INTERNATIONAL INVOLVEMENT
IN THE SOUTH CAUCASUS

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Introduction

The South Caucasus represents one of the most diverse and conflict-ridden regions in the world. It includes the three former Soviet states Armenia, Azerbaijan and Georgia, as well as numerous ethnic minorities and small nations within these states. The term South Caucasus is relatively new and has been used to replace the older term Transcaucasia. According to Valery Tishkov, there is a strong drive of national elites to separate the region from Russia and dismantle old ties to the point of changing names. "It is noteworthy," wrote Tishkov, "that the historical name of the region Transcaucasus has been questioned by the proponents of new political correctness who wish to create a mantle distance from Russia. Consequently, the region is being renamed the South Caucasus" (Tishkov 1999:4). It is, however, worthy of mention that the earlier name Transcaucasus (*Za Kavkazye* in Russian) reflected the Russian geographical position and literally meant 'beyond or behind the Caucasus', as the three republics were seen from the northern perspective of Russia. Recently, the term South Caucasus has came into use in order to more accurately describe the region and as Tishkov rightly points out, to de-link it from Russia.

Since the collapse of the Soviet Union, the South Caucasus has turned into a scene of heightened ethnonationalism, ethnopolitical conflicts, power-political games and sheer misery for the peoples involved. As Stephen Jones has observed, the South Caucasus has traditionally been characterized by "the internal conflict, fragmentation, and marginality tendencies encouraged and exploited by its larger neighbors" (Jones 2001:1). This pattern has been reactivated since the recent independence of the South Caucasian states and has led to three types of rivalries: "…firstly between the regional hegemons Iran, Turkey, and Russia; secondly between the Caucasian states themselves; and thirdly between nations within the states" (Jones 2001:1). This paper is primarily concerned with the third type of rivalry characterizing it as ethnopolitical conflict between national minorities and their respective states. However, a closer look at the region reveals that the three types of rivalries are strongly intertwined and cannot be fully comprehended without an overlapping analysis of the intra-regional political dynamics, ethnopolitical struggles and external involvement of great powers and international organizations.

Ethnopolitical rivalries have been part and parcel of Caucasian politics since the end of the Cold War and have resulted in three armed conflicts. The first conflict occurred in the Armenian populated enclave Nagorno-Karabakh located within the territorial boundaries of Azerbaijan. The two other conflicts occurred in Georgia between the Georgian central authorities of Tbilisi and the autonomous regions of Abkhazia and South Ossetia. In all three cases, the ceasefire agreements were reached without final settlements, turning the South Caucasus into an area of frozen conflicts and fragile stability. The region has attracted increasing international attention and a great deal of effort has been directed at the resolution of the existing ethnopolitical confrontations. This paper attempts to compare patterns of international involvement in the three cases of South Caucasian conflicts, identify what the general impact of such involvement has been and examine how it has varied across the cases and across time.

The subject is important for three main reasons. First of all it goes to the heart of one of the most intense debates in international law and political philosophy over the conflicting rights of self-determination and territorial integrity. In addition, it deals with such controversial issues as group rights vs. rights of an individual, protection of ethnic minorities vs. preservation of civic cohesion and state integrity, democratic management of multiethnic states vs. the moral right to secede. All of these issues represent a complex and problematic reality of the post-Communist South Caucasus that awaits sustainable solutions. Resolution of South Caucasian type ethnopolitical conflicts and related problems in a peaceful and democratic way indeed serves the interests of the international community, as it tries to avoid bad precedents and their potential replication in other parts of the world.

Secondly, international involvement in the South Caucasus has been targeted at broader issues of democratization and economic and political transformation, which raises interesting questions with regard to the applicability of some western norms and ideas to the multiethnic, post-Communist societies. It shows how the more traditional and well developed Western concepts such as self-determination, as well as relatively new ones such as power-sharing, multiculturalism, minority rights and group differentiation translate themselves into local realities. As Neil MacFarlane has observed, studying international involvement in the region "provides an important opportunity to assess the broader issue of the transferability of political, social, and

economic norms and practices developed in one cultural context to other very different ones" (MacFarlane 1999:2).

Finally, the resolution of ethnopolitical conflicts in the post-Communist space has important practical implications and concerns the overall stability of the post-Cold War world. It has been widely accepted that the ideological conflicts between capitalism and socialism have been replaced with the resurgence of ethnonational conflicts around the world. According to Will Kymlicka, "resolving these disputes is perhaps the greatest challenge facing democracies today" (Kymlicka 1996:1). Therefore, the experience of the South Caucasus may well provide valuable insights and lessons for the resolution of similar problems elsewhere and for the promotion of a just and peaceful world order.

The author argues here that international involvement in the South Caucasus has had practical, normative and ideational dimensions that together contributed to the overall international impact on the region. The practical side consisted of mediation efforts aimed at the resolution of ethnopolitical conflicts, in which international organizations such as the OSCE and the UN took the lead. In addition, the mediation efforts were supplemented by general assistance schemes and programmes targeted not only at the conflict zones but also at entire countries undergoing political and economic transition. Here the practical considerations of economic development and political stabilization, which would open up local markets for international businesses, were also underpinned by the normative principles of democracy, respect for human rights and minority cultures. In some cases normative and practical aspects of international involvement reinforced, in other cases contradicted each other. This contradiction became particularly apparent when external powers such as Russia or the United States, tried to pursue their interests in the region and when economic or geopolitical considerations outbalanced concerns of successful democratization or respect for human rights.

In addition to practical and normative aspects of international involvement, the author also wishes to stress its ideational aspect, which has gained particular importance in regulating ethnopolitical tensions in the region but continues to be relatively underemphasized. In this regard, the author refers to the impact of western ideas such as self-determination, group differentiation, power-sharing etc. on the local political and social realities of the region. Most of these ideas are highly contested and generate heated debates around the world, including in the West. There has been

no clear consensus reached on the best way of managing multiethnic states, taming or promoting ethnic affiliations and equating self-determination with independence or reinterpreting it as a form of cultural and political autonomy. However, despite a lack of consensus, some ideas have tended to gain greater recognition than others and have become translated into policy prescriptions of influential international agencies. Therefore, they are likely to have a profound impact on countries in regions such as the South Caucasus where these policies and ideas may be implemented and tested in a specific local environment.

Thus, this paper uses the concept of international involvement in its broadest sense and concentrates on the efforts and activities of both international organizations and external powers. There is one definitional difficulty, however, which is worth pointing out and which concerns the interpretation of the term 'international'. Should we consider international involvement as primarily Western involvement or should we also include in the analysis non-western members of the international community? If international involvement is defined only in terms of Western involvement, then countries such as Russia, Turkey, or Iran require separate investigations and would have to be excluded from the current analysis. If, however, the term 'international' also includes non-western members of the international community then the question is whether the international community ought to be held responsible for the actions of countries such as Russia. Technically Russian involvement in the region qualifies as 'international' since after the collapse of the Soviet Union, Russia is an external power to the region, however, it has often acted in defiance of internationally accepted rules and norms. Perhaps, this contradiction has to be resolved within the international community. The author has written this paper from the perspective of the South Caucasus and has therefore included in the analysis policies of Russia that were often contradictory to those of other international actors. A separation would have been artificial since ethnopolitical problems in the South Caucasus are closely intertwined with geopolitical considerations and are likely to have a significant impact on the final settlement of existing ethnopolitical conflicts. Similarly, cooperation or rivalry between Russia and other external powers in the region such as the United States or to a lesser extent Turkey and Iran are to be considered as part and parcel of 'international involvement' and need to be included in the overall evaluation of such an involvement.

