



საქართველოს სტრატეგიისა და საერთაშორისო ურთიერთობათა კვლევის ფონდი
GEORGIAN FOUNDATION FOR STRATEGIC AND INTERNATIONAL STUDIES

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**NORTH CAUCASUS - GEORGIA'S
PROBLEMATIC NEIGHBOR**

IRAKLI MENAGARISHVILI



EXPERT OPINION

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Regional cooperation, especially the relationship with immediate neighbors, is undoubtedly one of the most sensitive aspects of Georgia's foreign policy. Following the end of the civil war and the collapse of the Soviet Union, the entirety of the Caucasus became an area of increasing tensions and Georgia, as an independent state, was compelled to develop and implement its own national project in a rather difficult environment.

A significant, complicated and, simultaneously, interesting element of this environment is the North Caucasus. Ethnically and religiously diverse, this northern neighbor is also distinctive in that it is a part of Georgia's large neighbor – Russia – and, at the same time, perhaps one of the most problematic areas of the Federation. Given the complex nature of Georgia's relationship with Russia, the significance that the selection of a proper political approach and a correct tone of dialogue with the North Caucasus and, specifically, its separate administrative units, carries for Georgia is easy to understand. We believe that this excerpt will assist interested readers to properly comprehend the realities of our northern neighbors.

The essay has been prepared on the basis of a study carried out at the Institute of Strategic Research.

I. North Caucasus – General Overview

The North Caucasus became a part of Russia in the 19th century as a result of the Caucasian wars.

The North Caucasus comprises only 2.1% of the territory of Russia but houses 11.8% of Russia's population.

The region has historically consisted of seven republics populated by North Caucasian ethnic groups: Adygea, Karachay-Cherkessia, Kabardino-Balkaria, North Ossetia, Ingushetia, Chechnya and Dagestan. Scholars frequently divide it into two regions: the eastern region, comprising Dagestan, Chechnya and Ingushetia, and the western North Caucasus consisting of Adygea, Karachay-Cherkessia and North Ossetia. Interestingly, Kabardino-Balkaria is allotted neither to the west nor the east.

The region is very diverse in terms of ethnicity; especially Dagestan, where dozens of various ethnic groups reside.

In the 1990s, in comparison to other regions of Russia, the North Caucasus

was home to the most active centrifugal processes. However, over time, the struggle for independence gradually subsided in the North Caucasus. Today, some scholars believe that ethnic separatism in the region no longer exists and that ethnic separatism has found incarnation in religious separatism. It should also be noted that all researchers consider religious extremism one of the most significant problems in the region.

Specialists note that Islamic fundamentalism was used to fuel the spread of anti-Russian movements throughout the North Caucasus. Currently, a coordinated so-called Islamic underground, headed by a self-proclaimed Emir, Doku Umarov and called «Imarat Kavkaz» («the Caucasus Emirate»), is operating in the region.

From the outside, the territory on which claims have been laid by the Imarat, was divided into six provinces or vilayats: Dagestan, Noxçiyçö (Chechnya), Ğalgayçö (Ingushetia), Iriston (North Ossetia), the Nogay steppe (Stavropol region) as well as the joint vilayat of Kabarda, Balkar and Karachay.

The basic form of functioning of the Emirate is terrorism. Russia occupies one of the top places in the world in terms of the number of terrorist acts committed while 80% of terrorist attacks in Russia take place in the North Caucasus. Terrorism in the region has assumed an exceptionally radical and frequent character such as, for instance, in the form of female suicide bombers. According to some data, approximately 900 terrorist attacks have been carried out across the whole of Russia over the last three years.

Clanism is rather typical of the general social structure of the North Caucasian population. Nearly the entire population is more or less involved in clan wars. It is believed that the North Caucasian clans maintain intensive corrupt liaisons with officials at the federal level as well as with representatives of Russian law enforcement agencies. Clan wars in the North Caucasus are organically inserted into Russia's entire powerful corrupt system which the then-President of the country, Dmitry Medvedev, deemed in one of his speeches as 'prohibitive,' even in contrast with Russia itself.

One of the ways of achieving relative stability in the region was, and remains, the appointment by the central government of local governors and their unofficial funding (expenses allocated from the federal budget are used not directly for the development of the region but to buy the loyalty of the region's ruling elite).

