

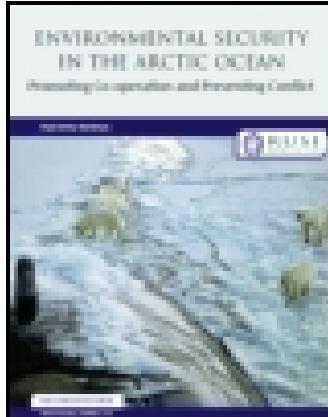
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RUSSIA AND TRANSCAUASIA

The Georgian Conflicts

Since the break up of the Soviet Union, Georgia has provided the stage for three separate conflicts. Firstly, an armed struggle for power took place between the supporters and opponents of former president Zviad Gamsakhurdia, and the return of Eduard Shevardnadze as Georgia's leader in March 1992 was the culmination of the triumph of anti-Gamsakhurdia forces. The second conflict was the war between nationalist forces in South Ossetia and the central authorities in Tbilisi. A ceasefire was agreed upon between Russia, South Ossetia and Georgia in July 1992, and has been policed by forces from Russia, Georgia and both South Ossetia and the Russian republic of North Ossetia.

The third conflict is the war in Abkhazia between separatists and the Georgian government which was still continuing in early 1993. This war has been the most protracted, and has seriously strained relations between Russia and Georgia, as Tbilisi has accused Russia of supporting Abkhaz forces. The conflict has also coincided with negotiations for a bilateral Russo-Georgian treaty. Military issues have been very much to the fore in the treaty negotiations as Russian forces (ie. former Soviet forces) are still stationed in Georgia.

The Ossetian and Abkhaz conflagrations commenced long before the return of Shevardnadze. Gamsakhurdia also fought to retain Tbilisi's control of these regions, and Shevardnadze has shown a similar determination to use force to prevent the break up of Georgia.

The settlement reached in South Ossetia in July 1992 followed a meeting between Yeltsin and Shevardnadze in Dagomys in June. This agreement was preceded by aggressive rhetoric from Ruslan Khasbulatov and Rutskoy. Khasbulatov warned that Russia might annex South Ossetia and accused Georgia of 'genocide' against the Ossetian population. Khasbulatov said that the flow of refugees from South Ossetia to Russia meant that the conflict there could not be considered an internal problem of Georgia, and therefore since it directly affected Russian state interests, the Supreme Soviet 'may be

forced to study' the question of South Ossetia's 'annexation to Russia'.¹ Rutskoy also accused the Georgian leadership of genocide and warned that Russia will not permit the conflict in South Ossetia to be resolved by force.²

Russian statements were partly motivated by concern that Russian forces may be caught up in the conflict. It also seemed, however, that Russian concerns went further, and represented an attempt to intimidate Georgia. Rutskoy's statement that Russia will not permit the conflict in Georgia to be resolved by force was an intrusion into Georgia's internal affairs, and carried the implication that Russia may use force.³ Rutskoy's comments also revealed his lack of enthusiasm for the sovereignty of states from the 'near abroad'. He said that Russia did not wish to enter into a state of war with another ex-Soviet state, but he then asked: 'for how long must we tolerate everything that is going on in relation to the Russophone population in other republics...understand no one is entitled to say, today I am sovereign and tomorrow I will begin to knife, kill and shoot people'.⁴ Georgia complained that one of Russia's deputy defence ministers, Georgy Kondratiev, visited Russian military bases in Georgia without obtaining the permission of the Georgian authorities. Russia denied that Kondratiev's visit had not been authorised. However, as already observed, unauthorised visits by Russian political and military leaders to various parts of the 'near abroad' have occurred more than once, and reveal scant respect for the sovereignty of these states.

Rutskoy feels that Russia should play a key role in resolving Georgia's internal conflicts, and that he sees the conflict as an opportunity to ensure that Georgia remains within a Russian sphere of influence. There is a strong Russian strategic interest in Georgia. Russia would appear to desire a pro-Russian state bordering Turkey, and as Russia can no longer feel confident that its navy will have access to Ukrainian naval facilities, Georgia's ports (though inferior to Ukraine's) become more important. Georgia also provides direct land access to Armenia, so providing a further reason for Russian strategic interest in Tbilisi.

