

RUSSIA AND THE CAUCASUS : MAINTAINING THE IMBALANCE OF POWER

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INTRODUCTION

Russia's expansion to the south and subsequent need to fortify and protect its borders in the Transcaucasus has been a primary feature of Russian policy for two centuries. That Russian insecurity about its borders intensified during the twentieth century is proven by the Soviet-Iranian Treaty of 1921 which subsequently permitted the Soviet Union to extend even farther: a paragraph of this treaty permitted it to occupy northern Iran in 1941, in order to "take the necessary measures in the interests of self-defence". The collapse of the USSR, however, forced Russia to withdraw into the North Caucasus which constituted the new southern border of the Russian Federation. At the same time, it was clear to Russian policy makers that the allegiances of the newly independent states of Azerbaijan, Georgia and Armenia were no longer necessarily with Moscow, but were more westward-looking. This required that a new border policy be generated both with regard to the North Caucasus and to ensure that the interests of the countries of the Transcaucasus would not do damage to Russian interests. The result can be described as a policy seeking to maintain an imbalance of power.

THE NORTH CAUCASUS

Following independence, Russia had to assemble its policy options with regard to the North Caucasus. These appeared in a paper put out by the Working Group of the Special Inter-regional Commission under the Security Council of the Russian Federation in 1992. The regions encompassed by the paper are Adygea, Dagestan, Ingushetia, and the autonomous republics of Kabardino-Balkar, Karachay-Cherkessia, North Ossetia and Chechnya, Krasnodar and Stavropol Krays, and the oblasts of Krasnodar and Rostov - a region stretching from the Black Sea to the Caspian.

All of the political units in the North Caucasus are multi-ethnic, but this ethnic complexity has been heightened by the various ethno-territorial reorganisations carried out by the Bolsheviks. As a consequence of these, Balkars have been separated from the closely related Karachays, the fact that the language of the Kabardians, Cherkessia, Adygeys and Abkhaz is basically the same is hidden by each ethnic sub-group's living in a separate political entity.

During perestroika, a number of processes were initiated in the North Caucasus, primary among which were ethnic realignment and sovereinisation. These were recognised by Moscow to be destabilising to the integrity of the state as a whole, although in 1992, no solution was offered. The process of ethnic realignment manifested itself in the formation of a number of confederative organs which sought to represent the interests of some of the North Caucasian political entities themselves. A little-known example of this was the process inaugurated at the Congress of Adygey Peoples, held in Nalchik in 1992.

ETHNIC REALIGNMENT IN THE NORTH CAUCASUS

In March 1992 the Nalchik Conference of Adygey People voted for the establishment of a national region for the Shapsug people, in Krasnodar Krai. This Adygey movement was part of a larger struggle throughout the then Soviet Union in the latter years of glasnost for the re-enfranchisement of peoples who had been deprived of various national rights during the Soviet period. According to the Russian policy paper cited above, this movement was triggered by the struggle for the redistribution of resources (land, power, sources of financial support), national self-determination, the rehabilitation of peoples deported by Stalin and raising the status of a people's national-state structure up to and including full sovereignty. It was, in brief, an effort to right old wrongs, including a form of Soviet

territorial administrative reorganisation which often found one people divided into several parts.

It cannot be said that Russian policy makers did not recognise the great scope of the Adygea plan when it was presented in 1992. The Russian Federation policy paper does mention an awareness of Adygey goals, largely because leaders of the various Adygey organisations—the Adygey National Congress, the Congress of Kabardin People, and 'Adygey Khase' (parliament) —talked often about uniting the republics where the Adygey lived, namely the republics of Kabardino-Balkar, Karachay-Cherkessia and Adygea with the possible inclusion into this territory of those lands occupied by the Shapsugs. Possibly for diplomatic reasons, Russia did not choose to mention the Abkhaz Republic, whose secession from the Republic of Georgia it initially supported. Also, Abkhazia was not a part of the Russian Federation. The significance of these developments to Russian interests was not understood in Moscow until the Russo-Chechen war.

The Republic of Adygea is also a member of the Confederation of the Peoples of the Caucasus(CPC): other members include Cherkessia, Kabardino, North Ossetia, Ingushetia, Chechnya, and Dagestan as well as Abkhazia, South Ossetia and, possibly, Lezgian areas of Azerbaijan should they fall under Sadval control. The initiative for the founding of the CPC was Chechen.

SOVEREIGNISATION

Sovereignisation, a movement beginning during perestroika, accelerated in the first years of independence. It was recognised in Moscow that the movement could threaten the integrity of the Russian Federation, but by the end of 1992, policy makers could not decide what to do about it. Chechnya, then on the point of secession, was the most extreme case, but there were many stages of sovereignisation short of secession which posed similar dangers to Russia. The primary political administrative problem was where did local authority end and Moscow's begin? What legitimacy did and should confederative movements such as the Confederation of Mountain Peoples of the Caucasus, the Assembly of Turkish Peoples and others have over the peoples of the North Caucasus?

