

GEORGIA, TRANSCAUCASUS AND BEYOND

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It is common knowledge that diversity is spice of life. No one can deny, however, that the same diversity can and does in a way encourage the emergence of conflicting interests. If this is true, and I tend to believe that it is, the Caucasus must be one of the most conflict-prone areas in the world, since hardly anywhere else on the planet can one find a territory of a comparable size as heterogeneous in terms of language, religion and culture.¹

The Caucasus has over the centuries drawn attention and attracted unremitting interest of major powers. Their encroachments and incessant meddling, that often resulted in pitting peoples, tribes and feudal lords one against the other, added to the locally generated woes, and by the 17th and 18th centuries life in the area turned into a virtual nightmare. Invasions, forced deportations, mass killings, devastating raids by the mountain tribesmen, abductions, slave trade and looting became routine.

It was not until one big power came to dominate the area that things albeit slowly began to change. Russia's interest toward the Caucasus extends at least four centuries back. It did not, however, materialise until the end of the 18th century when a Georgian king asked the coreligionist northern neighbour for protection.² It was provided and ultimately led to the abolition of Georgian statehood and virtual annexation of the country. However, it also

¹D. Ghambashidze, *The Caucasus: Its People, History, Economy and Present Position*, London, 1918.

²Sir O. Wardrop, *The Kingdom of Georgia*, London, 1977; W. E. D. Allen, *A History of the Georgian People: From the Beginning Down to the Russian Conquest in the 19th Century*, London, 1932; D.M. Lang, *The Georgians*, London and New York, 1962.

secured the survival of the Georgian culture. It also, most importantly, after centuries of isolation, provided via Russia an access to European ideas and practice. It took Russia over seventy years to pacify the Caucasus, but finally the Czars managed to bring the entire region under their sway and thus alter the course of its historical evolution.

A short period of independence³ ended abruptly in the Spring of 1921.⁴ The Red Army crushed the dreams of Transcaucasian nations and the communist dictatorship that followed eventually brought natural development of the area to a virtual standstill. This protracted social experiment that deprived individuals as well as entire nations of their right and ultimately their ability to adjust through trial and error, resulted in the emergence in the Caucasus and elsewhere of an artificial reality reminiscent of Peter Pan's eternal childhood.⁵ Not quite so happy, however, because of its drabness and inherently violent nature of the régime. But the security of "eternal childhood" seemed to be there and it helped develop mythology that was to play a crucial part first in dismantling the Soviet empire and later on in securing the failure of a quick transformation.

I am quite certain that many of the myths nurtured by the Caucasian peoples were essentially similar. There must have also been some, however, that reflected idiosyncrasies of somewhat distinct cultural experiences. I will name only a few that I have heard voiced in Georgia by average citizens as well as some academics and political leaders.

1. Nationalism is the cure of all social ills and ethnic tensions. Failure of communism to secure ultimate harmony in Georgia was largely due to its emphasis on the so-called internationalism.

2. Political unity on serious matters will never be difficult to achieve in post-communist Georgia since the considerations of national interests will invariably outweigh partisan ambitions.

3. Introduction of private property will work miracles overnight. Market forces, even unaided, will easily take care of all economic problems.

³Z. Avalishvili, *The Independence of Georgia in International Politics: 1918-21*, London, 1924.

⁴F.F. Davitaya, ed., *Soviet Georgia*, Moscow, 1972; A. Javakhishvili and G. Gvelesiani, eds., *Soviet Georgia*, Moscow, 1964; D.G. Sturua, et al., eds., *Ocherki Istorii Kommunisticheskii Partii Gruzii: 1883-1970*, Tbilisi, 1971.

⁵Bohdan Nahaylo and C. J. Peters, *The Ukrainians and Georgians*, London, Minority Rights Group, 1982, pp. 14-19.

4. The industrialised world is eagerly waiting for the opportunity to invest, and thus foreign investors will rush onto the scene as soon as communism falls.

5. International community and NATO in particular will act promptly to defend Georgia if there is a threat to her sovereignty or territorial integrity.

The above was compounded by several beliefs and attitudes that also developed over the last years of communist rule. The first equated democracy with anarchy and viewed any form of state control as essentially vicious, therefore denouncing every effort to strengthen the governmental institutions interpreting them as attempts to restore communist dictatorship. I would characterise the second as excessively or irrationally "green". According to this belief, the construction of hydro-power happens to be the only source of relatively cheap energy readily available in Georgia. Third was the belief that anything developed, created or constructed under the communist rule, whether an institution, a social pattern, a work of art or on some occasions even a building is innately pernicious and criminal and ought to be dealt with accordingly. Also public rhetoric abounded in references to history; a highly romanticised image of the remote past was presented as an ideal to be emulated.

