

REGIONAL CONFLICTS

**SOUTH CAUCASIAN CONFLICTS:
RECOVERY BEGINS WHEN THE DISEASE
IS RECOGNIZED AND THERE IS A DESIRE
TO CURE IT**

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The medicine cannot command over the disease.

Tacitus

At the end of 2003, the Southern Caucasus experienced several political earthquakes. New heads of state came to power in Azerbaijan and Georgia, thus compelling politicians to ponder the future of the Georgian-Abkhazian, Karabakh and Georgian-Ossetian conflicts in a new light. The Georgian events caused the greatest waves. Late in November 2003, the heads of Abkhazia, Adzharia, and South Ossetia came to Moscow immediately after Shevardnadze's resignation. Tbilisi betrayed its displeasure by saying that had not certain serious forces in Russia supported the separatists, the conflicts in Abkhazia and South Ossetia would have been settled long ago.

Regrettably, this was not the first time such statements were made. However, the Moscow consultations organized on the initiative of the heads of the above-mentioned republics were completely justified. Russian Foreign Minister Igor Ivanov remarked: "No one should suspect a plot or moves behind the scenes. Russia has never been engaged in such activities and is not engaged in them now."¹ The heads of the Georgian republics came to Moscow to express their attitude toward the events, as well as their concern over a possible spread of the Tbilisi crisis to their regions.

Everybody knows that both Sukhumi and Tskhinvali were following the shift at the top in Tbilisi with a great deal of anxiety; they were especially troubled by the statements of the new leaders that the

¹ See: *Diplomaticheskii vestnik*, No. 12, 2003, p. 59.

Abkhazian and Ossetian problems could be resolved by force. They were particularly concerned by the willingness of some people to “send one son to fight for the return of Abkhazia, while dispatching another to South Ossetia,” or “to don military uniforms themselves and live in the barracks” in order to build up the army.

The future alone will show how the situation will develop. Moscow firmly supports a peaceful settlement. When talking about the settlements in the Southern Caucasus during the live television broadcast held on 18 December, 2003, President Putin pointed out: “Those who believe that the problems can be resolved at Russia’s expense are wrong” and added that the sides should find mutually acceptable solutions themselves, while Russia could act as a guarantor. He further stated: “We are completely supporting and will continue to support Georgia’s territorial integrity. We do hope that the problems in its relationships with Abkhazia and South Ossetia will be resolved in a way that will not damage the interests of those living in these territories.”

The South Caucasian storm, however, did not take the limelight away from a meeting held in Vienna on 14 October, 2003 designed to start a direct dialog between Belgrade and Priština within the Kosovo settlement. The representatives of international organizations and countries (Russia, U.K., Italy, the U.S., Germany, and France) who make up the Contact Group suggested that all practical issues (the return of refugees and internally displaced persons; the search for missing persons; cooperation in power engineering, transportation, and communication) should be discussed in Vienna. They emphasized that a discussion of the political aspects of the Kosovo problem (its final status included) was premature. At this stage international efforts should focus on the previously agreed principle “standards first, status later.” Russia supported this decision.²

In fact, the Vienna meeting is directly related to the South Caucasian situation. The conflicting sides and international intermediaries are sparing no efforts to find solutions to the issues discussed there, which have been impossible to resolve so far. The Kosovo forum just happened to coincide with the tenth Hague meeting (convened on the initiative of the current OSCE chairman) of expert groups of the plenipotentiary delegations of the sides in the negotiation process on a full-scale settlement of the Georgian-Ossetian conflict. This meeting was a failure. For the first time in the history of such meetings it did not produce a final protocol, the draft of which caused disagreements. The Hague demonstrated once more that until the sides agree at least on minor issues, no serious talks are possible.

The difference between the way the Kosovo issue was discussed in Vienna and the situation regarding the so-called Boden Document on the Georgian-Abkhazian settlement is striking. One of the regular resolutions on the conflict issued in July 1999 by the U.N. Security Council unanimously recommended that the sides reach “a comprehensive political settlement, including with regard to Abkhazia’s political status within the Georgian State, in the shortest time possible.” It was in accordance with this resolution that, in the first half of 2000, Dieter Boden, former special representative of the U.N. Secretary-General in Georgia, drafted a document delineating the constitutional powers of Tbilisi and Sukhumi, over which the sides failed to agree. The negotiations stalled.

