
Antonenko explains long history of Georgian conflict

By Ben Goldstein

Daily Princetonian Publishing Company 16/10/2008

Though many Americans may have first heard of South Ossetia in August, this summer's conflict between Russia and Georgia over the breakaway Georgian region is a continuation of a decades-long conflict in the Caucasus, Oksana Antonenko, an expert on Georgian and South Ossetian relations, told a crowd of students, faculty and community members in Jones Hall on Wednesday afternoon.

Antonenko, a senior fellow at the International Institute for Strategic Studies who advises policymakers both in the United States and abroad about conflict resolution in the Caucasus, gave a detailed account of the events surrounding this summer's war and outlined her proposals for strengthening relations in the region.

"There was no turning back," Antonenko said of the conflict. "They were like two trains heading for a train wreck."

Tensions between Georgia and South Ossetia escalated dramatically this summer when Georgian troops began military action to reassert the country's sovereignty over the breakaway region. Russia responded by sending in forces to support the rebels.

Kosovo's declaration of independence, Antonenko said, gave South Ossetians the impetus to seek independence for themselves. She also cited the Beslan school siege in 2004, in which 186 children were killed in North Ossetia, as a major nationalizing point for South Ossetia.

Antonenko explained that Russia's stake in the war was based on a desire to avoid conflict in the South Caucasus because such action destabilizes the North Caucasus, which is still territorially part of Russia.

"They are extremely paranoid," she said. "[Conflict] would be by all means something they would like to avoid."

Antonenko said she was optimistic about the future of the region and noted that the conflict was a wake-up call for relations between Russia and the West.

Looking forward, Antonenko called for a new humanitarian process that could more immediately alleviate human suffering. She also recommended a legitimate fact-finding mission to establish an "hour-by-hour report of what happened" during this summer's conflict. Such an unbiased account, she explained, would prevent the myths and rumors that are already circulating from becoming further entrenched and making future peace processes more difficult.

She also called for the inclusion of South Ossetia and Abkhazia, another Georgian breakaway region, in the peace process, because alienating them would only drive them further into dependence on Russia.

Though Antonenko characterized Russian military action as overzealous, she said that such excessive behavior should come as no surprise based on the Russian army's past actions in Chechnya and Afghanistan. "What happened in August this year was by no means the main phase of this conflict," she said.

Hostilities have been present since war broke out between Georgia and South Ossetia in the 1920s, during which an estimated 20,000 people died, she said.

When the Red Army re-established control, the open conflict was swept under the rug, but tensions remained. Nonetheless, "tremendous reconciliation" between South Ossetians and Georgians was achieved during this period, she said.

The dissolution of the Soviet Union in 1991 led to another war that resulted in hundreds of deaths, Antonenko said. For the next 15 years, open war was prevented but, again, tensions remained.

The next escalation, Antonenko explained, was the 2003-2004 Georgian Rose Revolution, in which leaders promised "to put nationalism aside ... and leave room for genuine reconciliation [between Georgia and South Ossetia] and nation building," she said.

Instead, the new Georgian government sent troops into South Ossetia in summer 2004, she said. This action effectively destroyed the tenuous understanding of the previous 15 years and "brought back to the [South Ossetians], with very strong force, the reality that ... Georgian government will never give up this intention of trying to take South Ossetia by military force," she explained.

At that time, Georgian President Mikheil Saakashvili was focused on resolving the conflict, and proposed several comprehensive peace plans, but they were completely unilateral and "had absolutely no legitimacy on the [South Ossetian] side," she said.

As Saakashvili grew impatient with the peace process, Georgia began a major military buildup, assisted by the United States, as repayment for its assistance with the war in Iraq, Antonenko said.

Response to the lecture was overwhelmingly positive.

"Spectacular review of the situation," Former U.S. Ambassador to Afghanistan Robert Finn GS '78 said. "We could have gone on for hours."

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