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The Origins and Trajectory of the Caucasian Conflicts

VICKEN CHETERIAN

Abstract

Conflicts in the Caucasus began as a result of the weakening of the institutions of the Soviet Union. Since then there have been some major transformations. Initially, there were ‘triangular conflicts’ with the centre (Moscow) on the one side and two competing national projects on the other side (a Union Republic and a minority group with an autonomous status within this republic). After the collapse of the Soviet Union, these conflicts evolved into bilateral ones between two popular-nationalist movements with competing territorial claims: newly independent nation states, on the one hand, and minority groups with autonomous status, on the other.

ON 26 AUGUST 2008, SHORTLY AFTER THE SIGNING of a ceasefire between the Georgian and Russian forces, the popular Georgian TV station Rustavi-2 aired a video clip by Zurab Doijashvili. The next day Georgian Ombudsman Sozar Subari called for the privately owned television station to stop broadcasting the video because the ‘lyrics of the song are extremely insulting towards the Russian people. . . . It represents an alarming example of the expression of ethnic hatred and xenophobia, and broadcasting this product can be regarded as an obvious attempt at inciting ethnic hatred’.¹ Soon afterwards the video clip was taken off air, revealing how far both public opinion and political culture in Georgia had moved from the days of Zviad Gamsakhurdia, the first president of independent Georgia, when ‘Georgia for Georgians’ or ‘Five percent to foreigners’ were popular slogans used by the ruling elite.

Less than two years later, Russian Federal security forces killed two rebel leaders in the North Caucasus: on 2 March 2010, Alexander Tikhomirov, better known as ‘Said Buryatski’, was killed in a village in Ingushetia. Another rebel leader Anzor

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¹‘Stop Russophobic Music Video’—Ombudsman Tells Georgian TV’, *Civil Georgia*, 27 August 2008, available at: <http://www.civil.ge/eng/article.php?id=19315>, accessed 14 May 2010.

Astemirov, known as 'Amir Sayfullah', was killed on 24 March in a shootout on the streets of Nalchik, the main town of Kabardino-Balkaria. Tikhomirov was an ethnic Buryat, while Astemirov was an ethnic Kabard. The twin suicide bombing of the Moscow metro on 29 March, attacks which probably aimed at avenging the killed rebel leaders, in their turn killed some 38 people and wounded over 60. The suicide bombings were carried out by two young women: Jennet Abdurrakhmanova a 17-year-old girl and Mariam Sharipova a 28-year-old schoolteacher, both from Dagestan. Curiously, none of these four personalities were from Chechnya or of Chechen descent (Abdullaev 2010). The conflict in the North Caucasus had ceased to be conditioned by the Chechen national drive for sovereignty and self-rule, departing from the sources of tension that have caused two destructive wars in the recent past in the North Caucasus.

These two examples serve to illustrate how the political culture and sources of rebellion and violence have shifted in the Caucasus over the last two decades. It is no more mass nationalist sentiments which are fuelling revolt against an established order, or clashes with neighbouring political entities. From the time the conflicts in the Caucasus erupted in the late 1980s, we have witnessed a contextual change in political institutions, grassroots mobilisation and patterns of foreign influence and intervention. Yet, in spite of those evolutions, the Caucasus remains an unstable region, where sporadic explosions of violence remind us about regional tensions, with serious risks of spill-over. This was already apparent in the August 2008 war in Georgia, which escalated from clashes between Georgian troops and Ossetian militias into Russia's first war in its 'Near Abroad', accompanied by fears of a larger confrontation between Russia on the one side, and Europe and the US on the other. The conflict in Chechnya had already changed course, with an increasing number of violent attacks carried out outside its frontiers, destabilising the rest of the North Caucasus, as well as terrorist attacks against civilian targets deep inside Russia proper. Lastly, tension on the line of contact between Armenian and Azerbaijani forces has continued to claim victims, accompanied by verbal threats of larger military operations, with risks of neighbouring powers becoming involved.

The aim of this essay is to trace the evolution of the Caucasus conflicts over two decades, from the eruption of the Karabakh conflict in 1988 to the 2008 Russo-Georgian war. The essay aims both to be comparative (covering Karabakh, Abkhazia, South Ossetia and Chechnya), as well as suggesting paths of evolution from the beginning of those conflicts in the late Soviet years to their contemporary state. It is legitimate to question whether such a wide subject matter can be treated appropriately within the limits of an essay. It can only be achieved through a strict selection of facts to support observations and arguments, and by avoiding exhaustive coverage of developments and discussions of the conflicts in order to develop the central theme and support it by relevant references to events and literature. The interest of such an approach is in contextualising individual conflicts within larger historical trends, and linking the outbreak of violence back to the time of the Soviet collapse and the then functions of the USSR, as well as by underlining both continuity and change in the role conflicts played over two decades.

I will divide the time frame into three periods: first, the eruption of conflicts in the last years of the Soviet Union, from 1988 until 1996, with the Khasavyurt Agreement putting an end to the first Chechnya war; second, the period of state building and diplomacy, from 1996 until 2003—a symbolic date referring to the Rose Revolution in

Georgia and the coming to power of Ilham Aliiev in Azerbaijan and third, the period lasting from 2003 to 2008, with new forces challenging the *status quo* and with unsuccessful diplomatic efforts in conflict resolution. I will consider three conflicts due to their relevance: the Armenian–Azerbaijani conflict over Nagorno-Karabakh; conflicts in Georgia between central authorities in Tbilisi and the two secessionist regions of Abkhazia and South Ossetia and lastly, the conflict in Chechnya between nationalist-Islamist forces on the one side, and Russian authorities and pro-Moscow Chechen forces on the other. Finally, I will consider different ‘forces’ that have shaped the conflicts over two decades, and consider three dimensions in my analysis: elites in power, popular mobilisation challenging the established order and outside influences.

My basic argument is that the conflicts in the Caucasus started as a result of popular mobilisations challenging the established Soviet order and its legitimacy. Although the conflicts started over local issues—for example, the status of Karabakh within the Soviet system or debates on language policy in Georgia—they evolved rapidly to generate popular movements with nationalist discourses which challenged the Soviet system as a whole, propelled a new leadership emerging from the Soviet-era intelligentsia to positions of power,² and eventually led to genuine revolutions; in Armenia, Azerbaijan, Chechnya and Georgia at various periods, we witnessed revolutions overthrowing the existing order of the Soviet *nomenklatura*, leading to the overall weakening and later collapse of the Soviet Union. Twenty years later, we see the absence of popular mobilisation over territorial issues, and a complete elite takeover of the national question. In the absence of major foreign powers capable of dictating the terms of conflict resolution, that the conflicts themselves have become a resource for elites in power, and instruments to legitimise their newly established political institutions and to mould new political identities, without any popular participation in political choices.

Finally, I would like to underline that by overemphasising the conflicts as ‘ethnic’ and ‘nationalistic’, we have undermined the social processes and power struggles taking place parallel to the conflicts. The conflicts in the Caucasus cannot be understood without looking at those events as struggles between competing political entities, but also as fights within each political unit. The conflicts in the Caucasus were simultaneously ethnic or nationalist conflicts, and civil wars, with the aim to establish domination over territories and populations.

The origins of the conflicts: triangular struggle

The violent conflicts in the Caucasus have been at the centre of a large number of studies in the last two decades. With good cause: the Caucasus emerged as the major battlefield in the larger issue of redefining a post-Soviet political space. Interpretations of the causes of the Caucasus conflicts have focused on the success of nationality policies of the USSR in solidifying national–territorial identities (Suny 1993), claims to sovereignty by ethnic groups (Lapidus 1998), of ‘ethnic fears’ (Kaufmann 1998), ‘secessionist ethnic conflicts... intensified (or ‘escalated’) by foreign intervention’

²Intelligentsia here refers to the Soviet-era professionals working in education, and arts and culture who had developed sub-cultures occupying the space between the official party line and the dissident movement, often being rather close to the dissidents as in the case of Georgia.

(Horowitz 2002, p. 633), or as the outcome of territorial policies and specifically the autonomous status of national minorities (Cornell 2002). Other studies have looked at the intellectual constructions serving as ideologies of confrontation, including the role of intellectuals and specifically archaeology or ethnography (Tishkov 1997, p. 13), or historians (Shnirelman 2001) which later served as justifications for ethnic mobilisation and confrontation. A number of studies have examined—and overemphasised—the role played by outside powers not only in manipulating existing conflicts, but as a major interpretative discourse. Another major trend in the literature is to look at ‘nationalism’ as a basic cause of the Caucasus conflicts. Thus, the Soviet period is seen as a historic exception which during its existence suppressed pre-existing ‘nationalist’ conflicts, which resurfaced only after its demise (Goldenberg 1994; Croissant 1998).

