understand above all that historical justice can be achieved not through deterioration in relations between the republics of the North Caucasus and Moscow, but through a difficult search for mutual understanding and compromise that does not jeopardise the fragile stability of the North Caucasus.

The first sign of difficulties in Abkhaz-Circassian relations was the response to the decision by the International Olympic Committee to hold the Winter Olympics in Sochi. The Abkhaz welcomed the idea, while Circassians, particularly some groups in the Circassian diaspora, began to raise the issue of the unacceptability of holding the games on territory which had seen the most ferocious battles between Tsarist troops and Circassian divisions. The most radical members of the campaign against the Sochi Olympics started to raise more topics with potential for conflict that were related not to Circassian-Russian relations but to relations between the peoples of the Caucasus themselves. For example, questions unexpectedly emerged regarding Circassian and Abkhaz identity,<sup>8</sup> problems of interpretation of certain historical facts, disputes over which territorial unit certain regions should be assigned to, and much else.

One of the most hotly debated topics, mainly within the Circassian diaspora, was the Abkhaz citizenship law. This law states that apart from residents permanently residing in Abkhazia, only Abkhaz, Abaza and (since recently) Ubykhs can be native citizens of the Republic of Abkhazia. This offended many Circassians, whose total number is estimated at seven or even 10 million people, since this means that Circassians are the only ones out of the kindred nations who are denied the right to citizenship of the Abkhaz state by birth (the only state in the Abkhaz/Adyghe space).

We would argue that the emergence of these contentious issues is not merely a coincidence, but the result of serious differences in how the Abkhaz and the Circassians view their national projects and divergences in the meaning of such basic terms as identity. Without an understanding of the source of these differences, it is impossible to understand and hence overcome the misunderstandings and resentments that have arisen.

## Divergences between the national projects of the Abkhaz and the Adyghe

The Abkhaz have never been in any doubt that the purpose of their struggle is to defend their right to an independent Abkhaz state. At the same time, many Circassians saw an independent Abkhazia not so much as an example to follow, but as the basis for the creation of a common Circassian state. It is this view that underlies the idea that the Abkhaz should also join in with

<sup>8</sup> The existing ethnic names of the mountain peoples of the North Caucasus do not always coincide with their universal name (exonym). Thus, the ethnonym "Circassian" in literary sources could often mean not only a member of the Adyghe people, but also the Ubykh and the Abkhaz and occasionally even a member of other mountain peoples. However, the ethnonym "Circassian" in Russian ("cherkess") comprises the Adyghe group of peoples – Kabardinians, Adyghe/Natukhai, Bzhedugs, Shapsugs, etc. This is the definition that is also commonly used in Abkhazia and so the expression "Circassian history" is understood by the Abkhaz to be the history of the Adyghe and "the Circassian state" as the Adyghe state. In other words, the Abkhaz do not perceive themselves as Circassians at any level of identity, this term in Abkhaz consciousness being a general exonym for the Adyghe peoples. In Adyghe sources, the situation is entirely different.

those constructing a pan-Circassian state. It emerged that the Abkhaz, representing a people related to the Circassians, were seen by many in the North Caucasus as part of a nascent Circassian (political) nation.<sup>9</sup> Moreover, some Circassian leaders started to formulate new ideas, unacceptable to the Abkhaz, of a Western Caucasus community including not just Circassians and Abkhaz but also Georgia, as the closest country to the Abkhaz-Adyghe in terms of civilisation.<sup>10</sup> Against a context in which Georgia promotes its claims on Abkhazia, these tendencies are seen as a serious threat inside Abkhazia.

There is also a lack of clarity over certain aspects of how Abkhaz and Circassian identity is perceived and defined. In Abkhazia, people have always known that the Abkhaz-Adyghe ethnic community includes the Adyghe (Adyghe, Circassians and Kabardinians), Ubykhs and Abkhaz – peoples with independent languages which could only have evolved through prolonged, separate historical development. However, in the overwhelming majority of Circassian publications, the ethnic term “Circassian” is used generally to refer to the Circassians, the Ubykh and for the Abaza/Abkhaz. Nonetheless, although the Abkhaz value their kinship with the Circassians highly, the Abkhaz identity, which is based also on their independent language and on their own historical journey, has never for them become submerged within any other identity, including Circassian. This divergence in understanding of these terms, which is important both for individual identity and for the ethnos, was bound to lead to a lack of understanding and even to resentment.

## Do any resources exist for positive change?

Despite the unexpected difficulties which cannot be underestimated, we believe that Abkhazia still has the potential to positively influence the situation to overcome conflicts and build confidence between the Circassian North Caucasus and Abkhazia. The priority need is to stop ignoring these issues and instead to air them and come to an understanding of them, holding in-depth discussions of the problems at academic research institutions and in civil society. Various educational initiatives could play an important role here involving young people studying the historic past of the Caucasian war, the Soviet era and the Georgian-Abkhaz war. Academic and practical conferences could have a positive effect.

We believe that Abkhazia could also contribute in some measure towards establishing greater mutual understanding between Circassian society and the Russian centre. Today, some Russian historians and public figures, unlike their predecessors in the 19th century, justify or at least pass over in silence the extremely harsh manner in which the Caucasian war was conducted. This thwarts the ability to turn this tragic page in history and build confidence between the centre and the peoples of the North Caucasus. Tsarist Russia’s most problematic legacy of problem-solving in the North Caucasus through the use of hard power rather than through the search for common interests has not been fully overcome. Unfortunately residual elements of this approach remain to this day and continue to have a negative impact on the situation. A priority is to organise an open dialogue between society and the authorities at various levels in which representatives of Abkhazia could also take part. This process could be developed as part of the general democratisation of political life in the republics of the North Caucasus. It would require the strengthening of civil society institutions and development of forms of civic participation; here too, Abkhaz experience could be useful.

The constellation of forces in the North-West Caucasus following the Georgian-Abkhaz war clearly cannot be preserved forever. Despite understandable emotions, Abkhazia needs to realise that the North Caucasus has its own interests which are not always identical to those of the Abkhaz. It cannot expect its friends to stick by it forever simply because it needs them. Abkhazia

9 Andzor Kabard (2011). ‘Cherkesskaya khronika – optimisticheskaya tragediya’ [A Circassian chronicle – an optimistic tragedy], *Adyghe Kheku*. Available at <http://bit.ly/IrhDye>.

10 Ruslan Keshev (2010). ‘Abkhazo-cherkesskie otnosheniya: “bratstvo navek” ili “razvod s kommunal’noy kvartire”?’ [Abkhaz-Circassian relations: “eternal brotherhood” or “cohabiting divorcees”?].

needs to come up with a more considered policy towards the peoples of the North Caucasus who after all did come to its aid during its most difficult hour. It also needs to consider a formula acceptable to both sides on obtaining Abkhaz citizenship and recognising the harsh consequences of the Caucasian war, not just for the Abkhaz/Abaza but also for the other peoples of the North Caucasus, and some other steps as well. On the other hand, it is also true that, whilst they were fully entitled to develop relations with Georgia, the Circassian organisations could for example have played a more active role in persuading the Georgian authorities to sign the Agreement on Non-Resumption of Hostilities with Abkhazia. At this stage in history, the Circassians could play an important peacebuilding role in the Caucasus.

## Georgian perspective - summary

### Introduction

Georgia's relations with the peoples of the North Caucasus have always been complex – generally respectful, but occasionally turning hostile. Relations were particularly confrontational after the Russian Empire's conquest of the North Caucasus and the consolidation of its power. Since then, relations have borne the imprint of the internal contradictions in the North Caucasus and of the imperial policy of “divide and rule”. Relations were also affected by periods of crisis in the Russian state, in particular the demise of Tsarist Russia and the collapse of the Soviet Union. The end of Tsarist Russia brought hopes of liberation from the Russian yoke on both sides of the Caucasus mountain range, drawing together Georgians and the peoples of the North Caucasus through a shared goal. With the break-up of the Soviet Union, however, the Georgian-Ossetian and particularly the Georgian-Abkhaz conflicts – which flared up partly as a result of rash decisions made by new, inexperienced leaders of a recently independent Georgia – drove a wedge between these relations. Most recently, military confrontation between Georgian troops and North Caucasian militias took place during the Georgian-Russian war of August 2008. On that occasion, however, the confrontation was mainly due to high politics.

Of course, Georgia's relations with the North Caucasus have had and will continue to have a significant effect on how events and processes unfold in the region. However, any future projections require a thorough analysis of the constraints on these relations from a historical and contemporary perspective. Yet, even though Georgia directly borders on the North Caucasus, the specialist literature still lacks adequate high-quality analysis of the historical, political and other relations between the peoples in the North and the South. While some information can be gleaned from literature, in particular Georgian poetry and folklore, this information is understandably patchy. For this reason, a group of Georgian academics and experts took on the daunting task of attempting to fill this significant gap. The group attempted to find answers to questions on the relations between the Georgians and the peoples of the North Caucasus. They also looked at the situation in the North Caucasus and its influence on Georgian politics. Their efforts culminated in four articles, published in this collection, examining the subject from four perspectives: the historical background of Georgian-North Caucasian relations prior to 2008 (George Anchabadze); contemporary political and social trends in the North Caucasus (George Gvimradze); political and military dimensions of the North Caucasian factor in the 2008 Russia-Georgia war (Archil Gegeshidze); and Georgia's North Caucasus policy in the context of the post-August “new realities” (Ivlian Haindrava). These articles are published in Russian, English and Georgian editions. A brief synopsis and the main conclusions of these articles are provided below.

### Historical background of Georgian-North Caucasian relations before 2008

Since ancient times, the peoples living on both the Northern and Southern slopes of the Caucasus mountain range, despite their ethnic and linguistic diversity, have been seen as belonging to the same historical and cultural community. In the 11th to 13th centuries, at the height of the Georgian Kingdom, cultural interaction between Georgia and the peoples of the North Caucasus went both ways. High Georgian culture, including Georgian literature and liturgical works, was well revered. Politically, the North Caucasus was a reliable hinterland for Georgia from where it recruited auxiliary troops to resist foreign invaders. Even after the conversion of the peoples of the

North Caucasus to Islam, which created a certain barrier between them and Christian Georgia, on the whole relations remained amicable. The only exception was relations with Dagestan, whose rulers carried out looting raids on Georgia in the 18th century.

However, the protracted Russian-Caucasian war of the 19th century had a serious impact on Georgian-North Caucasian relations. Following the annexation of Georgia into the Russian Empire, the Russian government used Georgian territory to impose a blockade on those bordering districts in the North Caucasus where the recalcitrant mountain peoples lived, in an attempt to starve them into submission. Strengthening its hold over Georgia, the Tsarist Empire co-opted the local elite, both the aristocracy and royal family. This Georgian military caste rallied to the Russian banners and became actively involved in military actions against the mountain peoples. Georgian involvement in the Caucasian war and particularly in Dagestan was further motivated by revenge for the Dagestanis' earlier raids on Georgia.

This period of Russian-Georgian solidarity started to decline in the second half of the 19th century. In particular, increasing ethnic self-awareness and the emergence of a civic society, as well as the stepping up of the policy of Russification, stoked up feelings of protest within Georgia. This led the Georgian public to revise its view of the recent Caucasian war, and the mountain peoples were again conceived as Georgia's natural allies in any movement for national liberation.

After the February Revolution in 1917, ideas of autonomy and self-determination spread rapidly throughout the ethnic populations on the periphery of the Russian Empire. Georgians closely followed the formation of the Mountain, or North Caucasian Republic, greeting enthusiastically the mountain government's declaration of full sovereignty in December 1917. After the Southern Caucasian republics gained independence themselves in 1918, the idea of a pan-Caucasian confederation gained ground – although it remained merely an aspiration due to continuing disagreements between the republics, as well as the complex external political situation.

After the Bolshevik victory in the Caucasus (1920–1921), Georgian resistance to the occupation included a strong element of cooperation with the North Caucasians. Moreover, while the partisan uprisings in Georgia were finally suppressed in 1924, insurgencies continued for some time in the North, particularly in the mountain strip of Chechnya. This forced the Soviet administration to carry out periodic troop operations in Chechen-Ingush territory. In a resolute attempt to cut the North Caucasus “Gordian knot” once and for all, during the Second World War the Soviets deported entire peoples to Central Asia in late 1943 and early 1944: Karachaevans, Chechens, Ingush and Balkarians, among others. However, Chechens and Ingush hiding out in the forests continued to launch attacks from the mountains on members of the Soviet administration, the military and settlers. To wipe out the resistance, the authorities attempted to recruit the neighbouring peoples for counter-insurgency actions (Georgians, Ossetians, Dagestanis). However, these attempts met with little success, since the sympathies of the ordinary people lay more with the persecuted. Surprisingly, perhaps, the deported peoples remained on good terms with Georgia and the Georgians, even after they were politically rehabilitated (in 1957).

As the Soviet period progressed, the emotional link between Georgia and the peoples of the North Caucasus gradually weakened. This was due in part to the efforts of the central authorities, who of course had no interest in building up significant intra-regional links. However, during the period of *perestroika* in the late 1980s, the crisis in the Soviet system initially encouraged rapprochement. Contacts were re-established on environmental, cultural, humanitarian and other issues. Many mountain ideologues at that time would have been pleased for Georgia to take the lead in a Caucasus-wide liberation movement. After the declaration of independence by the Chechen Republic, Dzhokhar Dudayev, the most prominent leader in the North Caucasus at the time, was extremely interested in maintaining close relations with Georgia, which Chechnya saw as its route to the outside world, to the extent that Dudayev tried to play the role of mediator between Gamsakhurdia and his internal Georgian opposition in December 1991.

However, after president Zviad Gamsakhurdia was deposed in January 1992, the new government's attitude to the Chechen leader, who had given asylum to Gamsakhurdia and his entourage, was frosty.

However, the most significant decline in relations between Georgia and the peoples of the North Caucasus was caused by the 1992–1993 Georgian-Abkhaz war. These articles do not go into the reasons or chronicle of events leading up to the Georgian-Abkhaz war, but do nevertheless highlight one significant aspect. With *perestroika* and the resurgence of national projects, the Abkhaz national movement had taken a proactive role in the formation of a Confederation of Mountain Peoples of the Caucasus, and related institutions. Tbilisi took a very dim view of this, although it clearly underestimated the North Caucasian factor in its attempts to re-establish jurisdiction over the autonomous region. The Abkhaz were considerably outnumbered by the Georgians even on Abkhaz territory, but found allies in the ethnically and culturally related peoples of the North Caucasus. In the initial stages of the armed conflict, which was to last over 12 months between August 1992 and September 1993, the Georgian authorities often portrayed the main cause of the conflict in Abkhazia as being intervention from the North Caucasus, with Dudayev's Chechnya as one of the main culprits.

After the cessation of hostilities in Abkhazia in September 2003, Shevardnadze set out to establish closer relations with Moscow, to the extent of openly supporting Russia's military campaign during the first Chechen war, siding with Moscow against "separatism". However, as Russian-Georgian relations deteriorated, Georgian-Chechen relations picked up again a little, and in September 1997 the new Chechen leader, Aslan Maskhadov, was welcomed to Tbilisi with full presidential honours. Furthermore, after the start of the Second Russian-Chechen War (October 1999), Georgia took in several thousand Chechen refugees. Even so, Georgia's stance on the "Chechen question" remained inconsistent. Shevardnadze, still under the illusion that Russia might help Georgia to restore its territorial integrity, had treated Moscow reverentially. In October 2002, it even went so far as to hand over fighters from the Chechen resistance who had sought asylum on Georgian territory.

After the 2003 Rose Revolution, the Georgian policy on relations with the North Caucasus was not so active up until the events of August 2008. Thereafter, the Georgian authorities began to develop a more proactive policy towards the North Caucasus, examined in this volume by Ivlian Haindrava. Before going more in-depth into this, however, it is important to consider other political and social trends influencing dynamics in relations.

## Political and social trends in the North Caucasus

Despite constantly rising federal subsidies, the North Caucasus is economically far worse off than the other regions in Russia due to a succession of wars, violence, corruption, a huge "shadow" economy, unemployment and other factors. Per capita gross domestic product (GDP) in the North Caucasus is well below the figure for Russia as a whole. Furthermore, unbridled corruption means that the shadow economy accounts for an increasing proportion of the overall economy. In the absence of democratic traditions of governance, the multi-ethnic composition of the region along with other factors is creating conditions for inter-ethnic and inter-clan conflicts aimed at 'restoring just borders between territories'. Historical memory also plays a significant role. Whole *auls* and villages were destroyed during the Caucasus war and hundreds of thousands of people were deported from the North Caucasus. In the post-Soviet period, the methods used to oppress the peoples of the North Caucasus were no less cruel. During the two wars in Chechnya, approximately 160,000 people died – the majority of them civilians.

The emergence of Islamic fundamentalism, which is a relatively recent phenomenon since the collapse of the Soviet Union, and "terrorism" are generally considered to be the underlying cause

of the instability in the North Caucasus. Yet another aggravating factor is the scale and form of the Federal centre's response to events in the region, virtually amounting to war. The lack of clarity over the outcome of this "war" is turning the region into one of the world's "hotspots".

**Terrorism:** There has been a visible increase in terrorist activity in recent years. Along with the rise in numbers, there is also a change in the scale of planning and implementation of suicide bombings. The Russian authorities attempt to portray the terrorism as a phenomenon that has been imported from outside. But, in fact, the nucleus of terrorism and its causes are internal and closely linked to the socio-political problems of the region and indeed the Russian Federation as a whole.

**Islamicisation:** The collapse of the Soviet Union has been followed in the North Caucasus, and indeed in the rest of the post-Soviet space, by an increased clericalisation of society. Radical Islam in the region is gaining in strength and popularity, particularly among its young people. However, the process of the Islamicisation of the region is occurring in two directions at once: "Salafism" (or "Wahhabism") is supported by the insurgents and has as its aim the creation of an Islamic "Caucasian Emirate"; traditional Islam, on the other hand, tends to be supported by the authorities. From what we know of the North Caucasus, we can predict that relations between these two denominations of Islam are likely to be strained.

**Separatism:** Today, the principal and perhaps even the only force within the region espousing separatism is the "Caucasian Emirate". However, the real motivation and ultimate goal of its adherents are not entirely clear. The declared goal – the creation of an Islamic state on the territory of the entire North Caucasus based on Sharia law – they know to be unrealistic, not only because it is opposed by the Federal centre, but also because of deepening disagreements between the "Salafites" and the traditionalists. Another separatist force is the North Caucasian diaspora, primarily the Circassians, whose declared ultimate goal is the creation of a secular state on the territory of Kabardino-Balkaria, Karachaevo-Cherkessia and Adygheya. Given that achieving this goal would require firstly the unification of the Circassian-populated units to form a unified entity and secondly the collapse of Russia, the prospects of achieving this goal would appear to be very dim indeed. It should also be noted that these two separatist projects are essentially mutually exclusive, making it even less likely for either to be feasible.

## The Federal response

Overall, the Kremlin's policy towards the North Caucasus region cannot be considered a success. Its harsh suppression of armed resistance and continuing use of crude force, along with the over-reliance on personalities who are granted considerable discretion in local decision making and whose loyalty is bought with large budget allocations, have not prevented the instability from spreading to the entire region. In fact, such a policy is actually causing increased dissatisfaction amongst the ordinary people. No attempt has been made to understand the motives of terrorists and the Kremlin fails to acknowledge its own mistakes, instead focusing on the "imported" aspect of terrorism. Having said that, more recently the authorities have acknowledged that the problem lies in socio-economic factors – although they are making a major error in searching for the causes of these socio-economic problems in specific ethnic, psychological and cultural aspects of the region itself. The underlying premise of such an approach is that the Caucasians are corrupt and engaged in various types of criminal activity. This has imbued the term "Caucasian" with exclusively negative connotations and is feeding resentment towards Caucasians from within the Russian mainstream. Calls are already being heard for Russia to abandon the region, stop providing financial assistance and use the money instead to resolve its own social problems.

In conclusion, we surmise that it is unlikely that the existing socio-economic problems which pose a threat to stability can be overcome with current policies. The funds transferred to the region's

economy are too low to remove the root causes of the instability. At the same time, ethnic and religious conflicts are likely to deteriorate in the future, accompanied by a rise in opposition to the Federal centre. This less than optimistic scenario is not favourable for either Russia or Georgia.

## The North Caucasus factor in the 2008 Russia-Georgia war – political and military dimensions

The North Caucasus has always played a special role in Russian politics because of its geography, history, politics, culture and demographic processes. Moreover, in the post-Soviet period, the region has gained an important geopolitical function both as a resource and as an instrument for influencing the course of the political and economic processes in the South Caucasus. In other words, the North Caucasus has by necessity functioned as a base from which to exercise coercive pressure on the countries of the region, primarily on Georgia.

The 2008 Russia-Georgia war was yet another clear demonstration of the use of the North Caucasus as a base. Although the North Caucasian factor was not directly related to the principal cause of the war,<sup>11</sup> it is associated with certain political circumstances affecting Russia's decision to use military force. Firstly, the Kremlin had to show the “unruly” North Caucasians that it was in solidarity with their blood brothers (the Abkhaz and the Ossetians) in the fight against “Georgian imperialism”. In this interpretation, it was essential to rebuff “the Georgian aggressors”, since any failure by the Federal centre to intervene would have been seen at best as weakness and at worst as open disregard for the fate of their blood brothers. Secondly, a strong and prosperous Georgia that was not loyal to authoritarian Russia would in fact be capable of shifting the centre of gravity in its own direction, thereby undermining the foundations of Federal power in the North Caucasus with its increasingly centrifugal tendencies. Thirdly, the “anti-Georgia” attitude of the North Caucasians, which goes back to the 1992–1993 war in Abkhazia, remains to this day – albeit in a rather different form. This negative attitude nurtures a rag-tag army of mercenaries and adventurers simply waiting to be mobilised. Indeed, this was a further factor that made it easier for the Kremlin to take decisions that were hostile in relation to Georgia.

The use of the North Caucasus as a base in the process of preparing and waging military action was also influenced by the **geographical factor**. In particular, an important role was played by its **proximity to the theatre of operations** – the North Caucasus borders directly on Georgia, more specifically with South Ossetia and Shida Kartli. Although the theatre of operations was on Georgian territory in 2008, from a military strategy perspective the North Caucasus had an important function as a logistics and rearguard support base for Russian armed forces during military action. The geographical proximity and vicinity to the theatre of operations also played an important role in **preparations for the war**. For example, months earlier extra consignments of armour, rocket launchers, anti-aircraft weapons and surface-to-air missiles had been delivered to South Ossetia and Abkhazia. Another contributory geographical factor was the **similarity between the terrain and climate of the North Caucasus and the theatre of operations**. Russian troops had begun large-scale summer exercises on the Northern slopes of the Caucasus mountain range in conditions as close as possible to the theatre of operations years earlier. In July 2008, exercises on an unprecedented scale were held involving 8,000 soldiers and officers, 700 armoured vehicles, and 30 aeroplanes and helicopters.

Although Russia deployed all types of weaponry in the war against Georgia, including naval weapons and ballistic missiles, in fact the arsenal of the North Caucasus Military District (NCMD)

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11 Although Moscow's official version is that the reason for using force against Georgia was 'to protect its own citizens' living or serving in South Ossetia, there was actually quite a different reason for the aggression. For over three years, the Russian administration, in particular the president and the prime minister, had recognised that in fact the aim was to prevent Georgia from joining NATO and allowing components of the North Atlantic Alliance's missile defence system to be based there. See, for example, the news articles (in Russian) at [http://ria.ru/defense\\_safety/20111121/494106971.html](http://ria.ru/defense_safety/20111121/494106971.html) and <http://inosmi.ru/politic/20120120/183481557.html>.

proved entirely sufficient to allow it to achieve its main war aim. The 2008 Russia-Georgia war confirmed yet again the significance of the North Caucasus as a factor influencing the course of political processes in Georgia. Despite the complexity of the processes occurring in the North Caucasus region itself, connected with security, political, socio-economic, religious and other problems, Russia is still capable of controlling the situation. Moreover, it is capable of using the region's political, geographical and strategic military resources as an instrument to promote its interests outside its borders as well, particularly within Georgia.

## Georgia's North Caucasus policy in the context of the post-August 2008 "new realities"

After the events of August 2008, the Georgian authorities adopted a more proactive policy in relation to the North Caucasus, in contrast to the preceding period. A whole range of complementary actions of an organisational, ideological, propagandistic and political nature were implemented.

**Organisational** measures include setting up a Friendship Group with the Parliaments of the North Caucasus in the Georgian Parliament. This decision, which was taken in response to Russia's unlawful decision to recognise the independence of Abkhazia and South Ossetia, itself marks a clear departure from international practice and puts Georgia in an ambiguous position. Two other actions taken by the Georgian administration under the same heading – renaming the parliamentary Committee on Relations with Compatriots Residing Abroad as the Diaspora and Caucasus Issues Committee, and the creation of a Special Commission on Caucasus Affairs under the Office of the State Minister of Georgia for Diaspora Issues – are aimed at highlighting two facts:

- a) the reinforcement in everyday usage of the term "Georgian diaspora", which was not previously widely used in Georgian discourse;
- b) the emphasis on the special significance of the Caucasus (i.e. not just the South but also the North) for Georgian policy.

**Ideological** measures deserve particular attention and one in particular: the Georgian President Mikheil Saakashvili's call from the lofty platform of the UN General Assembly on 23rd September 2010 to the peoples of the Caucasus to establish direct people-to-people contacts and initiate projects in the fields of energy, education and culture. His speech covered political and economic cooperation, the creation of a common market and regional self-sufficiency. However, no further details on this initiative were provided. Many viewed it simply as a rehashing of the now almost forgotten concept of Georgia's first president Zviad Gamsakhurdia of a "Common Caucasian Home". This concept has no prospect of being realised due to the lack of appropriate resources and because of the political environment.

**Propaganda** measures are being implemented more proactively. For example, since January 2011 the "First Information Caucasus" Russian-language television channel began broadcasting from the state-funded public broadcast channel. Formally, the task of the satellite TV channel is to neutralise anti-Georgian propaganda in the official Russian media and to provide its audience with objective information on events occurring in Georgia and the Caucasus region. The channel presents Georgia in the most favourable light but also – in parallel – portrays Russia in the most unfavourable light. The propaganda is directed outside Georgia, primarily at the North Caucasus. In addition, in 2010 two international academic conferences were held in Tbilisi in collaboration with a US think tank on the topic: 'Hidden Nations. Enduring Crimes: The Circassians and the Peoples of the Caucasus between the Past and Future'. The first Tbilisi conference passed an

appeal to the Georgian parliament to recognise the Circassian genocide; the second called for a boycott of the Olympic Games in Sochi. The plans to erect a memorial to the victims of the genocide of the Circassian people in the newly-built tourist resort of Anaklia – right next to Abkhazia – can also be seen in terms of multi-vector propaganda.

In terms of **political measures**, Tbilisi has also undertaken a series of strictly political actions within its “Caucasus policy”. In October 2010, the Georgian government passed a resolution to provide a visa-free regime for entry and stays of up to 90 days for citizens of the Russian Federation with permanent residence in the North Caucasus republics. Whatever the political agenda, this act by the Georgian government has made life easier for residents of the North Caucasus who maintain regular contact with Georgia.

Tbilisi’s decision to recognise the genocide of the Circassians (Adyghe) in May 2011 caused an even bigger stir. Georgia’s intentions in becoming the first sovereign state to recognise the genocide were presumably:

- a) to strengthen its own position in the Caucasus as a fighter for the rights and interests of the North Caucasus and to gain the support of the Circassian diaspora abroad;
- b) to anger Russia by re-opening its most painful wound, the North Caucasus, where almost insurmountable problems continue to pile up;
- c) to sow distrust in relations between the Abkhaz and the North Caucasians (particularly the Circassians), since moral and political support to the latter has not come from their Abkhaz cousins but from the Georgians, their enemies in the 1992–1993 Georgian-Abkhaz war.

Today, every one of these goals has been achieved to some extent. There is another goal behind Tbilisi’s decision: it is designed to cause potential difficulties for Russia, including a partial boycott of the Winter Olympic Games in Sochi in 2014, which marks the 150th anniversary of the Circassian tragedy. After all, the Olympic events are to be held in the very places where the Circassians were annihilated and from where they were deported.

## Implications for Georgia

As the analysis in this volume clearly shows, the current situation must be a cause for concern for the Georgian political and intellectual elite, as well as society as a whole. Further deterioration of the situation on the Northern border is not at all in the interests of the Georgian state. Given the complexity and unpredictability of the situation in the North Caucasus, the Georgian authorities should tread very carefully. Since the collapse of the Soviet Union, Russia has on more than one occasion made use of the North Caucasus factor against Georgia. Over the past two years, the Georgian authorities have been attempting to respond to Russia’s policy of the last 20 years with practically the same methods. The use of the North Caucasian factor as a tool to achieve influence by either party prevents real building of peace and stability in the region. In fact, some experts view the Georgian authorities’ policy in relation to the North Caucasus as posing certain risks for Georgia itself.

Firstly, if the “Circassian project” were to proceed successfully (from recognition of the genocide to reunification and ultimately to independence), one more claimant to Abkhazia might well emerge – the Adygheans, who appear to be growing in strength. The Abkhaz may even be dragged into their cousins’ project against their will, and the large Circassian diaspora, with a certain level of political influence in a number of countries, may be a significant factor.

Secondly, it is unclear how Tbilisi would respond to a request to recognise genocides from other claimants living in its immediate vicinity. Ultimately, and in practice, there is an identical problem relating to the genocide of the Abkhaz in the Russian Empire, although the Abkhaz themselves have not as yet asked anyone to recognise their genocide.

Thirdly, various forms of retaliation by Russia cannot be ruled out in the medium term. In all probability, until the Sochi Winter Olympics are over, Russia will “tolerate” Georgia’s proactive policy and will not take any countermeasures that might destabilise the situation in the region. But still, there is no guarantee that the region will remain calm once the Olympics are over.

Fourthly, if Tbilisi’s “wishlist” scenario, in which the Kremlin loses control over the North Caucasus, were to come true, Russia would almost certainly be able to prevent destabilisation spreading to the other regions in the Russian Federation. By contrast, the consequences for Georgia are less predictable. If radical Islam is further strengthened, this will create problems not only for adherents of traditional Islam but also for Christians living in the southern periphery of Russia. This primarily relates to the North Ossetians, but the conflict could later spill over into South Ossetia as well.