The main argument presented in this paper is that international involvement in the three South Caucasian states has been largely similar and replicable across cases but it has varied substantially across time. The author singles out three main stages of international involvement, which would include the first stage of international neglect and Russian dominance; the second stage of international organizations and an increase in their activities; and the third current stage of US involvement and balancing Russia. The common characteristic of all three stages is the crucial role of geopolitical considerations affecting and often complicating the existing ethnopolitical confrontations. The striking difference is the increase of these geopolitical interests throughout the three stages, which started from Russia's dominance and ended up involving not only Russia, but also Turkey, Iran and the United States. Although South Caucasian states have largely welcomed increasing international attention and associated with it hopes of the final resolution of the existing conflicts, the results have so far been mixed. On the one hand, conflict resolution efforts intensified as the United States and other Western countries put greater stake in the stability of the region due to oil exploration and transportation projects. On the other hand, involvement of a greater number of interested parties further complicated the negotiation process and exacerbated intra-regional divisions to the point of creating hostile alliances. In the sections that follow, the author briefly describes the origins of South Caucasian ethnopolitical conflicts and the international responses they have been generating over the past ten years. The analysis also stresses geopolitical as well as normative and ideational factors that have played role in defining the overall nature of international involvement.

Three Cases of Ethnopolitical Conflicts

Nagorno-Karabakh

One of the first ethnopolitical conflicts to erupt on the former Soviet territory was over the Armenian populated Autonomous Region of Nagorno-Karabakh (NKAO) located within the territorial boundaries of Azerbaijan. Karabakh has been a disputed territory over the centuries and the decision to incorporate it into Azerbaijan

was taken in 1923 after long debates between the representatives of the government of Soviet Azerbaijan, Soviet Armenia, the emissaries of the central Soviet power in the Caucasus and the People's Commissar for Nationality Affairs Joseph Stalin. According to a US Institute of Peace report, Stalin, by including the Armenian populated region within the boundaries of Azerbaijan was pursuing a divide and rule policy ensuring that NKAO would remain a sore spot between the two republics and would strengthen Moscow's position as a power broker (Carley 1998: 1). It is hard to say what the exact rationale behind such a decision was, but as Alexey Zverev argues, "as long as Communist rule held in the USSR, so did the uneasy but peaceful relationship between the two peoples of Nagorno-Karabakh" (Zverev 1996:19).

The first confrontation, however, erupted in 1988, when Gorbachev's *Perestroika* was accompanied by the relative relaxation of tight Soviet rule and the Armenian majority in the Nagorno-Karabakh supreme legislative body felt secure enough to appeal to the Kremlin and request the region's unification with Armenia. Azerbaijan rejected the Armenian claim and the confrontation soon escalated into a violent conflict with both sides accusing each other of initiating the hostilities. In 1989, the Supreme Soviet of Armenia passed a resolution proclaiming the unification of Nagorno-Karabakh and Armenia which to date has not been rescinded (Carley 1998:1). In order to remedy the situation, the Soviet leadership decided to impose 'a special government administration in Karabakh' and thus subjected the region to direct control from Moscow. However, the Soviet leadership, preoccupied with numerous problems in the wake of its own dissolution, lost many opportunities for brokering the agreement or even initiating the negotiations and deploying the peacekeepers. According to Svante Cornell, "Moscow simply put a lid on the conflict without making a serious effort to deal with the long-term consequences. It was therefore inevitable that the conflict would flare-up again" (Cornell 2001:86).

In spring 1991, serious fighting broke out involving both the Soviet troops and the Armenian and Azeri forces. After the collapse of the Soviet Union, the Autonomous Region of Nagorno-Karabakh rejected the unification with Armenia and proclaimed full independence in early 1992 (Carley 1998:1). By mid-1992 the Karabakh Armenians with the support of Armenia proper had launched a successful offensive and ended up not only controlling Nagorno-Karabakh but also approximately 20 percent of Azerbaijani territory. The establishment of the Lachin corridor was of greatest significance, because it created a land bridge from the region

to Armenia. Even though a ceasefire was signed in 1994, the Armenians refused to retreat from the occupied territories until the independence of Nagorno-Karabakh was recognized and its security guaranteed.

The conflict in Nagorno-Karabakh, which began in the then existing Soviet Union, was considered by the international community as an internal conflict and was largely neglected by outside powers. The first result of such neglect was the virtually uncondemned alteration of existing territorial boundaries between the two states. The second result was the de facto acknowledgment of Russian dominance in the area, which led to a very limited international involvement in the active phase of the war. As Cornell pointed out, "the efforts of the international community to bring an end to the war that raged between 1992 and 1994 were half-hearted at best and exiguous at worst" (Cornell 2001:61).

The international mediation efforts increased over time. When both Armenia and Azerbaijan joined the Conference on Security and Co-operation in Europe (now OSCE) in 1992, the organization took the lead in mediating the conflict and continues to do so in the present. A group of CSCE member countries, the so-called 'Minsk Group' was formed and tasked to negotiate a settlement. In 1994, the High Level Planning Group (HLPG) was established with the aim of intensifying action in relation to the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict. The prime goal of HLPG was to make recommendations on developing and establishing a multinational OSCE peacekeeping force. However, the peacekeepers have not been deployed and Karabakh remains the only conflict in the South Caucasus where neither Russian nor international peacekeeping operations are conducted. In addition to the HLPG, a Personal Representative of the OSCE Chairman-in -Office was appointed in 1995 to work on creating conditions for the deployment of an OSCE peacekeeping operation and to facilitate "a lasting, comprehensive political settlement of the conflict in all its aspects" (OSCE Mission Survey 2001: 1). The headquarters of the PR is located in Tbilisi, Georgia, and consists of five Field Assistants.

The United Nations took a very cautious stand towards the conflict in Nagorno-Karabakh and first paid attention only in 1992 after the Armenian offensive. Fact-finding missions were sent to Karabakh with the aim of collecting information and supporting the CSCE efforts on the ground. In addition, the Security Council issued a statement in 1992 expressing 'serious concern' over the deterioration of the situation in Karabakh and breaches of ceasefire agreements. In 1993, the Security

Council issued its first resolution regarding the conflict and characterized it as "a serious threat to the maintenance of the international peace and security in the region" (Coppieters 1996:107).

Apart from mediation efforts, international involvement also consisted of more general assistance schemes to Armenia and Azerbaijan aimed at democratization, economic restructuring and the successful transition of these countries from centrally planned authoritarian regimes to market democracies. Even though most of these assistance programmes did not target the conflict zone specifically, the general understanding was that efforts at democratization and the development of the rule of law and civil society would eventually contribute to the peaceful settlement of the conflict. Among the main donor agencies were the UNDP, UNHCR, UNOCHA and other UN agencies, as well as numerous USAID funded programmes and international and local NGOs. The UNHCR has played a particularly important role in managing the refugee crisis in Azerbaijan, a country with more than one million internally displaced persons (IDPs).

Even though the share of the United States was quite significant in the overall international assistance, its standing towards the conflicting parties of Nagorno-Karabakh was quite controversial and the subject of intense debates both in the United States and in the South Caucasus. The problem was the pro-Armenian bias, which resulted from the strong pressure of the Armenian lobby in the US Congress. This led to the introduction of the infamous Freedom Support Act Section 907, which restricted the non-humanitarian US assistance provided to Azerbaijan. As a result of this decision, Armenia became one of the highest per capita recipients of US assistance in the world, while Azerbaijan was denied much of the support offered to other post-Soviet countries. According to Robert Berls, the Vice-President of one of the American oil companies:

> Section 907 thwarts the US Government's efforts to conduct an evenhanded policy in resolving the conflict between Armenia and Azerbaijan. As a co-chairman of the Minsk Group of the OSCE, the US Government bears a special responsibility to be an honest broker in the peace negotiations. Unfortunately, Scetion 907, which remains in force because of the action of the US Congress, restricts the ability of the US to treat both nations equally and fairly in this strategically important region of the world.

Increasing interests of the United States Government and the US oil companies in the Azeri oil resources of the Caspian basin brought to the fore the contradiction in US policy towards the region, which consisted on the one hand of satisfying the powerful American-Armenian lobby and on the other the pursuit of oil-related interests in Azerbaijan. Starting from 1997, the US got increasingly engaged in the exploration and transportation of Caspian oil, which boosted the confidence of the Azeri government in the US to the extent of requesting US co-chairmanship of the Minsk Group. As Svante Cornell has observed, "Azerbaijan's perception of US policy had grown in such confidence that Baku actually demanded Washington's participation in the Minsk Group, something that had hardly been imaginable a few years earlier" (Cornell 2001:378).

