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RFE/RL CAUCASUS REPORT
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A Weekly Review of Political Developments in the North
Caucasus and Transcaucasia from Radio Free Europe/Radio
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COMPARISONS BETWEEN KOSOVA, TRANSCAUCASUS MISLEADING. The success of the NATO air campaign against Yugoslavia, and the subsequent deployment of an international peacekeeping force under UN auspices in Kosova, have prompted senior officials in both Georgia and Azerbaijan to suggest that NATO should intervene to help resolve the deadlocked Abkhaz and Nagorno-Karabakh conflicts, specifically, to reverse the aftermath of what they claim was ethnic cleansing and enable displaced persons to return to their homes. And the indictment for war crimes of Yugoslav President Slobodan Milosevic has encouraged the Georgian leadership to launch an intensive lobbying campaign to bring Abkhaz president Vladislav Ardzinba before the International Court in The Hague on charges of genocide. (That campaign is being undertaken, with a degree of single-mindedness more appropriate to a traditional Caucasian vendetta than a disinterested search for justice, by former KGB general Tamaz Nadareishvili, who is chairman of the so-called Abkhaz parliament-in-exile, which comprises the ethnic Georgian deputies to the Abkhaz parliament elected in 1991.) While parallels between the three conflicts exist, calls to apply the "Kosova model" in the South Caucasus ignore several crucial and fundamental differences between the situation in Kosova, on the one hand, and Abkhazia and Karabakh, on the other.

The first difference refers to the political/territorial status of the region in question and the pre-conflict demographic composition of its population, and the circumstances in which tensions deteriorated into military activity.

Kosova had been stripped in 1989 of its autonomous status within Serbia that gave it a special status within the Yugoslav federation. That loss of autonomy led to the emergence, first of a shadow state government, and then, by early 1996, of a guerrilla organization--the Kosova Liberation Army (UCK)--that took up arms on behalf of the region's ethnic Albanians with the avowed aim of winning independence. The UCK's resort to military activity was, in other words, initially a classic national liberation struggle, and not a response to aggression and violence.

By contrast, the war in Abkhazia was precipitated when Georgian army troops invaded the region unprovoked in August 1992, at a time when the Georgian and Abkhaz leaderships were attempting to draft a formal agreement on Abkhazia's status within the newly independent Republic of Georgia. Volunteers from Russia's North Caucasus republics and some regular Russian army troops

provided support to the Abkhaz, who in 1989 had accounted for under 18 percent percent of the region's population. (The largest ethnic group were the Georgians, who comprised 46 percent of Abkhazia's population.)

Over a period of 14 months, culminating in an offensive against the capital, Sukhumi, the Georgian army was trounced and driven back across the Inguri River that forms the border between Abkhazia and the rest of Georgia, but not before Georgian troops had killed thousands of Abkhaz civilians. The fall of Sukhumi triggered a mass exodus "almost overnight," according to Georgia's ambassador to the UN, of virtually the entire Georgian population of Abkhazia.

Similarly, the low-level clashes in Nagorno-Karabakh between Armenian partisans and Azerbaijani Interior Ministry forces backed by Soviet army troops only escalated after the collapse of the USSR, when the Karabakh Armenians were constrained to mobilize all their forces in a struggle for survival. (Turan on 29 June quoted Armenian Foreign Minister Vartan Oskanian as drawing a direct comparison between the Karabakh defense army and the UCK, and as reasoning that a strict application of the Kosova scenario to the Karabakh conflict would logically entail NATO air strikes against Baku.)

The second difference lies in the attitude of the international community to the ethnic group inhabiting the contested autonomous region, and which is seeking to protect itself and its interests, on the one hand, and to the leader of the larger country of which that autonomous formation is a part, on the other.

The fact that the UCK was openly challenging the authority of one of the international community's favorite bogeymen, Yugoslav President Slobodan Milosevic, contributed in no small measure to the UCK first being granted the status of a negotiating partner, in an ethnic Albanian delegation that also included shadow state President Ibrahim Rugova, at the Rambouillet talks in March, and then to de facto (but not de jure) recognition of the provisional government it formed at that same time.

