

Russia and Turkey in conflict (mis)management in the Caucasus

Since the collapse of the Soviet Union, the disconnected region, which includes the Russian North Caucasus and three newly-independent states of the South Caucasus (Armenia, Azerbaijan, and Georgia), has seen more violent conflicts than any other post-Soviet region. It is the only part of Europe in which civil wars and interstate conflicts have claimed hundreds of casualties over the last five years. Not one of the armed conflicts that erupted in the Caucasus in the early 1990s has yet been resolved, so that three unrecognized quasi-states continue to defy the norms of the European security system, while Chechnya has turned into a despotic enclave. 2012 did not bring the beginnings of a breakthrough in negotiations for a solution to any of the region's so-called "frozen conflicts", but the dynamics of social change in the region are very high, so there is much new tension in the seemingly static situation.

Brief Points

- The landscape of conflicts in the Caucasus is changing, but the new dynamics, particularly in the North Caucasus, get little international attention.
- Russia has entered a protracted domestic crisis that limits its capacity for projecting power and is eroding its positions in the Caucasus.
- The process of reform within Georgia is experiencing setbacks; the country's economic slowdown translates into political tensions, but the intensity of the conflict with Russia has decreased.
- Turkey is the only country that is increasing its positions in the Caucasus, but remains reluctant to take on new responsibilities for managing conflicts.

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Conflicts and interested parties

The concentration of conflicts of various types in the Caucasus is so high that the interplays between the local and the global are uniquely intense, and parties in a village quarrel often see themselves as actors in a ‘clash of civilizations’. For analytic simplification, it is possible to structure the regional (in)security complex in terms of five levels: local or intra-communal; intrastate (including secessionist); interstate-regular, involving the three states of the South Caucasus; interstate-expanded, which includes the three neighbouring states; and internationalized, involving the major global powers. Remarkably, Russia is deeply involved on every level, from attempting to resolve the *hijab* issue in a village school to seeking to curtail the US influence in the wider Caspian region.

Turkey, on the other hand, while historically closely connected with the Caucasus and obviously exposed to the instabilities spilling over from the region, is very cautious about engaging proactively in conflict management. It is often seen by the regional actors as punching below its weight, and indeed most Turkish initiatives – such as the one to establish a Stability and Cooperation Platform (2008) – have fallen perfectly flat.

This analysis will argue, nevertheless, that Turkey has a good opportunity to strengthen its role in the Caucasus, providing its leadership is able to pay sufficient attention to this direction, where the ‘zero-problem’ slogan doesn’t apply, while Russia’s still dominant influence is quite probably on the wane.

Georgia’s time of troubles continue

For almost all visitors, Georgia is one of the easiest places in the world to fall in love with, yet this country has experienced more civil wars and revolutions, and has suffered from deeper economic contraction, than any other post-Soviet state. The latest of these revolutions was brewing in autumn 2012 (as a PRIO seminar was being held in Tbilisi) and was only prevented by President Mikhail Saakashvili’s dignified acceptance of the narrow defeat of his United National Movement party in the parliamentary elections. What has followed has been such a nasty sequence of settling scores and trading insults that the idea of a ‘truth commission’ that might sort out the

Table 1. Georgia’s economic performance

| | GDP % year-on-year | Export % month-on-month | Import % month-on-month |
|----------------|-----------------------|----------------------------|----------------------------|
| September 2012 | +7.0 | +20.6 | +18.1 |
| October 2012 | +5.2 | +16.2 | +6.8 |
| November 2012 | +3.0 | -2.3 | -4.5 |
| December 2012 | -0.8 | -21.5 | -8.6 |
| January 2013 | +2.6 | +25.2 | -4.3 |
| February 2013 | +2.2 | +7.7 | -7.7 |

Source: National Statistics Office of Georgia. http://geostat.ge/index.php?action=news_archive&lang=eng

consequences of the ‘Rose Revolution’ of 2003 appears to be the only way of restoring a modicum of political normalcy.¹ What is relevant here, however, is not so much the negative impact of this political discord on Georgia’s economic situation (see Table 1), as the pronounced tension-dampening effect on Georgian–Russian relations.