A clearer admission of Russian strategic interest in Georgia has arisen from the Abkhaz conflict. Russia was again integrally involved in

mediating and administering a ceasefire agreement in September 1992. The ceasefire failed to hold, however, and conflict intensified. By early 1993 Shevardnadze was accusing Russia of direct involvement in the conflict and saying that Georgia was at war with Russia. Russian defence minister Pavel Grachev (who visited Russian military facilities in February 1993, after which the Georgian government again claimed that this visit took place without the permission of the Georgian authorities) spoke of Russia's strategic interest in Georgia. Four days before his visit to Georgia he said that:

As for the Russian troops, the armed force stationed in Batumi and Gudauta, this is a special matter. There is much that could be said about this. Just imagine the Black Sea coast of the Caucasus and the section where our troops are stationed...I will only say that this is a strategically important area for the Russian army. We have certain strategic interests there and must take every measure to ensure that our troops remain there; otherwise we will lose the Black Sea.⁵

Shevardnadze responded negatively to Grachev's comments on Russia's strategic interests, but Grachev claimed that his comments had been misinterpreted. However, when asked two weeks later about when Russian troops would be withdrawn from Abkhazia, Grachev commented:

That is a decision for the political leadership. The defence minister does not decide this issue; however my point of view is, and I have said this, that there is a need for our forces to be there...I think that the Georgian people would not object to having Russian troops on their territory to defend Georgian sovereignty, among other things.⁶

Grachev's statements make clear Russia's strategic interest in Georgia. Russia is likely therefore to be reluctant to undertake a full withdrawal from Georgia, and will consequently demand to be involved in settling the internal ethnic disputes in Georgia, so as to legitimise a Russian presence there.

Armenia and Azerbaijan

The whole of Transcaucasia is likely to be of strategic importance to Russia. Armenia and Azerbaijan border on Iran and Turkey, significant Middle Eastern states that are, as Moscow is aware, becoming important actors in former Soviet Central Asia. Moscow's interest in developing relations with these states has grown since the break up of the Soviet Union, and Russia's desire for a cooperative relationship with Turkey and Iran means that it is likely that it will strive to maintain close relations with Armenia and Azerbaijan.

Russia accepts that Turkey will exert ever greater influence on Azerbaijan. Since the break up of the Soviet Union, Moscow has had no choice other than to accept the growing rapprochement between Baku and Ankara. Moscow has also been compelled to accept Azerbaijan's drift away from Moscow as a result of Abulfaz Elchibey's consolidation of power after assuming the presidency in June 1992. Under Elchibey, Azerbaijan has taken itself out of the CIS, saying that it never saw itself as a member. As Russia is concerned about the growth of Turkish influence throughout the Islamic regions of the former Soviet Union, then Moscow will be determined to retain some degree of influence in Azerbaijan.

Turkey and Iran have been extremely active in trying to mediate a settlement of the Nagorny Karabakh conflict, which makes it impossible for Russia to withdraw its interests in the region. If a settlement were to be reached without Russian involvement, this would amount to an abdication by Russia of its traditional presence in the region. Russia has therefore endeavoured to develop bilateral ties with Elchibey's Azerbaijan, despite his aversion to the CIS. The most significant breakthrough came with the signing of a Russo-Azerbaijan treaty in October 1992: the long term strategic direction of Azeri foreign policy is likely to be oriented towards Ankara, and Russian influence in Azerbaijan will be diminished.⁷

Russia's ties with Armenia will ensure continued access for Russia in the region: Russia has traditionally had a close relationship with Armenia, and Moscow will be determined to ensure Armenia's security, which faces serious challenges in the long term. As one

observer writes, Armenia is 'bordered by an unreliable ally in the form of Georgia, an uneasy partner in the form of Iran, a hostile regional partner in the form of Turkey, and a declared enemy in the form of Azerbaijan.' Moscow's support is Erevan's only plausible source of protection. Armenia is accordingly an enthusiastic supporter of the Tashkent collective security agreement, and called for its implementation against Azerbaijan in June 1992.⁸ Historical ties with Armenia and the desire to retain a presence in Transcaucasia mean that Russia will pursue the consolidation of an alliance with Erevan, and will endeavour to cooperate with Turkey in promoting a settlement of the Nagorny Karabakh conflict. However, if Turkish policy changes and Ankara provides greater support to Baku, Russia's relationship with Turkey is likely to deteriorate.⁹

Moldova

Moldova has been the scene of a civil war similar in nature to the wars in Georgia. The central government has been confronted with a separatist challenge in Transdnestr, and nationalist forces in Moscow have expressed support for the Transdnestrian leadership. As in the case of Georgia, the rhetoric between the Chisinau and Moscow has been extremely acrimonious.¹⁰ Moldova declared independence from the Soviet Union in August 1991, after the failure of the anti-Gorbachev coup in Moscow. In the autumn of 1991, the leadership of the 'Dnestr Soviet Socialist Republic' launched an insurgency against the Moldovan government. Its President, Igor Smirnov, revealed in an interview at the beginning of 1992, that he wanted to see the restoration of both the Soviet Union and a single Soviet Army.¹¹ Fighting intensified in the first half of 1992 until peacekeeping forces were deployed in July 1992 following an agreement between Russia and Moldova, signed by Yeltsin and Moldovan president Mircea Snegur in Moscow. At the summit of Black Sea states in Istanbul in June 1992, Moldova agreed to grant more autonomy to Dnestr.¹²

