The struggle for influence and oil in the Caucasus

Renewed fighting in Abkhazia

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While public attention is concentrated on America's war against Afghanistan, a conflict in another part of Central Asia that has gone largely unnoticed has flared up again. Since the beginning of October, violent clashes have been taking place in Abkhazia between guerrilla groups and government units, which threatens to develop into a conflict between Russia and Georgia.

According to international law, Abkhazia, which stretches from the summits of the Caucasus to the banks of the Black Sea, belongs to Georgia, and is situated in its northwest. It has been de facto independent since 1992-93, when 10,000 died in a bloody civil war and over a quarter of a million Georgians were driven out. The government of Abkhazia has even requested that the rebel province be admitted into the Russian federation, while the Georgian government in Tblisi insists that it remains a part of Georgia, and at the most wants to negotiate an extended autonomy.

Abkhazia is presently being protected by Russian troops, which supported the separatists in the civil war, and since then have functioned as a "peacekeeping force" in Abkhazia. Since 1993, the ceasefire has also been supervised by a UN mission (UNOMIG) consisting of 23 countries, including the USA, Russia and Germany. In 1999, agreement was reached at the Organisation for Security and Cooperation in Europe summit in Istanbul to vacate the Russian military base at Gudauta in Abkhazia, but this has still not been implemented by Moscow. High-ranking military representatives said this would take at least 15 years.

After the conflict had been smouldering for many years, it flared up again in August this year in a border dispute between Abkhazia and Georgia over the Kodori Gorge. According to Russian and Abkhazi sources, several hundred Chechen and Georgian guerrillas led by Chechen field commander Ruslan Gelayev penetrated the gorge from the Georgian side, carrying out assaults on Abkhazi villages and positions.

After a temporary break in the fighting in September, hostilities flared up again and reached a high point in the battle to take the village of Georgyevskoye on October 4, which Abkhazi units recaptured the same day, with at least 14 killed. Four days later, on October 8, a UN helicopter was shot down during a regular monitoring flight. Nine people died—five UN observers, a local translator and the three-strong Ukrainian crew.

On the following day, combat aircraft bombed villages in northern Abkhazia. Moscow at first denied this had involved Russian planes, and claimed later a Russian plane flying a sortie in Chechnya (500 kilometres away!) had gone astray. On October 17, Russian combat aircraft are again said to have penetrated into Georgian territory. In the meantime, both Russia and Georgia have moved thousands of soldiers to the common border, the worst crisis in relations between the two countries since 1993.

So far, it is unclear who is responsible for this renewed flare-up in the fighting in Abkhazia and for the shooting down of the UN helicopter. In the hail of mutual recriminations even those familiar with the situation are unable to clearly ascertain what is truth and what is propaganda.

For a long time, Russia has accused Georgia of offering a refuge to Chechen rebels in the Pankissi Gorge, which borders directly onto Chechnya. From here, by arrangement with the Georgian government, Gelayev's fighters set out to assist in reconquering Abkhazia and to open up a second front against Russia. The newspaper *Rossyskaya Gazeta* claimed on October 12, referring to captured Chechen fighters, that the attack on the Kodori Gorge had been personally agreed by Gelayev and Georgian President Eduard Shevardnadze. Reliable evidence for such claims has not been forthcoming, however. The Georgian government denies any responsibility and denies that Gelayev was ever in Georgia.

According to Georgia, the recent disputes are a result of Russian provocation, with the goal of discrediting the Georgian government by branding it as supporting terrorism. The Georgian army is not known to possess the portable surface-to-air rockets, with which the UN helicopter was shot down.

According to the third and most likely explanation, Chechen and Georgian partisans in fact instigated the fighting, and these were not supported by President Shevardnadze but by Georgian government circles who reject Shevardnadze's pro-Western course. In this respect, Interior Secretary Kakha Targamadze was mentioned, who is regarded as "Moscow's man" in Tblisi and a possible successor to Shevardnadze.

Targamadze's participation would explain how Chechen fighters were able to travel 400 kilometres across Georgia to the Abkhazi border without being noticed or obstructed. This explanation is also supported by the fact that Shevardnadze was absent when the fighting broke out, as he was making a state visit to the USA.

It is also conceivable that the Russian military, independently or in association with pro-Russian forces inside Georgia, were acting behind the back of President Vladimir Putin. Putin's recent rapprochement with the USA has met widespread rejection in Russian military and secret service circles. Above all the recent decision to shut the Russian Lourdes listening station in Cuba and the Cam Ranh naval base in Vietnam, as well as the agreement to allow the US to use former Russian military facilities in Uzbekistan, has resulted in unusually open criticism.

Just a few days before it became a reality, Defence Secretary Sergei Ivanov had categorically excluded the stationing of American troops in Uzbekistan. Mikhail Delyagin, director of the Moscow Institute for Globalisation, spoke of "extreme stupidity, because we have given up our strategic influence". The Moscow newspaper *Vremya Novostei*, which is published in association with *Newsweek*, already sees Russia's entire political elite in unexpressed opposition to Putin, and recalls the last phase of Mikhail Gorbachev's presidency in 1990.

Even if it is not clear who is pulling which strings in Abkhazia, the recent disputes nevertheless show that behind the "alliance against terrorism" the struggle continues between the Great and regional powers for power and influence in Central Asia.