The spectacular political miscalculations that resulted in the Russian–Georgian war in the first week of August 2008 remain too fresh for historians and too old for policy analysts, but it is essential to remember that it was not only French President Nicolas Sarkozy but also Turkish Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdogan who played key roles in getting that chaotic war under control. After capturing Poti with surprising ease, Russian troops

made no move toward Batumi and left the Baku–Tbilisi–Ceyhan (BTC) pipeline unharmed (contrary to many predictions), and this Russian restraint was undoubtedly related to Erdogan’s emergency visit to Moscow on 13 August 2008.²

The fruits of Russia’s victory, however, have long since turned bitter in its mouth, as the inescapable recognition of Abkhazia and South Ossetia as independent states brought numerous complications for Russia’s accession to the World Trade Organization (completed only in 2012), to its efforts to revive the conventional arms control programme in Europe, to its relations with the EU and China, and even in the maintenance of its ties with such close allies as Belarus and Kazakhstan. The plight of South Ossetia is closely



A Georgian UAV Hermes-450 was shot down by a Russian fighter over Abkhazia on 20 April 2008. Photo: Gerald L. Nino, via Wikimedia Commons

Table 2. Casualties (persons killed/wounded) from rebel attacks and counterinsurgency operations in the North Caucasus

| | 2011 | 2012 | January 2013 | February 2013 | March 2013 |
|-----------------------------|----------------|----------------|--------------|---------------|--------------|
| Dagestan | 413/411 | 404/290 | 10/14 | 31/12 | 26/15 |
| Chechnya | 95/106 | 82/92 | 14/8 | 0/2 | 6/7 |
| Ingushetia | 70/38 | 84/83 | 0/0 | 5/13 | 7/11 |
| North Caucasus total | 750/628 | 700/525 | 39/23 | 37/28 | 47/25 |

Source: *Kavkazsky uzel* (<http://www.kavkaz-uzel.ru/rubric/1103>)

linked with the deepening instability in the North Caucasus, but Abkhazia is persistently searching for opportunities to consolidate its fledgling statehood – and has been finding them not in Russia, which shows little consideration to Abkhazian sensitivities regarding interference in its domestic affairs, but in Turkey, which maintains a cautious attitude to this fragment of the post-Ottoman space. Economic ties with Turkey are crucial for securing the prosperity of Abkhazia (austerity may be a more accurate term), but even more important for this quasi-state are interactions related to the repatriation of Circassians (or the Adyghe), particularly from Syria.³

The reconfiguration of Georgia's political landscape after the October 2012 parliamentary elections has not brought any meaningful change in the rigidly intense hostility between Tbilisi and Sukhumi or Tskhinvali, as Georgian Prime Minister Bidzina Ivanishvili is unable to forge any common position based on showing some political flexibility towards the secessionist provinces within the victorious but incoherent Georgian Dream coalition. Neither has there been any tangible improvement in relations with Russia, despite Ivanishvili's pronounced advances and clear need to harvest some political dividends from re-established economic ties. Moscow is just paying scant attention.

Russia clings to the status quo, unsustainable as it is

Georgia has all but disappeared from political radar screens in Moscow, which remain crowded by improbable issues such as blasphemy or plagiarism and distorted by the deepening disarray among the elites. Saakashvili's defeat granted the Kremlin court a rare opportunity to gloat over the self-destruction of an intensely loathed adversary,

but the manner of his departure was in fact deeply unsatisfactory. Indeed, the key point holding together the Georgian Dream coalition is that the overbearing power of the executive branch needs to be trimmed down and reined in – a message that is utterly unacceptable for Russia's President Vladimir Putin, who is striving to reassert his own political dominance. Russia's recognition of Abkhazia and South Ossetia as independent states cannot be undone, and this encroachment on Georgia's sovereignty remains deeply offensive for every political force in Tbilisi, so the space for normalization is objectively limited. Putin's incentives for exploring this space are curtailed by suspicions that Georgia has in fact strengthened its commitment to democratic reforms, which was shaped in 2003 by the 'Rose Revolution', and so defies the pattern of post-Soviet authoritarianism.

Moscow's capacity for strengthening its influence in Georgia and the whole South Caucasus region is being eroded by the ongoing low-intensity civil war in the North Caucasus, which claimed 700 lives in 2012, including those of 209 law enforcement officers (see Table 2). The policy of generous federal funding of this depressed region has had to be curtailed owing to budget limitations, and the brutal policing is unable to deter the spread of discontent.⁴ The official discourse in which the rebels are stigmatized as 'terrorists' has lost relevance, as the underground networks portray themselves as being part of a revival of political Islam and have been turning themselves into offshoots of a 'Muslim brotherhood', while focusing their preaching on condemning corruption. Putin has replaced the ruling clan in Dagestan,⁵ but has been unable to find a satisfactory response to the evolving security challenges, seeking primarily to contain them in the hope of preventing them from threatening his pet project of the 2014 Winter Olympics at Sochi.