This confirms that today the status issue of the self-proclaimed republics is derailing a dialog that has taken a lot of effort to arrange. The question is: What next? Should the sides bide for time and suspect one another of evil intentions? Or should they try to avoid all difficulties and create conditions conducive to other political agreements? The second alternative is much more preferable. Over time new generations will appear and this will change the situation inside the conflict zone. The Hague meeting was very interested in a contribution made by I. Dulaev, member of the North Ossetian delegation, research associate of the North Ossetian Institute of Humanitarian and Social Studies of the Vladikavkaz Scientific Center of the RAS.

He presented the results of a public opinion poll in the zone of the Georgian-Ossetian conflict conducted in 2002 and compared them with the results of a similar poll conducted in 1997-1999 with the help of the John F. Kennedy School of Government at Harvard University. In South Ossetia the number of those who supported political-legal relations with Georgia (an autonomous region, auto-

² See: *Diplomaticheskii vestnik*, No. 11, 2003, p. 170.

my, or confederation) dropped from 21 percent in 1999 to 7 percent in 2002. Among the younger generation (between the ages of 20 and 29) there were no supporters. According to the latest poll, the number of those who preferred independence and orientation toward Russia was increasing. Humanitarian ties between the South Ossets and the Georgians have weakened considerably.³ The results provide food for thought.

My personal involvement in settling the internal conflicts in Liberia, and the conflicts involving Nagorny Karabakh, South Ossetia and Abkhazia convinced me that restored confidence between the conflicting sides is of primary importance for peace settlement. Stronger confidence-building measures are an important component of what any intermediary has to do. No noticeable advance toward a full-scale settlement is possible without real shifts in this sphere.

Across the post-Soviet expanse Russia is working hard toward this goal. At working meetings on 6-7 March, 2003 in Sochi, Russian and Georgian Presidents Putin and Shevardnadze paid particular attention to the Georgian-Abkhazian settlement, and the Abkhazian side was invited to discuss certain practical measures. It was pointed out that specific measures were needed to resolve the most urgent problems, such as the dignified and safe return of refugees and displaced persons, and economic rehabilitation of the conflict zone. It was recognized that the sides should concentrate on the following priorities: return of refugees and displaced persons (primarily to the Gali District); renewed railway communication between Sochi and Tbilisi; modernization of the Inguri hydropower plant, and identifying the prospects for the construction of other hydropower facilities on the upper reaches of the River Inguri. According to President Putin, life has demonstrated that "mutually advantageous business initiatives and projects relieve confrontation, contribute to the region's economic development, and serve the interests of the local population."⁴

Moscow initiated the meeting in Sochi with a clear understanding that the present impasse in the Georgian-Abkhazian settlement caused by a total absence of confidence between the sides required fresh approaches. It was becoming increasingly clear that all the existing problems could not be settled in a hurry and that the situation called for a more lucrative and gradual approach. In fact the principle formulated in Vienna "standards first, status later" demonstrated a similar tactic.

Recent experience is proving with increasing clarity that this approach to a full-scale settlement is absolutely justified. At the present stage of the peace process, when the wounds inflicted by the military confrontation are still bleeding, the sides should tackle the easiest problems conducive to their reconciliation and look for ways to move toward agreements in areas where such agreements are possible. This line of conduct will help achieve understanding on individual problems and create favorable conditions for talks on a political settlement.

In this context Russian diplomacy has been always supporting and actively contributing to meetings between the Georgian and Abkhazian sides on confidence-building measures within the Geneva peace process under the aegis of the U.N. (the first meeting took place in November 1997). These meetings have already been witness to numerous statements and declarations of good intentions. In particular, the third meeting held in Yalta on 15-16 March, 2001 pointed out that confidence-building measures were an important component of the peace process, which would help the sides move closer to a full-scale settlement of the conflict. On the strength of this the sides agreed to adopt a Program of Confidence-Building Measures between Georgia and Abkhazia.

