

ETHNIC SITUATION IN THE CAUCASUS

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INTRODUCTION

The Caucasus, as a geographical area, is one of the most important historical, cultural and ethnographical regions of the world. Its territory, which is 440,700 square kilometres, is sharply divided by the Caucasus Mountains into northern and southern parts. This division, however, has not prevented close relations among its inhabitants. Historically, "close ties existed among the people of the Caucasus, and throughout the centuries, permanent economic and cultural communications have been preserved."¹

The main communication route between the northern and southern parts of the Caucasus runs along the western coast of the Caspian Sea through the three kilometre-wide Derbent passage.

The region is renowned for its rich variety of flora and fauna, unique natural resources, agricultural products and handicrafts. Rare commodities produced in the region, such as oil, silk, caviar, cotton and non-ferrous metals are in great demand in world markets.

TERRITORY, ETHNIC GROUPS AND POLITICS

We now know that the first political entities came into being in the region in ancient times. The Manne Kingdom (900-700BC), Caucasian Albania (400BC-AD700) and Atropatean (400BC-AD300) existed in what is today Azerbaijan. Remains of Abkhazian (600-400BC) and Iberian (300 BC) states have been found in today's Georgia. Later on, different kingdoms and khanates were created in Azerbaijan, Daghestan, Ossetia and Georgia.

Occasionally, the Caucasus was ruled by world empires. From 1783 to 1917 it constituted the Caucasian Vice-regency of the Russian Empire. The Vice-regency was administratively subdivided into provinces, districts and boroughs. During the formation of these administrative units, ethnic boundaries were not taken into consideration. As a result, ethnic groups like Azeris, Lezgis or Kurds were divided into different administrative parts of the Vice-regency. Subsequently, with the demise of the Empire, this situation led to many territorial conflicts and local wars.

When the First World War brought about the collapse of the Russian Empire in 1917, the Azerbaijan Democratic Republic, the Republic of Georgia and the Armenian Republic were founded in the Caucasus. This was the beginning of a series of wars, started first by Armenia against Azerbaijan and Georgia. These wars were accompanied by mass deportations, terror against the civilian population, hunger and epidemics. By the time the Red Army invaded the region in 1920, thirty per cent of the Caucasian population had perished as a result of these events.

Under Soviet rule, independent states were eliminated and replaced by communist governments, which in 1922 "voluntarily" joined the USSR.

When we come to the present day, we see the Republic of Azerbaijan, the Republic of Georgia and the Republic of Armenia again established as independent states. The rest of the Caucasus remains within the Russian Federation and consists of the republics of Adygea, Daghestan, Ingushetia, Kabardino-Balkaria, North Ossetia-Alania, Chechnya-Ichkeria, Karachay-Cherkessia and Shapshugskaya.

Nevertheless, tensions seem to be far from removed. Ethnic groups continue to live in different political entities. To give an example, Azeris live in important numbers in Georgia and the Russian Federation, Lezgis in Azerbaijan and the Russian Federation, Armenians in

Georgia, etc. Moreover, some ethnic groups, which differ from each other in many ways including language, are saddled together in the same entity. Such is the case with Abkhazians and Ossetes living with Georgians, Karachays with Circassians, and Kabardins with Balkars, despite the fact that Circassians and Kabardins, and Karachays and Balkars speak related languages, not vice versa.

On the other hand, Moscow divided the Chechen-Ingush Republic into two republics in 1992, although Chechens and Ingush speak similar languages belonging to the Nakh sub-group of the Caucasian language group.

Apparently the eternal formula of imperial governments, *divide et impera*, still seems to be in force.

