

South Ossetia Epicentre of geopolitical change

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During the 1970s, Spokesman published a number of books by the brothers Medvedev, including notably Let History Judge (1975). There followed Political Essays and On Socialist Democracy, also by Roy Medvedev, and National Frontiers and International Scientific Co-operation and Secrecy of Correspondence is Guaranteed by Law, both by Zhores Medvedev.

Both brothers were among the first signatories of the so-called 'Russell Appeal' which launched the movement for European Nuclear Disarmament.

Some fragments of history

South Ossetia is separated from its principal northern half by spurs from Mount Kazbek that form the Caucasus Mountains. Recent events there have changed the political and economic history of the world, having returned Russia to the status of a 'great power'. This is guaranteed by virtue of Russia's influence, rather than the statistics of consumption.

The ancient Ossetian people's division into 'north' and 'south' has diminished only recently, thanks to the construction, between 1981 and 1985, of the almost four-kilometre long Roki tunnel, built at a height of three kilometres beneath Mount Sokhs. The Ossetians voluntarily became part of the Russian Empire, but in two stages. North Ossetia joined with Russia in 1767. Vladikavkaz, Russia's first fortress in the Northern Caucasus, was built in 1784. South Ossetia became part of Russia in 1801, together with Georgia, which was fragmented at that time into several principalities and kingdoms seeking protection from Russia against raids by the armies of the Persian and Ottoman Empires. The Ossetian people were driven from their historic lands in the southern reaches of the Don Valley by the Mongol invasions, finding refuge in the Caucasus Mountains. The North Ossetians, who were farmers and herdsmen, never experienced serfdom. The South Ossetians became serfs of the Georgian princes Eristavov and Machabeli. Tsar Alexander the Second's Manifest, which abolished serfdom in Russia in 1861, was extended to South Ossetia only in 1864.

The South Ossetian autonomous area

was declared in 1922. In 1991, the autonomous rights of the South Ossetians were revoked by the first president of Georgia, Zviad Gamsakhurdiya, in accordance with his programme of 'Georgia for the Georgians'. The South Ossetian autonomous area was renamed 'Samchabalo', after the family of the Georgian princes of Machabeli. It was forbidden to teach the Ossetian language at school. The uprising of the Ossetians, and then of the Abkhazians, against Gamsakhurdiya's decrees led to bloody wars, the defeat of Georgia, and to the appearance of the unrecognised republics of South Ossetia and Abkhazia in 1992 and 1994 respectively. Such a situation could only continue as long as Nato did not expand eastwards, ultimately to include Georgia.

The main strategic opponents of the United States, after the dissolution of the Soviet Union and the end of the 'Cold War', were not far from the trans-Caucasus. They were Iraq, Iran and Afghanistan. The significant increase in the price of oil due to rising demand gave this region greater importance also for the European Union. The independence of the small, unrecognised mini-state of South Ossetia, with a territory of 3,900 square kilometres, became a hindrance to the political and economic programmes of 'the West'.

Nato and Georgia

The end of the 'Cold War' and the disintegration of the Soviet Union could have led to Nato's liquidation since this military bloc had lost its strategic 'opponent'. But, contrary to its own promises and political logic, and under the influence of the United States, Nato adopted a policy of enlargement to the East, recruiting new members from among its former opponents. However, the rapid increase in the number of members of Nato weakened the economic base of this military organisation, particularly because all the Eastern European countries were almost completely dependent on Russia for sources of energy. If the energy balance in France is that 16% of its gas and 12% of its oil comes from Russia, in Italy 29% and 16%, and in Great Britain 2% and 17%, then the position of Eastern Europe with respect to gas and oil is completely different, not to mention Eastern Europe's complete dependence on Russia for nuclear generation of electricity. Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania, Slovakia, Hungary, Bulgaria, Poland and Romania depend on Russia for almost 100% of their gas and between 60 and 100% of their oil. All the nuclear power stations in Eastern Europe and Ukraine were built by the Soviet Union, and require uranium from Russia. Russia guarantees the reprocessing of their spent nuclear fuel. The switching of Nato military operations to the Asiatic region, particularly

Afghanistan and Iraq, has led to the organisation's dependence on Russia and Central Asian countries for air and overland transport communications. In normal circumstances this situation would quickly lead to improving all forms of co-operation between Nato, the European Union and Russia. However, this tendency contradicts the political and military interests of the United States, since it enhances Russia's role in world politics. Closer relations between Russia and the European Union are opposed by Poland, Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania, Hungary and the Czech Republic, where Russophobia forms part of national ideology.

