

Moscow, Tbilisi and the Abkhazian Card

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A problem until yesterday virtually unknown to Western observers, the Abkhazian revendication for autonomy from Georgia, along with the bloody Soviet repression early in April 1989 of a mass rally organised by Georgian nationalists in Tbilisi to reassert Georgia's viewpoint on the issue have been the cause of the most serious accident yet in the difficult sailing of Gorbachev's reform through the murky and agitated waters of the Soviet imperial periphery.

In addition to a 20-odd innocent bystanders, *glasnost'* has been the main victim, not only because of the total black-out on media coverage from Georgia, but also because the entire Georgian-Abkhazian issue is a masterpiece of misrepresentation and *disinformatsia* engineered from Moscow in the most traditional style of Soviet and Russian imperialism. Misrepresentation of this question is indeed particularly easy, Georgia being hardly known in the outside world, and the Abkhazian problem - and even the very existence of Abkhazia - being for its part almost totally ignored.

In order to understand the roots of the Abkhazian problem, one has to turn to history. And history teaches a very simple lesson: one cannot dissociate Abkhazia from the rest of Georgia, no more than one can distinguish Abkhazians ethnically or territorially or even linguistically. Abkhazia's history coincides completely and at every stage of the twenty-five centuries with the history of Georgia. This goes back to the very origins, since Abkhazia is no other than the ancient Colchis and one of the major provinces upon which was formed the Georgian nation. Georgian is rather the unifying "concept".

One therefore cannot speak of the "assimilation of Abkhazians by Georgians", no more than one can speak of the assimilation of Tuscans by Italians, or of the Burgundians by the French. Abkhazians were the ancestors of the Georgians as were the Mingrelians, or Meskhes, and Adzharians. It is the mixture of these different groups that through history led to the emergence of the Georgian nation. Whether one looks at the cultural or the religious history, it is equally impossible to distinguish the Abkhazians as a separate entity. But, of course, the feudal and decentralised nature of the Georgian monarchy before the Russian conquest preserved the principalities and explains why to this day the different provinces have preserved their identities, languages, and specificities.

So, one is tempted to ask, if things are so simple, why the tensions in today's Abkhazia and the indisputable rivalry that opposes Georgians and Abkhazians?

Again history is our answer, but a more recent history. One has to go back to the time of the first push "downwards" of the Russian Empire, under Peter the Great, at the end of the seventeenth century. While starting their expansion toward the "warm seas of the south", Russian armies were also pushing the north Caucasian populations further to the south. Thus it can be said that Russia's expansion, even before the start of the czarist policy of national domination, had its first effect in that it modified the demographic, ethnic and linguistic configuration of the oldest parts of Georgia, one that was most important, because of its very localisation on the border with Russia.

This "immigration", which in itself would not have created any major problem for a country traditionally open to foreign implantations (suffice it to say that to this day Greek colonies dating back to antiquity, "the Pontos Greeks", have maintained their community, their language and their identity), was complicated by a foreign factor: the national policy of czarist Russia which applied itself to Georgia after the annexation by Paul I in 1801.

Fueling the tension

One of the main instruments of the czarist national policy toward the new conquests of the empire was to dissolve their national identity. Thus, the official Russification policy was accompanied by an official encouragement to those that were described by Russian ethnologists as "non-Georgian" tribes: namely the Abkhazians, the Mingrelians and the Svanes. One can find numerous Russian sources that emphasise the non-Georgianity of those

populations, their linguistic “differences”, and their subordinate status as compared with the dominant Georgian nation.

The conclusion of those “studies” was, as can be seen - one example among many of that time - in the letter written in 1903 by the Procurer of St. Synode Pobedonostseff, to justify a policy of intense Russification of those minorities, under the rationale that in fact “they were no closer to Georgia than to Russia”; thus Russification was presented as a defence, a way out from the “Georgian



The serenade.

cultural domination". Throughout the nineteenth century this policy was carried through with constancy and determination, Georgian language being substituted by Russian in Mingrelian and Abkhazian schools and churches.

Under the new rule that was established in 1917, this basic approach toward "nationalities" was pursued. The new Soviet power, based on the ideological motto of "proletarian internationalism", erected itself so as to appear as "the protector" of the minorities within the national republics. This was designed to prove that the role played by the Russians in the whole Union was not unique, but reproduced in other national republics, with the same structure of a central dominating ethnic group co-existing with minor ethnic groups and a plurality of languages. It was also to prove, whenever needed, that if Russia could not manage to solve its national problem, neither could the other nationalities in their respective republics, which contributed to the relativising of the Russian "colonial" image.

The Soviet policy toward the nationalities and the nations, as seen through this test case of Georgian-Abkhazian relations, was one of continuously fueling the tensions born of an artificially created problem.

