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small nations and great powers

A STUDY OF ETHNOPOLITICAL CONFLICT IN THE CAUCASUS

Svante E. Cornell
## Contents

Map of the Caucasus ............................... xiv
Acknowledgements ............................... xvii

1. **The Caucasus: a region in conflict** ........ 1
   
   Historical and geographical settings and ethnolinguistic divisions
   
   The museum of peoples .......................... 4
   The crossroads of religion ....................... 5
   **The Caucasus: a security complex?** ........ 6

2. **The legacy of history: underlying factors in the Caucasian conflicts** ........ 11
   
   The Russian conquest of the Caucasus: the North Caucasus ................... 11
   The Chechen-Dagestani rebellions: 1783–1859 ............................. 12
   The Circassian resistance .......................... 13
   The Soviet era: the last ghazawat and the deportations ..................... 14
   **The Russian conquest of the Caucasus: the South Caucasus** ............. 16
   The Russian move into the Islamic empires .................................. 16
   The Georgian and Armenian allies .............................................. 19
   The Armenians: a dispersed nation ............................................. 20
   The Azeris: a divided nation ................................................... 21
   **The Soviet legacy: Leninist nationality policy and the structure of the Soviet Union** ........ 24
   The Soviet structure ................................................. 26
   **The devaluation of autonomy: a cause of conflict and an impediment to resolution** ........ 26
The legacy of Soviet-style ‘federalism’  
27
The refusal of autonomy as a solution  
29
A solution to this dilemma: international control and guarantees?  
32

**The fall of the Soviet Union and conflicting identities**  
32
Soviet identity and local identity  
33
The dissolution of the Soviet Union and the quest for identity  
35
Identity and conflict  
36

**A structural instability?**  
37

**The nature and roots of the Caucasian conflicts**  
39
The politicization of ethnicity—not of religion  
41
Religious rallying or Realpolitik?  
42

**Conclusions**  
44

3. The Armenian-Azerbaijani conflict over Nagorno-Karabakh  
47

**Early history and conflicting claims**  
48

**The Soviet era and the suppression of the conflict: 1921–87**  
59

**Perestroika and the re-emergence of the conflict: 1987–91**  
64
February 1988: the explosion  
65
Sumgait: the escalation becomes irrevocable  
67
The spiral of violence and the militarization of the conflict  
71
The mirroring nationalisms  
79

**Full-scale war: 1992–94**  
81
The shock of Khojaly  
81
The Armenian upper hand  
83
Azerbaijan’s disastrous internal distractions  
86
The tide of the war  
89
The hard road to stability in Azerbaijan  
94
The de facto integration of Karabakh into Armenia  
95

**The search for solutions**  
95
The role of the CSCE/OSCE  
96
The Russian challenge to the CSCE mediation and its consequences 99
1997–98: a semblance of progress—but a backlash? 102
Direct negotiations: a new stage? 107
The position of the parties and obstacles to a solution 108
Models of solutions 112
A return to the status quo ante 112
A re-negotiated autonomy 115
A territorial swap? 119
Joint sovereignty 121
Other suggestions and models 122
Pillars of a solution 124
Conclusions 125

4. Georgia: from unitary dreams to an asymmetric federation? 129
   The historical background 131
   The Georgian national revival 138
   The re-emergence of Abkhazian separatism 143
   Perestroika and the road to independence 146
   The escalation of tension with the minorities 151
      Abkhazia: the beginnings, 1989–91 151
      The escalation to war in South Ossetia 153
      The fall of Gamsakhurdia and the loss of South Ossetia 156
      The war in Abkhazia: 1992–93 158
      Post-war developments in Abkhazia 162
   Potential disturbances in Georgia 163
      The question of Ajaria 163
      The Javakheti dilemma 166
      The Meskhetians or Ahiska 170
      The ‘Zviadists’ in Mingrelia 172
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Section</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Peacekeeping</td>
<td>173</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The search for solutions</td>
<td>95</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Abkhazia: from bad to worse?</td>
<td>176</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>South Ossetia: a solution on the horizon?</td>
<td>181</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Conclusions</td>
<td>183</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5. Russia’s war with Chechnya</td>
<td>185</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Prelude: deportation and return</td>
<td>186</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The genocidal deportation of 1944</td>
<td>186</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Reasons for the deportation</td>
<td>188</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The return and rebuilding of the nation</td>
<td>189</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The revolution</td>
<td>194</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1991–94: de facto independence and Russian subversion</td>
<td>199</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The failure of negotiations</td>
<td>207</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The tragedy</td>
<td>210</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Reasons for the war</td>
<td>210</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Disastrous military intervention and steamroller tactics</td>
<td>213</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Budennovsk: a narrow escape from defeat</td>
<td>215</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The Chechen comeback and victory</td>
<td>217</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Why did the Russian army fail to invade Chechnya?</td>
<td>218</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Consequences of the war for Russia</td>
<td>220</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>International reaction and attitudes</td>
<td>223</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The United States</td>
<td>223</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Western Europe</td>
<td>224</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The Islamic World</td>
<td>224</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Eastern Europe and the CIS</td>
<td>225</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The International Court of Justice</td>
<td>227</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Legal considerations: the decolonization aspect</td>
<td>227</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The post-war era</td>
<td>229</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Russian-Chechen relations since 1996</td>
<td>229</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
6. Conlicts in the North Caucasus

The Ingush-Ossetian conflict

Background to the conflict

The Soviet era

The fall of the Soviet Union and the escalation of the conflict

October 1992: war

The Russian intervention

The outcome of the conflict and its aftermath

The Northwestern Caucasus

The Lezgin quest for unification

Dagestan: complexity par excellence

Russia and Dagestan

The return of Islam

Multi-ethnic Dagestan

August 1999

Political prospects

Conclusions

7. Turkey: priority to Azerbaijan

Turkish policy: 1923–91

Early euphoria

Turkey: Azerbaijan’s only ally?

Nagorno-Karabakh: Turkey’s wake-up call

Turkey’s dilemma in the Caucasus: the constraining factors upon Turkey

The Azeri reaction

The Javadov scandal

Turkey and Armenia: doomed to animosity?

Initial good signs but rapid deterioration
Moderate governments prisoners of their own predicaments 293

The strategic context 294

**Georgia: from neglect to commitment** 296

The Abkhazia dilemma 296

Initial Turkish neglect 297

The rapid development of the Turkish-Georgian partnership 298

**Chechnya and the North Caucasus: an ambiguous stance** 300

Implications for Turkey in the CIS and regional power alignments 303

Conclusions 305

8. **Iran: a reluctant neighbour** 307

The Azerbaijan question up to the Soviet breakup 309

The perceived Azerbaijani threat 312

The Russo-Iranian axis over the Caspian Sea 316

Iran and the Karabakh war 317

The Tehran-Moscow-Yerevan triangle 320

Conclusions 322

9. **Russia: a retreating hegemonic power** 323

The Russian foreign policy debate and foreign policy goals in the ‘Near Abroad’ 324

Initial Western orientation and its critics 324

The return of imperial attitudes and the 1993 security doctrine 329

The climax: the subduing of the Transcaucasus and the war in Chechnya 332

Patterns of intervention 333

Georgia: from confusion to assertiveness 334

Azerbaijan and Armenia: subtle but effective 343

Caspian oil: a lost round 349

Implications for Eurasian strategy 351

Conclusions: the retreating hegemonic power 354
The Caucasus
For Gudrun and Erik
Acknowledgements

A number of individuals have contributed advice, suggestions, positive criticism and practical help that have been crucial for the preparation of the book. These include Nicholas Awde, Hüseyin Bagci, Süha Bölükbası, Tair Faradov, Ashot Galoian, Kristian Gerner, Thomas Goltz, Jonathan Henick, Edmund Herzig, Harutiuin Kojyan, Patrik Jotun, Neil MacFarlane, Niyazi Mehdi, Erik Melander, Ambassador Mathias Mossberg, Kjell-Åke Nordquist, Ambassador Memmed Novruzoglu, Magnus Öberg, Necati Polat, Consul General Erdal Otuzbir, Alexander Rondeli, George Tcheishvili, Anders Troedsson and Peter Wallensteen, as well as people whose names cannot be mentioned here. Any remaining mistakes are naturally my own. Research for this book was supported by the Swedish Research Council for the Humanities and Social Sciences and the department of East European Studies at Uppsala University. The Swedish Foreign Ministry also provided financial support.

SVANTE E.CORNELL
Uppsala, August 2000
small nations and great powers
The Caucasus: a region in conflict

The Caucasus has arguably been one of the regions of the Eurasian continent most affected by what in the last decade has come to be called ‘the new world disorder’. Together with former Yugoslavia, it is the area of Eurasia most gravely hit by ethnopolitical conflict and warfare. Indeed, of the eight instances of armed civil conflict that have occurred on the territory of the former Soviet Union, five have taken place in the Caucasus. The conflicts in Nagorno-Karabakh, South Ossetia, Abkhazia, the Prigorodnii Rayon of North Ossetia, and Chechnya have together resulted in close to a hundred thousand deaths and an estimated two million six hundred thousand refugees and Internally Displaced Persons. The humanitarian burden has nevertheless been borne by the people of the region more than by the international community, whose aid and relief efforts have been less than satisfactory. A corollary of the armed conflicts of the region has furthermore been to aggravate the economic situation of the region, which was already suffering the problems of transition from the centralized and planned Soviet economy to a market economy. This, together with the availability of weapons that accompanies any war, has accentuated the risk of degeneration of tensions in other potential trouble spots, such as Javakheti in Georgia or Dagestan in the northeastern Caucasus.

The conflicts of the Caucasus, despite the unique circumstances and conditions of each conflict, display remarkable similarities in their roots and immediate causes. As a matter of fact, the four major conflicts—that is all those except the Ingush-Ossetian conflict—are cases of ethnic-based autonomous regions of the Soviet era revolting against their respective central governments during the liberalization and dissolution of the Soviet Union. This is by itself an interesting fact, as conflict theorists have argued that autonomy is in itself a desirable compromise solution to ethnic grievances. The Soviet Union and in particular the Caucasus, for a variety of reasons, form an exception to this generally observed trend. While autonomous minorities revolted, non-autonomous ones showed few signs of an imminent revolt, while campaigning for their minority rights to different degrees. Another equally remarkable similarity between conflicts in the Transcaucasus has been the importance of outside support for the revolting minority. The case of Chechnya nevertheless diverges from this pattern, as does the Ingush-Ossetian conflict.
squarely been described as ‘ethnic’ or ‘religious’ in nature, even superficial analysis of the conflicts shows the inadequacy of such simplistic explanations. The conflicts are primarily political conflicts over territory and ownership thereof. Naturally, the conflicts are all due to the process of politicizing ethnicity, which emerged openly in 1987–89, although its beginnings can be traced back to a considerably earlier date, and lasts until this day.

The Caucasus, throughout its history, has been a borderland. It has been an area over which empires have competed; an area in which civilizations and religions met; it has served both as bridge and barrier to contacts between north and south, and between east and west. Its crucial geopolitical location—lying between the historical Tsarist, Safavid and Ottoman empires as well as also between the regional powers of the late twentieth century: Russia, Iran, and Turkey—has been a mixed blessing. More often than not, the Caucasian peoples have ‘lost rather than gained from their important geopolitical position’, as Alexander Rondeli has noted. Foreign powers have co-opted local dynasties and leaderships against their rivals, annexed the territories on which the Caucasian peoples have lived, deported their populations, or suppressed them violently throughout history. Today, the Caucasian states are thought to have ‘the potential to become one of the real success stories of the next century’, being a crucial communications route between Europe and Asia, and thanks to their role in the production and export of the oil and gas resources of the Caspian Sea and its environs.Nevertheless, the speedy development of the Caucasus remains elusive for a series of interrelated reasons. The first, of course, is the persistence of the five armed conflicts that have plagued the region since the late 1980s: in fact, although the five conflicts are frozen along ceasefire lines (except for Chechnya which descended into war for a second time in September 1999), no final political solution has been found to any of them. On the contrary, the road to a mutually acceptable settlement in any of the conflicts remains hostage to the future. The second reason is that the attitudes of the principle outside powers are in general not conducive to peace and stability. The main states with an interest in the region pursue their own interests, which are frequently at the expense of those of the peoples and states of the Caucasus. This is naturally valid more for some players than others, as the individual chapters on the regional and great powers will show. Thirdly, the increasing geopolitical importance of the Caucasus, be it in the politics of oil or in the larger struggle for influence over the ‘Crescent’ of states (that is Central Asia and the Caucasus) that from a ‘northern’ perspective forms Russia’s ‘underbelly’—and from a southern perspective the ‘Northern Tier’ of the Middle East—implies that foreign powers are increasingly willing and able to ally with one state or another in the region, whereas the rebellious minorities, for their part, continue to seek links to outside powers to further their security. Although the struggle for influence in the region, as argued by Edmund Herzig, does increase the number of options available to the three states and prevents one state from dominating the area, in recent years this process has led to the formation of countervailing alignments of states which threaten to intensify the zero
sum character of the international relations of the Caucasus. This process may prove detrimental to peace and stability as the parties to a conflict see the possibility of seeking better terms for a solution either by biding their time or allying with certain external powers or forces.

The existing, open conflicts of the region, furthermore, do not fill the entire spectrum of potential confrontational relations between and among peoples and states in the region; there are several relatively acute problematic situations with the potential to deteriorate into violence. As a whole, then, the difficult international as well as inter-ethnic relations in the Caucasus pose important actual and potential threats to the regional security of Eurasia, and by extension to international security in general. The region and its conflicts are nevertheless little known and poorly understood outside the immediate neighbourhood of the Caucasus. In this chapter, the Caucasus region will be briefly defined and its ethno-territorial aspects outlined; the region as such and the interested parties to it will be defined; and the analytical framework of a security complex, which will provide a background for the subsequent analysis, will be introduced.

**Historical & geographical settings & ethnolinguistic divisions**

The geographical delimitation of the Caucasus, as that of Europe for that matter, has no generally accepted answer. The primary delimitation is geographical: the Caucasus then forms the mountainous region between the shores of the Black and Caspian Seas. This simplistic definition naturally needs to be qualified. If one is to define the region in the light of the history of the past 200 years and with regard to demographic factors, the logical northern border of the Caucasus would be the area originally in the foothills but later in the plains on the northern slope of the Caucasus mountains which separate the areas of habitation of the small peoples of the North Caucasus from the Russian-populated areas to their north. In late twentieth-century political terms, the most appropriate definition is the northern border of the North Caucasian autonomous republics with Krasnodar and Stavropol Krai, where mainland Russia can be said to begin. In the west, the border area is the region where Turkish-populated areas meet regions populated by Georgians and Armenians. This is a sensitive topic, as the Armenian population in the past extended much further westwards than is the case today. However, given the fact that the eastern border of the Ottoman empire with Russia became roughly defined—except for certain contentious areas such as Batumi, Kars, Ardahan, Erzurum, etc—in the first half of the nineteenth century, this border indeed forms a logical western border for the Caucasus. The appropriate southern border is more difficult to define, as demographically both banks of the Araxes river, which now forms a political border, is populated by Azerbaijani Turks. In this sense, the Araxes, which has defined Iran’s northern border since 1828, makes little sense; it divides a large people—the Azerbaijani Turks—into two empires, much as the eastern border of Turkey divided the Armenians.
Nevertheless, in political terms this border has been stable for the past 170 years, and must therefore be reckoned with. In terms of today’s political map, the Caucasus region then includes three entire states—Armenia, Azerbaijan, and Georgia—as well as a portion of a fourth: the North Caucasus which forms a part of the Russian Federation. The Caucasus, defined as such, comprises an area of roughly 400,000 km², with a population of something over 20 million. The delimitation is made difficult by the fact that the administrative units in the North Caucasus are drawn further north than the traditional places of residence of their titular nations. The North Caucasian peoples have thus moved north from their traditional areas of residence in the mountains or their immediate foothills, and now many of them live in the plains north of the mountain ranges, areas where large number of Russians and Cossacks also live. It seems safe to argue that the reason for this drawing of the map during the early Soviet era was in order to include large Slavic populations in these territories, with the aim of diluting their demographic composition.

The distinction between the North Caucasus and South or Trans-Caucasia is also relevant in itself. Here it should be noted that the term Transcaucasia stems from Russian (Zakavkaz) and literally means ‘the lands beyond the Caucasus mountains’, hence clearly reflecting a Russian point of view. A more neutral term, which will be used in this volume, is the South Caucasus or South Caucasia. Politically, it has been noted that the South Caucasus consists of the three independent states of Armenia, Azerbaijan and Georgia; the entire North Caucasus forms a part of the Russian Federation, with the status of Chechnya still to be decided. From West to East, the territorial units of the North Caucasus are Adygea, Karachai-Cherkessia, Kabardino-Balkaria, North Ossetia, Ingushetia, Chechnya, and Dagestan. It should be noted that the Abkhaz and South Ossetians, while holders of administrative units lying within Georgia, are ethnic kin of North Caucasian peoples.

The museum of peoples

The ethno-linguistic map of the Caucasus is an area of study in its own right, and it is difficult to draw a comprehensible outline in a concise manner. It is nevertheless crucial to have an idea of the ethno-linguistic and religious conditions to understand the politics of the present-day Caucasus. The South Caucasus is comparatively easy to map. It consists of three major peoples, the Azeris (6 million), Georgians (4 million) and Armenians (3.5 million in the Caucasus), as well as a number of less numerous peoples, some of which are indigenous. All the republics are multi-ethnic, although presently Armenia is developing towards a mono-ethnic state with over 95 per cent Armenians and little over 2 per cent Russians, the only significant remaining minority being a number of Yezidi Kurds amounting to less than 2 per cent of the population. However, both Georgia and Azerbaijan are multi-ethnic; in Georgia, for example, the titular nationality comprises less than 70 per cent of the population; the main minority groups are
Armenians, Georgians, Azeris, followed by Ossetians, Greeks, and Abkhaz. Furthermore, the majority population itself, the Georgians or Kartvelians, comprises several sub-groups such as Mingrelians and Svans. In Azerbaijan, the Azeri presently make up over 90 per cent; Dagestani peoples form over 3 per cent, and Russians 2.5 per cent. These figures approximate the official position; however, in reality the size of the Dagestani Lezgin community in Azerbaijan is unknown, officially put at 200,000 but according to Lezgin sources substantially larger. The Kurdish population is also substantial, according to some sources over 10 per cent of the population; in the south there is a substantial community of the Iranian ethnic group, of Talysh, possibly some 200,000–400,000 people.