This mentality had been evolving against the highly emotional backdrop created by the traumatic experience of April 9, 1989, when Soviet troops ruthlessly crushed a peaceful demonstration killing nineteen people most of them young women. The collective response that followed fostered emotional reactions as opposed to pragmatic choices. The latter practically became taboo. Anyone suggesting cautious, rational approach with regard to political matters risked being labelled a traitor of the nation.

It was also the time when owing to the slackening of discipline in the Russian armed forces and constant assaults at police stations, arms began to spread rapidly. This finally led to the development of what was aptly referred to as a "Kalashnikov culture" wherein the state ceded its monopoly on violence as all manner of irregular armed formations and criminal groups sprang up and engaged in administering the kind of "justice" that would suit their own nefarious interests.

The myths raised expectations. The attitudes prescribed behaviour. Emotions ran high. Guns were ubiquitous. Together, they spelled disaster.

The first post-communist government of Georgia led by President Gamsakhurdia consisted of political figures largely responsible for the creation, reinforcement and dissemination of the above mythology. It is little wonder, therefore, that the process of disintegration of state and society that had started earlier now became precipitous and irreversible. Although the new

authorities must be credited with declaring Georgia's independence on March 31, 1991, the rest of their activities revealed blatant incompetence. Their response to the unfolding new reality was largely neurotic. At times symbols seemed to matter more to them than substance. Opinions they occasionally voiced exacerbated ethnic tensions, and actually helped trigger the first major internal armed conflict in Georgia. Also Gamsakhurdia's insulting rhetoric, dictatorial practices and inability to compromise along with his amazing gift to turn even his best friends into foes soon shattered the myth of the inevitable "political unity" and ultimately led to his ouster as a result of a bloody uprising of December 1991, effected by his one-time comrades and widely supported by the majority of intellectuals.

Now that the final chord had struck, nothing was left of the state. One was inevitably reminded of the Hobbesian "state of nature" with the "war of everyone against everyone" and as a consequence "a continual fear and danger of violent death".

In March 1992 Eduard Shevardnadze returned to Georgia and took charge of the State Council, which was to lead the country to elections scheduled for the autumn of the same year. He shared whatever minimal power the council then wielded with most of the political groups that had emerged prior to the collapse of communism, including some that had closely cooperated with the Gamsakhurdia government and although they had disapproved of the latter's practices they did all the same remain faithful to the basic ideology.

Circumstances under which Georgia was to venture its transformation were by far the worst in the entire area formerly occupied by the USSR. The situation was further aggravated by the armed conflict in Abkhazia and the civil war that followed. Yet despite the daunting odds, the leadership of the country has never backed down on its commitment to build a democratic state. Special credit should go to the Head of State Eduard Shevardnadze - a statesman of high international profile, whose unflinching courage, infinite patience, extraordinary power of persuasion and the ability to maintain a purpose have largely determined whatever progress the country has made. As early as October 1992, internationally monitored elections were held as the legitimate government was formed. As soon as the circumstances allowed it, a radical economic reform was initiated. Helped all along by the international financial institutions, and the major industrial powers, the reform has resulted in stabilisation of the transitional currency. Criminal situation has been effectively dealt with - streets and roads are practically safe. The press is free. Multi-party parliament has been in session most of the time and although partisan bickering has seriously hindered the process of law-making, many important acts have been passed and on several crucial issues certain unity has been achieved. The activities of the Parliament have been crowned by the adoption of the Constitution - an extraordinary accomplishment, given the

diversity of opinion across the political spectrum. Presidential and parliamentary elections were scheduled for November 5, 1995.

Thus, in a relatively short period of time fraught with enormous problems Georgia has managed to accomplish what Brzezinski calls the first phase of transformation.

Serious problems remain, however, and the progress achieved ought to be viewed only as a relatively good start on the road to genuine democracy and sustainable economic growth. Most regrettably, the relative calm of the period has been punctuated by brutal terrorist acts, the latest being an attempt to eliminate the Head of State. Most probable explanation of this heinous attack is the mounting tension between the state conducting the policy designed to wipe out organised crime and the remaining groups of criminals that can no longer operate freely and are forced to resort to extreme kinds of violence with the view to creating confusion and thus regaining control.

But let me take you back to the time when the Soviet Union collapsed.