The history of the constitution of the socialist republics and of the Abkhazian autonomous republic is most revealing. As is well known, Stalin's idea to include directly the newly reconquered nations (Georgia, Armenia, Azerbaijan, Ukraine) in the Russian SFSR was defeated by Lenin's opposition to the idea and his preference for a federated system. At the same time, a very strong opposition to this integrative scheme came from the first political opposition to the Soviet power, namely the Georgian national Communists (the so-called "Ouklonists"). Since they represented the first serious challenge to the Soviet power, they were immediately put under check by the proclamation on March 21, 1921, by the Georgian Communist Party and the government (that is, by Stalin-controlled factions) of an "independent Socialist Republic of Abkhazia". This was a signal of intimidation, a sign to the Georgian nationalists of where the force and power stood - an unmistakable threat, but one that the Soviet authority, and Stalin in the first place, knew could not be fully carried out. It meant dismantling Georgia's territory and giving the impetus to the sudden and immediate unifying of all the Georgian forces that were already gathering themselves against the new domination.

In 1921, then, the RSFSR could not afford an open conflict with the

Transcaucasian federation that was not yet part of the Union; the Abkhazian separatism was supposed to be used but not abused. In consequence, this independent republic immediately (in December of that same year) "rejoin[ed] willingly by treaty" the Georgian republic while keeping its independent status. This happened after the first and last official visit of Stalin to Georgia (June 1921) where the leader was subject to extremely violent reactions by his fellow countrymen (he was "expelled from Tbilisi") and saw clearly the extent of the Georgian nationalist movement.

As long as the national Communist movement would last (1921-1930) and as long as the Georgian insurrections would follow one after the other (1922, 1924, 1926), the Abkhazian question would remain open, as a daily threat to the unity of the republic. It is only when Georgian nationalism seemed to have been uprooted and the Georgian nation exhausted ("ironed out" according to Stalin's own words), that suddenly things went back to normal in Abkhazia, and in 1931, the independent republic of Abkhazia became a mere autonomous republic along the lines of that of Azharia (the only religious republic, since Azhairians are Moslem Georgians) and that of South Ossetia.

Thus one is tempted to see a definite correlation between the rise and fall of nationalism in Georgia and the rise and fall of the Abkhazian question". Since we are witnessing now the second wave of Georgian nationalism (and this second wave dates back to the early 1970s - not just during the Gorbachev years), it is interesting to note that we are seeing the revitalisation of the "Abkhazia question", which had been dormant for more than four decades. Hence, the exacerbation of "Abkhazian nationalism" and of the tensions among Georgians and Abkhazians, which started some fifteen years ago, is not a mere spontaneous event.

Unequal opportunity

By giving definite privileges within those republics to the minorities (quotas for the access to the universities, policies favouring Abkhazians in the republic hierarchy ...) the central power managed to create for itself a clientele which would be well disposed to the Russian population that started immigrating to the shores of Abkhazia. In fact, the Russian population is more numerous in today's Abkhazia than "Abkhazians", but those two groups plus the Armenians barely equal in number the Abkhazians that declare themselves "Georgian". This policy, of course, tended on the one hand to raise the antagonisms of the

local Georgian population, thus exacerbating the Abkhazian wish to receive a separate status, and on the other, to bring a certain percentage of native Georgians (principally Mingrelians) to register themselves in the census as Abkhazians in order to have access to the same privileges, thus raising artificially the figures of the Abkhazian population (according to the last census the Abkhazians number 91,000 or 20 per cent of the total population of Abkhazia of 520,000).

The manipulation by Moscow of the status of Abkhazia continues to fuel tensions both among Abkhazians and Georgians, raising hopes among the former that they will be able to regain their independent status, and raising fears among the latter that this may happen with help from Moscow. Regularly over the past decade there were open letters and petitions requesting the change of the status of Abkhazia, its separation from Georgia, and its inclusion in the RSFSR. No radical option is possible, however. Indeed, creating a separate entity while keeping the actual demographic composition would mean recreating another Georgian dominated republic; the option of incorporating it into Russia is for the same reason not viable, because then the risk would be that of creating an open problem within the limits of Russian borders.

Thus no alternative solution can be found to the Abkhazian problem short of modifying the demographic balance. This is a long term process, well engaged - since Russian immigration is increasing - but which has not yet reached maturity. Despite this fact, under the current circumstances, the threat is one that cannot be simply pushed aside and treated as unrealistic by the Georgian nationalists.