Increasing US interests in the region, especially related to oil resources, correlated with greater US participation in the conflict-resolution process. Currently much pressure is applied on both sides to reach an agreement, as Karabakh has acquired special significance against the background of ongoing oil politics. President Bush organized talks in Florida for the Presidents of Armenia and Azerbaijan and reportedly reiterated that "he considers peace in South Caucasus as a top priority of his administration's foreign policy" (Peuch 2001:1). Some observers now believe that the Karabakh conflict is getting more attention from the international community, which has increased the likelihood of reaching a political settlement when compared to Abkhazia and South Ossetia (Carley 1998:5). Even though other conflicts in the South Caucasus receive less attention, a settlement reached in Karabakh would set an important precedent and have significant implications for similar ethnopolitical conflicts in the region.

Abkhazia

Abkhazia is an autonomous republic in Georgia situated on the coast of the Black Sea. The Abkhaz are a people close in language and origin to the North Caucasian peoples of the Adyghe group. Their territory was once part of Ancient Rome, Byzantium, Persia and later Turkey and Russia. According to Alexei Zverev, until Abkhazia's absorption into the Russian empire in 1810, Abkhazian rulers were in "nominal or effective union with various Georgian kingdoms and princedoms. Thus,

the historical evidence is ambiguous: both unity with Georgia and autonomy can be argued on historical grounds" (Zverev 1996:39).

On 31 March 1921, an independent Soviet Socialist Republic of Abkhazia was proclaimed, which lasted until December 1921 when Abkhazia joined the Georgian SSR under the Treaty of Union. In 1931, Abkhazia was incorporated into Georgia as an autonomous region with the status of a republic (*Avtanomnaya Respublika* or *ASSR*) (Zverev 1996:39). The Abkhaz evoked their short-lived independence in 1988 and demanded reinstitution of Abkhazia as a Union republic, which in fact meant secession from Georgia and which sparked the hostilities between Sukhumi and Tbilisi.

In 1990, the Supreme Soviet of Abkhazia actually proclaimed Abkhazia a full Union republic, which happened against the background of an extraordinary upsurge of nationalism in the rest of Georgia. Georgian nationalists at that time perceived Abkhazia as a threat to Georgian territorial integrity that could easily be manipulated by Russia. A dialogue, therefore, never took place and was inconceivable with both sides adhering to extreme positions. Nationalist forces that came to power in Georgia further exacerbated the situation by taking a more aggressive stand towards the minorities and autonomous regions in the country. In 1991, Georgia proclaimed itself an independent unitary state with no internal boundaries and autonomous regions. Abkhazia, in response, reinstated its 1925 constitution, which defined Abkhazia as an independent state united with Georgia on the basis of a special union treaty.

From 1992, the situation deteriorated dramatically not only with respect to Abkhazia but also to the rest of Georgia. The country was heading towards one of the most severe economic and political crises experienced since the turn of the century. The result was a forceful change of Gamsakhurdia's nationalist regime accompanied by rebellions in western Georgia, as well as an escalation of conflicts in both Abkhazia and South Ossetia. The Georgian army, reportedly without the consent of the new head of state Shevardnadze, advanced through Abkhazia and forced the Abkhaz leadership to retreat from the capital Sukhumi. The war continued until 1993, during which time the Abkhaz found significant support from the North Caucasian, in particular Chechen fighters as well as from Russian political and military actions. After breaking the ceasefire, which should have been guaranteed by the Russian forces, Abkhazians regained Sukhumi and forced the Georgian forces to retreat. The final Russian-brokered ceasefire came into effect in late October 1993, which has so

far endured, albeit with several violations. CIS peacekeeping forces were deployed, consisting primarily of Russian units.

However, a resolution of the conflict is not even in sight. The two sides maintain conflicting positions, with Abkhazia insisting on full independence and Georgia proposing autonomous membership in the asymmetric federation. An additional problem is that of refugees. Georgia refuses to negotiate on Abkhazia's status without a prior return of Georgian refugees to Abkhazia. The Abkhaz on the other hand, demand that the definition of their status be addressed before the return of refugees. The Abkhaz position is motivated by the inferior number of the Abkhaz themselves, who before the expulsion of Georgians comprised only 17 per cent of the total population. If all or most refugees return, they will outnumber the Abkhaz again and the secessionist regime will have even less legitimacy to speak on behalf of the entire Abkhazia.

International involvement in the conflict of Abkhazia started out on a very limited level and has increased over time. In the active phase of the conflict the main mediator, and to some extent participant, of the conflict was the Russian Federation. Georgians have repeatedly accused Russia of supporting the Abkhaz especially with heavy artillery and weapons, while Russian citizens from the North Caucasus were active fighters in the Abkhaz battalions. The first goal of Russian involvement was to force Georgia into the CIS and to guarantee long-term stationing of Russian bases on Georgian territory. After the humiliating defeat of the Georgian army near Sukhumi, both goals were achieved. Russia brokered a ceasefire in 1994, while Georgia entered the CIS and signed an agreement on military bases.

The role of international organizations at the time was restricted to soft, non-binding measures. In 1992, one month after the outbreak of the war, the United Nations sent its first fact-finding mission to Abkhazia. In May 1993, when the fighting intensified, the UN Secretary General appointed the Swiss ambassador Eduard Brunner as his 'Special Envoy' to Georgia, whose mission was also largely fact-finding and lasted until 1997. The Security Council issued a number of resolutions calling for the respect of ceasefires and in 1993 designated the situation in Abkhazia as a "threat to the maintenance of international peace and security" (Coppieters 1996:107). In the same year, the UN was faced with urgent requests from the Government of Georgia to deploy a peacekeeping force in Abkhazia and decided

to establish an observer mission (UNOMIG) in order to monitor the implementation of the Russian guaranteed ceasefire. According to Neil MacFarlane,

> the decision to send an observer force rather than a fully fledged peacekeeping force reflected the desire of the Russian Federation to take the lead in the management of conflict in the 'former Soviet space', and the unwillingness of the other permanent members of the Security Council to challenge Russian prerogatives. (MacFarlane 1999:36)

The passive role of the United Nations did not help much to solve the conflict and to an extent forced Georgia into accepting Russia's mediation rules and preferences. The UN, however, did contribute significantly – through specialized agencies such as the UNHCR, the UNICEF and the WFP – to the management of the refugee crisis, which followed the rapid exodus of the Georgian population from Abkhazia. Over the period of 1994-97, the UN Agency for Humanitarian Assistance also provided significant support to the UN and NGO activities in Georgia. However, as MacFarlane has observed, UN humanitarian assistance was primarily targeted at Georgia proper excluding the Abkhaz controlled territories. This omission "may have impeded the negotiation of a settlement by enhancing the Abkhaz sense of isolation and creating an appearance of UN bias in favor of Georgia's central government" (MacFarlane 1999:38).

As international attention towards the conflict in Abkhazia increased, a special group of countries under UN auspices called Friends of Georgia was set up comprising the USA, the UK, Germany, France and Russia. Its goal was similar to that of the Minsk Group and consisted of finding an acceptable political settlement for both parties. The difficulties the group faced were also similar to those of the Minsk Group. Azerbaijan and Georgia were skeptical about Russia's commitment to the peace process, while Armenia strongly opposed Turkish participation. This made it difficult to find a common ground not only among the conflicting sides, but also among the mediators. However, both Georgia and Azerbaijan welcomed different foreign mediation efforts as a way of balancing Russia's dominating role and, as Ghia Nodia argued, increasing the chances of settlement in the long run (Nodia 1999:24).