The North Caucasus presents a considerably more complicated population map. Its population is composed of several different groups of people. The first group of peoples are those which can be termed only as indigenous Caucasian peoples. These are the Vainakh peoples (composed of Chechens, Ingush, and Tsova-Tush) and Dagestani peoples—such as the Avars, Lezgins, Dargins, and Laks—in the northeast; and the Abkhaz and Circassian peoples (sub-divided somewhat artificially into Kabardins, Adyge, and Cherkess) in the northwest. Ethnologists have concluded that these groups do not have an origin outside the Caucasus; in fact they have according to certain sources been traced back 8,000 years in the case of Dagestan, and to over 6,000 years in Chechnya. They have thus remained in the region throughout the substantial migrations that have passed through the Caucasus in recorded history, protected well into modern times by the inaccessibility of their mountains. The second group of peoples inhabiting the Caucasus are settlers of Turkic and Iranian origin. Ossetians and Tats (Mountain Jews) are the only sizeable ethnic groups to claim Iranian origin. The Turkic peoples appeared in the Caucasus some time between the middle and the end of the first millennium, but not until the thirteenth century did they establish some sort of hegemony, as Chingiz Khan moved into the Caucasus from the south. The Turkic peoples of the North Caucasus belong to the Kipchak family of languages, and consist of the Karachais and Balkars (who are in fact one people speaking dialects of the same language) in the central North Caucasus, and the Kumyks and Nogais in Dagestan.

The crossroads of religions

As far as religious matters are concerned, the Caucasian diversity is equally prominent. In fact, followers of four major religions are found in the area.

Islam exists both in its Shi’i version, Ja’fari Shi’i Islam being the majority religion of the Azeris (75–85 per cent), of the Talysh of Azerbaijan, and a small number of Dagestani ethnic groups on the territory of Azerbaijan. The majority Sunni tradition exists both in its Shafi’i school, among the peoples of Dagestan, but predominantly in the Hanafi school, which is the religion of Chechnya and Ingushetia, of the Circassian peoples (the Adyge, Cherkess, and Kabardins), the Turkic Karachais and Balkars, the Ajars of Georgia, as well as of the minority
of Azeris (15–25 per cent) that are Sunni and the minorities of Ossetians (20–30 per cent) and Abkhazians (est. 35 per cent) that are Muslim.

Christianity is also present in the Transcaucasus in various forms. The main pillars of Christianity in the region are the Georgian Orthodox Church and the Armenian Monophysite Church. Moreover, the considerable majority of Ossetians are Orthodox Christians, mainly of the same rite as the Russians, who are also present in the region as settlers (roughly 3 per cent in Armenia, 4 per cent in Azerbaijan, 6 per cent in Georgia, as well as in the North Caucasus.) Nevertheless some Ossetians in Georgia seem to follow the Georgian Orthodox rite. The Abkhaz are also partly Christian, although the Abkhaz in general are equally weary of both Islam and Christianity—an interesting instance of the retention of pagan traditions, their amalgamation with Islam and Christianity, and a generally low religious profile. Since the break-up of the Soviet Union, a number of Protestant missions have reached the Caucasus from western Europe, but have gained few followers, with some success only in Armenia.

Judaism is represented in the form of the indigenous Georgian Jews, as well as the Tats or Mountain Jews, who live in Azerbaijan and Dagestan. They enjoy relatively good relations with the states of the region, and the Mountain Jews of Quba in Azerbaijan take pride in saying that ‘there are only two places in the world where Jews live together like this, in Israel and here’. Besides the Tats, there were Ashkenazi Jews living mainly in Baku, many of whom have migrated to Israel, more as a result of the generally difficult conditions in the country than any discrimination. There are also about 20,000 Georgian Jews.

Finally, Buddhism, which is actually one of the ‘indigenous’ religions of the Russian Federation according to the present constitution, is the religion of the Kalmyks, who live on the northwestern shore of the Caspian Sea, to the north of Dagestan. Kalmykia is not normally considered as a part of the Caucasus, but it is not part of any other Russian region and does border the Caucasus. Moreover, interaction between Kalmyks and the Caucasian peoples to their south are increasing. The role of religion in the conflicts of the area has been debated and is the object of much prejudice, especially in the West—this issue is treated below.

The Caucasus: a security complex?

Regions as levels of analysis and their definition have been an issue neglected in the theory of international relations for many years, despite the fact that the term ‘region’ is used widely in everyday language. Theoretical discussions have provided two levels of analysis, on which most theory has operated: first, the level of the individual state, and second, the so-called ‘system’ level of analysis—that is, the global international system of states. In a sense, then, there is a ‘unit’ level and a ‘global’ level of analysis; however, between these two levels are regions—or sub-systems of states whose security is linked more strongly to one another than to states outside the group. This regional level is very important in the
understanding of the security and security relations of states. However, in the words of Barry Buzan:

[the] important set of security dynamics at the regional level...often tends to get lost or discounted. At that middle level, one finds only the hazy notions of regional balances of power and subsystems, or crude media references that use region to describe whatever location currently contains a newsworthy level of political turbulence.\textsuperscript{11}

The correct definition of a region, then, becomes crucial for a thorough understanding of the security problems in a given geographical area of the world. Buzan, who paid special attention to the regional level of security in \textit{People, States and Fear}, defines a region in security terms as a distinct and significant subsystem of security relations existing among a set of states whose fate is that they have been locked into geographical proximity with each other.\textsuperscript{12} Based on the power relations between states in a given region as well as relations of amity and enmity, Buzan also defines a security complex as ‘a group of states whose primary security concerns link together sufficiently closely that their national securities cannot realistically be considered apart from one another’.\textsuperscript{13} How then, does one define a security complex? According to Buzan, the task ‘involves making judgments about the relative strengths of security interdependencies among different countries’. These interdependencies can be of varying strength as well as positive or negative. A positive interdependence implies two or more states whose security is linked together, but where there is no feeling of threat but, on the contrary, mutual trust; Buzan gives the example of the mutually reinforcing neutralities of Sweden and Finland. A negative interdependence is a relationship where two or more states are engaged in a rivalry, seeing each other as a threat to their respective national security. An example is the triangle of rivalry in the Persian Gulf between Saudi Arabia, Iraq and Iran (moreover, Buzan notes that triangular relationships are more unstable than bilateral rivalries, due to the imbalance inherent in any alignment within the group). Boundaries between security complexes occur where states have few or no security interactions or dependencies. For example, Burma’s relationship with its neighbours is basically devoid of security dependence; Buzan notes that Burma separates the south Asian from the southeast Asian security complexes. Importantly, security complexes exist ‘where a set of security relationships stands out from the general background by virtue of its relatively strong, inward-looking character, and the relative weakness of its outward security interactions with its neighbours’.\textsuperscript{14} Most often, Buzan argues, a complex is defined by a high level of threat or fear felt mutually among two or more major states, which will typically be close neighbours.\textsuperscript{15} The argument of mutuality is important, as a complex does not arise where only one state feels a major threat. Buzan gives the example of China and Vietnam; whereas China is Vietnam’s main security threat, the opposite is not true. Hence the balance factor in a relationship is important. Regarding the states that separate security
complexes from one another, they can either be outside the dynamics of both complexes they separate or actually ‘face both ways’ and be part of both, without actually linking them. Security complexes also normally include minor states; Buzan defines them as states which have little impact on the structure of the complex and whose security is tightly bound up in the pattern of the larger states. These states can become a source of threat to the larger powers by the impact of their alignments with other states and hence by their impact on the relations between the major states of the subsystem.16

The analytical tool of a security complex is highly relevant and applicable to the Caucasus, and is helpful in defining the states without which a study of the region and its security would be incomplete. Nevertheless, the Caucasus has not always fitted the description of a security complex. It seems fairly clear that a triangle has existed for over 250 years between Russia, Turkey, and Iran, in the different forms that these states have taken; from empires in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries to republics at the start of the twenty-first. The triangular relationship has been more active at certain times than at others: from 1828 onwards, Iran’s role was limited after its near total defeat in a war with Russia; between 1878 and 1918 Turkey’s role was limited by what was effectively Russian control of the Caucasus; finally throughout the entire Soviet era from 1923 until 1991, the triangle was effectively not in force, as the Soviet Union’s hegemony over the Caucasus was accepted by both Iran and Turkey who pursued their respective foreign policies in other directions; the triangular security complex was totally overshadowed by global bipolarity during the Cold War, from 1947 onwards. Iran and Turkey, furthermore, could pursue policies in other directions precisely because they were members of other security complexes. Iran was intensively involved in the Gulf security complex throughout the entire Soviet era; Turkey was preoccupied with its place in Europe; furthermore it has been involved in relationships that could be defined as negative security complexes with Greece as well as with the Middle East, in particular with Syria in the 1980s and 1990s.

What came to crystallize the Caucasus as a security complex again was the dissolution of the Soviet Union which created a geopolitical void in the border area between these three major powers. Hence, three minor powers emerged whose relationships with one another and with the major powers were to have significant negative influences on the entire complex; furthermore autonomous regions within Azerbaijan, Georgia and Russia have played an independent role which has affected the complex and its functioning significantly. First and foremost however, the relationship between Armenia and Azerbaijan immediately developed into a zero-sum game in which both states aimed at receiving outside support for their war effort towards the other. The third state, Georgia, retained its neutrality in this relationship. Meanwhile, to complicate things, a fourth major power has become increasingly interested in the region, the United States. Whereas in 1992 or 1994, the US could probably have been very much left out of the analysis of the Caucasus as a security complex, this is definitively no longer
possible given the proclaimed, as well as perceived, intensity of US interest and action in the region. As such, a study of ethnopolitical conflicts in the Caucasus region needs to take into account three regional powers as well as one non-regional power whose importance for the security of the region is nevertheless readily comparable to that of the three regional powers. This framework crystallizes the structure of this study. In chapter two, some of the main underlying problems of the region will be presented as a basis for analysis. Part two, consisting of chapters three through six, analyzes the conflicts in the region in greater depth. Whereas the cases of Nagorno-Karabakh and Chechnya are treated in separate chapters, the conflicts in Georgia are treated together, as are those of the North Caucasus. In the former case, the interrelations between the two open conflicts as well as the other potential trouble-spots of the country have been deemed to be of such importance, all occurring within and related to the political scene of Georgia, that they can best be understood in conjunction with each other. The cases in the North Caucasus are treated in one chapter as they, much like the case of Georgia, share many similar characteristics of occurring within the political context of the Russian Federation. However, due to their nature the conflicts are different; only the Prigorodniy issue has led to war, whereas the situation in Dagestan, the northwestern Caucasus, and the Lezgin issue have so far remained contained conflicts. The question of Chechnya is treated in a separate chapter and not within the framework of the North Caucasus, as the particular character and magnitude of this conflict deserve to be analyzed in their own right. Part three studies the international dimension, paying attention to the four major powers who have a significant amount of influence in the region. Hence chapters seven through ten study the roles of Turkey, Iran, Russia, and the United States; finally, chapter eleven takes up the concept of a security complex introduced in this chapter and attempts to form a regional picture to understand the security relationships and prospects of the Caucasus.
In this chapter, some of the crucial circumstances underlying the problems of the contemporary Caucasus are analyzed. A main determinant of the situation of the Caucasian nations, their relations with each other and with their outer neighbours has been the legacy of Russian and later Soviet rule. For 170 years, the main determining factor on the Caucasus has been Russia, and the policies of its rulers. Some parts of the region have effectively been under Russian control for longer, Georgia since 1783; others for shorter periods, Chechnya and Dagestan only coherently since 1859. However, the 1828 treaty of Turkmanchai stands out as the date whereby Russia successfully asserted its control over the Transcaucasus. Thereafter, the pacification of the region still had to be achieved, but Turkey and Iran were no longer able to significantly influence events in the region. For this reason, the Russian conquest of the Caucasus and its consequences for the peoples of the region are considered here. Following this, the legacy of the crucially important Soviet period, lasting from 1921-91, is analyzed in terms of Leninist nationality policy and the national delimitation of the Caucasus. The main focus of attention is the devaluation of the concept of autonomy for national minorities of the former USSR, which is directly related to the dichotomy between the creation of regions and republics autonomous in name, and the totalitarian way in which the Union was ruled. Thirdly, the effect of Soviet rule and the subsequent collapse of the union on the individual and collective identities of the peoples of the region are seen as factors contributing to the general instability of the Caucasus. Finally, the structure of instability and the nature and roots of the Caucasian conflicts that exists in the region is discussed.

The Russian conquest of the Caucasus: the North Caucasus

These Circassians are just like your American Indians—as untamable and uncivilized...and, owing to their natural energy of character, extermination only would keep them quiet, or...if they came under Russian rule, the only safe policy would be to employ their wild and warlike tastes against each other.¹
Russia’s entry into the areas lying north of the Caucasian mountain range took place in the sixteenth century, at the time of the disintegration of the Golden Horde, a process which had been started with Ivan the Terrible’s conquest of Kazan in 1539. As the Caucasus suddenly became an object of interest to the Russian empire, attention on the region from other power centres increased. One main interest behind Russia’s push to the south lay in a historical quest to gain access to Iran, for access to warm-water seas and the Iranian market. This was one aspect of Russia’s attempt to realize its dream of extending its empire southward towards India and the warm seas; the other side of this quest was the ‘great game’, as Rudyard Kipling termed it, between Russia and Great Britain in South Asia’s northern frontiers. However the first Russian advance into the Caucasus ended in a military setback; although Muscovy managed to expand into what is now the Stavropol and Krasnodar areas and build forts at the foot of the Caucasus mountains, it suffered a defeat in 1604 against the Ottomans and Dagestanis while trying to build a link to Iran. Thus Russia lost all its advances and was driven back to Astrakhan.

After 1604, the North Caucasus was spared from great conflicts and wars for over a century and a half. Up until 1783 Islam pursued a steady advance at the detriment of Christianity; but parallel to this development Cossack settlements pushed south as far as the foothills of the Caucasus.

The Chechen-Dagestani rebellions, 1783–1859

In 1783 the Crimean khanate broke up, and Russia once again decided to pursue its Caucasian plans. The Russian invasion saw a response led by the Sufi brotherhoods, managing to unite a number of Caucasian peoples under the leadership of Sheikh Mansur, a Chechen Naqshbandi leader, who was able to wage a successful jihad against Russia until 1791, when Mansur was captured. Seemingly, the unity of the Caucasians did not survive their leader’s capture. Russia was thus able to thus advance steadily into the Caucasus, where it faced increasingly weakening resistance. This allowed Russia to open a road to Georgia and thus to exert its influence south of the Caucasus mountains, as will be discussed shortly. However, the Russians were unable to consolidate their conquests. With the rise of Shamil, an Avar who was proclaimed Imam of Dagestan in the 1820s, the North Caucasian peoples once again united under the banner of Islam to chase the ‘Russian invader’ from their lands. In fact, Shamil managed to create a state in the northeastern Caucasus, known as Shamil’s Imamate, which was to last for thirty years. The struggle against Russia, the ghazawat, was waged successfully for a number of years, continuing briefly even after Shamil’s capture in 1859. The long resistance was due partly to the charismatic leadership of Shamil and the skill of the Caucasians in mastering their mountains, and also to the ill-planned strategies of the Russian commanders in the North Caucasus, and Russia’s constant underestimation of, and generally contemptuous attitude for, the Caucasians. Not until 1864 did Russia manage to
sustain its control over the North Caucasus. This was the period of what can be termed the Chechen-Dagestani rebellions, including the later rebellion of 1877–78 during the Russo-Turkish war.

The Circassian resistance

These events unfolded mainly in the northeast of the mountain range, and are relatively well known in the rest of the world due to the character of the Caucasian leaders, mainly Shamil and Mansur. For instance, the writings of Karl Marx on the Caucasian wars have been, as Paul Henze points out, ‘a constant source of embarrassment to the Soviets.’ However, an important component of North Caucasian resistance was the struggle of the Circassian people in the Northwestern Caucasus. As Henze states:

Shamil is only part of the history of North Caucasian resistance… The resistance of the Circassians in the western Caucasus is at least as significant, for it began earlier, lasted longer, and ended more disastrously for those who were fighting to defend their freedom.

Indeed, most Circassians were just as ferociously opposed to Russian rule as were the Chechens. But a major difference lay in the aftermath of the defeat in the 1860s. Whereas the Chechens stayed in the mountains to await better times and new opportunities to revolt, an overwhelming majority of the Circassians were forced to abandon the Caucasus, burning their villages behind them, and setting sail for the Ottoman empire. It is estimated that over a million people of Circassian origin live in Turkey, Jordan, and Syria, whereas only 500,000 live in the Caucasus. The once-proud Ubykh people, for example, is now extinct. This emigration was partly the ‘choice’ of the Circassians themselves after their defeat, but consistent evidence can be found that the Russians pursued a calculated policy of burning villages and holding exemplary massacres, in order to force as many as possible of the natives to leave. The natives were then to be replaced by more ‘reliable’ settlers, such as the Cossacks. The reason this strategy was developed more in the western part of the Caucasus than in the East seems to be that Russia was more interested in the fertile lands of the Black Sea region than in the Dagestani mountains. Thus it was a priority to establish tight control over these lands, and probably easier since subduing the Chechens and Dagestanis in their own mountains would require a greater use of force and would yield comparatively low results compared to the cost of such an operation. Moreover, the event needs to be seen in the light of the Russo-Turkish rivalry: the Circassians to the west would be Turkey’s logical allies in a war with Russia, whereas the areas inhabited by the Chechens and Dagestanis to the east would not have carried the same strategic significance.
The Soviet era: the last ghazawat & the deportations

After the 1877–78 rebellion, Russian authorities took a harder line with the Sufi brotherhoods, which they quite correctly perceived as a driving force behind the constant revolts in Chechnya and Dagestan. The murids (members of Sufi brotherhoods) who were not killed in the violent suppression of the rebellions were either executed or deported to Siberia. Thus Russia expected to have drastically reduced the potential for further uprisings on its southern flank. However, they were mistaken. Instead of disappearing, the Sufi brotherhoods only changed tactics. Rather than advocating ghazawat, they became underground organizations which, by working in silence, managed to include over half, and in some areas almost the entire male population of Chechnya, Ingushetia and Dagestan.

During this period, Russia maintained its rule over these lands without ever managing to exert any major influence on the Caucasian mountain dwellers or their habits and beliefs. Thus it seems fair to say that Russia occupied the northeast Caucasus without succeeding in truly incorporating it into its empire. The Russian revolutions of 1917 were to dramatically change this state of affairs.