The Caucasus has always been inhabited by a large number of ethnic groups. For that reason it is called the Mountain of Languages. Ethnic groups have permanently mixed with each other by way of counter migrations between the southern and northern parts.² Although the overwhelming majority of people are still autochthonal, the local demographic map of the region has undergone changes due to hostile or peaceful contacts with the outer world.³

The ethnic map of the region in the nineteenth century included mainly Abadzekes, Abazins, Abkhazians, Avars, Aguls, Adigs, Azeris (the largest group), Armenians, Archins, Assirians, Balkars, Byelorussians, Botliks, Budugs, Greeks, Georgians, Darginis, Didois, Ingiloes, Ingush, Italians, Kabardins, Kaytags, Karachays, Kalmyks, Kryz, Kubachis, Kumyks, Kurds, Laks, Lezgis, Moldovans, Germans, Nogays, Ossetes, Persians, Balts, Romanians, Russians, Rutuls, Tabasarans, Talishes, Tatars, Tats, Turkmens, Mesketian Turks, Ukrainians, Gipsies, Circassians, Chechens and Shapsugs.⁴

"Rose of Winds" of ethnic groups gives the opportunity to trace back the flow of tribes to the Caucasus. Greeks appeared from the west at the time of Homer. Between the seventh and fourth century BC Iranian tribes came to Azerbaijan and Daghestan. The first Jewish migration took place in seventh century BC. The Turks, whose descendants constitute the majority of today's population, started to come from the north from the third century onwards.

Russians also set out from the north from the ninth century onwards, although it was only in the sixteenth century, when the Russian colonisation of the area, be it voluntary or obligatory, as a governmental policy, came into practice by force of arms. Russians still constitute the largest newly arrived ethnic group in the area.⁵ When the population of the region increased from 10 million in 1912 to more than 30 million in 1989, its main beneficiary were the Russians. Their numbers increased from four million in 1912 to 8.470 million in 1989.

The Germans created their first colony in the Caucasus in 1819.⁶

The Armenians came in great numbers at the end of the nineteenth century as a result of Russian migration policy. Their numbers had reached 1.7 million by 1912.⁷

In 1880, the mountain people remaining in the country numbered 860,000, approximately two thirds of what it was some years ago.⁸ The main reason for this was the fact that, firstly, during many years of Caucasian wars, indigenous ethnic groups decreased in number. Secondly, all Ubykhs, nearly all Shapsugs, some Abazins, Abkhazians, Avars, Adigs, Ingush, Kabardins, Karachays, Lezgis, Nogays, Ossetes, Rutuls, Cherkess and Chechens, voluntarily or under duress, left the region.⁹ According to official statistics, from 1853 to 1865 more than 470,000 mountain people had settled in the Ottoman Empire.¹⁰ At the end of the nineteenth century 30,000 'disloyal' Abkhazians were forced to migrate there.¹¹ An example of ethnic cleansing.

Execution of Caucasian peoples continued afterwards. Germans were deported in 1941. In 1942, the liquidation of the Azerbaijan SSR was planned by deporting Azeris to Central Asia and by dividing up its territory between Armenia, Georgia and Russia.¹² In 1943-1944, the eviction of local Muslim groups, namely the Balkars, Ingush, Kabardins, Karachays, Kumyks, Nogays, Ossetes, Akhiska Turks, Cherkess and Chechens, took place. Their numbers are estimated at 1.5 million. At the same time, the autonomous regions of Kabardino-Balkaria, Karachay-Cherkessia and Chechen-Ingushetia were liquidated, and their territory was distributed to their neighbours. In 1946, the Pontic Greeks were exiled to Central Asia.

In 1956-57 and 1991, repressed ethnic groups were rehabilitated and they were allowed to return to their native lands. However, their full territorial rehabilitation has not been realised until today. Their autonomous regions have been cut down in size. For example, part of the land of the Ingush was given to North Ossetia in 1944. After their return, the Ingush again settled in this part of the land, although it remained within the boundaries of North Ossetia. After the disintegration of the Soviet Union, the Ossetes forced the Ingush to flee under the threat of genocide. Akhiska Turks still cannot return to their native lands in Georgia. Azeris living in Armenia or Armenian occupied Azeri lands were three times subjected to genocide and deportation in this century, namely in 1918-1920, 1948-1952 and 1988-1994.

ETHNIC CONFLICTS

Since the Second World War, over 200 regional conflicts and local wars have occurred in the world, during which more than 300 million people have lost their lives. They were mostly civilians.