Following the long sleep that had blurred the contours of ethnicity and hushed national interests, the awakening peoples of the Caucasus were groping in the twilight for their new or, perhaps, long-forgotten identities. As the painful process of adapting to the newly-gained freedom evolved, a new set of priorities, some of them potentially destructive, emerged along the way. Irredentism, separatism, territorial claims and counter-claims long repressed into the unconscious by somewhat sinister Leninist nationalities policy were uncomfortably back at work.

The war in Karabakh had already been raging for sometime and so had the Georgian-Ossetian conflict. In geopolitical terms, at least at the surface of it, the scene was the 18th century Caucasus redux with all major powers interested again. There were substantial differences, however.

First, there was Turkey as a democratic European state that had replaced the Ottoman Empire. Scholars of Georgian history, rightly or wrongly, have long kept the latter responsible for having isolated Georgia from European influence in the late Middle Ages after the fall of Constantinople in 1453. Now it was the new Turkey's turn to do the opposite, and it did precisely this. Suffice it to say that with conflicts raging first in Abkhazia and later on in Chechnya, Turkey provided the only available overland route to Europe. The period beginning with 1992 saw some top level diplomacy in action which has resulted in the development of a necessary legal infrastructure. This opened the way for intensive relationships at every level. Very soon, Turkey became the number-one trading partner of Georgia and has remained so until today. The second border

gate, that was recently opened in Akhaltsikhe with a ceremony attended by the Heads of State and Government, attests to the willingness of the two nations to further increase the volume of exchanges. At the time of hardship when Georgia's very survival was at stake, in spite of the pressure exerted by the home-based pro-Abkhaz lobby, Turkey extended credits and humanitarian assistance to its neighbour as well as the expressions of commitment to the territorial integrity of the friendly state that was being torn apart by aggressive separatists. Also, Turkey initiated the creation of the Black Sea Economic Cooperation – a regional organisation that brings together states that only a few years ago belonged to the opposite ideological camps and military alliances and viewed one another as adversaries. All Transcaucasian states are part of BSEC which has so far been chiefly concerned with economic matters but is certain to gain a political dimension and concentrate on security issues after a degree of economic integration is achieved.

There was a new Russia – a successor to the states that had dominated the area for two centuries. It still had military presence in most of the Caucasus and was looking for a *modus vivendi* compatible with its current interests. It was a country in transition from a totalitarian dictatorship to a market-based pluralistic democracy. It may have been for this reason that for the first time in centuries with the possible exception of the years immediately following the 1917 Revolutions, Russia did not always appear to be a unitary actor but rather pursued various, at times somewhat inconsistent policies emanating from different institutional sources. The controversy that reflected profound divisions along ideological fault lines reached its peak in October 1993 and ended in the dissolution of the obsolete Supreme Soviet. The plurality of approaches with regard to the Caucasus and Georgia in particular became especially apparent during the conflict in Abkhazia when the reactionary elements entrenched in the Russian political and military establishments openly instigated and supported separatists, while the President and his like-minded democratic wing invariably declared their commitment to the inviolability of borders and territorial integrity of the Georgian state, backed the international effort to settle the conflict and came up with peace initiatives of their own.

Relations with Russia have constituted a key element of Georgian foreign policy and are likely to remain so in the future due to historical ties, cultural affinity and the part the northern neighbour is certain to play in shaping the destiny of the region where its language is still widely used as the *lingua franca*. The two nations share a common interest in developing constructive partnership designed to maintain stability in the Caucasus, which as the historical experience and very recent events have demonstrated, is as important for Russia as it is for Georgia.

Aside from bilateral relationship Georgia and Russia collaborate within the framework of the Commonwealth of Independent States which has

lately been gaining momentum and is expected to evolve into a full-fledged regional organisation hopefully capable of securing stability and economic revitalisation in its immense Eurasian territory.

Post-communist Georgia has gone through many hardships and ordeals but none has been so agonising as the Abkhaz tragedy. It also evinced emerging new actors on the Caucasian scene and witnessed some of the old-style tampering from outside. The injustice that has occurred in Abkhazia, an integral part of Georgia, is outrageous, and unless the situation is rectified, a most harmful precedent will have been established that may in the future encourage the perpetrators of evil. A group of political adventurers having instilled in their people a maliciously concocted version of history designed to breed hatred towards the Georgians and claiming to represent the interests of the ethnic Abkhazs, who, incidentally, made up only 17% of the entire population of the area, first established an unfair ethnocratic rule by introducing some ridiculously disproportionate parliamentary quotas while later after unleashing an armed conflict against the central authority of the Georgian state, in which thousands died, forcibly drove away nearly half of the population of the autonomous republic only because they happened to be Georgian. Thus, they hoped to redress the balance of demographic superiority in their favour and wrench the territory away from Georgia.