This program was never elaborated, politics held sway over reality once more. An absence of specific steps aimed at creating a more or less normal atmosphere during the Georgian-Abkhazian dialog is worsening the political climate in the settlement process. In his interview to *Nezavisimaia gazeta*, former vice-speaker of the Georgian parliament V. Rcheulishvili made an important statement: "The time has come to revive all forms of contact with the Abkhazians and Ossets. We should say to the leaders of Abkhazia and South Ossetia that discussion of the status and the future model of state relations in Geor-

³ For more detail, see: I.S. Dulaev, "Gruzino-osetinskiy konflikt: opyt sotsiologicheskogo issledovaniya," *Voprosy pedagogiki i psikhologii*; *Sb. Nauchnykh trudov*, Vladikavkaz, 2003.

⁴ *Diplomaticheskiy vestnik*, No. 4, 2003, p. 58.

gia, of all sorts of federations and confederations, should be postponed. Let's first establish peace among our nations. We have declared the present (2003.—*M.M.*) year a year of restored confidence between the Georgians and the Ossets. The same should be done in relation to Abkhazia. This will call for Russia's help and support."⁵

There is no need to convince Russia of this, it needs a belt of good-neighborly relations and stability around the country, of which the Southern Caucasus is part. This is what the nations on the other side of the Caucasian Mountain Range also want. Eduard Shevardnadze said the same after the Sochi meetings: "Nobody doubts Russia's special role in the process. It can function as the main guarantor of Georgia's post-conflict arrangement as a whole and of Abkhazia's, in particular. This is in keeping with Georgia's long-term interests, as well as those of Abkhazia and the Abkhazian nation and of Russia itself."⁶

I should say once more that Russia is sparing no effort to revive the process of conflict settlement in the Southern Caucasus. Restored confidence will promote this process to the greatest degree. Confidence-building measures can be classified as follows: first, a stable cease-fire regime and greater stability in the conflict zone. This can be achieved by coupling the international-legal framework of this regime (of which much has been said in the memorandums and agreements signed in connection with the conflicts in South Ossetia and Abkhazia) with the sides' political will to observe it. The continued presence of peacekeeping forces in the conflict zones is of great importance, since often one of the sides regards this as a guarantee against resumed hostilities. This should be taken into account.

To stabilize the situation the sides should agree that those who have participated in the armed conflict, but have not committed either war crimes or crimes against civilians, should not be persecuted. I have in mind a mutual amnesty for this category; and the exchange of POWs and hostages is another important element of mutual confidence. The trip by Evgeny Primakov, then Russian Foreign Minister, to Baku, Erevan, and Stepanakert in May 1996 is one of the best examples. In the course of the visit, the sides in the Karabakh conflict liberated all POWs and hostages (110 people in all) according to the lists of the International Committee of the Red Cross.

Cooperation between the sides' law enforcement bodies is another indispensable condition of the sides' rapprochement. All negotiation difficulties aside, the law enforcement bodies should be interested in a joint fight against crime and in joint efforts aimed at improving the crime situation in the conflict zone. This cooperation will create conditions conducive to preventing and repressing all illegal actions and infringement on human rights for ethnic reasons.

Second, continuous negotiations are another sign that the sides do want to restore mutual confidence. World experience has demonstrated that talks are the most important, efficient, and most flexible instrument of peace settlement. Russian diplomacy has done a lot to ensure that the time between cease-fire and talks be as short as possible.

The negotiation process reaches its highest level when it turns into a direct dialog between the conflicting sides, especially if it occurs between the top figures. Between 1999 and 2003, the presidents of Armenia and Azerbaijan met regularly; the Georgian President and Head of South Ossetia met three times between 1996 and 1998. In August 1997, Head of Abkhazia Vladislav Ardzinba arrived on board a Russian aircraft together with Primakov to talk with President Shevardnadze.

Third, return of refugees and forced migrants is another sign of how far peace settlement has progressed. People's willingness to come back reflects the degree of their trust in the agreements the sides have reached. It should be said that so far there have been no positive shifts in this respect. The refugee problem created by the Abkhazian and Karabakh conflicts is as acute as ever. Certain progress has been achieved in South Ossetia, but no radical changes have taken place so far.