To see how this type of sovereignisation worked in practice, the Greater Adygea movement serves as an excellent example.

It is safe to say that the vote by the population of the Adygea Autonomous Oblast to become the Adygea Soviet Socialist Republic on 1 July 1991 was no surprise to seasoned political observers of the North Caucasian scene, and its conversion to the Republic of Adygea following the collapse of the USSR was inevitable. It does carry with it, however, some ambiguous overtones: the Adygea Republic is on territory which had been a part of Krasnodar Kray; the status of the republic's capital, Maikop, remains unclear because it was built as and ethnically remains a Slavic city, and there are counter claims on its territory by other groups, ethnic and otherwise, who also number among the historically older inhabitants of Krasnodar Kray. There is also Greater Adygea, which is more a state of mind and includes all the members of the Adygey peoples: the Abaza, the Abkhaz, the Cherkess, the Kabardin, the Mozdok and the Shapsug as well as the smaller tribes of the Abadzekh, Belsen, Bzhedukh, Natkhuadzh and Termigoy.

Within the last year Adygea's parliament began three processes which threatened to disturb Krasnodar's political equilibrium: first, it formally proposed to the Krasnodar administration that territory be set aside for a Shapsug autonomous region; second, it proposed an exchange of territory with the Kray so that Adygea can link up with Karachay Cherkessia on the one hand, and Abkhazia on the other; and third, its khase, after many drafts, approved a constitution.

Ye.M. Kharitonov, the administrative head of Krasnodar Kray, mentioned in an 15 April 1995 interview given to the Kray's semi-official newspaper Kubanskive Novosti that Moscow would make the decision on Shapsug autonomy, and that the issue on a territorial exchange has been deferred. A couple of months earlier, the Congress of Patriots of Kuban, a leading Cossack organisation, reacted very strongly against any exchange of territory with Adygea. Its resolution stated:

"The issue concerned the highly dangerous idea of the creation in the North Caucasus of a belt of Muslim states or a single Islamic state from the Black Sea to the Caspian."

The quotation cited above refers to Adygea's membership in the CPC, which also includes many of the other North Caucasian autonomous republics which are predominantly Muslim. In the Adygey context, of course, it may merely have been a first step toward a Greater Adygea. The Cossack resolution also mentions that Adygea has been inculpated in shipping weapons to Dudaev's forces. A commentary by Vadim Shorokhov on the geopolitics of the Caucasus noted that Russia had unofficially supported the CPC until the summer of 1994.

Major objections were voiced against the early drafts of Adygea's constitution: the Cossacks found it "illegal, anti-state, anti-Russian and anti-popular." Up until the third draft Adygea referred to itself as a 'sovereign' state and reserved for itself the right of secession, and Krasnodar Kray's legislative council objected to the omission of any mention of the Russian Federation, Adygea's reference to itself as a 'sovereign nation' and mention of its right to secession. The constitution finally passed by Adygea's parliament has omitted the objectionable statements, but the intent of Adygea patriots is clear.

In August 1995 two other Adygey peoples, the Abkhaz and the Kabardins, signed an agreement by which the Abkhaz followed up on their treaty of friendship and cooperation and offered Kabardino-Balkaria the right to use the Black Sea ports Sukhumi, Pitsunda, and Ochamchira on favourable terms. Pravda reported on 8 August that they now plan to set up a direct air route between their capitals Sukhumi and Nalchik. As parts of Georgia and of the Russian Federation respectively, Abkhazia and Kabardino-Balkaria are not legally qualified to enter into such arrangements, and their recent treaty-making activity has been condemned by both Tbilisi and Moscow. The tendency to enter into such agreements has become increasingly pronounced on the part of some constituent members of the Russian Federation and contributes to Moscow concerns over regional separatism.

The process of 'sovereignisation' began in the latter years of glasnost and continued through much of 1994. It was Moscow's policy to allow the various regions of the Russian Federation as much autonomy and sovereignty (even, at one point, up to and including secession) as they could use. It was a major step toward the decentralisation of the administration and, on paper, seemed to make sense. Not all political analysts, Russian or non-Russian, thought so. Umarserik Kasenov, director of the Kazakhstan Strategic Research Institute, claimed the process will weaken Russia's status as a great power.

A.A. Popov, a consultant to the Analytical Centre of the office of the President RF, accuses Moscow of supporting 'ethnocratism' by indulging in 'ethnostatophilia!' He says with regard to the Georgian-Abkhaz conflict, that

". . . having secured inviolability of the ethnocratic regime which by force of arms detached Abkhazia from the Georgian state and 'cleansed' it of the 200,000 strong Georgian population, Moscow convinced everyone in the Caucasus that separatist rebellions are a good thing and that a reference to the sanctity of the 'struggle for national liberation' justifies everything."