Since the dissolution of the Soviet Union, the question has remained at the centre of foreign policy disputes: who will control this strategically important region rich in raw materials lying in the heart of the Eurasian

landmass? A key question is how the rich oil and gas reserves of the region can be brought to the world market.

After the independence of the former Soviet Central Asian Republics, Russia still enjoyed a monopoly in this regard, since all the existing pipelines traverse Russian territory. The Western powers, therefore, began to seek alternative export routes that would break the Russian monopoly and provide a direct route to the Caspian oil for the Western companies.

The shortest route, running southward to the Persian Gulf, was blocked because of the American policy of sanctions against Iran. Under no circumstances was the Mullah's regime in Teheran to be able to control the flow of oil. In the southeast, first the civil war in Afghanistan and then the conflict with the Taliban regime meant the existing plans for a pipeline along this route collapsed. The present war against Afghanistan aims to change this situation by installing a pro-Western regime in Kabul. In the meantime, however, the only remaining route was to the west, and here Georgia offered itself as the ideal corridor, which connects oil production in Azerbaijan with the Black Sea. Great efforts were undertaken by Europe and America to loosen Georgia from Russian dependence and integrate it into the various Western alliances.

Georgia and Azerbaijan were at the heart of the European Union's 1993 TRACECA project (Transport Corridor Europe-Caucasus-Asia). This was conceived of as rapidly and cost-effectively establishing traffic and communication routes from Europe to Asia—the "Silk Road of the 21st Century"—as an alternative to Russian routes. In 1996 this was followed by another consortium named INOGATE (Interstate Oil and Gas Towards Europe), to which the USA also belonged and which concentrated on the building of pipelines, railroad lines, roads, ports and airports between Azerbaijan and the Ukraine via Georgia. A highpoint of these efforts was a conference in Baku in September 1998, in which 33 countries and 12 international organisations took part, with 21 large oil companies from the USA alone participating.

From the mid 1990s, Georgia, Azerbaijan, the Ukraine, Moldavia and finally Uzbekistan established the GUUAM alliance (named after the initial letters of these countries), which sought closer ties with NATO. Another pro-NATO alliance exists between Turkey and Azerbaijan.

Russia opposed this development, by stoking up ethnic conflicts in Georgia (Abkhazia and South Ossetia) and so strengthened the country's chronic political instability. President Shevardnadze even accused Moscow of being responsible for an assassination attempt made against him. Georgia, for its part, offered the Chechen separatists an area into which they could retreat from the Russian troops. A pipeline runs through the disputed territory of Chechnya, which connects the Azerbaijani capital Baku with the Russian Black Sea port Novorossisk, and which until 1999 was the only connection between the Caspian and Black Sea. In the meantime, it has almost completely dried up.

In spring 1999, Western efforts showed their first success. An oil pipeline leading from Baku to the Georgian Black Sea port of Supsa began operations. It had been built by a consortium led by the British-American company BP Amoco. For the first time since the days of the oil pioneers Rothschild and Nobel, oil again flowed from Baku to the West bypassing Russia.

However, at just five million tons per year, the new pipeline's capacity is small. A pipeline ten times more efficient, through Turkey to the Mediterranean port of Ceyhan, is still in the planning phase and could only be finished in 2006 at the earliest. For political reasons, the US government has strongly advocated the Baku-Ceyhan pipeline for years. However, the oil companies always regarded it with scepticism because of its great length (1,730 kilometres) and high cost ($2.9 billion). It would only prove profitable if, beside Azerbaijani oil, it were also used to carry oil from Kazakhstan, which is presently transported by ship or by a further pipeline via the Caspian Sea.

On October 1, the opening of a pipeline linking Tengiz, the most important oil field in Kazakhstan, with Russia's Black Sea port at Novorossisk, delivered these plans a grievous blow. Built by the Caspian Pipeline Consortium (CPC), the new facility carries oil exclusively across Russian territory and has a yearly capacity of 28 million tons, which can be increased to 67 million.

Although CPC also involved prominent foreign companies, in particular America's Chevron, nevertheless the start-up of the Tengiz-Novorossisk pipeline means that the plans to create an efficient western corridor independent of Russia have failed, for the time being.

It is in this context that the renewed fighting in Abkhazia must be seen, which has so far predominantly benefited Russia. On the one hand, it supplies a pretext for the Kremlin to put pressure on Georgia militarily. After the crash of the UN helicopter, Defence Secretary Ivanov said it was now absolutely clear that the Georgian leadership was unable to control the situation in its territory or was manipulating terrorists for its own ends—a scarcely veiled threat that Russia might seek to impose order in Georgia and secure it against the "terrorists".

On the other hand, the instability in Georgia is undermining the plans for the Baku-Ceyhan pipeline. This failure would leave Russia controlling the export routes from the Caspian and thus an important lever to influence geopolitical developments in the region.

Russia's participation in the American "alliance against terrorism" does not mean that the Russian government has stopped defending its own strategic interests, which in the long run are incompatible with those of America's. The same applies also to China, the European powers and all the other members of the alliance.

Such alliances between imperialist powers, "no matter what form they may assume, whether of one imperialist coalition against another, or of a general alliance embracing *all* the imperialist powers, are *inevitably nothing* more than a 'truce' in periods between wars. Peaceful alliances prepare the ground for wars, and in their turn grow out of wars." (Emphasis in the original)

These words were written 85 years ago by no less a figure than Lenin, who composed one of the most astute studies of imperialism. They retain their full validity today.