Yet, there is a need to redefine our understanding of the conflicts in the Caucasus, or, rather, to analyse the causes of current instability in the region. In other words, the Caucasus continues to be a region of instability and war, yet the reason for this is different today from what it was in the late 1980s. ‘As tides of nationalism recede’, Mark Beissinger has remarked, ‘the renormalisation of political order is accompanied by a shift away from mobilised contention toward institutionalised forms of nationalist politics’ (Beissinger 2002, p. 32). Such a new reframing is needed in order to grapple with the ideological but also sociological transformations of conflict dynamics in the post-mass nationalism era, as illustrated by the spread of *jihadi* ideologies in the North Caucasus following the collapse of the Chechen national-independence movement, as well as the new conflict dynamism in the post-August 2008 war between Georgia and Russia.

A series of conflicts that started with the Armenian–Azerbaijani dispute over Nagorno-Karabakh led to a chain-reaction of ethno-territorial conflict at the moment of Soviet collapse, leading to the wars in Karabakh (Chorbajian *et al.* 1994; de Waal 2003), South Ossetia, Abkhazia (Ekedahl & Goodman 1997; Coppieters *et al.* 1998) and to the two wars in Chechnya (Lieven 1998; Smith 1998; Malashenko & Trenin 2004; Tishkov 2004). National mobilisation with large popular appeal suddenly surfaced in the Caucasus and overthrew the reign of the Soviet *nomenklatura*. Although one should be careful of drawing a causal relation between nationalist movements on the one hand, and conflict and war on the other (Van Evera 1994), what distinguished the Caucasus from the Balkans or Central Asia was that popular movements inspired by a nationalist discourse overthrew the existing order in an attempt to replace it with a new one, very often led by the Soviet-era intelligentsia. By contrast in the Balkans, it was the *nomenklatura* itself which appropriated the nationalist ideology and project (Lukic & Lynch 1996), while in Central Asia the local *nomenklatura* resisted and retained power, with Tajikistan the obvious exception (Rubin 1993/1994; Schatz 2004), which more closely resembled the evolution of the states of the South Caucasus.³

³The first Armenian President Levon Ter-Petrossian, and most of the leaders of the Karabakh Committee that came to power in 1989, were members of the Soviet–Armenian intelligentsia; Zviad Gamsakhurdia and Abulfaz Elchibey, respectively, the first presidents of Georgia and Azerbaijan, were Soviet-era intelligentsia members with long records of dissident activism. In the North Caucasus, the intelligentsia played a key role in the development of the post-Soviet political space in the North Caucasus with figures such as Zelimkhan Yandarbiyev, a writer, and vice-president under the first Chechen *de facto* President Djokhar Dudaev, and Musa Shanibov, leader of the Kabard national movement who also played a key role in the Caucasus Peoples Confederation.

Historically, it was not evident that a popular movement emerging to challenge the Soviet order had to carry the banner of nationalism. The dissident movement in the Soviet Union since the 1960s was largely led by human rights activists. The first wave of popular mobilisation was not led by national movements, but by environmentalists (Geukjian 2007; Cheterian 2008, pp. 159–61; Cheterian 2009b); in Armenia, Azerbaijan and Georgia the first street demonstrations mobilising between 3,000 and 5,000 people, which were broader than just the dissident movements, were concerned with environmental issues.⁴ Soon after, the emerging national movements swept away all other political formations and dominated the political scene. As popular mobilisation reached the North Caucasus, it did not go through the initial timid environmental movement as nationalism was already becoming a dominant force. What needs to be remembered is that nationalist movements in the Caucasus were both mass movements and anti-systemic (Evangelista 2002, p. 15). In other words, the conflicts evolved as superimposed political processes. They comprised both socio-political conflict between an emerging mass movement coloured by nationalism struggling against the Soviet system (whether against the Soviet central authorities or against the corruption and political monopoly of the republican ruling cast), and simultaneously, conflicts to define a new political entity which therefore entered into collision with neighbouring ethno-territorial projects.⁵ They succeeded in overthrowing the ruling elites in the republics, that is the national *nomenklatura* ruling the three republics of the South Caucasus, and the Russian–Chechen *nomenklatura* ruling in the Checheno-Ingush Autonomous Republic. In other words, the national movements produced both political and also social revolutions, replacing a ruling class with another one, and accelerating social and economic transformation.

The aim of national movements was to reformulate the power structures and the institutional hierarchy between the centre and the regions. Their demands were initially addressed to Moscow, identified as the only source of authority: when Karabakh Armenians formulated their demands to transfer their autonomy from Azerbaijan to Armenia, they addressed Moscow and not Baku, since the Soviet centre was perceived as the only sovereign power which could achieve such important changes. Soon, however, the nature of conflict transformed into ‘triangular conflicts’, that is between the centre on the one side, and two competing national projects on the other: a first national movement of the titular nation of the Soviet union republic and a second national movement belonging to a ‘minority’ nation with autonomy status in the Soviet system.⁶ As Moscow revealed itself to be incapable of addressing territorial

⁴They included demands closing down the Nairit synthetic rubber factory in Yerevan and Medzamor nuclear power station not far from the capital (1987), protests against the Caucasus Mountain Railway project in Georgia (1988), and opposition to the cutting down of the Topkhana forest in Azerbaijan (November 1988).

⁵I should clarify here that not all national movements in the Caucasus emerged as anti-systemic. For example, both the Ossetian national movement in South Ossetia and the Abkhaz national movement were anti-Georgian in their essence and looked towards Moscow for protection.

⁶The ‘triangular conflicts’ as defined here differ from Rogers Brubaker’s ‘triadic relational nexus’ which considers the nationalising state, a minority group and external national homelands (Brubaker 1999, p. 55), and which takes its historic references from Central and Eastern Europe, rather than cases emerging from Soviet experimentation.

questions—as in the case of Karabakh—two new dimensions appeared: first, a national resistance in Azerbaijan developed opposing the transfer of territory, leading to an evolution from a bilateral Karabakh–Moscow conflict,⁷ into a triangular one—Karabakh–Baku–Moscow. Moreover, a popular mobilisation in Armenia to support their ethnic kin in Karabakh complicated the picture even further, introducing the spectre of conflict between two neighbouring Soviet republics. This complication spilled over in the era of independence, when Baku argued that the conflict was essentially between a sovereign state and its western neighbour Armenia claiming part of its territory, while Armenia argued that the conflict was essentially between Azerbaijan and the Armenians of Mountainous Karabakh with Armenia being an interested party.

We can see the emergence of ‘triangular conflicts’ equally in the case of Georgia. The Georgian National Movement became a real political force starting from 1988. Initially, under pressure from this emerging new force, the Soviet Georgian authorities adopted a number of measures to strengthen national identity, including the passing of a language law in November 1988 (Birch 1996, p. 161). This was intended as a reaction to perceived Soviet policies of Russification, and referred to a decades-long struggle for the defence of the Georgian language and cultural rights against top-down modernisation policies imposed by Moscow. Yet, the Georgian national mobilisation had an adverse impact on national minorities, especially on those that enjoyed special standing—such as autonomous republic or autonomous region status. As Georgia was struggling to upgrade its status from a Soviet republic to independent statehood, other entities were trying to do the same: Chechens demanded the status of a union republic, while the South Ossetian parliament demanded to be upgraded from an ‘Autonomous Region’ to an ‘Autonomous Republic’ (Saparov 2010, p.100). The Georgian national movement took a radical position against the Soviet state considering all Soviet institutions illegitimate, including the Soviet Georgian constitution of 1925. Although the thrust of the Georgian national movement was directed against the central authorities, it nevertheless disregarded the sentiments of national minorities. More than that, mainstream Georgian public opinion regarded the autonomous entities of Abkhazia, Ajaria and South Ossetia as the product of Russian and Soviet policies of ‘divide and rule’. In November 1988, a demonstration calling for the end of ‘discrimination against Georgians by Abkhaz, Azerbaijanis, Ajaris and Ossetians’ attracted some 100,000 people in the capital Tbilisi (Suny 1994, p. 321). Later, on 9 April 1989, demonstrations protesting against events in Sukhumi were violently repressed by the Soviet army causing 20 people to be killed and up to 1,400 wounded, mainly as a result of poisonous gas. This violent event effectively put an end to the last vestiges of legitimacy of the Soviet order in the eyes of the Georgian people. Tensions between ethnic Abkhaz and ethnic Georgians were well recognised since the clashes in Sukhumi in 1978, and yet the surprise was the eruption of violence in South Ossetia in March 1989, leading to the first bloody confrontations in Georgia.