By contrast, the international community declined to recognize as legitimate the 1994 presidential elections in Abkhazia and the unrecognized Nagorno-Karabakh Republic. Instead, it has made clear its unswerving support for Georgian President Eduard Shevardnadze, who is viewed as playing a key role in the liberation of Eastern and Central Europe from Soviet hegemony, and of Azerbaijan's President Heidar Aliiev, whose country possesses considerable untapped Caspian oil reserves. In addition, a 1994 OSCE statement on the Abkhaz conflict deplored the reprisals committed by Abkhaz against Georgians, but not vice versa. That document also declines to mention Georgia's role in beginning the war.

Third, the NATO air strikes against Yugoslavia were a direct response to the systematic ethnic cleansing of Kosova launched by Yugoslav troops in February under the code name "Operation Horseshoe." By contrast, fighting in both Abkhazia and Karabakh was ended by the signing of formal ceasefire agreements in the spring of 1994. There is thus no urgent and compelling need for international military intervention in either region to save lives. True, those ceasefire agreements have not prevented sporadic exchanges of fire (along the Line of Contact in

Azerbaijan and on the Armenian-Azerbaijani frontier) and terrorist activities in Abkhazia. And consensus still has to be reached, and the appropriate security conditions created, for the return to their homes of Georgians and Azerbaijanis forced to flee during the fighting. Based on UNHCR data, the number of Georgian displaced persons numbers some 200,000--or 100,000 less than claimed by some representatives of the Georgian leadership, while some 780,000 (not one million as claimed by the Azerbaijani leadership) Azerbaijanis fled from districts currently controlled by Karabakh Armenian forces. Only some 30,000--40,000 of that number, however, fled from the self-proclaimed NKR.

Moreover, while there is uncontrovertible evidence of the Serbs' systematic deportations of Kosova Albanians, it is extremely difficult to determine the extent to which the Georgian and Azerbaijanis exodus from Abkhazia and Karabakh were part of a systematic policy implemented by the Abkhaz and Karabakh Armenian leaderships, and to what extent they were simply a spontaneous panic reaction. It is, for example, highly questionable whether either the Abkhaz or the Karabakh Armenians had the capacity in 1993 to round up the population of entire villages and load them on trains as was done in Kosova. In Kosova, the fighting pitted the UCK against regular Serbian army and paramilitary police troops, and almost all killings and atrocities perpetrated against the civilian population were the work of the Serbian forces. By contrast, in both Abkhazia and Karabakh the local population mobilized to repel aggression, but in response to that aggression targeted enemy civilians to a greater extent than did the UCK.

While NATO military intervention in either Abkhazia or Karabakh is inappropriate and unnecessary, the presence of an international peacekeeping force that would guarantee the security of returning displaced persons is perceived as a vital component of any formal settlement of the Abkhaz conflict. Other provisions of the UN Kosova peace plan are also applicable in the Abkhaz conflict, for example the creation of an interim administration under the UN aegis.

NATO Secretary-General Javier Solana made it clear after meeting with Armenian President Robert Kocharian in Brussels last week that he considers the alliance's involvement in resolving the Karabakh conflict unwarranted, adding that "we are not thinking of deploying troops in the region." In the case of Abkhazia, the rationale for an international military presence, whether under NATO or UN auspices, has two separate facets. First, Tbilisi argues that international security guarantees are needed to enable Georgian displaced persons to return to their homes. Abkhaz officials have responded to that concern by proposing the creation of joint Abkhaz/Georgian/Russian police patrols to prevent guerrilla activities and reprisals against civilians in Gali raion. And second, as Bruno Coppieters recently pointed out in his admirable study of the security aspects of the Abkhaz conflict ("Westliche Sicherheitspolitik und der Konflikt zwischen Georgien und Abchasien," Bundesinstitut fuer ostwissenschaftliche und internationale Studien, Cologne, January 1999), since a formal settlement of the conflict will leave Abkhazia an integral part of Georgia, the Abkhaz would be justified in demanding some kind of international security guarantees to preclude

reprisals or the abolition of their autonomy by a post-Shevardnadze Georgian leadership. (Recent indications that Tamaz Nadareishvili may make a bid for the presidency either next year or at some later date can only compound Abkhaz worries.)