Finally, Georgia can only respond to the challenges emanating from the North Caucasus and deal with them effectively if it is a strong and developed country. Indeed, if Georgia can become a developed and perhaps attractive country, any favourable shift in the current balance of power in the North Caucasus would perhaps open up the prospect of solving the problem of finding a mutually acceptable compromise with Russia and with Abkhazia and South Ossetia.

This raises the question of what, if any, potential exists for collaboration between Georgia and Russia on the current situation in the North Caucasus. Many experts suggest that there are many objective reasons for viewing the North Caucasus as a natural area for collaboration between Russia and Georgia. These questions can only be answered if the need to apply pragmatic approaches is recognised and, above all, if all interested parties have the necessary political will. While the papers in this volume may not provide all the answers, they certainly provide food for thought that can be the start of a search for common ground in this most volatile region.

## PART 1

# The Abkhaz perspective

# The North Caucasus factor in the Abkhaz-Georgian armed conflict of 1992-1993

NATELLA AKABA

## Introduction

The 1992–1993 Georgian-Abkhaz war is a perfect example of a ‘conflict of a new era’, as defined by the former UN Secretary General Boutros Boutros-Ghali. This type of armed conflict affects civilians as much as the armies of the hostile parties. In this case, the conflict has now spread beyond the South Caucasus and into the wider region, drawing in the citizens not only of Abkhazia and Georgia, but also of other countries – Russia, Ukraine, Turkey, Syria and others, mainly the Abkhaz’ ethnic cousins the Adyghe, (Adyghe, Kabardinians and Circassians), the Abaza, and members of the Abkhaz and Circassian diaspora. In fact, representatives from almost all the peoples living in the North Caucasus and the Southern Russian Cossacks have fought in Abkhazia. At the same time, Ukrainian citizens (members of the radical right-wing party the Ukrainian National Assembly–Ukrainian National Self Defence (UNA-UNSO)) – and, according to unverified reports, citizens of the Baltic countries – have taken part in the war on the Georgian side. This reflects the significance of the concept of “Caucasian brotherhood” for the overwhelming majority of Abkhaz on the one hand and Georgia’s commitment to a policy of Euro-Atlanticism on the other.

Views are divided, not to say diametrically opposed, over the participation of volunteers from the North Caucasus in the 1992–1993 Georgian-Abkhaz war and the role they played in it, no more so than in relation to their motives. Those who witnessed and were directly involved in the events on the Abkhaz side have no doubt that they were motivated by the desire to come to the assistance of a brotherly people, outnumbered and facing a deadly threat. In Georgia, however, public opinion and the expert community are convinced that they were simply hired mercenaries fighting for reward. This article attempts to identify the motives of the people who came to the help of the people of Abkhazia.

## The start of the war: the role of public organisations and leaders in the North Caucasus

In the first few days following the Georgian military’s incursion into Abkhazia in August 1992 – which resulted in mass looting, killing on the basis of ethnicity and acts of repression initially aimed at the Abkhaz, but later extended to include the entire non-Georgian populace within the republic – many people believed that a Georgian victory was a foregone conclusion. Indeed, the Abkhaz military, greatly outnumbered and outgunned by the Georgian forces, appeared to be confined to a small patch of territory, extending from the Gumista river to the village of Kolkhida. However, a partisan movement was developing within the besieged city of Tkvarchali and some villages in Ochamchira district. Moscow’s policy, which was opaque and highly contradictory, was hardly designed to reassure the non-Georgian population. It felt, with good reason, that governments all around the world were backing Shevardnadze. For their part, the leaders and activists of the Abkhaz national movement and those leaders from the Armenian, Slav and Greek communities that supported them hoped – rightly, as it turned out – that their North Caucasus cousins would not simply stand by and watch Abkhazia being brought to its knees.

The policy of *perestroika* and democratisation had given the Abkhaz the opportunity to “re-discover” for themselves their ethnically and culturally close relatives, the Adyghe, as well as other peoples living in the North Caucasus. Of course, it was not as if there had been no contact at all between the Abkhaz and the Adyghe during the “era of stagnation”. Nonetheless, Moscow and Tbilisi had

generally tried to steer clear of encouraging too much rapprochement, given the “problems” that the Abkhaz were already causing the central authorities from time to time.<sup>12</sup>

Exchange visits between the Abkhaz and the Adyghe, arts festivals and youth campaigns combined to have an enormous moral and political impact on both Abkhazia and the North Caucasus. As these peoples rediscovered each other and became increasingly aware of how much linked them – common origins, a shared history and culture – they began to wonder about a Caucasian identity. This rapprochement had been instigated by national movements: the Popular Front “Aydgylara” in Abkhazia and the International Circassian Association, the Kabardinian National Congress, the Adyghe Khase, etc. in the republics of the North Caucasus. In August 1989, these and other public organisations met in Sukhum and created the Assembly of Mountain Peoples of the Caucasus, which proclaimed itself the historical successor to the Republic of the North Caucasus.<sup>13</sup> This happened, significantly, shortly after the tragic events of July 1989 in Abkhazia, the first time a Georgian-Abkhaz clash led to bloodshed. The clashes made it clear that a further escalation of violence in Abkhazia was a distinct possibility, and the Abkhaz started to look around for potential allies. On 1st–2nd November 1991, the Third Assembly of the Mountain Peoples of the Caucasus, held in Sukhum, proclaimed the launch of the Confederation of Mountain Peoples of the Caucasus (KGNK). The assembly was attended by 211 representatives of the Abaza, Abkhaz, Avar, Agin, Aukhov-Chechen, Adyghe, Balkarian, Circassian, Darghin, Kabarda, Karachaev, Lak, North Ossetian, Shapsug and South Ossetian peoples. (These founder-members joined the KGNK in the capacity of “peoples” rather than “republics”.) Sukhum was proclaimed the headquarters of the KGNK; Mussa (Yuriy) Shanibov, a Kabardinian, and Yusup Soslambekov, a Chechen, were elected as leaders. The assembly passed an Appeal to all ‘peoples and parliaments of the Caucasus’, calling on them ‘to support the idea of a Confederative Union of the peoples of the Caucasus – the only Union capable of forming the basis for inter-ethnic agreement in the region and resolving socio-economic problems.’<sup>14</sup>

The KGNK’s initial objectives were ethnic and cultural. However, it later turned its attention to political demands – such as raising the political status of the ethnic groupings who had joined the association and restoring the unified Mountain Republic within the Russian Confederation. In response to instability in the North Caucasus and armed conflicts in the South Caucasus, the KGNK set up its own armed forces, which, as Yuriy Shanibov expressed it, could have functioned rather like the UN “blue helmets” and helped to support peace and stability in the North Caucasus.

The KGNK’s objectives and slogans were, understandably, radicalised following the start of the Georgian-Abkhaz war. In the very first days of the war, Vladislav Ardzinba, the chairman of the Supreme Council of the Republic of Abkhazia, appealed to the administrations and peoples of the republics of the North Caucasus to provide immediate assistance to Abkhazia. Calling on the administration and peoples of Kabardino-Balkaria, he stated: ‘In its hour of deadly peril, the Presidium of the Supreme Council of the Republic of Abkhazia appeals to the President of the Kabardino-Balkarian Republic and the fraternal peoples of Kabardino-Balkaria to provide assistance with all the means at their disposal.’<sup>15</sup>

Ardzinba’s call did not go unheeded. Following emergency meetings held on the evening of 14th August, the Kabardinian public organisations Adyghe Khase, the Kabardinian National Congress (KNC) and others passed declarations and appeals, criticising the aggression of troops under the Georgian State Council against the people of Abkhazia and demanding the immediate withdrawal

12 I am referring here to a number of mass popular protests in Abkhazia against Georgia’s assimilationist policy.

13 This consisted in 1918 of seven “autonomous states” – Dagestan, Chechen-Ingushetia, Ossetia, Karachaevo-Balkaria, Kabardia, Adygheya and Abkhazia. However, the Republic did not last long. It was replaced in 1920 by the Autonomous Mountain Republic, which only extended from Kabardia to Chechnya, but this also turned out to be infeasible and was abolished in 1924. (For more details, see V. Berezovsky and V. Chervyakov. ‘Konfederatsiya gorskikh narodov Kavkaza’ [The Confederation of Mountain Peoples of the Caucasus]. Available in Russian at [http://www.rau.su/observer/N03\\_92/3\\_06.HTM](http://www.rau.su/observer/N03_92/3_06.HTM).)

14 Ibid.

15 From the newspaper *Respublika*, Nalchik, 22nd August 1992.

of the Georgian State Council troops from Abkhazia. An appeal was also made to the Russian administration to take concrete measures to resolve the situation in Abkhazia. The International Circassian Association (ICA) also appealed to the Adyghe and Abaza peoples and the South Russian Cossacks, saying: 'We shall not abandon Abkhazia in its hour of need! The International Circassian Association issues an urgent call for volunteers to defend our cousins the Abkhaz people.' On 17th August 1992, a session of the KGNK's parliament was convened in Grozny under the political slogan: 'Hands off Abkhazia!' Similar demands were seen at large public demonstrations in Kabardino-Balkaria, Dagestan and Adygheya.

The KGNK was thus a firm ally for Abkhazia as it entered into war with Georgia. As rightly pointed out by Aleksandr Krylov: 'These actions by the Georgian administration appeared blatantly unjust to the people of the former USSR, leading to the influx into Abkhazia of many volunteers who came to fight for the Abkhaz against the Georgian army (Ossetians, Transnistrians, Russians, Chechens, etc.). These volunteers fought within international divisions, although the South Russia Cossacks fought under their own separate military units.'<sup>16</sup> One of the first to respond to the call was Aleksandr Bardodym, a talented 25-year-old Moscow poet who had studied under the Abkhaz Translation Group at the Literary Institute and who had fought under Shamil Basayev. It may come as a surprise to some that the volunteer fighters in these divisions came from a very wide range of peoples, mainly from the North Caucasus and Southern Russia, both Muslims and Christians. Abkhazia was defended by Chechens and Cossacks, Kabardinians and Balkarians, Circassians and Karachaeans, Ossetians and Ingush, with no ethnic or religious conflicts or tension arising between them.

## The position of the various political forces in relation to Abkhazia

Since the Abkhaz armed forces, along with the majority of the civilian population, were concentrated in the Gudauta district and were completely encircled by State Council troops on the Sukhum and Gagra sides, it was very difficult for the first groups of volunteers to enter Abkhazia. The volunteers included Kabardinians (Ibragim Yaganov, Aleksey Bekshokov and others), the Chechen Shamil Basayev and many others. Only a few of the volunteers were armed, with most hoping to pick up weapons on the spot in Abkhazia. Since Georgian assault troops already controlled all major routes, the volunteers could only enter Abkhazia via mountain passes. On the basis of memoirs written by generals Gennady Troshev and Anatoly Kulikov, the Russian researcher Oleg Lukin states that the Russian police attempted to detain a group of Chechen volunteers heading for Abkhazia in the Pyatigorsk area. The Chechens took some bus passengers hostage and used them as a "human shield" to break through the border into Abkhazia. Kulikov goes on to say that Russian special forces set up an ambush in the mountains aimed at freeing the hostages and disarming the militants, but a command came 'from higher up' to allow them to proceed.<sup>17</sup>

So why did Moscow decide to allow volunteers from the North Caucasus to come to the assistance of the Abkhaz? To answer this question, we need to go back to the events which were occurring at the time in both Moscow and the North Caucasus. President Yeltsin's protracted conflict with the Russian Supreme Soviet, headed by Ruslan Khasbulatov, meant in practice that there was a dual administration. This made the situation in the Russian capital explosive. Yeltsin's position on the incursion of Georgian troops into Abkhazia was diametrically opposed to that of the overwhelming majority of members of the Russian Supreme Soviet. Whereas Yeltsin was willing to try anything to maintain good relations with Shevardnadze – principally to secure Georgia's membership of the Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS), even if it was against Abkhazia's interests – the

16 A. Krylov. 'Uroki gruzino-abkhazskoy voyny. Rol' Moskvy i Tbilisi' [The lessons of the Georgian-Abkhaz war. The role of Moscow and Tbilisi], in the internet journal *Novaya Politika*, 17th May 2005.

17 O. Lukin. 'Chechensky faktor v gruzino-abkhazskoy voyne 1992-1993' [The Chechen factor in the 1992-1993 Georgian-Abkhaz war]. Available at <http://www.watchdog.cz/index.php?show=000000-000005-000004-000151&lang=1&bold=lukin>.

Russian Supreme Soviet had on more than one occasion publicly criticised Georgia's actions and demanded the withdrawal of Georgian troops. On the other hand, subjective factors also played a role – in particular, the negative attitude of many in the Russian military to Shevardnadze, whom as former head of the Soviet Ministry of Internal Affairs they blamed for the rapid withdrawal of the Russian military from Germany.

Here, it is important to remember that *perestroika* and *glasnost*, as well as reviving hopes of an ethnic and cultural revival by the peoples of the North Caucasus, had also allowed radicalist and separatist movements to emerge (clearly in Chechnya in particular). This was bound to be of concern to Moscow. The Georgian-Abkhaz conflict, therefore, did not just threaten the stability of the North Caucasus, but also drew the attention of ethnic nationalist zealots in the North Caucasus republics to what had happened in Abkhazia. Nevertheless, war in the South caused instability in the whole of the North Caucasus in this ethnically and religiously complex region.

Georgia's actions and Moscow's failure to act particularly alarmed Abkhazia's cousins – the Circassians, Adyghe and Abaza. Protests against the actions of the Georgian "imperialists" were, quite logically, extended to encompass Moscow's at times erratic Caucasus policy. This was met in the North Caucasus (and primarily in Chechnya) with growing alarm over the potential for repressive measures by Federal authorities. The Russian administration, along with the regional leaders, was nevertheless just as concerned that the situation around Abkhazia might develop and quite justifiably feared that the Georgian-Abkhaz armed conflict might spill over into Russian territory. Thus, at the end of August 1992, the Vice-President of the Russian Federation, Alexandr Rutskoi, met leaders of the North Caucasian republics and discussed the situation with them. An extraordinary meeting of leaders of the republics, territories and *oblasts* of the North Caucasus was convened in the city of Armavir in Krasnodar Territory to discuss the situation in the North Caucasus that had arisen as a result of the military action in Abkhazia. A delegation was formed at the meeting to hold negotiations with the President of the Russian Federation on how to resolve the emergency situation in the North Caucasus. The participants of the meeting issued an Appeal to the President of the Russian Federation, Boris Yeltsin, and the Chairman of the Supreme Soviet of the Russian Federation, Ruslan Khasbulatov. The appeal noted that: 'the events in Abkhazia could spread to the North Caucasus region and lead to civil war in Southern Russia.' The appeal also referred to: 'the need for a rapid political resolution of the military conflict in Abkhazia and the withdrawal of troops from its territory. To resolve this humanitarian problem, the Russian administration must undertake a peacebuilding mission and employ all its international authority to this end.'<sup>18</sup>

However, the response of the Russian authorities was to completely ignore the view of the leaders of the North Caucasus republics and the majority of members of the Supreme Soviet of the Russian Federation. It continued its handover of Soviet arms held in the arsenals of the Transcaucasian Military District to the Georgian State Council.<sup>19</sup> This was in spite of the Council's flagrant violation of its commitment not to use these arms against the civilian population – a commitment which Georgia, along with the other former Soviet republics, had undertaken in Tashkent when the former Soviet Army's weaponry was redistributed. On 21st September, Vladislav Ardzinba, Chair of the Supreme Council of the Republic of Abkhazia, sent a letter to the Russian President Boris Yeltsin stating: 'The administration of Georgia, in contravention of all the articles of the Moscow Agreement, is building up its military power. Just a few days ago, Georgia again received a large contingent of arms from the arsenals of the Russian Combined Forces. There is every reason to believe that Defence Minister Kitovani's threat to move to decisive action in the near future is entirely feasible. Georgia is preparing a strike with SU-27 fighter aircraft equipped with bombs and air-to-ground missiles in the Gudauta district, where the Abkhaz population resides and a significant number of refugees is concentrated, as

18 Quoted from: A.V. Kushkhabiev (2006). 'Kabardino-Balkariya i gruzino-abkhazsky vooruzhenny konflikt' [Kabardino-Balkaria and the Georgian-Abkhaz armed conflict], No. 3, Nalchik, pp. 344–370.

19 Georgia, like other former Soviet republics, has undertaken these commitments on the distribution of weapons of the former Soviet Army in Tashkent.

well as in the Ochamchira district and the city of Tkuarchal. The fighter crews, bombs and missiles have already arrived at Sukhum airport. If the Georgian administration proceeds, this will lead to large numbers of civilian victims and make the situation ungovernable. I appeal to you for assistance in bringing about the immediate withdrawal of State Council troops from the territory of the Republic of Abkhazia.<sup>20</sup> Russia's response was to complete the transfer of the Akhalsikhe motorised infantry division to Georgia on 22nd September.

The Russian administration's position is clearly demonstrated by the statement issued by the Russian government regarding the legality of the KGNK's participation in the Georgian-Abkhaz war. On 25th August, the Russian Ministry of Justice declared that the actions of the Confederation were illegal and in flagrant violation of the Constitution. On 27th August, the Russian Public Prosecutor's Office instituted criminal proceedings against the KGNK on charges of inciting inter-ethnic hatred, committing acts of terrorism and sabotage, and hostage-taking. It has been reported that: 'Tbilisi viewed with satisfaction the statement of the Russian Minister of Justice, Fedorov, that the Confederation of Mountain Peoples of the Caucasus was an illegal organisation and that criminal proceedings were being instituted against it. In response to this, rather bizarrely, it was reported in the press that the KGNK had announced that it would initiate criminal proceedings against the President of the Russian Federation, Boris Yeltsin, and the Justice Minister, Nikolay Fedorov, for "inciting inter-ethnic hatred between peoples"'. However, an official denial was quickly issued by the KGNK.<sup>21</sup>

The events in Abkhazia also presented the official leaders of the North Caucasus republics with a difficult choice. They clearly had to take account of public opinion and calls from the more politicised groupings in their societies to rush to Abkhazia's aid immediately. However, announcing an initiative to provide assistance to Abkhazia – or for that matter simply failing to prevent volunteers arriving from their republics – would seriously damage their careers. Sergei Markedonov, analysing the behaviour of presidents from the different North Caucasus republics, notes that they responded in different ways. The President of Kabardino-Balkaria, Valery Kokov, adopted a very cautious position and did not respond to the KGNK's demand that he support the people of Abkhazia in their fight with Georgia. The actions of the Russian Prosecutor-General's office which led to the KGNK's leader, Yuriy Shanibov, being arrested on 23rd September 1992 in Nalchik sparked a serious political crisis in the republic, with clashes arising between the police and the Kabardinian National Congress along with the KGNK. In September 1992, the Kabardinian National Congress was bandying slogans on Kabardia's secession from Russia as well as the withdrawal of Russian troops and special forces units from its territory. On 27th September 1992, a state of emergency was decreed in the capital of Kabardino-Balkaria. The republic's president, Valery Kokov, spoke out strongly against the demonstrators and appealed to the Russian administration to send Russian internal troops to Nalchik. In October 1992, the demonstrations were dispersed.

At the same time, the Adygheyan President, Aslan Dzharimov, came out more or less openly in support of Ardzinba and responded to his call to send volunteers to Abkhazia. The Chechen leader Dzhokhar Dudayev, despite providing military assistance, criticised the Abkhaz as being pro-Russian. The other leaders of the republics, Vladimir Khubiyev, an ethnic Karachayevan (Karachaevo-Cherkessia), and Akhsarbek Galazov (North Ossetia) made no response to the call, although a number of volunteers from these republics arrived at their own initiative in Abkhazia. Sergei Markedonov, referring to this diversity of responses by leaders of the republics, calls it 'a situation caused by Russia's multiplicity of interests and its policy of keeping its options open during the open phase of the Georgian-Abkhaz conflict.'<sup>22</sup>

20 More details can be found in: K. Myalo. 'Rossiya i poslednyye voyny XX veka, Russia and the last wars of the 20th century]. Available in Russian at [http://www.patriotica.ru/actual/myalo\\_wars\\_.html](http://www.patriotica.ru/actual/myalo_wars_.html).

21 Quoted from: V. Berozovsky and V. Chervyakov. 'Konfederatsiya gorskikh narodov Kavkaza' [The Confederation of Mountain Peoples of the Caucasus]. Available in Russian at [http://www.rau.su/observer/N03\\_92/3\\_06.HTM](http://www.rau.su/observer/N03_92/3_06.HTM).

22 S. Markedonov (2006). 'Interesy Rossii v Abkhazii i Gruzii i puti ikh osushchestvleniya' [Russian interests in Abkhazia and Georgia and how they are realised], in *Aspekty gruzino-abkhazskogo konflikta* [Aspects of the Georgian-Abkhaz conflict], Edition 12, Irvine, pp. 25–26.

These differences surfaced most publicly at a meeting in Moscow on 3rd September 1992. The meeting was televised and followed very closely in Abkhazia. Its “Final Document” was widely discussed in the territories controlled by the Abkhaz side. It was obvious that unprecedented pressure had been brought to bear on Vladislav Ardzinba by Yeltsin and his entourage, whose position was openly pro-Georgian. The Abkhaz delegation at the Moscow meeting – and indeed Abkhaz society as a whole – objected to provisions in the document that included a demand that ‘illegal military formations and groups’ be disbanded and withdrawn from Abkhazia and prevented from returning in future (Article 1). This was clearly a reference to the volunteer divisions.

Moreover, Article 11 stated that: ‘the authorities and administrations of the republics, territories and *oblasts* of the North Caucasus within the Russian Federation will take effective measures to prevent any acts from their territories that contravene the provisions of this agreement.’ If it had signed this document, the Abkhaz side would have dealt a blow to those people who had come to the assistance of the people of Abkhazia, something that was completely unacceptable from a moral point of view. Consequently, the head of the Abkhaz delegation, Vladislav Ardzinba, announced at the meeting that he would not agree to these provisions: ‘I will insert my own view in the margin, since I cannot, either from a moral or legal standpoint, criticise people who came to Abkhazia to sacrifice their lives for the Abkhaz people, for all the peoples of Abkhazia ... I will insert my own view regarding Article 11 when I sign the document.’<sup>23</sup>

## The significance of the volunteer movement

In Abkhazia today, the support provided by the peoples of the North Caucasus and the Cossacks of South Russia in its hour of need is seen as highly significant. The Abkhaz philosopher and expert Oleg Damenia remarked: ‘Without such powerful support from the North Caucasus peoples and members of our diaspora, I am not sure what the outcome of this war would have been. I am not at all sure we could have withstood the onslaught. I don’t just mean the military reinforcements that came from the North Caucasus, though these were significant. I also have in mind the moral and particularly the political components of this support. And I am referring here not just to the people who came here to fight on the Abkhaz side but also to all the peoples of the North Caucasus region who gave their unconditional support to Abkhazia. This was an extremely important factor. The political administration in Russia, whatever its view of the events occurring at the time in the Caucasus, had to consider the political mood in the North Caucasus region. That political mood was created by those people who stood side by side with our soldiers.’<sup>24</sup>

This assistance is valued just as highly by the Abkhaz historian Stanislav Lakoba, who remarked that: ‘when all the borders around Abkhazia were closed and our enemies said that even a bird could not fly through them, and Shevardnadze was announcing that the Confederation of Mountain Peoples of the Caucasus was simply a paper fiction, representatives of the North Caucasus came to Abkhazia by all conceivable and inconceivable routes. They stood alongside us, fought, perished, became heroes of our war.’<sup>25</sup> Lakoba says that beginning from 1998, movement of the Caucasian peoples turned into a serious political force. For Abkhazia, particularly in the first days of the war, this represented enormous moral and psychological support. Lakoba highlighted: ‘People came on foot from all the republics of the Caucasus through mountain passes, and what is more they were genuine volunteers, not mercenaries as some have tried to portray them. Throughout the war, the volunteers accounted for no more than 10% of our army, but their contribution to our victory cannot be overstated. They included Sultan Sosnaliyev, Mokhammed Kilba, Gamzat Khankaroy, Yusup Soslanbekov, Mussa Shanibov, and indeed Shamil Basayev and his group. They all played a

23 ‘Russia-Georgia – concluding document from the Moscow meeting on 3rd September 1992’. Available in Russian at <http://russia.bestpravo.ru/fed1992/data02/tex12083.htm>.

24 Interview conducted with Oleg Damenia in Sukhum in September 2011.

25 Interview conducted with Stanislav Lakoba in Sukhum in September 2011.

very big part; they are all people on whom we counted. Without this North Caucasus factor, which the Georgians underestimated, I think that it would have been very difficult for us to hold out. As it turned out, the Abkhaz were quite right to create the Confederation, and the fact that on the eve of the war Sukhum was proclaimed the Confederation's capital is also highly significant.<sup>26</sup>

## Afterword

Analysing these events preceding the war, there is compelling evidence that the volunteers were in fact motivated by ideology rather than profit in light of: the contacts made between the Abkhaz, Adyghe and other peoples of the North Caucasus; the movement for Caucasian unity which arose in the early 1990s; and the creation of the Confederation of Mountain Peoples of the Caucasus (later renamed the Confederation of the Peoples of the Caucasus). Significantly, many of those who took part in or witnessed these events recalled the Spanish Civil War of 1936–1939. The Abkhaz writer Dzhuma Akhuba, addressing his call to the Russian intelligentsia, writes: 'Remember the heroic deeds ... of Hemingway, Ehrenburg and Koltsov, who fought with the pen and the sword for the freedom and independence of other peoples, who fought fascism in foreign countries.' A comparison to the Spanish Civil War is also made by Anna Broydo, who worked in Abkhazia during the war as a war journalist. She writes: '...The volunteers were always quick to emphasise that their actions were not motivated by profit and for them there was no insult worse than "mercenary".'<sup>27</sup>

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26 Interview conducted with Stanislav Lakoba in Sukhum in September 2011.

27 A.I. Broydo (2008). 'Proyavlenie etnopsikhologicheskikh osobennostey abkhazov v khode Otechestvennoy voyny naroda Abkhazii 1992–1993' [The emergence of the ethno-psychological characteristics of Abkhaz during the 1992–1993 Patriotic War of the people of Abkhazia], Moscow, p. 148.

# The Circassian question and Abkhazia: historical factors and contemporary challenges

ARDA INAL-IPA

## Preamble

The situation in the Russian Caucasus has deteriorated significantly over the last two decades. This is mainly as a result of the events in Chechnya and because the problems of the North-Western Caucasus region, populated by the Circassian (Adyghe) people, have resurfaced to become a key factor. The history of the “Circassian question” in Russia goes back to the conquest of the Caucasus in the 19th century. Despite some fairly lengthy periods of peace, the problems of the Russian West Caucasus have never really gone away: to this day, the Circassian people remain scattered across a number of different republics and “territorial-administrative units”; the creation of a standardised literary language remains unresolved; there is still no procedure in place for the return of Circassian refugees from the time of the Caucasian War to their homeland; and much else besides. The Circassian question has been linked with Abkhazia almost from the start. The Abkhaz and Adyghe peoples have interacted closely at various historical periods, mainly since they are genetically related and have lived in close proximity to one another for thousands of years. Events in the recent past, when brigades from the North Caucasus came to fight with the Abkhaz in the 1992–1993 Georgian-Abkhaz war, have again shown that they are close allies. But today, in peacetime, new and more complex aspects of the Circassian question are emerging that concern relations between the Abkhaz and the Adyghe peoples. This article attempts to analyse this aspect of the problem, in order to identify and understand the sources of the challenges concerning the two societies today.

One of the difficulties in writing this article is that it covers the most “fresh” trends, which have not yet been subjected to academic theories and research. The problems in Abkhaz-Circassian relations are still at an embryonic stage. Attempts to investigate the origins of some misunderstandings and contradictions are thus all the more urgently needed if we are to identify the action required to increase understanding between the societies before negative attitudes can form.

This is important not only for the future of bilateral relations, but also in view of the urgent need for confidence building between the peoples to support stability in the Caucasus, given the fragility of the current period of peace. The Georgian-Abkhaz and Georgian-South Ossetian wars may no longer be raging, but they did not end completely with the signing of peace treaties and agreements on the non-resumption of hostilities.

## Methodology

This article focuses on the North-Western Caucasus, on materials connected with the Circassians (Adyghe), and on the Abkhaz and the history of their recent relations as part of the Russian Empire, the USSR and in current conditions. The article does not consider how the situation has been affected by the events in Chechnya and across the North-Eastern Caucasus. These factors, although very important, are too complex to be analysed here. Instead, we examine the historical record from the 19th and 20th centuries and reflect on its consequences and effects on Circassian-Abkhaz relations, as well as a number of problems currently facing relations between Russia, Georgia and Abkhazia.

## Historical factors

Public discussions on the historical past – and particularly relations between the peoples of the Caucasus and Russia – ebb and flow under the influence of events in the North Caucasus. Although a century-and-a-half has passed since the end of the Caucasian War, the current situation clearly continues to be dogged by events from that period. Some would go so far as to say that the current “Circassian question” is a continuation of the Caucasian War. But wars need not always cast such a long shadow. This article attempts to come to an understanding of the specific features of Russia’s fight for the Caucasus that make revisiting this dramatic period of history so unavoidable.