Fourth, the restored and developing economic ties between the sides are an indispensable condition of their progress toward a complete settlement. In some cases (Abkhazia and South Ossetia), the

⁵ *Nezavisimaia gazeta*, 28 March, 2003.

⁶ *Svobodnaia Gruzia*, 11 March, 2003.

return of refugees is directly related to rehabilitation of the local economy ruined by the fighting. Restored economic ties will inevitably draw people into economic activity and alleviate the hostility and alienation that is obvious on both sides. Joint steps may promote conflict settlement in the Southern Caucasus.

Fifth, the potential of "people's diplomacy" should be tapped. There are no particular barriers and no considerable differences between the sides in this question. The Memorandum on Security and Confidence-Building Measures signed in Moscow in May 1996 describes such confidence-building measures as meetings between politicians, public figures, and academics attended by representatives of the Russian Federation and other countries, round tables of representatives of the creative intelligentsia, as well as the exchange of information among journalists. In the Karabakh context contacts among religious figures are of special importance.

In fact, the range of such measures is much wider than described above.⁷ These measures will prove effective in future only if everything that has been attained is carefully preserved. By this I mean that the sides should strictly abide by their agreements and avoid steps that might separate them.

The Sochi meeting generated numerous comments ranging from the hope that the sides would finally find a way out of the Georgian-Abkhazian impasse to another salvo of accusations against Russia's "imperial designs." There appears to be no doubt that Russia wants to settle conflicts on post-Soviet territory, including the conflicts in Georgia. This resolution is much more justified than the "honest broker" position (an American term for U.S. policy in the Middle Eastern settlement), since the conflicts and the developments around them directly affect Russia. Moscow is involved in what can be called "conditioned mediation." Russia has to mediate in the conflicts in the post-Soviet expanse for many reasons, while the conflicting sides agree on its involvement for an obvious fact that otherwise no stable settlement will be possible. Not everyone likes this, but all have to accept it for geopolitical reasons obvious in the Southern Caucasus. Sergei Markedonov, department head of the Institute of Political and Military Analysis, was absolutely right when he wrote that the "success coefficient" of Russia's involvement in Abkhazia and South Ossetia "is higher by an order than that of any of the 'humanitarian operations' of the West in the last decade."⁸

History saw fit to place the final dot in the Georgian-Ossetian armed confrontation on 24 June, 1992, also in Sochi where the leaders of Russia and Georgia signed an Agreement on Settlement Principles. Its fulfillment demonstrated that efficient negotiation mechanisms are one of the indispensable conditions of any peace settlement. As distinct from the Georgian-Abkhazian settlement, a new mechanism has been functioning for over 11 years, a Joint Control Commission for the Georgian-Ossetian Settlement. Set up under the above-mentioned agreement, it has become a standing body of the four sides (Russia, Georgia, South Ossetia, and North Ossetia) involved in the settlement and liquidation of the damage done by the conflict. The OSCE mission in Georgia is also involved; in July 1999 it was decided to invite representatives of the European Commission as observers in the discussion of economic issues.

Under the 1994 provisions on the Joint Control Commission, it is expected to monitor fulfillment of the agreements and understanding between the sides; to elaborate and carry out measures conducive to positive solutions to the political, military (peacekeeping), law enforcement, economic, humanitarian, information, and other issues. The Commission concentrates on promoting dialogs and political settlement. There are three groups functioning within the Commission's framework: one responsible for peacekeeping forces and cooperation with the sides' law enforcement structures; the second for economic rehabilitation, and the third for refugees.

Today, the voices of those who insist that the Commission has lost its significance, "failed and exhausted itself," have become louder. This cannot but cause amazement: in the last few years the Commission has survived numerous tests and proved itself to be an efficient hospital for treating many of the

⁷ For more detail, see: M.V. Mayorov, "Konflikty. Otoydi ot zla i sotvori blago," *Mezhdunarodnaia zhizn*, No. 12, 2002, pp. 73-78.