The chief hotbeds of tension are presently multi-ethnic regions. For example, in the territory of the former Soviet Union there are 180 'explosive' zones, of which the most dangerous ones are located in the Caucasus. Here, the situation is further complicated by the presence of antagonistic pairings; Armenia-Azerbaijan (since 1988), Nagorno-Karabakh-Azerbaijan (since 1988), Armenia-Kurds (since 1988), Georgia-Abkhazia (since 1992), Georgia-Southern Ossetia (since 1992), Northern Ossetia-the Ingush (since 1992), the Lezgis-Azerbaijan (since 1988), and Russia-Chechnya (since 1991).

The evolution of a conflict seems to pass through a number of stages. At the beginning, any conflict has a 'peaceful' or concealed character, then armed clashes unfold, leading to military aggression, ethnic cleansing, invasion of territories, and creation of "deserted zones". From among the antagonistic pairs mentioned above, Armenia, Nagorno-Karabakh, Abkhazia, North Ossetia and Moscow appear to be aggressors. In this manner the latter renders various kinds of help to the first four; moreover, Armenia and Nagorno-Karabakh enjoy the support of influential Jewish and Armenian communities in the USA, France and other states, and the Armenian lobby and radical politicians in Russia.

The radical wing of the Sadval organisation and some Russian activists support the Lezgis who propagate the idea a 'free economic area of Lezgis' at the expense of Azerbaijani and Russian territory, with its further transformation into a Lezgi State.¹³

Together with these developments, ethnic narrow-mindedness or a reluctance to establish contacts beyond one's own nation, feelings of ethnic superiority, ethnophobia or direct hostility against other ethnic groups, can be observed in relations among these ethnic groups.¹⁴ In this framework, the fate of the Russians in the Caucasus, the Azeris, Abkhazians, Ossetes, Akhiska Turks in Georgia, the Armenians in Daghestan, the Kurds and Udis in Armenia, the Georgians in Azerbaijan, the Lezgis in Azerbaijan and Russia, the Abadzeks, Abazins, Adigs, Balkars, Ingush, Kabardins, Pontic Greeks, Cherkess, Chechens and Shapsugs in Russia, should be considered.

The ethnic situation in the contemporary Caucasus has been affected by the formation of a shadow economy under the former Soviet Union, a bureaucratic bourgeoisie, the Mafia, perestroika and the disintegration of the USSR, a lack of governmental, national or regional policies in concerned states, tendencies to revive totalitarian regimes, and attempts to resolve ethnic questions by military force.

The following factors have also played significant role in aggravating ethnic conflicts:

1. The establishment factor—which is linked with vertically connected structures, when a hegemonic ethnic group suppresses and tries to level out ethnic minorities by denying them self-government or autonomy and their own language, literature, press and education. Then, suppressed ethnic groups react to such policies from below, as in the case of Caucasian ethnic groups to Russians and ethnic minorities in Azerbaijan and Georgia.

2. The local factor—which is linked with horizontal structures and appears in the form of genocides, ethnic cleansing and deportations, by way of nationalist activities of social and political organisations. Thus, the Ossetian 'Stir Nakhas' and Our Ossetia foster the conflict with the Ingush and stoke anti-Russian sentiments among Ossetes and in Daghestan. "Tenglik", "Birlik", and the Avar People's Front named after Imam Shamil instigate radical ideas, and call for a 'struggle against the colonial policy of Russia in Northern Caucasus'.

3. Foreign factor—which appears as attempts to drive a wedge between ethnic groups, to exert ideological influence on them, to support one side in a mutual claim and to foster anti-Russian sentiments.