Violent means employed by the government to regulate the situation in a

region such as the North Caucasus, where the custom of blood vengeance is still practiced, spawn new violence. All this leads to the prolongation of economic instability, unemployment and poverty.

This has been ultimately taken advantage of by the radical Islamist movement, which has determined to realize public discontent through the establishment, in the form of the “Imarat Kavkaz,” of a state based on the Sharia law and to transform unemployed youth into “jihad” warriors.

Several Major Recent Trends

According to specialists, the efforts of Russia’s central authorities have rendered certain results:

- 1) Russia is attempting to prove to the international community that the terrorist group active in the region carries an international character. The Supreme Court of the Russian Federation has proclaimed the «Imarat Kavkaz» as an international terrorist organization. Thus, Russia has partly succeeded in justifying its own actions in the North Caucasus under the pretext of combating terrorism (A. Malashenko).
- 2) The Second Chechen War has ended, not so much due to an effective anti-terrorist operation but a growing rift between the terrorists themselves and their recruitment by Russia (the Kadyrovs are considered the Kremlin’s exceptional achievement).
- 3) Russia has accomplished the destruction of organized ethnic separatism. As noted, some of the separatists have left the region while some have joined the struggle for Islamic separatism.
- 4) The appointment of effective local government, loyal to the center and, at the same time, attaining some success in the region, can also be regarded an achievement.

Although, a significant part of the region’s problems remain unresolved:

The center has failed to strengthen the stability and, in resolving the Chechen problem, omitted the necessity to resolve the difficulties in Dagestan, Ingushetia and others. The personalization of politics presents a significant error. The issue of terrorism in the region remains unresolved and the only way to combat it is to conduct violent politics.

On March 29, 2010, the entire world was shaken by terrorist attacks in

Moscow. The US Secretary of State said at the time that modern humanity faces «a common enemy» and terrorism is a threat which equally endangers everyone. Although, a Russian expert believes that, in the case of Russia, the problem is far more serious: «In Russia, however, the problem of terrorism is arguably more difficult than in Europe or the United States. We have radical Islam right inside our borders, in the North Caucasus» (Maria Lipman).

II. North Caucasus as a Factor in Georgian-Russian Relations

The history of Georgian-Russian relations over the last two decades (following the collapse of the Soviet Union and the declaration of Georgia as a sovereign state) indicates that the North Caucasus has played a particular and dramatic place in the development of these relations.

The Georgian and North Caucasian peoples are linked by a centuries-long history of friendship and cooperation. Throughout the long-term coexistence, Georgians and North Caucasians were natural allies.

The process of Caucasian occupation by Russia commenced in 1801 with the annexation of Georgia. Georgian soldiers engaged in Russia's military service participated in the lengthy battle conducted by the Russian Army against the North Caucasians, including Imam Shamil.

Despite such circumstances, the Georgian and North Caucasian peoples upheld mutual ties into the 19th century.

Beginning in the 19th century, Tbilisi became a scientific research center for the history, culture and ethnography of the Caucasian peoples. The mass resettlement of North Caucasians (Muhajirs) and its consequences were fully reflected in the Georgian press at the time where it is clear that Georgians met the tragedy of the Highlanders with despair and compassion.

During the Soviet era, the North Caucasian nations and Georgia found themselves within the borders of one autocratic state; however, since, according to the Soviet national policy, Georgian and North Caucasian cultural relations were politically sanctioned, both sides made full use of this opportunity.

The Tbilisi State University became a true center of this cooperation. To the present day, it remains the only university in the world which presents

courses in all the Caucasian language groups: Abkhazian-Adygean, Nakh and Daghestani. Tbilisi State University also offers a course in the Ubykh language which has no analogue in the world.

Conflicts in the Caucasus Following the Collapse of the Soviet Union

After the collapse of the Soviet Union, the tension which had subsisted for many years developed into an open conflict. In numerous cases, in the Northern Caucasus, these conflicts took the shape of bloody confrontations; furthermore, a conflict ongoing at any point in the Caucasus affected the entire region.

Prior to the actual collapse of the Soviet Union, particularly significant events took place in Georgia. In 1988-1989, a national liberation movement gained strength in Georgia which Russia counteracted with ethnically Caucasian Abkhaz and South Ossetian factors.

