
Europe's Caucasian Moment

By Borut Grgic And Alexandros Petersen
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The European Union is getting closer to the security concerns of the Eurasian landmass, in particular the "frozen conflicts" in Moldova, Georgia and Azerbaijan. And it's not just due to the EU's expansion to the Black Sea. If Europe wants to reduce its dependency on Russian energy, it will need alternative oil and gas supplies from the Caspian region. But those strategic pipelines are only kilometers away from hotspots like Nagorno-Karabakh, Transnistria, South Ossetia and Abkhazia.

Over the weekend, six people were killed in firefights between separatist South Ossetian militia and Georgian forces. This new outbreak of violence threatens to further complicate peace efforts in nearby Abkhazia. After years of neglect, EU heavyweights are finally taking action there. Last month, German Foreign Minister Frank-Walter Steinmeier developed a three-step strategy to resolve the Abkhazia dispute.

This statelet in northwestern Georgia is run by an ethnically distinct minority that demands formal independence from Georgia. Lacking international recognition, the Abkhaz -- just like the South Ossetians -- won de facto independence with Russian support through a chaotic conflagration amid the breakup of the Soviet Union. During a 1992-1993 war, the secessionists defeated the Georgian army and forced the majority ethnic Georgian population to leave. The enclave's isolated economy is fueled by Russian business interests, which sit comfortably behind a shield of so-called Russian peacekeepers that divide the territory from the rest of Georgia.

So it is no surprise that the conflict plays out in confrontations between Tbilisi and Moscow. A Russian aircraft was recently filmed shooting down a Georgian surveillance drone. Moscow's "peacekeepers" frequently harass ethnic Georgians in the breakaway region, demanding protection money or, like last year, forcing them to vote in separatist elections. These provocations serve a greater strategic agenda: keeping Georgia out of NATO.

The unresolved conflicts of the two breakaway regions are the greatest obstacles to Georgia's ambitions to join the alliance. Moscow holds the trump card.

Mr. Steinmeier's plan was ambitious but realistic. It envisioned a stage of confidence-building measures leading to a gradual return of displaced peoples, followed by economic revitalization with European help. Abkhazia's final status was to be determined in the last stage. In a nod to Moscow, Mr. Steinmeier's plan did not demand the internationalization of the peacekeeping force.

Russia gave the plan a green light in private meetings, only to reject it when the German foreign minister made it public. Prime Minister Vladimir Putin and his successor as Russian president, Dmitry Medvedev, see it as in Moscow's interest to preserve the simmering status quo. By publicly ambushing the plan, Moscow hopes to put an end to what it considers as European meddling in its own backyard. Russia wants to sow confusion about its true intentions, thus delaying any resolution of the conflict.

While the first attempt of the German peace plan failed, it nonetheless indicates a growing realization among the EU's power brokers that it is time to get serious about resolving festering conflicts in the union's new

neighborhood. Berlin's leadership is particularly notable as Germany is closest to Russia among the EU's major member states. And yet Berlin's peace initiative showed that it considers its diversified investments and diplomatic interests in the Caspian region important enough to strengthen Europe's relations with Georgia.

There is now no time to lose to draft an improved plan that will better provide for Abkhaz demands to shape their own destiny, without jeopardizing Georgia's sovereignty, democratization and Western integration. Any stepped-up effort must include the separatist Abkhaz leadership. Isolated and increasingly overshadowed by Moscow, the leaders in Sukhumi are no more enthusiastic about Russian dominance than the Georgians are. True, the Abkhaz depend on Moscow's support in their fight against Tbilisi. But they are worried that in the process of getting independence from Georgia, they are being integrated into Russia. That's why they have quietly reached out to Western capitals. An EU high representative, with a significant staff and peacekeeping contingent, would likely be welcomed by the Abkhaz.

By seeking a resolution to the conflicts, Europe is facilitating stability and prosperity in its neighborhood. Reducing tensions in the region also benefits Russia. Violence in Abkhazia has been linked to unrest in Russia's North Caucasus republics of Chechnya, Dagestan and Ingushetia. If Russia got bogged down in a confrontation in Abkhazia, violent separatists in the North Caucasus would step up their own rebellions.

Therefore, achieving peace may not be an insurmountable task. The key to a resolution in Abkhazia is to convince Russia that stability on its southern border is more important than a violent veto over Georgia's, and possibly Abkhazia's, Western integration.

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