⁷Igor Nolyain sees the Karabakh conflict as a Moscow–Armenian national movement conflict (Nolyain 1994).

The conflicts of the Caucasus emerged in the conditions of weakening and rapid collapse of the Soviet order which left behind a political and security vacuum that needed to be filled. In these conditions, various political projects emerged around social formations competing with each other. Rival nationalist projects competed, and even fought against each other, but also strengthened each other (Zverev 1996, p. 14). Without the Armenian territorial demands, Azerbaijani nationalism would have taken a different form, and without the anti-Armenian pogroms in a series of Azerbaijani cities, Armenian nationalism would have taken a softer tone. Yet, it is wrong to see these conflicts as primordial antagonisms, as ‘ancient hatreds’ between nations. Rather, it was the specificity of Soviet political culture—which imposed centralised hierarchical order and did not develop horizontal institutional mechanisms—and its rapid disintegration that left behind a power vacuum, creating the conditions of national mobilisation and territorial competition (Cheterian 2008, pp. 26–8).

The withering away of the Soviet state transformed what was up to then internal conflicts within the Soviet borders into conflicts with an international dimension. First, it divided the Caucasus between four newly independent states—Armenia, Azerbaijan, Georgia and Russia. The South Caucasus witnessed the emergence of three internationally recognised, and three *de facto* states, while the North Caucasus remained under Russian sovereignty, although the Chechen rebellion posed a serious challenge. The conflict over Karabakh led to an undeclared war between two newly independent states, Armenia and Azerbaijan; the conflict between Georgians and Ossets in South Ossetia had repercussions across the Georgian–Russian border, as did the conflict in Abkhazia.

The collapse of the Soviet Union led to the intensification of conflicts, from skirmishes to total wars. In Karabakh, the withdrawal of 11,000 Soviet troops from November 1991 to February 1992 led to an all out war. The violence of confrontations together with the havoc it caused, population movements, and the near collapse of economic activities made many question whether the independence of the new states was really viable. At the time, people in the South Caucasus imagined that the newly gained independence from Moscow was provisional, and that once the former imperial centre reorganised itself it would return to the region to bring it under its wings, in a similar way to what happened in the 1918–1920 period.

History has a curious and complex manner of moving forward yet, very often, in the minds of many in the Caucasus, Russian omnipotence was to take new forms: many thought at the time, and continue to insist, that the wars of the early 1990s were instigated and conditioned by Russia, as an imperial policy of ‘divide and rule’.⁸ Even more, the conflicts are often described as being fought between centralist forces of the former empire, and national liberation forces, rather than between newly independent states against minority groups within their borders in their turn striving for sovereignty. The collapse of the USSR deeply transformed the conflicts from triangular (Moscow–union republic–autonomy) to bilateral ones between two nationalist movements competing over the heritage of the Soviet Union. Russian

⁸This was in spite of the fact that the power of Moscow was in the midst of an unprecedented retreat on all fronts: from Eastern Europe to the former republics of the Soviet Union, making the area under Russian rule even smaller than the area occupied by the Tsarist Empire of the nineteenth century.

interference was very much present, yet it played only a secondary role. However, many nationalist leaders continued to deploy discourses of Russia's 'hidden hand' for a double purpose: to reject any legitimacy of the political demands coming from ethnic minorities, attributing them to old revanchist forces; and to absolve themselves from their own responsibilities in initiating the armed conflicts by pointing fingers towards the Kremlin.⁹ Such interpretations helped justify why larger nations such as Azerbaijan or Georgia militarily lost wars against minority groups in the conflicts of Karabakh or Abkhazia. The dominant discourse, therefore, is that the conflicts were not 'Georgian–Abkhaz' or 'Armenia–Azerbaijani' but rather between Azerbaijan and Georgia on the one side seeking independence, and Moscow trying to hinder their efforts through these little conflicts. Russia has a similar alibi, an external enemy responsible for its own Caucasian mess: the West, which according to popular narrative was behind the Chechen conflict with the aim of destroying the Russian Federation.¹⁰

However, there can be other interpretations that help us shed more light on the conflicts in the Caucasus. These conflicts ended their 'first round' in the early to mid-1990s, with similar, as well as surprising outcomes: the 'smaller' challengers inflicted defeats over larger nations. This was the case with Karabakh Armenians against Azerbaijan, Abkhazia against Georgia and Chechnya against Russia. The image of Russia the imperial power being behind the conflicts in Karabakh and Abkhazia is not consistent with Russia's disorganised military campaign in Chechnya and its defeat in 1996. Therefore, a different set of arguments are needed to shed light on the conflict mechanisms in the Caucasus in the aftermath of the Soviet collapse.

First, these conflicts were not between states on the one side and non-state actors on the other. The conflicts were between popular-nationalist movements on both sides; the legal recognition of Armenia, Azerbaijan, Georgia and Russia as sovereign states by international organisations in late 1991 and early 1992 did not change the facts on the ground, mainly that these new states lacked institutional capacity at the moment of outbreak of conflict, including the police, military and espionage necessary to run a successful military campaign.¹¹ Second, the notion of 'separatism' does not help understand the nature of the conflicts as they developed in the field. It was not Karabakh, Abkhazia or Chechnya 'separating' from central authorities. Rather, they were asserting their political sovereignty on the background of a new and rather sketchy political order taking shape in a distant metropolis. It was the new leaders in Baku, Tbilisi and Moscow that did not accept the emergence of new sovereignties on their fringes, or even the recognition of the autonomous character of some provinces that had existed under the Soviet order. Instead they sent newly formed and often

⁹Russian omnipotence and responsibility in igniting and managing the conflicts in the Caucasus also fitted some Western reports which still carried the hallmarks of Cold War influence. See Goltz (1993).

¹⁰The West Masterminded Chechen War to Destroy the USSR and Russia', *Pravda*, 11 December 2009, available at: <http://english.pravda.ru/russia/history/111072-0/>, accessed 29 June 2010.

¹¹This argument partially fits the Russian Federation, which inherited the old Soviet state institutions including the military infrastructure, but its situation had degraded as a result of a lack of investment, the withdrawal of Soviet forces from Eastern Europe and former Soviet republics and demoralisation resulting from cataclysmic political changes, leading to the catastrophic military campaign in Chechnya especially in the early months of the war.

irregular military forces to bring these rebellious provinces, which were in the thrall of popular mobilisation, under their own authority. The military campaigns of Azerbaijan in Nagorno-Karabakh, of Georgia in South Ossetia or Abkhazia and of Russian Federal troops in Chechnya resembled conquests rather than repressing centrifugal forces. As a result, the military effort demanded from the minorities entrenched in their mountainous and far away provinces was much less than the military and logistic effort needed by the new states fighting a war in distant regions. Lastly, the minority groups revealed superior motivation, organisational skills and mobilisation than could be achieved under the political mobilisation capacity of the newly independent states. One of the reasons for this discrepancy is that for the ethnic minorities the wars were seen as existential ones, and in case of defeat they feared losing the political autonomy they enjoyed in the Soviet period, while for the political elites of the states these wars in far away provinces had only secondary importance in a period of intense power struggle and resource and property distribution in the capital (Cheterian 2008, pp. 285–318).

The leaders of the independent states failed in their military campaign to impose their authority on independence-minded former Soviet autonomies. The end result was not a total military defeat for any conflict party, but rather an equilibrium of forces leading to ceasefire agreements, opening a new phase of competition and friction. The radical nationalism that emerged after the Soviet collapse, and led to the violent conflicts, did not survive long, nor did it take institutional forms. In the words of Ronald Suny in Georgia, 'exclusivist nationalism gave way to a more pragmatic inclusive idea of the nation that opened discussion of the possible restructuring of the state along federalist lines' (Suny 1999/2000, p. 141). It took 'defeat and state collapse' for Georgia to move away from an exclusivist nationalist political culture and explore new possibilities. Once the military conflicts subsided the identity issue relaxed and instead of ethnic homogeneity differences over politics, class or ideology emerged. However, the unsolved status of the territorial questions still made the Caucasus a dangerous neighbourhood, and the resolution of the conflicts a necessity in order not to see a re-run of the former quarrels.