The escalation of the separatist movement in the North Caucasus in the early 1990s raised hopes in Georgia that, due to its own problems, Russia would alter its policy of support of the separatist movements in Sokhumi and Tskhinvali.

Among the North Caucasian population, many sincerely believed in their duty to "help their oppressed Ossetian and Abkhaz brothers," however, the organizational nature of interference in Georgian internal affairs and the amount of resources expended clearly showcased the involvement of the Russian secret service and the fact that they were the principal players in the game.

In 1989, the Confederation of Mountain Peoples of the Caucasus was established, holding its first congress in Sokhumi. The anti-Georgian direction of the organization was evident at the outset. For instance, without consulting the legitimate authorities of Georgia, the city of Sokhumi was declared the headquarters of the Confederation. The majority of experts believe that the Confederation of Mountain Peoples of the Caucasus was wholly or partly managed by the Russian secret service in order to galvanize the North Caucasian factor against Georgia.

In 1990, the nature of government in Georgia changed drastically. Before the official collapse of the Soviet Union, the population of Georgia elected the leader of its national movement, Zviad Gamsakhurdia, as the Chairman of the Soviet Supreme Council. In April 1991, Georgia declared indepen-

dence and in December of the same year, the USSR dissolved and Georgia officially became independent.

Already on December 11, 1991, the Supreme Council of Georgia abolished the South Ossetian Autonomous Oblast while in March 1991, at the orders of President Gamsakhurdia, a division of the Soviet Interior Troops entered South Ossetia, soon to be supplemented by other informal paramilitary groups marking the beginning of the Georgian-Ossetian conflict. Over 40 thousand displaced persons flooded Russia, and especially South Ossetia, from Georgia. Due to territorial claims during the Ossetian-Ingush conflict, IDPs from Georgia took a drastically anti-Ingush position and assisted the expulsion of the Ingush from their places of residence. The North Caucasus and Georgia became directly involved in each other's internal conflicts.

During President Gamsakhurdia's incumbency, a distinct direction of Georgia's North Caucasian policy was the establishment of close ties with the Chechen Republic.

The former government of Georgia, under the leadership of President Zviad Gamsakhurdia, attempted to create a solid foundation for the country's independence with the support of the North Caucasus and, in particular, Chechnya. Georgia had hoped that even in a confrontation with the Ossetians, it would bring the Chechens to its side as an ethnic group related to the Ingush. Moreover, in 1991, Presidents Zviad Gamsakhurdia and Dzhokhar Dudayev jointly raised the idea of a Confederation of the Caucasus. In it, Abkhazia was granted a "special role" through which the settlement of the Abkhaz issue was planned.

This was Zviad Gamsakhurdia's attempt to use the North Caucasian factor both to regulate internal problems and attain his own political goals in the Georgian-Russian relations. It can be said that for Georgia this was an act brought about by a thirst for victory over its own weakness.

It is natural that through such policy, Gamsakhurdia opposed Russian authorities which became yet another reason why during the 1991 Civil War, the Transcaucasian Military District troops supported his forcible expulsion from power. The displaced President Gamsakhurdia ultimately found shelter in Grozny which created another potential precondition for engaging the North Caucasian factor.

In 1991, when the antagonism between the central Georgian government and the Abkhaz separatist forces escalated, the Confederation of Moun-

tain Peoples of the Caucasus urged the Russian authorities to “give a political assessment” of the Georgian-Abkhaz conflict.

The most severe manifestation of the confrontation between the Georgian state and the North Caucasus is the Georgian-Abkhaz armed conflict which began on August 14, 1992 with the deployment of armed forces of the Georgian State Council on Abkhaz territory. At an assembly held in Grozny in the same month, according to many experts’ assessments, “the objective for the establishment of the Confederation was ultimately made clear.” Mobilization in support of Abkhazia against Georgia was declared. The declaration adopted by the Assembly reads: “As there is no other way to withdraw Georgian occupation forces from Abkhazia, we resolve that: 1. All central member-organizations of the Confederation send volunteers to Abkhazia to provide military resistance, 2. The Confederation’s armed forces conduct military operations against any opposing forces in order to halt their invasion of Abkhazia, 3. Tbilisi be declared a disaster zone, 4. All individuals of Georgian nationality remaining on the territory of the Confederation be taken hostage, 5. All types of shipments ensuing from Georgia be suspended and 6. A report on military preparedness be sent to the Central Authority prior to August 1992.”