The North Caucasus was soon drawn into the war, as General Denikin’s White armies were present in the region, enjoying the support of the Cossack populations. Soon the Caucasians were forced to choose between the White and the Red armies. The White armies were characterized by their overt Russian nationalism, and were thus only the incarnation of the tsarist invader; on the other hand, Lenin offered the mountain peoples full autonomy and supported their right to self-determination. In the end, most Caucasians extended their support to the Red armies. Thus during the civil war between 1917 and 1920, the Red armies in the Caucasus found refuge and shelter among the natives, and their victory over Denikin’s armies must be at least partly attributed to this alliance. Unfortunately, the Bolsheviks were no different from their predecessors when it came to their attitude towards the indigenous peoples. Their scorn and disdain for the ‘backward’ peoples of the Caucasus and their subsequent treatment of the natives could only result in conflict. As soon as the White armies were defeated, the Bolsheviks in fact initiated a brutal process of sovietization, characteristic of later Soviet rule in its disrespect and ignorance of the local situation and conditions. The Bolsheviks thus quickly managed to antagonize the mountain dwellers, mainly by their attack on the local social structure, and in particular the suppression of Islam. Beginning in August 1920, a’sharia army of the Mountain Peoples’ was formed, and an uprising gained strength in the southern parts of Dagestan. The Bolsheviks were concentrated in northern Dagestan and also kept a firm hand on lower Chechnya; initially, the rebel armies had some dramatic military victories, but from the beginning of 1921 the Bolshevik reconquest began. By April, the rebels were forced to withdraw to the mountains of western Dagestan. The fall of this last stronghold occurred on 21 May 1921, in a manner very similar to the fall of Shamil at Gunib in 1859. The mountaineers were
in both cases reduced to a small number of fighters and were attacked by an overwhelming number of Russian troops. In Shamil’s case it had been 40,000 Russians against no more than fifty followers, and in 1921 the Bolsheviks used six rifle regiments and four cavalry squadrons to subdue around 300 fighters.

The Bolsheviks paid a high price for crushing the Terek-Dagestani rebellion. Indeed, from a purely military point of view, at least 5,000 men had perished between 1917–21—a number quite comparable to the probable losses in the Chechen war more than seventy years later. However the adverse consequences were not limited to this. In fact, the existing enmity towards Russia and Russians was cemented in Dagestan and in Chechnya. The mountain dwellers realized that whether tsarist or Communist, Russia brought only war and destruction. Whereas before 1920 their enmity might have been directed rather against Czarist Russia than against Russia as a nation, these events seemed to prove the contrary. Thus, until the deportations of 1943–44, the north-east Caucasus was a scene of periodic revolts and insurrections.

It should also be remembered that Soviet Russia’s relationship with Iran and Turkey was ambiguous. Although Moscow renounced unequal treaties with Iran and returned certain territories to Turkey, it is also apparent that Soviet Russia kept imperial designs for Iran and Turkey, and in certain ways during the Second World War attempted to pursue the ‘Great Game’ with England over Iran. During the civil war, Moscow’s territorial control shrunk dramatically, and in any case the Caucasian rebellion of 1920–22 made any such designs unthinkable. In order to suppress the rebellion in Dagestan, the Bolsheviks had to use troops based in areas south of the Caucasus—in particular troops based in Georgia. This constant irritation in the Caucasus mountains diverted Soviet attention and made it impossible for Moscow to effectively project its influence southward. In any case, the fact that Russia brutally crushed an Islamic rebellion ensured that Soviet Communism would enjoy little popularity in Muslim countries in the years to come; the possibility of inciting a Communist rebellion in either Iran or Turkey became drastically reduced. However, the Second World War meant a renewed attempt by Moscow to extend the territory under its direct jurisdiction and under control by proxy, such as in Central and Eastern Europe.

In the Fall of 1942, the German armies reached the areas inhabited by the Karachais and the Balkars, on their way to the oilfields of Grozny and Baku. Staying only until March 1943 and never actually reaching lands inhabited by the Chechens or the Ingush, the German offensive was to have catastrophic consequences for the Caucasian peoples, as Stalin accused certain groups of cooperation with Nazi Germany and ordered the full deportation of a number of non-Russian peoples to Siberia and Central Asia. It is debatable to what degree the Caucasian peoples actually co-operated with the Germans, but it seems safe to say that in the extent to which collaboration did exist, it was never widespread among any of the accused peoples. The specific case of Chechnya is addressed in chapter five. However, some Caucasians may have taken advantage of the situation in order to revolt, and even if this act in itself showed no support for
Germany, it could easily be viewed as treason by Soviet authorities. Furthermore, no matter what the actual level of co-operation was, such rumours were an ideal pretext for ‘solving’ the problem of Caucasian intransigence once and for all. There is today a consensus among scholars that most of the accusations were unfounded. The selection of peoples to deport was another indication of the purpose of the act: the Chechens were traditionally the leaders of Caucasian rebellions; the Karachais and Balkars were both of Turkic origin, and were thus a potential pro-Turkish fifth column. These were thus the peoples seen as most dangerous to Soviet rule.

The punishment imposed on these peoples was completely disproportionable to any alleged crime. Ethnicity was the sole criterion for deportation, and covered not only people living in the region; for instance, a Karachai living anywhere else in Soviet-controlled territories was deported in the same way as one living in the Caucasus. Furthermore, soldiers belonging to the deported nationalities fighting in the Soviet army against the Germans were deported in the same way upon completion of duty. It is thus implausible that the issue of collaboration was anything other than a mere pretext for the total expulsion of these peoples from the Caucasus. In November and December 1943, all the Karachais were loaded on cattle wagons and transported to Central Asia and Siberia; in February 1944 came the Chechen and Ingush turns, and in March the Balkars.

The Russian conquest of the Caucasus: the South Caucasus

Upon arriving in the Caucasus, be sure to follow these guidelines in dealing with the natives:

1. Refrain from anything that could weaken their perception of our power, the principal source of our strength in these regions.
2. Establish commercial relations so as to generate among them needs that they still do not feel.
3. Maintain continuous state of dissension among their diverse nations and never forget that their unity could be fatal for us.
4. Introduce among them the light of Christianity.
5. Absolutely prevent them from the possibility of links with Turkey and Persia.

The Russian move into the Islamic empires

As Russia began to move towards the Caucasus, one of its main concerns was to secure control over the south Caucasus in order to be able to move south towards Iran and the Ottoman Empire. Its interests were manifold. There were trade interests and colonization intentions, but none of these were comparable to the strategic considerations that incited Russia to incorporate South Caucasia into its empire. The South Caucasus would be a southern flank from which Russia could
base its further advances southward; it would also be a protection, a sort of buffer, against invasions from the south, thereby preventing them from reaching Russia proper. The first Russian moves into the region date back to Peter the Great’s Persian expedition in 1722. However, the failure of this campaign left Russia out of the Caucasus until 1783. Ever since the time of Peter the Great Russia’s lack of warm-water outlets had been perceived by Russia’s rulers as a constant obstacle to its becoming a world power comparable to England. It was this that pushed Russia into advancing into the Crimea in the seventeenth century in order to gain access to the Black Sea; and into seizing the Baltic region from Charles XII of Sweden. The idea was developed by Peter the Great as a part of his life-long struggle to transform Russia from a backward peasant society to a great European power. For this purpose, Russia needed naval trade routes and a war fleet comparable to those of the European powers of the time. However, one of the reasons for the interest in an Indian ocean outlet was the danger of being dependent on the Black Sea and the Baltic. Both seas are semi-enclosed and a fleet based in either can only reach the ocean by crossing narrow straits (the Bosphorus and Dardanelles for the Black Sea, and the Oresund or the Baltic in the case of the Baltic). Thus it was strategically awkward to rely on these two seas, as a powerful enemy could easily cut off Russian access to the oceans. Although tsarist Russia never managed to gain access to the Indian ocean, Soviet Russia continued the quest even if gradually realizing its futility. However, in order to extend its influence southward to Iran, Russia had first to deal with the Caucasus.

Thus when Russia was incorporating the North Caucasus into its empire, it had already started its activities in the South Caucasus, notably by interfering in the regional politics of the area. This was done using a traditional Russian tactic: to co-opting local elites, thus gaining allies through which it could extend its influence. This was a tactic Russia was to use successfully first in Georgia and Armenia. The Georgians and Armenians were peoples with quite a developed sense of national identity, something that was largely missing in present-day Azerbaijan, an area divided into khanates which in turn came under varying levels of control from the Iranian Shahs. The factor uniting Georgians and Armenians, respectively, was primarily their respective churches, but also their common languages and history. However, the disunity among the khanates in Azerbaijan provided an ideal situation for the tsars to make use of their skills in dividing and ruling.

At this time, both Islamic empires—the Ottoman Empire and Iran—were in decay. For centuries, Armenians and Georgians had tried to coexist with these empires, an often uneasy situation. However, they were impressed by the strength and power of Russia, which was attempting to establish its influence in the region. Thus it seemed natural to align with a strong, orthodox Christian Russia rather than to go on living under the uncertain rule of Islamic rulers. It is in this light that the emerging ‘alliance’ between these two peoples and Russia must be seen. Russia was able to find allies in the South Caucasus at a quite early stage of the conquest, something which greatly facilitated the whole operation.
As mentioned earlier, the eastern part of the South Caucasus comprised the areas which today belong to Azerbaijan. In the late eighteenth century, the land was dominated by a number of khanates, which normally came under the control of Iran, although their degree of self-rule and autonomy was quite high, and varied with Iran’s ability to exert its power so far to the north. The khanates in the north, that is in the present-day Azerbaijan, included Baku, Shirvan, Ganja, Nakhchivan, Karabakh, and Yerevan. Compared with their Christian neighbours to the west, the khans were generally much more reluctant to accept the Russian advance into their lands. However, the Russian advance was bound to affect them, as one of Russia’s main access routes to the South Caucasus was the Caspian Sea littoral. Russia could advance through the Caucasus mountains along three main routes: firstly, the Black Sea littoral, a logical route since it would lead the Russians directly to their Georgian allies. However, two factors argued against this route. First, it was populated by the Circassian tribes, a factor which made it an advance through hostile lands; secondly, the dense landscape of the Black Sea littoral made a military advance difficult. All alternative route for the Russians was what came to be called the ‘Georgian military Highway’, a way through the Caucasus avoiding the high mountains, through the valleys of the Ossetian lands. This would be difficult in winter times, and in any case an advance through the lowlands was preferable to an advance over the mountains. The third alternative was an advance over the Caspian littoral, where the land was much more accessible. Thus as Russia chose to use this route to penetrate the South Caucasus, the Muslim areas there had to be subjugated as well. Ultimately, through force of circumstances, Russia used two of the three routes through the Caucasus: the Georgian military Highway and the Caspian littoral.

Once the areas were under Russian control, the organization of their administration became imperative. Russian sources of the time show that the issue of the status of the newly conquered lands was quite heavily debated, and the many shifts in Russian policy suggest that Moscow was unsure which policy to adopt. In fact there were two choices. One option was to maintain a colonial rule over the territories (Russians themselves used the term) modeled on western colonial rule in overseas territories. This would mean that the regions would not be incorporated outright into the Russian empire; they would be under Russian rule but without the status of being part of Russia itself. The other model would be to incorporate the South Caucasus into Russia as a province equal to any other province in Russia in terms of rights and duties vis-à-vis the tsar. Initially, Russia chose the colonial variant. This was largely due to the potential cost of making the region into a province, which would mean maintaining a Russian administration, imposing Russian as official language, and restructuring the entire society. A colonial-style rule would let the local rulers (such as the Azeri khans) handle their internal matters as long as they remained loyal to the tsar. Gradually, this policy was reversed and Russia increasingly governed the South Caucasus directly, but this aspect of Russian rule is important since it shows the degree of importance given to the Caucasus. Russia was not overwhelmingly interested in
the South Caucasus itself other than for strategic regions and thus did not consider it worth investing a lot of money and effort in ‘russifying’ the area.12

The Georgian & Armenian allies

As we have seen, Russia’s advance in the South Caucasus was greatly facilitated by the existence of benevolent allies in the area. Here Georgia’s role was crucial. After Peter the Great’s abortive Persian expedition in 1722, the Ottoman and Persian empires concluded an alliance in 1727, recognising the threat from the north and the danger of allowing their mutual enmity to jeopardize the security of both empires. Consequently, Russia was forced to surrender her conquests of 1722–24. Although Russia was to attempt another expedition in 1737, this was unsuccessful and the Ottomans were even able temporarily to chase Russia out of the Crimea. Thus on the eve of Catherine’s accession to the throne, Russia’s conquests in the Caucasus were basically restricted to increased commercial relations with Asia. But Catherine the Great, as she was to be called, would promote Russia’s role in the Caucasus. At this time, sovereignty over Georgia was an issue of dispute between the Persians and the Ottomans. In this three-party turmoil, the Georgian king Vakhtang IV (1702–84) sought Russian support to re-establish the independence of his kingdom. His attempts to use Russia against the Islamic empires failed, but his follower, Irakli (1760–94) was able to achieve Russian support through a treaty in 1783. By gaining control of Georgia, Russia set one foot firmly in the South Caucasus13 (see chapter four). From this point on, Russia under Catherine the Great and her successors were to incorporate the entire South Caucasus within 30 years, and at the same time put an end to instability in the Crimea.

It should be noted that the Russian successes were largely due to a change in military strategy. Instead of raiding faraway places and trying to establish fortifications which proved impossible to defend in the long run, as had been done in the past, the Russian forces advanced in a kind of rolling formation, moving slowly and securing every conquest that had been made. In 1784 the fort and later city of Vladikavkaz in contemporary North Ossetia was founded, which provided the basis for Russia’s vitally important Georgian military highway. In 1801, Georgia was annexed to the Russian empire, and Russia was in the South Caucasus to stay.

As Armenia was a part of the Persian empire, Russia tried to extend its rule to this potentially benevolent Christian people as well. However, a majority of the Armenians in the Caucasus lived scattered in the numerous Azerbaijani khanates, notably in the khanates of Yerevan, Karabakh and Nakhchivan. Moreover, the majority of Armenians lived not in the Caucasus but in Eastern Turkey, something which was an advantage for Russia in its aim to annex certain territories of eastern Turkey. Without going into the details of a widely debated issue, it seems safe to say that Armenian groups in the Ottoman empire allied with Russia and formed a potential fifth column in Turkey, much like the
Circassians did for Turkey in the northwestern Caucasus. Armenians were to play a crucial role throughout the entire period of Russian rule in the Caucasus, being loyal allies and occupying important positions in the administration. As Tadeusz Swietochowski states, the Armenians were for Russia what the Maronites in Lebanon were to be for France in later days: loyal Christians being the pillar of colonial rule in a strategic location in the Middle East. Russia consistently tried to alter the demographic conditions in the South Caucasus, by inciting Muslim Azeris to leave, and welcoming Christian Armenians in great numbers.14

Russia’s stirring in the South Caucasus soon led to a Russo-Persian war which was to last until 1813. By 1805 Russia had already manifested its advances in the former Persian lands; the khanates of Shirvan and Karabakh were conquered in 1805, giving Russia a strategic advantage, as these khanates protected Georgia from attacks from the east and the Araxes river, which would form Russia’s, and later the Soviet Union’s, border with Iran. Soon Armenia was under firm Russian control, and the entire South Caucasus was subjugated. Russia’s treaty with Persia in 1813, the Gulistan treaty, only cemented these territorial gains. But Russia would not stop at taking the northern part of Azerbaijan. When Shah Fath ‘Ali tried to challenge Russian rule in the region and crossed the frontiers demarcated by the Gulistan treaty, he overestimated the local disaffection with Russia among Azerbaijanis. Although initially the military results were satisfactory for the Iranians, Russia soon managed to push the Persians back and even capture both Ganja and Tabriz.

The Armenians: a dispersed nation

The tensions in eastern Anatolia between Armenians on the one hand and Kurds and Turks on the other reached boiling point in the late nineteenth century, with the Kurdish population being used as a lever against the Armenians by the leadership of the empire. Armenians and Muslims (of either Turkish or Kurdish origin) came into conflict especially in the early years of the First World War, in which Russia intended to annex large parts of Eastern Turkey. Massacres occurred on both sides, and the Young Turk government decided to ‘deport’ the Armenians to Syria. The result was the death of hundreds of thousands Armenians between 1915 and 1921. Armenian and most Western sources claim this was a policy of premeditated genocide against the Armenian people, with up to 1.5 million Armenians systematically massacred; Turkish sources and a minority of Western analysts claim that the number of deaths was distinctly lower, possibly around 300,000, and that the massacres were not government policy but a result of civil war; these sources also note that large numbers of Turkish and Kurdish people also died, and that where military units participated in or perpetrated the massacres, they did so in breach of their orders. The crucial issue of whether the massacres of Armenians were a result of a premeditated policy of genocide has been widely debated by scholars, and still carries considerable political weight today, as will be seen in chapters three and seven.
The episode is one of the most tragic of the twentieth century for all victims, irrespective of their origin. The effects of these events were nevertheless incomparably more severe for the Armenian nation. Whereas Turkey emerged from the First World War and its own subsequent war of liberation as an independent and sovereign republic, the state of Armenia that had been promised by the treaty of Sevres of 1921 was never created; the Lausanne Treaty after the Turkish war of liberation overrode Sevres and made no mention of an Armenian state. Armenia was limited to a diminutive Soviet republic of 30,000 square kilometres after a difficult period of independence in 1918–20. More Armenians live outside the Armenian state than in Armenia; large communities exist in the Middle East, the United States, France, and Russia in particular, as well as in Latin America and other countries of Europe. The legacy of the First World War massacres have also left a deep imprint on the Armenian psyche; it is no exaggeration to state that the ‘genocide’, as it is always referred to in Armenia, is one of the most important factors determining Armenian society today. As will be discussed later in this volume, it has had a profound impact on the present era’s developments. Although the episode is not addressed at greater length here, the issue has been extensively researched. A strong and well-researched Armenian account is Vahakn K. Dadrian’s *The History of the Armenian Genocide*, which is based on Ottoman and German sources. Other works are Richard G. Hovannisian’s *The Armenian Genocide in Perspective* and *The Armenian Genocide*. A notable Turkish account is Kamuran Gürün’s *The Armenian File: The Myth of Innocence Exposed*; also works by Türkkaya Ataöv such as *The ‘Armenian Question’: Conflict, Trauma and Objectivity* put forward the Turkish viewpoint.