South Ossetia

South Ossetia is another autonomous region in Georgia which has become the scene of ethnopolitical struggle since the demise of the Soviet Union. The first tensions date back to 1988-89, when nationalist movements in Georgia were gaining strength and, consequently, straining relations between Georgia and its autonomies. In 1988, South Ossetia demanded to be upgraded from the status of Autonomous Region (Oblast) to Autonomous Republic (the status previously enjoyed by Abkhazia). A year later, South Ossetians sent a petition to Moscow asking for the unification of North and South Ossetians. Georgian nationalists led by Gamsakhurdia reacted harshly to the Ossetian demands and convinced the Communist government of the then Georgian Republic to organize a 'march on Tskhinvali' (the capital of South Ossetia) to 'defend the Georgian population'. The marchers were prevented from entering the city and the first clashes occurred. When Gamsakhurdia came to power, one of the first decisions he made was to abolish the autonomous status of Ossetia, thus triggering further escalation of the conflict. In retrospect, Shevardnadze would acknowledge that "the conflict in South Ossetia had been the grossest mistake of the former Georgian leadership" (cited in Coppieters 1996:47).[1]

Shevardnadze's regime showed a more conciliatory approach to the South Ossetian problem but was unable to stop the fighting that continued throughout 1992 with Georgian artillery attacks on Tskinvali. At this point relations with Russia deteriorated significantly. While Yeltsin was trying to negotiate solutions, the Russian helicopters attacked the Georgian National Guard armored forces, and Russian troops were relocated to North Ossetia. The speaker of the Russian parliament, Khasbulatov, "reportedly threatened to bomb Tbilisi in a telephone conversation with Shevardnadze, and hence by June 1992 Russia was on a brink of war with Georgia" (Cornell 2001:169-170). According to Cornell, the gravity of the situation was instrumental in engineering a rapprochement between Shevardnadze and Yeltsin who signed a ceasefire agreement on 22 June 1992. In July of the same year, peacekeeping forces were set up consisting of Russian, Georgian and Ossetian forces. The ceasefire has held ever since, and even though a solution to the conflict is yet to

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[1] The current status of South Ossetia is undefined, since the negotiations are still underway with regard to the reorganization of Georgia into a federal state. While it is clear that South Ossetia will be granted autonomous status, it is the type and extent of autonomy that is being negotiated.

be found, progress on the grassroots level has been made and hope for a final resolution is much higher then in the case of Abkhazia or Nagorno-Karabakh.

The main international agency involved in the South Ossetian conflict was the CSCE. In 1993, the UN and the CSCE agreed that the international lead on resolving the conflict in Abkhazia should be taken by the UN, while that in South Ossetia should be managed by the CSCE (MacFarlane 1999:36). The main task of the CSCE was to monitor the ceasefire protected by the tripartite peacekeeping forces headed by the Russians. However, given the relatively well-functioning ceasefire, the CSCE mission was extended to include measures for conflict resolution. In 1994, at the 14th meeting of the Permanent Committee, it was decided to expand the CSCE mission to Georgia and to complete the original objectives by a number of development-oriented objectives such as the promotion of respect for human rights, free media, democratization and institution-building. In relation to the Georgian-Ossetia conflict, the objectives included the creation of a broader political framework, in which a lasting political settlement could be achieved, as well as the organization of round tables and discussions in order to identify and eliminate sources of tension and extend political reconciliation (OSCE Mission Survey 2001:2).

Lara Olson elaborates in the *Accord* issue on Abkhazia on what is now the commonly held view among the international community in Georgia that "although a full-scale political settlement to the Georgia-South Ossetia conflict remains elusive the negotiation approach and the synergy between formal and informal channels show more promise of a positive outcome than in the Georgia-Abkhaz case" (Olson 1999:27). In Ossetia, both through formal and informal channels, progress has been made on issues such as trade, return of refugees, demilitarization, exchanges between Georgian and Ossetian NGOs and reconstruction. Olson points out that unlike in Abkhazia economic and humanitarian programmes have not been made conditional on a final political settlement but have been supported by the injection of international funding. The EU and the UNDP have allocated several million dollars for the economic development of South Ossetia, while the OSCE and international NGOs such as Links and Vertic have facilitated direct contacts between Georgian and Ossetian NGOs, journalists, academics, business and government representatives (Olson 1999:27).

The UNDP country office in Georgia has developed a special programme for the rehabilitation of the Tskhinvali region. The objective of this programme is to

assist the Georgian government in finding a rapid and peaceful solution to the conflict by supporting the normalization of relations between Tskhinvali region authorities and the Georgian central government. Among the activities performed are the repair of basic infrastructure in selected villages, restoration of telephone lines, rehabilitation of roads and bridges, as well as the support of newly returned local farmers and families. The UNDP attempted to undertake a similar rehabilitation programme for Abkhaza and sent its first needs assessment mission in 1998. A number of donors, including the USA and the EU, committed several million dollars for reconstruction and other assistance programmes, but the initiative failed because the two conflicting parties could not agree on its implementation.[2]

This example shows that compared to Abkhazia, South Ossetia has made significant progress in terms of communication between the local and central authorities, in the exchange of information, as well as in the development of mutually beneficial civil society and economic initiatives.

Another important factor contributing to the relative normalization of Georgian-Ossetian relations is the role of Russia. From the ceasefire agreement up until the present, neither the Russian government nor the peacekeepers on the ground have obstructed the return of refugees and relative stabilization. From 1997 to 1998, the UNHCR together with the Norwegian Council of Refugees helped 800 families return to the conflict zone. Trade links and transportation have indeed intensified significantly between Georgia and Ossetia. However, South Ossetia due to its location on the Russian border has become the main route of smuggling and illegal trade. Economic support of the Ossetian government from Russia also has diminished substantially partially owing to Russia's increasing preoccupation with it own problems in the North Caucasus. If Georgia were in a stronger economic position, this would be the time to make a greater contribution to the restructuring and rehabilitation of South Ossetia and thus its reintegration into the Georgian economy. However, economic difficulties in Georgia proper do not allow for such engagement in the region and leave South Ossetia more dependent on international aid.

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[2] As described in the *Accord* issue on Abkhazia, the Georgian side perceived international assistance "to be a means of tying Abkhazia in practical terms back into an integrated Georgian economy. The Abkhaz side perceived reconstruction assistance as a way of rendering Abkhazia itself more viable" (MacFarlane 1999: 40).

Three Stages of International Involvement

The analysis of international responses to ethnopolitical conflicts in the South Caucasus suggests that the pattern of international involvement has been largely similar in all three cases. The two main international agencies tasked to perform mediating and conflict resolution functions have been the OSCE and the United Nations. In addition to mediation efforts much of the humanitarian and development-oriented assistance has been provided both to the conflict zones directly and to the South Caucasian states more broadly. A few noticeable exceptions, however, can be observed. In the case of Abkhazia, international assistance has largely been conditioned on the resolution of the status issue and thus has been limited in scope. US non-humanitarian assistance to Azerbaijan also was restricted by the decision of the Congress referred to earlier in this paper, although starting from 1997 many of these restrictions have been lifted. Nagorno-Karabakh differs from the other conflicts in the region by two main factors. One is that it can be characterized as an international as opposed to an internal ethnopolitical conflict, since it involves two independent states, Armenia and Azerbaijan, that have been fully fledged participants in both the active phase of the conflict and in the current negotiations phase. Second, it is the only zone of conflict where peacekeeping forces have not been deployed. In the two other cases, Russian units have been leading the peacekeeping operations.

In spite of the above differences, one may conclude that the international community perceives the South Caucasus as a single unit and has developed a pattern of its involvement with very limited variations across the cases. The variations, across time, however have been quite significant. It has started with the complete acceptance of Russia's 'special rights and interests' in her 'sphere of influence' and evolved into the acceptance of region's 'strategic importance' to the world and to its only superpower, the United States. The author would set down three main stages of international involvement in the South Caucasus, which can roughly be characterized as the following: the first stage of Russian dominance and international neglect lasted from 1991 to 1994. The second stage of international organizations roughly corresponded to the period of 1994-97, during which international organizations took a more active stance both in terms of conflict resolution and in general support of the

newly independent states. The third and current stage can be characterized as that of balancing Russia and increasing US involvement.