It is noteworthy that the call from the Confederation triggered volunteer mobilization throughout the rest of Russia, including Vladivostok, to first against Georgia in Abkhazia. It is also worth mentioning that while Russia waged a devastating full-scale war against Chechnya, the Confederation did not take any steps to protect the “Chechen brothers.” In fact, after the Abkhaz conflict, the Confederation no longer had a place among North Caucasian politics.

In 1990-1993, the two ongoing conflicts on the territory of Georgia sparked a rather violent confrontation with the North Caucasus: with North Ossetia due to the Ossetian conflict and directly with the Adygean-Cherkessian ethnic groups due to Abkhazia and, consequently, with the whole of the North Caucasus, since the representatives of almost all North Caucasian ethnic groups fought on the side of Abkhazia as both volunteers and mercenaries. Exceptionally massive was the engagement in the hostilities of Kabardinian and Cossack militia units. The North Ossetian battalion also fought on the side of the separatists.

In September 1993, Sokhumi, the capital of Abkhazia, fell. Georgian gov-

ernment troops suffered a heavy defeat. Regular military units of the Russian army, including special purpose units, fought alongside the Abkhaz separatist and North Caucasian troops. This defeat resulted in numerous casualties and 250 thousand people were displaced.

The Chechen Wars and Georgia: The Events of Pankisi

The events unfolding in the Pankisi Gorge and its surroundings mark one of the most dramatic episodes in the influence of the North Caucasian factor on Georgian-Russian relations. Most importantly, the tension and recriminations surrounding the topic of Pankisi are still relevant today. Time and time again, Georgia is accused of fostering and, what is more, even funding terrorist militant trainings on its territory.

The attempt to suppress Chechen separatism through forcible means initiated in December 1994 brought no results to the Russian government. After two years of bloody fighting, the Russian army was forced to leave Chechnya.

In 1997, President Aslan Maskhadov, elected by the Chechen and recognized by Russian officials, arrived in Moscow and, together with Russian President Yeltsin, signed an agreement where the parties assumed the responsibility to settle all contentious issues arising between the Russian Federation and Chechnya peacefully. Despite the fact that the agreement between the two independent states was in written form, in reality, as stated by historian Gibrail Gakayev: "Ichkeria was a failed state both in terms of international and legal recognition (*de jure*) and the construction of public authority institutions and the protection of fundamental human rights and freedoms."

Georgia, which had recently suffered through a civil war and was attempting to attain internal stability, managed to avoid being drawn into the Russia-Chechnya conflict. Despite the fact that Georgia had not officially recognized Chechen independence, both Presidents Eduard Shevardnadze and Aslan Maskhadov attempted to establish new relations between Chechnya and Georgia.

In August 1997, Aslan Maskhadov visited Tbilisi and held meetings and talks with senior officials of the country. In the same year, the delegation of the Chechen Parliament also arrived in Tbilisi. Talks on business ties between the two Caucasian peoples continued with the purpose of their

further convergence. The issue of the peaceful resolution of the Abkhaz conflict was also raised during the talks. Maskhadov expressed regret over Chechen participation in the Abkhaz war.

The principal problem of the government of the Chechen Republic of Ichkeria became the fact that it was impossible to decriminalize Chechnya. The country became a harbor for offenders.

On August 7, 1999, a mass invasion of Chechen fighters into Dagestan took place under the leadership of Shamil Basayev which resulted in high casualties. In September, residential buildings were detonated in several Russian cities which were also attributed to Chechen insurgents.

President Maskhadov immediately distanced himself from the terrorist attacks. However, he did not openly denounce Shamil Basayev and did not hand over the terror suspects to Russian judicial authorities. His special representative in Moscow, Mayrbek Vachagaev explained this by the fact that Maskhadov was guided by the example of Russia which repeatedly failed to take responsibility for the actions of its citizens and provided military support to separatist forces on Georgian territory – in Abkhazia and South Ossetia.

In October 1999, Russia resumed military action in Chechnya under the pretext of counter-terrorism operations which are widely known as the Second Chechen War during which the Russian authorities attempted to drag Georgia into the hostilities.