The Azeris: a divided nation

From the early sixteenth century, the ruling dynasty of Iran—the Safavid—was in fact a Turkic dynasty. During the subsequent 200 years, Azerbaijan remained stable under Safavid rule. However, the Safavid dynasty fell in 1722 and the empire disintegrated, to be replaced fourteen years later by Nadir Shah. When he was killed in a palace coup in 1747, the whole empire collapsed into chaos. The Azerbaijani areas of the empire disintegrated into more or less independent khanates. These were organized on the model of the Iranian monarchy, and their financial base was state ownership of land. Tribalism was still an important factor, as members of a tribe living in an area formed the constituent territorial units of the khanates. Although the Azeri language was already widely used as literary language in the fifteenth century (i.e. before the Safavid era) there was no tradition of unity or common state. Further the population on Azeri territory was not (and is still not) homogeneous. There were Armenians, Lezgins, Talysh and Kurds inhabiting the area and forming sizable minorities. The consequence was that Azerbaijan was divided into almost twenty khanates; needless to say, this fact facilitated Russia’s manipulation of the local leaders, in conformity with its traditional policy of ‘divide and rule’.
In 1812 Russia ended a war with Turkey and went on to an offensive against Iran. This led to the Treaty of Gulistan in 1813, which gave Russia control over large territories that hitherto had been at least nominally Iranian, and moreover a say in Iranian succession politics. The whole of Dagestan and Georgia, including Mingrelia and Abkhazia were formally ceded to Russia, as well as eight Azeri khanates (Karabakh, Ganja, Sheki, Kuba, Shirvan, Talysh, Baku, and Derbent). However, as we have seen, the Persians soon challenged Russia’s rule in the area, resulting in a military disaster. Iran lost control over the whole of Azerbaijan, and with the Turkmanchay settlement of 1828 Russia threatened to establish its control over Azerbaijan unless Iran paid a war indemnity. The British helped the Iranians with this matter but the fact remained that Russians troops had marched as far south as Tabriz. Although certain areas (including Tabriz) were returned to Iran, Russia was in fact at the peak of its territorial expansion.

However the result of the Treaty of Turkmanchay was a tragedy for the Azerbaijani people. It demarcated a borderline through their territory along the Araxes river, a border that still today divides the Azerbaijani people. This division is not merely political; since the amount of time elapsed is so important, the cultures and societies of the two Azerbajians have diverged substantially. The question raised by Swietochowski in his book *Russia and Azerbaijan* is pertinent: How long can a people be divided into such different empires without losing what they have in common? The first element is language. The Azeris under Russian rule have increasingly become fluent in Russian, to such an extent that parts of the young Soviet-educated elite have Russian as their first language with their mother tongue only in second place. Although this ‘russification’ in terms of language did not reach the level that can be found among certain North Caucasians or Central Asians, the Russian language has had a profound impact on north Azerbaijan. South of the Araxes, the Persian language occupies much the same position as Russian in the north. However in terms of culture and identity, it seems clear that the Iranian impact has been stronger in south Azerbaijan than has the Russian impact in the north. For example, many Iranian Azeris see themselves as Iranians as well as Azeris; few if any North Azeris ever saw themselves as Russians. This fact is probably related to the structural differences between the Soviet and Iranian states. Iran was always a unitary state where the Azeris enjoyed varying degrees of cultural autonomy, and in some periods even dominated the political life of the country. By contrast the Soviet state was federal in structure, and the Azeris had a republic of their own, could generate a national identity, and promote their language and culture to a much higher degree than the Azeris in Iran. Despite the differences, Azeris on both sides of the border have kept their language alive. As for the differences between them, it is certain that Russian and Iranian words, respectively, have entered the vocabulary on either sides of the Araxes, but this has not occurred to an extent that it could pose difficulties for communication.

The other aspect is religion. The differences in religious approach between Iran and the Soviet Union, particularly during the period 1979–91, deserve the use of
the expression ‘heaven and earth’. For while the Soviet Union remained consistently anti-religious and inspired a kind of ‘state atheism’, the religious factor was always important in Iran, which after the 1979 revolution in fact became an Islamic state. Furthermore, the Azeris were not left out of the religious movement; even among the leading religious clergy in Iran people of Azeri origin can be found. By contrast, secularism and even atheism have had a strong impact on the Azeris in the north, especially among the young generation. Religion is not something the youth grew up with, nor is it something that has any great influence on their lives. Thus it can be said that the religious element is one of the greatest separating factors between the two Azerbaijan today and will remain so in the future. This is an important factor since it carries with it the whole concept of life and human existence.

The relations between the two Azerbaijan s have varied with time. At certain stages, the border has been closed, as was the case during some periods of Soviet rule, but at other times it has been relatively open. For example, the Baku ‘oil rush’ at the turn of the century led to an increase in the contacts across the Araxes. The labour force in the oil-related industries was to a large extent composed of Iranian Azeris who were attracted by the hope of better pay. However, for the most part they were doing the lowest paid jobs and lived in difficult conditions. Nevertheless, the fact remains that the relations between the two Azerbaijan s were at one of the historical peaks since separation. As one Azeri writer recalls, the contact was so strong that whenever a folk song or tale emerged on one side of the river, it soon became known on the other side.

An important episode was the Soviet-backed Republic of Azerbaijan in northern Iran during and after the Second World War. In August 1941, the Red Army invaded northern Iran, while Great Britain invaded the southern parts of the country. In December 1945 an Azerbaijan national congress was convened in Tabriz and a government formed. Nevertheless, the Soviet forces left Iran in May 1946, and the Azerbaijan Democratic Republic ADR fell to the Iranian army after only a few months. Although the ADR was mainly a puppet government in an abortive Soviet ploy to control parts of Iran, the episode was significant because it raised hopes, especially in Soviet Azerbaijan, for the unification of Azeri lands.

As for the situation today, the level of interaction is relatively low, mitigated especially by the Iranian government. However, feelings do exist, as one of the early protests against Soviet rule during Perestroika was carried out by the Azeris living along the border with Iran, especially in Nakhchivan. The protesters attacked the border post in 1989, condemning their separation from their relatives and kin on the other side. Considerable potential exists for the strengthening of the bonds. Especially if the Azerbaijani republic becomes a ‘Kuwait of the Caucasus’ as has been predicted by some scholars, a second ‘Baku oil boom’ could have the same effect on the eve of the twenty-first century as it did just a century earlier. Simultaneously, Iran is a state in relative decline, socially as well as economically. Thus the calm that can be observed today might be misleading; the situation is
potentially volatile and many interests would be affected by a ‘growing together’ of the two Azerbaijan. The political consequences of such a development are discussed in detail below, but for the moment it should be noted that the result of the Russian/Soviet ‘great game’ in Iran has left behind a powder keg.

The Soviet legacy: Leninist nationality policy & the structure of the Soviet Union

The impact of the Soviet legacy on inter-ethnic relations in the Caucasus, or other parts of the union for that matter, has been identifiable mainly through the effects of Leninist ‘nationality policy’, in particular the hierarchical nationality-based territorial structure on which the union rested.

For ideological reasons many Marxists were vehemently opposed to the very idea of acknowledging ethnic identities through a federal state structure. On the contrary, some Bolshevik saw nationalism as a formidable obstacle to the creation of a socialist society, where ethnic identities would melt into what came to be called Homo Sovieticus. This ideological principle existed at different strengths throughout the Soviet era. Simultaneously, Marxist theory saw the emergence of nations as a logical stage in the evolution of the dialectical historical materialism and could hence be fitted into a Marxist framework. As such, Orthodox Marxists considered it a part of the necessary development of pre-capitalist societies en route to Socialism. Consequently, as well as the view of nationalism as a reactionary phenomenon, an alternative view saw it as ideologically correct for the socially ‘less developed’ peoples of the Union.24

For practical reasons, however, the union by necessity came to be organized in a federal structure.25 On the edges of the former tsarist Russian empire, nation-states had already emerged and would be difficult to disband and reincorporate into a centralized structure. For example, Ukraine had declared its independence in 1917, and Georgia, Azerbaijan and Armenia enjoyed a short period of tumultuous independence between 1918 and 1921. The Baltic states and Finland were, by comparison, more successful in sustaining their independence, Finland has remained independent ever since and the Baltic states (as well as semi-independent Tuva in Siberia) were only incorporated into the Soviet Union during the Second World War. Moreover, Tatar intellectuals were lobbying for the creation of a republic of Turkestan which would be associated with the Soviet structure but retain a high level of autonomy. It would certainly have been a daunting task, particularly given the weakness of the Bolshevik regime in the early 1920s as it emerged from the Russian civil war, to assemble this heterogeneous and territorially enormous territory into a unified, centralized state.

In order to rebuild the former empire without loosing control over its borderlands, the Bolshevik regime had to implement a federal structure as the basis for the Soviet Union. Hence, in the words of Richard Pipes, ‘the first modern state to place the national principle at the base of its federal structure’ was
This was in itself an ironical situation, as in theory the arrangement was directly opposed to the ideological precepts of Marxism.

Nevertheless, the structure developed by the Soviet state was highly complicated and hierarchical. Being a federal structure based on territorially defined and ethnicity-based entities, it granted different levels of nominal self-determination to various minorities, though often with less than objective reasons, as will be discussed below.

Some of these territorial arrangements were conditioned by relations with outside powers, and were hence not consonant with realities on the ground. More importantly, however, the borders between autonomous territories were often awkwardly drawn, cutting across ethnic groups. Several interpretations can be offered for this: a benevolent observer would argue that this was simply as the result of ignorance, and that anyway these were only considered to be temporary solutions since ultimately all nationalities would melt together to form a qualitatively superior (Communist) human being, where ethnicity would play no role. Other authors have argued that the flaws in the national delimitation were unavoidable giving overlapping settlement patterns especially in the Caucasus and Central Asia, and that the need to create economically viable entities prevented the exclusive application of the ethnic principle in delimiting national-territorial borders.

A more critical interpretation is that Moscow drew boundaries at will with the very aim of dividing and ruling territories that were seen as potential trouble-makers. Hence it was desirable to separate certain peoples from each other, in particular those with common identities such as Turkic or/and Islamic peoples. By isolating ethnic sub-groups from their kin, unified rebellion against the Soviet state was more likely to be prevented.

Whatever the case, the Soviet state structure and the drawing of intra–Soviet boundaries led to the emergence of significant grievances, many of which erupted into conflict during the last years of the Union. With the restructuring of the Soviet Union into fifteen independent states and several separatist or semi-separatist entities claiming statehood, it became clear that the previously intra-Soviet boundaries were suddenly, in the case of borders between union republics, now borders between independent states—hence with an importance which they were never designed for. As the newly formed states were discussing the restructuring of their administrative systems, the minorities accorded autonomous status during Soviet times became an important contentious issue. Hence it is interesting to note that it is the autonomous territories and not non-autonomous minorities that have conducted secessionist projects during and after the break-up of the Soviet Union, with the sole exception of Moldova. Some have been involved in ferocious warfare, some have received an increased level of autonomy, some have not been much influenced by change at all. An analysis of the development of autonomous territories of the former Soviet Union also enables us to assess the very concept of autonomy and its implications for peaceful ethnic coexistence. Basically, the following questions are raised: Is autonomy a solution
which sustains peace or one which increases the risk of future confrontations? If so, under what circumstances? And for which territories, and in what form, is autonomy still a viable form of government?  

The Soviet structure

In the Soviet Union, there were four hierarchical levels of autonomy. At the top of the ladder were the fifteen union republics (SSR) which in 1991 all became independent states. Union republics were smaller versions of the Union itself, with parliaments, constitutions, and virtually all the state structures enjoyed by independent states. They also had the legal right (according to the Soviet Constitution) to secede from the Soviet Union: the union republics were the constituent parts of the union. The second level was the autonomous republics (ASSR) which were under the jurisdiction of the union republics. The ASSR had constitutions and supposedly enjoyed a high degree of autonomy within the union republic. Under these were the autonomous oblasts or regions, which had no constitution and more limited forms of autonomy, mainly in the cultural and social spheres. Finally, in certain cases autonomous okrugs existed, mainly in Siberia, with an even lesser degree of autonomy.

The ‘devaluation of autonomy’: a cause of conflict and an impediment to resolution

Ever since the 1960s and in most parts of the world, ethnopolitical conflict has been an increasing source of concern in the international arena. In Africa, South Asia, the post-Communist states of Eastern Europe and Eurasia, as well as in Western Europe, old grievances have been revived, and new conflicts have erupted between ethnically defined social groups. This has led to the mushrooming of research on ethnic conflict and resolution in recent years. One of the principal findings of this research has been the effectiveness of solutions of regional autonomy. Hence Ted R. Gurr has argued that ‘negotiated regional autonomy has proved to be an effective antidote for ethnopolitical wars of secession in Western and Third World States.’ Likewise, Kjell-Ake Nordquist has observed that creating an autonomy—‘a self-governing intra-state region— as a conflict-solving mechanism in an internal armed conflict is both a theoretical and —very often—a practical option for the parties in such conflicts.’

However, the record of autonomy in the empirical context of the former Soviet Union does not seem to corroborate the more positive experiences connected with autonomy in other parts of the world.

In many cases, ethnic mobilization takes place as minority groups perceive themselves subjected to assimilation procedures or to other forms of oppression by the government of their state of appartenance. As the level of conflict escalates, representatives of minority groups often advocate autonomy or secession, especially in cases where minorities are compactly settled in defined
geographical areas; by contrast, in situations where ethnic groups live in overlapping settlement patterns such demands occur less frequently. Normally, states are very reluctant to accept this type of demand, for a variety of reasons. First and foremost, the central government fears that granting territorial autonomy to the minority group would only be but a step towards the eventual secession of the region in question. Second, granting autonomy to one region could be understood as discrimination against other inhabitants or groups. Third, autonomy could risk the intervention of a foreign state affiliated with the minority population in question. In the end this type of conflict is typically settled by a compromise on regional autonomy. Examples are the granting of autonomy to the Basques of Spain in 1980, the Miskitos of Nicaragua in 1990, Nagas in India in 1972, or Afars in Ethiopia in 1977.

However, the recent experiences of the former Soviet Union do not follow this pattern. What can be observed here is that the state advocates a return to autonomy for the rebellious minority, the latter refusing to accept any solution short of independence. This circumstance does not necessarily mean that the secessionist movements in the area are in essence more radical than separatist movements in other parts of the world. Rather, it has to do with the legacy of the Soviet type of federalism, and the way the entire concept of autonomy is viewed by those peoples who experienced it.

The legacy of Soviet-style ‘federalism’

The Soviet Union was from the outset, particularly after the national delimitation of 1924, an entire system of hierarchically different regional autonomies—in theory, but only in theory. From the beginning and according to Lenin’s professed ideas of liberating the peoples oppressed by tsarist Russia, it is possible that the system might have been genuinely intended to pave the way for the self-determination of the numerous ethnic groups of the union, albeit within a socialist framework. However, the 1924 delimitations were engineered primarily by Stalin, who had a background as Commissar for nationalities. Stalin’s perception of national minorities was far more careful than Lenin’s. Hence he paradoxically used the ‘nativization’ (korenizatsiia) process of the 1920s to increase central power and diminish the actual power of the autonomies. Two strategies were applied in order to achieve this.

The first was quite simple to ensure that the autonomous structures were given no actual autonomy or real political power, their authority being restricted to the cultural and social spheres. Hence actual power remained in Moscow; the autonomies, so to speak, never became autonomous. The second strategy was to use national delimitation to create sources of dissent among the Caucasian peoples in particular, whom Stalin saw as the most disloyal in the union—a perception later exemplified by the deportations of the Second World War. Thus a number of borders between ethnic communities were drawn in such a way not to
correspond with the demographic realities. A series of brief examples should illustrate this.

In the north Caucasus, the most flagrant example is the delimitation between the Turkic Karachai/Balkar peoples on the one hand and the Circassian Kabardin/Cherkess on the other. Settlement patterns would logically have indicated a division of the region inhabited by these peoples along an east—west axis, and would have united the Karachais and Balkars, who are in fact one people speaking a common language; and the Kabardins and the Cherkess, both Circassian peoples speaking closely related languages. Hence two republics, ‘Karachai–Balkar’ and ‘Kabardin–Cherkess’ would have been the logical solution. However, Stalin chose to divide the area along a north-south axis, which, although still dividing these peoples into two republics, united the Karachais and the Cherkess in one, and the Kabardins and the Balkars in the other. The territories of these new entities were also drawn further north, in order to contain large numbers of Russians and Cossacks; as the Circassian and Turkic peoples have no particular history of co-operation, having lived side-by-side for centuries with a certain amount of mutual suspicion, the Russian population was able to play a leading role in these groups, thus preventing any unified Caucasian action against the centre. Furthermore, artificial distinctions between very similar peoples were created or reinforced. As well as the case of the Karachais and Balkars, the Circassians were divided into three groups, the Adyge, Cherkess, and Kabardins; the Vainakh were equally artificially divided into Chechens and Ingush. Another fact which proves the argument is the practice of altering the hierarchical status of an autonomous region according to the whims of the decision-makers in Moscow, or in certain cases simply creating and abolishing units at will. Thus Abkhazia was first a union republic (SSR) in a treaty relationship with Georgia until 1931 when it was subjugated to the latter. Similarly the Chechen and Ingush initially had republics of their own, which were merged in 1936 to a Chechen–Ingush republic, which in turn was to be abolished during the deportations of 1944 and then reinstated with slightly altered territory in 1957.

In the south Caucasus, the 1921 treaties between the Soviet Union and the emerging Turkish republic created a map which brought conflict and dissent that has lasted up to the present day. Stalin actually managed to divide both the Armenian and Azeri peoples into non-contiguous territories, creating the Armenian enclave of Nagorno-Karabakh (an AO) completely encircled by Azerbaijan, and the Azeri enclave of Nakhchivan (an ASSR), cut off from mainland Azerbaijan by Armenia. Both entities were put under the jurisdiction of the Azerbaijani SSR. Moreover, there are sizable Azeri and Armenian minorities in southern and south-eastern Georgia, as well as an Azeri minority in Dagestan, centred around the city of Derbent.

It is hard to argue that the logic behind these seemingly illogical drawings of boundaries was not the principle of ‘divide and rule’. As the Soviet power, particularly after the Terek-Dagestani rebellion in 1920–22, feared unified action
in the name of Islam by the Caucasian peoples, it sought to divide them and prevent them from making contact with one another.