1. The unprecedented ferocity with which the Caucasian War was waged by the Tsarist regime has made it difficult to evaluate the outcome of the war as a natural result of military conflict. To quote a description by a participant in the war, Lieutenant General R.A. Fadeyev: ‘...we had to turn the Eastern shore of the Black Sea into Russian land and to do this we had to purge the entire littoral of the mountain peoples ... We had to annihilate a significant proportion ... of the population to force the rest to lay down their weapons unconditionally ... Our plan of war was to deport the mountain peoples and settle the Western Caucasus with Russians.’<sup>28</sup> But according to the testimony of another participant in the events – the military geographer M. Venyukova: ‘... the war was waged with a relentless, ruthless severity. We advanced step by step, irrevocably cleansing each piece of land on which a soldier’s foot trod of every last highlander down to the last man. Hundreds of mountain villages were razed to the ground, entire crops trampled by horses. The villages of people were immediately led away under escort and sent to the shores of the Black Sea and beyond, to Turkey.’ The nature of warfare, which Russia waged against the peoples of the western Caucasus, was condemned by many contemporaries, and today they view the descendants of the conquered peoples as the embodiment of genocide.
2. Another factor that explains why the events of the 19th century remain eternally etched on the memory of the peoples of the Western Caucasus is the calls for the creation of a Circassian state that resounded at the height of resistance to the Tsarist Empire’s policies. These calls were supported by a number of European countries, in particular Great Britain, Russia’s rivals in the Caucasus and the entire Black Sea region. Questions of statehood at another level emerged in 1917, 1918, 1920, 1921 and again later – already from within the Russian Federation (incidentally, Abkhazia was also involved in most of these projects). However, plans for a state or a republican alliance uniting all the Adyghe people were short-lived.<sup>29</sup>
3. A third important factor, in our view, was that many contemporary Russian academics and public actors have failed to come to an objective assessment of the Caucasian War. Today, some Russian historians and public figures, in contrast with their predecessors in the 19th century, justify or at least pass over in silence the extremely harsh nature of the conduct of the war in the Western Caucasus. Denying the crimes committed by Tsarist Russia in the Caucasian War effectively makes it impossible to move on from this tragic stage in history. It leaves this highly contentious topic a subject of current public discourse which taints Adygheyan attitudes to the Russian centre.
4. The most problematic legacy of the Caucasian War is that the default problem-solving paradigm in the North Caucasus is not to search for a compromise or common interests, but to annihilate or deport the enemy. Vestiges of this approach unfortunately seem to occasionally remain to this day and continue to have a negative effect on the situation.

28 R.A. Fadeyev (2003). ‘Kavkazskaya vojna’ [The Caucasian War], Moscow.

29 Thus, for example, in November 1917 the Union of United Mountain Peoples of the North Caucasus and Dagestan proclaimed the state of a Mountain Republic. However, the parliament of the Mountain Republic rapidly announced its own dissolution after Dagestan was taken by troops under General Denikin. Then, in 1918, when it was already incorporated within the RSFSR, a North Caucasus Soviet Republic was proclaimed, combining seven states: Dagestan, Checheno-Ingushetia, Ossetia, Karachaevo-Balkariya, Kabarda, Adygheya and Abkhazia. The republic lasted just six months. In 1920, the Autonomous Mountain Republic was established, which extended only from Kabarda to Chechnya and which also turned out to be infeasible: it was liquidated in 1924.

## The Circassian question in the present day

Since the collapse of the Soviet Union, one of the most serious internal policy challenges facing the Russian state has unquestionably been Moscow's relations with the North Caucasus republics. The well-known political commentator and diplomat Vladimir Degoyev writes: 'The time has come to reveal a big secret. Since 1991, Russia has been steadily losing sovereignty in the North Caucasus. The exigencies of everyday life mean that the local population is increasingly failing to comply with Russian laws, which are no longer seen as the exercise of legitimate power but either as a source of income, exploitation or a source of grievance.'<sup>30</sup> Another well-known Russian expert on the modern Caucasus, Sergey Markedonov, describes the features of current Russian policy in the Caucasus in the following terms: 'Entire republics have been farmed out to outwardly loyal clans who are simply required to ensure that voters in elections produce the "right" results. The country, instead of being strengthened, has been fundamentally weakened.'<sup>31</sup>

As already noted, the interpretation of historical events has an enormous part to play in the genesis of the Circassian problem. This makes assessments of the Caucasian War, and the manner in which these assessments are reflected in current day Russian policy in the Caucasus, of particular significance. We should include here a separate comment on the special position of the former Russian president Boris Yeltsin. Readers may recall that on the 130th anniversary of the end of the Caucasian War, on 21st May 1994, Yeltsin addressed the peoples of the Caucasus. His address contained the following words: 'In the present day, when Russia is constructing a legal state and recognises the primacy of universal human values, there is an opportunity emerging for an objective interpretation of the events of the Caucasian War as the valiant struggle of the peoples of the Caucasus not only for survival in their native land, but also for the preservation of a distinctive culture, the best features of the national character. The problems we have inherited from the Caucasian War, and particularly the return of the descendants of the Caucasian deportees to their historical homeland, must be resolved at an international level by negotiations attended by all interested parties.'<sup>32</sup> In practice, the approach voiced by Yeltsin to the sensitive questions of the historical past and to contemporary policy in the Caucasus unfortunately came to nothing. In our view, this was a missed opportunity for building relations between the centre and the peoples of the Caucasus on a new, more robust basis.

An important factor in the current political processes in the North-Western Caucasus is the re-emergence of the idea of a resurgence or new version of a unified Circassian nation. This has resulted from global processes such as the collapse of the Soviet Union and the emergence of new states, along with modern Russia's not always entirely constructive ethnic policy. Discussions outline a number of ways this could be implemented, ranging from reuniting the people in their historical homeland within a single entity of the Russian Federation to the creation of a dispersed but spiritually and politically united nation. Other, bolder plans are also being voiced.<sup>33</sup>

These processes, which are extremely important in political terms in the North-Western Caucasus, ought to be the subject of intense interest from government at all levels. A reasonable response would be to take public opinion into account. In fact, however, the response is entirely different. Officials in the capitals and the regions ignore the analysis and recommendations of experts on the modern North Caucasus and are out of touch with what is actually happening on the ground. As a result, policy frameworks used in the North Caucasus are outmoded and ineffective. This is allowing a situation to develop in which the North Caucasus is becoming the subject of the

30 V. Degoyev. 'Kavkazsky vopros i budushcheye Rossii' [The Caucasus question and the future of Russia]. Available (in Russian) at <http://www.regnum.ru/news/1463877.html>.

31 S. Markedonov. 'Kavkazskaya proektsiya vlastnoi rokirovki v Rossii' [Caucasian projection of castling power in Russia]. Polit.ru, 30th September 2011. Available at <http://polit.ru/article/2011/09/30/Caucas>.

32 Address to the peoples of the Caucasus by the Russian President Boris N. Yeltsin on the occasion of the 130th anniversary of the end of the Caucasian War, Moscow, 18th May 1994 (ITAR-TASS).

33 R. Keshev. 'Abkhazo-cherkesskie otnosheniya' [Abkhaz-Circassian relations], Interview, 10th December 2010.

foreign policy of other states, whose interest is not always to strengthen ties between the republics of the North Caucasus and the central authorities in Russia. These are certain Arab countries, Georgia, to some extent Turkey and also Western countries.

## Georgia's policy in relation to the North Caucasus

Prior to 2008, it would have been difficult to identify any systematic, consistent Georgian policy on the North Caucasus. However, after the war in South Ossetia, the North Caucasus became one of the important foreign policy “vectors” of the Georgian state. Since the escalation of the Georgian-Abkhaz conflict in the late 1980s, the attitudes of the peoples of the North Caucasus towards Georgia have been relatively frosty. The Georgian-Abkhaz war only deepened this mutual hostility. However, the Georgian government has adopted a number of measures on refugees from Chechnya that have made a start on improving Georgia's relations with the eastern republics of the North Caucasus. The Adyghe are now becoming the principal subject of Georgian policy in the North Caucasus. At the same time, the Circassians' negative attitude towards Georgia, the foundations of which were laid during the Georgian-Abkhaz war, is gradually transforming. Relations are even extending to a kind of partnership over important questions of interpretation and assessment of the political consequences of the Caucasian War, as well as the search for an acceptable future political configuration in the Caucasus. Generally, Georgia demonstrates quite innovative skills in its foreign policy actions in relation to the North Caucasus. We need only refer to decisions such as: the unilateral introduction of a selective visa-free regime for residents of the republics of the North Caucasus; the establishment of entitlements and quotas for residents of the North Caucasus relating to education or medical assistance within Georgia; the opening of the special television channel “First Information Caucasus” (PIK), which broadcasts to the peoples of the North Caucasus; the recognition by the Georgian Parliament of the Circassian genocide that took place during the Caucasian War in the 19th century; the opening of a Centre of Circassian Culture; and the announcement of a tender for a memorial to the Circassian deportees.

However, it is clear that the underlying aim of all these measures aimed at improving relations with the peoples of the North Caucasus is anti-Russian: seeking to weaken Moscow's influence in the North Caucasus. In other words, virtually every action taken to improve Georgia's relations with the peoples of the North Caucasus is undertaken to ensure that these countries' relations with the central authorities in Moscow deteriorate. This approach is clearly not designed out of any concern for the Adyghe. Unfortunately, support from some Western circles for this policy by Georgia only renders the situation in the North Caucasus more volatile and provokes Russia to take harsh measures. Such measures in turn strengthen the positions of radical forces in the Caucasus, which are the enemy not only of Russia but also of Europe and the entire democratic world. Georgia's policy in the North Caucasus is thus not particularly far-sighted or constructive. Its policymakers cannot see the obvious dangers lurking behind the short-term successes. Georgia will have to accept its share of responsibility for the rise in extremism in the North Caucasus and for Moscow's predictably tough response to the strengthening of anti-Russian feeling there. Over the long term, this is unlikely to be in the interests of the peoples of the North Caucasus.

Georgia's active policy towards the Circassians will clearly contribute negatively to Abkhaz-Circassian relations. Any action taken by Georgia that demonstrates they recognise the Circassians' current needs, and that they respect and acknowledge their historical sufferings, will inevitably be accompanied by a warming in the Circassian-Georgian relationship. The Abkhaz take a jaundiced view of this, since in the absence of a resolution of the conflict, any improvement in relations between the republics of the North Caucasus and Georgia is seen by them as an attempt to undermine the Circassian-Abkhaz brotherhood formed during their joint struggle against the Georgians. On the other hand, the Abkhaz, who are highly dependent on Russia, do not support debates initiated by US and Georgian think tanks with an anti-Russian slant - for example, discussions on the genocide of the

Circassians during the Caucasian War, on the inadmissibility of holding the Olympics in Sochi, etc. The position of the Abkhaz is met by blank incomprehension by some in the Circassian community. We should note here that the position adopted by Abkhazia on this does not mean it is entirely uncritical of the dramatic aspects of the Caucasus' past and present. On the contrary, criticism of Russia's Caucasian policy is commonly heard in Abkhaz public discourse. However, a clear distinction is made in Abkhazia between the Tsarist policies and the present. A further distinction is made between the mistakes and omissions of Russia's current policy in the North-Western Caucasus and the positive steps taken by them. Although they understand all the problems and share the concerns of the Adyghe people, the Abkhaz will never be able to change their view of the Russian Federation's 2008 recognition of the independence of the Abkhaz state. This decision was taken by Russia even though it was obvious it would have serious consequences for its relations with Western countries, not to mention Georgia. But it is not simply Abkhazia's high regard for this recognition and gratitude for the enormous economic and financial assistance from Russia that prevent it from joining in with anti-Russian public relations campaigns. People in Abkhazia are clear that historical justice should be achieved not through undermining relations between the republics of the North Caucasus and Moscow, but by solving the difficult task of searching for mutual understanding and compromise without jeopardising the fragile stability of the North Caucasus.

## The emergence of thorny issues in Circassian-Abkhaz relations

Once Abkhazia's alliance with Russia was strengthened by the recognition of its independence, it could have played a significant role in removing thorny aspects of the relations between the republics of the North Caucasus and Moscow. However, while Abkhazia was still considering how best to use the available resources to positive effect, the first signs of cracks in Abkhaz-Circassian relations unexpectedly appeared.

### The first alarm signals

Warning signs started to emerge following the decision by the International Olympic Committee (IOC) to hold the Winter Olympics in Sochi. The Abkhaz supported the idea. However, the Circassians, particularly the Circassian diaspora, began to question whether it was acceptable to hold the games on territory which had witnessed the most ferocious battles between Tsarist troops and Circassian divisions. The Abkhaz did not join the protests of some Circassian organisations abroad.<sup>34</sup> Instead, they suggested that the games should be used as an opportunity to draw attention to the historical past and the present-day problems of the peoples who, before the Caucasian War, had lived on the land on which the Olympic Games were due to be held. This was counter to the attitudes of the most radical members of the campaign against the Sochi Olympics. Other highly contentious issues were added to the campaign which had nothing to do with Circassian-Russian relations, but addressed relations between the peoples of the Caucasus themselves. Questions of Circassian and Abkhaz identity unexpectedly cropped up,<sup>35</sup> along with problems of interpretation of certain historical facts, disputes over which territorial unit certain regions should be assigned to – and much more. Issues that should rightly only be the subject of rigorous academic research were disputed publicly over the internet in discussions that were cleverly manipulated by interested parties and not always impartial. Dilettante attempts to

34 Anti-Russian feeling developed in a number of Caucasian organisations abroad, including some Circassian ones, as a result of the events in Chechnya. These organisations originally provided aid to thousands of Chechen refugees, who fled to Turkey and other Middle Eastern countries, but also appealed to international organisations denouncing the harsh methods used to conduct the war in Chechnya. Such organisations have subsequently attracted the special attention of Georgian intelligence, which are attempting to use them as a resource in their anti-Russia policy and to resolve problems with Abkhazia.

35 The ethnonyms used by the mountain peoples of the North Caucasus themselves do not always coincide with the ethnonyms used by others (exonyms). Thus, the ethnonym "Circassian" in literary sources could often refer not only to a member of the Adyghe people, but also the Ubykh and the Abkhaz and occasionally even a member of other mountain peoples. However, the ethnonym "Circassian" in Russian ("*cherkess*") comprises the Adyghe group of peoples – Kabardinians, Adygheans/Natukhai, Bzhedugs, Shapsugs, etc. This is the definition that is also commonly used in Abkhazia, and so the expression "Circassian history" is understood by the Abkhaz to be the history of the Adyghe and "the Circassian state" as the Adyghe state. In other words, the Abkhaz do not perceive themselves as Circassians at any level of identity. This term in Abkhaz consciousness constitutes a general exonym for the Adyghe peoples. In Adyghe sources, the situation is different again.

conduct “historical investigations” into contentious issues only succeed in aggravating discord and grievances as well as misapplying disagreements over the historical past to current realities.

### The question of Abkhaz citizenship

One hotly discussed issue – mainly within the Circassian diaspora, but also on history websites, in social networks and in periodicals – is the Abkhaz citizenship law. This law states that apart from residents permanently residing in Abkhazia, only ethnic Abkhaz, Abaza and (since recently) Ubykhs are entitled by right of birth to be citizens of the Republic of Abkhazia. This has offended many Circassians, who according to various estimates total seven or even 10 million people, since it means that the Circassians are the only people out of the kindred nations who are denied the right to citizenship of the Abkhaz state (the only state in the Abkhaz/Adyghe space). This is despite the fact that 2,500 Circassians defended the fledgling Abkhaz state on the battlefield and hundreds laid down their lives for Abkhazia’s freedom.

### The question of the genocide of the Circassian peoples during the Caucasian War

The essence of the disagreements over the recognition of the genocide of the Circassian people can be summarised as follows. The Resolution of the Parliament of the Republic of Abkhazia on 15th November 1997 on the deportations resulting from the Caucasian War only refers to the Abaza/Abkhaz; the question of recognising the genocide of the Adyghe people was not considered. On the other hand, the Abkhaz public responded negatively to the ecstatic public welcome given by some Circassians to the Georgian Parliament’s Resolution recognising the genocide of the Circassians by the Russian Empire during the Caucasian War, which was passed on 20th May 2011.

We would argue that the emergence of these contentious issues is not merely a coincidence, but the result of serious differences in how the Abkhaz and the Circassians view their national project and divergences in basic understandings of identity. Without an understanding of the origin of these differences, it is impossible to understand and hence overcome the misunderstandings and resentments that have arisen. We attempt here to touch on these questions briefly.

### Divergences between the national projects of the Abkhaz and the Adyghe

The launch of the Abkhaz national liberation movement at the end of the 20th century was originally viewed by the peoples of the North Caucasus as providing an impetus towards the construction of a North-West Caucasus state. However, subsequent events – particularly the deterioration of Abkhaz-Circassian relations over the last year – have shown that the national projects that the Abkhaz and the Circassians have been fomenting for years and even decades are fundamentally different. The Abkhaz have never been in any doubt that the purpose of their struggle is to defend their right to an independent Abkhaz state. Conversely, many Circassians saw an independent Abkhazia not so much as an example to follow, but the basis for the creation of a common Circassian state. In this view, the Abkhaz were expected to join in the building of a pan-Circassian state and, as a people related to the Circassians, were seen by many as part of a nascent Circassian (political) nation.<sup>36</sup> Moreover, some Circassian leaders had begun to formulate new ideas of a Western Caucasus community that included not just Circassians and Abkhaz, but also Georgia as the closest country to the Abkhaz-Adyghe in terms of civilisation. This was entirely incomprehensible and unacceptable to the Abkhaz.<sup>37</sup> As long as Georgia promotes its claim to Abkhazia, these tendencies will be seen as a serious threat within Abkhazia.

36 Andzor Kabard (2011). ‘Cherkesskaya khronika – optimicheskaya tragediya’ [A Circassian chronicle – an optimistic tragedy], *Adyge Kheku*. Available (in Russian) at <http://bit.ly/IrhDye>.

37 Ruslan Keshev (2010). ‘Abkhazo-cherkesskie otnosheniya: “bratstvo navek” ili “razvod s kommunal’noy kvartire”?’ [Abkhaz-Circassian relations: “eternal brotherhood” or “cohabiting divorcees”?].

## The question of identity

At this point, we should consider the lack of clarity over some aspects of how Abkhaz and Circassian identity is perceived and defined. In Abkhazia, people have always “known” that the Adyghe (Adygheyans, Circassians and Kabardinians), Ubykhs and Abkhaz form a group of related peoples within an Abkhaz-Adyghe group, and these are peoples with independent languages which could only have formed through prolonged, separate historical development. However, many present-day Circassians have a completely different view. The overwhelming majority of Circassian publications unhesitatingly classify the Ubykhs as Circassians, along with others such as the Abkhaz/Abaza. In other words, the ethnonym “Circassian” is generally used to refer to the Circassians, the Ubykh and the Abaza/Abkhaz. However, although the Abkhaz place a high value on their kinship with the Circassians, Abkhaz identity, which is based also on its independent language and its separate historical path, has never been seen by them as submerged within any other identity, including Circassian. This difference in understanding these terms, which is important both for individual identity and for the ethnos, was bound to lead to a lack of understanding and even resentment.

## Do any resources exist for positive change?

Despite these unexpected difficulties, which cannot be underestimated, we believe that Abkhazia still has the potential to positively influence the situation to overcome conflicts and build confidence between the Circassian North Caucasus and Abkhazia. In our view, the way to counter the destructive processes in relations between the two is not to ignore them, but instead to air these issues through in-depth discussion and interpretation of them at academic research institutions and in civil society. We would recommend that a number of educational initiatives be adopted, involving young people studying the history of the Caucasian War, the Soviet era and the Georgian-Abkhaz war. Academic and practical conferences could have a positive effect. In the present circumstances, efforts to educate societies could become most effective through civil society, given the greater activeness of civil society organisations and opportunities for networking.

We believe that Abkhazia could also contribute in some measure towards increasing mutual understanding between Circassian society and the Russian central authorities. It seems essential to us to establish an open dialogue between society and the authorities at various levels in which representatives of Abkhazia could also take part. This process could be developed as part of the general democratisation of political life in the republics of the North Caucasus. It would require the strengthening of civil society institutions and development of forms of civic participation. Here too, Abkhaz experience could be used. Strengthening real democracy would gradually help to replace the currently ineffective authoritarian forms of governance in the Russian Caucasus. Activating civil society and developing civil society dialogue with the authorities would help to stabilise the political situation, which is in the interest of both Russia and Abkhazia. Building the trust of the North Caucasus republics in the central authorities is also in the interests of them both. This is important for Abkhazia, as strengthening links between the republics of the North Caucasus and Abkhazia in this context would not be met with caution and distrust by Moscow. Moscow’s attitude to the patterns of contemporary Abkhaz politics is ambivalent. On the one hand, the Abkhaz elite’s wayward pursuit of “too much” independence creates, from a Russian perspective, an alarming example for the republics of the North Caucasus. On the other hand, the high levels of loyalty shown to Russia not only by the Abkhaz authorities, but by Abkhaz society itself, could be a serious resource and a stabilising influence on the situation in the North Caucasus.

The constellation of forces in the North-West Caucasus following the Georgian-Abkhaz war clearly cannot be preserved forever. Despite understandable emotions, Abkhazia needs to realise that the North Caucasus peoples have their own interests, which are not always identical to those of the Abkhaz. It cannot expect its friends to stick by it forever simply because it needs them. Abkhazia needs to come up with compromises and a considered policy towards the peoples of

the North Caucasus, who did after all come to its aid in its time of need. It should also devise a formula that would be acceptable to both sides for obtaining Abkhaz citizenship and recognise the harsh consequences of the Caucasian War, not just for the Abkhaz/Abaza but also for the other peoples of the North Caucasus, and much, much more. On the other hand, it is also true that, while they are fully entitled to develop relations with Georgia, the Circassian organisations could have played a more active role in persuading the Georgian authorities to sign with Abkhazia the Agreement on Non-Resumption of Hostilities. At this stage, the Circassians could possibly play a significant and historic peacebuilding role in the Caucasus.

## Conclusion

The policies adopted by the various players in the North Caucasus are unfortunately overshadowed in many respects by the past. This is seen most clearly in the outmoded frames of reference used to define their own interests, based as they are on realities that prevailed during the Caucasian and Crimean Wars of the 19th century. Today, the rivalry between Russia and the West in the North Caucasus is having a destructive effect on the situation. Instead of drawing lessons from history, when Western attempts to weaken Russian influence in the region only served to aggravate the situation, Georgia has carried on the tradition by supporting elements of anti-Russian feeling in the North Caucasus. This is a hazardous policy, which could lead to the serious destabilisation of the situation across the region. Opponents of the Russian state are using the Olympics to revive historical trauma and reverse the positive steps that the new Russia has in fact taken. At the same time, Russia is itself squandering the opportunity to correct the mistakes and omissions of the past. Remaining silent or ignoring the new direction that political and public discourses are taking in the North Caucasus prevents these processes from being analysed and interpreted openly. This drastically reduces the scope for the central authorities to make adequate conciliatory steps that would help to reduce tension and strengthen state institutions.

In some respects, this is a sort of a war for the choice of civilisation in the North Caucasus. Russia and the West could well be allies in this process, given their pressing need to secure regional stability. Unfortunately, Georgia is playing an unconstructive role in the North Caucasus which is merely increasing the discord between the peoples of the North Caucasus and the Russian central authorities by exacerbating mutual distrust, with all the consequences that entails.

Russia must also share some responsibility for these negative trends. Instead of attempting to understand and take into account the emerging interests of the peoples of the North Caucasus, it has chosen an inflexible authoritarian approach to its Caucasus policy which is often outmanoeuvred by the innovative public relations methods adopted by the Georgian government.

Over the last few years, particularly since August 2008, there has thus been a new twist in the geopolitical struggle for influence in the Caucasus. This difficult situation is putting a strain on Abkhaz-Circassian relations. If they are to avoid becoming pawns in this great geopolitical game, the Abkhaz and Circassian peoples need to understand that it is the peoples themselves who bear primary responsibility for maintaining these relations. When considering any new political act or any response to external initiatives, they should avoid anything that might in the short or long term upset the balance of power or destabilise the Caucasus, as this is clearly not in the interests of any and all of the peoples residing in the Caucasus.

# The North Caucasus in contemporary Georgian politics

SPARTAK ZHIDKOV

## Geopolitical significance of the North Caucasus for Georgia

From a geopolitical perspective, the North Caucasus – or more precisely the territory densely populated by the various North Caucasus peoples – is unquestionably of interest to Georgia, and for two reasons. Firstly, some parts of the North Caucasus are ethnically homogenous with Abkhazia and South Ossetia – two countries to which Georgia has always felt and probably always will feel it has a claim. Secondly, it forms a natural barrier between Georgia and the Russian Federation proper (i.e. the portion of Russia inhabited by ethnic Russians), which for most Georgian politicians is the power that poses the greatest threat to Georgia.

Georgia's relations with the peoples of the North Caucasus are highly complex, but geopolitical factors are clearly the Georgian administration's prime concern. Put simply, Georgia is always thinking about the North Caucasus both in terms of the potential consequences of a conflict with them and in terms of the advantages of an alliance with them.

If we accept that the Caucasian peoples form a single “super-ethnos”,<sup>38</sup> the idea of an alliance between the Georgians and the North Caucasus nations makes complete sense.<sup>39</sup> Over the last two decades, Georgian politicians have dithered between making common cause with the North Caucasus against Moscow or neutralising its “destructive” influence on Abkhaz and South Ossetian issues. Georgia's three successive presidents have attempted to address the problem, each in his own way and with varying degrees of success. Zviad Gamsakhurdia approached it directly by promoting the idea of a “Caucasian Home” even before he came to power. This was a straightforward plan to unify the Caucasus, preferably around Georgia, which was keen to gain the support of its neighbours and avoid becoming isolated as it fought to secede from the USSR. By taking every opportunity to recall the tragic details of the Caucasian War and its aftermath, Georgia hoped to persuade the peoples of the Caucasus, who with few exceptions had suffered huge privations during that war, to act as a buffer zone to offset Georgia's military and (due to its ethnic and national diversity) political vulnerability.

In the early 1990s, however, Georgia's only allies were Azerbaijan and Chechnya. Georgia discovered that any anti-Russian sentiment in the North Caucasus was more than outweighed by anti-Georgian feeling. As a result, when Georgia attempted to resolve the Ossetian issue by force in 1991, public figures in the North Caucasus turned from reminiscing about the activities of the Tsarist generals Yermolov and Baratinsky, and began to recall more recent periods of Stalinist deportations and Georgian annexations.<sup>40</sup>

By contrast, the reinstatement of the Mountain Republic (or the Republic of the Union of Mountain Peoples of the Caucasus), which had been proclaimed in the region in 1918–1919, enjoyed far greater popularity in the North Caucasus at the time. Although it had only had an ephemeral existence, it appeared far more attractive to the North Caucasians than the utopian Caucasus Home project. In the early 1990s, radical politicians in the Caucasus had not yet ruled

38 Comparable, for example, to the Slavic or Turkic peoples.

39 It is, however, marked by numerous disagreements, including territorial conflicts going back to the Middle Ages. A further complication occurred in the 19th century, when the Georgians supported the Russian government during the Caucasian War and in the 20th century, when a number of peoples of the North Caucasus were deported during Stalin's rule, with Karachay, Balkaria and southern Georgia, the territories from which the indigenous populations were deported, being incorporated by Stalin into the Georgian SSR.

40 Although the incorporation into the Georgian SSR of the territories of Karachay, Balkaria and southern Chechnya following the deportation of the local inhabitants did not affect all Caucasian peoples, it was very illustrative.

out the possibility that Russia might collapse from within. Few people in the North Caucasus were calling for military action against Moscow; the attention of those backing reinstatement of the Mountain Republic was directed elsewhere, at Turkey or the Islamic countries. Whichever of these they chose, they were all clear about two aspects. Firstly, the Mountain Republic had to be a federal entity (the Confederation of the Peoples of the Caucasus, which was an active political force from 1991 to 1994, had only been partly successful). Secondly, a Federation of the North Caucasus would need its own corridor to the outside world and the best, if not only, candidate for this was Abkhazia. If it were to fulfil this function, Abkhazia would have to be politically independent. However, at that time, Georgia was conducting an unremittingly unitarian policy. Therefore, while it might allow Abkhazia to retain its autonomous status, it would not permit Abkhazia to establish official relations at state level with the republics of the North Caucasus. Geopolitically, then, conflict between Georgia and the North Caucasus was inevitable. The only question was whether it would be transformed into a military conflict.

## Growing rift with the North Caucasus and Russia

After Gamsakhurdia was toppled and Eduard Shevardnadze came to power in 1992, there was an almost total rift between Georgia and the North Caucasus community. The Georgia-Chechnya alliance was revoked, to be replaced by implacable hostility amid Georgian outrage at the Chechens' determined efforts to restore Gamsakhurdia to power in Georgia right up to his demise. At the same time, the new outbreak of war in South Ossetia in May to June 1992 saw the Confederation of the Peoples of the Caucasus springing to the military defence of the Ossetians. When war subsequently broke out in Abkhazia, Caucasian stock fell even further in Georgia, with Circassian, Vainakh and Dagestani volunteers now portrayed by the Georgian side as aggressors and, in many cases, hirelings of Moscow or the Islamic world. The idea of a "Caucasian Home" clearly had to be abandoned. This trend continued even after the end of the Georgian-Abkhaz war and continued throughout Shevardnadze's rule.

Georgian politicians, of course, continued as before to look for friends in the North Caucasus, hoping at least to erode the military and political assistance provided by the Caucasians to Abkhazia. The Balkarians (during their brief conflict with the Kabardinians) and the Ingush (in their rather longer conflict with the Ossetians) became allies of the Georgians for tactical reasons. However, the Georgians were not the most important allies for these peoples, and these nations were too small to have any major impact on the situation around Abkhazia which in any case they were clearly very reluctant to do.

Up to 1994, the Georgians saw the North Caucasus as a victorious enemy. Every time tension rose in Abkhazia, the Confederation and other political organisations in the North Caucasus would issue dire warnings to Tbilisi. At the time, with its army defeated and decimated, Georgia could not be sure that it would be victorious in any new military campaign against Abkhazia. This situation improved slightly for the Georgians after the start of the Chechen War in December 1994, when the military action unleashed by the Russian army siphoned off many of the volunteers who had fought on the Abkhaz side in the previous war. The Confederation of Peoples of the Caucasus failed to call on the Caucasian peoples to fight alongside the insurgents, or even to act as an intermediary in the conflict. This led to it becoming a spent political force.

During the first Chechen campaign (1994–1996), Georgia, weakened by the Georgian-Abkhaz war, adopted a markedly pro-Russian stance. At the time, Tbilisi was very interested in an alliance with Moscow, and made no attempt to make common cause with the North Caucasus against Moscow. It continued to blame the peoples of the North Caucasus for Georgia's loss of Abkhazia, which coloured its entire attitude to them.