Initially, only a few days after the start of the war, the President of Russia, Boris Yeltsin, asked President Shevardnadze to grant permission to use Russian military bases to launch attacks on Chechnya.

At the time, Vladimir Putin was already the Prime Minister of Russia and success in the war was a necessary precondition for his later presidency. Thus, Putin, via diplomatic and other means, attempted to persuade Georgia to deploy Russian border troops along the Georgian side of the Chechen section of the Russia-Georgia border.

As the then-State Minister, Vazha Lortkipanidze, recalls, in exchange, Putin was prepared to deploy Georgian guards along the River Psou. Georgia rejected this proposal due, firstly, to a lack of trust towards Russia. In addition, the Georgian side was aware that the placement of Russian troops at the border presented the possibility of the whole of the Caucasus com-

ing into conflict with Georgia and the hostilities then spilling over into the country.

Several days after the start of the war, a large influx of Chechen refugees began movement towards Georgia. There is a reasonable suspicion that their expulsion into Georgian territory was predetermined. This influx encompassed Kist groups who had Georgian citizenship but were studying or working in Chechnya, Kists who had been born in Georgia but granted Russian citizenship and Chechens who had no ties with Georgia. Up to 5,000 individuals had arrived in Georgia by November.

According to data issued by the European Commission against Racism and Intolerance (ECRI), Georgia received a total of 8,000 refugees of which only Russian citizens were granted official refugee status.

Georgia's decision not to give way to Russian troops greatly strained Georgian-Russian relations although, at the time, the dynamics of these relations were already progressing towards complications.

The issue was that Georgia had begun to conduct its own policy, independent from Russia. Georgia had managed to achieve stability within the country and embark on the road to radical reforms. Georgia had announced its ambition towards European and Euro-Atlantic integration and reached an agreement to withdraw Russian border troops and military bases from the country. Georgia had also acquired a significant function as a transit country in the supply of Central Asian oil and gas to Europe.

According to assessments of the Russian ruling elite, all of the above was in contradiction to Russian national interests. The course taken by Georgia was to be suspended. These circumstances were precisely the leading cause of the events unfolding around the Pankisi Gorge.

Russia launched a massive targeted propaganda campaign against Georgia. Its leitmotif was that Georgia was assisting Chechen separatists in their fight against Russia. "Pankisi is a knife in Russia's back," "Shevardnadze and his transoceanic bosses are conspiring to turn the Caucasus into an enormous bloody wound," "The Pankisi Gorge – a haven for bandits." This was the sentiment infused by Russian mass media.

Along with thousands of refugees from Chechnya, the Pankisi Gorge became host to so-called "militants" or those who fought against the Russian army, weapons in hand. Moreover, Russian forces deliberately opened cor-

ridors to Chechen armed formations in order to assist their infiltration into Georgia. Their exact numbers were unknown. The Pankisi Gorge, where the criminogenic situation was severe even before the start of the war, was virtually beyond Georgian government control. For instance, Ruslan Galaev's armed forces indeed found a seat in the Gorge as did individuals hailing from Arab and other Muslim countries.

Besides anti-Georgian propaganda efforts, Russian authorities turned to more specific and harsh action. Georgian airspace was regularly violated and the Gorge and its surrounding territories were bombed. There were human casualties. The Russian government became exceptionally "free handed" after September 11, 2001. Chechen rebels were labeled as international terrorists while the rest of the world realized that "Russia's attempts to portray its campaign in Chechnya as a part of the international war on terror intentionally simplifies the situation." However, Russia still managed to reach its objective – global society agreed to perceive these persons as terrorists especially since the Russian and Western press wrote about fugitive Afghani al-Qaeda members taking cover in the Pankisi Gorge. A version about Osama bin Laden's presence in the Gorge emerged.

In light of such general global sentiment, on September 11, 2002, the anniversary of the tragedy in the United States, Vladimir Putin addressed Georgia with a threatening statement. He referred to the country as a terrorist enclave, accused it of supporting international terrorism and stated that Georgia posed a threat to their national security and openly declared that Russia had a full right to conduct military operations on Georgia's territory.