As the Soviet Union was about to meet its destiny almost 70 years later, a whole range of ethnopolitical conflicts surfaced. The roots of many of them, as will be discussed in Part two of this volume, had been directly created by Soviet rule; however, most of them built upon older grievances and historical problems between the communities in question. Apart from the events in the Fergana valley and the war in Tajikistan, Central Asia was largely spared the ethnic warfare seen in the Caucasus. In Moldova, however, conflict erupted between the majority Moldovans and the Russian-speaking minority in the self-proclaimed republic of Transdniestria (heavily backed by Moscow) when the Moldovan leadership embarked on a nationalist course. Nevertheless, the region of the former Soviet Union which has been the most plagued by ethnopolitical conflict was and remains the Caucasus. Ethnic tensions that had lain dormant since the Soviet incorporation of the south Caucasus were allowed to re-emerge as Gorbachev’s Glasnost’ and attempts at democratization began to alter the political atmosphere in the union.

The refusal of autonomy as a solution

Negotiations seeking political solutions to the conflicts in Nagorno-Karabakh, Abkhazia and South Ossetia, discussed in detail in chapters three and four respectively, have been under way, both with Russian involvement and international presence, in the form of the OSCE in Nagorno-Karabakh and South Ossetia and the UN in Abkhazia. However, these efforts have been unsuccessful, in the sense that their only result so far has been to reaffirm the deadlocked, incompatible positions of the parties. The Azerbaijani and Georgian governments are not ready to accept the demand of the enclaves, that is the granting of independence (including the right to form federations with ethnic kin in the Russian Federation or in Armenia). Significant disagreement remains on a very basic issue—the status of these regions. Whereas the Georgian and Azerbaijani sides demand the return of the rebellious territories to their sovereignty, including a renewed solution based on the concept of autonomy, more generous and certainly more real than in the past, the separatists categorically refuse this model. Instead, they seek to gain international recognition for their secession and for their right to complete self-determination. Hence, they refuse to accept the concept of autonomy as the solution to the conflicts, instead advocating their solution through secession. In negotiations, the Abkhaz and Karabakh Armenians refuse any solution based upon what they term ‘vertical’ relations, that is their subordination to Georgia or Azerbaijan. They argue that a solution must be based on ‘horizontal’ relations, that is equality in status; hence both argue for confederations between entities with equal status as the only solution acceptable to them short of unilateral secession.
Hence, these conflicts seem to differ markedly from the usual pattern of global ethnic conflict in the extreme suspicion on the part of the ethnic minority towards a solution to the conflict in the form of continued coexistence in a single territorial entity. This is all the more interesting, for example in the case of Nagorno-Karabakh, where Azerbaijani officials in negotiations have offered the Karabakh Armenians a high level of autonomy bordering on independence (albeit not specified in detail) only to be refused. Now the question arises as to whether this refusal of the solution of autonomy is conditioned by circumstances specific to these conflicts. Other nearby examples from the Soviet Union would suggest that this is not the case. In fact the Chechen conflict, among others, also showed a similar distrust on the part of the minority for the concept of autonomy. Indeed, during the years of Chechnya’s de facto independence 1991–94, Moscow seemed ready to offer Chechnya quite generous conditions of self-rule and broadly based rights, even surpassing the conditions already given to Tatarstan and Bashkortostan with whom Russia managed to sign separate treaties in 1994. The Chechen leadership rejected then—and still rejects today—any solution that would keep Chechnya under Moscow’s even nominal jurisdiction. The Chechens have already proven their readiness to go to war to achieve independence; and nothing seems to suggest that they would be any less ready to do the same again. Even in the cases of Tatarstan and Bashkortostan, Moscow encountered enormous difficulties in reaching a negotiated solution by which these territories renounced their declarations of independence, which had been issued roughly at the same time as Chechnya’s. This despite the fact that these republics are encircled by Russia, having no territorial connection to the outside world. Only after substantial guarantees and concessions from the Russian side, amounting to virtual independence in the economic sphere, did the leaders of these two republics agree to subjugate their authority to Moscow. Similarly, Ukraine’s agreement with Crimea on autonomy was only reached after a long period of tense negotiation.

Throughout the former Soviet Union, the concept of autonomy suffers from being viewed as distinctly less value and appreciated as a solution to the grievances of ethnic minorities than in other areas of the world. Moreover, a striking circumstance regarding the post-Soviet conflicts needs to be stressed. Although both Azerbaijan and Georgia, as well as Central Asia, harbor numerous minorities of various sizes and problems, only those that were the holders of an autonomous status actually rebelled. Lezgins, Talysh and Kurds in Azerbaijan, and Armenians and Azeris in Georgia have been comparatively inactive, having no autonomous status. Meanwhile Armenians in Azerbaijan, Abkhaz and Ossetians in Georgia, and Chechens in the Russian Federation, all holders of autonomous status, revolted. In a sense, then, the autonomous status seems to have fuelled rather than diminished minority demands—a factor which is helpful in understanding why Central Asia, where there are few autonomous regions, has witnessed fewer instances of ethnic conflict than the Caucasus. In a sense, an autonomous status carried with it a state structure around which
ethnic mobilization took place, and was clearly instrumental in increasing awareness of national identity. In the words of Rogers Brubaker:

The significance of the republics as institutional crystallizations of nationhood lay less in the constitutional fictions of sovereignty, statehood, and autonomy—symbolically potent and self-actualizing though they proved under Gorbachev—than in the durable institutional frame the republics provided for the long-term cultivation and consolidation of national administrative cadres and national intelligentsias (periodic purges notwithstanding) and for the long-term protection and cultivation of national languages and cultures (the promotion of Russian as a lingua franca notwithstanding).

In retrospect, the Stalinist legacy meant that the whole hierarchy of autonomous structures, which was the very structure of the Soviet Union, never resulted in self-determination for the peripheries. The centralized and totalitarian character of the Soviet state never permitted the autonomous entities—be it union republics or lower-ranking entities—to exercise any autonomy. It could be argued that the federal structure of the union even legitimized the totalitarian rule of the centre over the peripheries; it was used in a rhetorical manner to conceal the suppression of minority aspirations. Hence, the quasi-state structures of the entities, which in theory had most of the characteristics of an independent and democratic state, were the outer and inner figureheads of a totalitarian system. With people working in and with republican governments or constitutions, or oblast parliaments, a semblance of self-determination was kept alive. But this semblance never was anything more than just that. The obvious result of this past is that now that the national minorities have acquired self-rule on their own, often with the use of force, they are extremely reluctant to accept a return to an autonomous status which they now know will probably never give them the amount of self-determination they have been, or will be, promised. The hypocrisy of the past is a significant contribution to this seemingly cynical view. Minorities such as the Abkhaz or Karabakh Armenians fear that in case they accept any agreement that gives them the rights they perceive a need for on paper, they may never be able to exercise these rights if they accept subjugation to their former central government. Autonomy becomes dangerous and risky; secession or a confederation whereby they enjoy equal status compared to their former overlord—and keep their armed forces—becomes the only safe perceived way for national survival and development.

Clearly, the main reason for the difficulties of resolving ethnic conflicts in the former Soviet Union through solutions of autonomy must be related to the Soviet legacy. Naturally, the readiness of the central governments to offer wide-ranging autonomy to their rebellious ethnic minorities might very well be based upon the same perception; that offering autonomy and implementing the decision are two very different and not necessarily related things—just as in the past,
autonomy is advocated, but the question is whether the central governments are ready to accept the adverse consequences for themselves of living with an actually—and not only theoretically—autonomous ethnic minority within their territory.

A solution to this dilemma: international control & guarantees?

At the core of the problem, then, is the fear that the concluded agreements will be neither followed nor implemented. This fear is justified, especially in the South Caucasus, where the ethnic minorities weigh very much lighter demographically than their neighbours and former overlords. The Abkhaz, as mentioned, number only roughly 100,000, whereas there are 4 million Georgians. Similarly, the Karabakh Armenians number slightly over 150,000, compared to over 6 million Azeris. The fact that despite these figures the conflict led to their relative victories was primarily due to internal disorder in Azerbaijan and Georgia, and quite overt Russian and Armenian support for the ambitions of the minorities (see chapters three, four and nine). With stable states and societies in these two countries, the minorities would not have the same potential to stand up against them militarily. Following this logic, the minorities are afraid that their autonomous status, once agreed upon, will gradually turn into suppression due to their sheer numerical inferiority. Basically, the problem is that there is no confidence in the implementation of the basic principle of international law, Pacta sunt servanda.

If this is indeed the case, the solution to this dilemma lies in finding a way to assure these minorities that their rights will not be infringed upon. This necessarily involves foreign actors who are in a position to exert power over the central governments, and that would undertake to guarantee that the latter follow the agreements they have pledged to follow. The effect of international guarantees need not be discussed in detail here; suffice it to say that an example of their importance is the Dayton agreement in Bosnia-Herzegovina and its implementation. So far, the international community has been unable to play a decisive role in the area, partly because it has remained within the sphere of influence of the Russian Federation. Hence, the minority leaders as well as the central governments of the conflict areas have been forced to turn to Russia in their search for a guarantor power; and it would be no exaggeration to say that Russia is not the most disinterested and objective guarantor that exists. On the contrary, Russia is actively pursuing its own interests in the area; the experience of the last few years has shown that Russia is more inclined to create dissent between ethnic communities, following the divide and rule logic, than to work for the long-term resolution of conflicts. Hence the unwillingness of both Azerbaijan and Georgia, and even of the minorities, to assign too important a role to Russia.

The fall of the Soviet Union & conflicting identities

One clear source of conflicts not only in the Caucasus but worldwide in the post-Second World War era has been the awakening of assumed primordial identities
such as tribe, ethnicity or religion. The very fact that this can be termed an awakening, however, implies that these identities are neither static nor innate. They are very much tied to social and political circumstances; in particular, they are mobilized and shaped by political processes. This ethnic mobilization usually takes place in an atmosphere of conflict with another communal group; in this sense we can often speak of mirroring nationalism: people rally against a common enemy, which increases their sense of common belonging to a certain group. Within the boundaries of a state, it can roughly be said that communal conflict arises when one or more of its component communities ceases to identify with the state they belong to due to perceived discrimination against the community, political mobilization of group identity, or a combination of these factors, which often catalyze each other. In order to prevent this from occurring, the rulers of multi-ethnic states have often embarked on a process of nation-building, aiming at superseding tribal or ethnic identities with a national identity, which in many third world countries is perceived as an artificial and abstract concept.

Soviet identity & local identity

Another, perhaps more advanced method of obliterating ethnic or communal identities is to impose an ideology in their place. In the case of the former Soviet Union, the Communist ideology was thought to gradually erase differences between peoples and create a qualitatively New Man. However as discussed above, the structure of the Soviet state was based on national divisions. The ‘national’ units making up the union were, however, not ethnically homogeneous either; the result of this heterogeneity was an explicit or implicit policy of assimilation of minorities by the ‘titular nationality’ of the constituent units. In Georgia, for example, previously distinct groups such as Mingrelians and Svans have been increasingly assimilated into adopting a Georgian identity; Abkhaz and Ossetians also complain of ‘Georgianization’ policies. Similarly a strong tendency of assimilation into a Russian identity existed, especially among non-Muslim minorities within Russia, such as the Komi, Mari, Udmurts, or Mordvins. For these minorities, then, the question of personal and group identity was highly complicated. In the Caucasus and Central Asia, until early this century, there was perhaps not a well-developed national identity among most peoples. With the exception of Armenians and Georgians, the concept of nation was actually largely absent among the peoples of these regions. Even for the Azerbaijanis, who have a long literary tradition dating back to the sixteenth century, the main identity was either sub-national (khanates, regions, or clans) or supra-national (Islam). This was equally true for the smaller mountain peoples of the north Caucasus, whose societies were deeply permeated by a non-feudal clan structure. With the consolidation of Soviet power in the 1920s, the leadership in Moscow was actually instrumental in creating not only the all-encompassing Soviet identity, but also a national identity, especially in the early years of Korenizatsiia when the non-written languages of these peoples were written down and their use was
encouraged. Although Sovietologists have speculated that this might actually have been done in order to prevent the Caucasian peoples uniting and resisting in the name of Islam by emphasizing differences and distinctions between them, the fact remains that the concept of nation was introduced and took root in most areas in one form or another. The effectiveness of the policy can be seen in the Chechen rebellion of the 1990s. Whereas previous north Caucasian rebellions were generally carried out in the name of Islam as holy war, the *ghazawat*, and supported by many of the mountain peoples, the present rebellion has developed in the name of the Chechen nation, and has remained largely isolated within Chechnya, the rebels receiving no more than verbal support from certain other mountain peoples.

In the Soviet era, a Soviet, Communist identity was promoted with considerable success, which existed everywhere but was stronger in some regions, such as North Ossetia, than in others, for example Chechnya. Although this identity was supposed to be the strongest and deepest, that was often not the case: people adopted a Soviet identity at the side of, but not in place of, their communal identity. This is only natural as surrendering the primary, traditional identities of nation, religion, region, or clan is a process that can take place only gradually and very reluctantly. Furthermore, the Soviet class-inspired identity was largely inapplicable to the Caucasian peoples, some of whom had a prefeudal social structure, and in any case had not experienced a truly capitalist mode of production. Hence it was more difficult for Caucasian than European citizens of the Soviet Union to understand and apprehend the Soviet ideology and identity. But this problem was of minor importance, as on the part of Soviet identity, the national, ethnic identity was at times even encouraged and reinforced by the central power, and in any case never prohibited. On the other hand, the perhaps strongest identity prior to Soviet rule, that of Islam, was systematically suppressed. Indeed, the Soviet regime saw religion in general and Islam in particular as a threat, as it had both the power to mobilize people, as shown in the ‘last *ghazawat*’ (‘holy war’) in Dagestan in 1920–22, and to unite distinct people under a common banner. Between these identities, certain nations gravitated towards absorbing the identity of the titular nationality of their republic. The case of Mingrelians and Svans in Georgia cited above are examples of this phenomenon. Further, many Kurds, Lezgins, and Talysh in Azerbaijan were assimilated into an Azerbaijani identity, a process facilitated by the Muslim identity common to these peoples. In contrast, Armenians in Azerbaijan or Azeris in Armenia were not influenced by this tendency, and nor were the Abkhaz in Georgia. Because of the very deep linguistic and at times religious distinctions and mutual hostility between these peoples, their respective identities were preserved.

In the north Caucasus, the main process after the brief but crucial interlude of Korenizatsiia in the 1920s was the central government’s attempt at russification. Although most Caucasian peoples largely preserved their identity due to their very distinct social organization and strong Islamic identity, the large number of Russians who reside in the territories of the region have had an impact, as has the
consistent practical advantages for the local population of acquiring fluency in the Russian language, be it for educational or career purposes. Again, the importance of religion is remarkable: the Ossetians, who are mainly Orthodox Christians, have been subjected to a higher degree of russification than others. The issue of identity was very complex and sometimes confused in the Soviet era, both because of the inherent characteristics of the Caucasus as a region and due to central government policies, influencing group identities of minority groups by encouraging or discouraging certain identities at different times.

The dissolution of the Soviet Union & the quest for identity

The main consequence of the dissolution of the Soviet Union in terms of identities was the withering away of the Soviet identity for the peoples of the Caucasus. Hence the unifying glue, the overlapping identity which held the peoples of the union together was no longer present. This constitutes a factor in the eruption of violent conflicts which has been largely neglected in current research on the conflicts in the region. The Soviet identity was instrumental in attenuating and mitigating conflicts between the peoples of the Soviet Union. The official rhetoric of brotherhood and unity, while often receiving only paid lip service, seems to actually have had an impact on the thinking of Soviet citizens. Doubtless, tensions existed, as between Armenians and Azeris or between Georgians and Abkhaz; however such tensions were alleviated not simply by suppression, but also by a genuine feeling of common Soviet identity and belonging at the grassroots level. With the break-up of the Soviet Union, everything changed. Both in practice and in theory, the overlapping common identity was lost: in practice because the Soviet Union fragmented into fifteen different states, four of which had territories in the Caucasus (Russia, Azerbaijan, Armenia, and Georgia) and in theory as the bond of the union, Communism, was discredited and virtually disappeared. In reality, and on an individual level, this meant that a search for identity, consciously or subconsciously, took place. The options for the individual, then, were either to retreat one step and assume the national identity of the republic he lived in; to retreat to the basic level and choose the identity of the ethnic group, tribe or locality of birth—or finally to seek a supranational identity, such as Islam for the Muslim population.

So far, it seems that most minorities have refused to adopt the national identity of their republic of residence. This would of course have been more difficult in some cases than others; for example, it would be unrealistic to expect the Armenians living in Azerbaijan to suddenly feel ‘Azeri’ or even ‘Azerbaijani’; however it has not happened even in cases where the distinctions between the peoples may seem less significant. Hence the Lezgins protest the policies of assimilation they feel threatened by; the Mingrelians and Svans suddenly recall their distinctiveness from other Georgians; and the Ingush and Chechens, who virtually form one people, decide to split. Admittedly, this last case has a mainly political basis, as the Ingush believed that staying within Russia was necessary to achieve
the aim of full territorial rehabilitation from the deportations, and the return of the Prigorodniy district ruled of 1943 by north Ossetia (see chapter six). But basically, the process of nation-building in the Caucasian republics has so far been unsuccessful. The governments have been unable to make minorities feel a part of the state. One reason for this is that the ethnic conflicts that have plagued the region in many cases predated the fall of the Soviet Union. Hence the process of break-up was initiated at a time when a policy of official nation-building was out of the question, as it would have compromised the Soviet identity of these republics.

Identity & conflict

This quest for identity, prompted by the new political structure of the region, has had far-reaching consequences for peace in the region. As Ted Gurr has noted, the two prerequisites for ethnic mobilization are a strong group identity and discrimination on communal/ethnic grounds. The resurgence of communal identities among the Caucasian nationalities, then, has been a decisive factor in allowing ethnic mobilization to develop into outright conflict. Perceived discrimination, whether actually ethnically based or due to the general absence of respect for human rights in the Soviet Union, existed long before the 1980s and in many areas has lessened over the years. Hence the primary reason for the increasingly conflictual attitude of minorities in the late 1980s was not discrimination but the strengthening of group identity. This circumstance can be observed in most of the conflicts that have raged in the post-Cold-War era. Minorities have been seeking revisions of their present status, claiming the right to republics of their own.