The decision by Shevardnadze, then first secretary of the Georgian Communist Party, to close to local trade the border between Georgia and the southern RSFSR (this was precisely the region where at that time Gorbachev was serving as regional Party secretary) had an adverse effect on the situation and marked the beginning of the open phase of the crisis. Indeed, this decision had the effect of depriving Abkhazia's inhabitants of their main source of revenue, i.e. the selling of citrus fruits to Russia through the border. This frustration translated itself into the revendication - first expressed in the later 1970s - by some Abkhazians to obtain re-attachment to the RSFSR (the same idea that we have seen under its czarist version, that Abkhazians are no closer to Georgians than to Russians, so they should look to where their "objective" interest lies ... which can only be on the side of the stronger of the two parties, i.e. Moscow).

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If one turns to the more recent period, the Gorbachev era, the direct - hence not fortuitous - correlation between the surge of the Georgian national movement and the revival of Abkhazian revendications that we have described for the earlier Stalinist period, is again very evident. There is an almost strict parallelism between Georgian revendications for the defence of Georgia's language, its national and cultural identity and not only similar but simultaneous Abkhazian requests.

The failure of the local elite

This has one very direct effect on the Georgian movement: one of *self-limitation*. For Georgians, due to their very concrete past experience (Georgia has lost in the past century through czarist and Soviet action one third of its territory to its Turkish, Russian, Azerbaijani and Armenian neighbours), are frightened of losing more of their territory. For many Georgians, a Georgia without Abkhazia would mean having less, for it would amount to losing its historical main ground (the archeological fields of Abkhazia are essential to the understanding of the oldest Georgian past).

The second effect has been evident up to the violent crisis of April 9: the *rallying* of the Georgian opposition around its own leadership, notwithstanding the fact that it is still the same Communist leadership that helped create the actual problem or that, to say the least, did not act to control or reduce it.

Both factors - the self-limitation as well as the rallying - could be seen as positive ones from the point of view of the central power, especially at a time when the emerging nationalism could structure itself as a challenging force. It is also true that this new evolution could mean many different things at the same time. It could be, and it certainly was, in one sense, the recognition by the opposition of its very fundamental weakness when confronted by a real threat: the possible disintegration of the national territorial integrity.

Turning to the "real power" for help whenever there is a direct threat to the nation is like an echo of the question posed by Stalin "how many divisions does the Pope have?" In this case, the Georgian national opposition had to come to terms with the evidence that it has no divisions, only words that have been granted it by Gorbachev's *perestroika*. As for real power, it is deprived of it today as yesterday, and has thus to rely on the traditional source of power - the Party - in its local affiliates, the Georgian Communist Party.

Concurrently, this might signify that the local Communist elite was indeed changing, and that national communism once eradicated by Stalin in Georgia might, based on the model provided by Eastern Europe (a more nationalistic and thus quasi-legitimate leadership) be re-emerging. Thus, the significance of the rallying of the nationalists around the Party's First Secretary Dzumber Patiashvili would in this case be that they believed this evolution possible and were trying to accelerate its emergence by "forcing" him to choose a side, i. e. by making him act as a Georgian before acting as a Communist. After the massacres in early April, however, the disappointment has been extremely serious. The same Patiashvili blamed the deaths on "nationalist provocateurs". But this 180-degree turnabout did not spare him Moscow's wrath.

Playing with fire

The fact that he has been dismissed together with the entire Georgian party leadership, as well as the appointment of the local KGB chief as Party Secretary, is certainly a bad omen for the strategy of *rallying*, and possibly for *self-limitation* as well. Whether manipulation of the Abkhazian problem will succeed in its objective of frightening and slowing down the national self-assertion process, or whether it will have a boomerang effect by creating a surge of very strong nationalism including the local Party apparatus is difficult to predict, even for those who artificially ignited the fire.

All this having been said, one fact remains undisputed: the Abkhazian problem was an artificially created one three centuries ago, one that was inflated in the nineteenth century and manipulated during the present one, but also one that might nowadays be, in a sense, taking its own life and becoming uncontrollable.

From there one can only derive obvious conclusions: if manipulation is possible in the case of Abkhazia, it cannot be written off as an explanation of

the Karabakh issue. The similarities are too numerous. If Moscow has been playing on nationalist antagonisms and on the exacerbation of those feelings on this side of the Transcaucasian region, it can certainly do so on the other side. Abkhazia is proof in itself that the Soviet power is in no way reluctant to manipulate its borders, to touch upon the integrity of republican territories, or to play with the minorities of this or that republic. To the contrary, Soviet history is one of constant displacement of the inner borders, one of permanent transfers of populations (under Stalin, but also under Khrushchev), the only permanent trait being that the RSFSR is the only republic never to have lost territory to any of the surrounding ones.

But playing with fire, tempting as it may be especially for a system that views itself as omnipotent, is never without risks. The question that is raised by the Abkhazian test case, as well as by the Karabakh issue, is whether in the end the risks could outweigh the definite advantages that the central power - be it czarist then or Soviet today - has gained from these tactics.