Moscow's policy changes, including a rejection of the 'sovereignisation' process brought about by the war in Chechnya, found the North Caucasus undergoing a political realignment. Two confederative structures were beginning to emerge: the CPC, and a potential union of Turkic peoples ('mountain Turks') consisting of the Karachay, the Malkar,

the Kumyks and the Nogay. Throughout the Soviet period, the territorial-administrative districting was aimed at breaking up such ethnic blocs. The North Caucasus, which could be considered a geopolitical backwater from the early nineteenth century, when the boundaries of the Russian Empire were expanded to include the Transcaucasus, are once again on Russia's frontier.

If the various North Caucasian movements and processes were causing so much instability on Russia's southern borders, similar movements were bringing about instability in the newly independent states of the Transcaucasus. The same type of instability Russia was trying to prevent in the North Caucasus was working in Moscow's favour in the Transcaucasus.

THE TRANSCAUCASUS

The emergence of the three newly independent states of Azerbaijan, Armenia and Georgia deprived Moscow of a border that had protected its southern flank for almost two hundred years, it also emphasised its own loss of sovereignty over three former vassal states. Moscow has bent its efforts in the direction of acquiring military bases in these republics, trying to force Azerbaijan and Armenia to place Russian border guards on the Azeri and Armenian borders with Turkey and Iran, and establishing good relations with Iran as a counterweight to Azerbaijan.

At the same time, Moscow openly supported Abkhaz secession from Georgia until 1994 (as mentioned above), morally and financially supported the Kurdish movement to establish an autonomous republic in the environments of Karabakh, and may have provided some sort of aid and moral support to the Lezgian Sadval movement, which aspires to its own territorial autonomy on territories now part of Dagestan and Azerbaijan. In brief, Moscow's policy makers have decided that the surrender of some form of sovereignty by the three Transcaucasian states is necessary in order for the Russian Federation to maintain the security of its borders.

Russia has since withdrawn its support for Abkhazia's secession, a move made at the same time it was apparently decided to quash the Chechen secession by force of arms. The Armenian government has been forced, for domestic and international reasons, to drop its open support for the Kurdish movement. The Lezgian movement to establish their own homeland - Sadval - is the least known and the most persistent of these movements, and presents a major challenge to Azerbaijan's sovereignty. At the same time, Russia stands to indirectly benefit from the disruption and potential for domestic instability caused to Azerbaijan by the Lezgian struggle.

The Sadval struggle had been going on for several years in the late Soviet period, but only began to attract wide attention after the fall of the USSR. According to the 1989 census there were some 205,000 Lezgians in Dagestan and 171,000 in Azerbaijan. Unofficial data (collected by Sadval) claim there are actually more than 800,000 Lezgians. The discrepancy is explained by a two factors: the tendency of Lezgians in Azerbaijan to register themselves as Azeris due to political pressure to conform to the dominant political group and the existence of other ethnic groups - Tabasarans, Aguls, Rutuls and Tsakhur - who are actually Lezgians but were counted under different names, being the most important of these. Sadval wishes to create an independent state of Lezginistan straddling Dagestan and Azerbaijan, but will compromise on an autonomous region under the management of the Dagestani government.

While the Lezgian struggle had rarely been violent, this changed after the failure of a Russian-Azerbaijani joint initiative to create a 'stability zone' on the Russian (Dagestani) - Azerbaijani border in October 1993. In the late Spring of 1994, clashes took place between Azeri and Lezgian inhabitants of Derbent, a Lezgian stronghold with a substantial Azeri population, during the journey of Sergey Stepashin, then head of the Russian Federal Counter-intelligence Service, to that same city. He was there to meet with the head of the Dagestani parliament to discuss the Lezgian issue. It was apparently decided that Russia

would deal with the Lezgian issue without making any concessions because a protocol was signed on establishing a border post between Russia and Azerbaijan. This made passage across the Dagestani border difficult for Lezgian and Azeri alike. The idea of the 'stability zone' was dead. Some of the Azeri media, including Azadlyg, the newspaper with the largest circulation in Azerbaijan, suspected that Stepashin, and Russia, had played a significant role in ending the 'stability zone' concept and driving Lezgian national liberation from Dagestani (Russian) territory into Azerbaijan where clashes, some severe in nature, began to take place. In effect, Azerbaijan suspected that Russia had exported a potentially serious struggle to her 'Near Abroad.'

The end effect of these Transcaucasian manipulations is that Georgia is severely destabilised due to the Abkhaz secessionist movement, and two others - the Adjar and the South Ossetian; Azerbaijan is confronted not only by the Karabakh conflict and its aftermath, but also by two lesser challenges to its territorial integrity - 'Lezginistan' and the Talysh struggle (the 'Mughan Republic'); and Armenia is forced to take protection from Russia at a cost to its own sovereignty. It is a classical imbalance of power brought about by an opportunistic power manipulating ethnic-political turmoil in a series of lesser powers for the protection of its own interests.