What, then, precipitated these claims? One could argue that the eased atmosphere that was a result of the dissolution of the authoritarian Soviet Union brought these latent claims to the surface. Yet even ten years ago, Alexandre Bennigsen, one of the foremost scholars of Muslims in the Soviet Union, argued that the Karachais and Balkars, for example, had an extremely weak national identity, being more loyal to tribal and local identities. The step from such a condition to asking for national self-determination is a large one, which can only have been made possible by a strengthened group identity and cohesion in the post-Soviet era. Given the fact that there are over fifty distinct ethnic groups in the Caucasus, it is clear that if this kind of phenomenon occurs in even a limited number of cases, the consequences for peace and stability could be fatal. In the Dagestani republic, which is composed of over thirty ethno-linguistic groups in a population of roughly 2 million, popular fronts are emerging among many of the larger nationalities, which ask for privileges and favours to be accorded to their own group. Such claims, which often oppose one another, are naturally disastrous and may easily ruin the delicate multi-ethnic balance of a society such as the Dagestani. At the same time, the poor economic condition of the war-ridden countries of the Caucasus only serves to aggravate an inflamed situation.
In terms of the management of both open and latent conflicts, the polarization of identities described above presents a distinct challenge. In the case of conflicts that have escalated into hostilities, this polarization has been driven to its extreme. Hence it can be presumed that a long period of time is needed for the attenuation of the strong communal identities of the peoples involved in conflict. Although in many cases the danger of the conflicts spreading has been both real and present, all open conflicts in the Caucasus (Nagorno-Karabakh, South Ossetia, Abkhazia, Prigorodnyi, and Chechnya) have been contained. This does not mean that they have had no effect on neighbouring peoples. Quite the opposite, the permanent instability of the Caucasus as a whole, and the fact that the region is formally saturated with arms of all sorts, has done much to assist the process of ethnic mobilization and the feeling of insecurity of all its component peoples. Meanwhile, the disastrous condition of the regional economy has led to scarcity of even basic goods, and as competition for scarce resources becomes fiercer, the danger is that this competition takes the form of a competition between ethnic groups; in particular, this danger has been present within the Russian Federation since the economic crisis of 1998, given the fact that most north Caucasian republics are dependent on subsidies from the federal budget for a majority of republican incomes. Regional inequalities often overlap with ethnic settlement patterns, and therefore inequalities that may not be ethnically determined are perceived as such. If in such a case populations are already mobilized around a strong communal identity, ethnic conflict becomes a real threat.

A structural instability?

Another main factor which is helpful in explaining the conflicts in the Caucasus is the structural instability that observers such as Neil MacFarlane have pointed to. In MacFarlane’s words, “the most obvious characteristic shared by states making up the Caucasian regional system is their weakness.” Beside the legacy of the Soviet territorial structure in the region, MacFarlane notes several other main factors underlying the political instability of the Caucasian states. The first is the Soviet legacy. Beyond its consequences for autonomy and state structure, the Soviet era has resulted in a population unfamiliar with participatory politics, and moreover distrustful of the state, government, and institutions which rule their respective countries. The lack of political culture has facilitated the rise of ethnic politics and what MacFarlane terms ‘political sloganeering’. The rise to power of nationalist politicians in the early 1990s in Georgia (Zviad Gamsakhurdia) Azerbaijan (Abulfaz Elchibey, Iskender Hamidov) and Chechnya (Johar Dudayev) and throughout the 1990s in Armenia (both presidents Ter-Petrosyan and Kocharyan came to power on the Karabakh issue) all illustrate this phenomenon. Another crucial factor consolidating instability, so to speak, has been the dramatic decline in economic production throughout the entire region. The breakdown of Soviet-era trade relations both within the region and with the rest of the former Soviet Union—itself very much caused by the conflicts of the region and the
blockades and embargoes they have brought with them—bears part of the responsibility for this; however, the economic structure of the union, which was aimed at making all peripheral republics dependent on Moscow economically, is equally to blame. The transition process to market economy is another reason for the chaotic condition of the Caucasian economies, which only began recuperating in the second half of the 1990s, and then only slowly compared to the free fall of the first half of the decade. All states are only slowly approaching 1990 production levels. MacFarlane concludes that:

In short, all of the states of the region are weak. They lack the capacity to extract sufficient resources from their societies to establish themselves as truly sovereign entities. Their populations lack any profound attachment to government…[which] do not control what goes on in their territories. They face deep economic crises. This provides little basis for orderly interaction between sovereign states or for defence against stronger contiguous actors.⁴²

In the international relations of the Caucasus, there is an inner triangle as well as an outer triangle which is changing its shape to a quadrangle. The relations between the three south Caucasian states forms the inner triangle. As MacFarlane notes, ‘problems within the states are inextricably linked to relations between them.’⁴³ The complicated character of the relations between these three states, and the lack of any history of voluntary co-operation between them, must be defined as a main destabilizing factor. It is a fact that two states in the region, Azerbaijan and Georgia, see the third, Armenia, as a chief security threat to themselves and to the entire region. Armenia has potential territorial claims on both Georgia and Azerbaijan, claims that are latent in the case of Georgia but more overt in the case of Azerbaijan.

One way of analyzing the Caucasus sees this circumstance as the root of the security problems in the region. According to this view, Armenian irredentism inhibits security co-operation between the three states of the Caucasus, instead leading to a zero-sum game between Armenia and Azerbaijan. Georgia, though retaining its neutrality in the conflict, is closely linked to Azerbaijan by their common interests in safeguarding their territorial integrity. Moreover the Armenian-Azerbaijani zero-sum game enables foreign powers to assert their interests in the region by supporting one or another of the two states, hence reinforcing the outer triangle of rivalry between Turkey, Russia and Iran. Another view asserts that the root of insecurity in the region is the stubborn insistence of the Georgian and Azerbaijani governments to keep their ‘mini-empires’ together, preventing the just cause of people’s right to self-determination. This view, popular in Armenia, is also supported by certain Russian analysts, such as Sergo Mikoyan.⁴⁴ However, this analysis sometimes becomes rather bewildering when supporting Russia’s right to secure its territorial integrity by subduing Chechen rebels but condemning Georgia and Azerbaijan for keeping
their miniature empires intact by all means, as Mikoyan seems to argue. Be that as it may, there are hence diametrically opposite interpretations of the roots of the Caucasian problems. However, it is easier to agree on the consequences: the impossibility of achieving a consensus among the three Caucasian states regarding security issues. This brings into effect the outer triangle.

For reasons that will be analyzed in detail in later chapters, from the onset Russia, Turkey, and Iran were heavily involved in the Caucasian international politics. Among these three, a similar imbalance has developed as between the three Caucasian states: the interests of two of them, Iran and Russia, were compatible enough to form a co-operation against the third, Turkey. The main common interest bringing Russia and Iran together was indeed the quest to prevent the spread of Turkish and Western influence in the Caucasus and Central Asia, an occurrence which both states see as detrimental both in the short and the long run. The addition of the United States to this triangle, on Turkey’s side, seems to complicate further these competitive relations by, so to speak, evening out the odds. For the Caucasus, this has meant an increased geopolitical importance which further complicates the relations between the Caucasian states. For the conflicts in the area, it has delayed rather than hastened the resolution of these conflicts, for a variety of reasons.

First of all, all four interested states are pursuing their own interests in the region rather than working impartially and unselfishly for the resolution of the conflicts. Indeed, certain representatives of warring parties in the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict look back to the days when countries such as Sweden and Finland were involved in mediation. The very fact that the major powers pursue their own interests has in turn meant suspicion on the part of the conflicting parties as to the honesty of peace proposals. Most blatantly, the concept of a ‘common state’ advanced primarily by Russia is rejected by Azerbaijan and Georgia as being merely a tool for Moscow to perpetuate its influence in the region. On the other hand, the great power ramifications also mean that the conflicting parties prefer to wait and see rather than to compromise in face-to-face negotiations with their counterpart. Recent meetings between the presidents of Azerbaijan and Armenia may break this trend, but their results are as yet unknown. The geopolitical games between great powers is interpreted as a window of opportunity to ‘shop around’ for better terms; rather than compromising now, the belligerents prefer to consider the possibilities of achieving a better deal sometime in the future due to the increased power that an alliance with either of the great powers might offer them. Hence the importance of studying the interests and actions of the major powers with an interest in the Caucasus. This issue is discussed further in chapter eleven.

The nature & roots of the Caucasian conflicts

In the reports of often varying quality and accuracy that have reached international headlines—or more often the ‘notices’ section of newspapers—
dealing with developments in Caucasian conflicts, one seldom fails to find a last, explained paragraph or sentence stating that the issue is a conflict ‘between Muslim Azerbaijanis and Christian Armenians’ or between ‘Christian Russia and Muslim Chechen Rebels’ or, in the worst case, an inexact statement such as ‘Christian Georgians and Muslim Abkhazians.’ Such statements, deliberately or not, seek to simplify these conflicts as being religiously motivated. In other words, the information that belligerents happen to be of different religions is taken to be a sufficient explanation for the reader who might wonder what the roots of the respective conflicts actually are, thereby removing the need to go into further detail. The question that arises is whether this is indeed a correct assumption or if it merely reflects a western bias—a desire to find simplistic explanations for issues that are actually not at all simple or readily comprehensible to the unfamiliar citizen.

In this case it may be of interest to seek assistance from conflict theory, to seek the definition of a religious conflict or a conflict with heavy religious influences. It has been established that it is not enough that the two communities in conflict hold different religious beliefs in order to describe a conflict as religious in character. Religion must be on the agenda of the conflict; religion must be the issue of the conflict or the conflict must be understood in clearly religious terms by at least one of the sides. Also, one might expect a rallying of co-religionists in other countries in response to the conflict. It has been advanced that one can speak of the involvement of religion in a conflict where at least one of the following conditions is met: 1) At least one party refers to a religious body of thinking to legitimize conflict behaviour; 2) the polarization of parties is underpinned primarily by religious identity and/or theological perspectives.

While analyzing the Caucasian conflicts, and trying to identify the nature of the conflict, one cannot but conclude that the main, even overwhelming issue at stake is territorial control. As has already been shown, four of the conflicts consist of an ethnically based autonomous area from the Soviet era trying to shake off its respective central government’s control, all took the opportunity of the fall of the Soviet Union and the ensuing constitutional vacuum to declare their independence at the same time as the fifteen union republics. Only the Prigorodniy case differs in that it is a conflict between two republics in the Russian Federation over a slice of territory once under Ingush control but handed to North Ossetia in 1944 (see chapter six). The five conflicts described above can readily be classified as ethnopolitical conflicts. They have no ideological component, unless nationalism is defined as an ideology, and economics are involved at best only as contributory factors, as in the Armenian claim that Nagorno-Karabakh was economically discriminated against in Soviet Azerbaijan. The reason why the respective communities do not accept the other’s control over a certain territory is because of their ethnicity, and the hostility felt by persons of the other ethnicity toward one’s group—and respectively, the fear of the consequences of being ruled by members of the other group. In a sense, the main determinant of the conflicts is a security dilemma based on fear; or one
could say, on the development of nationalisms mirroring each other, fuelling and directed against each other, and scarcely able to develop without each other. One could most readily define these conflicts as ethnopolitical—that is, based on the politicization of ethnicity.

In these ethnopolitical conflicts, religion often functions as a factor separating the two communities. Indeed, while speaking of ethnicity it is necessary to define what differences there are between two groups. In all cases, the belligerent groups are differentiated by speaking different languages, having lived somewhat segregated from one another with different social organization, and hence having different backgrounds, as well as in most cases a long history of mutual suspicion towards each other. As far as Chechens and Russians, Armenians and Azeris, and Ingush and Ossetians are concerned, their adherence to different religions has undoubtedly been an additional factor in their mutual hostility and distrust.

The politicization of ethnicity—not of religion

The point, interestingly, is that it is ethnicity, and not religion, that has been politicized. In this framework, religion has merely occupied a place among other determinants of ethnic identity. A case in point is Georgia, which had three autonomous territories in Soviet times: Abkhazia, Ajaria, and South Ossetia. Only with Ajaria, populated by Muslim Georgians, was there a pronounced religious difference. However, the fact that Ajars and Georgians share a common language and in fact many common elements of identity with the exception of religion seems to have been a factor in the prevention of the escalation of conflict between Tbilisi and Batumi. On the other hand, South Ossetians are Orthodox Christians as are the majority of Abkhaz, whereas all the other determinants of ethnic identity separated them from the Georgians. Despite this fact, the conflicts between the Georgian central government and these territories were severe and violent. The war in Abkhazia, although periodically showing signs of approaching a solution, at times also looks as intractable as those in Chechnya and Nagorno-Karabakh. Indeed Abkhazia is the only one of five conflicts to have experienced substantial return to warfare, as happened in May 1998.

Regarding the two defining factors of religious conflict outlined above, it is difficult to apply any, let alone both of them, to any of these conflicts. In no case does a party to the conflict refer to a religious body of thinking to legitimize conflict behavior. It is nevertheless true that certain factions within the warring parties have resorted to extremist interpretations of religion. This is particularly true for the Chechen-Russian war, where Islam has occasionally been used for rallying the people. However, in the case of Chechnya, the predominance of adat, or customary law, over Islamic law is striking according to many observers. Whenever religion has been used, it has been as a political tool rather than for its own aims. As Anatol Lieven quotes Johar Dudayev in November 1994, Dudayev had stated that introducing sharia, Islamic law, would be one way to fight Russian aggression, but if the Russians stop their aggression, Sharia would be removed.
In the case of Armenia and Azerbaijan, it is a fact that the Catholicos of the Armenian church and the Sheikh-ul-Islam of Azerbaijan joined their peoples’ respective demonstrations and claims in February 1988. Vazgen I, Catholicos of All Armenians, wrote a letter to Gorbachev on 25 February 1988, asking him to accept Nagorno-Karabakh’s demand to be joined to Armenia five days earlier. He also appeared on Armenian TV, supporting the claims. At roughly the same time, priests appeared in the rallies in Yerevan campaigning for the annexation of Nagorno-Karabakh. Later in 1988, the Ayatollah Allah-Shukur Pashazade, Sheikh-ul-Islam of the South Caucasus, came on the scene after being heavily criticized for his silence on the issue—so far, he had only urged the Azeri government to show restraint. In conjunction with the beginning of Muharram, the mourning month of the Shi’is, Pashazade issued a condemnation of ‘the enemies of Islam’ and called for ‘the mobilization of the faithful’. Vazgen I issued another declaration in 1989, where he confirmed his belief in the self-determination of Nagorno-Karabakh.

Nonetheless, the spiritual leaders were never at the forefront of the respective movements, and their actions seem to have been coloured more by a desire not to be left behind by events than any actual religious fervor against the enemy. Moreover they actually met in order to discuss the conflict and jointly distanced themselves from violence. For example, in 1994 Vazgen, Pashazade and the head of the Russian Orthodox Church jointly encouraged the leaders of Armenia and Azerbaijan to ‘shake each other’s hands’ and work for peace. And a closer look at the statements of the leaders in the earlier stages of the conflict show that they ‘support’ the popular movement, call for ‘the mobilization of the faithful,’ but stay clear of targeting any population group openly, and do not incite people to violence—quite the opposite—they urge their respective governments to show restraint. On the whole, the spiritual leaders proved to be less militant than either the population in general or the politicians of their respective countries. This is surely not what one would expect from a ‘religious conflict’. As for the threat of Islamic fundamentalism, Pashazade can hardly be accused of promoting it. His answer to a question by The Sunday Telegraph as to whether he believes in sharia is illuminating: ‘Well, of course, I believe in the sharia.’ But with a sly grin, he added: ‘If I weren’t the Sheikh, I might respond differently. People should have the right to choose their own form of government.’

Neither can one claim that religious identity, and surely not theological perspectives, have been the primary factors underpinning the polarization of the parties. Again, the polarization of the parties is based on ethnic and political grounds.

Religious rallying or Realpolitik?

In terms of religious rallying, there exists a picture in the Caucasus, just as in the case of the war in Bosnia, of ‘civilizational rallying’. Russia is rightly viewed as having supported Armenia against Azerbaijan and North Ossetia against
Ingushetia; Russia is also often viewed as heavily anti-Muslim, suppressing or supporting the suppression of Muslims from Bosnia and Kosovo over the Caucasus to Tajikistan. But Russia is also supporting Ajars and Abkhaz against Georgia, and the country in the Caucasus with which Russia has the highest level of hostility is arguably Georgia and not Azerbaijan.

As far as the Muslim world is concerned, there has hardly been any widespread rallying in support of Azerbaijan or Chechnya. True, there were demonstrations in most Muslim countries against Russia’s policies in Chechnya; but it was in the Baltic states and Poland that support for the Chechen rebels was the strongest. Likewise it was secular Turkey and not Islamist Iran which provided the strongest backing for Azerbaijan and Chechnya in their respective conflicts. Most interestingly and also most revealing of the priority of ethnicity over religion in Eurasian international relations is perhaps the Iranian policy in the Caucasus (see chapter eight). For a variety of reasons basically related to Iranian fear of Azeri irredentism with regard to the over 20 million Azeris in Iran, Iran ended up supporting Armenia against Azerbaijan in the war, despite the fact that Azerbaijan is the only sizable state with a Shi’i majority population just like Iran. Within the South Caucasus, the best bilateral relations today exist between Azerbaijan and Georgia, whereas Georgian-Armenian relations are considerably more tense. Some Armenian observers are even quoted as having stated that had Armenia not been at war with Azerbaijan, it would possibly had been at war with Georgia, presumably over the issue of the large and compact Armenian minority in the Javakheti region of Georgia, bordering Armenia (see chapter four).

In the light of these facts, the statements and analyses found in Western media and academia are all the more remarkable. Samuel Huntington, for example, joins a Russian analyst in their claim that ‘informal coalitions were developing along civilizational lines. Christian Armenia, Georgia, Nagorno-Karabakh and North Ossetia are lining up against Muslim Azerbaijan, Abkhazia, Chechnya, and Ingushetia.’ Arguing that Georgia is lining up with Ossetia and against Azerbaijan is indeed peculiar; as a matter of fact Georgia even enjoyed cordial relations with Dudayev’s Chechnya during the time of the nationalist Gamsakhurdia regime. In the same context, Huntington adds in support of his thesis that ‘Muslims in the Russian Federation rallied behind the Chechens’, taking the example of the Chuvash republic exempting its citizens from serving in Chechnya. This is correct enough, and Chuvashia was indeed one of republics protesting against Russian action—but Chuvashia is overwhelmingly Christian and only a minority of Muslims exists, despite the Turkic roots of the people. No one rallied behind the Chechens in any substantial scale, but other North Caucasians with ethnic as well as religious links to the Chechens, in Dagestan and Ingushetia, did protest and try to prevent Russian troop incursion, whereas other Muslim peoples in Central Asia and in Russia remained virtually silent. The predominance of this kind of thinking led to difficulty in understanding the Georgian-South Ossetian conflict in particular, but also the Georgian-Abkhaz conflict once it is observed that Abkhazians in Abkhazia are not predominantly
Muslim, as opposed to the Abkhazians in Turkey. Most protagonists of civilizational clash-thinking either erroneously categorize the Abkhaz as Muslims, or simply disregard this conflict, just like they disregard the Kyrgyz-Uzbek conflict in the Osh region of Kyrgyzstan in 1990 or the ethnic cleansing of Muslim Meskhetian Turks from Muslim Uzbekistan in 1989.