The development of the above stages coincides with the increase of American interests in the region and the simultaneous decrease of Russia's dominance. It is worth pointing out, however, that there is much overlap of the three stages. For instance it is hard to draw a strict line between the first and the second stages and identify the exact time and extent of activation of international organizations. At the same time, the decrease of Russian dominance is a relative term and one has to keep in mind that Russia has continued to be an important regional player throughout all three stages of international involvement. However, the author has employed the above division mostly for analytical purposes, since it can well illustrate the evolving pattern of international engagement and identify the changing real or perceived obstacles to settling ethnopolitical conflicts in the region.

Following the collapse of the Soviet Union, in the period of 1991-94, international organizations and Western powers started to slowly enter the former Soviet space by opening up regional offices and local representations. However, apart from symbolic and rather limited activities, the international community did not take great interest in the fate of the newly independent states. On the contrary, the persistent Soviet legacy contributed to the perception of these emerging new states as Russian satellites that belonged to the Russian sphere of influence and required no external interference in their internal troubles. Michael Lund in his EastWest Institute report well summarizes the position of the United States towards the South Caucasus in the early 1990s, which largely corresponds to the general Western position towards the region:

> The US did not take an active interest in the Caucasus region and tended to regard it as lying within a Russian sphere of influence that implicitly accepted the Russian notion of the so-called 'near-abroad'. As the 1990s unfolded, however, several factors led the US to increasingly develop a more explicit set of goals and policies toward the Caucasus and to build the bilateral relations with each of the three independent governments there. (Lund 1999:6)

The above position of the international community coincided with the active phase of ethnopolitical conflicts in the region, allowing Russia to step in as the only 'legitimate' power to mediate the conflicts and even use them for furthering Russia's own strategic interests. After the collapse of the Soviet Union, Russia was preoccupied with the

possible loss of her military presence in the southern tier states and a restriction of her access to the Black Sea. By the beginning of 1993, neither Georgia nor Azerbaijan had agreed to join the CIS. Azerbaijan also refused to allow Russian troops on its territory and despite heavy pressure from Moscow continues to remain the only state in the South Caucasus free of Russian military presence. Georgia has also managed to negotiate an agreement with Russia on a gradual withdrawal of troops, which in 1993-94 seemed inconceivable for Russia's interests. The Russian defense minister at the time, Pavel Grachev, reportedly stated that, "every measure should be taken to ensure that our troops remain there" (Cornell 2001:345).

Under these circumstances maturing ethnopolitical conflicts in the South Caucasus presented an opportunity for Russia to pressure the newly independent states back into her sphere of dominance. Moscow played a controversial role in Nagorno-Karabakh by supporting one conflicting party or the other depending on Russia's immediate interests at the time. A similar pattern was repeated in Abkhazia, when on the one hand Russia was handing over part of the Soviet armaments to Georgia and on the other, supplying war planes to the Abkhaz and assisting them in bombing the Georgian held Sukhumi (Zverev 1996:53). In both Nagorno-Karabakh and Abkhazia, Russia also tried to organize mediation talks in parallel to those of the OSCE and the UN often without cooperating or even informing the international participants. According to the American representative of the OSCE in Karabakh, John Maresca:

> At first, Russia fully supported the Minsk Group. But in 1993 Russia reactivated its earlier independent mediation effort…Russia wished to re-establish its dominance in the region and to exclude outsiders, namely the US and Turkey…Moscow would like to re-establish control of the former (Azerbaijani) Soviet frontier with Turkey and Iran, and to share in Azerbaijan's oil riches…For leverage, the Russians have used an implicit but dramatic threat if Azerbaijan does not comply, Russia will step up its backing for Armenia…with disastrous military results for the Azeris. (cited in Cornell 2001:113)

Azeri sources have repeatedly maintained that Russians fulfilled their promise and provided substantial military backing to Armenia not only during the war but also in its aftermath. According to Neil MacFarlane, there was a covert transfer of arms to Armenia, which, "according to a March 1997 comment by Defense Minister Vazgen Sarkisian, allowed the Armenians to double their military capabilities with no impact

on the budget" (MacFarlane 1999:53). The patterns of Russian involvement in the conflicts of South Caucasus suggests that Russians used the conflicts in order to exert pressure on these states and force them into accepting Russian rules and preferences. As MacFarlane has observed, the "classic example here was the manipulation of Georgia's conflicts to secure Georgia's accession to the CIS and long-term leases on military facilities in Georgia" (Ibid). After the humiliating defeat in Sukhumi, Georgia agreed to join the CIS and prolong the Russian military presence on its territory, while Russia recognized the territorial integrity of Georgia and imposed economic sanctions on Abkhazia. Similarly, Azerbaijan agreed to join the CIS and made serious concessions fearing even greater humiliation from the Russian-backed Armenians in Karabakh.

Both Georgia and Azerbaijan had been extremely disappointed with the passive, observer role of the international community, which has effectively pushed them back into the arms of Russian influence. Both countries had made significant concessions and thus saved their recently acquired independent statehood and nominal territorial integrity. Russia on the other hand succeeded in temporarily weakening South Caucasian states and restoring her influence over the region, which Russia saw to be in her immediate interest. However, destabilization of the southern borderline regions could hardly have been in Russia's long-term interest. Moreover, it had a spillover effect and culminated in the bloody conflict in Chechnya, proving Margo Light's observation that "Russian policy itself sometimes threatens Russian security" (Light 1996:48). On the positive side, Russian mediation did stop the fighting on the ground and brokered a fragile peace, which later enabled the greater involvement of international and non-governmental organizations.

From 1994, both the UN and the OSCE had their mandates expanded in the conflict zones and the overall role of international organizations in the region increased. This development marks the second stage of international involvement in the South Caucasus, coinciding with the attempts of the local governments, especially of Georgia and Azerbaijan, to pursue a strategy aimed at increasing international involvement in the conflict and replacement of Russian peacekeepers with international forces. In 1995, UNOMIG increased from 40 to 136 members and received an extended mandate to monitor the activities of the peacekeeping force and verify that troops of heavy military equipment remained outside of the security zone. UNOMIG was also tasked to investigate reported or alleged violations of the ceasefire

agreement and attempt to resolve such incidents (UNOMIG mission survey 2001:9). In Karabakh, the OSCE started to work on the deployment of an international peacekeeping force consisting of 600 soldiers, but the plan was never realized. At the same time, the range of general assistance programmes to Georgia and Armenia increased significantly. The US Agency for International Development launched a number of development-oriented programmes and even though the United States did not follow an explicit and integrated policy toward conflict prevention and resolution in the Caucasus, the concern over these conflicts did underlie the array of US government activities. According to Michael Lund, "this is the theory that programmes such as economic reform to marketwise economies and assistance for building democratic institutions and the rule of law are themselves the best antidotes against the emergence of violent conflicts" (Lund 1999:7).

The position of the United States has become more focused on conflict resolution activities in the recent years, especially since the US discovered strategic and oil-related interests in the region. A 1997 speech of Deputy State Secretary Strobe Talbott marks the turning point in the US policy towards the South Caucasus and the beginning of the third stage of more active international involvement to an extent of balancing and challenging Russia's dominant position. In his speech, Talbott made it clear that:

> It matters profoundly to the Unites States, what will happen in an area that sits on as much as two hundred billion barrels of oil. That is yet another reason why conflict-resolution must be the job one for US policy in the region: it is both the prerequisite for, and an accompaniment to, energy development. (Talbott 1997:2)

The oil riches of the Caspian basin, therefore, put the region in the spotlight of great power interests and consequently intensified international efforts to resolve the conflicts. As pointed out in the USIP report by Patricia Carley, the current fever over oil pipeline routes elevated the existing ethnopolitical conflicts from obscure regional strife to a significant source of concern for international political and business leaders (Carley 1998:1). The positive results, however, from the increasing international and in particular US involvement in the region are yet to follow.

