
Does Nationalism Play Role In Georgia Conflict?

By Peter Fedynsky

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The conflict in Georgia involves competing territorial, economic, political and cultural claims of Georgians, Ossetians and Russians. Underpinning those claims is ethnic identity, which is shaped by language, history, culture and kinship. Taken to extremes, ethnicity can turn into nationalism, which elevates the ethnic awareness and interests of one group above all others. VOA Moscow Correspondent Peter Fedynsky examines the role nationalism has played in the recent violence in the Caucasus.

Russian soldier, left, talks to Georgian police officers on the outskirts of Gori, northwest of Tbilisi, Georgia, 14 Aug 2008 Complex migrations and demographic changes, through many centuries, put Ossetians and Georgians on a collision course that has resulted in varying degrees of friction between them, most recently the current conflict in the Caucasus.

Language can be powerful motivating force

Ossetians and Georgians speak different languages. They do not even have the same name for the territory that both seek to control. What Ossetians refer to as South Ossetia, Georgian authorities prefer to call the Tskhinvali region.

Alexander Rondelli, president of the Georgian Foundation for Strategic and International Studies in Tbilisi, notes that language is a powerful and often dangerous motivating force in many societies, around the world.

"It's a very strong feeling; very strong feeling, because it mobilizes people. It's vernacular mobilization, I would say," said Rondelli. "It's something which keeps people together. And, it's something for which people are really ready to be killed."

Accusations of ethnic cleansing

And, in Georgia they are being killed. Although casualty figures are difficult to confirm, both sides are accusing each other of ethnic cleansing. Human Rights Watch, an international non-governmental organization, reports Ossetians have attacked Georgian villages. Russia accuses Georgia of outright genocide against Ossetians, a small ethnic group that straddles the border of northern Georgia and southern Russia.

Hasan Dzutsev, professor of sociology at the North Ossetian Institute of Humanitarian and Social Research in Vladikavkaz told VOA all Ossetians seek reunification.

Quest for reunification

From left, Russian President Dmitry Medvedev, Abkhazia's President Sergei Bagapsh, and leader of South Ossetia's rebel government, Eduard Kokoity in Moscow, 14 Aug 2008 Dzutsev says reunification is an age-old dream, noting that until 1922, Ossetians lived together on one territory, but in Stalin's time, they were artificially divided when Southern Ossetia was transferred to Georgia and the North was given to Russia.

Alexander Rondelli says Northern and Southern Ossetia were two of many autonomies created across borders of former Soviet Republics, with the intention of fomenting ethnic tensions in a classic divide and conquer

tactic. Today, Russian troops claim a peacekeeping role in South Ossetia. Georgians call them invaders and fear the Kremlin is seeking to destroy their fragile democracy.

Russian interest in Ossetia

In Moscow, independent Russian political analyst Alexander Kononov says huge industrial projects during the communist era changed the ethnic composition of Soviet republics, as large numbers of Russian speakers were sent to construct, for example, a nuclear power plant in Lithuania or a cotton mill in Central Asia. Kononov says this created an ethnic time bomb, which exploded after the collapse of the Soviet Union, as various peoples of the USSR sought to reclaim their languages and ethnic identities. Kononov notes that many Russians, himself included, do not feel a need to affirm their ethnic identity.

The analyst says there were many Russians in the Soviet Union and that, as a rule, large ethnic groups tend to ignore the identity of other peoples and do not overly concern themselves about their own. He says there is no need for affirmation, because it is clear that Russians are Russians.

Russian tanks on the outskirts of Gori, northwest of capital Tbilisi, Georgia, 14 Aug 2008 However, smaller ethnicities are sensitive to the possibility of subjugation and even extinction. There are about 500,000 Ossetians; roughly 70,000 of them in Georgia. Hasan Dzutsev says South Ossetians fear complete annihilation by Georgians - a charge Tbilisi says is without basis.

What is driving conflict?

Alexander Kononov says the conflict in Georgia involves two fundamental but competing principles of international relations, which he says poses a threat to global security.

Kononov says the first principle is the inviolability of international borders established by the United Nations and the Final Act of the 1975 Helsinki Agreement. He says there is also the principle of self-determination of peoples enunciated by U.S. President Woodrow Wilson's "14 Points" in 1918. Kononov says, without exception, one side or the other of every ethnic conflict cites one or the other principle.

The analyst says international law has not established which of these principles should take precedence. Thus, the need one ethnic group has for independent territory to allow its language and culture to bear political and economic fruit collides with another group which needs that same territory to protect its vital interests.

Each analyst interviewed for this report cited examples of multi-ethnic societies that work, such as Switzerland and Canada. The Caucasus is a place where ethnic animosities have exploded in bloodshed. In recent times, Chechens fought Russians, Ingushetians struggled against Ossetians, Armenians battled Azeris and the Abkhazians competed with Georgians. The war that has erupted between Ossetians and Georgians is an ethnic struggle that has global implications for oil, democracy and political influence in the post-Soviet world.
