

Further escalation of tensions in the Caucasus between Russia and Georgia

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14 July 2008

The first ten days of July have witnessed a new intensification of tensions between Russia and Georgia over the status of two breakaway regions of Georgia—Abkhazia and South Ossetia.

While unrecognized by the United Nations, both territories are protected by Moscow and the majority of their populations have Russian passports. For its part, Tbilisi is trying to bring them back under its control, counting on the military and political support of the US and NATO.

In South Ossetia, on the night of July 3-4, Georgian troops used mortars, grenade launchers and small arms to fire on the region's capital, Tskhinvali. According to North Ossetian authorities, one person died and several were wounded.

Eduard Kokoity, the leader of South Ossetia, declared a general mobilization. He then halted it, however, referring to the need to guarantee peace.

Just before, on the morning of July 3, an attempt was made on the life of the head of the parallel pro-Georgian "provisional administration of South Ossetia," Dmitria Sanakoev. His automobile hit a mine not far from a post of peace-keeping forces, after which it was hit by machine-gun fire.

Sanakoev's administration was created by the Georgian authorities in November 2006 during "alternative presidential elections" held on the same day as the "official" elections in the republic. The base of this parallel administration is the Georgian population living on the territory of South Ossetia.

At the end of June and in the beginning of July, a series of explosions occurred in several cities of Abkhazia, a region on the shores of the Black Sea bordering Russia. As a result, more than fifteen people were wounded and four were killed:

* On June 29 in Gagra two explosions occurred minutes apart - six people were wounded;

* On June 30, six more people were wounded in an explosion at a market in Sukhumi;

* On the morning of July 6, four bombs went off near the village of Rukhi in the zone of the Georgian-Abkhazian conflict. In the evening of the same day, an explosion occurred in a café in the center of Gali - four people died and six were wounded.

The Abkhazian authorities charged the Georgian secret services with responsibility for these acts of violence. They stated that the organizers of the explosions wanted to demonstrate the incompetence of the Russian peacekeepers and their inability to provide security for the population.

The sharpening of the situation became a pretext for unprecedentedly harsh statements by the US State Department, which placed all the blame for the escalating tensions on Russia.

On Monday, July 7, the American State Department announced, "The United States reiterates its strong support for Georgia's territorial integrity, and calls for an immediate halt to recent bombings on both sides of the cease-fire line in Abkhazia, Georgia." Calling upon the government of Georgia and the "de facto authorities of Abkhazia" to immediately begin direct negotiations, Washington for the first time openly advocated acting independently of the efforts and positions of Moscow.

Along those lines, the official US State Department representative, Sean McCormack, proposed the deployment of an international peacekeeping contingent in those regions of Abkhazia where the explosions had recently occurred. These police forces would be an alternative to the Collective Peacekeeping Forces, which are composed of Russian troops.

These declarations were seen by Moscow as unacceptable ultimatums.

On July 9, the government newspaper, *Russian Gazette* wrote that Moscow was being addressed "in a tone resembling a dialog, at a minimum, with a colonial regime," and that Washington was itself "on slippery ground."

The newspaper continued that as long as "the US State Department avoids a mutual dialog with Moscow and Sukhumi and talks with Russia and Abkhazia as if they were colonies, the hot summer of 2008 in the Caucasus will flow into a hot autumn, and then into winter."

Konstantin Zatulin, first deputy of the chairman of the Gosduma's (the lower house of Russia's legislature) committee on CIS (Commonwealth of Independent States) affairs, suggested that the statement by the US State Department was due to a poor knowledge of geography. "Evidently, they have confused Georgia with the American state of Georgia," declared Zatulin on July 9 in the *Russian Gazette*. "If they are talking about one of their own states, then the Americans have an unconditional right to invite international police forces. But to invite police into the zone of Georgian-Abkhazian conflict may be undertaken only with the agreement of those two sides. We have the format of a peace-keeping operation which is agreed to by both sides."

Formally, the status of Abkhazia is still regulated by resolutions adopted by the CIS in August 1994. According to these resolutions, Russia is the main guarantor of stability in the breakaway republic and maintains its "peacekeeping" contingent there, deployed in 12-kilometer security zones on both sides of the border river, Inguri.

A further development of these 1994 resolutions was the collective agreement reached at a summit of the CIS in 1996, which introduced a ban on trade and other relations with the unrecognized republic. However, by 1999, Russia relaxed a number of the sanctions, and in

the spring of this year virtually cancelled them entirely.

This sharp turn-around was a response to the West's recognition of Kosovo's independence, which was declared in February of this year, and also to plans to offer Georgia and Ukraine membership in NATO.