Nato's critical dependence on the energy resources of Russia and Central Asia has led the United States not only to absorb by military means ownership of the native resources of Iraqi oil, but also to plan complete control over the oil and gas reserves of the Caspian region, energy resources which are reckoned to be almost equivalent to those of the Persian Gulf.

'Caspian oil is the best instrument for geo-economically bringing Central Asia and the Trans-Caucasus into world markets, to separate them from Russia, and to liquidate for ever the possibility of post-Soviet imperial integration,' declared Zbigniew Brzezinski, the influential advisor and former strategist of the US State Department, ten years ago. In order to realise this plan, in 1996, an oil pipeline from Baku to Tbilisi to Ceyhan (BTC) was proposed, which was especially important for Georgia, struggling with economic decline. It would have been much easier and cheaper to send Baku oil to coastal terminals via Armenia and Iran. However, Armenia's participation was opposed by Azerbaijan, and the United States opposed Iran's. The chosen route, 449 kilometres in Azerbaijan, 235km in Georgia, and 1,059km in Turkey, was dearer and technically more complex, and passed through Kurdish regions of Turkey, so that it took a long time to find sponsors. In the end, construction of the pipeline began in 2003, paid for by 11 oil companies, including British Petroleum and the Azerbaijan Oil Company as the main backers.

The problem of supplying natural gas to the European Union outside Russian territory was partly resolved by the 'Baku-Tbilisi-Erzurum' pipeline, which commenced operations at the end of 2006. It undoubtedly reduced Georgia's dependence on Russian gas. However, the real reserves of oil and gas in Azerbaijan turned out to be significantly more modest than expected. The resources of this region, which has supplied Russia, the Soviet Union and Europe with oil and gas for almost 150 years, are badly exhausted. The Baku-Tbilisi-Ceyhan pipeline has for a while not operated at its projected capacity, nor is it profitable. In order to guarantee Europe's

oil and gas supplies in the long term by going around Russia, it is necessary to look to the southern route for the oil and gas resources of Kazakhstan, Uzbekistan and Turkmenistan. Since the end of 2006, Kazakhstan began to send oil by tanker across the Caspian Sea from Aktau to Baku for onward transportation via the Baku-Tbilisi-Ceyhan pipeline. Part of the Baku and Kazakh oil was sent by pipeline to the Georgian port of Supse, where it is transferred to tankers, and the terminal can handle about five million tonnes of oil a year. The Nabucco project has been put forward in an attempt to solve the 'gas' problems of Eastern Europe, with not only Georgia but also Ukraine participating. It was precisely these projects of transporting energy resources through Georgia to the European Union, and circumventing Russia, that made Georgia's membership of Nato so important.

Georgia and the Nabucco Pipeline

Project 'Nabucco', named in honour of Verdi's opera first performed in Milan in 1848, arose somewhat later. But it was not so much Verdi's music that played a part in the choice of name as the subject of the opera, concerning events in Babylon, one of the most notable cities of antiquity, the ruins of which attracted many explorers to Iraq. The Nabucco pipeline might run not far from these ruins. The route of the pipeline is planned to go from Azerbaijan and Georgia into Turkey, then further into Bulgaria, Romania, Hungary, the Czech Republic and Austria. But there is not enough Azerbaijan gas to fill the pipeline, and only the somewhat richer gas resources of Turkmenistan and Kazakhstan can guarantee to meet the demands of Eastern Europe. Gas pipelines, as distinct from oil ones, can run along the seabed. However, the countries of Eastern Europe, not having had serious conflicts with Iran, were ready to build a gas pipeline on Iranian territory, using Iranian gas. Iran has the second largest natural gas reserves in the world after Russia. Georgia's membership of Nato was considered as a guarantee of all these oil and gas pipeline systems.