The situation had to be discharged. The Georgian government, which also had several attempts to return Pankisi under its control, received a helping hand from the West. Following the US-led initiative to establish an anti-terrorist coalition, it was resolved to provide assistance to Georgia to prevent the Pankisi Gorge from escalating into a new hotbed of tension. In 2002, the United States allocated USD 64 million to initiate the "Train and Equip" program in Georgia with the aim of establishing a Georgian anti-terrorist military force with the Pankisi Gorge set as the principal target.

In 2002-2003, the Georgian government regained control over the Pankisi Gorge. This is what Russian journalist, Anna Politkovskaya, wrote about the issue: "Georgian Internal Troops have now entered the Gorge and they have not only entered the territory but also conducted an anti-terrorist

operation (and it really took place). They not only conducted the operation but also, in their “defense” efforts, managed not to spoil relations with the part of the population not engaged in criminal activities. This is a quality which has been long lost by Russian federals in Chechnya.”

There were hopes that one of the sources of tension in the relations with Russia would be eliminated. However, despite statements made at the start of the hostilities that the Chechen War would end with a triumphant victory, even after ten years it can clearly be seen that this war has seen no end. It is carried on through the resistance of the rebels. In order to justify its failure, Russia has consistently, over the years, accused Georgia of harboring Chechen military bases.

Thus, in this case, the North Caucasian factor is being exploited by Russia to exert pressure on and discredit Georgia.

“Peaceful Caucasus”

In the mid 1990s, when the first Chechen campaign ended with the so-called “Khasavyurt Accord,” and a fragile balance was established among the opposing forces in the South Caucasus, the idea of a common Caucasian cooperation once again gained momentum, presaging a foundation for stability in the region. Naturally, all regional actors perceived the idea through a lens of their own political interests and aspirations.

The first such initiative was proposed by the President of Georgia, Eduard Shevardnadze, in February 1996. The initiative, termed “Peaceful Caucasus,” implied six basic principles of cooperation and stability in the region: 1. Territorial integrity and inviolability of existing borders, 2. Protection of human rights everywhere and in all instances, 3. Protection of transport and other communications and the prohibition of their obstruction, 4. Cooperation in environmental protection and elimination of the consequences of natural disaster 5. Ethnic and religious tolerance, rejection of all forms of nationalism and xenophobia and 6. Comprehensive support of investment and international projects in the Caucasus and the provision of their security. The initiative also implied the active engagement of the North Caucasus in the common Caucasian cooperation scheme.

The initiative gained the support of utterly all leaders of the region and neighboring states. Moreover, the Turkish President, Süleyman Demirel, proposed a special multilateral agreement on ensuring stability in the Cau-

casus while the Azerbaijani and Armenian leaders stepped forward with the idea of establishing a Caucasian OSCE.

Shortly after, the United States and the European Union also expressed interest in the prospect of establishing a system of security and stability in the Caucasus.

Russian leadership took a proactive stance towards the initiatives at the onset. Its task was entirely clear – the placement of the common Caucasian cooperation under Moscow’s umbrella and, with this purpose, its confinement only to internal regional actors. Although, as a rule, all other authors of the initiative took into account the essential and active participation of other stakeholders (regional neighbors Turkey and Iran, as well as the US and EU) in both issue discussions and practical cooperation in the common Caucasian format.

On June 3, 1996, at the invitation of the President of the Russian Federation, the Presidents of Russia, Azerbaijan, Georgia and Armenia held a conference of the so-called “Caucasian Four” in Kislovodsk. The leaders of 12 North Caucasian Republics, Regions and Oblasts (except for Chechnya) were also invited to participate in the meeting. During the conference, the Declaration for Inter-Ethnic Accord, Peace, and Economic and Cultural Cooperation in the Caucasus was signed. This was the first case where the voice of the North Caucasus was heard in discussions of common Caucasian problems.

The meeting was repeated in 1997 in the same format but beginning in 2000 it took on the configuration of quadrilateral interstate consultations where the representatives of the North Caucasus were no longer invited.

Although the implementation of the “Peaceful Caucasus” idea and other subsequent initiatives failed to extend beyond political statements, the idea of collaboration within a common Caucasian format was and still remains one of the principal trends in the establishment of a platform for constructive cooperation between Russia and interested international partners, including Georgia, on North Caucasian issues.