The first cracks appeared in 1995–1998, with President Shevardnadze's dismissal of pro-Russian members of the security forces (Igor Georgadze, Shota Kviraya and Vardiko Nadibaidze). Later on, during the second Chechen campaign, Shevardnadze did not, as before, provide assistance to Russia against the Ichkerian insurgents. Under the Istanbul Agreements of 1999, Tbilisi also secured the removal of Russian bases from Georgian territory. After the Chechen divisions were defeated, Georgia provided them to all intents and purposes with a base in the Pankisi Gorge. This was seized on as a pretext for a decisive cooling in Georgia-Russia relations, although the actual reasons lay elsewhere. Firstly, Georgia was already stronger, having overcome its political and (to some extent) its economic crisis, so that it no longer needed Russian support. Secondly, the Chechen war had for some time distracted Moscow's attention from Georgian affairs; it not only neutralised Chechnya as a force that might provide assistance to the Abkhaz, but also turned the Ichkerians into a real ally for Georgia. In the autumn of 2001, the Chechen field commander Ruslan Gelayev, who had fought against the Georgians in Abkhazia in 1992–1993, crossed into Abkhazia through the Georgian-controlled Kodori Gorge. For some time, this posed a serious threat to the republic and even the capital of Abkhazia. Georgia, which understood that the Chechen war was weakening Russia, was only too happy to offer the insurgents refuge on its territory. In 2002–2003, Moscow's behaviour towards Shevardnadze became openly hostile. Despite this, there was still no sign of a warming of relations between the North Caucasus and Georgia.

Victory in the Abkhaz war did not bring about the realisation of the Caucasus radicals' pre-war plans of the 1990s. The Russian Federation was clearly not about to collapse, and Moscow was in fact prepared to wage all-out war to retain the North Caucasus. It was also clear that any assistance the countries of the Islamic world could provide to the insurgents both economically and politically would be far less than previously thought. At the same time, the participation of Caucasian volunteers in the Georgian-Abkhaz war demonstrated clearly that the peoples of the North Caucasus were capable of conducting an independent policy, something that Moscow could not ignore. Abkhaz independence had now become a point of honour for the Caucasians and its existence was a symbol of Caucasian unity. Tbilisi could not expect any step change in sentiment throughout the North Caucasus, including Chechnya, which had been re-incorporated into the Russian Federation following the suppression of the insurgency.

## New political initiative underway in Georgia

Mikheil Saakashvili's accession in 2003 appeared to open up new prospects for Georgia in its search for allies on the other side of the Caucasus mountains. Saakashvili immediately began openly espousing the slogans of Zviad Gamsakhurdia. The lynchpins of Georgia's ideology were now active opposition to Moscow, alliance with NATO and support for all anti-Russian forces in the Caucasus. Saakashvili's initial successes – subduing Adjara in 2004, painlessly occupying the Kodori Gorge in Abkhazia in 2006 – revived hopes of a new resurgence in Georgia. The Georgian administration's main concern continued to be regaining control of Abkhazia and South Ossetia. Since by this time both countries had declared full independence, this could only be achieved by force. Tbilisi was of course fully aware that the North Caucasus would respond negatively to any military action by Georgia against Abkhazia. However, the Georgians were hoping to carry out a rapid operation and to present all their neighbours, including Russia and the North Caucasus, with a *fait accompli*.

Prior to August 2008, Georgia had no need for complex political alliances: since they were counting on a *blitzkrieg*, the Georgians undertook no political attempts to neutralise potential allies of Abkhazia or South Ossetia. Georgian politicians did recall the Circassian genocide, but only briefly, with no attempt to politicise the issue. It was not at all clear until the very last minute what the scope and extent of Russian intervention in the conflict might be and whether it would limit itself to providing indirect assistance, which would be too little to save Abkhazia and South Ossetia. The events of August 2008 provided the answer to many questions. They showed, firstly, that

the Caucasus remained extremely important for Moscow, and the Russian administration was not only unwilling to cede it, but would even consider full-scale military action to reinforce its position. Secondly, the events showed that Caucasian solidarity remained firm (as was shown by the concerted action taken by the Abkhaz and the Ossetians, and by the revival of the North Caucasus volunteer movement). Moscow exploited the sentiment among the residents of the North Caucasus, one particular example being its recruitment of a Chechen battalion for the war in South Ossetia. Russia thus engineered a repeat of the situation in 1992, with a Chechen division once again participating in a war against Georgia (it is important to remember that many of Ramzan Kadyrov's fighters had started out as supporters of Dzhokhar Dudayev). It also showed it was too early for the Georgians to count on active assistance being provided by the West. The Georgian administration realised that it needed a new strategy, primarily a political one. It was these circumstances that became the launchpad for a new Georgian initiative.

However, these were not the only reasons why the Georgian Parliament passed its Decree recognising the genocide of the Circassian people on 20th May 2011. Foreign policy activity traditionally increases on the eve of scheduled elections in Georgia, and the political situation in Tbilisi is such that a change of government appears likely at the end of the 10-year cycle. Mikheil Saakashvili's political skills have enabled him to deal with a succession of crises; the Georgian president has consistently dismissed threats to his authority – from Zurab Zhvania, then Nino Burdjanadze and later from Badri Patarkatsishvili. Today, however, a promising new candidate has emerged in the person of Bidzina Ivanishvili. Saakashvili is trying to raise his approval rating by launching new political initiatives. Throughout all three Georgian presidents' rule – Gamsakhurdia, Shevardnadze and Saakashvili – the Georgian administration has traditionally directed public attention to external problems to weaken support for the opposition. On this occasion, the Circassian issue is being used for this purpose.

## Changing nature of the Caucasus situation

The last few years have seen a change in the situation in the Caucasus. In the first place, Russia's recognition of the independence of Abkhazia and South Ossetia, its deployment of a major contingent of Russian troops on their territory, and a series of official agreements concluded between Moscow, Sukhum and Tskhinval have significantly reduced Georgia's prospects of resolving the conflict by military means. This may, at first sight, suggest that any attempts by Georgia to loosen Russia's grip on the republics of the North-Western Caucasus are unlikely to be very successful.

On the other hand, Tbilisi cannot fail to have noted some evolution in sentiment in the North Caucasus. This is evidenced by the escalation in tension in the second half of the 2000s, not only in Dagestan and Ingushetia, but also in hitherto peaceful republics such as Karachaevo-Cherkessia and Kabardino-Balkaria. Terrorism has become apparent in these republics, with a number of armed groups emerging or becoming active in ways that undoubtedly lead to destabilisation. This is not to say that the Adyghe peoples never caused Moscow any problems earlier; however, those problems were of an entirely different order. One example was the most active expression of protest to date in Kabardino-Balkaria against Russian authority – mass demonstrations by the Kabardinians in late October and early November 1992. These were prompted by Moscow's attempts to restrict the movement of volunteers from the Confederation of the Peoples of the Caucasus, who were coming to the assistance of Abkhazia against the Georgian army. These popular protests forced the Russian administration to give up its plans. However, it must be emphasised that the Kabardinians' protests were not specifically anti-Russian and even more importantly were not intended to destabilise the situation. Once Moscow found an acceptable means of settling the conflict by freeing the leader of the Confederation, who had been arrested, and stopping the persecution of the volunteers, the conflict died down almost immediately.

Things were quite different in the North Caucasus in 1992. During the Georgian-Abkhaz war, politicians and the public in most republics were gripped by an almost romantic fervour, which was the inspiration for the numerous volunteers who went to fight for Abkhazia. In those years, even the most acute problems seemed at least surmountable, if not entirely capable of resolution. Although the North Caucasus was also affected by the severe consequences of the collapse of the Soviet Union (with the economic downturn, a rise in criminality and social deprivation affecting the majority of the population), the general feeling on the ground was that things were improving. Compared with the general picture of destabilisation in the neighbouring regions – and particularly in Georgia itself, as it teetered for many years on the brink of total financial and economic ruin – the situation in the North Caucasus seemed far from the worst, and the quality of life appeared to be entirely acceptable. It was only as time went on that the North Caucasians (particularly the younger generation) began to feel dissatisfied. No particular prospect of economic development emerged in the region, and domestic problems began to increase, in particular terrorism, which affected literally the entire population of the Caucasus republics.

Opinions are divided over the forces that lay behind the armed confrontations, which became an everyday reality in the second half of the 2000s in Kabardino-Balkaria and Karachaevo-Cherkessia, not to mention the formerly peaceful North Ossetia or Dagestan. Some see these events as the result of the spread of Islamist ideology and the penetration of emissaries of radical groups from the Middle East. Others point to the links between the Islamic underground and the criminal world, explaining the Russian security forces' inability to impose order in terms of failures of intelligence, a lack of understanding of the Caucasus mentality and the direct interests of some Russian officials in prolonging instability. Experts from a number of countries have been studying these processes without as yet coming to a consensus view, although one conclusion is clear: the existence of active armed groups and the powerlessness of the local society (not to mention the Federal centre) indicates that society is in crisis, both socio-economically and spiritually. The situation is steadily deteriorating and the cause is most likely to be found not so much in a regional crisis, but in a general lack of political sustainability across the whole of the Russian Federation.<sup>41</sup>

One way or another, the political activity of the Circassian political organisations is beginning a transition to a new phase. Back in the 1990s, it fit entirely within Moscow's rather inchoate (and thus relatively lax) unwritten world view, which allowed the Caucasians space to pursue their distinctive national way of life and also to support Abkhazia, irrespective of the official position of the global community and even the Kremlin itself. Today, any movement towards radicalisation by the new generation of Caucasian politicians is a source of irritation for Moscow. In these new tendencies, Moscow sees clear threats to its control over the Caucasus region, particularly since it has no ready-made solution to the mounting problems.

The level of political tension in the North Caucasus is thus already quite high, even without Georgia's initiatives, and Tbilisi's role in raising the Circassian question may be considered entirely modest. Indeed, the casual observer might well wonder why the politicians in Tbilisi focused on the Circassian people's tragedy but passed over the fate of the other peoples of the North Caucasus in the 19th century. When two dozen Circassian organisations from a number of countries petitioned the European Parliament in October 2006 to recognise the 19th century Circassian genocide, this was ignored and Tbilisi also appeared to take little interest in it. Ultimately, the genocide's geopolitical significance was raised after the summer of 2007, when it was announced that Sochi would be the capital for the 2014 Winter Olympics. This immediately raised hopes both in Georgia itself and in the secessionist republics: the Georgians thought it would give them leverage over Moscow on the Abkhaz question; their adversaries, on the other hand, hoped that Russia would now be interested in stabilising the situation on their Southern borders and recognise Abkhazia, which borders directly on the Sochi district, as well as South Ossetia.

41 See online article (in Russian) by Sergey Markedonov: 'The North Caucasus: between an unstable past and an uncertain future', available at <http://www.kavkasion.ru/sergej-markedonov-severnyj-kavkaz-mezhdu-nestabilnym-proshlym-i-neyasnym-budushhim>.

Another important detail is that the August 2008 war made it clear that however the peoples of the North Caucasus might respond to a repeated attempt by Georgia to gain Abkhazia by force, they would no longer be able to play a defining role in a war. Their position would still be important in terms of military strategy and politics, but they would no longer be as significant as they had been in the early 1990s. This is well understood both in the North Caucasus and in Georgia. For the Georgians, it means that Tbilisi no longer needs to maintain its bitter fight with the North Caucasus and it can dispense with the bitter propaganda war against the pro-Abkhaz political movements on the other side of the Caucasus mountains. It has also engendered hopes that Georgia might be able to persuade the Caucasians gently and unobtrusively that the Abkhaz issue, although it does affect the interests of the Circassian peoples, is not worth shedding blood over. The continuing existence of Abkhazia and South Ossetia no longer depends directly on the North Caucasian community, since Russia has vouched for these republics. In fact, the tandem of Vladimir Putin and Dmitry Medvedev have staked their political reputation on it. Georgia, of course, is hoping that this regime is not permanent and Russia's new leaders, whoever they might be, whether liberals or ultra-nationalists, will no longer be personally committed to the recognition of Abkhazia and South Ossetia. The independence of these countries may yet in fact become an irritant to any new regime, which would allow Georgia to restart bargaining over the issue. While the Adygheyan peoples may not feel entirely excluded from the process, they are certainly aware that their role in the conflict has been reduced to a rhetorical one since 2008. Of course, the Caucasus leaders will from time to time come out with statements of support for Abkhazia, but this is now more likely to be in the wake of Moscow's policy.

Tbilisi has claimed for many years, despite the clear evidence to the contrary, that it was mighty Russia, rather than volunteers (Caucasians and Cossacks), who fought in Abkhazia against the Georgian army alongside the Abkhaz. Now that this legend has unexpectedly been converted into reality – and Russia with all its military might is indeed carrying out the task of defending Abkhazia on the ground and by sea – the Circassians, Kabardinians and other ethnic groups related to the Abkhaz, although they may not feel sidelined, certainly do not feel they are the principal actors in the conflict. This disenchantment is fuelling visible resentment in the North Caucasus: whereas earlier the political self-expression of the Adygheyan, Circassian, Shapsug and Kabardinians took the form of full participation in Abkhaz affairs, this opportunity is now denied them.

One high-profile example of the new mood was provided in an interview with Ibragim Yaganov, the Chair of the public movement "Khase" of Kabardino-Balkaria.<sup>42</sup> Yaganov was one of the most popular commanders of volunteer brigades in Abkhazia during the 1992–1993 military campaign. The interview appeared in December 2011 and caused quite a stir, including some stinging criticism, particularly in Abkhazia. However, Yaganov's views are important given that he is both a field commander and a capable politician. Yaganov remarked: 'We, those who fought there, are analysing what has happened and coming to certain conclusions. And we have radically altered our view on this issue. But there is one barrier I cannot overcome. The only thing that currently constrains me is the memory of our fallen comrades.' He added: 'I am totally committed to settling relations with Georgia. Unfortunately, we are part of the Russian Federation and must deal with the circumstances in which they have placed us.' In other words, Russia is now seen as the major destructive factor rather than Georgia.

There has been a steady decline in the prosperity and stability of the Adygheyan republics and they now lag behind many of the other outlying areas of the Russian Federation. This is also a factor in the recent increase in interest in the Circassian issue in the North Caucasus itself. Moreover, Georgia will of course take any opportunity to weaken the positions of its powerful neighbour to the North-West.

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<sup>42</sup> Interview given by Ibragim Yaganov to Avraam Shmulevich, Chair of the International Hyperzionist Movement "Bead Artsein", 27th December 2011.

From an objective point of view, the August 2008 war could only strengthen Russia's position in the North Caucasus. There would certainly have been protests from the Adygheyan peoples if Moscow had simply left Abkhazia to its fate. However, discussions on the Caucasian War of the 19th century were already gaining currency in the Adygheyan republics. And once Tbilisi resigned itself to the failure of its *blitzkrieg*, it transitioned smoothly into a new strategic initiative – the search for political allies in the North-West Caucasus.

It is of course highly unlikely that Georgian politicians will be able to provoke any significant rise in political tensions in the North Caucasus: they will only be able to exploit opportunities as they arise. This is clearly demonstrated by the timing of their actions (Georgia only seriously engaged with the Circassian issue a year after the August war) and the tentative nature of the steps the official and semi-official structures in Tbilisi are taking. This hesitancy is not only a function of the threat from Moscow. The Western world is gradually adopting a more restrained stance in relation to Georgia, with not everyone seeing the country as the most promising and progressive ally, even in Washington. In the near future, the Western partners may well begin criticising Georgia, above all over the regime's poor record on democracy. The West is increasingly viewing Georgia's actions over the North Caucasus as provocative.<sup>43</sup> Given this, Tbilisi feels better off keeping its powder dry and not entering into any political commitments, except perhaps at the level of rhetoric. Russia currently has no official reason to reproach the Georgians, who are not after all engaged in direct subversion in the North Caucasus. We do not yet know who will be in power in Georgia in five to 10 years. The long-frozen Circassian question might yet be dropped as quickly as it was raised.

## Significance of the “Circassian question”

Even so, Tbilisi is promulgating its new “Circassian” policy slowly and steadily, step by step. In December 2009, a Group of Friendship with the Parliaments of the North Caucasus was created in the Georgian Parliament; on 4th January 2010, the “First Information Caucasus” TV channel (PIK) was launched; on 13th October 2010, a visa-free regime was introduced for residents of the republics of the North Caucasus entering Georgia; in February 2011, a resolution was passed creating a special committee on Caucasus issues under the State Minister of Georgia on Diaspora Issues; on 20th May 2011, the Georgian Parliament passed the Resolution referred to above, recognising the genocide of the Circassian people during the Russia-Caucasian War. Georgia was, notably, the first country in the world to recognise the genocide of the Circassian people.

These actions may have a number of different political consequences for Georgia. The positive consequences from the Georgian administration's point of view are that they create problems for Moscow on the eve of the 2014 Olympics, which is still a highly prestigious event for Russia. Calls are even being heard from some circles for a boycott of the Olympics, a precedent being found in the position of the global community in 1980 following the deployment of Soviet troops in Afghanistan. Prospects are also emerging of defiant amity developing between the Georgian government and certain national organisations in the Caucasus. And most important of all, the Georgian initiative is not simply aimed at weakening links between the North Caucasus community and the Abkhaz: it is an attempt to deprive Abkhazia of its main source of support in the North Caucasus. The Adygheyan, Circassians, Kabardinians, Abaza, Shapsugs are the ethnic groups most closely related to the Abkhaz. They could prompt Russia to take decisive action if Moscow belatedly responds to one or other hostile actions by Georgia in relation to Abkhazia.

<sup>43</sup> See, for example, Lincoln Mitchell, Alexander Cooley and Thomas de Waal. 'A New Start for US-Georgia Relations?', Moscow Carnegie Center, 23rd June 2010. Available at <http://carnegieendowment.org/2010/06/23/new-start-for-u.s.-georgia-relations/29s>. The experts suggest that relations with Georgia should be reviewed and a more critical approach be adopted. In particular, the US should find a “golden mean” between recognition (which is unacceptable for the West) and cooperation in relations with Abkhazia, i.e. ‘helping the region in status-neutral ways’. A balanced policy on Abkhazia might be new, not so much for the European countries as for the US, which has always taken a tough stance on Abkhazia.

The contacts between the Georgians and Circassians may be a cause of alarm for the Abkhaz, who have always trusted their North Caucasus cousins implicitly and recall the early 1990s when they rejected Georgia's projects and supported Abkhazia's struggle for national sovereignty. On the other hand, Georgia's initiative contains a pitfall for Abkhaz diplomacy: if Georgia recognises the events of the Caucasian War as genocide and the Abkhaz do not follow suit, the Circassians will have a grievance against Abkhazia. But if the Abkhaz issue a similar statement, this would complicate relations between Moscow and Sukhum. Arguing over the genocide will not isolate the Abkhaz from their cousins across the Caucasus mountains, but it is certainly capable of causing a degree of friction. Opportunities are opening up for Georgia to play on disagreements between its neighbours.

At the same time, the document recognising the Circassian genocide could backfire on Georgia. This is particularly true in relation to Armenia, which has been attempting for a long time and with some degree of success to secure the global community's recognition of the Armenian genocide of 1915 (the latest example being the French parliament's decision to make denial of the genocide a criminal offence). Regarding these subtleties, the Georgian political scientist Mamuka Areshidze has given a direct warning: 'politicising these events is fraught with negative consequences for Georgia. If the Circassian genocide is recognised, this will provide a justification for Armenia to demand that Georgia immediately recognises the 1915 genocide, which would ruin Georgia's relations with Turkey and Azerbaijan.'<sup>44</sup>

We should comment here (and this is something that the more open-minded Georgian political scientists are also saying) that it does seem rather odd to recognise the genocide of the Circassian people without making any statement about the fate of the Chechen people in the same period. This narrow geographical focus for the recognition of genocide is clearly dictated by political concerns. The Vainakh peoples suffered no less than the Circassians from the Caucasian War. The Georgian Parliament did, incidentally, recently announce its intention to consider recognising the genocide of the Ingush people. But what would the consequences be if Georgia were to recognise the Chechen genocide? It would certainly impose some political obligations on Tbilisi. In particular, if there were an anti-Russian uprising in Chechnya, the Georgians would logically be obliged to support the insurgents, at least in the political arena. Georgia would certainly not want to assume obligations of this kind. Such a statement could lead to a new military conflict with Russia, and Georgia is for the moment at least too vulnerable and has no direct protection. It would also mean providing political support for the Chechen resistance, which has gone underground. This would in turn lead to conflict with the current administration in Chechnya headed by Ramzan Kadyrov.

Of course, everyone in the North Caucasus understands Tbilisi's purpose in promoting the "Circassian question". Tbilisi's current plan to revive relations with the Circassians is clearly political in nature. A number of North Caucasus politicians are recalling that several Georgian formations fought on the Russian side in the Caucasian War and indeed were present at the victory parade in Krasnaya Polyana in May 1864. However, the new Georgian initiative plays on sentiments emerging in the North Caucasus. It is a bold strategic plan, which could yield Tbilisi certain dividends. Taking the wider view, it is clear to everyone that Tbilisi will not be able to provoke a new Caucasian War. Moscow would almost certainly not even permit serious conflict on the scale of the Chechen wars of the 1990s and 2000s. This is clearly understood by the Adyghe themselves. The national movement of the Adygheyan peoples has also always acted within the law and in accordance with international standards. Extremist methods of the sort that could disrupt the Olympic Games in Sochi are simply not in their nature. It is almost inconceivable that the Circassians would take such actions: they value their reputation in the eyes of the global community too highly.

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<sup>44</sup> 'Cherkessky otvet' [The Circassian response]. Taken from an interview given by Mamuka Areshidze to *Moskovskye Novosti*, 17th May 2011.

However, a change in attitude in the national republics of the North Caucasus, which have so far been totally loyal to Russia, would in itself not be a bad result for Georgia. It might help the Georgian administration, if not in a military conflict, then at least in one of the countless rounds of the diplomatic game. And even if they prove unable to weaken Russia's position in the North Caucasus, the Georgians will still be satisfied if enmity with the Adygheyan peoples is replaced by mutual sympathy. This would provide an opportunity to restore (even if only in part) its lost influence to the North of the Caucasus mountains, an outcome which would certainly not be negligible for modern Georgia.

## PART 2

# The Georgian perspective

## Historical aspects of the North Caucasus factor in relation to modern Georgia (up to 2008)

GEORGE ANCHABADZE

### Nature of Georgian-North Caucasus relations prior to 19th century

There have been relations between the people living in what is now Georgia and the tribes of the North Caucasus since the remote past. Even in antiquity, the residents of the northern and southern slopes of the Caucasus mountain chain were seen, despite their ethnic and linguistic diversity, as belonging to the same historical and cultural “community”, to use a modern term. Strabo, the famous Ancient Greek geographer, wrote in the first century BC of the inhabitants of the Caucasus uplands: ‘They all speak different languages, since they live apart and secluded as a result of their pride and savagery. But they are all ... Caucasians.’

This view also underpinned the so-called genealogical schema of Leonti Mroveli (Leontius of Ruisi), the 11th century Georgian bishop, writer and historian. In his view, the Armenians, Georgians and tribes who populated the territories of modern Azerbaijan and the North Caucasus shared the same origin and a common ancestor, traditionally related to Togormah, one of the biblical patriarchs (in Georgian, Targamos).

Georgian high culture (including Georgian literature and the Georgian liturgy) spread throughout the North Caucasus, particularly in the 11th to 12th and early 13th centuries at the height of the Georgian kingdom, which the scholar Nikoloz Berdzenishvili refers to as ‘the centre of Caucasian feudal relations’. Cultural interaction went both ways. In the words of another famous Georgian historian, Simon Dzhnashvili: ‘the energies of the other peoples of the Caucasus, including Abkhaz and Circassians, made a significant contribution to the cultural mix in pre-feudal and feudal Georgia.’

In political terms, despite occasional military clashes, the North Caucasus was a relatively safe hinterland for Georgia, which it used to recruit auxiliary troops to fight alongside the Georgian people against foreign invaders. This is well attested over a historical period of more than 2,000 years, since the last centuries BC, in chronicles in Georgian and other languages.

The conversion of the peoples of the North Caucasus to Islam (particularly from the 15th century onwards) created a barrier between them and Christian Georgia that we know today. However, this did not mark a fundamental change. According to historical sources, the Caucasian mountain peoples continued to take part in the military campaigns of the Georgian emperors. It is clear that they did this not simply as hired mercenaries but under the terms of an alliance – as is shown, for example, by a description of a meeting of Kabardinian troops in Tbilisi who came at the bidding of the Emperor Irakli in 1751.

It is not until the 18th century that we see signs of strain, and then only with Dagestan, whose rulers carried out looting raids in the countries of Transcaucasia. These raids, which have entered Georgian historiography as *lekianoba* or “the invasion of the Leks” (“Leks” being the Georgians’ collective term for the Dagestan mountain people), ravaged the country, causing a huge demographic decline. However, Georgian-Dagestani relations, despite these regular military confrontations, never descended into all-out warfare and political, cultural and economic ties were maintained.

At the end of the 18th century, therefore, the “Caucasus factor” had a dual significance for Georgia, with the mountain peoples (who themselves did not form a single political unit) being both enemies and allies. Both these aspects are revealed in a funeral oration for Irakli II given by the statesman and diplomat Solomon Lionidze in 1798. Here the orator, speaking of the

deceased's military glories, notes: 'The Lion of Judah from the house of David<sup>1</sup> ... fought against three empires: the Ottoman, the Persian and the Caucasian peoples.' The latter is a reference to the Caucasian mountain people and primarily the Dagestanis, with whom Irakli had crossed swords on more than one occasion. However, Lionidze goes on to speak of camaraderie in battle: 'As soon as Emperor Irakli's joyous banner is unfurled, the Dagestanis hasten to join his army, Ossetians and Circassians are happy to shed their blood for Emperor Irakli.'

## Under the patronage of the two-headed eagle

By the 1830s, the lands of the Southern Caucasus had been incorporated into the Russian Empire. Conquering the North Caucasus proved more difficult, since additional pockets of mountain peoples' resistance appeared both in the east of the region (Chechnya and the mountainous area of Dagestan) and in the west (where the Adyghe tribes and the Ubykhs formed a bastion of independence). It cost the Empire a great deal of effort, in terms of finance and lives, to subdue them, and the "Russian Mountain War" or "Caucasian War" lasted for just under a century until 1864.

This protracted armed conflict had a lasting impact on the development of Georgian-North Caucasus relations. Following its annexation of Georgia, the Russian government used the country to impose a blockade on those bordering districts where these recalcitrant mountain people lived, as part of a war of attrition intended to starve them into submission. The Tsarist Empire also used a mixture of force and incentives to strengthen its hold over Georgia, by co-opting the local elite – both the aristocracy and royal family. This military caste – faced with the loss of its position and function in the now abolished Georgian state apparatus – rallied to the Russian banner and later became actively involved in military actions in the Caucasus.

The involvement of the Georgian military in the mountain campaigns, and particularly in Dagestan, was made easier by the idea that they were wreaking revenge on the "Leks" for their earlier raids on Georgia. This is mentioned by the 19th century Dagestani poet and thinker Magomed-beg in his poem 'The Capture of Shamil':

*'The Georgian regiments marched to drum and horn;  
They called on them to recall their former enmity:  
You must crush all the Dagestanis, they said,  
To avenge your forefathers, they said.'*

Translation based on Derzhavin's Russian version

Evidence of this attitude among the Georgian gentry can be found in Georgian letters and literature in the first half of the 19th century. A typical example is a poem by the Romantic poet Nikoloz Baratashvili – 'The campaign of the Georgian princes, nobles and peasants against the Dagestanis and Chechens in 1844 under the leadership of the provincial Marshal Prince Dmitrii Tamazovich Orbeliani'. The poem begins with the words: 'Quake, Caucasus! Your end is nigh,/The sons of Kartli are coming/To avenge innocent blood ...' and more in this vein.

Russian-Georgian solidarity, which reached its peak during Prince Vorontsov's vice-regency in the Caucasus (1844–1854), started to decline in the second half of the 19th century. On the Georgian side, this was caused by a rising tide of resentment at Tsarist authority, increased ethnic self-awareness, and the emergence of a civic society that absorbed the national and social ideas of the age. Members of the social-political and literary movement headed by Ilia Chavchavadze, which came to prominence in the early 1860s, played an important role in the development of Georgian public thought. A phrase put in the mouth of a simple peasant by Chavchavadze in his

1 This refers to Irakli II; the Georgian emperors from the Bagration dynasty traced their genealogy back to the Biblical Emperor David.

book 'A Traveller's Notes' (1871) – 'we should belong to ourselves' – became a rallying call for the restoration of the country's political sovereignty.

This also came at a time when the Russian government, once the outcome of the Russian-Mountain War became clear, was beginning to lose interest in using Georgia as a "base" beyond the Caucasus mountain range. By now, it was initiating a systematic Russification policy, which meant the growth of nationalist and revolutionary ideas in Georgia was met with harsh countermeasures.

In this context, the Georgian public started to revise their view of the events that occurred in the recent Caucasian war, which impacted on their perception of the North Caucasus region as a whole. The literature of the late 19th century began to contain inspiring examples of courageous and noble mountain peoples, Chechens, Ingush and Circassians, whose heroic struggle against an invader's superior forces were presented as an example to follow. The mountain people were already conceived as Georgia's natural allies in any movement for national liberation.

## On the verge of a new era

After the February Revolution in 1917, ideas of autonomy and self-determination spread rapidly through ethnic populations on the periphery of the Russian Empire. In the North Caucasus, a multi-ethnic political centre – the Alliance of United Mountain Peoples – had already emerged on 5th March 1917. Its aim was to unite the mountain peoples 'from the Black Sea to the Caspian in a union to strengthen freedom and establish life on democratic principles'.<sup>2</sup> In November 1917, this organisation formed a Mountain Peoples' government, which directed its efforts towards creating a North Caucasian, or Mountain, Republic.

The processes in the North Caucasus were closely monitored in Georgia. When a telegram was read out at a session of the Georgian National Council – in which the mountain government declared full sovereignty on 2nd December 1917, pending the convening of a pan-Russian Constituent Assembly – the message was greeted by loud applause.