4. Standard of living—according to international standards, the Caucasian autonomous regions and republics are 'developing countries'. In the period 1993-94, the north Caucasus occupied the last place in the list of Russia's eleven regions in terms of per capita income, ninth place in terms of prices for main food items, eleventh place in purchasing capacity per capita.¹⁵ According to a 100-point business reliability study done in 1993, Georgia, Armenia and Azerbaijan were allocated 21, 19 and 16 points, respectively.¹⁶

5. Refugees—the majority of them are victims of human made disasters, like wars, invasions or civilian conflicts.¹⁷ There are approximately 50 million refugees in the world today. Two million of them live in the Caucasus. One-third of these are the 700,000 Azeris from Armenia or Armenian occupied Azeri lands. In addition, there are 64,000 Russians, 11,000 Georgians and 22,000 Kurds, who took refuge Armenia; as a result of the Ossete-Ingush conflict there are 90,000 refugees from both sides, in addition to 70,000 Russians. Almost the whole Armenian community and 155,000 Russians fled from Azerbaijan; 65,000 Akhiska Turks took refuge in Azerbaijan after the bloody events in Uzbekistan in 1989, where already 40,000 of them were settled after they were deported from their homeland in Georgia in 1944; 280,000 Georgians from Abkhazia; 100,000 Ossetes and 100,000 Azeris from Georgia.

RUSSIA'S ROLE IN THE CAUCASUS

Moscow's representative in the Caucasus, V.P. Polyanichko, who has rich experience of working in conflict zones (he was advisor to the pro-Soviet government of Afghanistan for some years), had managed to preserve a partial peace in Nagorno-Karabakh and in the Ossete-Ingush conflicts between 1990-1992. However, he was killed on 1 August 1993. It is suspected that circles which were interested in a continuation of the conflicts in the region were involved in his death. That is to say, Russian special services, local powers, 'underground' forces, and the military.¹⁸ It is because of these factors that Armenia's war with Azerbaijan between 1988-1994 was incited by Moscow, not, as it is believed, just for Caspian oil, but for the Caucasus. Tedious arguments about inter-ethnic conflicts among Caucasian states being caused by Islamic fundamentalism or Pan-Turkist orientations merely disguise realities.¹⁹ Moreover, the dispute as to which of Moscow's vassals Nagorno-Karabakh should be attached, namely Armenia or Azerbaijan, does not have much meaning.

Armenia's tragedy does not lie in the fact that Stalin subordinated Karabakh to Azerbaijan in 1923, but in the fact that the Red Army occupied and annexed independent national republics of the Caucasus in 1920, and incorporated them within the Soviet Empire.²⁰

In connection with these, it is noteworthy to remember the suggestions of republican-Dekabrist, P.I. Pectel, in his project for the "constitution" at the beginning of the nineteenth century:

- "to decisively conquer all nations living in the region between Russia, Persia and Turkey.
- to classify all Caucasian nations into two categories; peaceful and turbulent. The former should be left in their places and given Russian administration. The latter, on the other hand, should be deported from their lands with their families and scattered all over Russia in smaller numbers.
- to set up Russian villages in the Caucasus, to allocate them lands expropriated from its native population, to erase all signs of native population from these lands and to turn them into calm and well organized Russian counties."²¹

Having started to push south under Tsar Ivan the Terrible (b.1530-d.1584), "the Russian state turned out to be more interested in Caucasian matters. Final annexation of the Astrakhan Khanate in 1556 brought her nearer to the region.²² The Persian campaign of Peter I (b.1672-d.1725), via Daghestan and Azerbaijan, was another stage in this development, for Òhe clearly realized the significance of the Caucasus for Russia in the struggle against the Muslim world, and he was the first to secure a foothold behind the Caucasus Mountains, in order to commence new campaigns from there against Asian neighbours. After his reign, every war with Persia and Turkey ended with conquest of a part of the Caucasus."²³

At the end of the nineteenth and the beginning of the twentieth century, Russia launched thirteen wars in the Caucasus and in the adjoining regions. Her main adversaries were the Ottoman Empire, Persia, Great Britain, France and the Crimean Khanate. The Caucasian war, which lasted from 1802 to 1872, proved to be the most disastrous for local Caucasian ethnic groups.²⁴ It cost Russia 77,000 soldiers and 100 million gold francs. The picture was much darker for the local population. They were subjected to genocide and mass deportations, hundreds of thousands of them perished or had to leave their ancestors lands. The bloodiest period of the war took place between 1834-1859, when the Chechens and Daghestanis united under the banner of the Third Imam Sheikh Shamil and fought against invaders.²⁵