The War of 2008 and the North Caucasus

The so-called “Five Day War” of 2008 and its consequences (the occupation of Georgian territories and the Russia’s recognition of Abkhazia and South Ossetia as independent states) have naturally found reflection in the

North Caucasus. Here, two aspects should be signed out: first, the participation of the North Caucasians in the conflict and second, the impact of the conflict itself and its consequences on the south of Russia.

In 2008, through its conflict with Russia in South Ossetia, Georgia once again antagonized the North Caucasus. First and foremost, it should be noted that the representatives of North Ossetia and two Chechen units (“Vostok” and “Zapad” which were formed by “GRU” – Russia’s Main Intelligence Directorate) became engaged in the war at the onset of the hostilities. Furthermore, according to a statement issued by Eduard Kokoity, even before the war, on August 2, he received a pledge of support from the North Caucasus. Then, several days later, the government of Tskhinvali announced its readiness to declare full mobilization and request the recruitment of North Caucasian volunteers. Significantly, these pledges and calls were not mere words and it can be said that the enlistment of volunteers was conducted almost throughout the entire North Caucasus. Although, it should also be noted that the mobilization was not of a scale similar to the one carried out during the conflict of the early 1990s. A Russian journalist, Ivan Sukhov, believes that due to confessional differences, for the North Caucasian population, this was a war of others. Volunteer mobilization, according to Sukhov, demonstrates, on the one hand, the local politicians’ desire to prove their loyalty to the Kremlin and, on the other hand, that the North Caucasus is still a region which enables the assembly and relocation of armed groups whose supervisory authority is uncertain.

Besides military engagement, the North Caucasus was involved in the conflict in numerous other aspects. Even before the beginning of the war, almost all of Russia’s southern republics were receiving evacuees. Upon the commencement of the hostilities, the evacuees were labeled as refugees. In the North Caucasus, obviously and primarily, throughout the entire military confrontation in North Ossetia, the evacuation of the wounded was being carried out. Humanitarian aid was transported from the North Caucasus to South Ossetia. Specialists were sent to Tskhinvali from Kabardino-Balkaria to work on the rehabilitation of power infrastructure in Tskhinvali after the war had ended.

All of the above once again proves that through the confrontation in the Tskhinvali region, Russia, along with the resolution of other issues, had attempted to instigate conflict between Georgia and the North Caucasus.

The August war gave rise to other trends as well. In the south of Russia, where anti-Russian sentiment is strong, it was clearly impossible for an unambiguous attitude towards the conflict to exist. Before the onset of the hostilities, statements in support of Georgia were voiced among the Chechen population. Moreover, “Imarat Kavkaz” called upon the North Caucasians to conduct action against Russia, expressing their willingness to lend support to the Georgian government during the conflict at the latter’s request. According to the “Imarat,” information on the participation of North Caucasians in military operations on the side of South Ossetia was a part of Russian “propaganda.” On the other hand, such a statement regarding their readiness to intervene in the conflict, according to Andrei Smirnov, an analyst with the Jamestown Foundation, demonstrated the “Imarat’s” desire to be recognized as an independent political force rather than an Islamist-terrorist group.

It is noteworthy that the war found a particular response in Ingushetia where no sympathy was expressed towards evacuees from Ossetia; in fact, the opposite can be said. As reported by the *Kavkazski Uzel* the war reminded the Ingush of the 1992 conflict with North Ossetia. Thus, Ingushetia, unlike all other republics of the North Caucasus, did not receive refugees from South Ossetia.

Evidently, the sentiments are rather contradictory which once again attests that the North Caucasus is a very complex region owing to the numerous ethnic groups, their varying historical experiences and sharply differentiated social strata.

The Impact of the August War on the North Caucasus

First and foremost, it should be noted that the Russia-Georgia war of 2008 has not been, even in part, the catalyst of anything new. It simply served the function of an additional impetus for existing events and trends.

The fact that the recognition of Abkhazia and South Ossetia has failed to trigger an avalanche of analogous demands for recognition in the North Caucasus once again signifies that separatist ideology is less urgent in the region. As can be seen, the consideration of this aspect has contributed to the fact that Russian authorities have so boldly made the step towards Abkhaz and South Ossetian recognition.

Nevertheless, following the August war, certain activity was detected in

Ingushetia although it is difficult to directly associate this process with the “Five Day War.”