The Dnestrian leadership fears that it would be swallowed up if Moldova and Romania were ever to be reunified. This is why it has resisted Chisinau's attempts to exert Moldovan sovereignty over the

left bank. Moscow has not played the part of a neutral bystander, but through the presence of the 14th Army, it has intervened, so subverting the sovereignty of an independent state which is recognised by Russia. The 14th Army has supported, armed, and fought alongside the armed militias of the Dnestrian republic; as one observer expresses it, 'a symbiotic relationship has taken shape between the army and the Dnestr republic.'

The former commander of the 14th Army, Lieutenant General Gennady Yakovlev, was appointed by Smirnov as chief of defence of Dnestr in December 1991, until he was removed as 14th Army commander in January 1992. The former deputy chief of staff of the 14th Army, Colonel Stefan Kitsak, served as the commander of the Dnestr republican guard, and in July 1992, the commander of the Tiraspol garrison, Colonel Mikhail Bergman, was appointed as commander of the police and internal affairs troops of the Dnestrian republic. The leadership of the 14th Army and the Dnestr republic had jointly embarked on a merging of the 14th Army and the Dnestrian republican guard.

The 14th Army's support for the Dnestrian authorities became more overt after General Aleksandr Lebed was appointed as commander in June 1992. Lebed was outspoken in his support for the Dnestrian separatists, and fiercely condemned the policy of the Moldovan leadership. He described the Snegur leadership as fascist.¹³ In an interview with *Literaturnaya Rossiya* in July 1992 he called for a Nuremberg trial of Moldova's leaders, and said that the Dnestr people have a right to this (ie. the 14th) army.¹⁴ He then expressed his opinion on the future of Dnestr, which he saw as either joining the Russian Federation; its accession to a Russian Ukrainian state were such a state to be formed; or an independent state closely linked to Russia.¹⁵ Lebed has also stated that Dnestr is an inalienable part of Russia, and that the CIS is an assemblage of abnormal states.¹⁶

Lebed's words constitute a flagrant violation of Moldovan sovereignty, and make nonsense of the Russian military leadership's claim that its armed forces stand outside politics. Grachev ordered Lebed to refrain from speaking to the media, although he was praised as a patriot by Gulko and by the current chief of the General Staff,

Mikhail Kolesnikov.¹⁷ It is claimed that Yeltsin opposed the appointment of Lebed.¹⁸ If so, Yeltsin's control over the Russian military is, to say the least, less than total.

Lebed opposed Romanian involvement in any settlement of the Moldovan crisis, arguing it should be resolved by the three former union republics, Moldova, Russia and Ukraine.¹⁹

Rutskoy became directly involved in the Moldovan conflict in April 1992, when he visited Dnestr and expressed support for the Dniestrian forces, calling for autonomy for Dnestr in a Moldovan federation. He also argued that the 14th Army should act as a peacekeeper, despite the fact that this army was involved in the fighting. Rutskoy's visit was criticised by Snegur who saw it as interference in Moldova's internal affairs. Rutskoy justified Russian interference in the Moldovan conflict by arguing that 'while following the course of non-interference in the affairs of other states, Russia must, at the same time, defend Russian and other citizens'.²⁰ In June 1992 in the same rebuke he delivered to the Georgian leadership over Ossetia, he castigated the Moldovan government for committing genocide and warned that Russia would not allow Moldova to use force to resolve this conflict.²¹

Following the summit of Black Sea states in Istanbul in June 1992, Russia gained a diplomatic victory when the presidents of Moldova, Romania, Ukraine and Russia called upon the parliament of Moldova to examine and solve the problem of the status of the left bank of the Dnestr.²² Burbulis warned in Istanbul that Russia was ready to apply economic sanctions against Moldova if it refused to grant federal status to Dnestr.²³ Snegur favours granting Moldova autonomy within a unitary state. Since the deployment of peacekeeping forces, Chisinau has offered the left bank Russians a substantial share of ministries in the Moldovan government, along with administrative autonomy and legal codification of Dnestr's right to secede if Moldova ever unites with Romania.²⁴

The Moldovan government's willingness to grant autonomy and even the right of secession to Dnestr in the event of unification represents a triumph for Russian foreign policy in the region. The support

rendered by the 14th Army to the Dnestr leadership and the criticism of the Moldovan leadership by Rutskoy, forced Yeltsin and Kozyrev to take greater interest in the fate of the Dnestr republic, and meant that Russia played an essential part in resolving what was a conflict taking place within the Moldovan state. The ceasefire agreement legitimises a Russian presence in Moldova, and the link between the Dnestr region and the Russian Federation enables Moscow to keep a toehold in Moldova. The 14th Army is likely to remain in Dnestr for several years, so reinforcing the link with Moscow.