Up until now, the ongoing oil politics has been a mixed blessing for the region. On the one hand it brought long awaited attention to the South Caucasus and to the regional conflicts. On the other hand, it has further exacerbated existing

political divisions and turned the region into a scene of intensified regional and great power rivalry. Azerbaijan, Georgia, and Turkey find themselves on the same side as the United States, supporting exploration and transportation of Caspian oil through non-Russian routes. The US is interested in diversifying world oil supplies and decreasing its dependence on the Persian Gulf. Georgia and Azerbaijan see the pipeline projects as guarantors of both their economic and political viability. These projects are expected to diminish their dependence on Russia and consequently to loosen Russia's hold on the region. Armenia, on the other hand, continues to be Russia's main ally in the region given its traditional fear of Turkey and the growing power of Azerbaijan. Armenia has sided with Russia and Iran, creating an alternative and opposing alliance. Such intra-regional divisions significantly complicate the possibility of constructive regional cooperation both in political and economic spheres, which in turn could have provided ground for the resolution of ethnopolitical conflicts.

In spite of the clear shift in US policy towards greater involvement in the South Caucasus and the retreat of Russia's dominating power, the question of ethnopolitical conflicts remains unresolved. There is increasing talk about the resolution of the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict as the construction of pipelines comes to an end and the first oil starts to flow to Europe. Some even hope to use the pipeline as the main bargaining chip to negotiate a peace between Armenia and Azerbaijan. For instance, John Maresca, formerly US negotiator for the conflict over Nagorno-Karabakh, proposed to build the so-called 'peace pipeline' through Armenia, which is not only economically the most efficient option but also politically important and may result in the final settlement of the conflict. However, such proposals are not popular in Baku and the current US-backed plan is to build a Baku-Tbilisi-Ceyhan pipeline bypassing Armenia. The latter plan is certainly more acceptable to Georgia and Turkey, but threatens to leave Armenia
isolated and pushes her into an ever closer alliance with Russia.

Geopolitics or Ethnopolitics?

Throughout all three stages of international involvement geopolitical factors seem to have played a role obstructing the settlement of ethnopolitical conflicts and raising questions about the desirability of a dramatic politicization of ethnic conflicts. On the one hand, too much emphasis on the discourse of nationalism and ethnicity leads to a deadlock situation in terms of conflict resolution since matters of national identity, sovereignty, ethnic or national affiliation and political recognition are value-laden, non-tradable concepts that can hardly be bargained and compromised around the negotiation table. In this respect, it is not the ethnic but the political aspect of ethnopolitical conflicts that makes a rational bargaining and search for compromise solutions possible. On the other hand, an excessive politicization of ethnic conflict may also complicate the situation, as it did in the South Caucasus by introducing the political interests of not only conflicting parties but also those of the regional and great powers. This leads to a rather paradoxical situation to be observed in the example of the South Caucasus. Mediation efforts of an interested party make it difficult to find a relatively just and sustainable solution. However, mediation of non-interested parties such as that of international organizations seems to be ineffective precisely due to the lack of interest and commitment of mediators as well as to the lack of bargaining mechanisms that might be able to induce the parties to compromise.

In what the author has marked as the first stage of international involvement, it was Russia's perceived geopolitical interests that prevailed over her commitment to the conflict-resolution process and rendered mediation a tool for furthering Russia's interests in the region. As a result, Russia promoted her own short-term political objectives at the expense of finding a final settlement and allowing the conflicts to be frozen for an indefinite time. By the mid-1990s, the international organizations took a more proactive stance in the resolution of conflicts in the South Caucasian states, but positive results failed to follow. The common explanation for this failure has once again been geopolitical, but this time it was the lack of geopolitical interests of the great powers that left international efforts half-hearted, while international organizations had no particular leverage on the belligerent parties and thus were incapable of brokering a settlement. If in the first stage it was the passive attitude of

international institutions and an excessively aggressive one of Russia that seemed obvious reason for failure. The second stage made it clear that the efforts of international organizations as well as a more cooperative position of Russia were also insufficient for bringing the conflicting parties to an agreement and for increasing their commitment to end the confrontation.

The overall failure of international efforts in the first and second stages led many Caucasian and foreign observers to conclude that nothing gets done until the US intervenes (Nodia 1999:25). The US, however, did not intervene actively until it discovered geopolitical interests in the region that were worth defending. In terms of conflict resolution, the US has kept a relatively low profile and was absent from the negotiations and unable to influence them. The change in US policy was promoted by American oil companies that were eager to exploit the oil riches of Azerbaijan and decided to mount significant lobbying efforts to counter the Armenian lobby in Congress. There was increasing pressure to remove Section 907 (see p.9) and support Azerbaijan in securing its independence and stability. In his speech "Azerbaijan: A Geopolitical Factor in the Region" Zbigniew Brzezinski pointed out that Azerbaijan is strategically important for the United States, since it contributes to the diversification of energy sources and provides access to Central Asia. In the words of Brzezinski, it also promotes Russia's understanding that prosperity of the region would not harm but rather benefit Russia (1999:2).

Russia herself, perhaps unintentionally, played a role in triggering a more assertive policy of the United States towards its southern neighbors. First of all, it was the American perception of Russia which changed as a result of Russia's mishandling of the war in Chechnya. According to Svante Cornell, "it seems in retrospect as if the US leadership gradually lost all respect it had for Russia as a great power with which it desperately needed to keep good relations" (Cornell 2001:375). It became clear that Russia would not be able to maintain stability on her periphery, and hence Russia's retreat allowed the US to step in and promote its own strategic and oil-related interests in the Caucasus. Even though Russia has not been welcoming increasing international and especially US presence in its neighborhood, it was unable or unwilling to put up strong resistance which would make the US leadership think twice before engaging in the region at the expense of antagonizing Russia.

Russia's changed position could be explained either by the weakening of her military and political power, or by the adjustment of foreign policy priorities in the so-

called near abroad. Russia has most likely realized that she would not be able to maintain a monopoly over the Caspian basin and its resources and therefore decided to support the 'uncertain stability' in the region as it may also be in line with her political and economic interests. Stability would allow Russia to engage and benefit from the ongoing international projects connected with the exploration of oil and development of the transport corridor. At the same time, uncertainty about the future of the region given the unsettled conflicts also serves Russia's interests leaving a certain leverage at her disposal, which she may decide to use if the need arises. However, other external powers that primarily have an economic stake in the region are more interested in its sustainable stability, which can only be achieved through the resolution of the existing ethnopolitical conflicts.

Given its growing geopolitical interests in the South Caucasus, the United States began to more actively engage in the conflict resolution process. It is becoming clear now that any prospective settlement of the conflicts will have to take into account the changing geopolitical context. In this respect, the conflict in Nagorno-Karabakh is particularly important and is expected to be settled first, given the rising Western and especially US stake in the stability of the region. There is a danger, however, that South Caucasian states could get carried away with geopolitical calculations and forget about the ethnic component of their ethnopolitical conflicts. A long-term and sustainable settlement of the existing conflict as well as the prevention of any possible future ethnic-based disturbances could only be achieved through the creation of an extremely elaborate and democratic system of power-sharing based on a re-evaluation of minority-majority relations. It would also require a set of thoughtthrough, conscious policies aimed at either strengthening the ethnic and hence more communitarian elements in the political system or downplaying it through the adoption of a more universal and individualistic approach.

Georgia is a good example in that sense, as the authorities there are trying to promote the idea of an asymmetric federation in order to accommodate the claims of the Abkhaz and the South Ossetians. However, restructuring of the Georgian state would be incomplete without accommodating the interests of other, currently non-hostile minorities. For example, Armenians in Javakheti would most likely seek a degree of autonomy within the new Georgian federation. If the Armenian claims were to be met, then the Azeri population of southeastern Georgia would also try to acquire a certain political status. Respect for all the existing minority claims would be

a precondition for Georgia to join any international and especially European institutions and would thus require the development of a new, more consociational approach, based on the respect of group-differentiating rights. This seems to be the model currently promoted by the international community and most likely to be included in the proposed settlements of the existing conflicts in the South Caucasus. The possibility of settlements based on the promotion of minority or group-differentiating rights reflects the ongoing debate in the Western scholarly literature between communitarian vs. universalistic or group-differentiating vs. individualistic approaches in the management of multiethnic states. Georgia sees a clear need for accommodating minority cultures by allowing them greater autonomy and political participation without losing territorial integrity and national cohesiveness. These are complex and controversial issues that introduce the ideational aspect of international involvement, which seeks to translate some of the Western norms and highly debated ideas into the practical reality of states that have only recently emerged.