Another significant reaction caused by the emergence of the two new states in the region is linked with economic assistance. Both the first and the second regions subsist solely at the expense of donations allocated by the Russian Federation. Therefore, the already existing discontent in Russia was further fueled by a feeling that the state had spawned two more black holes.

The lack of a developed and cautious policy in Russia with regard to the North Caucasus has also been reflected in the fact that the Russian media repeatedly voiced the phrase “Russia supports coreligionist Ossetians” (although no one had mentioned coreligionist Georgia), which, as Alexey Malashenko believes, did not remain outside the attention of the North Caucasian Muslims.

How is the North Caucasus Perceived in Russia?

The Russian government views the North Caucasus as an integral part of the Russian Federation although, at the same time, the aforementioned region objectively poses one of the most considerable threats to its national interests.

The way the image of the North Caucasus is being exploited by Russian authorities should also be noted.

During Putin’s presidency, the North Caucasus was portrayed as Russia’s “weak point,” constantly being recharged by external sources (specific countries were almost never identified directly although attempts were made to demonstrate that separatism and religious radicalism did not exist within the country but were imposed from outside).

Opinions have changed somewhat since 2009 when, on June 9, in Makhachkala, President Medvedev listed “systemic issues” as the most significant difficulty in the region: clanism, corruption, unemployment, poverty, etc. Thus, today, the Russian government regards the North Caucasus as a marginal region submerged in excessive corruption, clanism, etc. Despite the fact that all officials, including senior and top officials at the regional level are appointed by the center, the Kremlin is trying to avoid possible liability for the region’s problems.

It is noteworthy that such an approach by the Kremlin puts the rest of the Russian population against the North Caucasians. It turns out that the Caucasians are corrupt and aspiring to live at the expense of the rest of Russia which in turn is tormented by their lawlessness while in reality numerous violations are not prevented by the Kremlin.

As for the region itself, according to Russian experts, all republics, the opposition and civil society among them, perceive the North Caucasus as a part of Russia. The words of Dagestani poet, Rasul Gamzatov, have virtually become akin to an official slogan of the republic: **“Dagestan did not become a part of Russia voluntarily, nor will it voluntarily secede.”** According to expert opinion, the only group opposed to the Russian reality is the radical Islamist grouping, although their numbers are continuously growing.

Beyond the region, the attitude of the Russian society towards the North Caucasus is rather cautious which is caused by at least three factors: first, the instability of the North Caucasus and the reactions to it on the part of the media and the authorities which trigger an irrational fear among the society; second, trends in the ethnic structure of the region due to which Russian society finds it difficult to perceive the region as “one of their own,” and third, the disbelief of society that the government has the ability to alter the situation in the region. For instance, according to a survey conducted by the Levada-Center in September 2010, only 12% of respondents believe that the Russian authorities will succeed in resolving the problem in the nearest future, 27% believe that it is impossible to change anything at all, 38% consider that regulating the state of affairs will take many years and among them 65% assess the situation as “extremely tense.”

Moral Dilemma

It is interesting, and agreed upon by experts, that for the Kremlin the problem has now assumed a moral character. One of the answers to the question of why Russia will not give up the North Caucasus and exit the region is that, at present, Russia has severed all roads for retreat, including moral, has muddled everything up and is now to abandon the problems that could destroy the region?

Conclusion

According to expert opinion, the North Caucasus failed to become a natu-

ral part of Russia. It is often even called the “internal abroad.” Russia was unable to integrate the region into its own state body. The reason for this is a civilizational difference between the region and Russia, the overcoming of which is prevented by the weakness of civil society in the region, its lagging behind in terms of economic and social development, and a growing factor of religious extremism. The issue of mental modernization is also very problematic in the region which is reflected in the inter-ethnic struggle, a consequent lack of regulation of internal borders and the region’s irreconcilability with Russia.

One of the reasons of the center’s ineffective policy towards the region is also cultural and mental. For Russia as well, the North Caucasus could not become its organic constituent. The Russians, generally, do not have a sense of co-citizenship with the North Caucasians. During the infamous terrorist attack at the Moscow subway, no one, beginning with President Medvedev, expressed concern that the 18 year-old young women, who detonated themselves, were also citizens of Russia.