State-building and conflict resolution attempts

The ethno-territorial conflicts were directly linked to inter-elite power struggles (Cheterian 2001, pp. 18–20). In fact, we can see a dialectical interplay between the military developments on the conflict frontlines and the deepening power struggles in the republican capitals. The Azerbaijani defeats in Nagorno-Karabakh in winter and spring 1992 led to a sharpening of the power struggle in Baku; the Soviet era *nomenklatura* in power was overthrown by the Azerbaijani Popular Front (*Azerbaijan Khalq Jabhasi*), opening the way to the 11-month rule of former dissident Abulfaz Elchibey. The new powers, once consolidated in Baku, launched the summer 1992 offensive with remarkable initial military successes, occupying nearly two-fifths of the territory of Nagorno-Karabakh Autonomous *Oblast*'. Later, it was once again the military defeats of Azerbaijani forces that destabilised the rule of Elchibey and opened the way for the return of the former leader of Soviet Azerbaijan and Soviet *politburo* member Heidar Aliiev to power. The same is valid in the case of the Abkhazia war: the

first freely elected president Zviad Gamsakhurdia was overthrown by a coalition of opposition forces. Former collaborators of Gamsakhurdia, elements of the Georgian *nomenklatura* which had recently lost power, and illegal armed groups such as the notorious *Mkhedrioni*, came together to overthrow the rule of Gamsakhurdia in January 1992. Two months later the leaders of the *coup d'état* invited Eduard Shevardnadze, the former leader of Soviet Georgia and Soviet foreign minister under Gorbachev, to return to Tbilisi and lead the country out of its crisis. A power struggle between (and within) the Shevardnadze administration and supporters of Zviad Gamsakhurdia provoked the war in Abkhazia, and played a key role in the weak performance of Georgian forces. With the defeat of Georgian forces in Abkhazia in September 1993, pro-Gamsakhurdia forces attempted a comeback, taking over Zugdidi, the traditional stronghold of Zviadist forces and advancing eastwards to Kutaisi only to be stopped and beaten back. In Armenia, which did not suffer military defeat, the intelligentsia remained in power longer, but eventually Levon Ter-Petrosian was overthrown in February 1998 as he was pushing for concessions on the Karabakh issue, and a group of former leaders of the Karabakh war led by a former *de facto* president of Karabakh, Robert Kocharian, took power. The intelligentsia succeeded in overthrowing the Soviet-era *nomenklatura* in the Caucasus by leading popular revolutions, but wars, refugees and collapsed economies did not permit them to consolidate their power. In the case of the Russian invasion of Chechnya in December 1994, we see a similar pattern, whereby the Russian administration attempted to boost Yel'tsin's popularity at a time when he was coming under pressure from various nationalist and leftist forces, by provoking a 'small victorious war' (Gall & de Wall 1997a).¹²

The end of the violent period of the conflicts began in 1992 in the case of the Ossetian–Georgian conflict, followed by the Abkhaz–Georgian conflict in 1993, the Karabakh conflict in 1994 and the first war in Chechnya in 1996. The conditions of the end of the military phase of the conflicts were also similar: the failure of centralist forces in bringing political unity through the use of military force, and the signing of ceasefire agreements, while postponing the political resolution to later periods.

In South Ossetia the Dagomys Agreement was signed on 27 July 1992, and Joint Peacekeeping Forces (JPKF) composed of Russian, Georgian, North Ossetian and South Ossetian soldiers, five soldiers each, were deployed. In spite of the lack of political agreement on the status of the former Soviet province and any serious process of negotiations between the conflict parties, the ceasefire agreement held well and succeeded in normalising relations in this ethnically mixed region until the Rose Revolution of 2003. In Abkhazia, the ethnic Abkhaz forces, with support from the Russian military, took complete control of Abkhazia up to the Inguri River during heavy fighting in September 1993, after which the two antagonists signed a ceasefire agreement in Moscow on 14 May 1994.¹³ Russian peacekeeping forces under the flag of the Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS) separated the belligerents. In Karabakh, the massive Azerbaijani counter-attack of winter 1993–1994 on several

¹²See also Evangelista (2002, p. 37).

¹³The text of the ceasefire agreement between Abkhazia and Georgia is available at: <http://www.c-r.org/our-work/accord/georgia-abkhazia/keytext3.php>, accessed 24 July 2012.

portions of the war-front did not manage to pierce the Armenian defences. On 16 May 1994, representatives of the three sides (Armenia, Azerbaijan and Nagorno-Karabakh) met in Moscow and signed a ceasefire agreement. As the sides failed to agree on the modalities of peacekeeping forces, no foreign troops were introduced to the conflict zone. In Chechnya, the rebel forces launched a massive attack on three major cities including Grozny, Gudermes and Argun in August 1996, forcing the Russian leadership to agree to a ceasefire arrangement, and eventually sign the Khasavyurt Agreement on 31 August. Here, too, no outside peacekeeping forces were introduced.

The ceasefire agreements in the conflicts of South Ossetia, Abkhazia and Nagorno-Karabakh, were signed under Russian patronage, and in the absence of engagement of other major powers in the conflict settlement. Moscow saw the ceasefire agreements as a step to preserve its own influence over the South Caucasus, and as a first step to introduce mainly Russian—or exclusively Russian—peacekeeping troops. The hesitation of Western powers in the immediate aftermath of the Soviet collapse to engage their troops in post-Soviet territories, which they saw as regions remaining firmly under Russian influence, and at a time when their attention was tied to the ongoing conflicts in the Balkans, helped Russia to bring about ceasefire agreements under its own conditions. But Russia failed to profit from its favourable political–military position in the period immediately following the ceasefires. This was mainly because Russia lacked a model for modernisation (Markedonov 2009, p. 19) that it could offer to states emerging from Soviet collapse as it was facing similar challenges itself. Moscow also lacked the funds and technology to help reshape the economies of the region or to invest in export-oriented sectors such as oil and gas. Eventually, it had to cede its dominant position to Western or Middle Eastern competitors. Russian influence over Armenia increased, with a military treaty keeping the Gumri military base, as well as achieving an increasingly dominant position over strategic sectors of the Armenian economy including the Medzamor nuclear power plant, the Hrazdan power plant, the natural gas distribution network and the electricity grid. Russia also had a dominant position over Abkhazia and South Ossetia through its military presence under peacekeeping flags, as well as through economic leverages. But Russian influence over Azerbaijan and Georgia decreased, as those two countries came closer to the economic orbit of Western powers following oil projects and pipeline deals.

In the immediate aftermath of violent confrontations, the period following the ceasefire arrangements was rich in attempts at conflict settlement. The most important diplomatic activities concentrated around settling the Georgia–Abkhazia conflict and the Armenian–Azerbaijani conflict. The Georgian authorities did not invest much energy in the conflict in South Ossetia, the logic being to attempt and solve the major ethno-territorial conflict from the Georgian perspective, that of Abkhazia, which would later lead to an easy solution in the case of secondary conflicts like the one in South Ossetia.

The Abkhaz position radicalised following the brief May 1998 war. Now, the Abkhaz *de facto* authorities searched for federal solutions not with Georgia, but with Russia. This Abkhaz change in position coincided with important developments in Moscow. The Yel'tsin administration had imposed a blockade against Abkhazia forbidding male inhabitants of the region aged between 16- and 60-years-old from crossing the border. After 2000, Moscow dramatically changed its policy towards

Abkhazia, distributing large numbers of Russian passports (Serrano 2007, p. 110; Trier *et al.* 2010, p. 8). Following 1998, there were diplomatic activities to regulate the Abkhazia conflict, with suggestions on conflict resolution advanced by foreign diplomats, like Liviu Bota in 1999 and Dieter Boden in 2001, both personal representatives of the UN Secretary General.

Following the signing of the May 1994 ceasefire, intensive meetings between Armenian and Azerbaijani representatives tried to find a political solution to the conflict. Two periods witnessed intensive negotiations during which the negotiating parties came close to finding a common agreement. The first was in 1997–1998, following intensive mediation from the OSCE Minsk Group, which first proposed a ‘package solution’ and later a ‘phased’ solution to the conflict. The intensive negotiations led to internal frictions. In Armenia, President Levon Ter-Petrosian was increasingly isolated as strong opposition mounted among his close collaborators. He was forced to resign in February 1998, as his Prime Minister Robert Kocharyan, Minister of Defence Vazgen Sargsyan and Minister of National Security Serge Sargsyan opposed his policy on Karabakh and forced him to step down.