Arguing that Muslim rallying occurred in any of the conflicts in the Caucasus is at best a major exaggeration, if not simply false. Interestingly, the depiction of these conflicts, just like the Yugoslav conflicts, as civilizational clashes failed to impress Muslims worldwide. However, it was significantly more successful in the Western world—perhaps naturally since media exposure is more pronounced there. It is a fact that Western countries showed a surprising laxity towards instances that can be described as wars of aggression of peoples happening to be Christian against peoples happening to be Muslim, as in Bosnia, Kosovo, Nagorno-Karabakh, Chechnya, or Ingushetia. Serbian ethnic cleansing in Bosnia was too close to Europe to be simply disregarded and too obvious to be distorted or misconstrued.

In contrast, events in the Caucasus, including the ethnic cleansing of over 600,000 Azeris from Armenian-occupied territories in Azerbaijan, were swept under the carpet, as were the unparalleled violations of the totality of rules of war and human rights in Chechnya. The predominance of prejudice and simplistic explanations of conflicts in the Western media, through its results in Western policy-making, has indeed led to a risk of the civilizational clash scenario becoming a self-fulfilling prophecy. As far as the conflicts in the Caucasus themselves are concerned, it seems clear that religion has not been a decisive factor in any of them. The role of religion has been restricted to being one of the determinants of ethnic identity. The lack of appeal of religion, despite its potential usefulness in a conflict situation for the purpose of rallying the faithful, is primarily related to the legacy of seventy years of Soviet atheism which obviously seems to have reduced the role played by religion in individual and social life among all peoples of the former Soviet Union. Then from the diverse web of relations between Caucasian peoples, what have been the decisive factors in influencing events? We have already noted the predominance of ethnic politics, which is tightly linked to group cohesion in view of the existence of an outside enemy. But beyond this, the construction of a web of intermingling and sometimes contradictory relations—consider Chechnya’s relation to Georgia—is coloured by one sole factor: Realpolitik. The underlying factor determining the relations between Caucasian peoples is not a civilizational divide based on religion but simply a combination of nationalism and national interests.

Conclusions

The aim of this chapter was to provide a basis for analyzing and understanding the particular aspects of each conflict in the Caucasus. The legacy of the Russian conquest and Soviet rule provides a historical framework; the analysis of the
structure of instability in the region and of the nature of the conflicts is helpful in viewing the similarities, differences and inter-linkages of these conflicts that this study aims to present. Hence the time has come to move to the case studies of the conflicts of the Caucasus. Here it has been deemed appropriate to begin with the most complicated conflict of the region, which is arguably also the one with the greatest potential to affect the regional and international environment: the Annenian-Azerbaijani conflict over Nagorno-Karabakh.
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The Armenian-Azerbaijani conflict over Nagorno-Karabakh

‘Bitterly we paid for this maturity, bitter was the price for crushing our great trust, a crushing which reminds us of 9 January 1905. We, first the people of Karabakh, then the people of Armenia, marched to the winter palace, to the Lenin square in Stepanakert, and to the theatre square in Yerevan, convinced that the central power would understand us. We marched with words of trust in the land of socialism, in the Russian people, in Perestroika, with portraits of the secretary general of the party, M.S. Gorbachev. But against us fire was opened. The fire was the unjust solutions of the Politburo and the Supreme Soviet, lies created with the help of mass information, a blackening propaganda which witnessed of badly concealed benevolence to the Azerbaijani side. The fire was Sumgait.’

—Silva Kaputikian, 1988

‘I don’t want sugar, I don’t want flour…I want my land back…Out of one million refugees, we can find 150,000 good men to fight; it is better to die for our land than to die here.’

—Azeri refugees in the Saath camp, Azerbaijan

Since the beginning of 1988, a conflict has endured between the South Caucasian republics of Azerbaijan and Armenia over the disputed area of Nagorno-Karabakh. The conflict has led to over 20,000 deaths and almost 1.5 million refugees and internally displaced persons, a refugee flow which has resulted in a considerable crisis especially in Azerbaijan, where the number of displaced persons is close to 1 million, roughly 12–15 per cent of the population of the country consists of displaced persons. Over 14 per cent of Azerbaijan’s territory (that is, the Nagorno-Karabakh area and an additional 10 per cent of the country’s territory) remains occupied, territories which have been ethnically cleansed of their Azeri population in the course of warfare by Armenian Forces. The conflict was initially regarded as an internal conflict by the major powers and international organizations, and consequently the efforts of the international community to bring an end to the war that raged between 1992 and 1994 were half-hearted at best and exiguous at worst. However, the conflict over Nagorno-Karabakh, while
clearly possessing an internal dimension as the struggle for independence on the part of the Armenian population of Nagorno-Karabakh, is also since the end of 1991, an internationalized conflict between two sovereign states: Armenia and Azerbaijan. The existence of three parties to the conflict, the governments of the two sovereign states as well as of the unrecognized ‘Republic of Nagorno-Karabakh’ is a factor which has made finding a solution to the conflict all the more difficult. An important but puzzling fact is that while not openly branding Armenia as a party to the conflict, the international mediation efforts have concentrated on bilateral talks between the governments of Armenia and Azerbaijan, while according considerably less importance to the government of the unrecognized republic of Nagorno-Karabakh. In this chapter, an attempt is made at a comprehensive analysis of the conflict. Chronologically, the history of the conflict can be divided into five phases: first, the background to the conflict in the late nineteenth century and the hostilities between 1905 and the incorporation of the two states into the Soviet Union in 1921; secondly, the suppression of the conflict during the Soviet era between 1921 and 1987; third, the re-emergence of the conflict in the Perestroika period, 1987–91; fourth, the war, 1992–94; and finally the search for solution, 1994 to the present.

**Early history & conflicting claims**

The Karabakh region is disputed on mainly historical grounds by both Azeris and Armenians. The Azeris claim that the region has always been under Azeri rule in recorded history; on the other hand, the Armenians advance the claim that Karabakh was originally an Armenian site of residence and that Azeri rule was illegitimate.

The disputed and confusing history of the Karabakh region can be seen in its very name. Karabakh is actually an amalgamation of Turkish and Persian. ‘Kara’ means ‘black’ in Turkish, and ‘ba’ means garden in Persian as well as vine in Turkish. The contemporary ending ‘-bakhy’ stems from the russification of the word ba. The word ‘nagorno’ simply means ‘mountainous’ in Russian. Thus in the name of the region, three different languages can be found, in fact the languages of the three powers that have dominated the history of the region. The region is termed Artsakh in Armenian, and Yuqan or Dagliq Qarabag in Azeri. The history of this borderland between Azeris and Armenians is the subject of debate, particularly as related to the circumstances surrounding its population’s origin and its state affiliation.1

Armenian sources claim that Karabakh was part of a great Armenian kingdom as early as the fourth century BC; nevertheless evidence of the area’s incorporation into Armenian-controlled territory is conclusive only from the time of Tigran the Great (see below). From the mid-sixth century BC until this time, Armenia (signifying in this context not only the territory of Caucasian Armenia but also parts of eastern Turkey and northern Iran that were inhabited by Armenians) had been integrated into the Persian empire of the Achaemenids. The Persian
influence was also significant in the cultural and religious spheres, as the Armenians of the time often spoke Persian and had adopted the Persian social structure and the Zoroastrian religion. Nevertheless, one can not speak of an independent or even autonomous Armenian political entity at that time. By the mid-fourth century, and with the decline of the Achaemenids, an Armenian dynasty (the Yervandunis) had managed to unite ‘much of Armenia into a single province…and had, in effect, created an autonomous unit within the Persian empire’.2

The disintegration of the Achaemenid empire that followed Alexander the Great’s attack on Persia provided an opportunity for the establishment of an independent Armenian state, centred around lake Van and ruled by the Yervandunis. This state retained its independence until roughly 200 BC, when the Seleucid empire (originally formed by Alexander’s General Seleucus) subdued the Yervandunis. However, the Seleucid empire over-stretched itself westwards and was defeated by Rome in 188 BC, after which it had to relinquish its territories in Asia Minor. An Armenian kingdom was formed under Artashes and recognized by Rome the same year. According to the maps provided by George Bournoutian, the Armenian kingdom by circa 15 BC extended over 100 km west of Lake Van, south to Lake Urmia, north to the river Kura, and east to the Caspian Sea, where it controlled an area around present-day Lenkoran in southeastern Azerbaijan. It nevertheless is not certain whether Mountainous Karabakh, or perhaps only the southern parts of it, were incorporated into this kingdom. In the first century BC, however, Armenia expanded greatly under the rule of Tigran the Great. Tigran took advantage of succession problems in Parthia and civil war in Rome to form an alliance with Mithradates of Pontus, and subsequently expanded south into Mesopotamia and southward into Syria, Cilicia and Phoenicia; furthermore it grew northward, incorporating Mountainous Karabakh (Artsakh in Armenian) and lands north of it, lower Karabakh or Utik in Armenian. Armenia thus became an empire extending from the Mediterranean to the Caspian Sea. After the death of Tigran in 55 BC, Armenia found itself in the middle of the power struggle between Rome and Parthia. By 10 AD, the Artashesian dynasty had died out and Armenia initially came under Roman rule but remained coveted by Persia, and for a long time acted as a buffer zone between these two empires.3

With the advent of the Sassanid dynasty in Persia, Armenia gravitated closer to the Persian orbit. This enabled the Armenians to install a royal dynasty of their own, that of the Arshakunis (279–428 AD). During the rule of this dynasty, two crucial events took place: the conversion of Armenia to Christianity (officially in 301 AD but in all likelihood in 314 AD)4 and the creation of an Armenian alphabet by Mesrop Mashtots. These two events were instrumental in developing and strengthening a unique Armenian identity through both religion and a literary tradition. The creation of the alphabet was undertaken with the specific aim of distinguishing Armenia from its neighbours.5
The area of Mountainous Karabakh formed part of the greater Armenian states mentioned above between the second century BC and 387 AD. In 387, Armenia was split between the Byzantines and the Sassanids. The fate of Mountainous Karabakh in this context remains debated; Walker claims that the Armenian lands extended north to the river Kura, and that Mountainous Karabakh was not separated from Armenian lands until 428 AD; other Armenian sources contend that the area had already been separated from Armenia and incorporated into Caucasian Albania by 387.

At this point it may be useful to compare the development of Armenia with that of present-day Azerbaijan. Actually the Azeris cannot muster a similarly direct lineage to the past; in fact, many scholars argue that the concept of Azerbaijan, as well as the national identity of the people living on the territory, is a twentieth-century phenomenon. As Croissant notes, ‘unlike the Armenians, the Azeris had, until quite recently in historical terms, neither a common language and religion upon which to trace their national identity nor a sufficient stimulus to realize such an identity.’

The area of present-day Azerbaijan, known as ancient Media, was invaded by Persians in the sixth century BC, by Alexander the Great in the fourth century BC, and by Romans in the first century BC. According to the Greek Historian, Strabo, and Armenian chronicles until the fifth century, the population of present-day Azerbaijan was divided between a western third populated by Armenians with the Caucasian Albanians (unrelated to the Balkan Albanians) to their east from which the Azeris claim descent. The Caucasian Albanian state emerged by the fourth century BC, occupying an area between Iberia (Georgia) in the West, the Caspian in the east, the Caucasus mountains in the north, and the river Araxes in the south. Hence its territory conforms roughly to present-day Azerbaijan. Albania was usually a vassal of larger powers, for a while it was even a vassal of Tigran’s greater Armenia, but it was most often linked to Persia. Whereas Albania’s history is debated, it carries a high level of importance as Azeri scholars argue that Azerbaijan is an heir to Caucasian Albania and hence to its territory, which incidentally included Mountainous Karabakh for long periods of time. However, the ethnic roots of the Azeris are subject to perhaps even fiercer debate. Most importantly, the time of the arrival of a substantial Turkic population is important in this context. The controversy regarding the state of the Shirvanshahs is illustrative of the interpretations of history. Whereas most scholars take it that the state appeared north of the river Kura around the sixth century, isolated medieval sources place the dynasty’s origins in Achaemenid times. From an Azeri point of view, this is taken as implying a direct link back to the fourth century BC, supposedly making the Azeri claim to territory more legitimate. Naturally, one may justifiably ask what importance should be granted to early history in political controversies of today; whether a people has been on a territory for several hundred or several thousand years may seem irrelevant to a Western observer; nevertheless in the Caucasus such facts play an important role and are the focus of extensive debate.
The date of the arrival of Turkic tribes from Central Asia is debated. Nevertheless it seems clear that by the eleventh century, the region had acquired a considerable Turkic population, which arrived with the Seljuk invasion and blended with the indigenous population. Azeri historians claim that the Turkish element of population was already strong in the seventh century AD, citing various contemporary, albeit controversial, sources. ‘Incursions by Turkic-speaking groups’ are accordingly noted from ‘the beginning of our era’, increasing steadily from the fifth century onwards. The Shirvan region in northern Azerbaijan is claimed from antiquity to have been an area of contact between Caucasian, Iranian and Turkic-speaking groups. Incursion by Huns and Khazars in the fourth and fifth centuries are taken as evidence of a Turkic presence (nevertheless it must be noted that Huns and Khazars were not purely but partially Turkic). According to Peter Golden, one can speak of ‘genuine interaction between the Turkic peoples and the populations of Transcaucasia’ after the fourth century AD, in the shape of the Huns. Another important source providing evidence of the Turkic presence in present-day Azerbaijan is a seventh-century work by Ubeid Shariya Al-Jurhumi, who noted that Azerbaijan ‘has long been a land of Turks. Having gathered over there, they have mixed with one another and become integrated.’ Azeri scholars have also argued the existence of an ethnic link between Turks and Albanians, basing their claims on toponyms and the etymology of personal names. It seems safe, nevertheless, to conclude that a certain level of limited Turkic presence in the south Caucasus existed long before the eleventh century, although it can not be conceived of as dominating present-day Azerbaijan. Nevertheless, a Turkic element may very well have played an important role in the social and cultural development of Albania in the second half of the first millennium. The Albanians had been Christians since the fourth century, until Islam was brought in the seventh century by the Arab invaders. In fact, the religion of the Albanians has also been a cause of controversy: certain, primarily Armenian sources claim that the Albanian church was part of the Armenian church; however there is more conclusive evidence to prove that an independent church existed in Albania at the time. Nevertheless, equally importantly, what was left of the Albanian church after the conversion of the majority of Albania to Islam became integrated with the Armenian church.

The seventh century was the scene of a major event, the invasion of the Arabs and their settlement in Albania. This event led to the Islamicization of the majority of the Albanians; those that remained Christian are said to have orbited towards Armenia. The conversion to Islam also made the blending of the Albanians with the Seljuk Turks easier.

As far as Karabakh is concerned, it resisted Sassanid rule relatively successfully and kept a form of autonomy until the Arab invasions, with which most of Transcaucasia came under Arab rule until the late ninth century. Armenian sources claim that ever since this time ‘Mountainous Karabakh was the only part of Armenia where a tradition of national sovereignty was preserved unbroken
until the late medieval period;\(^\text{20}\) this is one crucial reason for the emotional attachment so many Armenians feel to the region. There seems to be some evidence that the area was inhabited by Armenians in the eighth century, as a ‘peripheric dialect’ of Armenian called Artsakhian is mentioned in contemporary writings. The issue of the ethnic origin of the population of Mountainous Karabakh in this era is highly important. Azeri sources argue that the population of Karabakh was chiefly formed of Albanians who had remained Christian and become integrated in the Armenian cultural sphere as the rest of Albania was Islamized. The Azeri viewpoint hence opposes the Armenian position that the inhabitants of Mountainous Karabakh have been ethnically Armenian for over two thousand years; rather, they argue that these were Albanians (and hence of the same stock as the Azeris themselves) that had been ‘Armenized’. Politically, this argument is used as to prove that the Karabakh Armenians have no reason to question their appartenance to Azerbaijan. Naturally, the validity of such a claim is rather misplaced, and is in any case not official Azerbaijani policy but rather an academic oddity.

Whatever it matters, the truth may never be available; as Croissant quotes Robert Hewsen, ‘the population of southeast Caucasus, whether under Armenian or Albanian rule, was highly mixed, and to label it as being essentially one or the other or even to divide it simply into two groups is well in advance of the evidence.’\(^\text{21}\) What is a fact is that irrespective of its ethnic origins over the course of the centuries, the population of Mountainous Karabakh adopted an Armenian identity while still keeping a strong local attachment to Karabakh. In fact, until the nineteenth century Karabakh was the seat of the ‘Catholicosate of Albania’, keeping a religious identity of its own.\(^\text{22}\) During the twelfth century three local princely families (the so-called Meliks, rich property owners) exercised a certain level of control over the region. By the early thirteenth century, Hasan Jalal Dawla, a Muslim Armenian Melik, proclaimed himself autocratic lord and prince of princes of variously Khachen (Zangezur), Artsakh and Aghvank (Albania) and managed to get approval for his position from the Mongols who controlled the wider region. In fact, a large portion of the Armenian feudal class was Muslim at least in name; what portion of the population converted to Islam in this period is unknown. It is reasonable to assume that Muslim Armenians, by intermarriage and otherwise, gradually integrated with other Muslim populations of the region over the centuries. The descendants of Hasan Jalal, known as the Jalalians, retained a semi-autonomous rule under the Seljuk and Mongol overlords for several generations, with the number of ruling families again growing to five; with the return of Persian authority they were confirmed by the Shah in 1603. The Meliks reportedly survived the incursions of Tamerlane in the fourteenth century, and of Turkmen tribes in the fifteenth.\(^\text{23}\)

During the fifteenth century the Meliks seem to have lost influence to the Christian clergy which imposed itself and Christianity.\(^\text{24}\) To the east of Karabakh, Azerbaijan had by the end of the sixteenth century become incorporated into Safavid Persia. Actually, Safavid rule in the Caucasus—that is, in the areas defined
by Persia as ‘Azerbaijan’—was subdivided into four administrative regions: Tabriz, Shirvan, Shukkur-Saada, and Karabakh (centred upon Ganja). The closeness of Azerbaijani culture to the Safavid rule is demonstrated by the fact that Shah Ismail (1486–1524) wrote poetry in Turkish, in a language very similar to modern Azerbaijani Turkic. This was a time of confrontation between the Safavid and Ottoman empires, a confrontation that largely took place in the Caucasus, but where the Ottomans prevailed only for shorter periods such as that between 1578 and 1603 when the Caucasus was under Ottoman control.