x The likelihood of a carbon-copy replay in Abkhazia, or elsewhere, of the NATO campaign against Yugoslavia, as opposed to the application of selected aspects of the Kosova peace plan, appears unlikely, however. Addressing a meeting of the Council of Foreign Relations in New York on 28 June, U.S. Secretary of State Madeleine Albright said "some [people] hope, and others fear, that [Kosova] will be a precedent for similar interventions [by NATO] around the globe. I would caution against any such sweeping conclusions." (Liz Fuller)

ABDULATIPOV CONDEMNS FOREIGN INCURSIONS IN CAUCASUS.

Over the past eighteen months, Russian political commentators have repeatedly expressed anguish and alarm at the erosion of Russia's influence in the North and South Caucasus. But members of the Russian government have until now refrained from publicly accusing the U.S. and its allies of seeking to dominate the region. Writing in "Nezavisimaya gazeta" on 26 June, Nationalities Minister Ramazan Abdulatipov condemned such efforts by the U.S., the countries of Western Europe, Turkey, Iran (!), Afghanistan, Pakistan and "other states that are not amicably disposed towards Russia," attributing those efforts partly to military-strategic objectives and partly to a desire to attain "the maximum control over the economic and political development of the Caucasus, in particular in light of the huge resources of oil and gas concentrated in the Caspian Basin."

Abdulatipov argues that Russia's ultimate fate as a multinational state depends to a large degree on processes in the North Caucasus. He therefore seeks to pinpoint the most dangerous internal trends in the region and to propose effective policies to counter them. In doing so, he progresses from wishful thinking ("I am convinced that the Caucasus and Russia are inseparably bound and cannot exist to the optimum degree [polnotsenno] one without the other") to a somewhat idiosyncratic definition of Russia's past policies in the region ("Russia has acquired tremendous experience of cooperation between people in the Caucasus...I would stress that this is the 'Russian variant' of cooperation between peoples.")

Among those dangerous trends, Abdulatipov singles out the politicization along ethnic lines of the intensifying struggle for power, resources, finances, markets, and access to lucrative posts; the "criminalization of all spheres of society" and accompanying accumulation of vast quantities of arms; and rising unemployment in the North Caucasus against a background of impoverishment of the local population. He adds that unresolved conflicts in the South Caucasus compound instability in the Russian North Caucasus, and consequently argues in favor of trying to resolve all those conflicts wholesale, rather than piecemeal.

But most of his proposals for an adequate Russian policy to counter those trends are couched only in the most general terms, have been advocated on numerous previous occasions, and border on the utopian. Abdulatipov offers no guidelines, for example, on how to

ensure that the interests of Russia and the peoples of the North Caucasus coincide, or that relations between Russia and the South Caucasus are based on "mutual trust" and a partnership of equals. Nor does he indicate how the signing of a memorandum abjuring the use of violence to resolve contentious issues either by the state or between ethnic groups would prove binding or effective. While noting the importance of ensuring the economic well-being of the peoples of the North Caucasus, especially in Ingushetia and Dagestan, which constitute a "buffer zone" bordering on Chechnya, he fails to explain where and how the Russian government could raise the funds needed to do so.

Ingushetia's President Ruslan Aushev once observed of Abdulatipov that he is an outstanding theoretician of nationalities relations, but out of his depth when called upon to tackle practical problems. This article substantiates that diagnosis. (Liz Fuller)

QUOTATIONS OF THE WEEK. "Russian law enforcement bodies are working in the North Caucasus in the hardest conditions. But they know what to do and can do it well." -- Russian Prime Minister Sergei Stepashin, quoted by Caucasus Press on 29 June 1999.

"The [Karabakh] conflict has been thrust on us. We are obliged to resolve it and I believe we will achieve that sooner or later." -- Azerbaijani State Foreign Policy Advisor Vafa Guluzade, quoted by Turan, 29 June 1999.

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