Tributes to the mountain peoples' traditions of liberation struggles flooded in from Tbilisi, perhaps all the more so since – even at this historic moment – their movement for political self-determination was still confined within the former Russian Empire. Commenting on these events at the time, the famous politician, poet, publicist and member of the Georgian National Council, Shalva Amiredzhibi (1886–1943), stated: 'The Northern side of the Caucasus mountain range has already begun to shine under the rays of freedom. The fact that it was the mountain people who were the first of all the peoples of the Caucasus to declare autonomy recalls their impetuous and vital nature. We, inhabitants of the lowlands, are accustomed to walking along long, flat roads and this has also affected our character. But in the mountains, people walk along mountain paths, and footpaths are the quickest route to a destination.'<sup>3</sup>

The events of the following days confirmed how fitting these words were. On 21st December 1917, the rulers of the Alliance of United Mountain Peoples had already declared complete secession from Russia and refused to attend the Constituent Assembly.<sup>4</sup> The North Caucasus, along with Finland, thus became the first region of the Russian Empire to declare full independence from the metropolis (with the important difference that Finland had already been an autonomous state within the Russian Empire, had precise borders and large numbers of well-armed Cossack troops were not within easy reach).

2 Nal'chik (2004). *Istoriya Dona i Severnogo Kavkaza (1917–2000)* [The History of the Don and the North Caucasus (1917–2000)], p. 9.

3 S. Amiredzhibi. *Dagestan-Chechnya// 'Sakartvelo'*, 12th December 1917 (in Georgian).

4 V-G. Dzhabagiyev (1991). *Revolutsiya i grazhdanskaya vojna na Severnom Kavkaze* [The revolution and civil war in the North Caucasus].

In April 1918, Transcaucasia also seceded from Russia to form a federative state. However, this state quickly fell apart (in May 1918) into autonomous republics – Georgia, Azerbaijan and Armenia.

Faced with the threat of retaliation from Russia, representatives of the North Caucasus gave active consideration to a close alliance with the peoples of Transcaucasia and in particular the Georgians, to whom they were linked by long tradition and cultural affinities. Amiredzhibi recalls the enthusiasm with which the Georgian emissaries to the first mountain congress in Vladikavkaz (May 1917) were welcomed: ‘In honour of our delegates, the mullah recited a prayer to which the entire congress listened standing. The mountain people then assured us that it expressed the warmest feelings for the Georgian people.’<sup>5</sup>

The idea of a union with their southern neighbours is a keynote that runs throughout the documents and actions of the rulers of the Mountain Republic. In 1918, for example, the official mission of the mountain government published a manifesto in Trebizond with the following wording: ‘The North Caucasians are convinced that Transcaucasia is incapable of existing as an independent state without links with the peoples of the North Caucasus and Dagestan. For geographical, economic, strategic and political reasons, it is essential to create a united Caucasus.’<sup>6</sup>

This was a proposal that Transcaucasia was unable to meet – although even here, during the brief period of existence of the local independent republics, the idea of a pan-Caucasian confederation was not extinguished. However, continuing disagreements between the republics, as well as the complex external political situation, prevented them from taking any action that might put the idea into practice.

## In a totalitarian state

The Soviet victory in the Caucasus (1920–1921) ushered in an unprecedentedly repressive regime in the territory that was ruthless to indigenous and Russian residents alike. In the spring of 1921, a meeting of émigrés from Georgia, Azerbaijan, Armenia and the North Caucasus was held in Paris which concluded an agreement on an anti-Bolshevik alliance. Georgian resistance to the Soviet occupation, expressed in partisan uprisings up to 1924, included a strong element of cooperation with the North Caucasus peoples. From 1922 to 1924, the North Caucasus was visited on more than one occasion by representatives of the Georgian underground who were in contact with local anti-Communist cells. There were also plans for the simultaneous deployment of large forces across the whole of the Caucasus, but for a number of reasons this came to nothing. However, the Kistin Chechens living in the Pankisi Gorge on Georgian territory took part in the Georgian resistance. One division under Colonel Kakutsa Cholokashvili – the Georgian insurgency’s main strike force – remained in hiding in the Pankisi forests for some time.

After the anti-Bolshevik uprising in Georgia was suppressed in August 1924, the remnants of the insurgent groups were forced out of the country. In the North Caucasus, particularly in the mountain strip of Chechnya, the partisan movement kept up a wide range of activities for a long time. This forced the Soviet administration to carry out periodic troop operations in Chechen-Ingush territory, involving major infantry and artillery forces along with airborne attacks on populated areas not under their control.

During the Second World War, the Soviet government resolutely attempted to cut the North Caucasus “Gordian knot” once and for all. Charged with brigandage and collaborating with German troops, entire peoples were deported to Central Asia in late 1943 and early 1944: Karachaeans, Chechens, Ingush and Balkarians. Almost all of the upper central slopes of the

5 S. Amiredzhibi. *Op. cit.*

6 G. Bammat. *The Caucasus after the fall of the old regime in Russia*, Russian translation from the French (by Giorgi Mamulia). Available at <http://www.chechen.org/prometheus9.html>.

North Caucasus were “purged” of their indigenous population. The only Chechens and Ingush left in their native land were insurgents hiding out in the forests and those who had managed to join them. These people also carried out an unequal fight with the enemy, attacking from their mountain hide-outs members of the administration, the military and settlers colonising the abandoned Chechen-Ingush lands.

The Soviet authorities moved in several divisions of the People’s Commissariat for Internal Affairs (NKVD) to wipe out the resistance. Attempts to recruit the neighbouring peoples for counter-insurgency actions (Georgians, Ossetians and Dagestanis) met with little success in the Caucasus republics, except with previous members of the security forces.<sup>7</sup> The sympathies of the ordinary people lay more with the persecuted, with some Georgian shepherds even hiding Chechen fugitives.

The attitude of the Georgian mountain people to what was happening to their Chechen and Ingush neighbours is revealed clearly in their folk poems. Gabriel Dzhabushanuri (1914–1968), whose family together with many other Khevsurian families were settled in the now deserted Ingushetia in 1944, wrote a cycle of poems dedicated to the destroyed Kistin<sup>8</sup> *auls* [fortified village] and the fate of their inhabitants, driven from their native land. The poet was deeply moved by the sight of abandoned houses once full of life:

*‘You are sad, lonely aul  
Abandoned and unpeopled,  
I too am alone,  
I want to join you  
In shedding tears.’<sup>9</sup>*

The scholar Meka Khangoshvili recently published poems by the peasant Khvtiso Aludauri, who witnessed a battle between an operational unit of Soviet troops and Chechen insurgents led by Ibi Alkhashtovy:

*‘I saw the Russians engaging with the Kistins, the cliffs echoed loudly,  
From Maista the machine-gun clatter reached me,  
Ibi did not dishonour the cradle his mother rocked...  
You fought for a just cause, Ibi, with many a heroic deed,  
You fought for justice but you too were not spared by the enemy...’<sup>10</sup>*

In recent years, as Russian-Georgian relations have deteriorated, Russian (including North Caucasian) political and newspaper articles have contained allegations that the real reason for the deportation of the mountain peoples was that this was an attempt by Stalin to extend Georgian territory. While it is true that some of the ethnic lands of the Karachaevans, Balkarians, Ingush and Chechens that bordered the Georgian Soviet Socialist Republic (SSR) were incorporated into it following the deportations, other lands were similarly transferred to neighbouring autonomous and administrative units in the Russian Soviet Federative Socialist Republic (RSFSR), Northern Ossetia and Dagestan, and the Stavropol and Krasnodar Territories, within the Kabardinian Autonomous Soviet Socialist Republic (ASSR).

Therefore, the redrawing of the borders is not conclusive proof that the deportation of the mountain peoples was implemented to promote Georgian interests, and no other arguments are advanced by the authors of this theory. In fact, the real motives for deportations are easy to

7 For example, in 1955 the famous Ingush *abrek* [member of Caucasian mountain bands who fought the Russians in the 19th century], Akhmed Khuchbarov, who fought against Soviet power from 1929.

8 The Georgian mountain people use the term “Kistin” to refer to the mountain Chechens and Ingush.

9 A. Arabuli (Ed.) (2010). *Gabriel Dzhabushanuri – Poems, ballads, diaries, records, private letters*, Tbilisi, p. 42 (in Georgian).

10 M. Khangoshvili (2011). ‘The Kistin in Georgian oral literature’, in *Archaeology, Ethnology, Folklore of the Caucasus*, Collection of abridged reports, Tbilisi, p. 665.

discern in the context of the Stalin administration's general policy of "global" resettlement of peoples in the 1940s. Its victims included not only the North Caucasians, but Soviet Germans, Finns and Koreans, Crimean Tartars, Kalmyks and "Meskhetians" as well as a number of other peoples and ethnic groupings.

Because of this, after the deported peoples of the North Caucasus were politically rehabilitated and given the opportunity to return home (1957), they remained on good terms with Georgia and the Georgians.

Generally, throughout most of the 20th century, the indigenous peoples of the North Caucasus were drawn to and sympathised with Georgia, clearly on the basis of cultural and historical affinity. Some even proposed an administrative union with Georgia. For example, in June 1920, the ruler of Western Dagestan, Colonel Kaitmas Alikhanov – in response to the threat posed by the attacking Red Army but also based on ties "of spirit and blood" – appealed to the Georgian Foreign Minister on behalf of influential Avarians to incorporate Avaria into the Georgian republic on an autonomous basis.<sup>11</sup>

The Georgian government, which was committed to the integrity of the RSFSR under the Moscow Agreement of 7th May 1920, which also recognised Dagestan as a part of Russia, refrained from responding to the Avarians. Nevertheless, this did not stop the Bolsheviks from carrying out a military incursion into Georgia to establish their own authority there (February 1921).

A few years later, with Soviets firmly in power, there were serious discussions in Moscow and in the North Caucasus on incorporating North Ossetia into Georgia, together with South Ossetia, to form an autonomous republic within the Georgian SSR. It is important to note that the Ossetian delegation which led the talks with Stalin agreed to this plan.<sup>12</sup>

As we know, North Ossetia also came out strongly in favour of incorporation within Soviet Georgia in October 1981, when large numbers of people protested during the escalation of an Ossetian-Ingush territorial dispute.

Nevertheless, the emotional link between Georgia and the peoples of the North Caucasus gradually weakened over the Soviet period, despite contacts in the economic, scientific, cultural and educational spheres. The central authorities had no interest in building up intra-regional links between the individual parts of the USSR, although it is unfair to lay this entirely at Moscow's door, as many analysts currently do. The rise in national self-consciousness of the peoples of the Soviet Union (which was to some extent a result of state policy on science and education) gained in momentum after the Second World War. This effectively put an end to the original plans to create a single Soviet nation and meant that the collapse of the Union was only a matter of time. It was also accompanied by an increase in ethnocentrism and national myth-making, which disturbed the equilibrium of inter-ethnic relations.

## In the post-Soviet period

The first Georgian Republic (1918–1921) already showed signs of embryonic ethnic disagreement between the Georgians on the one hand and the Abkhaz and Ossetians on the other. In the Soviet period, these disagreements (which had both internal and external causes) were strengthened and exacerbated. During the *perestroika* period, they came out into the open, with unrestrained nationalism replacing the Soviet myth of friendship between peoples.

11 N.G. Dzhavakhishvili (2005). *The struggle for the freedom of the Caucasus*, Tbilisi, pp. 40–41.

12 M.M. Blijev (2006). *South Ossetia in collision with Russian-Georgian relations*, Vladikavkaz, p. 326.

Inexperienced politicians placed at the helm in Georgia in the first free elections of the Soviet period (1990) were incapable of maintaining stability in the country. This led in 1991 to the bloody Georgian-South Ossetian conflict. In Abkhazia, a fragile peace lasted until 1992. However, the incursion of Georgian military formations into the autonomous republic (14th August 1992) was countered by armed resistance from the Abkhaz, which grew into the 1992–1993 war.

As we shall see, the Georgian-Abkhaz war (and its consequences) was an important factor in the transformation of relations between Georgia and the North Caucasus. However, the crisis in the Soviet system initially encouraged rapprochement between the North Caucasus and Georgia. Contacts were established on environmental, cultural, humanitarian and other urgent issues. This process as a whole was not even seriously affected by the events of 1990–1991, when a blockade of Avarian villages in Kakhetia was organised by activists in the Georgian national movement under Zviad Gamsakhurdia and the Georgian-South Ossetian conflict began. In fact, the then president of the Chechen Republic, General Dzhokhar Dudayev – the most prominent leader in the North Caucasus at the time, who had declared the political independence of his country – was extremely interested in maintaining close relations with Georgia, which Chechnya saw as its route to the outside world.

Gamsakhurdia, by that time president of Georgia, was also interested in strengthening regional ties. However, he received a mixed reception in the North Caucasus. The Adygheyan peoples, the Abaza, the North Ossetians and some Dagestanis were not generally positive towards Gamsakhurdia as a politician (due to the events in South Ossetia and Kakhetia and the tension in Abkhazia). On the other hand, he had the confidence of Dudayev and the Ingush national movement, which had asserted its territorial claims to North Ossetia. Apart from that, as far as I am aware, Tbilisi's representatives also attempted to establish links with Karachaevan-Balkarian civil and political groupings to use them to help neutralise Adygheyan support for the Abkhaz.

To complete this picture of intra-Caucasus relations which emerged around the first president of post-Soviet Georgia, we should note that there was strong opposition to Gamsakhurdia even in his own country. Measures to put this down led in December 1991 to armed conflict within Georgia. Battles were fought on the streets of central Tbilisi with sidearms and rocket-launchers. This was a rude shock for Dudayev. He sent a special mission to Tbilisi in an attempt at reconciling the two sides. However, the opposition leaders rejected the Chechen mediation. Their aim was to depose the president and Dudayev was seen as his ally.

On 6th January 1992, after holding out for two weeks, Gamsakhurdia left Tbilisi and Georgia with his closest entourage, only to re-appear soon in Grozny under the protection of President Dudayev.

When the Georgian opposition came to power, it invited Eduard Shevardnadze, the former ruler of Soviet Georgia and later Foreign Minister of the USSR, into the country. Shevardnadze was head of a makeshift ruling body, the State Council, which was made up of unelected members of the opposition. Dudayev issued public statements that the State Council was illegitimate, but he could not of course interfere in the internal affairs of Georgia.

Despite this, a massive propaganda campaign backed by the new Georgian administration, which was worried that Gamsakhurdia might return, portrayed the Chechen president as virtually the main instigator behind the actions of the “Zviadists” in Georgia. A typical example was the satirical poem entitled ‘What did you do in the forests?’, which was published in the press and directed at Zviad Gamsakhurdia's armed supporters active in Western Georgia. It begins:

*‘You, who grew up in the Georgian cradle and were educated on the poetry of Vazha-Pshavela, Crept up to us with a Chechen dagger dipped in Chechen poison...’<sup>13</sup>*

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13 *Sakartvelos Respublika*, 12th September 1992 (in Georgian).

This was part of an attempt to use official propaganda to discredit Gamsakhurdia in the eyes of the Georgian population, by presenting the enemy as the Chechens giving succour to the Georgian exiles.<sup>14</sup>

This process was accelerated when the war in Abkhazia began. The Georgian-Abkhaz conflict, which had been latent for some time, flared up in the late 1980s amid the political upheavals in the Soviet Union. After the first inter-ethnic clash in mid-July 1989, which resulted in 21 victims, the Georgians and Abkhaz realised that confrontation on an even larger scale was likely in the future and each side began to take their own precautions.

The Abkhaz were considerably outnumbered by the Georgians even on Abkhaz territory, but they found allies in the ethnically and culturally related peoples of the North Caucasus. These were mainly Abaza and Adyghe (Kabardinians, Circassians, Adygheys) but also Chechens and other mountain peoples. As the Soviet system collapsed around them, they attempted to overcome their relative vulnerability by uniting with other Caucasian peoples under the banner of the pan-Caucasus idea. Books on the Mountain Republic and its actors became increasingly popular. Many mountain ideologues and thinkers in the late 1980s and early 1990s would not have been against Georgia taking the lead in a Caucasus-wide movement. However, then, as now, Georgia's sole priority was for the country to move closer to the West. In contrast to the Georgian nationalists of the early 20th century (Cholokashvili, Amiredzhibi, etc.), their descendants clearly underestimated the North Caucasus factor at the end of the century.

The Abkhaz national movement chose a different path. Following the outbreak of open conflict with the Georgians, it speeded up the process of integration of the mountain peoples (more precisely, the popular movements which enjoyed influence in the Caucasus at the time). On 25th to 26th August 1989, just a month after the incident in July, the First Congress of Mountain Peoples was held in Sukhumi at which the Assembly of Mountain Peoples of the Caucasus was created. At its third meeting, held again in Abkhazia from 1st to 3rd November 1991, the Assembly had already given way to a Confederation of Mountain Peoples of the Caucasus. It was also decided at the meeting to form a Caucasian Parliament, a court of arbitration, a defence committee and other confederation institutions, whose capitals were declared as Sukhumi and Grozny.

The central authorities in Tbilisi took a very dim view of these actions, which had not been agreed with them in advance. They gradually came to the decision that the quickest way of establishing Georgia's full jurisdiction over the autonomous republic would be to mount a campaign of military deterrence. They were encouraged by the United Nations' swift acceptance of Georgia as a member state on 31st July 1992. This took place before elections were held following the military takeover (due largely to respect for Shevardnadze, one of the world's major statesmen of the period) and Russia's handover to Georgia of a large amount of weapons and military technology, including dozens of tanks and other armoured vehicles.

The Georgian military in Abkhazia, as already noted, had encountered resistance from the Abkhaz. In these circumstances, the Confederation of Mountain Peoples of the Caucasus issued a public ultimatum to the Georgian authorities to withdraw their troops from Abkhazia, threatening that unless they did so, they would raise a volunteer army and send it to the areas occupied by the military. Shevardnadze went along with this game plan, announcing that self-defence units, which had begun to be set up throughout Georgia in response to the North Caucasians' ultimatum, had already enlisted over 30,000 men. The war machine had started and Georgia was drawn into an armed conflict that was to last more than a year.

14 This must be balanced by the fact that Gamsakhurdia himself helped to promote this by publicly stating that the Chechens and Ingush were on his side when he was still in Georgia and speaking out against the Georgian opposition. During the 1991–1992 "Tbilisi War", rumours spread throughout the city that there were Chechen snipers on Rustaveli prospect, on the roofs of houses, shooting at passers-by. However, no one actually saw these snipers, either alive or dead.

The assistance provided by the Confederation to the Abkhaz was considerable. In the autumn of 1992 alone, between 4,000 and 7,000 militants from the Confederation arrived in Abkhazia and took part directly in military action.<sup>15</sup> Humanitarian aid was also collected across the whole of the North Caucasus for dispatch to Abkhazia. This represented significant physical, material and moral support for the small Abkhaz forces. Alongside other outside forces that assisted the Abkhaz, the North Caucasians made a significant contribution to the final outcome of the war.

Despite this, it should be noted that the Abkhaz themselves bore the brunt of the fighting in the 1992–1993 war. Their units formed the core of the forces fighting against the Georgians. Approximately three quarters of those who died on the Abkhaz side were born in Abkhazia.

We emphasise this because, since the Georgian-Abkhaz conflict remains unresolved, many Georgian authors choose to ignore these facts and attempt to demonstrate that the war in Abkhazia was mainly inspired and supported by external forces. Today, Russia is probably seen as the only external factor. The events of 1992–1993 are even occasionally referred to as the “Russia-Georgia war”. But the historical truth is that Yeltsin’s Russia gave the green light to the Georgian-Abkhaz war and allowed it to spread by arming both sides. On its own, however, this does not explain the scale of the ensuing war, which was the result of other long-term (underlying) causes and a deliberate political decision to use force (direct cause). At that time, shortly after the collapse of the Soviet Union, the Russian leaders would simply not have had the capacity to force the two sides into this against their will. In fact, in the early days of the war, as the situation in Abkhazia deteriorated, Shevardnadze made a personal appeal for understanding and support to Yeltsin. It was only later, once it realised that Moscow was playing a double game, that Georgia began to accuse the Russians openly of assisting the Abkhaz. Initially, however, the North Caucasians and primarily the Chechens under Dudayev were portrayed as the main enemy.

This is shown very clearly by the political cartoons that appeared regularly in the Georgian press. For example, in the very first days of the Georgian-Abkhaz conflict, a cartoon appeared in the newspaper *Sakartvelos Respublika* with the caption: ‘General Dudayev threatens...’. The cartoon depicts a map of Georgia with the Chechen president wielding a huge axe and trying to cut off the North-Western part, Abkhazia, from the rest of the country. The words ‘Union of North Caucasus Peoples’ are written on the blade of the axe and the long handle which the General is holding is labelled ‘Zviad Gamsakhurdia’.<sup>16</sup> The cartoon is thus clearly intended to convey to the reader the idea that North Caucasian aggression is the real cause of the events in Abkhazia and also to point the finger at the ex-president. A large number of pro-government experts and political scientists explained to the population through the media that Dudayev needed Abkhazia as a route to the sea. They did not, however, explain just how a chaotic Chechnya could ever control the Abkhaz shore across several entities within the Russian Federation that separated the two territories.

This kind of manipulation, against a background of military failures and economic deprivation, turned Georgian public opinion against Chechnya and the North Caucasus as a whole. Whereas 18 months earlier most people had been sympathetic to Chechen secessionism, during (and after) the Abkhaz war the predominant view was that support should be given to Russia’s efforts to keep control of the North Caucasus. The implied trade-off was that Russia would be able to secure Georgia’s territorial integrity.

This shift in public opinion allowed President Shevardnadze immediately after the cessation of hostilities in Abkhazia (September 1993) to take measures he thought would ensure that the lands lost during the war would be returned. While officially retaining its pro-Western stance, Georgian

15 Major-General V.A. Zolotarev (Ed.) (2000). ‘Rossiya [SSSR] v lokal’nykh voynakh i voennykh konfliktakh vtoroy poloviny XX veka’ [Russia [USSR] in local wars and military conflicts of the second half of the 20th century], Moscow, p. 390.

16 *Sakartvelos Respublika*, 18th August 1992 [in Georgian].

diplomacy began actively establishing relations with the Russian Federation. A declaration passed in November 1993 at the constituent assembly of the ruling political organisation, the Union of Georgian Citizens, emphasised: ‘Our move to new relations with the new Russia is based on our countries’ close and overlapping strategic interests in the Caucasus and Black Sea region.’<sup>17</sup>

In December 1993, Georgia became a participant and in April 1994 a *de jure* member of the Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS), which it had previously refused to join on principle. In February 1994, a Russian-Georgian agreement on military cooperation was signed. This was followed in 1995 by an agreement on Russian military bases on Georgian territory which was signed between the governments of the two countries.

The North Caucasus was a priority within the new Russia-Georgia relations. The Georgian administration was attempting to ensure that the Caucasus factor would not operate in the event of a new war in Abkhazia and to convince Moscow that any separatism would have harmful consequences. As a result, when the First Chechen War began in December 1994, Shevardnadze’s Georgia was perhaps the only country in the world to openly support this disastrous step.

However, Abkhazia remained a serious problem for the official administration in Tbilisi and one which Russia was either unwilling or unable to resolve. It was bogged down in Chechnya and had just ended its first military campaign with the Khasavyurt Agreement (31st August 1996). This was a period of a new shift in the attitude of senior figures in the Georgian administration to Georgia’s policy on Russia and the Chechen Republic. The deterioration in Russia-Georgia relations was matched by a rapprochement between Georgia and Chechnya, as dramatically evidenced by the two-day visit to Tbilisi by the then Chechen president, Aslan Maskhadov, who was received practically as a head of state (September 2009). Zurab Zhvania, the speaker of the Georgian parliament, proclaimed that the meeting between the presidents of Georgia and Chechnya heralded a new stage in the resolution of the conflict in Abkhazia. There were whispers in the corridors of parliament that Chechnya had its own plan, which would be a positive contribution to the resolution of this problem.<sup>18</sup>

After the Second Russian-Chechen War started (1st October 1999), the Georgian government rejected a Russian proposal to deploy Federal Border Service units on Georgian territory adjoining Chechnya (as had been done in the first Chechen campaign)<sup>19</sup> and opened its doors to Chechen refugees. Streams of civilian Chechen refugees appeared in Georgia, mainly in the Pankisi Gorge but also in Tbilisi. The media also reported that there were Chechen militants based in the Pankisi forests. This led to sharp protests from the Russian side and “unidentified” aeroplane bombings of Pankisi. In the circumstances, the Georgian authorities made the mistake of deploying a detachment in Abkhazia under the Chechen field commander Ruslan Gelayev. This resulted in fighting in the Kodori Gorge, with losses on both sides (October 2001). Gelayev’s troops were forced to withdraw.

The Kodori adventure was highly unpopular with the Georgian public, which was already suffering under Shevardnadze’s rule. It was sharply criticised by the civil society movement, which issued a statement emphasising that ‘dragging the Chechens into the Georgian-Abkhaz conflict will bring new sorrow to the Chechen people and escalate the pan-Caucasus crisis’.<sup>20</sup>

Despite the serious deterioration in Russia-Georgia relations in the second half of the 1990s and

17 *Svobodnaya Gruzija*, 26th November 1993.

18 *Nezavisimaya Gazeta*, 2nd September 1997.

19 O.A. Belov (2002). ‘Pogranichnoye sotrudnichestvo mezhdyy rossiyskoy federatsiyey i Gruziiyey//Gruzija’ [Cross-border cooperation between the Russian Federation and Georgia], in *Problemy i perspektivy razvitiya* [Georgia: Problems and prospects], Vol. 2, Moscow, p. 24.

20 ‘Po povodu obostreniya gruzino-abkhazskogo konflikta’ [On the escalation of the Georgian-Abkhaz conflict], in *Kavkazsky Aktsent* [Caucasus Accent], 16th–31st October 2001; G.Z. Anchabadze (2006). *Voprosy gruzino-abkhazskoykh vzaimootnosheniy* [Georgian-Abkhaz relations], Tbilisi, pp. 164–165.

the strengthening of Chechnya-Georgia links, Shevardnadze refused to change his position on this issue. Abkhazia was his goal and he was playing the game in the North Caucasus for the sake of Abkhazia. As a former member of the Politburo of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union, Shevardnadze was more at home with senior Russian officials and preferred to resolve problematic issues via Moscow. As a result, when there appeared to be a chance of resolving the Abkhaz issue with President Putin's help, Shevardnadze took a step which ran counter to Caucasian traditions. On the eve of the meeting with Putin at the Summit of CIS heads of state in Chisinau (October 2002), he handed over five Chechen resistance fighters who had sought asylum on Georgian territory to the Russian side. This fact was reported widely in the media.<sup>21</sup> The intention was undoubtedly to create a favourable background to the talks. The Georgian president also remained silent at the summit over the question of the Russian bases in Georgia, although their withdrawal had been an objective of Georgian policy for several years. However, despite the promising meeting with the Russian president (which Shevardnadze called 'historic'<sup>22</sup>), the situation relating to Abkhazia remained unchanged.

Since August 2008, the North Caucasus factor has become more relevant than ever to Georgia. However, discussion on this goes beyond the scope of the present article.

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21 Some reports claim that, in individual cases, people were extradited clandestinely.

22 See article at <http://lenta.ru/voyna/2002/10/07/summit/>, 7th October 2002.

# The North Caucasus: political and social trends and their significance for Georgia

GEORGE GVIMRADZE

## Introduction

The turbulence in the North Caucasus following the collapse of the Soviet Union has been the subject of constant attention from the international expert community and political groups in many countries. Many believe it threatens Russia's continuing presence in the North Caucasus and if current dangerous trends persist might even lead to the collapse of Russia.<sup>23</sup> Other analysts incline to the view that Russia's collapse, if it were indeed to happen, would not primarily be a result of what is happening in the North Caucasus.<sup>24</sup> What they all agree is that the North Caucasus represents a major and possibly the main problem facing the Russian state. Moreover, since what happens or is likely to happen in the North Caucasus has a significant impact across the entire Caucasus region, it is also of interest to experts and the political establishment in Georgia.

The main concern is what is currently actually going on in the North Caucasus and what it might ultimately lead to. There is a great deal of uncertainty over both questions and particularly over future scenarios. Analysts and politicians alike continue to propose two broad scenarios for the future of Russia's North-Caucasus Federal Territory (NCFT) – one based on inertia, the other on optimism. (The “inertia” scenario is also referred to as a negative scenario, since if current trends continue, there can be no positive outcome.<sup>25</sup>) The official socio-economic development strategy for the region proposes a third possibility – the so-called “baseline scenario”. However, its outcomes are so close to those of the inertia scenario, analysts do not differentiate formally between the two. In the strategy itself, the optimistic scenario is referred to as “optimal”, implying that it is both realistic and the best that can be achieved.<sup>26</sup>

The North Caucasus is a complex region. We need to go back several centuries to gain a full and general understanding of the region, but we also need to consider a new aspect – the emergence of Islamic fundamentalism – which is already a major factor in the North Caucasus. Of course, Islam per se is hardly a new development in the Caucasus, particularly in the north of the Caucasus mountain range. Nonetheless, it was not seen, or at least was not active, in the radical form that increasingly dictates the agenda in the south of Russia since the collapse of the Soviet Union.

## Overview of the situation in the North Caucasus

For all its turbulent history, the North Caucasus remains an integral political and economic part of the Russian Federation. The region comprises 2.1% of Russia's territory but 11.8% of its total population. The Slav population, however, has been in decline since the 1970s. According to official data, the Russian-speaking population of Chechnya had already fallen below 7% by 2002. In neighbouring Ingushetia, the figure was 23%, while even in 1989 Slavs accounted for

23 See article 'Jihad in Caucasus threatens the existence of Russia, confirms Obama's State Dept', *Kavkaz Center*, Department of Monitoring, 19th August 2011. Available at <http://www.kavkazcenter.com/eng/content/2011/08/19/15002.shtml>.

24 A. Malashenko. *Losing the Caucasus*, Carnegie Moscow Briefing Paper, Vol. 11, Issue 3, August 2009. Available at [http://www.carnegie.ru/publications/?fa=23877&zoom\\_highlight=losing+the+caucasus](http://www.carnegie.ru/publications/?fa=23877&zoom_highlight=losing+the+caucasus).

25 A. Malashenko. '2020 god - posledny shans dlya Severnogo Kavkaza?' [Is 2020 the last chance for the North Caucasus?], *Pro et Contra*, Vol. 14, No. 4–5, July–October 2010. Available [in Russian] at <http://carnegie.ru/proEtContra/?fa=42252>.