Faced with a religious army, Russians used different forces and mechanisms in 'the battle for Caucasus'. Among them were:

1. Cossacks, who were present on the scene from the sixteenth century. They rendered 'important services' in occupation, colonisation, Russification and Christianisation of the region. They established economic structures and contributed to stability.²⁶ Currently, Russia is reviving these traditional "quick reaction forces" with similar duties. Cossacks fought in Nagorno-Karabakh on the side of Armenians, in Georgia on the side of Abkhazians. Now, they are involved in the affairs of Chechnya.

2. Russian diplomacy contributed to the enlargement of the Russian territories more than its army. It enabled Russia to become a great, powerful, inherent fear, and opened up for her the way to world supremacy. When Catherine the Great died (1796), Russia's power had surpassed even the most chauvinist nationalist ambitions of the time. "However, her achievements constituted only a base whereof to start real conquests."²⁷

3. The Armenians, who appeared in Russia in the thirteenth century, "could not help exerting influence on the fate of the country."²⁸ Empress Catherine II (who reigned from

1762 to 1796) “went to extremes in her favouritism towards Armenians and that may probably explain the immorality and the extraordinary splendour reigning in her palace. 29 The Armenian lobby has prevailed in the Russian establishment upto today: from the interior minister of the Russian Empire Prince Loris-Melikov, to deputy interior minister of the USSR, Dekanazov; from ‘unchangeable’ party activist Mikoyan who served at ‘the court’ of Lenin, Stalin, Khrushchev and Brezhnev, to the Deputy Speaker of the Russian Duma, Chilingarov; from members of Presidential Council, Satarov and Migranyan, to the ministers of Russia, Danilov and Melikyan; from the head of Russian TV, Sagalaev, and the ‘Voice of Russia’, Ogannesyan, to the leaders of the ‘Party of the Russian Poor’, Aivazyan, and ‘Socialist Party of Workers’, Vartazarova. It is possible to list other Armenians in the upper and lower echelons of Russian government.

4. The ‘Russian factor’ is exploited by Moscow to interfere with the affairs of the autonomous regions and sovereign republics. In 1995, the Russian minister of foreign affairs, A. Kozyrev, declared that the “situation of Russians in the near abroad is not satisfactory, therefore there may be cases in the future where we would be obliged to use direct armed force in order to protect them.” 30 Boris Yeltsin ordered that in Chechnya, priority should be given to Russians in the distribution of humanitarian aid and allocation of governmental posts. 31 At any rate, ‘anti-Russian sentiments’ are not so serious in the Caucasus as some individual victims and their supporters dramatise. 32 Despite the fact that they have been excluded from local power structures, national economy and competitive employment opportunities, the majority of Russians tend to integrate to the new systems. 33

5. The bugbear of ‘Islamic fundamentalism’. The distinctiveness of the historical development and geo-strategic position of Russia lies in the fact that Russia is not simply situated next to the Muslim world, but the Muslim world is inherent in Russia. This statement does not carry only a geographical meaning. 34 At the present, more than 20 million Muslims live in Russia. There are 11,152,000 Russians in the Caucasus where 8,733,000 Christians and 86,000 people belonging to other confessions also live.

The Russian minister of foreign affairs, Primakov, stated in 1996 that “as far as Islamic fundamentalism is concerned, I think it should never be confused with Islamic extremism. Islamic extremism includes a variety of shapes which different groups or movements adopt while carrying out propagation and imposition of an Islamic way of life (Islamic model), sometimes with the help of arms.” 35

In this connection, one should also recall Christian and other extremists. For instance, the Red Brigades in Italy and Germany, ETA in Spain, the IRA in Great Britain, the Armenian ASALA acting against Turks, and Muslim, Jewish and Sikh extremists, Hindu extremism of the Tigers of Liberation of Tamil, Ilam in Sri Lanka, or the Buddhist extremist organisation “Aum Sinrike” in Japan.