⁸ S.M. Markedonov, "'Gruzinskiy paradoks' v rossiiskoy politike," *Mezhdunarodnye protsessy*, No. 1, 2003, p. 120.

diseases caused by the conflict. Can the Commission's "well-wishers" point to another permanent negotiation mechanism that involves all the sides?

There may be different attitudes toward the results the Commission has achieved. We can speak of its comparative inefficiency or an absence of real breakthroughs in the economic sphere and return of the refugees. We are not completely satisfied either, yet the Commission's activity in recent times has shown that the negotiation format created in 1992 is effective and helps maintain peace and relative stability in the confrontation zone. We should cherish what we have and work together toward resolving the urgent settlement problems.

In 2000, when the Ministry for the CIS was disbanded, the Commission's Russian part was transferred to the Foreign Ministry of Russia. From the very beginning we set ourselves the goal of final coordination and signing of a Russian-Georgian Intergovernmental Agreement on Cooperation in Economic Rehabilitation in the Conflict Zone and Return of Refugees. The ministry proceeded from the assumption that this document might prove to be another confidence-building measure.

According to the document signed in Tbilisi on 23 December, 2000, Russia and Georgia recognized the need to continue funding the efforts in the confrontation zone. The sides agreed that two interstate programs—on cooperation in economic rehabilitation and on the return of refugees—would be elaborated together with representatives of South and North Ossetia.⁹

This document is being implemented with great difficulty. Recently the Joint Commission has been working hard to normalize the situation in the conflict zone, which became aggravated in 2002-2003. The South Ossetian side, however, treats the program's economic side as a priority and is displeased with lack of agreement in this sphere. Today, we must do much more than before to restore confidence between the sides, and the road to this lies through real progress under the Agreement.

The Sochi meeting revived the Commission's activity in this sphere. In May and June 2003 Gori and Moscow hosted the Commission's regular meetings, at which the measures needed to implement the Agreement were discussed. It was decided to work more actively on a Russian-Georgian program of interaction in economic rehabilitation; the same can be said about the Commission's Special Committee for Refugees.

The pessimistic assessment of the results of the Gori meeting expressed on 17 June, 2003 in Vienna at the OSCE Permanent Council was out of tune with the real developments. Indeed, if a discussion of specific problems of economic rehabilitation in the conflict zone was rated negatively, what can be rated as a positive assessment? Settlement is a hard and even tortuous process that requires patience. The wall of confrontation and alienation must be gradually removed in order to advance, step by step, toward a full-scale settlement. Obvious improvements in the economic sphere and the return of refugees are visible signs of progress.

It should be added that the Sochi meeting was not the first attempt to deal with the central issues of the Georgian-Abkhazian settlement. In June 1998 the personal representatives of Shevardnadze and Ardzinba met in Moscow to draft documents for a meeting between the two heads. Russian diplomats cooperated in drafting two documents: an agreement on peace and guarantees of preventing armed clashes, and a protocol on returning refugees to the Gali District and on economic rehabilitation. These were fundamental documents drafted and essentially coordinated by the sides. The meeting, however, did not take place, the documents remained unsigned and the opportunity to reach a settlement slipped through the fingers.

It seems that not even the most dedicated optimists believed that the meeting in Sochi would produce immediate results in the Georgian-Abkhazian settlement. However, the meeting between the presidents of Russia and Georgia demonstrated that the achieved agreements would serve as milestones marking the way toward agreements on specific problems now existing between Tbilisi and Sukhumi.

It would be highly naïve to pretend that we see nothing, hear nothing, and say nothing. The results of the Sochi meeting were not hailed by everyone. We cannot exclude the possibility that the change of leadership in Georgia will be used to denigrate the significance of the Sochi agreements, to put them

⁹ See: *Diplomaticheskii vestnik*, No. 2, 2001, p. 43.

on a backburner, or to ignore them altogether. A difficult situation has also developed in the Georgian-Ossetian settlement process. Despite its past progress, the Joint Commission has been stalling for several months already. Time keeps going—we do not want to remember it as a “time of lost opportunities.”