26 'Ob utverzhdenii strategiya sotsial'no-ekonomicheskogo razvitiya Severo-Kavkazskogo federal'nogo okruga do 2025' [Socio-economic development strategy of the North Caucasus Federal District to 2025], 6th September 2010, p. 53. Available [in Russian] at <http://government.ru/gov/results/12423/>.

just 43% of the population in the united Chechen-Ingush republic.<sup>27</sup> In Chechnya itself, war, xenophobia and the difficult socio-economic situation mean that, according to official data, only 1% of the population is Slav.<sup>28</sup> The difficult socio-economic situation has not prevented the North Caucasus region from having the highest birth rate in the Russian Federation, although it also has the highest infant mortality rate. Both are evidence of the low levels of social development. The region is directly dependent on federal subsidies, which are constantly rising. In 2010, the federal budget provided 8.5 billion roubles (approximately €220 million as at 5th March 2012) just to tackle unemployment, 13% up on 2009.<sup>29</sup> Even so, it is economically far worse off than the other regions in Russia due to a succession of wars, violence, corruption, a huge “shadow” economy, unemployment and other factors. Per capita gross domestic product (GDP) in the North Caucasus is well below the figure for Russia as a whole. ‘In Adygheya and Karachaevo-Cherkessia, it is 40%, in Kabardino-Balkaria 35%–37%, and in Ingushetia just 20% of the average for Russia.’<sup>30</sup>

The North Caucasus region is ethnically very diverse. Dozens of different ethnic groups live in Dagestan alone, straddling arbitrary administrative borders. These borders, along with other factors, stir up inter-ethnic and clan conflicts aimed at ‘restoring just borders between territories’.

Although the whole region is highly unstable, some parts of the North Caucasus are more unstable than others. Levels of instability and violence are far higher in the East than the West. The East is more prone to clericalism and radical forms of Islam.<sup>31</sup>

Historical memory is another factor that makes the situation in the North Caucasus more complex. As just one example of the cruelty with which Russia conquered the Caucasus, various sources agree that approximately 400,000 people were deported from the Western part of the North Caucasus alone.<sup>32</sup> Whole *auls* and villages were destroyed during the Caucasus War. Some researchers estimate that 90% of ethnic Circassians live outside their homeland as a result of the bloody campaign.<sup>33</sup> In the Soviet era, around 500,000 Vainakhs were deported to Central Asia.<sup>34</sup> However, the most painful historical memories of the North Caucasians relate to the methods used to oppress them, particularly since the atrocities committed by Imperial Russia and the Soviet authorities continue to be matched or exceeded today. During the two wars in Chechnya, according to a number of estimates, approximately 160,000 people died, the majority of them civilians.<sup>35</sup> Over 2,000 people are still classed as missing. Many point to the security forces’ involvement in people’s disappearances. In the words of Vladimir Lukin, Plenipotentiary for Human Rights in the Russian Federation, ‘the methods used to combat criminal activity are more terrible than the crimes themselves.’<sup>36</sup>

27 C.W. Blandy. *Caucasus Series – North Caucasus: Negative Trends*, Defence Academy of the United Kingdom, Research & Assessment Branch, October 2009. Available at <http://www.da.mod.uk/colleges/arag/document-listings/caucasus/>.

28 P. Goble. “‘Mass Exodus’ of Russians from North Caucasus ‘Threatens Russian Federation’s Existence’”, – Scholar’, *Georgian Daily*, 5th April 2010. Available at [http://georgiandaily.com/index.php?option=com\\_content&task=view&id=18051&Itemid=134](http://georgiandaily.com/index.php?option=com_content&task=view&id=18051&Itemid=134).

29 S. Rudkovsky. ‘Svernyy Kavkaz v 2010 godu poluchit 8,5 mlrd. rubley na bor’bu c bezrabotitsey’ [North Caucasus to receive 8.5 billion roubles in 2010 to combat unemployment], *RIA Novosti*, 15th April 2010. Available [in Russian] at <http://www.rian.ru/economy/20100415/222618197.html>.

30 S. Markedonov. ‘Bezopasnost’ Rossii na Severnom Kavkaze posle priznaniya Abkhazii i Yuzhnoy Osetii’ [Russia’s security in the North Caucasus following its recognition of Abkhazia and South Ossetia], *APN*, 24th September 2008. Available [in Russian] at <http://www.apn.ru/publications/print20722.htm>.

31 A. Malashenko. *Losing the Caucasus*, Carnegie Moscow Briefing Paper, Vol. 11, Issue 3, August 2009. Available at [http://www.carnegie.ru/publications/?fa=23877&zoom\\_highlight=losing+the+caucasus](http://www.carnegie.ru/publications/?fa=23877&zoom_highlight=losing+the+caucasus).

32 A. Shmulevich. ‘Krov’ Krasnoy Polyany. Okonchatel’noye reshenie cherkesskogo voprosa’ [The blood of Krasnaya Polyana. The final solution of the Circassian question], *APN*, 2nd July 2008. Available [in Russian] at <http://www.apn.ru/publications/article20237.htm>.

33 ‘14 Reasons for Opposing Sochi 2014’, *No Sochi 2014 Olympics Campaign*. Available at <http://nosochi2014.com/campaign/14-reasons-for-opposing-sochi-2014.php>.

34 ‘The deportation of the Chechens and Ingush on 23rd February 1944’. Available [in Russian] at [http://www.elbrusoid.org/articles/neighbors/359401/?sphrase\\_id=5488](http://www.elbrusoid.org/articles/neighbors/359401/?sphrase_id=5488).

35 ‘Russia: Chechen Official Puts War Death Toll at 160,000’, *Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty*, 16th August 2005. Available at <http://www.rferl.org/content/article/1060708.html>.

36 ‘Society of Dagestan is on the brink of civil war: over 2,000 disappearances remain unsolved’, *Caucasian Knot*, 3rd June 2011. Available at <http://www.eng.kavkaz-uzel.ru/articles/17343/>.

So what is the underlying cause of the instability in the North Caucasus? The main factors are generally considered to be terrorism and the high level of Islamicisation. We examine these factors briefly below. However, the major concerns are Russia's response to events in the region, virtually amounting to war, and a lack of clarity over the outcome of this military action, which is turning the region into one of the world's "hotspots". This distinguishes the North Caucasus from the rest of the Russian Federation and explains why it is of such interest to the global community.

## Terrorism

The terrorist acts of 11th September in the US were a landmark for the Russian authorities and provided them with an excellent opportunity to recategorise the insurgents in the North Caucasus as "terrorists", a term they used increasingly. This led to Doku Umarov becoming the first North Caucasian on the US State Department's list of international terrorists.<sup>37</sup> The insurgents themselves, by announcing the creation of the "Imarat Kavkaz" ("the Caucasian Emirate") and pronouncing their ideology as Islam in its most radical form, then added themselves to this list. As a result of this campaign, constructed out of the tragedy of 11th September, insurgents who had been called "freedom fighters" from the late 1990s and early 2000s,<sup>38</sup> and who thereby evoked sympathy and solidarity, were renamed terrorists. In fairness, this classification is not entirely without grounds.

In recent years, there has been a visible increase in terrorist activity. The explosions in the Moscow Metro and airport can hardly be called military operations, not to mention the Beslan tragedy. According to estimates by the Center for Strategic and International Studies (US), the statistics for violence in the region continue to rise. The number of suicide bombers has increased.<sup>39</sup> It is striking that along with the rise in numbers, there are also changes in quality – the scale of planning and implementation of the suicide bombings is growing. Over the whole period from 1st January 2008 to 30th April 2010, there were 27 suicide bomb attacks.<sup>40</sup> This continues to increase steadily, with 12 suicide bomb attacks carried out, killing 63 people<sup>41</sup> in the last eight months alone up to and including August 2011.

The situation is further exacerbated by the fact that, despite attempts by the Russian authorities to claim that terrorism is an "imported" product brought in from outside, the nucleus of terrorism and its causes are in fact located inside the country and are closely linked to the socio-political problems of the region and indeed the Russian Federation as a whole.<sup>42</sup> We should also add that the activity of the insurgents has already long since gone beyond one republic (Chechnya) and recently spread across the entire North Caucasus region. To date, Russia has experienced the greatest number of acts of terrorism in Europe and also has one of the highest numbers in the world. Of the 14 major acts of terrorism in the world, four were in the Russian Federation.<sup>43</sup>

Thus, terrorism is objectively becoming one of the most serious challenges facing the entire Russian Federation.

37 E. Barry. 'US Declares Chechen Militant a Terrorist', *The New York Times*, 24th June 2010. Available at [http://www.nytimes.com/2010/06/25/world/europe/25moscow.html?\\_r=1](http://www.nytimes.com/2010/06/25/world/europe/25moscow.html?_r=1).

38 T. Parfitt. 'Trouble in the North Caucasus', *The Guardian*, 22nd June 2009. Available at <http://www.guardian.co.uk/commentisfree/2009/jun/22/ingushetia-president-assassination-caucasus>.

39 *Violence in the North Caucasus – Summer 2010: Not Just a Chechen Conflict*, Center for Strategic and International Studies, Russian and Eurasia Program, 2010. Available at <http://csis.org/publication/violence-north-caucasus-7>.

40 *Violence in the North Caucasus – Spring 2010: On the rise, again?*, Center for Strategic and International Studies, Human Rights and Security Initiative, 2010. Available at <http://csis.org/publication/violence-north-caucasus-6>.

41 '63 cheloveka pogibli v Moskve i na Severnom Kavkaze v 2011 godu v resul'tate samopodryvov smertnikov' [63 people died in Moscow and the North Caucasus in 2011 as a result of suicide bombings], *Caucasian Knot*, 31st August 2011. Available (in Russian) at <http://www.kavkaz-uzel.ru/articles/191734/>. Summary of the article available in English at <http://www.eng.kavkaz-uzel.ru/articles/18208/>.

42 M. Lipman. 'Radikal'ny islam, vzleleyanny Rossiiyey' [How Russia nourishes radical Islam], Carnegie Moscow Center, 5th April 2010. Available at <http://carnegieendowment.org/2010/04/05/how-russia-nourishes-radical-islam/3qi5>.

43 'Chronology: Major terrorist attacks since September 11, 2001', *Monsters and Critics*, 22nd August 2011. Available at [http://www.monstersandcritics.com/news/usa/news/article\\_1658256.php/CHRONOLOGY-Major-terrorist-attacks-since-September-11-2001](http://www.monstersandcritics.com/news/usa/news/article_1658256.php/CHRONOLOGY-Major-terrorist-attacks-since-September-11-2001).

## Islamicisation

The collapse of the Soviet Union and one of its consequences – the liberation of post-Soviet society from state-imposed atheism – has led to a growing interest in religion among the population of the republics of the former USSR. Societies in a number of post-Soviet countries and regions have become increasingly clericalised, with the North Caucasus being no exception: the region has become one of the most clerical and traditional societies in the post-Soviet space. Radical Islam in the region continues to gain in strength and popularity among the population, particularly among its young people.

The terrorists/insurgents preach an ideology of “pure Islam” – so-called “Wahhabism” – which has as its aim the creation of an Islamic republic in the form of the “Emirate of the Caucasus” referred to on the previous page. This gives rise to the crucial question of whether Islam is the end or a means to an end.

The insurgents’ declared position – they declare that Islam is the principal ideology and the creation of an Islamic state – is that Islam is their goal. However, current internal disagreements between North Caucasians – the current process by which ethnic separatism (which governed the secessionist process following the collapse of the USSR to the mid-2000s) is being transformed into religious separatism – all suggest that Islam is still a means to an end. However, as many analysts note, Islam itself may become the goal in the future.<sup>44</sup> This further complicates the situation: the real motivation of the insurgents becomes unclear, particularly where the federal and local authorities lack the political will to make sense of or address this motivation.

A significant number of the insurgents lack proper theological knowledge of Islam, which again suggests that Islam is not yet their ultimate goal. There has been much comment over the admission by Doku Umarov himself in his speeches that he has committed a number of errors in terms of “pure Islam” and that few insurgents understand the details of Islamic theology.<sup>45</sup> However, the ideology of “an Emirate of the Caucasus” was in fact developed by people such as Said Buryatsky, who received full fundamentalist theological training in Arab countries. The late Said Buryatsky was on more than one occasion called the “ideologue” of Islamic radicalism, both by members of the security forces and the insurgents themselves.<sup>46</sup>

Another issue is that there are two opposing trends in the Islamicisation of the region. The insurgents, as already noted, are attempting to spread “Salafism” (better known as “Wahhabism”), while the authorities in the individual republics (for example Ramzan Kadyrov, head of the Chechen Republic) are lobbying for the traditional branch of Islam. According to assessments by a number of experts, the central authorities of the Russian Federation also support traditional Islam.<sup>47</sup>

Based on past events and the specifics of the North Caucasus, it is highly likely that relations between these two denominations of Islam will become even more strained in the future – particularly since tension between them has been extremely high since the mid-1990s, at times leading to attacks by radicals on mosques and attempts on the lives of individual religious leaders. The central authorities’ support for traditional Islam appears to be logical, since “Sufism” is opposed to the radicals and if its position is reinforced, it could squeeze out “Salafism”. However, we should also bear in mind here that the radicals are well aware of how to confront any attack

44 R. Kurbanov. ‘A. Malashenko: Nel’zya upravlyat Kavkazom, ignoriruya shariyat’ [The Caucasus is ungovernable if Sharia law is ignored], *Nastoyashcheye vremya* (online newspaper), 27th April 2009. Available (in Russian) at [http://gazeta-nv.ru/index.php?option=com\\_content&task=view&id=1993&Itemid=216](http://gazeta-nv.ru/index.php?option=com_content&task=view&id=1993&Itemid=216).

45 S. Markedonov. *Radical Islam in the North Caucasus – Evolving Threats, Challenges and Prospects*, A report of the CSIS Russian and Eurasia Program, November 2010. Available at <http://csis.org/publication/radical-islam-north-caucasus>.

46 A. Malashenko. ‘v litse Saida Buryatskogo vooruzhennoye podpol’ye na Kavkaze ponoslo bol’shoi uscherb’ [The armed underground in the Caucasus is greatly damaged by the death of Said Buryatskogo], 8th March 2010. Available (in Russian) at <http://www.m.kavkaz-uzel.ru/articles/164068/>.

47 A. Malashenko. ‘2020 god – posledny shans dlya Severnogo Kavkaza?’ [Is 2020 the last chance for the North Caucasus?], *Pro et Contra*, Vol. 14, No. 4–5, July–October 2010. Available (in Russian) at <http://carnegie.ru/proEtContra/?fa=42252>.

by the security forces and that they are likely to act in a radical manner out of an instinct for self-preservation. Indeed, their position is gaining in strength due to the increasing popularity of the insurgents among the general population. Supporters of the “Caucasian Emirate” project are not only opposed to the federal authorities but also to the local authorities, who are steeped in various types of criminal activity. The local population is finding such activity increasingly intolerable, whereas the insurgents do not stoop to petty crime.

On this subject, an interesting idea has been proposed by the Carnegie Moscow Center expert Aleksey Malashenko, who thinks that the way out of this problem is not through supporting one particular branch of Islam over another, but through subjecting analysis of the conflict to a theological prism. He would like to see theological debates between the various branches of Islam in order to raise awareness on the fact that not all so-called “Wahhabites” have radical views. However, many experts believe that Islam is inherently political and that the religion cannot be wholly de-politicised.<sup>48</sup>

### Separatism

The conflict in the North Caucasus has lasted for over 200 years. No single reason has been identified that would explain the region’s centrifugal tendencies. But it is also difficult to say definitively whether the current tendency is towards separatism, or whether it is simply a desire to be an “independent/autonomous” member of the Russian Federation – that is, to be able to act at its own discretion within its borders but continue to receive federal subsidies from the centre.

As already noted above, ethnic separatism is undergoing a process of transformation. Many experts maintain that there is no real desire in the North Caucasus to secede from the Russian Federation on ethnic grounds,<sup>49</sup> since everyone understands that there are not enough resources to support independence. Other analysts state that there is no longer any organised form of ethnic-based separatism movement within the region itself. Former fighters for national independence are faced with either “going into the forest” and becoming religious extremists, or leaving the country and seeking political asylum abroad.<sup>50</sup> One way or another, today the principal and perhaps only force within the region that still articulates the idea of separation is the “Emirate of the Caucasus”. But here too there is the problem that its supporters’ real motivation and their ultimate goal are unclear. The declared goal – the creation of an Islamic state on the territory of the entire North Caucasus based on Sharia law – is not realistic. Indeed, the federal authorities are not the only – and perhaps not even the main – obstacle to achieving this goal. Although the idea of governing on the basis of Sharia law is also popular with traditional Muslims, the disagreements between the “Salafites/Wahhabists” and these traditionalists are so profound that it will take a very long time to overcome them. Moreover, not all of the North Caucasus is Muslim and, no less importantly, not all Muslims are fighting to create a clerical society.

Another force promoting separatism is the North Caucasian diaspora, primarily the Circassians, whose declared ultimate goal is the creation of a secular state on the territory of the former Circassia – in other words, the unification of Kabardino-Balkaria, Karachaevo-Cherkessia and Adygheya. There are then at least two opposing separatist projects. One of these exists in the region itself and we have touched on how feasible it is above. The other project is located outside the region. The basis for the Circassians’ project is a calculation that Russia will inevitably collapse in the future, which would provide them with the opportunity to unite the Circassian lands and create a unified Circassian state on the principles of a civic nation. However, the Karachaevans and Balkarians are more in favour of an “Emirate”, particularly because they, unlike the Circassians, are of Turkic origin. This in turn causes antagonism between them and represents yet another obstacle on the path to implementing the project of a “united Circassia”.

<sup>48</sup> Ibid.

<sup>49</sup> ‘Vnutryennee zarubezh’e Rossii’ [Russia’s internal abroad], Interview with A. Malashenko, *ZN.UA*, 12th September 2009. Available (in Russian) at <http://www.zn.ua/1000/1600/67156/>.

<sup>50</sup> According to author’s interview with Mayrbek Vachagayev, expert at the Jamestown Foundation.

These two separatist projects are therefore essentially mutually exclusive and this raises the question of whether either is feasible. But the Circassian project faces other problems too. In particular, there is no realistic prospect of a Russian collapse any time soon. Even if it were to happen, problems would arise between the two communities, which would have to co-exist in any new state. The fact of the matter is that although members of the Circassian diaspora returning from Western countries and accustomed to European or US standards of social relations will understand the advantages of living in a secular civic nation, it is not at all clear whether the Circassians currently living in the North Caucasus will be ready for this. Another question is whether the members of the diaspora will be prepared to abandon the lives they have built for themselves in the West and return to a post-Russian Circassia, not to mention a Circassia within the Russian Federation, to implement their project.

We should also note, at this point, that it is not possible to simply copy Western approaches and traditions in the Caucasus without thoroughly preparing the ground and accepting the need to go through historical stages of development. For example, Georgia has been trying unsuccessfully for 20 years to build a truly secular society and civic nation.

## The policy (response) of the Federal centre

It is generally agreed that the Kremlin's policy towards the North Caucasus region over the last 20 years has consisted of a succession of blunders. Many problems remain unresolved to this day, while many other problems continue to deepen. Despite two wars and repeated declarations of victory over the terrorists, the Kremlin has been incapable of achieving stability in the region. Distracted by the process of resolving the situation in Chechnya, the authorities "lost sight" of the fact that the problems were spreading to the neighbouring republics of Dagestan, Ingushetia and now even Kabardino-Balkaria. In Chechnya itself, many problems remain, as witnessed by the well-known and highly regrettable events in Grozny, when on 30th August 2011 three young people blew themselves up on the eve of the Muslim festival of Eid al-Adha (Uruz Bayram).<sup>51</sup>

The over-reliance on individual personalities in the policy towards the region has been a big mistake. The Kremlin is counting on the loyalty of individual leaders in return for large allocations from the Federal budget and non-interference in domestic affairs. While taking advantage of this, the local authorities are failing to be accountable to their own population. This has increased dissatisfaction among the ordinary residents in the region and also explains the growing popularity of insurgents among the young population.

As already noted, the issue of terrorism is not being resolved. The particular problem here is the overall attitude to and perception of the terrorists, which is not a problem specific to Russia. Malashenko thinks that Islamic radicalism is 'a result of many mistakes made by politicians – Muslim, European, American and Russian'.<sup>52</sup> The perception of terrorists across the world is of course negative, but this should not be used as a reason for rejecting any attempt to understand their real motives, all the more so in the North Caucasus. The Russian public tends to forget that the suicide bombers are themselves also citizens of the Russian Federation and does not count them as victims of their terrorist acts. While we cannot force people to sympathise with terrorists, we do need to try and understand what actually makes these young men and women blow themselves up. Malashenko believes that it is now time to acknowledge the existence of an Islamic opposition within the region and to start a process of talks with it.<sup>53</sup>

51 'Sledstvie nazvalo vzryvy v stolitse Chechny teraktom' [Investigation calls explosions in the Chechen capital an act of terrorism], *Caucasian Knot*, 31st August 2011. Available (in Russian) at <http://www.kavkaz-uzel.ru/articles/191746/>.

52 A. Malashenko. '2020 god - posledny shans dlya Severnogo Kavkaza?' [2020 – the last chance for the North Caucasus?], *Pro et Contra*, Vol. 14, No. 4–5, July–October 2010. Available (in Russian) at <http://carnegie.ru/proEtContra/?fa=42252>.

53 *Ibid.*

A further serious problem is the failure by the Federal authorities to acknowledge their own mistakes, although this could clearly be a first positive step on the way to overcoming the regional problems. Not wishing to acknowledge their own share of blame for what has happened, the Federal authorities are looking for causes of the problems of the North Caucasus outside the region. Over the last two decades, the causes of the North Caucasus problems have been explained by the central authorities solely in terms of “imported” terrorism and violence from abroad. Presenting the issue in this way also benefited the local rulers. A number of different states in the West and the Middle East were identified and presented as supporting the insurgents in their fight for independence. The very idea of secession was believed to have been imported from abroad. Today, we can see a partial shift in this approach. In the last two years in particular, the authorities have begun to say that the main problem is the socio-economic situation, which is forcing the young people to “go into the forest”. This approach could be seen as positive were it not for one important detail. The central authorities are attempting to identify the causes of these problems based on specific ethnic, psychological and cultural aspects of the region itself. The underlying premise of such an approach is that the Caucasians are corrupt and engaged in various types of criminal activity. This is revealed by the fact that the term “Caucasian” now has an exclusively negative connotation and this is a process in which the authorities have connived quite deliberately.

This attitude is repeated in the media which in turn has a negative impact on how the North Caucasus is perceived by the rest of the population of the Russian Federation. Fewer and fewer people are considering this young region of the Federation as a part of Russia and the North Caucasians are perceived as criminals, brigands and outsiders. People find it hard to believe that it will ever be possible to resolve the problems of the North Caucasus.<sup>54</sup> Calls are also heard for Russia to abandon the region, stop regional funding and use the money to settle Russia’s own social problems. However, a number of experts put the question in moral terms: having gone in and turned everything upside-down, is Russia now to leave the region with the same old problems that might cause its downfall?<sup>55</sup>

Conflict in the North Caucasus affects the interests of various stakeholders within the local and Federal authorities. Vladimir Putin, during his 2000 pre-election campaign for the Russian presidency, positioned himself as a man who knows how to resolve the Caucasus problem. Resolving the problems in the North Caucasus was also at the top of the agenda of the outgoing president, Dmitry Medvedev, at least at the level of rhetoric. It is of course clear that Russia’s leader needs to reverse the current status quo, which by inertia is drifting towards rapid escalation: even if they are unable to completely extinguish the conflict in the North Caucasus in the short term, they will at the very least have to transform it either into a local (intra-regional) conflict or convert it into the more civilised form of political rivalry. With this aim in mind (shifting the problem to the local level), huge amounts of funding are being allocated (in addition to the funds used to buy the local elites’ loyalty). This is an attempt by the central authorities to demonstrate that they are up to the challenge and to show that the main problem is at the local level, so that any complaints should be directed to the local authorities.

For some bodies and individual officials at both local and Federal level, conflict in the North Caucasus is notoriously very favourable. The protracted conflict allows the Federal security agencies to justify their presence in the region and continue to receive high levels of funding from the Federal budget, not to mention through their involvement in lucrative criminal activity. The presence of the conflict is also used as an excuse by individual leaders of the republics to use force to combat “brigandage” and “terrorism”. After all, without the conflict, the Kremlin would not need to buy their loyalty, at least not for so much money.

54 ‘Itogi vtoroy chechenskoy voyny v obshchestvennom mnenie rossiyan’ [The results of the second Chechen war according to Russian public opinion], Levada Center, 6th October 2010. Available (in Russian) at <http://www.levada.ru/press/2010100602.html>.

55 ‘Kavkaz: v plenu korruptsii ili separatizma?’ [The Caucasus: in thrall to corruption or separatism?], Interview with A. Malashenko and A. Bulatov, *Ekho Moskvy*, 5th July 2009. Available (in Russian) at <http://www.echo.msk.ru/programs/smoke/602925-echo/>.

Although the Kremlin's overall policy is mistaken, it must also be acknowledged that the central authorities have managed to achieve some progress on certain issues. For example, it has successfully marginalised the insurgents in the perception of the international community. As already noted above, they are no longer referred to as fighters for independence abroad, particularly in the West. They are instead gradually being viewed as part of global terrorism. One might legitimately question whether this view is objectively justified and whether there are really enough terrorists from Arab countries fighting alongside the North Caucasus fighters to justify calling their activities "international" and its leader an "international terrorist" when they have never gone outside the borders of a single state.

The ending of the second Chechen war is also presented as a success. Even so, experts doubt whether this war can really be considered to be over; they find it difficult to identify a single fact or date for the end of the war. Even if that bloody conflict can be considered over, we cannot avoid noting that this success was achieved not through effective "anti-terrorist operations", but due to the fighters falling out between themselves. As a result, Chechnya is currently ruled by Ramzan Kadyrov, who is not under the Kremlin's full control and who is himself facing armed opposition. This is making the situation highly unpredictable.

It should be noted that appointments of certain individuals to high office in the North Caucasus republics have had a relatively positive impact on the overall situation in some places, particularly in terms of improving infrastructure. One example is the reconstruction of the city of Grozny and the recent announcement that the restoration of the city of Argun<sup>56</sup> is now complete. However, this is clearly not enough. In addition, the lack of accountability of local rulers to their own population and the high levels of corruption and other forms of criminal activity mean that the "stability" thus achieved remains very fragile.

Another of Russia's successes has been to close down organised forms of ethnic separatism. Nonetheless, as already noted, this ethnic separatism is being transformed into religious separatism. Activists in the secessionist movement have either had to leave the region or to "go into the forest".

Another important question is whether the Kremlin has the additional resources needed to resolve the problems of the North Caucasus. So far, the only, albeit very important, active resources come from allocations within the Federal budget. This has however had the side-effect of the mispending of these funds and high levels of corruption. Even Russia's outgoing president, Dmitry Medvedev, has noticed that corruption levels are high, even by the standards of the rest of the country: he referred to the level of corruption in the North Caucasus as "excessive".

Academic study of the region may also be seen as a potential resource, which could inject something positive into the process. A number of Russian experts have in-depth knowledge of the problems of the North Caucasus. They regularly attend various conferences convened by a number of foreign centres, articles are written, research is conducted and basic knowledge about the region is accumulated. This is indeed an important resource, but there is still little call for it from the Russian authorities.

In conclusion, we would say that it is unlikely that the optimistic scenario in which existing socio-economic problems are overcome and long-term peace is established will be achieved. The funds transferred to the region's economy are too low to remove the root causes of the instability. Ethnic and religious conflicts will also deteriorate in the future, accompanied by a rise in opposition to the Federal centre.

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56 'Na otkrytie "gorodo budushchego" Arguna Ramzan Kadyrov prikatil ... na velosipede' [Ramzan Kadyrov turns up at the opening of Argun, the 'city of the future'...on a bicycle], 29th August 2011. Available at <http://www.kp.ru/daily/25743/2731865/>.

## Conclusions for Georgia

As the preceding analysis clearly shows, the current situation must be a cause for concern to the Georgian political and intellectual elite as well as society as a whole. Further deterioration of the situation on the Northern border is not at all in the interests of the Georgian state. However, the activities of the Georgian authorities over the last two years is dangerous, since the authorities in Georgia are attempting to “respond” to Russia’s policy of the last 20 years with practically the same methods. Since the collapse of the Soviet Union, Russia has on more than one occasion made use of the North Caucasus factor against Georgia. This inevitably recalls the article by Konstantin Zatulin and Andranik Migranyan – ‘The CIS: the start or the end of history? Towards the end of an era’. The article proposes a strategy of reintegration of the post-Soviet space<sup>57</sup> and, in many ways, helps us to understand the logic behind the Russian authorities’ actions. On the one hand, attempts by the Georgian authorities ‘to build up relations with individual ethnic groups in the Russian North Caucasus’ are dismissed by authoritative authors as yet another destabilising factor in the region, along with the presence of Russian bases in Abkhazia and South Ossetia.<sup>58</sup> The use of the North Caucasus factor as a tool to achieve influence by either party prevents real building of peace and stability in the region.

On the other hand, many experts suggest that there are many objective reasons for viewing the North Caucasus as a natural area for collaboration between Russia and Georgia. If the Georgian authorities were to take a more reasonable approach on the North Caucasus, this could be one factor in contributing to a process of the normalisation of relations between the two countries. One example of this is Georgia’s visa waiver scheme and work/study permits for residents of the North Caucasus which cannot per se be referred to as a negative phenomenon.

It should be borne in mind that any further deterioration of the situation in the North Caucasus would also create a number of problems to the south of the Caucasus mountains. Should Russia lose control of the North Caucasus, it would almost certainly be able to stop the destabilisation spreading to other territories in the Russian Federation, but it is not at all likely that the neighbouring states in the South Caucasus would be able to do so. Given the difficulties of border control, the problems of divided ethnic groups, the potential movements of refugees from the north to the south (as was seen during the wars in Chechnya), etc., we could expect an increase in threats to the national security of these countries.

If support for radical Islam continues to grow, this will create problems not only for traditionalists within that religion, but also for Christians living in the southern outlying parts of Russia. It may lead in particular to problems for the North Ossetians, whose territorial dispute with the Ingush is still unresolved. In the future, this potential conflict could easily spread into South Ossetia.