Western disengagement and opportunities for Turkey

A protracted recession and the deepening crisis of supranational European institutions continue to determine the progressive paralysis of EU common foreign and security policy, and this incapacitation is particularly pro-



The early-warning radar station at Gabala, Azerbaijan, was abandoned by Russian forces in December 2012. Photo: *Vestnik Kavkaza* (<http://vestnikkavkaza.net/articles/politics/21939.html>)



New border crossing between Georgia and Turkey. Photo: Mr Rosewater via Wikimedia Commons

nounced in the Caucasus. The ‘soft power’ that constituted the basis of the EU’s role in the region has been profoundly undermined, and the Eastern Neighbourhood policy has lost its limited incentives as its political resource base has sharply contracted. The USA has also reduced its engagement with the Caucasus, not least because the geostrategic importance of Caspian oil and gas, which a few years back appeared hugely significant, has sharply diminished. The EU has also curtailed its plans for a new ‘energy corridor’, abandoning the *Nabucco* pipeline project, even if the key guidelines of the common energy policy set before the arrival of the current crisis remain unrevised. This disengagement and deprioritization have taken regional leaders by surprise, so while Ilham Aliyev feels unconstrained in discarding the quasi-democratic camouflage for his despotic regime in Azerbaijan, Georgian elites of various persuasions feel abandoned by their partners and patrons in the West.

The only regional power that is currently finding its capacity for influencing the turbulent developments in the Caucasus undiminished – and even increased, even if only by

default – is Turkey. While the ambitious plan to establish a ‘gas hub’ for the EU has failed to materialize, Ankara has secured the central role in importing and transporting gas from Azerbaijan, and has also wrestled important concessions from *Gazprom*, taking greater volumes at lower prices. While the US-promoted ‘reconciliation’ with Armenia may have come to a dead end, Ankara has gained important ground in expanding its influence as well as economic penetration, benefitting also from the tensions in Azerbaijani–Iranian relations.⁶ Prime Minister Erdogan values his personal ties with President Putin, but this chemistry does not prevent him from consolidating Turkey’s position of a ‘rising power’ and exploring the boundaries this position from Abkhazia to Absheron.

The landscape of conflicts in the Caucasus is changing, and while the high-resonance confrontation between Russia and Georgia is calming down, other conflicts, particularly in the North Caucasus, are taking on new dynamics. The escalation of these tensions are not receiving the international attention they deserve, as the USA and the EU are forced to concentrate their political efforts elsewhere, particularly in the Middle East, and have been reducing their stakes in maintaining stability in the Caucasus. Russia has entered a protracted domestic crisis that limits the capacity of Putin’s regime for projecting power and leaves it immobilized in terms of countering the low-intensity but high-complexity civil war raging in Dagestan and Chechnya. Turkey remains reluctant to take on any new responsibilities for managing conflicts in the Caucasus but finds itself in a new situation where, in the absence of other external players, a small contribution could have a strong impact. Many opportunities will present themselves in the near future, and Ankara can choose the one that could produce a much-

desired foreign policy triumph (thus breaking the recent sequence of setbacks and deadlocks) and prove its ability to act as a self-confident ‘emerging power’.

Notes

- ¹ This idea is elaborated in Anna Dolidze and Thomas de Waal, ‘A Truth Commission for Georgia’, *CEIP Article*, 5 December 2012 (<http://www.carnegieendowment.org/2012/12/05/truth-commission-for-georgia/eqdm>).
- ² One useful examination is Igor Torbakov, ‘The Georgia Crisis and Russia–Turkey Relations’, Washington: Jamestown Foundation, 2008 (<http://www.jamestown.org/uploads/media/GeorgiaCrisisTorbakov.pdf>).
- ³ See Sufian Zhemukhov, ‘Recognition Without Independence: Abkhazia’s International Context’, *PONARS Eurasia Memo* 245, September 2012 (<http://www.ponarseurasia.org/memo/recognition-without-independence-abkhazia%E2%80%99s-international-context>).
- ⁴ On the diminishing effectiveness of military means in counterterrorist operations, see Vladimir Muhin, ‘The Third Chechen war’, *Nezavisimaya gazeta*, 10 October 2012 (in Russian).
- ⁵ See Musa Muradov, Elizaveta Surnacheva, ‘Clan comes first’, *Kommersant-Vlast*, 4 February 2013 (in Russian).
- ⁶ See Anvar Valiyev, ‘Azerbaijan–Iran Relations: Quo Vadis, Baku?’, *PONARS Eurasia Memo* 244, September 2012 (<http://www.ponarseurasia.org/memo/azerbaijan-iran-relations-quo-vadis-baku>).

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