Robert Kocharyan, his successor, was reputed to be a hard liner, but soon after taking power he too engaged in an intense process of negotiations. More than 16 face-to-face discussions took place between 1999 and 2001 between the presidents of Armenia and Azerbaijan, discussing conflict resolution from all possible angles. These meetings culminated in the Key West summit hosted by US Secretary of State Collin Powell. Yet, the Florida meeting failed to seal a deal as the Azerbaijani leader was ‘taken aback by the strength of feeling in the country’ (Stern 2001).

Aliev, in turn, found himself isolated from his own political elite, many of whom resigned prior to or following the Key West summit.¹⁴ The lesson of the resignation of Ter-Petrosian and the failure of Key West was that isolating two leaders in a negotiation process could help them to find a common understanding, yet it distanced them from their own public opinion and possibly their own political class. The 1997 and 1999–2001 Armeno-Azerbaijani negotiations were the most serious attempts at conflict resolution in the Caucasus conflicts, and the Key West meeting was the moment that came closest to achieving a peace treaty.

From the ceasefire arrangements in the early to mid-1990s, the south and the north of the Caucasus mountain chain witnessed separate developments. In the case of the Russo-Chechen conflict, there were no serious attempts at negotiations following the formal signing of a peace treaty between the newly elected Chechen President Aslan Maskhadov and Russian President Boris Yel'tsin on 12 May 1997, in Moscow. The Khasavyurt Agreement (August 1996) which was supposed to end armed confrontation between the Russian Federal troops and the Chechen fighters and open the stage for a political solution failed to stabilise the region. The new Chechen leadership headed by Aslan Maskhadov could not unify the powerful Chechen field commanders, transforming the country into a state of constant civil war between rival factions competing over the control of territory and resources (Stanley 1997). Permanent

¹⁴Among those who resigned were the Foreign Minister Toufiq Zulfugarov, and the presidential advisor on international affairs Vafa Guluzade, who resigned at the beginning of the negotiations process in 1999, revealing deep splits among Azerbaijani foreign affairs decision-makers.

instability in Chechnya further degraded the economy which was already in a deplorable state as a result of the collapse of the Soviet Union and the war of 1994–1996. It was the failure of the Chechen resistance to build state institutions that further radicalised many of the fighters under the influence of *salafi-jihadi* ideology and led them to form an alliance with Khattab—a Saudi *mujahed* who had moved to the North Caucasus after fighting in Afghanistan and Tajikistan. They sought to form a North Caucasian *imamat* whose activities would spread beyond the borders of Chechnya (Moore & Tumelty 2009). Looking from a wider historic perspective Moshe Gammer sees a ‘circle in the spiral’ being completed: anti-Russian resistance starting as *jihad*, turning into Chechen nationalism in the late 1980s, and again in the late 1990s moving back to *jihadi*, or Islamist, positions (Gammer 2006, p. 218). This political failure of the Chechen national idea was the explosive essence that ignited the misconceived adventure of Chechen fighters led by Shamil Basayev and Khattab and led them to invade Dagestan, crossing over the boundaries of ethno-territorial division to establish the state of the imagined Umma. The continuation of the conflict in Chechnya radicalised Chechen resistance and put it into contact with *jihadi* volunteers from the Middle East and Central Asia (Wilhelmsen 2005). The misadventure of Basayev and Khattab gave a strong reason for the Russian military and the new rising star of Russian politics Vladimir Putin to relaunch a military campaign in 1999 in an attempt to retake Chechnya (Kramer 2005). After heavy fighting and huge losses the Russian military succeeded in pacifying rebellious Chechnya, although the entire region of the North Caucasus has been destabilised as a result of a decade of war.¹⁵

During this post-war period, the South Caucasus entered a stage of stabilisation and state building, with various degrees of success. On the one hand some states, such as Armenia and Azerbaijan, succeeded in building institutions and eliminating illegal military formations, while Georgia had weak state institutions and the continuous existence of illegal armed formations (such as the guerrilla forces active in western Georgia, the ‘White Legion’ (*tetri legioni*) and ‘Forest Brothers’ (*iqis dzmebi*), or the paramilitary forces under the control of Ajaria’s ruler Aslan Abashidze). Similarly, *de facto* independent states emerged with various degrees of success in state building, with Abkhazia and Nagorno-Karabakh succeeding in creating military structures under the command of the *de facto* political leadership, while Chechnya under Aslan Maskhadov failed to do that. As a result, Chechnya between the two wars was in a state of permanent civil war.

The period following the violent conflicts also witnessed the emergence of new political systems, with the new elites increasingly monopolising the political as well as economic space, while the popular mobilisation that the region witnessed in the late 1980s had died down. The front lines of Karabakh were mainly calm. In South Ossetia, relations between ethnic Ossetians and Georgians were normalising, in spite of the absence of a formal political agreement that could put a definitive end to the conflict. In Abkhazia, tension continued between the Abkhaz *de facto* authorities and Georgian paramilitary fighters. In May 1998, these tensions erupted into the large-scale military operations known as the ‘six days’ war as Georgian paramilitary groups

¹⁵‘160 000 Zherty’, *Izvestiya*, 16 August 2005, available at: <http://www.izvestia.ru/russia/article2515033/>, accessed 17 May 2010.

tried to take over regions of the southern Gali district, leading to violent reactions from Abkhazian armed forces. In October 2001 fighting erupted once again in Abkhazia when a military group composed of 400 mainly foreign fighters led by Chechen field commander Ruslan Gelayev, and around 100 Georgian Interior Ministry troops (Razoux 2009, p. 262), advanced from Kodori Valley in the direction of Sukhumi, but were beaten back by Abkhaz resistance. On several occasions, the region went through new waves of popular mobilisation, for example to protest against the results of presidential elections in Armenia in 1996, and against the results of parliamentary elections in Georgia in 2003 leading to the Rose Revolution. However, there was no popular mobilisation for or against a solution proposed to the ethno-territorial conflicts. The conflicts became the domain of narrow circles within the ruling elite. The attempts to resolve the Karabakh conflict in 1997 and in 2001 were not opposed by street demonstrations. Opposition came instead from within the elites in power.

Internationalisation of the conflicts and a new arms race

The intensive Armenian–Azerbaijani negotiations of the late 1990s took place during a period when Azerbaijan was going through yet another metamorphosis: entering global oil markets. In September 1994, a major oil deal was signed between the Azerbaijani leadership and a consortium of oil companies led by British Petroleum. Known as ‘the deal of the century’ the \$8 billion agreement brought Azerbaijan to global attention and attracted major powers into the Caucasus and the Caspian region. The construction of a pipeline pumping oil from Baku through Georgia to the Turkish port of Ceyhan added to the strategic importance of the region in the eyes of European capitals in search of energy diversification. It is interesting that Azerbaijani President Heydar Aliev used the new prestige of his country to return to the negotiations table and sincerely seek a compromise solution. Yet, after the failure at Key West there were no more serious attempts at engagement in intense negotiations, in spite of ongoing sporadic meetings and declarations. Instead, Azerbaijan was occupied with internal political issues, mainly the power transfer from Heydar Aliev the father to Ilham Aliev the son, and the creation of the first post-Soviet dynastic rule (Rasizade 2004).

The oil contracts signed in the first half of the 1990s under Heydar Aliev brought Caspian oil to international markets and resulted in a fundamental change in Azerbaijani policy under the new leader Ilham Aliev. It also brought about another major shift in the forces playing a role in the regional conflicts, by introducing a series of new foreign actors into the region. Neither the US nor the EU had paid much attention to the Caucasus during the violent period of the conflicts, limiting their attention to providing humanitarian aid and bringing international organisations to the region to supervise ceasefire agreements brokered by Moscow: thus, the UN mission to Abkhazia (UNOMIG) had a basic mandate that was limited to investigating and reporting by 88 military observers.¹⁶ But the signing of the Caspian

¹⁶On UNOMIG’s mandate, see <http://www.unomig.org/glance/mandate/> (accessed 4 October 2011).

oil deals and the investment of several billions of dollars in the oil sector created a new reality involving Western business interests. Oil interests, in their turn, invited governments to provide them with the necessary protection against the dual danger of hostile states and a multitude of non-state actors. Among the lobbyists, there were personalities that had occupied critical posts in former US administrations with contacts inside the Clinton administration, and these lobbyists had visions that surpassed the simple protection of investments.¹⁷ The active lobbying of oil companies in Washington soon led to the awakening of geopolitical interests in the American capital as well as in a number of European capitals, where the central question was: who is going to supervise and dominate the Caspian oil resources flowing to international markets? This competition between major powers, often labelled as 'the new great game' (referring to the nineteenth century competition between the British and Russian empires for supremacy over Central Asia), brought new state actors and their interests, oil companies, diplomats, journalists and a series of other interests to the region. It also redrew the power relations between the old actors of the conflicts: oil interests strengthened some and marginalised others (Cheterian 1997).