57 ‘Russia should take active steps to weaken the position of anti-Russian forces in Azerbaijan and Georgia, whilst at the same time openly strengthening its economic and military presence in Armenia until the West and Armenia’s neighbours find the means to re-align Armenia with the Western countries (speculation around the post-election problems in Armenia’s domestic policy shows that this search has already begun). The blockade should be lifted without delay from Abkhazia (this is also important for domestic policy objectives: incentives must be found to prevent the union of Russian North Caucasus on a pro-Chechen basis. Given that the Chechen leadership has already realised the need for special relations with Georgia – Chechnya’s only external border – removing the blockade from Abkhazia followed by measures for its economic revival would allow to unite the entire non-Vainakh North Caucasus around the objectives of Russian policy, at Georgia’s cost), to assist with the strengthening of links between North and South Ossetia, encourage separatist trends in Adzharia. In addition, Armenia could be made to understand that in the event of Georgia continuing its anti-Russian line, Armenia could de facto annex the Akhalkalaki and Akhaltsikhi districts, then secure a corridor securing direct communications between Armenia and Russia. The threat of such serious destabilisation of Georgia, reinforced by a demonstration of Russian resolve to go to the end of this road, would be a serious sobering factor for the current Georgian administration.’ K.F. Zatulin and A.M. Migranyan. ‘SNG: nachalo ili konets istorii. K smene vekh’ [CIS: The start or the end of history? Towards a new era], *Nezavisimaya Gazeta, Sotrudzhestvo*, 26th March 1997. Available in Russian at <http://www.zatulin.ru/index.php?&section=digest&id=35>.

58 ‘Statement for the Record on the Worldwide Threat Assessment of the US Intelligence Community for the House Permanent Select Committee on Intelligence, 10th February 2011. Available at [http://www.fas.org/irp/congress/2011\\_hr/021011clapper.pdf](http://www.fas.org/irp/congress/2011_hr/021011clapper.pdf).

If the enmity between the Circassians and the Turkic-speaking ethnic groups (the Balkarians and the Karachaeans) were to increase, which is possible, this could negatively affect the situation in Abkhazia. If the Cherkessk-Sukhumi road is built, as announced in 2010, it would be even easier for refugees to enter Abkhazia in the event of an escalation in the conflict.

This gloomy prognosis could, one might think, act as an incentive for the parties to work together to prevent a security crisis. This raises the question of what, if any, potential exists for regional collaboration in the current situation in the North Caucasus. Might Russia and Georgia, despite their disagreements, combine forces in this direction? What would be the potential points of contact in the short and long term? These questions can only be answered if the need to apply pragmatic approaches is recognised and, above all, if all interested parties have the necessary political will. If not, Georgia will have to resolve any problems that arise on its own. The Georgian state's capacity to deal effectively with the challenges emanating from the North Caucasus will depend on its strength and internal development. If Georgia manages to develop further and attract external investment, a possible shift in the current balance of power in the North Caucasus might open up the prospect of a favourable resolution of the problem of finding a mutually acceptable compromise with Russia, and with Abkhazia and South Ossetia.

## The North Caucasus in the 2008 Russia-Georgia war

ARCHIL GEGESHIDZE

The Russia-Georgia war of 2008 has already been the subject of several analyses by Georgian and foreign observers, politicians and political scientists. No other conflict in the “post-Soviet space” has attracted so much attention in the form of conferences, essays or articles. However, in most cases the war has been viewed as one episode in a longer historical process in which Russia, the West, Georgia, the Abkhaz and the South Ossetian sides are engaged at varying levels and for a variety of motives. Whether we agree or disagree with the arguments and conclusions of these attempts to make sense of the events, the sheer quantity of analyses clearly indicates the significance of these events and the multiplicity of their causes and consequences. It is also clear that the topic is far from exhausted. Although the 2008 war is no longer in the headlines, it will continue to be of interest to current and future chroniclers for some time to come. This particular article is dedicated to an issue that has received less attention: the cause and effect relationship between the North Caucasus factor and the August 2008 war. Our hypothesis is that the North Caucasus factor had a decisive influence on the grounds for, planning and course of military action.

### The North Caucasus factor: a definition

The North Caucasus, in common with all the earth’s populated areas, has its own unique identity based on its geography, history, politics, culture and demographic processes. Historically, its unique political geography has meant that the North Caucasus has always had the potential to figure in the geopolitical codes<sup>59</sup> of entities from the wider region, including the South Caucasus as well as more distant players. Following the collapse of the Soviet Union and the increase in independence and sovereignty of the former Soviet republics in the South Caucasus, this potential started to increase steadily. The construction of a new energy corridor avoiding Russian territory and the increasingly independent foreign and security policy adopted by the countries in the region, particularly Georgia, were viewed with alarm by Russia. In response, Russia attempted to obstruct them, all the more since these processes in the South Caucasus were backed by the West. Russia could not shake off its inferiority complex due to the Soviet Union’s defeat by the West in the Cold War.

The North Caucasus had now become a border region adjoining a potential danger zone with geopolitical significance<sup>60</sup> both as a resource and an instrument for influencing the course of the political and economic processes in the South Caucasus. The aim was to align the geopolitical codes of all local and external stakeholders with Russia’s code using any methods on the principle that ‘the end justifies the means’. In other words, the North Caucasus was to form a base from which to launch a policy of coercion.

In fact, the North Caucasus was eminently suited for this. The region is directly adjacent to the “danger zone”; a major military force is concentrated on its territory; and its strategic depth allows it to provide rearguard support for military action to the south of the Caucasus mountains.

The 2008 war was another demonstration of the North Caucasus’ potential to affect the situation across the wider region. This war, like the other conflicts, was determined by politics, geography,

59 In geopolitical discourse, geopolitical codes are the political geography assumptions behind the foreign policy decisions of states. These codes generally comprise: a) a definition of the interests of a state; b) the definition and awareness of external threats to these interests; c) planning of suitable responses to these threats; and d) justification for those responses. See, for example, P.J. Taylor and C. Flint (2000). *Political Geography: World Economy, Nation-state and Locality*, Prentice Hall, pp. 62–63.

60 English-language studies on geopolitics refer to these as “fault line regions [states]”.

physical military might and the quality of the military command structure. In the North Caucasus, all these components were physically present. Therefore, the present article treats the North Caucasus region as a factor in the 2008 war. The analysis of the North Caucasus factor below relates mainly to its impact on the motivation and conduct of the Russian side, since Georgia did not have access to the North Caucasus as a resource for waging war (even though the war took place on Georgian territory).

## The North Caucasus factor: the political dimension

Before and after the 2008 Russia-Georgia war, as in most cases of this type, the parties attempted to justify their actions. These attempts form part of a propaganda war which continues today and in which the official media and formidable intellectual and diplomatic resources of the interested parties are engaged. The back-and-forth nature of the propaganda war produced two opposing views on who had started the war and why. One view, justifying Russia's actions, is based on the following narrative:

'Russia's actions were a response to aggression by Georgia. Georgia was bent on war and chose to ignore its commitments under bilateral and multilateral agreements and the peace negotiations aimed at settling the Georgian-South Ossetian conflict, preferring to use crude military force. It launched a surprise night-time attack on the city of Tskhinvali and attempted to wipe out the population, mostly Russian citizens, using multiple rocket launchers and heavy artillery. The victims of this vicious attack included Russian peacekeepers serving in the region under the above agreements. The only way to overcome the aggressor and save the South Ossetian people from inevitable genocide was the peace enforcement operation that was carried out. Without Russia's prompt and vigorous response, Abkhazia would have been next in line, as is shown by many documents obtained or seized after the Georgian army surrendered.'

No wonder that this line is also taken by the Abkhaz and the South Ossetian sides who partake as best they can in the propaganda war on Russia's side. This is also the view shared by the expert community in Russia and by some Western analysts. The other response is based on a pro-Georgian narrative:

'Russia and its puppet regime in Tskhinvali provoked Tbilisi into retaliatory measures that were then used as a pretext for a large-scale incursion by Russia into Georgia and the subsequent occupation of 20 per cent of its territory. The rocket attacks on Tskhinvali were a response to provocation under duress and cannot be considered as starting the war. The starting point of the war should instead be looked for in the covert or overt actions of Russia and its puppets which started months and even years before. Russia's real objective cannot have been to protect its "own citizens" in South Ossetia – after all, this is a country that destroyed 300,000 of its own citizens in Chechnya. In fact, it was guided by wide-ranging geopolitical imperatives, namely to punish Saakashvili's defiantly pro-Western regime and prevent a dangerous rapprochement between Georgia and NATO. If successful, Georgia's existing pro-Western policies might become an undesirable precedent for other post-Soviet republics which might follow its example and attempt to break with the Russian sphere of influence. However, Russia was just as concerned at the prospect of an increase in centrifugal forces in the North Caucasus that could occur if Georgia, not entirely loyal to the idea of a strong and authoritarian Russia, were to emerge as a prosperous and Western-style modernised state on its southern borders. Without the war and subsequent occupation of Abkhazia and South Ossetia, Russia would not have been able to halt this process.'

The overwhelming majority of Western experts, as well as the Georgian political elite, share this view. But the important thing here is not to establish which of these versions is correct or even

which has the greatest number of supporters. Much has already been said and written on this, including by the present author.<sup>61</sup> For the purposes of this article, it is important to establish the role of the North Caucasus: what might its role have been as a contributory factor to the unfolding of events under either of these versions?

If we examine the first pro-Russian narrative, it would appear as if there is no direct cause and effect relation. The “humanitarian intervention” motive that permeates the plot of this narrative proceeds from genuinely “humanistic motives” of the Russian state and is universal in nature. The universality of this motive means that Moscow was acting for “the citizens of Russia” regardless of where they live, in any country, and this has no particular relation to the North Caucasus. However, closer inspection reveals additional arguments. They may not be the main arguments and thus “are not included in the narrative”. Nevertheless, such arguments may have been significant in forming the motivation for the “humanitarian intervention”. The most widespread conclusion drawn by Russian experts relates to the complex political circumstances in the North Caucasus. In particular, the Kremlin had to show the “unruly” North Caucasians that it was in solidarity with their blood brothers (the Abkhaz and the Ossetians) in the fight against “Georgian imperialism”. In this interpretation, failure to respond to “the Georgian aggressors” would have been seen at best as weakness of the Federal centre and at worst as an open disregard for the fate of their blood brothers. In either case, it would have added to the already difficult situation in the North Caucasus.

The pro-Georgian version of the war includes a number of arguments purporting to demonstrate that a war with Georgia was in Russia’s interests. These interests are all geopolitical in nature and it is difficult to choose which of them is the most important. One of these arguments is directly related to the North Caucasus. A strong and prosperous Georgia that was not loyal to authoritarian Russia might have been capable of shifting the centre of gravity in its own direction, thereby undermining the authority of the Russian Federation in the region. The Kremlin realised that the economic and social disintegration as well as moral collapse that this would inevitably entail would have increased tension in relations between the region and the Centre that would ‘constitute a threat to Federal order and the socio-economic structure of the Russian Federation.’<sup>62</sup>

Another factor unconnected to the narratives listed above – but which served as an additional argument for the formation of the “enforcement” policy – is the presence of an “anti-Georgia” public mood in the North Caucasus that supported “protecting our blood brothers”. The “anti-Georgia” attitude, which goes back to the 1992–1993 war in Abkhazia, remains to this day – albeit in a rather different form. Georgia’s position during the wars in Chechnya, particularly their acceptance of several thousand Chechen refugees, considerably improved the way Georgia and Georgians were perceived in the North Caucasus. Despite this, the negative attitude remains, leading to a rag-tag army of mercenaries and adventurers simply waiting to be mobilised. This was an additional factor that made it easier for the Kremlin to take decisions that would harm Georgia. On the other hand, the factor of “anti-Georgia” attitudes in Georgia was not fully appreciated by the Georgian side; this contributed, although not decisively, to its blunders when preparing for hostile action from Russia.

## The North Caucasus factor: the military strategic dimension

**Geographical aspects:** The age-old debate between geo-determinists and geo-indeterminists over the impact of geographical space and climatic conditions on statehood continues, with no clear winners. Until recently, the “opponents” of geography appeared to be winning the argument

61 See, for example, A. Gegeshidze (2009). ‘The August Events: Background Factors of the Crisis, Causes and Prospects of Elimination’, in S. Tsiskarishvili (Ed.) *Crisis in Georgia 2008: Preconditions, Reality, Perspectives*, Tbilisi, Independent Experts’ Club. Available at [http://fes.ge/de/images/Fes\\_Files/09\\_GeoP/crisis%202008%20in%20georgia\\_final.pdf](http://fes.ge/de/images/Fes_Files/09_GeoP/crisis%202008%20in%20georgia_final.pdf) (696Kb PDF).

62 See full article in Russian at [http://nvo.ng.ru/concepts/1999-11-26/1\\_cons1.html](http://nvo.ng.ru/concepts/1999-11-26/1_cons1.html).

– ‘space and borders are passive neutral elements’, whilst ‘a defining role must be assigned to politics and the technologies that have transformed space and borders’. However, the recent rise in problems mainly connected with climate change has restored the former balance between the two camps.

In our case, however, it is clear that the geography of the North Caucasus determined to a significant extent the preparation, course and consequences of the 2008 war.<sup>63</sup> Once the political decision was taken to teach “unruly” Georgia a lesson and the military were involved, the first task was to develop a strategic plan. Drawing up a strategy – in other words an overall plan for the conduct of military action – involves a number of elements or dimensions. Different writers on strategy have different views on the precise number. Clausewitz, for example, thinks that strategy consists of five components. Howard’s view is that it includes just four components. Grey, on the other hand, is convinced that a military strategy is comprised of 17 elements.<sup>64</sup> What most of these writers agree on is that any strategy must include geographical conditions (space, horizontal and vertical roughness of the relief, distances and climate).

The geography of the North Caucasus presented a set of possibilities and limitations. This space is characterised both by quantitative parameters (the distances which need to be travelled) and qualitative (obstacles or communication routes). Some of these make it easier to carry out objectives; others prevent it. The principal enabling circumstance is **proximity to the theatre of operations** – the North Caucasus borders directly with Georgia, more specifically with South Ossetia and Shida Kartli. It is also important to bear in mind that there were plans that any future war would open a second front in Abkhazia. Although the theatre of operations was on Georgian territory in 2008, from a military strategy perspective the North Caucasus had an important function as a logistics and rearguard support base for Russian armed forces during military action.

The geographical proximity and vicinity to the theatre of operations also played an important role in **preparations for war**. For example, according to press reports, a meeting of the Security Council of South Ossetia was held on 3rd August 2008 in Tskhinvali – that is, the centre of the future theatre of operations. The meeting was attended by Nikolai Pankov, Russia’s Deputy Defence Minister, the Deputy Head of the Russian Military Intelligence Service (GRU) [name not provided – A.G.] and Anatoly Khrulev, the Commander of the 58th Army. The meeting was also attended by the military and political leaders of South Ossetia, Marat Kulakhmetov, commander of the Combined Peacekeeping Forces, and Konstantin Friyev, commander of the Ossetian peacekeeping battalion. A meeting of the Abkhaz Security Council was held at the very same time. That was the day on which the mobilisation of “volunteers” and Cossacks began in the North Caucasus.<sup>65</sup>

Twenty-five container-loads of arms had been delivered to Abkhazia months earlier. These unlawful arms consignments included, among others, armoured personnel carriers, D-30 howitzers, BUK-M1 surface-to-air missiles, BM-21 Grad rocket launchers and Shilka self-propelled anti-aircraft weapons. A slightly smaller arms consignment was also sent to South Ossetia.<sup>66</sup> Moreover, on 4th and 5th August 2008, virtually on the eve of the war, the following were deployed to the

63 Geographically, the North Caucasus consists of the Fore-Caucasus and the Caucasus mountain chain proper. The Fore-Caucasus consists of high steppe with a north-western and north-eastern declivity. It is located midway between the highest points of the Kuma and Kuban rivers. To the south, the Fore-Caucasus has a high hilly relief and merges almost imperceptibly with the northern outliers of the Caucasus mountain chain. The mountain chain, whose average elevation is just under 4,000 metres above sea level, is crossed by a number of roads, particularly in its western and eastern sections. In the middle section, on the other hand, there are only mountain paths. The main mountain pass roads are the Georgian Military Highway through the Krestovy Pass and the Transcaucasian Highway through the Roki Pass. In the winter period, roads are often closed for long periods following heavy snowfall because of the risk of avalanches. The area of the North Caucasus is equivalent to 1.5 percent of the total area of Russia, but its population is over 10 percent of the country’s total population. It is the most densely populated region in the Russian Federation.

64 See C.S. Grey (1999). ‘Inescapable Geography’, in C.S. Grey and G. Sloan (Eds.) *Geopolitics: Geography and Strategy*, pp. 169–170.

65 See article in Russian at <http://www.novayagazeta.ru/politics/44515.html?print=1>.

66 R.D. Asmus (2010). *A Little War that Shook the World. Georgia, Russia, and the Future of the West*, p. 166.

northern portal of the Roki tunnel: the 135th and 693rd Motorised Rifle Regiments of the 19th Division of the 58th Army, the 104th and 234th Air Assault Regiments of the 76th Air Assault Guards Division, the 217th Air Assault Regiment of the 96th Air Assault Division and the 31st Separate Special Forces Air Assault Brigade. These comprised 11,693 servicemen, 891 armoured vehicles and 138 artillery weapons.<sup>67</sup> This was purportedly so that they could ‘deploy troops in the quickest possible timeframe to assist the peacekeeping forces in South Ossetia’.<sup>68</sup>

This new strategic manoeuvring capability and the unexpected shift of the focus of the escalation in tension from Abkhazia to South Ossetia were of great significance. This manoeuvrability later allowed Russia to open a second front in Abkhazia.

If it had not been for the North Caucasus and its contiguity with Abkhazia and South Ossetia, operations of this kind would have been impossible.

Another contributory geographical factor is the similarity between **the terrain and climate of the North Caucasus and the theatre of operations**. Russian troops had begun large-scale summer exercises in conditions very close to the theatre of operations. From 2006, annual exercises were conducted on North Ossetian territory involving an increasing amount of military technology and troops. In July 2008, exercises on an unprecedented scale were held involving 8,000 soldiers and officers, 700 armoured vehicles, and 30 aeroplanes and helicopters. Unlike previous exercises, the notional enemy was the Georgian army and the object of the exercises was to hone skills in “peace enforcement”.

However, most of the geographical features of the North Caucasus limit rather than enable action. **The land border between Russia and Georgia, particularly the South Ossetian section, passes through high mountains.** The average height of this 74-kilometre-long section is over 4,000 metres above sea level and the vertical roughness of the relief creates unfavourable conditions for the rapid deployment of troops to the theatre of operations. The Roki road tunnel runs through the Caucasus mountain range at a height of 2.5 kilometres above sea level and is 3,660 metres long. In addition, the shortest corridor to the theatre of operations, the narrow North-South Didi Liakhvi Gorge, makes land-based troops vulnerable to enemy attacks. This aspect of the local geography of the North Caucasus was a decisive factor that defined the nature of military operations throughout its different stages. It meant that the types of military technology and troops deployed had to reflect the geographical conditions.

**Military aspects:** These limitations are not as significant where airpower and ballistic missiles are concerned. However, if the goal set at strategic level is to occupy hostile territory and destroy the enemy’s military infrastructure, aeroplanes and missiles alone are insufficient. In the 2008 war, Russia had to deploy its air force, army and navy. In this context, the North Caucasus factor was crucially significant since the land forces deployed in the war were under the North Caucasus Military District (NCMD).

The 58th Combined Operation Army was deployed on NCMD territory.<sup>69</sup> It contained approximately 70,000 servicemen. The army’s arsenal consisted of 609 tanks, almost 2,000 armoured personnel carriers, 125 mortars and ordnance, 190 Grad rocket launchers and 450 anti-aircraft weapons. It consisted of the 42nd (Khankala, Chechen Republic) and 19th (Vladikavkaz, North Ossetia) Motorised Rifle Divisions, the 135th Separate Motorised Rifle Regiment (Prokhladny, Kabardino-Balkariya), five separate motorised rifle brigades (including the 33rd and 34th mountain brigades in Dagestan and Karachaevo-Cherkessiya), the 1st Guards Tactical Missile Brigade (Krasnodar),

<sup>67</sup> S. Cornell and S.F. Starr (Eds.) (2009). *The Guns of August 2008. Russia’s War in Georgia*, p. 75.

<sup>68</sup> See article in Russian at <http://www.novayagazeta.ru/politics/44515.html?print=1>.

<sup>69</sup> From 4th October 2010, the NCMD was abolished and replaced with a new structure – the Southern Military District (SMD). The SMD comprised combined and combat units of the NCMD, the Black Sea Fleet, the Caspian Flotilla, the Fourth Air Force Command and the Air Defence Force.

artillery brigades and regiments, and other combined and individual units. Also deployed on the territory of the NCMD were the 20th Motorised Rifle Division, the 7th Guards Air Assault (Mountain) Division (Novorossiysk), the 60th Combat Training Centre (“Kapustin Yar” training range), separate helicopter regiments and squadrons, anti-aircraft missile brigades and regiments, and other units under central and district command. The total combined and separate units in the District amounted to between 80,000 and 90,000 personnel.

A significant portion<sup>70</sup> of the air force in the North Caucasus also took part in military action. There were approximately 20 airbases under the command of the 4th Airborne Army of the Air Force and Air Defence Force<sup>71</sup> from its headquarters in Rostov-on-Don under the direct command of the Russian Air Force. The number of serving servicemen was 8,000 persons. Assault regiments, anti-aircraft missile regiments, radio signalling regiments, bomber regiments, helicopter regiments, electronic warfare battalions, etc. were stationed at these bases. They were armed with: SU-24M and SU-25SM bombers; MiG-29 and SU-27 fighter aircraft; and Mi-8, Mi24 and Mi-28N helicopters. It should be noted in particular that a number of divisions and regiments of the 4th Airborne Army were equipped with modern S-300PM anti-aircraft defence systems. It is important to note that virtually all Georgian territory was within the range of the frontline aircraft and the combat helicopters stationed in the North Caucasus. For example, Budyonovsk – where one of the many airbases and one of a number of helicopter regiments were situated – was just 235 kilometres from the Georgian border and 350 kilometres from Tbilisi.

Russia clearly had enormous potential resources for meeting its strategic objective. In reality, it did not need to use all this firepower. This is partly because the warships from the Black Sea Fleet also took part in the military action in addition to the air force and ground forces. They landed additional weaponry and personnel, blockaded Georgian ports and made an important contribution to achieving the overall strategic goal. Russia thus carried out the first combined military operation since the Second World War (see Figure on following page). According to various estimates, between 25,000 and 40,000 Russian servicemen, approximately 1,200 armoured units and artillery weapons, 200 aircraft and 40 helicopters were deployed in the war.<sup>72</sup> Russian helicopters carried out approximately 300 combat sorties, particularly in the first days of their engagement in military action. Of these sorties, 43 were attacks on various targets outside the immediate theatre of operations.

Finally, South Ossetian militias and volunteers from the North Caucasus fought side by side with the Russian army. The precise number of these units is unknown but it is clear that there were at least several hundred persons involved. Many of them committed acts of looting and plunder along with soldiers from Russian subunits. Georgian journalists identified a number of cases of looting by officers and sergeants in the Russian army.

## Conclusion

The 2008 Russia-Georgia war confirmed yet again the significance of the North Caucasus as a factor influencing the course of political processes in Georgia. Despite the complexity of the processes occurring in the North Caucasus region itself, connected with security, political, socio-economic, religious and other problems, Russia is still capable of controlling the situation. Moreover, it is capable of using the region’s political, geographical and strategic military resources as an instrument to promote its interests outside its borders, particularly within Georgia.

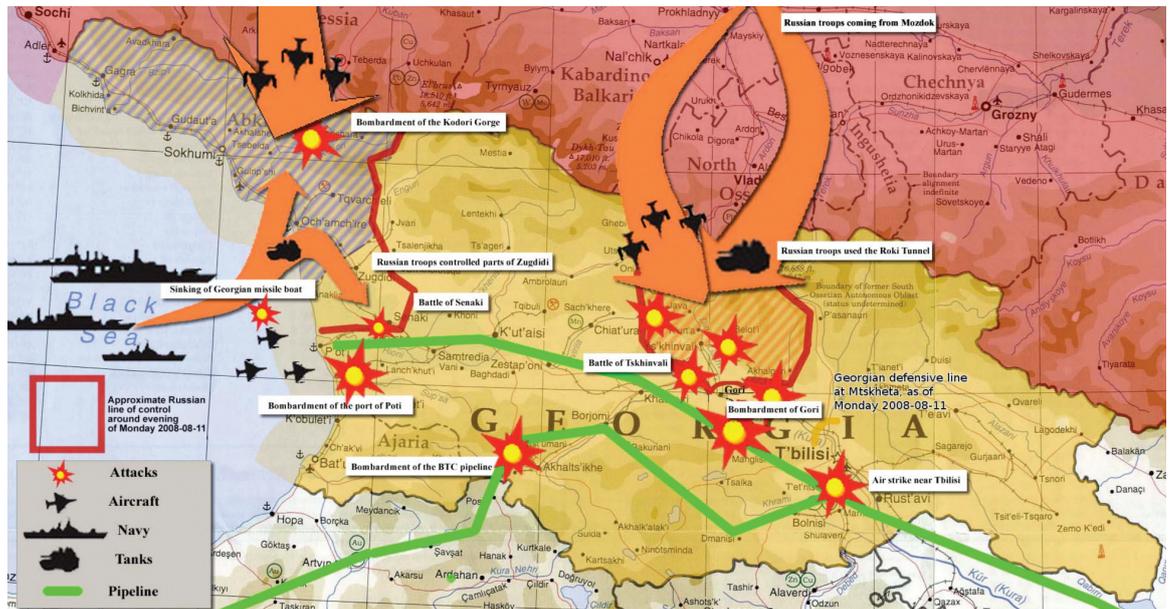
70 The 76th Pskov Air Assault Division and TU-22M strategic bombers from the 37th Airborne Army were also engaged in the course of the war.

71 Reformed in 2009 into the 4th Command Air Force and Air Defence Force.

72 A. Cohen and R. Hamilton (2011). *The Russian Military and the Georgia War: Lessons and Implications*, Strategic Studies Institute, p. 11.

## Map of the August war

Source: Wikimedia Commons: <http://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Georgia-War-2008-08-11.jpg>



## Georgia's North Caucasus policy in the context of the post-August "new realities"

IVLIAN HAINDRAVA

Georgia cannot be said to have had any obvious deliberate or consistent policy on the North Caucasus prior to 2008. Zviad Gamsakhurdia, the country's first president, did propose the idea of a "Common Caucasian Home". However, this idea quickly stalled, partly because Gamsakhurdia himself did not hold onto power long enough to implement all of his plans (which were in fact rather confused, some even potentially undermining Georgian statehood). In any case, no one had any idea on what basis a "Common Caucasian Home" would be constructed or what it might look like. Furthermore, this rather extravagant concept already had a rival in the form of the Confederation of Mountain Peoples of the Caucasus (KGNK), created in 1989 with its headquarters in Sukhumi (the word "Mountain" was later removed). We can safely assume that Gamsakhurdia intended Georgia to occupy a leading role in the "Caucasian Home" project. However, the KGNK turned out to be an anti-Georgian project (although Gamsakhurdia did send his representatives to its meetings), since its only legacy was its active participation on the Abkhaz side in the 1992–1993 Georgian-Abkhaz conflict. Even during the two bloody wars in Chechnya, the Confederation did not raise a finger to protect the Chechen people. Apart from one episode when Gamsakhurdia found safe haven in Grozny after he was toppled, the early 1990s – a period of conflict in Abkhazia and South Ossetia – saw an abrupt deterioration in relations between Georgia and the peoples of the North Caucasus (to varying degrees depending on the people) and fomented mutual distrust.

Georgia's second president, Eduard Shevardnadze, dealt with the North Caucasus issue on an ad hoc basis, only responding to processes in the North Caucasus that directly affected Georgia. In practice, this concerned the problem of Chechen refugees and the situation around the Pankisi Gorge, which was a serious headache for Georgia. Closing the Georgian border to Chechens fleeing from the terrors of Federal troops as they "restored constitutional order" would have been morally indefensible and politically short-sighted. Moreover, Georgia did not at the time have the resources needed to erect barriers and screen militants from civilians. Georgia faced constant pressure over the Pankisi Gorge from Russia, which even launched air bombardments against its neighbour's territory under the pretext of preventive strikes against militants' bases. In the end, Shevardnadze managed to "sort out" the situation, although not without the help of the Americans: their "train and equip" programme enabled Georgia to address the problem of Chechen fighters in the Pankisi Gorge without harming the majority of the refugees. This allowed Georgia to save face in the eyes of the West and the North Caucasians (particularly the Chechens). However, this did not go any further and Georgia was still unable to gain Moscow's trust, partly because Moscow itself had no interest in providing it.<sup>73</sup>

With very few exceptions, Georgian politicians and experts generally ignored the North Caucasus. Virtually the only "North Caucasus expert" was Mamuka Areshidze, with little or no competition or indeed support from others. Sporadic attempts were made to understand the North Caucasus generally and to locate it within the context of Georgia-Russia relations. One such attempt by the current author postulated that the North Caucasus was becoming an "area of permanent instability" that required a new conceptual approach from Georgia.<sup>74</sup> But no such concept emerged.

73 For details, see: I. Menagarishvili, N. Melikadze and G. Gvimradze [2010]. *North Caucasus as a Factor in Russian-Georgian Relations*, Institute for Strategic Studies (with the assistance of the Friedrich Ebert Foundation), Tbilisi, pp. 111–114.

74 I. Haindrava [1999]. 'Religioznaya voyna na Severnom Kavkaze: vzglyad iz Gruzii' [Religious war in the North Caucasus: a view from Georgia], in *Tsentrāl'naya Aziya i Kavkaz* [Central Asia and the Caucasus], No. 5(6). Available in Russian at <http://www.ca-c.org/journal/cac-06-1999/haindrava.shtml>.

The first foreign policy action by Georgia's third president, Mikheil Saakashvili, was to visit Moscow on 11th February 2004. However, the "thaw" in relations between the two countries, which the Georgian president had himself announced, was quickly replaced by an open clash of personalities between Vladimir Putin and Saakashvili and increasing enmity between the countries, each accusing the other of all manner of transgressions.<sup>75</sup> For the sake of balance, we should note that this enmity had existed from the very first days of Georgian independence, but its culmination in the August 2008 war was entirely due to Putin/Medvedev on the one hand and Saakashvili on the other. Before then, the North Caucasus was more or less below the Georgian political radar. After August 2008, this changed completely.