Arming Georgia

The establishment in Georgia of efficient military units and their armaments was actively begun in 2004, mainly for a forced solution of the South Ossetia and Abkhazia problems. There was simply no other reason for the rapid militarisation of this small country which had no military tradition. This, of course, was understood in Abkhazia, South Ossetia, and in Russia. The territorial conflicts, which had been going on in Georgia since 1992, prevented the country's acceptance into Nato. They could either have left

these territories a free choice, rather like Cyprus, or returned their promised broad autonomy. However, antagonisms between former members of the Georgian Federation go back too far. That left only the military variant, which was approved not only by the United States, but also by several Nato member countries, and also by Israel and Ukraine, which had begun to supply large amounts of modern armaments to Georgia, including anti-aircraft systems, instructors, and even military uniforms. Georgian soldiers were also trained in the role of Special Forces, which they practised in Iraq, where the Georgian contingent was rotated. Georgian and American units undertook joint manoeuvres. But all these measures were not enough to establish military efficiency for the entire nation. This quality can be instilled only by history and by state experience, which form the psychology of a people. Georgians simply did not know what real war was. Georgia was never a colony of Russia, she was a privileged protectorate.

The main errors in this plan were the dates. In 2004, nobody expected that wars in Iraq and Afghanistan would continue without any apparent victory for four more years, broadening in their scale. If these wars had been finished sooner, freeing the American Army, Navy and Air Force, together with Georgia joining Nato, then the blitzkrieg in South Ossetia and Abkhazia might have had some hope of success. American military bases would have been established on Georgian territory, not only for the protection of that country, but also for the possibility of war with Iran. In winter all the passes, tunnels and roads through the Caucasus mountains are completely closed by snow and impassable to military equipment. Pentagon experts always judge the capability of the Russian Army by the results of the Chechen campaign. It was thought that Dmitry Medvedev, as a new commander in chief, would display indecisiveness and reluctance to take risks.

Results and consequences of events in Georgia

Oil and sea pipelines passing through Georgia's territory were, naturally, inactive for two to three weeks while military activity continued. The transportation of oil by barge and tanker from Kazakhstan was also stopped. Azerbaijan sent its oil through the Russian pipeline to the terminal in Novorossisk. The Nabucco gas pipeline project, on which construction has not yet begun, has become more difficult to realise. According to the headline of one of the commentaries on US Vice President Dick Cheney's visit to Baku, Tbilisi and Kiev at the beginning of September 2008, 'Cheney flies to the Caucasus to save Nabucco, but sentence on the project has already been handed down'. The main potential sources of gas for this pipeline, Kazakhstan and Turkmenistan, have already decided to send their

deliveries to China and Russia. For them the main problem was the price of gas, particularly the very low price paid by Ukraine. China and Russia proposed market prices and reliable transit. To find sufficient capital to build Nabucco, which is more than 3,300km long, at a cost approaching six billion dollars, is now practically unrealistic.

The construction of American bases in Georgia has been deferred for an indefinite period. The arrival of the American naval fleet off the coast of Georgia, preposterously to deliver 'humanitarian aid', followed by the appearance of Nato warships and various announcements by President Yushchenko who tried, without effect, to limit the movements of the Russian Black Sea fleet, have given rise to political complications in the Ukraine. Now it has become clear that Russia's Black Sea fleet will remain in Sevastopol for the foreseeable future, preventing any real possibility of Nato membership for Ukraine. The full history of President Saakashvili's fateful instruction to commence the massive bombardment of South Ossetia, delivered by mobile phone from Tbilisi at midnight on 7 August 2008, timed to coincide with the beginning of the Olympic games in Beijing, remains unclear. A study of all the 'Georgian' details of this short war is possible only in Tbilisi, where both authors of this article were born in 1925.

Translated by Tony Simpson



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