Exports of Azerbaijani oil and gas had not only economic and financial, but also strategic dimensions. Between 1994 and 2009 Azerbaijan received nearly \$30 billion in direct foreign investment exclusively in its energy domain (UPI 2009). Net revenues from oil and gas by 2024 are estimated to be \$198 billion (World Bank 2009). In 2010, Azerbaijani Gross Domestic Product (GDP) was \$52.1 billion, while that of its rival Armenia was a mere \$8.8 billion (International Crisis Group 2011, p. 6). Azerbaijani military spending increased from \$160 million in 2003 to 3.1 billion in 2011, exclusively financed by petrodollars; over 92% of its total exports are hydrocarbon products. With petrodollars, Azerbaijan possessed the means to challenge the ceasefire agreement of 1994.

Another incident from outside the context of the Caucasus region that came to further overload the situation was 9/11. In the new age of 'war against terror' *jihadi* elements present in and around Chechnya became unacceptable. What was tolerated in the past had to be eliminated. This was the immediate reason for accelerated military cooperation between the US military and Georgian armed forces. The first target was the Pankisi Valley which, with its native Chechen population, had provided sanctuary to Chechen fighters (including the field commander Ruslan Gelayev mentioned above), but also to Arab *jihadi* volunteers *en route* to Chechnya. This was at the height of the second war in Chechnya and *salafi-jihadi* militants from the Middle East were very active in Chechnya.¹⁸ For this purpose, intense military cooperation was begun with Georgia under the name 'train and equip', aiming at the development of Georgian armed forces to police the northern borders of the country. Soon, the programme evolved into a major operation. At the same time, the Shevardnadze

¹⁷Among the most prominent names are former Secretaries of State Henry A. Kissinger and James A. Baker, III, former Defense Secretary Dick Cheney, former Senator and Treasury Secretary Lloyd Bentsen, former White House chief of staff John H. Sununu, and two former national security advisers, Brent Scowcroft and Zbigniew Brzezinski'. See Kinzer (2007).

¹⁸At the time, Chechnya was high on the agenda of *salafi-jihadi* groups. Eleven out of 19 aeroplane hijackers of 9/11 had either fought in Chechnya or had left home declaring that they were leaving for *jihad* in Chechnya. See Murphey and Ottaway (2001, p. A12) and Van Natta Jr and Zernike (2001).

administration seemed to be obsolete and incongruent for the new tasks ahead of the Georgian state, seen from the angle of new international realities. A weak and corrupt administration could not efficiently handle the fight against terrorism as well as the fight against criminalised elements that made up part of the Georgian political equation under Shevardnadze.

More lastingly, the 'War on Terror' placed the Caucasus in the geographic centre of a major military confrontation: to its east, there was Central Asia and Afghanistan with the US campaign against *al-Qaeda* and the *Taliban*; to its south, there was the Middle East with Iraq invaded and occupied by US forces in March 2003, and Iran continued to be a major preoccupation for Western leaders with the question of a potential military operation surfacing from time to time. This made the Caucasus a potentially important region from a logistical point of view. Azerbaijan, for example, was regularly approached as to making its ports available, especially in the case of an eventual US attack against the Islamic Republic.¹⁹ The importance of an Azerbaijani base grew in the eyes of US military planners as difficulties in supplying troops in Afghanistan increased with attacks on convoys in Pakistan, and the closing down of Khanabad airbase in Uzbekistan in July 2005. Speculation concerning a foreign, possibly NATO, military base increased as Azerbaijan revised its military doctrine to allow the setting-up of foreign military bases on Azerbaijani soil.²⁰

In the first half of the 2000s signs emerged that both Azerbaijan and Georgia were ready to challenge the ceasefire agreements of the 1990s. This was most evident in Georgia where, following the Rose Revolution of 2003 a new political class came to power with the project of establishing a strong state in Georgia. During the mobilisation phase of the Rose Revolution, the ethno-territorial conflicts did not play any significant role. But Mikheil Saakashvili started making references to the conflicts from his first inauguration speech of January 2004, claiming a responsibility to reunify Georgian territories. The new leadership succeeded in reforming the administration, increasing the capacity of the state to raise taxes. This was translated in various forms, first of all in establishing an effective administration, strong law enforcement agencies and a strong army. Simultaneously, defence spending increased from around \$50 million in 2003 up to \$1 billion or 5.6% of GDP in 2008 (Fuller & Giragosian 2008). The Georgian authorities declared that the 20-fold increase in military spending was necessary to upgrade the military in view of the declared objective to join the NATO alliance. Yet, the choice of the armaments procured, and especially the building of two major military bases, one in Senaki near Abkhazia and the other in Gori at a short distance from South Ossetia, clearly revealed Georgia's intention to use military pressure over the two *de facto* entities.

The intense militarisation of Georgia was taking place while the Russian military presence in that country was winding down. The Russian military evacuated its former bases in Akhalkalaki in the south and Batumi on the Turkish border, fulfilling Russian

¹⁹US plans to expand military presence in Azerbaijan close to Iran', *Alexander's Gas and Oil*, 13 April 2005, available at: http://www.gasandoil.com/news/middle_east/b6e5b7a43c36e4bc336f009785cb9b46, accessed 5 October 2011; Sanamyan (2011).

²⁰'Azerbaijan Parliament Approves Military Doctrine', *News Az*, 9 June 2010, available at: <http://news.az/articles/17123>, accessed 5 October 2011.

obligations made at the OSCE Istanbul summit of 2000. At the same time, the Russian military strengthened its presence in South Ossetia and Abkhazia. In fact, South Ossetia came under the direct administration of the Russian power structures when career military or intelligence officers took over posts such as prime minister and defence minister and the intelligence services of the *de facto* administration. Russia also increased its influence over the two break-away republics by distributing Russian passports to the local population; now, Moscow could claim that any future military intervention was to protect its citizens in the two regions. In this context, the Georgian–US military cooperation took on a significant importance, with training programmes and equipment transfers continuing. Foreign and especially US military assistance to Georgia relative to the Georgian defence budget was ‘not that large’ (Tseluiko 2010, p. 29) and was geared to prepare Georgian troops for peacekeeping operations in places like Afghanistan, Iraq or Kosovo. By 2007, Georgia had made a major military contribution to the US-led occupation of Iraq with 2,000 soldiers, the third contingent in the international force after the US and the UK and a smaller contingent was sent to Afghanistan as part of the International Security Assistance Force (ISAF). More important than training and hardware transfer, Georgia felt itself in league with the only superpower of our times. Now, the revolutionary leaders of Georgia thought it was time to challenge both the post-conflict *status quo* and Russian influence in the South Caucasus.

Similarly, Azerbaijan increased both its military spending and its bellicose rhetoric. The military spending of Azerbaijan grew from \$160 million in 2004 to \$300 million in 2005 and \$600 million in 2006—the equivalent of the entire Armenian state budget. The military spending of Baku was \$1.3 billion in 2008 and \$2.1 billion in 2010.²¹ This explosion of military spending was conditioned by the massive export of Caspian oil, after the Baku–Ceyhan pipeline was completed in May 2005 and in 2008 Baku was pumping 1 million barrels of oil per day. The petrodollars and military spending hardened the official Azerbaijani discourse, saying that Baku would agree to no more than autonomy for Nagorno-Karabakh within the framework of territorial integrity of Azerbaijan, and in case the ongoing peace negotiations would not lead to this result Azerbaijan would use force and start a second Karabakh war.

