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# Fire Flares over Frozen Conflicts in the Caucasus

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Background : Brussels and Washington are worried about increasing tensions in Nagorno-Karabakh, South Ossetia and Abkhazia. The independence of Kosovo opens <sup>3</sup>the Pandora box<sup>2</sup> on the Caucasus

MOSCOW - Officially, it has nothing to do with the independence of Kosovo, but the turmoil that has broken out in the <sup>3</sup>Frozen conflicts<sup>2</sup> in the Caucasus is watched with great worry by Brussels and Washington.

It began last week on the borders between Azerbaijan and Nagorno-Karabakh, the Armenian enclave in Azerbaijan, which after the bloody fighting in the nineties, now claims to be independent. The clashes were the worst since many years. Western delegates hurried there to ask both parties to respect the cease fire. They got that promise, but only after Azerbaijan had threatened to solve the conflict "by means of force".

Then, Thursday, Russia poured oil on the fire of another smouldering conflict by lifting <sup>3</sup>all commercial restriction<sup>2</sup> in her trade with Abkhazia. South Ossetia and Abkhazia are separatist regions in Georgia which are propped up by Russian help. Georgia called it an <sup>3</sup>extremely dangerous provocation<sup>2</sup>.

Russia has always warned that the independence of Kosovo will open <sup>3</sup>the Pandora box<sup>2</sup>. Abkhazia and South Ossetia called on the international community this week to recognize their independence. Moscow, however, did not want to go this far.

The restoration of the full economic relations, which practically are closely-knit, is an intermediate step that serves Russia's own interests. Russia is going to organize the 2014 Olympic Winter games in Sochi, a city that lies near the border with Abkhazia. By the decision taken this week, Abkhazia can be brought in to assist in the construction of Olympic facilities. According to Georgia, this will open the door to delivery of weapons to Abkhazian separatists and to the strengthening of Russian presence in Abkhazia.

While the Georgian <sup>3</sup>frozen conflicts<sup>2</sup> were being heated up, the western delegations were busy quelling the Nagorno-Karabakh crisis. Matthew Bryza of America and Simmons of NATO, turned up there quickly to hold parties back >From new <sup>3</sup>large-scale incidents<sup>2</sup>. Also the British John Prescott flew to Armenia on behalf of the Council of Europe in connection with the state of emergency that has been put in force after the government last week made a bloody end to the protests by the opposition.

It appears that due to the tension in the Caucasus, the Western Real-politic is winning over the promotion of democracy. In January, the western countries endorsed the re-election of Sahakashvili in Georgia despite indications pointing to election fraud. Likewise, after heavy-handed ending of the demonstrations in Armenia, it was conspicuously silent on the western front.

The demonstrations had been organized by the opposition to protest against election fraud that brought Kocharian's ally to power. Western observers mentioned irregularities; nonetheless they endorsed the outcome of elections.

<sup>3</sup>Armenia is such a rare case where the western and the Russian observers share the same opinion, a Ukrainian commentator wrote. He also affirmed that the time for colour revolutions (nick name for popular street revolutions in

Ukraine and Georgia in 2003) seemed to be over.

While the state of emergency is still in force in Armenia and many opposition politicians have been arrested, Sahakashvili called on the Georgian opposition to unity because of the existence of foreign threat. The opposition went, instead, to the streets in protest against his 'falsified' victory and the leaders of the opposition went on hunger strike.

Next to possible Russian intrigues, it is thus mainly the internal tensions in Armenia and Georgia that explain why western delegations flew out like a swarm of bees to the Caucasus. After all, Kosovo, as is heard officially, has to remain "a unique case".

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