Types of International Involvement

Traditional analysis of international involvement in ethnopolitical conflicts focuses on the mediation efforts, peacekeeping operations, as well as on rehabilitation and assistance programmes provided by the international donors. International efforts in the South Caucasus have also been directed at the liberalization of economies and the democratization of civil and political activities, with an underlying assumption that liberal democracies are inherently stable and peaceful. Hence, as MacFarlane observed, "support of democracy is an element of security policy" (MacFarlane 1999:3), echoing the words of Ambassador at Large Stephen Sestanovich, who underlined that the prime objective of US policy in the Caspian area is "the formation of democratic institutions, because they are the long-term guarantor of stability and prosperity" (cited in MacFarlane 1999:3). In this respect, the international agenda encompasses both normative and geopolitical interests, which in theory are to be mutually reinforcing. In addition, the international agenda also has significant ideational elements that tend to be relatively underemphasized. In terms of conflict resolution, international involvement brought to the South Caucasus recently developed ideas in the West with regard to power-sharing systems, group-

differentiating rights, respect of ethnic minorities, as well as multiculturalism and cultural tolerance. Some of these ideas and norms are new to the region and to a certain extent to the West itself. They are waiting to be implemented and tested as proposed solutions to the ethnopolitical conflicts in the newly independent states of the former Soviet space with the international backing and support. In previous sections of this paper the author has discussed some practical aspects of international involvement and will now focus more on its normative and ideational aspects.

According to Neil MacFarlane, Western states try to spread their system of ideas and beliefs that "not only embodies universal norms but also serves the interests of the developed states" (MacFarlane 1999:3). In this respect, the normative commitment to democracy and liberal economy presupposes geopolitical interests in peace and stability. It is a commonly held assumption that democracies do not go to war with each other and open trading economies also see no incentives in waging wars. Therefore, democratization of the emerging states serves Western interests in their stability as trading and political partners. In this case political and normative interests are mutually supporting. However, in other cases geopolitical considerations come into conflict with normative commitments and undermine the normative and practical coherence of the international agenda.

One obvious example of the above contradiction in the South Caucasus is the case of Azerbaijan. Azerbaijan is not a model democracy and special efforts have to be made in order for Azerbaijan to avoid oil inflicted inequality and authoritarian underdevelopment. However, given the pro-American attitude of the current Azerbaijani government and the US interest in Caspian oil resources, democracy and respect for human rights has stopped being the top international and especially American priority over the past few years. Similarly, the commitment of the United States to prevent Iran from emerging as a significant regional player in the Caucasus is strong enough to sacrifice some elements of the normative agenda. This even contradicts American economic calculations, since American oil companies seek to exploit Iran's geographical position in the transport of the Caspian oil and disagree strongly with American efforts to avoid Iranian pipeline routes (MacFarlane 1999:5).

The international normative agenda also carries with it a set of more abstract ideas, such as those of sovereignty, national self-determination, territorial integrity etc., which according to MacFarlane have been self-consciously promoted by Western states and international organizations. "In this respect, one could argue that the

experience of the post-Soviet civil conflict in Georgia and Azerbaijan is in some respects responsibility of the West" (MacFarlane 1999:4). Even though it would be an exaggeration to blame Western ideas for local misfortunes, it is the responsibility of the international community to ensure that once exported these ideas yield positive results.

Given the proliferation of armed confrontations and ethnic conflicts on the basis of conflicting rights of self-determination and territorial integrity, Western scholars and practitioners started to reinterpret self-determination not as an independence, but rather as a recognized autonomy based on principles of cultural protection, self-government, power-sharing, group differentiation and other mechanisms that ensure the protection of collective identity. This new interpretation of self-determination provides the basis for the proposed solutions to the existing ethnic conflicts and minority related problems both in the South Caucasus and in other parts of the world. Acceptance of these ideas is often a precondition for membership in international organizations and supranational institutions such as the EU and requires rather dramatic reorganization of not only state structures but also a change of perceptions with regard to minority-majority relations, identification with a particular state and an understanding of shared statehood. This can be characterized as an ideational aspect of international involvement which is likely to have significant practical implications.

According to a 1999 UNESCO report of an international conference of experts, the majority of today's conflicts take place within states where communities are aspiring to greater recognition of their cultural and political identity. This induced the international community to reevaluate the existing understanding of self-determination and redefine it not as a source of conflict and confrontation, but rather as a just solution to existing and potential conflicts. The common view advanced at the UNESCO conference was that "in most cases it is not the assertion of claims by oppressed communities but the denial of self-determination by state authorities which causes armed conflicts" (van Praag/Seroo 1999:23). Self-determination in this context is reinterpreted as a cultural recognition and attribution of 'new' cultural rights to the minorities. The example of the former Soviet Union, including that of the South Caucasus is often evoked as an illustration for the need of greater respect for group identity, autonomy and culture, which had previously been ignored both by practitioners and political theorists. Previously, the prime emphasis was put on

individual human rights; however, as Kymlicka argues it has become increasingly clear that ethnopolitical conflicts cannot be resolved simply by ensuring the respect of basic individual rights (Kymlicka 1996:3). The extreme individualism of the liberal tradition has come under increasing attack since it failed to recognize rights of minority cultures and accord due importance to group identification in the contemporary world of globalization and ethnopolitical struggles (Kymlicka 1996:5).

As a result, there is increasing interest at the international level to supplement the traditional human rights approach with a theory of minority rights. International organizations such as the OSCE, the Council of Europe, and the UN have all adopted different declarations on the rights of national minorities, minority languages, indigenous rights etc. The protection of ethnic minorities through different forms of self-determination and political recognition is also a guiding principle for the settlement of ethnopolitical conflicts in which organizations such as the OSCE and the UN are actively involved. In the case of the South Caucasus, the promotion of either group-differentiating rights or individual rights is likely to be a long and complex process, since both are sets of values which are new to local political cultures and meet with long established historical traditions and beliefs.

According to Alexander Rondeli, the post-Communist states inherited a political culture that "lacks democratic traditions, elements of civil society, mutual trust and a culture of dialogue" (Rondeli 1997:21). Under such circumstances state-building turned out to be a painful and conflict-ridden process, and has "revealed the extreme weakness of civic elements of nationhood and the corresponding emphasis on ethnicity" (Rondeli 1997:20). In the context of collapsing state structures, national economies and social security, identification with one's ethnic kin became extremely important and further strengthened the role of ethnicity as a prime source of personal identification. Individuals were identified mainly in terms of their ethnic or other collective identities, which practically brought ethnic conflict from the public into the private sphere, blurring the distinction between the two and further encouraging a stigmatization of individuals solely in terms of their ethnic affiliations.

These developments have also contributed to the understanding of self-determination in absolute terms as a right of the ethnic community for political recognition through independent statehood. Even today, after great efforts of international and non-governmental organizations, the mutually exclusive understanding of self-determination remains the prime obstacle in the resolution of

existing conflicts. Reinterpretation of the concept of self-determination in terms of group rights within a common state has not been widely adopted, especially among the minorities aspiring to secession. The interpretation of cultural self-determination as a conflict-preventing mechanism referred to above must therefore be considered too simplistic. A good example is the Basque country, which enjoys one of the widest cultural and political autonomies available to an ethnic group in Europe, but the violent struggle of the Basques for independence has not ended. Similarly, the author would argue that even if the Karabakh Armenians, the Abkhaz and South Ossetians had been granted extended respective autonomies within the independent Azerbaijan and Georgia, the conflicts would have occurred nevertheless. The secessionist movements were driven by the interests of group elites seeking to take advantage of a collapsing Soviet state and to redraw borders according to their perceived political preferences. By denying these preferences recognition, the international community pushes the secessionist regimes into acceptance of the new rules of self-determination and discourages them from breaking away. At the same time, renewed international emphasis on group rights defined in terms of ethnicity and culture may further strengthen the already strong ethnic affiliations at the expense of civic and individualistic elements that are strikingly lacking in the South Caucasian nations.