In the prelude to the declaration of Kosovo's independence, Russia repeatedly stated that this would become a precedent for similar measures with regard to unrecognized regions on the territory of the former USSR, in particular, Abkhazia and South Ossetia.

Fearing direct geopolitical confrontation with the US, however, Moscow did not decide to formally recognize the independence of these two regions. Instead, in April, a decision was made to begin full-scale economic collaboration with them, which further stoked regional tensions.

The ratcheting up of these tensions began at the end of April and in the beginning of May. Now a more explosive turn in the confrontation is taking place.

On July 8, four Russian aircraft flew over the airspace of South Ossetia, violating *de jure* the Georgian border. Two days later, On July 10, the Russian Ministry of Foreign Affairs acknowledged the fact, and explained that Moscow's actions had allowed "a cooling of hotheads in Tbilisi and had prevented the development of the situation along violent lines, the probability of which was more than real."

In response, on Friday, July 11, the Georgian parliament threatened that the next time Russian military planes violated Georgian air space, Russia would have to "pick up the pieces."

On the same day, the Georgian ambassador in Russia was recalled from Moscow for consultation.

Both Georgia and Russia are appealing to the UN, and have presented resolutions for confirmation by the UN Security Council. Tbilisi wants the international body to condemn Russia's actions in the zones of conflict as "provoking" Georgia to armed action. Moscow insists that the Georgian side sign an agreement not to use force against the unrecognized republics.

Western Europe is trying to serve as an independent mediator in this conflict. According to a plan by Germany's Minister of Foreign Affairs, Frank-Walter Steinmayer, the mediation process should pass through three stages. The first stage must be de-escalation—both sides are obligated to renounce force. In the second, Abkhazia must be rebuilt with financial aid from the EU, and Georgian refugees must return. Only in the third stage would discussions begin over the future status of Abkhazia.

This position is an indication that Western European governments are displeased with Washington's aggressive actions on the territories of the former Soviet Union and that they want to preserve cordial relations with Russia, which is the main supplier of energy resources for Europe.

Aleksandr Rar is director of Programs for Russia and the CIS of the German Council for Foreign Policy. In explaining the attitude of Western European powers to events in the Caucasus, he told the *Independent Gazette* on July 9 that Washington's actions are due to the fact that "Mr. Bush is leaving and he quickly needs to show a positive result of his activity, especially since Afghanistan and Iraq are becoming a catastrophe for American policy."

Another indication of the United States' determination to support Georgia is last week's visit to Tbilisi by Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice. Within the framework of this visit, which was linked with the signing in the Czech Republic of an agreement to build elements of American anti-missile defense, Rice declared that "frankly, some of the things that the Russians did over the last couple

of months added to tensions in the region."

The American Secretary of State also said that admitting Georgia to the Membership Action Plan (MAP) for NATO would help regulate the frozen conflicts in Abkhazia and South Ossetia, "therefore the USA will try to add Georgia to the MAP."

If this decision is made—which would be in December of this year—for the first time since the end of the "Cold War," the world will confront the danger of direct military confrontation between Russia, which as before maintains a powerful arsenal of nuclear weapons, and NATO.

The geopolitical interests of the American ruling elite are the main source of the growing tension in the Caucasus. The weakening of the American economy and the desire to secure control over the key routes for the supply of energy resources to the world market from the regions of the Caspian Sea, the Caucasus and Central Asia, drive American imperialism to military adventures and aggressive measures vis-à-vis dependent regimes.

The wars against Iraq and Afghanistan are only the clearest examples of this explosion of imperialist ambitions. Within this context, Georgia is seen by Washington as the most crucial outpost in the Caucasus; the United States is systematically arming and supplying Georgia's army.

The Georgian army has about thirty thousand men at the moment, out of which two thousand were sent last fall into Iraq.

The geopolitical goals of the USA collide with the unwillingness of Moscow to make concessions in those regions which traditionally have been seen as Russian spheres of influence. The strengthening of the Russian state in recent years due to the high prices of oil and gas worldwide has made the ruling elite in Russia more confident in its power and less compliant.

Armed conflicts in the Caucasus erupted in the 1980s and 1990s in conjunction with the fall of the Soviet Union. Tens of thousands lost their lives, and hundreds of thousands became refugees. Nothing can more starkly demonstrate the fatal nature of the processes of the last 20 years than the fact that the destruction of the Soviet Union has brought to the peoples of the region not peace and a flourishing life, but the growth of social inequality and the danger of bloody wars with incalculable catastrophic consequences.



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