Aside from the Cossacks and the reactionary elements in the Russian army, the separatists were helped all along by an obscure political entity calling itself the "Confederation of the Mountain Peoples of the Caucasus", which prior to the conflict had declared the city of Sukhumi its capital, thus stating symbolically its ultimate objectives. Shamil Basaev, whose latter-day activities in the Russian town of Budyonovsk have won him world-wide notoriety, had been named a "Hero of Abkhazia" by the separatist régime for the atrocities he had committed against the ethnic Georgian population as a commander of the Confederation forces. Ironically, the Confederation has by now, mysteriously vanished and has not been heard of since the separatist war, as had been earlier predicted, spilled over to the Northern slopes of the Caucasian mountain range, that are inhabited by those very peoples whom this ephemeral organisation claimed to represent.

Separatist leaders – perpetrators of ethnic cleansing as the Final Document of the OSCE Budapest Summit appropriately described their act, flagrantly flouting all relevant international documents including the ones they themselves have signed, stubbornly deny 250,000 displaced persons their right to return to their homes. Also, they keep rejecting the proposals of a fair political settlement, developed by the Georgian, UN and Russian sides, that envisages broad autonomy for Abkhazia within a federal Georgian state.

Georgia's relations with her Transcaucasian neighbours have in the course of millennia displayed a lot more of friendly disposition and cooperative effort than of antagonism and clash of interests. In fact, at no point in history has Georgia confronted either its Christian neighbour Armenia or Muslim Azerbaijan. At different times during the last eight centuries Georgians have sheltered Armenian refugees. Currently, ethnic Armenians make up about 9% of the population of Georgia.

The number of ethnic Georgians currently residing in Azerbaijan is over 15,000. A lot more numerous community of Azeris –over 350,000 people– presently lives in the territory of Georgia. At the peak of the Karabakh conflict there were fears that the hostilities could spill over onto the Georgian territory and involve local communities of the Azeris and Armenians. Fortunately, despite a number of provocations, this did not happen.

At this point it seems appropriate to clarify that Georgia has successfully incorporated both the Armenian and Azeri elements into the texture of its society. It is particularly true of its capital city – Tbilisi. The relaxed ambience of the city that has always been marked by a high degree of ethnic and religious tolerance has encouraged the development of cultures. As a matter of fact, both Azeri and Armenian cultures have flourished in Tbilisi and have produced outstanding works of literature, music and visual arts.

Tbilisi also acted as a melting pot that synthesised various cultural elements to give rise to a specific Tbilisi urban culture. I would be remiss if in this context I failed to mention Sayatnova – whose poetry was an ultimate manifestation of the above spirit. Armenian by birth, he was raised in the 18th century Tbilisi and wrote poetry in three languages – Georgian, Armenian and Azeri. His monument in the old section of Tbilisi symbolically represents the unity of the three Transcaucasian nations – a state of affairs highly desirable but as the recent history has demonstrated rather difficult albeit not at all impossible to achieve.

Certain grounds for optimism already exist. Current situation in the Transcaucasus is better than what it was two years ago in that actual fighting has stopped. It is not to say that the unsettled dormant conflicts cannot at any time rekindle, but terminating hostilities is in itself an accomplishment and this ought to be recognised. There is also a visible shift in mentality towards more pragmatic approaches which may help concentrate and build on the positive facets of relationships instead of dramatising past resentments and battling over chimeras. True enough, examples of present day co-operation are minimal but they do exist, one of them being the joint implementation of the European Union Food Aid programme successfully carried out last winter. Also one cannot fail to notice that radical elements keep losing ground, political leaderships show greater responsibility than ever before. A

lot will depend on their wisdom and ability to find rational compromises. They may count on the assistance of the international organisations since both UN and OSCE are actively involved in the Caucasus.

However, none of these are likely to bring durable peace to the region unless local efforts are reinforced by those of external powers. It should be borne in mind that the immaturity of the Transcaucasian states stems from their prolonged artificial exclusion from the process of nation-building and, therefore, their belated attempts at adjustment may last years. This transition should not be simply allowed to run its natural course. To avoid misery and possible bloodshed international community ought to get actively involved to run its natural course. To avoid misery and possible bloodshed international community ought to get actively involved in order to accelerate it. More so, since now that the attention of the world's major powers is increasingly focusing on the Caucasus in anticipation of the new Caspian oil boom it should be in everyone's interest to maintain peace and stability in the transit area.