In the North Caucasus, there was a radical shift away from the ethno-national paradigm that characterised the region in the early 1990s. The Chechen resistance was undermined by the heavy military campaigns of the Russian Federal forces, as well as by the creation of a local administration with strong military capabilities entrusted to the former Mufti of the Chechen republic Ahmad Kadyrov, and after his assassination to his son Ramzan. However, it was not just the Russian policy successes that led to the weakening of the Chechen resistance, but the internal contradiction of the resistance movement itself: the idea of Chechen national independence, the banner around which the Chechens had fought with success in 1994–1996, was discredited in the years of *de facto* independence of 1997–1999. In the second Chechnya war, the Chechens fought against the Russian invasion without knowing why they were fighting; Maskhadov’s only demand was the withdrawal of the Russian troops after

²¹See Yevgrashina (2008); ‘Aliyev: Azerbaijan’s defense spending tops Armenia budget’, *Azernews*, 26 June 2010, available at: <http://www.azernews.az/azerbaijan/21743.html>, accessed 24 July 2012.

which he was ready to negotiate, including over the forms which Chechen sovereignty was to take.

The Russian military victory against Chechen resistance came with a price tag. The Chechen resistance was weakened but also radicalised towards the *salafi-jihadi* positions, which had previously constituted a marginal force. The resistance increasingly became terroristic aiming at (easier) civilian targets, especially in the neighbouring North Caucasus and in the Russian capital, bloody operations leading to the Beslan school tragedy or the Moscow metro bombings. Islamic ideology has the advantage of overcoming tribal and ethnic cleavages, as a result of which anti-Russian resistance has spread across the North Caucasus with a strong presence in Dagestan and Ingushetia, two neighbours of Chechnya. While North Caucasian *jamaat* (or Islamic resistance groups) have a global dimension and gain inspiration from global *jihad*, they can be more dangerous when they become the expression of national grievances, and become the embodiment of national-resistance struggles, as is the case in Iraq, Afghanistan or Somalia.

The Caucasus entered the globalised world through its hydrocarbon exports, which, in turn, had a deep impact on its social, economic and political structures. The Caucasus, while itself an area of geopolitical competition, simultaneously became part of several political sub-regions where severe political competition existed, similar to those of the Middle East and Central Asia (Sakwa 2011). We can see the interaction between local conflicts and great power competition most clearly in the clash of August 2008.

Some remarks on the August 2008 war

The August 2008 war between the Georgian and Russian armies took place against the background of the degradation of political relations as well as military escalation. In April, tension was high around the administrative frontier separating Abkhazia from Georgia. A Georgian unmanned aerial vehicle (UAV) was shot down, probably by a Russian warplane,²² and Russia sent some 3,000 troops to repair the railway. At the same time, Georgian troops organised exercises under the supervision of US military advisors. In July 2008, two military manoeuvres underlined the degree of tension: Russia massed 8,000 of its troops along the northern border of Georgia for Kavkaz-2008 military exercises. At the same time, the joint military exercise codenamed 'Immediate Response 2008' brought together 1,200 US military personnel and 800 Georgian troops at the former Soviet air base Vaziani, situated only 20 km from Tbilisi (Bessonov 2008). During the first seven days of August, clashes between Georgian forces and Ossetian paramilitaries made a major confrontation seem dangerously real. Then, in the late hours of 7 August a massive Georgian military attack was unleashed against the regional capital, Tskhinvali.²³ In the course of the next day, as world leaders attended the opening ceremony of the Olympic Games in

²²C.W. Blandy reports that 'the Abkhaz downed two Georgian drones on 18 March and 20 April, with a further two more on 4 May and a fifth on 8 May' (Blandy 2009).

²³'Georgia Controls Tskhinvali—Saakashvili Claims', *Civil Georgia*, 8 August 2008, available at: <http://www.civil.ge/eng/article.php?id=18975>, accessed 24 June 2010.

Beijing, Russian military forces started their slow but massive move towards the Georgian positions.

Although the military outcome was decided some 48 hours after the engagement of hostile forces (Litovkin 2008) and a ceasefire was announced five days after the start of the confrontation, the political consequences were far-reaching. The August 2008 war created immediate tension between Russia and Western powers, but did not bring any radical shift in relations between Moscow and the West—as some political analysts have suggested—nor did it mark the start of a new ‘Cold War’. The tension it caused between Russia and the West was short term, and these relations were back to normal after a while and especially after the Obama administration initiated the ‘reset’ policy towards the Kremlin (Kessler 2009). Yet, it caused much harm in the process of conflict resolution in the Caucasus itself, and specifically in the conflicts between Abkhaz and Ossetians on the one side and Georgia on the other. Up to the 2008 war, Russia was theoretically in favour of Georgian ‘territorial integrity’, while developing protectorates in South Ossetia and Abkhazia. The Russian recognition of Abkhazia and South Ossetia as independent sovereign states has put an end to diplomatic efforts over two-decades to find a compromise solution and conclude a peaceful agreement to end the conflicts between the *de facto* governments and the Georgian central authorities. It also ended the duality of the Russian position. The current situation is a dead-end, since it is difficult to imagine how the Russian position of recognising Abkhazia and South Ossetia as independent states, and the Georgian position considering them to be part of its sovereign territory, could be reconciled. There is a need for fundamental change in the geopolitical situation in the Caucasus before imagining constructive negotiations between the conflicting parties and the normalisation of relations.

Yet, the August 2008 war was a fundamentally different war from the ones fought in the late 1980s in South Ossetia or the August 1992 war in Abkhazia (Cheterian 2009a). The earlier conflicts took place in revolutionary circumstances, when there was no clear, legitimate authority in Georgia, and when the various competing militias did not follow any superior civil or military hierarchy. For example, the Georgian military intervention in Abkhazia remains shrouded with mystery, as Eduard Shevardnadze, who was the head of the Georgian state at the time, claims that his defence minister took the initiative by himself when he ordered his forces to enter the Abkhaz capital Sukhumi (McGriffert *et al.* 1997, p. 265). The conflicts were the result of chaos following the disintegration of the previously existing order, and the Georgian defeat in Abkhazia was followed by an internal power struggle between the supporters of the former President Zviad Gamsakhurdia, and the Georgian authorities headed by Eduard Shevardnadze. The situation in 2008 could not be further away from the picture of the early 1990s. This time, it was well structured armies²⁴ under a clear military hierarchy which in turn followed orders of their civilian leaderships, fighting for territory and influence. The year 2008 was an attempt to establish order, not the outcome of chaos. A military defeat in the 1990s led to regime change, but not in 2008: Georgian forces were overwhelmed in front of superior Russian pressure, but the Saakashvili administration survived defeat.

²⁴This applies to the Abkhaz, Georgian and Russian armies, while the Ossetian forces resembled paramilitary organisations with loose coordination.

The August 2008 war revealed that Russia, the US and the EU can be competitors as well as partners in the same geopolitical space. During the crisis, French diplomacy played a key mediating role in brokering a ceasefire agreement and an end to hostilities, at the same time as the US administration put pressure on Moscow in order not to enlarge the level of hostilities, and not to seek ‘regime change’ in Georgia by advancing towards Tbilisi. After the war, Western powers tried to stabilise the Georgian economy by providing massive aid, to avoid an internal backlash against Saakashvili as a result of economic hardship caused by the war. On the other hand, France, Russia and the US, the co-chairs of the OSCE Minsk Group, continued their efforts to mediate between the sides in the Karabakh conflict. Immediately following the August 2008 war, Russian President Dmitrii Medvedev launched a new initiative to bring the presidents of Armenia and Azerbaijan to a series of face-to-face meetings under his personal patronage. The Medvedev initiative was an expression of the increase of Russian power over the region following Russian military advances in August 2008. At the same time, the Medvedev initiative revealed the limits of Russian power; three years after the Moscow meeting, and after a number of face-to-face meetings between Aliev and Sarkissian, the Russian leader was ‘frustrated’ to see no real progress towards the solution of the Karabakh conflict.²⁵

Conclusion: new elites and old conflicts

In this essay, I have analysed the eruption and evolution of the conflicts in the Caucasus over two decades (1988–2008) by looking at three actors: mass movements, elites in power and foreign powers. I argued that the conflicts erupted with the emergence of mass mobilisations which were anti-systemic by their nature. After attempts by environmentalists to gather several thousand people in the city centres of the republican capitals, nationalist issues succeeded in mobilising hundreds of thousands for longer periods of time. Nationalist mobilisation opposed both central Soviet authorities as well as the republican ruling casts: the local *nomenklatura*. These nationalist movements created fears and anti-mobilisation among competing national projects. Next, nationalist movements came into friction and clashed with each other. The popular movements succeeded in overthrowing the local Soviet order and replacing them with a new ruling elite originating from the republican intelligentsia, and entered a period of confrontation with each other. With the disappearance of the Soviet centre, the various national movements clashed with each other over control of territories and populations, and created a new political order based on ethno-national legitimacy.