To conclude, Russia was and remains the main contender for the Caucasus since the Caucasus ensures her strategic geopolitical interests and provides a gateway, firstly to the south, especially to the Asian Pacific region, which is forecast to become the leading region in the twenty-first century, and secondly to major markets for scarce raw materials and manufactured products. For these reasons, “although Russia refrained from the ‘big brother’ role in relation to the former Soviet Republics, all conflicts occurring there are solved with her help”. 36 So, she helped Armenia to fight against Azerbaijan between 1988 and 1994, Abkhazia against Georgia between 1992 and 1993. From 1994, she has been pursuing a war against her own autonomous republic of Chechnya. For Russia finds herself in a position, similar to Great Britain and France, after they lost their colonies.

UNIONS AND ORGANIZATIONS OF CAUCASIAN NATIONS

At the beginning of twentieth century, the leader of the Azerbaijan liberation movement, M.E. Resulzade, proposed to unite the regional powers in a “Common Caucasian Home” as a

form of national liberation movement. This idea was revitalised in 1990, after perestroika in the USSR, in the Confederation of Caucasian Nations (CCN), which reckons that only a union of regional ethnic groups and their autonomy will enable them to achieve genuine independence. The CCN tries to sustain stability in the region. Therefore, it sent volunteers to Abkhazia and recognised the self-declared Republic of South Ossetia. However, the CCN did not take action in relation to either the war of Armenia and Nagorno-Karabakh against Azerbaijan, that of North Ossetia against the Ingush, Moscow against the Chechens, or Chechen attempts to involve Dagestan and Ingushetia in the Chechen conflict.

The following can be listed as pro-Moscow organisations; the Association of Social Economic Cooperation of Republics, Territories and Regions of the Northern Caucasus, and the Assembly of Democratic Powers of Northern Caucasian Nations.

The following are independent organisations: the Congress of the Kabardin Nation, the National Council of the Balkar Nation, the International Cherkess Association, the National Congress of the Chechen Nation, the Avar National Front Named after Imam Shamil, the International Lezgi Union Sadval, the Kumyk 'Tenglik', the Lak People's Movement, the People's Front of Georgia, the people's Front of Azerbaijan, and the Armenian National Movement.

At the same time the Caucasian nations have started to participate in international organisations. In 1992, the Black Sea Economic Cooperation project came into being, covering also the Caucasian region. The same year, the Organisation of Caspian States was created with Russia, Azerbaijan, Kazakhstan, Iran and Turkmenistan as its members. It aims to resolve problems relating to ecology, fishery and oil exploration in the Caspian basin. In 1994, representatives of the Chechnya, Dagestan, Kalmykia, Chechen and Cherkess communities in Turkey and observers from Georgia set up the Caucasian Representation in Istanbul which aims to strengthen economic, cultural and social co-ordination with Black Sea countries.

The unions and organisations of Caucasian nations desire, firstly, to harmonise their policies on a regional scale and establish themselves as independent governments. Secondly, they aim to promote themselves at an international level and to strengthen their position in the Islamic part of the Asian-Pacific region. Thirdly, they strive to detach themselves from competition between Russia and Turkey in the Black Sea-Caspian region and to create leverage by involving the USA and other Western countries, Japan and other countries of the East, in the region.

CONCLUSION

The above mentioned arguments lead to the conclusion that the Caucasus will, for a long time, remain as a focus of attention of various local, regional and international forces. That is to say, it will remain, as before, an explosive zone with sufficiently dangerous social, economic, military, political and ethno-confessional instability.

To avoid future conflicts, the following is recommended:

1. Autonomous regions and republics should enjoy genuine independence.
2. Russia, Azerbaijan, Georgia and Armenia should guarantee their citizens constitutional rights, irrespective of their nation, race, language, confession, or political or other affinities.
3. Reforms, which open up perspectives for a harmonised combination of interests of all ethnic groups living in multinational states, should be undertaken.

4. Russia, Azerbaijan, Georgia and Armenia should work out, at a governmental level, national and religious policies, taking into consideration peculiarities of the Caucasus and its ethnic groups.

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