There is a certain paradox to the support that Dnestr has received from Moscow. The Dnestrian leadership supported the abortive August 1991 coup as it supported the existence of the USSR. Two of Dnestr's staunchest defenders, Lebed and Rutskoy, both opposed the coup. However, both the Dnestr leadership and the nationalist camp in Moscow favour Russian predominance throughout the former Soviet Union. From the standpoint of the nationalist camp in Moscow, a Russian link with Dnestr may constrain any moves towards Moldovan Romanian unification. Yet, if unification does take place, Dnestr would be likely to separate, and, as Lebed suggested in *Literaturnaya Rossiya*, become linked in some way with Russia. This would enable Russia to maintain a territorial presence on Ukraine's south western flank and give Russia legitimate security interests in this region.

1 BBC, *SWB* SU/1408 B/5, 16 June 1992.

2 BBC, *SWB* SU/1413 C2/8, 20 June 1992. Rutskoy also directed his comments to the Moldovan government, at that time engaged in conflict with the pro-Moscow leadership in Dnestr.

3 Shevardnadze accused Russian forces of participating in the Ossetian conflict BBC, *SWB* SU/1414 C2/1, 23 June 1992. He also accused Rutskoy of threatening to bomb Georgian cities. See BBC, *SWB* SU/1415 C3/1, 24 June 1992.

4 BBC, *SWB*, SU/1414 C1/3, 23 June 1992.

5 BBC, *SWB* SU/1622 C1/6, 25 February 1993.

6 BBC, *SWB SU/1625 B/7*, 1 March 1993. Note that Russian forces are to be withdrawn by 1995 and border troops by 1994. See BBC *SWB SU/1660 B/13*, 12 April 1993.

7 In February 1993, the Azerbaijani defence ministry claimed that Russian troops aided Armenian forces in Nagorny Karabakh, *RFE/RL News Briefs* 15-19 February 1993 p.6.

8 *Los Angeles Times*, 17 June 1992.

9 See the Turkish prime minister's criticism of Russia in *The Independent*, 8 April 1993.

10 In June 1992, Moldovan President Mircea Snegur declared that Russia was at war with Moldova. See BBC, *SWB SU/SU1414 C1/3*, 23 June 1992.

11 *Krasnaya Zvezda*, 1 January 1992.

12 See the discussion below.

13 *Sovetskaya Rossiya*, 7 July 1992.

14 *Literaturnaya Rossiya*, No.31, 31 July 1992, p.2. Lebed has also criticised Yeltsin's foreign policy. In a news conference in Tiraspol on 4 July, he attacked the policy of 'going with an outstretched hand to the world's cabinets, instead of building up a great power capable of imposing its will'. See *RFE/RL Research Report*, Vol.1, No.29, 17 July 1992, pp.73-74

15 *Literaturnaya Rossiya*, *op. cit.*

16 See *RFE/RL Research Report*, Weekly Review, Vol.1, No.29, 17 July 1992, p.73. Kozyrev also shares the view that Dnestr might one day become a part of Russia, *Le Monde*, 7-8 June 1992.

17 *Izvestiya*, 9 July 1992.

18 *Nezavisimaya Gazeta*, 4 August 1992.

19 BBC, *SWB SU/1421 C1/1* 1 July 1992. Lebed's opposition to Romanian involvement displays the aversion felt by many Russians to involvement by 'distant foreign' states in conflict resolution within the former Soviet Union.

20 BBC, *SWB SU/1350 C1/4*, 8 April 1992.

21 Ambartsumov said in a TV interview on 22 June 1992, that he agreed with Rutskoy's views on Moldova and Georgia, and contended that changes in the borders of newly independent states could be justified by the 'general geo-political interests of Russia'. *RFE/RL Research Report*, Weekly Review, Vol.1, No.27, 3 July 1992, p.72.

22 BBC, *SWB SU/1419 C2/1*, 29 June 1992.

23 BBC, *SWB SU/1418 C1/2*, 27 June 1992.

24 Vladimir Socor 'Moldova's New 'Government of National Consensus'', *RFE/RL Research Report*, Vol.1, No.47, 27 November 1992, pp.7-8.