During this initial period—that is up to December 1991—there was no outside intervention. The conflicts themselves were the internal affairs of the Soviet state, which did not tolerate the presence of international organisations or actors of foreign states on its soil. With the collapse of the USSR and the recognition of Armenia, Azerbaijan and Georgia as independent states, the Karabakh conflict took on the dimension of a war between two states, while in South Ossetia and Abkhazia the

²⁵See ‘Russia’s Medvedev ‘Frustrated’ With Karabakh Impasse’, *Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty*, 27 June 2011, available at: http://www.rferl.org/content/russia_medvedev_frustrated_karabakh_impasse/24248417.html, accessed 8 September 2011.

situation was considered by the international community as internal conflicts. Similarly, as Russian armies marched on Chechnya in December 1994, international organisations considered this an internal Russian conflict. The only outside force interfering in the conflicts of Karabakh, South Ossetia and Abkhazia was Russia. The problem was that former Soviet-turned-Russian military bases existed in those conflict zones, and before even Russia could formulate a clear policy towards what was called by the Russian Foreign Minister Andrei Kozyrev the 'Near Abroad' the Russian military was already on the ground and taking action. Soon, Russian politicians would start to use the military leverage they had on the ground as a political instrument to press concessions on new political entities trying to break free from Moscow's influence. One such Russian demand at the time was to force Azerbaijan and Georgia to join the ill-defined CIS which was meant to replace the former Soviet Union as a loose confederation of sovereign states. During the height of the wars, Western states were hesitant to intervene in any direct manner in the Caucasus, still considering it a region of Russian traditional influence. Similarly Iran, the former empire which dominated over the South Caucasus before the arrival of Russian troops into the region in the early nineteenth century, refrained from intervening in the conflicts, especially that of Karabakh, bordering its northern frontiers. Turkey, on the other hand, showed active political interest as well as limited military support in favour of Azerbaijan in the Karabakh conflict.

With the eruption of the violent phase of the conflicts, mass mobilisation, which played such a key role in the initial phase, soon disappeared as a factor. The various mass mobilisation and political movements that took place in the Caucasus outside the new elites in power were formed around non-nationalist and non-territorial issues. The large-scale demonstrations in Yerevan in 1996 and 2008, in Georgia in 2003 and 2007 and in Azerbaijan in 2005 were around electoral fraud, political representation and corruption of ruling elites. They were led by sections of the former elite groups that were chased from power and had no more space within the political institutions, and sought the support of the populace to bring about political change. On the other hand, opposition to diplomatic solutions to conflicts did not come from the street, but from elite groups within the ruling circles, as the cases of Armenia in 1997–1998 and Azerbaijan in 2001 reveal. At the same time, and in spite of ongoing military clashes such as those between Georgia and Abkhazia in 1998 and 2001, Georgia and South Ossetia in 2004, and Georgia on the one hand, and South Ossetia, Abkhazia and Russia on the other in 2008, as well as minor sporadic clashes between Armenian and Azerbaijani troops on the Karabakh frontlines, we did not witness mass mobilisation on the streets of Baku, Tbilisi or Yerevan around national themes. The hydrocarbon contracts signed in Baku in September 1994, a few months after the signing of the Karabakh ceasefire, introduced globalisation into the Caucasus arena. Major oil companies made investments in the Azerbaijan oil sector which has tilted the balance of forces towards Baku in the Karabakh conflict. It also brought a number of new outside actors into the geopolitical game of the Caucasus. Moreover, it accelerated social stratification within the region, with wealth concentrating within certain social and geographical spaces. In the early 1990s, Western capitals and international organisations were timidly involved in mediation efforts to stop violent clashes and find political resolutions to the confrontations. After the oil contracts, the role of numerous foreign diplomats posted in Baku changed

from that of simple diplomatic envoys to representatives of countries with billions of dollars in investments in Azerbaijani oil and gas sector. In the early 1990s, the conflicts of the Caucasus were by and large viewed as Moscow's problem. In 2008, the eruption of conflict threatened Western investments and the energy security of European economies. The multiplication of foreign actors, whether state agencies or multinationals, and their influence over the Caucasus further complicates the geopolitical situation of the region. Now, there is no single power broker that can force the conflict parties into an agreement, unlike, for example in the early 1920s or in the early 1990s in the case of the South Caucasus, when a single outside power (Moscow) had enough influence to impose peace under its conditions on the warring little nations of the Caucasus.

Currently, there is no visible popular movement which is agitating for the conflicts, and nor are there mobilised popular movements calling for peace and resolution of the conflicts. The small initiatives that come from non-governmental organisations (NGOs) are often of foreign inspiration and funding, and remain isolated from broader social developments. Most of those initiatives are hostile to social movements, and consider them to pose more of a risk to the peace process rather than being a force in favour of it. International diplomacy (which is the exclusive funding source of the NGO initiatives) has focused its efforts on power elites, hoping that an agreement between them will be the solution to the conflicts in the Caucasus. The negotiations which have continued for two decades are held in secret, away from public scrutiny. The lack of real democratic processes fits well with the secretive negotiations, as both processes exclude the citizen from participating in policy making.

The elites that came to power following independence, upon which all international hope for conflict resolution seems to be focalised, have limitations in the way that they can approach the conflict issue. The three South Caucasus republics seceded to independence as the conflicts erupted; as a result, the independence movements and the mobilisation around ethno-territorial issue became intermingled. In other words, the issue of the conflicts lies at the heart of the definition of the new political space and legitimisation of its institutions. It was the Karabakh Movement in Armenia that led the country into independence; and similarly in Georgia, it was the National Movement which fought against Moscow and against centrifugal forces in Abkhazia and South Ossetia. The Azerbaijani Popular Front was simultaneously anti-Soviet and opposed to the ceding of Nagorno-Karabakh. The Azerbaijani national movement emerged as a reaction to the Armenian mobilisation for Karabakh, and this reactive position has left its fingerprint on the formation of the Azerbaijani national self-image since. After doing field studies on Azerbaijani elite perceptions on the Karabakh conflict in 2001 and in 2009, Ceylan Tokluoglu concludes that 'Azerbaijanis (re)construct Armenian identity by defining the Armenians, not themselves, as a "unique community"... They also attribute a "special mission" to them, which is to occupy the lands of other nations' (Tokluoglu 2011, p. 1225). The increasingly negative and stereotypical image of the 'other' is yet another and novel obstacle to conflict resolution. Yet, those images of the 'enemy' do serve a function for the young states of the Caucasus: to limit the boundaries of the community and provide legitimacy to state institutions with shallow historic roots.

The ideological and emotional weight of the conflict thematic and their symbolic representation makes any compromise on the issue look like a defeat. Therefore, elites

prefer preserving the *status quo* and shield behind radical rhetoric (de Waal 2009). Elites in power have equally used the conflicts as a resource, as a political instrument reinforcing their position *vis-à-vis* competitors. The two Russian invasions of Chechnya (1994, 1999) were conditioned not only by security and political challenges posed by Chechen separatist and Islamist forces, but also were utilised to project an image of the powerful leadership of the Kremlin. Following the contested presidential elections of February 2008 in Armenia, the Karabakh front-line was activated with violent clashes unseen since the 1994 ceasefire agreement.²⁶ In Georgia, the Georgian offensive on Tskhinvali in August 2008 took place less than a year after the most severe internal crisis of the Saakashvili administration, when in November 2007 mass demonstrations organised by opposition formations called for the resignation of the Georgian president. The ruling elites in the Caucasus, as well as in Russia, refer to the electoral system as a source for legitimacy but also violate it by manipulating elections. This lack of electoral legitimacy makes the symbolic value of the conflicts even more important for the elites in power. The population can be invited to make sacrifices for the higher goal, for the liberation and defence of national territory. As leaders continuously utilise conflict thematics for internal political reasons, they are also widening the chasm between their own position and the possibility of conflict resolution.

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²⁶The clashes on the north-eastern portion of the line of contact started on 4 March 2008, exactly two days after opposition demonstrations in Yerevan which were repressed by force, causing the death of 10 people. The two sides dispute who initiated the military operations. See 'Armenia/Azerbaijan: Deadly Fighting Erupts in Nagorno-Karabakh', *Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty*, 4 March 2011, available at: <http://www.rferl.org/content/article/1079580.html>, accessed 7 October 2011.

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