There is a danger in the South Caucasus that a re-organization of states according to ethnic boundaries would create closed and antagonistic ethnic communities that may themselves become intolerant of internal minorities or representatives of the majority culture. These countries have already experienced significant ethnicization of personal and public relations and would only succeed in managing their ethnopolitical conflicts if a group-based approach to human rights is balanced by due emphasis on individual and universal rights. Group identification is already very strong in the South Caucasus, as well as an awareness and appreciation of distinct ethnic and cultural affiliations. What is lacking, however, is respect of individuals notwithstanding their cultural and national belonging. The basic universal norms of individual freedom and human autonomy are what is most needed now in the South Caucasus, while international emphasis has been shifting towards the communitarian values of group membership and cultural autonomy.

Many Western liberal thinkers reacted to the recent ethnonational revival in post-Communist Europe by placing greater emphasis on the importance of communities, particularly national or ethnic. As Van Dyke has argued, the main flaw

of liberal tradition is its individualism, which cannot accord any status to groups and acknowledge people's need for belonging and group identification (cited in Kymlicka 1996:4). For many Western liberals recognition of group-differentiating rights and protection of minorities have become essential in promoting peace and justice, introducing a shift from the individualistic conception of human rights to a more communitarian one. The author would argue, however, that in the cases of existing conflicts efforts should be directed at striking the right balance as opposed to promoting one approach at the expense of another.

The so-called benign neglect of minority issues, which has dominated world politics since World War II, has come under increasing criticism and is being revised by introducing special group-differentiating rights on both the international and the local levels. However, such an approach also carries the danger of buying into the nationalistic rhetoric of different ethnic groups and acknowledging their value as a group, while downplaying the individual significance of group members. The author believes that it is precisely basic human rights with its emphasis on individual autonomy and freedom of choice that should become the primary concern of conflict-ridden regions like the South Caucasus. The South Caucasian nations already have a strong communitarian culture, which identifies and values individuals in terms of their group membershipand within which a group is defined primarily in ethnic or religious terms. Universalnorms about the proper separation of the personal from the public, and of nationality from citizenship have always been rather weak, and the demise of Communist states has further strengthened kinship loyalties and encouraged the creation of even closer particularistic societies. Under these circumstances, greater emphasis on ethnic distinctiveness and group differentiation, unchecked by the already existing local culture of communitarianism, may significantly undermine civic cohesion and impede the development of a multiethnic citizenry loyal to the state and its constitution.

Post-Communist experience in the author's view showed that recognition and delimitation of minority cultures and rights was not sufficient for the successful management of multiethnic states. Most ethnic minorities were entitled to group-differentiating rights under the Communist regime, expressed in the form of administrative territorial autonomies of a varying degree. According to Roger Brubaker, the distinctive feature of the Soviet Union was "the thoroughgoing state-sponsored codification and institutionalization of nationhood and nationality

exclusively on the sub-state rather than a state level" (Brubaker 1996:27). Such an organization of the Soviet state on the 'principle of nationality' contributed perhaps unintentionally to the heightened awareness of ethnonational differences and perhaps later to the rise of aggressive ethnonationalism, which contributed to the ultimate demise of the Soviet state. The acceptance of ethnic differences and their recognition through group rights failed to prevent outbursts of ethnic confrontation among the minority and majority groups of the former Communist states, since their political culture as well as loyalty to the state and civic and political institutions was extremely weak and could not survive the change of a regime.

Post-Communist South Caucasus provided a good ground for nationalist leaders to use ethnic based communitarian values of their societies in order to mobilize people against their neighbours or former compatriots. The author believes that there is little hope that minority rights will be protected in the South Caucasus without first creating democratic states based on universal norms of individual freedom and respect for human rights. This is not to say that rights of minorities as groups should not be protected, but they should not be overemphasized at the expense of individual rights and civic, institutionalized inclusion of all citizens both within the autonomous units and within states in general. Such an overemphasis may prevent the newly independent states from changing their relatively exclusive and ethnically defined political culture, which has been the source of ethnopolitical conflict and a threat to territorial integrity and political viability.

Export of Western practices and values to different social and political cultures has always been accompanied by resistance and difficulties that arise from the local interpretation of international norms. In the case of the South Caucasus, the development of individualistic political culture will have to face the already existing communitarian values that differentiate people primarily in accordance with their ethnic or national affiliations and sets the respective rules of inclusion and exclusion. At the same time, a group-differentiating approach may further encourage stigmatization and differentiation of individuals solely in terms of their group identities and prevent development of an inclusive, state-wide civic identity. In any event, the political and cultural transformation under the impact of internationally accepted norms and ideas would be a difficult and controversial process. However, the author believes that a balanced approach is likely to have more positive, long-term implications.

Conclusion

In order to evaluate how much has been accomplished by the international involvement in the South Caucasus, it is important to clarify what the initial objectives were and how many of them have been met. As noted in the introduction, it is difficult to identify a coherent international agenda, since it involves both Western states and institutions as well as non-Western, regional powers with competing claims and interests. Much of the international involvement in the ethnopolitical conflicts of the South Caucasus has been motivated by the geopolitical interests in the region and has evolved from passive acceptance of Russian supremacy to balancing Russia through greater diversification of the international presence. The result has been a greater integration of the South Caucasian states into the international community, as well as increasing confidence in the sustainability of their political independence. More targeted international assistance has also contributed to the resolution of refugee crises especially in Georgia and Azerbaijan and to the alleviation of humanitarian consequences of internal destruction and warfare. If, however, the prime objective of international involvement was the resolution of ethnopolitical conflicts in a sustainable way, then not much has been accomplished.

Currently, the South Caucasus represents a region of frozen conflicts, where negotiations have been underway for years but no progress has been made in terms of final settlements. The current situation is to an extent a result of international involvement, which allowed Russia to manipulate ethnopolitical conflicts in her own interests and allowed geopolitical interests to overrule other considerations. As Dov Lynch pointed out, "Russian intervention in the early 1990s played a key role in the emergence and then freezing of these conflicts. External intervention continues to be crucial in maintaining the status quo" (Lynch 2001:15).

However, external factors are only part of the whole picture and cannot explain the overall failure to achieve progress in the process of conflict resolution. International involvement has significantly evolved and been enhanced over the past ten years but has as yet failed to deliver concrete results. This, in the author's view, is an indicator that international efforts are important but not sufficient in settling ethnopolitical conflicts without the will and determination of the conflicting parties themselves. Up until now, the South Caucasian ethnic communities in conflict have

not shown sufficient readiness to compromise and enter into a constructive dialogue that would end the confrontation. This could be indicative of the fact that the status quo continues to serve the interests of some of the local elites, and international efforts should be directed more at identifying and addressing these interests.

There are important pragmatic reasons for continuing the status quo. Armenia, Azerbaijan and Georgia are wary of making significant concessions due to their obvious unpopularity among the public and especially among the IDPs. Therefore, they prefer to maintain frozen stability and address other, perhaps more urgent issues of economic and political transition. If the general socio-economic situation in these countries improves, then greater incentives will be created for the breakaway regions to join in the mutually beneficial development process. However, such a prospect seems overly optimistic in these countries plagued by corruption and internal strife. Meanwhile, the breakaway regions survive as de facto states and believe that time works in their favor. The longer they maintain de facto independence, the argument goes, the greater will be the chances of their international recognition.

Given the economic underdevelopment and the political weakness of the South Caucasian states, as well as the mutually exclusive understandings of self-determination, power-sharing and self-government between these newly independent states and their national minorities, the prospects for the resolution of ethnopolitical conflicts in this region remain bleak. One of the lessons to be learned from the example of the South Caucasus is that management of multiethnic states requires a democratic and just distribution of power and resources coupled with the respect of both minority and individual rights. It seems that the South Caucasian states have learned their lesson, as they are more willing to compromise and seek mutually beneficial power-sharing deals. The situation is more problematic with the breakaway regions that now face the danger of becoming exclusive ethnic communities and face their own internal problems with minorities.

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