## Main elements of Georgia's North Caucasus policy after 2008

In the post-war period, the Georgian administration undertook a series of actions which imply that it intended to pursue an active policy towards the North Caucasus. These can be divided into three (overlapping) categories, as outlined below.

1. **Organisational measures** to form the institutional basis for implementing a specific North Caucasus policy:
  - a) Setting up a friendship group in the Georgian parliament with the parliaments of the North Caucasus in December 2009;
  - b) Renaming the parliamentary Committee on Relations with Compatriots Residing Abroad as the Diaspora and Caucasus Issues Committee in December 2010;
  - c) Deciding in February 2011 to create a special commission on Caucasus affairs under the Office of the State Minister of Georgia for Diaspora Issues.
  
2. **Actions based on ideology and propaganda**, setting out a basis for a North Caucasus policy and designed to win "hearts and minds", such as:
  - a) A speech by Mikheil Saakashvili to the UN General Assembly on 23rd September 2010 in which he presented his vision of 'a free, stable and united Caucasus';<sup>76</sup>
  - b) The launch in January 2010 of the "First Caucasus" TV channel (renamed PIK – Russian abbreviation for First Caucasus Information – after broadcasts were temporarily halted), with a target audience primarily in the North Caucasus;
  - c) Convening an international conference on 'Hidden Nations, Enduring Crimes: The Circassians and the Peoples of the Caucasus between Past and Future' in March 2010 in Tbilisi. In November of the same year, a second conference was held on the same theme;
  - d) The opening in Tbilisi in October 2011 of the Centre of Circassian Culture;
  - e) Publishing a tender for a memorial to the victims of the genocide of the Circassian people.
  
3. **Political actions** with potentially far-reaching consequences – to date these are:
  - a) The decision to introduce a visa-free regime for residents of the North Caucasus entities of the Russian Federation which came into force on 13th October 2010;
  - b) The passing on 20th May 2011 by the Georgian Parliament of a Resolution recognising the genocide of the Circassian (Adyghe) people during the Russian-Caucasian War.

We examine each group below in terms of the political and legal aspects as well as sustainability over time, identifying the potential inherent in each action.

<sup>75</sup> See, for example, International Conflict Group (ICG), 'Georgia-Russia: Learn to Live Like Neighbours', Briefing No. 65, August 2011. Available at <http://www.crisisgroup.org/en/regions/europe/south-caucasus/georgia/B065-georgia-russia-learn-to-live-like-neighbours.aspx>.

<sup>76</sup> See full speech in English: 'Remarks of H.E. Mikheil Saakashvili, President of Georgia on the 65th Session of the United Nations General Assembly' on 24th September 2010, at <http://www.president.gov.ge/en/PressOffice/News/SpeechesAndStatements/?p=5505&i=4>.

## Organisational measures

Resolutions establishing “friendship groups” with the parliaments of other countries would normally be seen as entirely constructive steps. Resolution 1773 (2010) PACE, for example, encourages ‘the establishment of parliamentary friendship and similar groups among national parliaments, in order to promote the exchange of good practice, in particular in the parliamentary and political field’.<sup>77</sup> On closer inspection, however, there is an obvious asymmetry in establishing a “Friendship group with the parliaments of the North Caucasus” within the Georgian parliament. In this case, the parliament of a sovereign state and UN member is announcing its intention to be friends, not with the parliament of another UN member state, but with the parliaments of (neighbouring) political entities within the Russian state. Asymmetry of this kind is not in accordance with international practice, although it might perhaps have been less surprising if the two UN member countries involved (Georgia and Russia) had good neighbourly relations and the action had been agreed in advance. However, following the August 2008 war, Georgia broke off diplomatic relations with the Russian Federation and any show of friendship at the official level with individual entities within Russia is bound to raise questions. Russia has of course gone much further than Georgia and crossed a “red line” by recognising the independence of Abkhazia and South Ossetia, establishing diplomatic relations with them and opening embassies in Sukhumi and Tskhinvali. However, these decisions are not only opposed by the overwhelming majority of countries, but are also directly criticised by many of them as well as by many international organisations. In other words, Georgia has responded to an illegal act by Russia against itself,<sup>78</sup> by departing from international practice and putting itself in an ambiguous position. In the end, the parliaments of the republics of the North Caucasus predictably failed to respond to the initiative, with loyalty to Moscow being essential to ensure the continuation of vitally important cash transfers to republican budgets.

Two other actions taken by the Georgian administration under the same heading – renaming the parliamentary Relations with Compatriots Residing Abroad as the Diaspora and the Caucasus Issues Committee, and the creation of a Special Commission on Caucasus Affairs under the Office of the State Minister of Georgia on Diaspora Issues – appear to be aimed at:

1. Reinforcing the use of the term “Georgian diaspora” in everyday usage (the post of State Minister for Diaspora Issues was first set up in February 2008). This had not previously been commonly heard in Georgian discourse (a full discussion of this question is, however, outside the scope of this article);
2. Emphasising the special significance of the Caucasus (including the North) for Georgian policy.

On the second point, there is little doubt. However, there is little information available on what precisely this Special Commission, which was intended to study political and social processes in the North Caucasus republics,<sup>79</sup> has actually done or achieved since it was set up – apart from announcing a tender for a memorial commemorating the victims of the Circassian (Adyghe) people, based on the Georgian Parliament’s Resolution of 1st July 2011 (the tender was awarded in December 2011 to a sculptor from Kabardino-Balkaria). Nonetheless, this hardly required the establishment of a Special Commission.

## Actions based on ideology and propaganda

In his speech to the UN General Assembly on 23rd September 2010, President Saakashvili recalled the common history and common interests of the peoples of the Caucasus, calling on them to establish

<sup>77</sup> See details of the Resolution, ‘Development of a Parliamentary Democracy’ at, <http://www.assembly.coe.int/ASP/Doc/XrefViewHTML.asp?FileID=17926&Language=EN>.

<sup>78</sup> See ‘Recognition of the independence of Abkhazia and South Ossetia is in violation of international law’, in *Report of the Independent International Fact-Finding Mission on the Conflict in Georgia*, Vol. 1, p. 17. Available at <http://www.ceig.ch/Report.html>.

<sup>79</sup> For more information (in Russian), see ‘Creation of a Special Commission on Caucasus Affairs under the Office of the State Minister of Georgia on Diaspora Issues’, available at <http://pik.tv/ru/news/story/4721-speckomissii-po-voprosam-kavkaza-sozdaetsia-v-ministerstve-po-delam-diaspor-gruzii>.

direct people-to-people contacts and initiate projects in the fields of energy, education and culture. His speech included references to political and economic cooperation, the creation of a common market, and regional self-sufficiency which would end its reliance on external aid. ‘In terms of human and cultural space, there is no North and South Caucasus – there is one Caucasus’, Saakashvili stated, going on to say that the Caucasus does not only belong to European civilisation but is one of the birthplaces of that civilisation. Other messages were that: ‘Our unity would not be directed against anyone and, once again, we will not aspire to change any borders’; ‘It is time to stop fighting and weakening each other and to realise that our strength consists in our unity’; ‘Our region will never be truly free if it is not united.’<sup>80</sup> No further details have since emerged on the Georgian president’s initiative: during a visit to Georgia in November 2011 by the Armenian President, Serzh Sargsyan, Saakashvili merely repeated the main points of his speech a year earlier.<sup>81</sup> As a result, it is viewed by many as an attempt to revive Gamsakhurdia’s contradictory and illusory concept of a “Common Caucasian Home”, now almost forgotten. Little remains of the concept itself, apart from Georgian ambition and its claim to leadership in the Caucasus “region” (which is not in political terms a region at all). Therefore, it has not been taken up by Georgia’s neighbours – the Azerbaijani press, for example, responding with vitriol to Saakashvili’s “variations on a theme of Caucasian unity” during talks with his Armenian counterpart in Tbilisi. Such ambition is, in any case, well beyond the country’s capacities, burdened as it is by a range of internal and external problems.

In the virtual sphere, however, Saakashvili and his government are even more active than in the real world. In January 2010, the “First Caucasus” Russian-language television channel began broadcasting from the state-funded “public broadcast” channel, an event vehemently criticised by the Russian authorities.<sup>82</sup> The owners of the relevant satellite (the French company EUTELSAT), which allowed the channel to be broadcast over a relatively large territory, soon ran into difficulties and the broadcast was stopped “for technical reasons”. However, it was soon replaced by another satellite (Hot Bird) and the channel went back on air, renamed PIK (First Caucasian Information Channel). The channel was officially intended to counter anti-Georgian propaganda in the official Russian media and to provide its audience with objective information on events within Georgia and the Caucasus region. In practice, it is well recognised that the channel is more interested in open propaganda than counterpropaganda (despite a statement on the channel’s website that it does not plan ‘to combat propaganda with propaganda’): all current affairs programmes (and particularly news bulletins) attempt to portray Georgia in the most favourable light, at the same time portraying Russia in the most unfavourable light. The propaganda is directed at audiences outside Georgia<sup>83</sup> (Georgian television is already saturated with pro-government propaganda) and primarily at the North Caucasus,<sup>84</sup> although there is little airtime devoted specifically to the North Caucasus. It is hard to judge the extent to which the PIK broadcasts are achieving their aims in the North Caucasus (and elsewhere), although official circles in Russia are now clearly less concerned about it. In fact, on 5th August 2011, PIK was given the honour of providing one of three interviewers of the then President of the Russian Federation, Medvedev (along with the TV channel “Russia Today” and the radio station “Ekho Moskvy”). Russia’s senior politician thus more or less legitimised the channel in his country. (For this author, at least, the complete ramifications of this political game are unclear.)

80 Extracts from ‘Remarks of H.E Mikheil Saakashvili, President of Georgia on the 65th Session of the United Nations General Assembly’ on 24th September 2010.

81 See article ‘Saakashvili: United Caucasus Has No Alternative’, *Civil Ge*, 29th November 2011, available at <http://www.civil.ge/eng/article.php?id=24200>.

82 ‘The creation of the Georgian propaganda machine, the Russian-language television channel “First Caucasus”, which began broadcasting this year, requires the closest scrutiny. It will produce anti-Russian and anti-government propaganda messages and extremist ideology’, the Russian Deputy Minister of the Interior, Arkady Yedelev, stated. See article ‘Georgian television starts broadcasting in Russian’, available in Russian at <http://inotv.rt.com/2010-01-19/Pervij-Kavkazskij---mashina-propagandi>.

83 According to a survey of public opinion, conducted by the National Democratic Institute in September 2011, PIK is watched by just 3 percent of Georgian citizens.

84 ‘The channel’s aim is for us to be watched in the Caucasus, where the population currently receives information mainly from Russian television’, stated the head of PIK, the British journalist R. Parsons. See article ‘End of the Kremlin’s monopoly on information in the Caucasus’, available in Russian at <http://kavkasia.net/Georgia/2011/1295914608.php>.

In March and November 2010, Ilia State University in Tbilisi held two international conferences on the topic ‘Hidden Nations, Enduring Crimes: The Circassians and the Peoples of the Caucasus between the Past and Future’, in collaboration with the Jamestown Foundation (US). The latter foundation is a think tank that also organised a discussion entitled ‘Circassians: Past, Present and Future’ on 21st May 2007 in Washington. The discussion was organised together with the US Circassian Cultural Fund and touched on the topic of the genocide of the Circassian people in the Russian Empire in the 19th century. This suggests that the “Circassian question” did not spontaneously emerge as part of the Georgian post-August 2008 arsenal, but developed as a result of circumstances that were favourable to the initiators – but extremely unfavourable for Georgia since the outcome of the 2008 war could not in any way be called “favourable”. The first Tbilisi conference passed an appeal to the Georgian parliament to recognise the Circassian genocide; the second Tbilisi conference called for a boycott of the Olympic Games in Sochi (these issues are discussed below).

The other actions under this heading are on a much smaller scale. The opening of a Centre of Circassian Culture in Tbilisi would have been an entirely welcome development were it not for a highly politicised response from Andro Gabisonia, the representative of the Circassian Congress in Georgia: ‘Friendship between Circassians and Georgians is important primarily as [a means of them] uniting and gaining power. Previously, we have neglected work on the peoples of the North Caucasus, which has been to some extent a blind spot in our life. The significance of this event for Georgia is that a serious political force is developing in the North Caucasus, and Georgia’s status as a country which unites peoples is being reinforced.’<sup>85</sup> Unsurprisingly, this accords with Saakashvili’s speech to the UN General Assembly and indirectly confirms Georgia’s aforementioned ambition.

The plans to erect a memorial to the victims of the genocide of the Circassian people in the newly built tourist resort of Anakliya – right next to Abkhazia – were also underpinned by “multi-vector” propaganda.

### Political actions

On 13th October 2010, the Georgian government’s resolution to introduce a 90-day visa-free regime for citizens of the Russian Federation with permanent residence in the North Caucasus republics came into force. President Saakashvili stated that this was to be seen as part of the policy of “a unified Caucasus” announced by him at the UN General Assembly. Sergei Lavrov, the Russian Foreign Minister, responded by noting that ‘it is customary to discuss such matters as part of relations between civilised partners’ and that the manner in which this had occurred ‘suggests yet another act of propaganda.’<sup>86</sup> Whatever the political agenda, however, the Georgian government’s action has certainly made life much easier for residents of the North Caucasus in regular contact with Georgia. Glen Howard, President of the Jamestown Foundation, remarked that ‘the Georgians are doing much in using a “soft approach” when dealing with the North Caucasus, for example, by the introduction of a visa waiver for residents of these republics’. He made these comments in a speech delivered at the forum ‘Crisis in the North Caucasus: Any Way Out?’, organised in February 2011 by the Central Asia-Caucasus Institute at Johns Hopkins University. Howard also thinks that these trends will assist in the economic development of the region; moreover, the fact that students from the North Caucasus are studying in Tbilisi will help a new generation from the region to engage with the West.<sup>87</sup> Generally, on the issue of movement between the two countries, Georgia appears in a far more favourable light than Russia: “other” citizens of the Russian Federation (i.e. those who are not residents of the republics of the North Caucasus) can obtain a Georgian visa on arrival at Tbilisi airport and also (since the second half of 2011) at the Upper Lars checkpoint on the Georgian Military Road. Georgia has thus introduced visa waivers for all its immediate neighbours (unilaterally in the case of the Russian

<sup>85</sup> See article ‘A step towards rapprochement of peoples’ (in Russian) at <http://www.ekhokavkaza.com/content/article/24364936.html>.

<sup>86</sup> See article ‘Russian FM: Tbilisi’s North Caucasus Visa-Free Move “Propaganda”’, *Civil Georgia*, 12th October 2012, available at <http://www.civil.ge/eng/article.php?id=22746>.

<sup>87</sup> See article ‘The future of the Caucasus and the position of the US’, available in Russian at <http://www.voanews.com/russian/news/Caucasus-USA-Russia-2011-02-18-116503168.html>.

North Caucasus) and even with Iran (with which Georgia does not even share a border). A further post-war political act by the Georgian administration directed at the North Caucasus (and beyond) was the one that resonated most widely and thus deserves to be examined in some detail.

## Recognition of the genocide of the Circassian (Adyghe) people

On 20th May 2011 (21st May marks the anniversary of the tragic event), the Georgian parliament passed a Resolution containing the following wording (the preamble omitted):<sup>88</sup>

1. Recognises the mass murder of Circassians (Adyghe) during the Russo-Caucasus War and their forceful eviction from their historic homeland as an act of genocide in accordance with the IV Hague Convention on Laws and Customs of War on Land of 18th October 1907, and the UN Convention on the Prevention and Punishment of the Crime of Genocide of 9th December 1948;
2. Recognises the Circassians forcefully deported during and after the period of the Russo-Caucasus war, as refugees, in line with the UN Convention on the Status of Refugees of 28th July 1951.

Georgia is thus the first sovereign state to recognise the genocide of the Circassians (Adyghe). This has naturally attracted attention from politicians and analysts far beyond the Caucasus itself.

This recognition did not come out of the blue. Apart from the Jamestown Foundation initiative referred to earlier (which was itself based on activities by organisations within the large Circassian diaspora), action was taken in the early 1990s by the parliaments in the North Caucasus republics in which those Circassians who had survived the tragic events now found themselves following the Soviet redrawing of boundaries. On 7th February 1992, the Supreme Council of Kabardino-Balkaria passed a Resolution condemning the genocide of the Adyghe (Circassians) during the Russo-Caucasus War and proposed that the Supreme Council of the Russian Federation consider recognising the genocide of the Adyghe (Circassians) and issuing dual citizenship to their fellow nationals living abroad.

In April 1996, the President and the State Council of the Republic of Adygheya sent a similarly-worded appeal to the State Duma of the Russian Federation.<sup>89</sup>

In October 2006, some 20 Adyghe public organisations from a number of countries submitted a request to the European Parliament to recognise the genocide. A month later, public organisations from Adygheya, Karachaevo-Cherkessia and Kabardino-Balkaria submitted a request to the President of Russia, Vladimir Putin, to recognise the Circassian genocide. None of these resolutions and appeals had any legal consequences; only the appeal to Georgia in 2010 resulted in official recognition of the genocide.

There are several motives underlying the action by the Georgian administration:

1. To strengthen its own position in the Caucasus as a fighter for the rights and interests of the peoples of the North Caucasus and to gain the support of the Circassian diaspora abroad. Many Circassians, wherever they resided, welcomed Tbilisi's decision, sometimes with jubilation;
2. To anger Russia by re-opening its most painful wound, the North Caucasus, where almost insurmountable problems continue to pile up, one of which is the restoration of the rights of the divided Circassian people. Moscow, in any case, tends to view this resolution by the official administration in Tbilisi as revenge for the 2008 war and its own recognition of Abkhazia and South Ossetia;

<sup>88</sup> For the full text (in Georgian), see <http://www.parliament.ge/>

<sup>89</sup> The documents (in Russian) can be accessed at <http://www.aheku.org/forums.php?m=posts&q=1624>.

3. To sow distrust between the Abkhaz and the North Caucasians (particularly the Circassians), since moral and political support to the latter has come not from their Abkhaz cousins, but from the Georgians, their enemies in the 1992–1993 Georgian-Abkhaz war.

The third point merits a separate comment. In October 1997, the Abkhaz parliament passed a Resolution, which began as follows: ‘The parliament recognises the mass murder and deportation of the Abkhaz (Abaza) to the Ottoman Empire in the 19th century as genocide, the gravest crime against humanity.’ However, the authorities in Sukhumi have never referred to the Circassian tragedy in these terms, either then or in the years that followed, and not even after the Russia-Georgia war. The Abkhaz analyst Inal Khashig wrote: ‘The mere act of recognising the genocide has already achieved some results for Tbilisi. There is already some evidence of a cooling in relations between the Abkhaz and the Circassians. The Abkhaz cannot understand the Adyghe’s jubilation at Georgia’s action, since Abkhazia sees Georgia as the principal enemy; the Circassians cannot understand why the administration in Tbilisi should recognise the genocide while their Abkhaz counterparts remain silent and do not respond in any way to this issue.’<sup>90</sup> Sukhumi is understandably reluctant to annoy Russia – its principal, indeed only, sponsor and guarantor of its secession from Georgia. Given this, it is difficult to see how it can achieve a balanced relationship with the Circassians on the one side and Russia on the other.

To some extent therefore, the official administration in Tbilisi has achieved every one of its goals, by recognising the Circassian genocide. Another indirect positive political outcome may be that recognition of the genocide will distract the Circassians from pursuing the idea of a Caucasian Emirate (in which they have not, in fact, yet played a major role) by diverting their attention to other political objectives. These goals, however, are unlikely to be in accordance with the goals of the Karachaevars and Balkarians, who live in the two North Caucasus republics together with the Circassians.

There is, finally, one more aspect of recognition which might be seen purely in terms of Russia-Georgia relations but which also certainly has a North Caucasus dimension.<sup>91</sup> This is the Winter Olympics in Sochi which are to be held in 2014. Not only is this the year that marks the 150th anniversary of the Circassian tragedy, the venues for the games are the very sites on which the Circassians were annihilated and from where they were deported. In June 2010, the Jamestown Foundation held a roundtable meeting revealingly entitled ‘Sochi in 2014: Can an Olympics Take Place at the Site of the Expulsion of the Circassians 150 Years Earlier?’<sup>92</sup> One of the speakers at the meeting was, tellingly, the Georgian parliamentarian Nugzar Tsiklauri – the Chair of the Committee on Relations with Compatriots Residing Abroad, which changed its name a few months later to the Diaspora and Caucasus Issues Committee.

The official administration in Tbilisi would be delighted to disrupt the Kremlin’s Olympic party, particularly since it was Vladimir Putin who not only led the lobbying for Sochi’s Olympic bid, but who is also about to take the credit when he is re-elected President of the Russian Federation. Even a partial boycott of the Games would be some comfort for Saakashvili, although so far no one has officially declared their intention of boycotting the games. The Georgian president himself responded to the question by the Czech television channel ČT24 on whether Georgia would boycott the games in Sochi by stating: ‘That does not depend on me but on the Georgian Olympic Committee. But that is not the only issue. This is a site on which ethnic cleansing has been carried out, and where the Circassian genocide occurred. Sochi certainly has a complex

90 I. Khashig (2011). ‘The politics behind the Georgian parliament’s recognition of the Circassian genocide’. Available at <http://bit.ly/PhYhP8>.

91 Alexander Khloponin, Russia’s Plenipotentiary Presidential Envoy in the North Caucasian Federal District, for example, commented on Georgia’s recognition of the Circassian genocide in the following terms: ‘Clearly Georgia is playing a political card in relation to the Circassian topic and is playing it to the tune of the Olympic Games.’ A. Khloponin (2011). ‘Gruziya razygryvayet “cherkesskuyu kartu” k Olimpiyskim igrām’ [Georgia plays the “Circassian card” in relation to the Olympic Games], *Vzglyad*, 14th July 2011.

92 See details of the roundtable meeting and speakers at ‘Sochi in 2014: Can an Olympics Take Place at the Site of the Expulsion of the Circassians 150 Years Earlier?’ Available at [http://www.jamestown.org/media/events/single/?tx\\_ttnews%5Btt\\_news%5D=36493&tx\\_ttnews%5BbackPid%5D=19&cHash=26c988362ab0fc0689a4e86cd5b64050](http://www.jamestown.org/media/events/single/?tx_ttnews%5Btt_news%5D=36493&tx_ttnews%5BbackPid%5D=19&cHash=26c988362ab0fc0689a4e86cd5b64050).

history. It also has problems with security. The North Caucasus is a difficult territory. 2014 is approaching rapidly but time is needed to resolve these problems. And I can't predict what might happen between now and 2014."<sup>93</sup>

The Georgian president is perhaps stretching the truth a little when he says it is the National Olympic Committee of Georgia rather than the country's ruler that would take what is, after all, a political decision to boycott the Olympic Games. Mikheil Saakashvili also appears to have forgotten that his final presidential term lapses in 2013 and the decision will not (or should not) depend on him for this simple reason. But the main question remains, and it may not be just the Circassians who would support a boycott of the games. As to the security of the Olympic Games (where Russia, as usual, is keen to point the finger at Georgia), Saakashvili has said, 'not only do we have no plans, nor are we capable of creating a physical threat to the 2014 games in Sochi.'<sup>94</sup>

## Risks

It is entirely understandable and natural that Georgia views any "freezing" of the situation in line with the "new military realities" (i.e. those that have emerged as a result of the war), which Russia<sup>95</sup> officially advocates, as ceding part of its sovereign territory. And this process, again understandably, has led to a response directed at the North Caucasus, where Russia is the most vulnerable. However, Saakashvili is playing a dangerous game. Even before Georgia recognised the Circassian genocide, James Clapper, US Director of National Intelligence, was already commenting that in addition to the presence of Russian troops in Abkhazia and South Ossetia, Georgia's recent actions in relation to Russia's North Caucasian republics were also contributing to an increase in tension in the region.<sup>96</sup> In December 2011, a similar comment was made by the Brookings Institution expert Fiona Hill at hearings within the US Helsinki Commission (Commission on Security and Cooperation in Europe) on conflicts in the Caucasus.<sup>97</sup> "Rocking the boat" in the North Caucasus is just as risky a strategy for Georgia as for Russia and is unlikely to produce any immediate benefit.<sup>98</sup> Hopes that Russia will simply abandon (or be forced to abandon) the North Caucasus in the face of insurmountable problems seem naïve (Russia is clearly in no hurry to part with the Kuril Islands, for example). The Georgian-Abkhaz (and Georgian-Ossetian) conflict would not be resolved on its own, even if Russia were to cease its intervention entirely (and its call for the recognition of the independence of Abkhazia and South Ossetia, which looks unrealistic today). The North Caucasus peoples are certainly in no hurry to come under Georgia's wing, economically or otherwise; in any case, Georgia simply does not have the resources required for this.

Indeed, if the "Circassian project" were to succeed (proceeding from recognition of the genocide to reunification and ultimately to independence), a new claimant to Abkhazia might well emerge – namely, the Adygheans, who appear to be growing in strength. The Abkhaz may even be dragged into their cousins' project against their will, and the large Circassian diaspora with

93 See full interview 'Saakashvili: Russia has sought to capture Georgia', available in Russian at <http://www.inosmi.ru/caucasus/20111018/176204705.html>, 18th October 2011.

94 See article 'Saakashvili 'Georgia Poses Zero Threat to Sochi Olympics'', *Civil Georgia*, 25th February 2011, available at <http://www.civil.ge/eng/article.php?id=23182>.

95 See, for example, the statement by the Russian Foreign Ministry, 25th August 2009, (in Russian) at [http://www.mid.ru/brp\\_4.nsf/0/4107A0E2642142ABC325761D0022E2AA](http://www.mid.ru/brp_4.nsf/0/4107A0E2642142ABC325761D0022E2AA).

96 See article 'U.S. Intelligence Chief: Georgia's North Caucasus Efforts Contribute to Tensions' 18th February 2011, available at <http://www.civil.ge/eng/article.php?id=23162>. Full text of the US Intelligence statement is available in English at <http://intelligence.senate.gov/110216/dni.pdf> (5.8Mb PDF).

97 Transcript of the hearing 'Conflicts in the Caucasus: Prospects for Resolution' is available at [http://csce.gov/index.cfm?FuseAction=ContentRecords.ViewTranscript&ContentRecord\\_id=516&ContentType=H&ContentRecordType=H&CFID=71896503&CF\\_TOKEN=84007306](http://csce.gov/index.cfm?FuseAction=ContentRecords.ViewTranscript&ContentRecord_id=516&ContentType=H&ContentRecordType=H&CFID=71896503&CF_TOKEN=84007306).

98 See, for example, P. Zakareishvili (2011). 'The North Caucasus: Bone of Contention or a Basis for Russian-Georgian Cooperation?', in *Caucasus Analytical Digest*, No. 27, 27th May 2011. Available at <http://georgien.boell-net.de/downloads/CaucasusAnalyticalDigest27.PDF> (331Kb PDF).

a certain level of political influence in a number of countries may be a significant factor. In a lecture at the George Washington University in November 2010, Sergey Markedonov remarked: 'Despite its claims to hegemony in the Caucasus region, Russia is facing serious problems in the North Caucasus.' The analyst believes: 'Following its recognition of Abkhaz independence, Moscow has collided with increasing Circassian nationalism, which views Abkhazia as part of the Circassian world in Adygheya, Karachaevo-Cherkessia and Kabardino-Balkaria.'<sup>99</sup> It is clear that Tbilisi's recognition of the Circassian genocide has merely reinforced these attitudes. However, the question of "a unified Circassia" is too wide-ranging and multifaceted to be covered in this article.

Another factor to bear in mind is that Georgia's capacity to conduct an active policy (even if this is a policy of "soft power") in relation to the North Caucasus is dependent to a large extent on the wider geopolitical situation – particularly on the outcome of the presidential elections in Georgia itself and Russia, and indeed in the US.

Finally, it is also unclear what position Tbilisi would adopt if its close neighbours start to request recognition of other genocides. Ultimately, there is an identical problem relating to the genocide of the Abkhaz in the Russian Empire (see above), although the Abkhaz themselves have not as yet asked anyone to recognise their genocide.

## Conclusion

The Russian Federation has not yet responded (in its customary heavy-handed manner) to Georgia's recognition of the Circassian genocide and its other actions relating to the North Caucasus.<sup>100</sup> Of course, this is understandable – virtually all analysts agree that until the Sochi Winter Olympics are over, Russia will not take any action capable of destabilising [even more] the situation in the region and threatening the Olympic Games and its own prestige. However, the Games will be over in mid-March 2014. Georgian policy still has the option of recognising the genocide of the Vainakh people (incidentally this topic was raised at the March 2010 conference in Tbilisi), although there is little point in speculating about what might be in the minds of the leaders in Moscow and Tbilisi.

We can only hope that the political elites will not spend the time between now and March 2014 thinking up further ways of annoying each other and each other's citizens. A far better use of their time would be to look for ways of ditching the zero-sum game approach (after all, the two sides did manage an agreement on WTO membership without losing face). Such an approach has been adopted by all official sides in all conflicts in the Caucasus without exception and is counter-productive – for all as a whole and for each individual party.

As the Georgian and Russian authors of a recent joint study on the problems of the North Caucasus confirm,<sup>101</sup> a stable North Caucasus is by far the only area of common interest for Georgia and Russia which they can use "here and now" to build a process of reconciliation.

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99 See article 'Caucasus: a new balance of power', available in Russian at <http://www.voanews.com/russian/news/Markedonov-Caucasus-2010-11-13-107716023.html>.

100 I. Jurgens and S. Kulik consider it necessary to pay 'particular attention to Georgia' in relation to the North Caucasus in the document 'The North Caucasus: Some questions of external impact', August 2011. Available (in Russian) at <http://www.kavkaz-uzel.ru/articles/190453/>.

101 T. Sharashenidze and I. Sukhov (2011). 'The North Caucasus from the standpoint of Russian-Georgian relations', in *Russia and Georgia: Searching the Way Out*, Georgian Foundation for Strategic and International Studies, pp. 25–53.









**International Alert.**

346 Clapham Road, London SW9 9AP, United Kingdom

Tel +44 (0)20 7627 6800, Fax +44 (0)20 7627 6900

[general@international-alert.org](mailto:general@international-alert.org)

[www.international-alert.org](http://www.international-alert.org)

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