In the early eighteenth century, with Peter the Great showing increasing interest in the Caucasus, the Armenian leadership (dominated by the Church) attempted to approach Russia and Georgia with the aim of concluding an alliance that would protect the region from Persian or Ottoman rule. One argument used to attract Russia was also that Karabakh could be used as an outpost in the expressed Russian intention to reconquer Constantinople. When this attempt failed, a descendent of Hasan Jalal named Davit Bek rose to power, but the discontent shown by other Meliks was sufficient to call in the Ottoman army in 1728. Ottoman rule lasted only until 1735, when the incoming Shah of Persia, Nadir, occupied the region. By 1747, and following the assassination of Nadir Shah, Persian rule had collapsed in the Caucasus and today’s Azerbaijan and Armenia were partitioned into khanates, semi-independent principalities ruled by Muslim and apparently Turkic rulers.

By the middle of the eighteenth century, the internal conflicts between the ruling families had destroyed the local Armenian elite in Karabakh. This led to the region slipping out of Armenian control, and a Turkic ruler managing to impose his rule and create a semi-independent dynastic state, the khanate of Karabakh, based in Shusha. Hence the Karabakh khanate was comparable to the khanates of Shirvan (where the Shirvanshahs ruled), Baku, Kuba, Sheki, Derbent, Nakhchivan, and Yerevan. All of these khanates were ruled by Turkic Muslim families. The population components of these khanates was mixed; in effect Armenians, Turks, and other groups lived scattered over the entire area, with overlapping settlement patterns. It is significant that the Yerevan khanate itself was an area with a notable Muslim majority in 1826, a situation which had already been reversed by 1832.

At the end of the eighteenth century, Russia’s expansion in the Caucasus reached Georgia (see chapter two) and the Georgian Gubernia or protectorate was formed in 1801, confirming Georgia’s annexation to Russia. Simultaneously the first Azeri areas were included into Russia, that is the khanates of Kazakh and Shamshadil. In these first years of the nineteenth century, Russia tried to assert its influence over the khanates, and Karabakh was one of the first to accept Russian overlordship, although insurrections against Russian rule occurred and Russian control was far from stable.

Russian attempts to assert control over the region led to the conquests of a number of khanates between 1806 and 1809, and ultimately to the first Russo-
Persian war of 1812–13. The Treaty of Gulistan, which ended this war, in fact led to Karabakh officially passing from nominal Persian control to Russian rule. Only about ten years later, new insurrections took place in Karabakh and other khanates, as the khans or their descendants returned and tried to make use of the popular disaffection with Russian rule that they hoped would enable them to reclaim their respective thrones. These movements were supported by Iran, and thus resulted in a second Russo–Persian war which led to fresh Persian defeat, and the 1828 Treaty of Turkmanchay. This was important as far as Karabakh is concerned since immediately after the treaty, Russia encouraged and organized a population exchange. Thus huge number of Armenians left Persian and Ottoman lands to settle in the Russian Caucasus, and respectively large numbers of Muslims left the South Caucasus for areas under Persian or Ottoman control. According to Russian census reports, the Armenian population in Karabakh represented 9 per cent of the total in 1823 (the remaining 91 per cent being registered as ‘Muslims’), 35 per cent in 1832, and a majority of 53 per cent in 1880. This information is only of limited use, as the census included the entire Karabakh khanate, that is including lower Karabakh. Hence the figures for Mountainous Karabakh remain unknown; it is nevertheless certain that the overall increase in Armenian population was due to an increasing migration of Armenians to Mountainous Karabakh or an exodus of Muslims from the region.

The process accelerated after every Russo-Turkish war (1855–56 and 1877–78) as Russians saw the Azeris as generally unreliable and as potential allies to the Turks, given their ethno-linguistic affinities. In contrast, the Armenians were seen as Russia’s natural allies in the region, devoted to the tsar, and reliable. In a sense, then, Armenians were favoured by the authorities and even took up important positions in the administration of the region. Naturally, the opposite was true in the Ottoman Empire, where Armenians were seen as a potentially pro-Russian fifth column, leading to the massacres of 1890. Even before that, though, Armenians left Turkey whereas numerous Azeris, in particular Sunni Azeris, migrated from the Caucasus to the Ottoman Empire. By the turn of the century, there were over 1,200,000 Armenians in the South Caucasus, in what is called ‘Eastern Armenia’ as opposed to ‘Western Armenia’, located in modern-day Turkey. The Armenian population in the Western part is debated; Turkish sources speak of less than a million whereas Armenian sources often mention several million Armenians.

In the latter part of the nineteenth century, the Baku oil boom led to a concentration of Armenians in Baku, occupying the higher industrial and managerial positions. As the Armenians were clearly favoured by the Russian rulers in terms of their benefiting from the oil riches, tensions with the natives arose: whereas the two populations had been able to live in peace earlier in spite of the population movements and the fact that Armenians had made use of the practice to buy out Azeris from their lands, this practice could have been seen as leading to problems.
These tensions remained covert until the first Russian revolution of 1905, which soon spread to the South Caucasus. Disturbances broke out first in Baku, Nakhchivan, and Yerevan but soon spread to Shusha in Western Karabakh, where the first inter-ethnic riots erupted. It is still disputed how the clashes started, contesting allegations existed primarily as to who struck first. However, it is important to note that—as in more recent years—the central imperial authorities’ failure to intervene led to speculation that the authorities either provoked the violence or at least saw no reason to stop it, as it would distract both groups from their respective pursuit of freedom.30

Armenian or pro-Armenian sources such as Dasnabedian and Walker argue that the Azeris (whom he terms Tatars) provoked the fighting, leading to a strong Armenian response and eventually what he terms ‘the victory of the Armenians’. Dasnabedian claims that the Azeris ‘unleashed a war against the Armenians…with a clear intention to massacre, pillage, and destroy (sic)’.31 Accordingly, the ‘Tatars’ massacred unarmed Armenians in February 1905 in Baku, later moving to other cities including Karabakh; in response, the Dashnaks according to Dasnabedian were successful in ‘stopping the original momentum of the armed and destructive Azeri mobs’ and even to ‘counterattack and sometimes severely punish’ the Azeris.32 Walker claims that the ‘Tatars were free to massacre with impunity.’33

According to Feigl, on the other hand, the Dashnaktsutian committed terrorist acts (similar to those orchestrated in the Ottoman empire by the organization at the time)34 against the Azeri majority in Shusha, Baku and Ganja, leading to the eruption of violence.35 In Baku, accordingly, most of the Azerbaijani leading stratum was eliminated; in Susha, Azeri homes were destroyed, and 500 Azeris and 40 Armenians were killed. In total, Feigl claims, 158 Azeri villages and over 10,000 Azeris were killed during this period. None of these authors, however, include any references to support their claims; moreover their respective arguments are made less credible by the fact that they depict one side as the sole perpetrator and do not even mention any atrocities committed by the opposite side, portraying that side instead as victims.

According to van der Leeuw, the riots started with the killing of an Azeri schoolboy and a shopkeeper in Baku, in early February 1905. Bloody clashes followed and an Azeri mob marched on the Armenian quarters of Baku; within four days, 126 Azeris and 218 Armenians had been killed. By August, violence broke out in Shusha after a Dashnak manifesto was issued calling for the eviction of all Turkic and Persian elements from the ‘holy place of Armenia’. Hundreds of Azeris were reportedly killed; a truce was established by the end of the month. Nevertheless the news from Shusha spread back to Baku, where Azeris attacked Armenian industries. Violence re-emerged in the summer of 1906 in Karabakh, with ‘wholesale battles waged between Armenian and Azeri village communities.’ Consequently, the city of Shusha became rigorously divided into an Armenian uptown and an Azeri downtown.36 Swietochowski for his part cites Armenian sources that claim that a total of 128 Armenian and 158 Muslim villages were destroyed or pillaged, indicating that the violence was very much two-sided;
accounts of the number of dead vary between 3,100 and 10,000. According to Swietochowski, all data suggest that the Azeri side suffered more casualties than the Armenian. This stems from the fact that the Azeri mobs were very badly organized, whereas the armed Dashnak units that did much of the fighting on the Armenian side were considerably more effective, a fact noted by almost all analysts. Dasnabedian, in his history of the Dashnaksutium, proudly claims that ‘thanks to its decisive role in...the Armeno–Tatar confrontations of 1905, the ARF’s prestige in the Caucasus and elsewhere had noticeably increased.’

As Swietochowski suggests, the events of 1905–6 were crucial in the formation of the national identity of the Azeris: ‘The Tatar–Armenian war generated Muslim unity for a cause that transcended local or sectarian loyalties, and henceforth such divisions ceased to be a serious impediment to political action’. The feeling of common identity also grew in Iranian Azerbaijan, and even developed into a serious threat of retaliation against Armenians in Tabriz, who were forced to publicly distance themselves from the actions of their fellow Armenians in the Caucasus. The events during this first Russian revolution are then of crucial importance to the further development of the Armenian–Azerbaijani conflict, primarily because this period saw the first instances of organized armed confrontation between the two communities. The symbolically so important ‘first blood’ of the conflict was spilled during this period. Moreover, the events were instrumental in, and certainly hastened, the development of a self-aware Azerbaijani nation.

Following the Russian revolutions of 1917, the short-lived Transcaucasian Federation was born, as the leading political groupings of the time (that is the Georgian Mensheviks, the Azerbaijani Musavat party, and the ARF) agreed to form a federal government for South Caucasus. The South Caucasus became in most matters completely separated from Russia, and finally declared independence on 22 April 1918. However, it soon proved impossible to reconcile the three South Caucasian peoples, mainly because the Armenians favoured either a British or a Russian protectorate and the Georgians were favourably disposed towards German rule. The Azeris had relied on Turkey’s role, hence the end of the First World War upset the designs of both the Azeris and the Georgians.

Having seen its western possessions seceding from the early nineteenth century onwards and having lost all hope of recreating an European empire, the Young Turkish leadership in the Ottoman empire took advantage of the chaos in Russia to start a campaign aimed at incorporating the Turkic areas of the floundering Russian empire. The Brest–Litovsk peace treaty of March 1918 ‘provided the much appreciated and diplomatically tailored legal framework to the Turkish armies to advance in the Caucasus’, by the Russian cession of the vilayets of Kars, Ardahan, and Batum to Turkey. One immediate obstacle stood in their way: Armenia. In April, the Transcaucasian Federation was formed in Tbilisi, but the new state did not recognize the terms of the Brest–Litovsk treaty. With Turkish troops amassing on its western borders, the creation of the Federation took place in a decisively chaotic atmosphere. Negotiations were scheduled to take place
between the Ottoman empire and the Transcaucasian Federation, but faltered due to the Caucasian refusal to accept the Turkish precondition, namely Caucasian acceptance of the terms of the Brest-Litovsk treaty. An initial Ottoman attack effectively meant the end of the Federation, as its three component peoples reacted very differently to it. Basically, the Azerbaijani component welcomed the Turkish invasion and armed Azerbaijani formations actively supported the Turkish advances; the Georgian side was ambivalent towards it, allied as it was with Turkey’s ally Germany but not favourable to Turkish rule; Armenia remained bitterly opposed and vowed to fight Turkish advances. Ottoman armies nevertheless penetrated deep into Transcaucasia, although the severely outnumbered Armenian forces succeeded in halting the Turkish advance at the battle of Sardarabad, 40 kilometres from Yerevan, on 24 May. The Armenians were however, seriously weakened, and were in a weak position in the negotiations that took place in Batum. Meanwhile Georgia desperately sought Germany’s involvement. Germany, despite its alliance with the Ottomans, desired access to raw materials from the Caucasus independently of Turkey. Having obtained guarantees from Berlin, Georgia declared its independence on 26 May. On 28 May, Azerbaijan did the same and three days later, Armenia was left with no choice but to declare its independence.

The Armenians and Georgians had no choice but to accept the peace terms dictated by Turkey in the Treaty of Batum of 4 June 1918. This meant not only the acceptance of the Brest-Litovsk treaty but also of additional Turkish territorial gains, including the areas of present-day Javakheti on the part of Georgia, and parts of the Alexandropol and Echmiadzin areas on the part of Armenia. In addition, the Ottomans obtained full transit rights through Transcaucasia, and the treaty with Azerbaijan guaranteed Ottoman military support for the new Azerbaijani republic initially based in Ganja. Whereas the Brest-Litovsk treaty had led to Turkish gains of 26,000 km², the Treaty of Batum meant gains of an additional 21,000 km².

Nevertheless the establishment of the three South Caucasian republics was no easy task. Indeed, the settlement patterns of the three peoples overlapped considerably. This was so particularly in the case of the Armenians and Azeris; in general one could argue that Armenia’s main problem was that the Armenian population of the Caucasus was not centred in any particular area but dispersed throughout the region. The largest concentrations of Armenian population were, significantly, in Baku and Tbilisi. The delimitation of the Caucasus into three ‘national’ states was consequently made impossible in principle, and it is certain that the Armenian declaration of independence was made only because it was the only option left to the ARF leadership in Tbilisi. According to Suny:

Given a choice, the Armenian leadership in Tiflis (Tbilisi) would not have declared independence, preferring some kind of political relationship with Russia or at least with the other peoples of Transcaucasia. But hostilities between these peoples and the cool calculation by Georgians and
Azerbaijans that they could improve their situation by abandoning the Armenians and allying with the Germans and Turks respectively left the Armenians completely isolated. The decisions of other nations forced the Dashnaks to take upon themselves the role of leaders of a new state, a state that came into existence in an incredibly inhospitable environment.  

This recipe for conflict was substantially aggravated by the Ottoman invasions that prompted a confrontation between the Azeris and the Armenians. Atrocities committed by the Ottoman armies, with the participation of the Azeri units, led to acts of vengeance by Armenian mobs, initially in Baku where a short but bloody civil war raged in March 1918; however, the turning tide of the First World War and the ultimate defeat of the Ottoman empire in October meant the start of what could be termed a pan-Caucasian war. The three republics fought desperately to gain control over territories disputed among them before the start of the Paris peace conference which was intended to settle such territorial disputes.

One of the main scenes of territorial conflict was Nagorno-Karabakh itself. Karabakh was the scene of atrocities by both parties to the conflicts, the Turkish/Azeri ‘Army of Islam’ under Nuri Pasha’s leadership and the Armenian army under Andranik. Whereas the Turkish/Azeri side had had the upper hand, the defeat of the Ottoman empire unleashed a brutal attempt by Andranik to annex the area to Armenia.

Nevertheless, the British, who replaced the Ottomans after their withdrawal, reaffirmed Karabakh’s (as well as Zangezur’s) belonging to Azerbaijan, by appointing a Muslim governor in Shusha, Khosrov Sultanov. This led to protests among the local Armenians, who only reluctantly accepted Azerbaijani jurisdiction. It is nevertheless significant that Sultanov did manage to persuade the Armenian Assembly in Nagorno-Karabakh to accept Azerbaijani rule, an act that according to Swietochowski ‘recognized the realities of geography, economy and transportation that linked this ethnic enclave with Azerbaijan rather than with Armenia beyond the mountains.’ Meanwhile guerrilla fighting continued, especially in the mountains, since Andranik and the Dashnaks never accepted this arrangement. British policy in South Caucasus seems to have been characterized by short-sightedness and a total disdain for the interests and future of the Caucasian peoples. Britain’s main interest appears to have been to prevent Bolshevik, or even other Socialist forces such as the Georgian Mensheviks, from acceding to power; South Caucasus would return to Russian rule once the White armies had defeated the Bolsheviks. The background to the seemingly pro-Azeri positions or rather anti-Armenian position taken by the British on the question of Nagorno-Karabakh can be deduced from the condescending attitudes the British often had regarding Middle Eastern peoples. As outlined by Artin Arslanian, the British felt only contempt for Armenians and Georgians, as they had for Arabs, Jews, and Christians alike throughout the Middle East. The one exception was the Turks. Owing to their long history of administrating Ottoman territories, the
Turks enjoyed a certain level of respect in British eyes as ‘brave and clean fighting Turks’, despite their ‘uncivilized’ behaviour. As Arslanian quotes General George Milne, responsible for British military operations in South Caucasus:

They [the local nationalities] are certainly not worth the life of one British soldier. The Georgians are merely disguised Bolsheviks…The Armenians are what the Armenians have always been, a despicable race. The best are the inhabitants of Azerbaijan, though they are in reality uncivilized.47

It does not seem so far-fetched thereof, that the allocation of Nagorno-Karabakh to Azerbaijan, while intended only as a temporary measure, was prompted by British condescension for Armenians.

In the following years, three separate republics existed, but turmoil continued, mainly as the Dashnaks pursued their irredentist claims on their neighbours. They had territorial claims on both Georgia (the Akhalkalaki and Gocharli regions which are still today predominantly Armenian-populated) and Azerbaijan (Karabakh, Zangezur, and Nakhchivan). Thus, far from being peaceful, this era was characterized by inter-ethnic strife. By 1919, however, the Dashnaks had been driven out of Nakhchivan, and although they stayed in power in Zangezur until 1921, they were soon toppled in Yerevan as well.

Nevertheless the first republic to be Sovietized was Azerbaijan, probably due to the priority given by the Bolsheviks to securing the oil fields, and to the fact that Azerbaijan was the only republic in the South Caucasus where there existed a widespread support for the Bolsheviks, notably among the workers of Baku.48 Thus the Red Army entered Baku in April 1920, as the Azerbaijani army was locked up in Karabakh fighting an Armenian uprising, and Azerbaijan became the first Soviet stronghold in South Caucasus. In November, Soviet power was established in Yerevan, sacking the Dashnaks, and the Red Army proceeded to secure control over the whole of South Caucasus, with Georgia being the last of the three states to be conquered, in April of 1921.49

As a preliminary conclusion on the modern history of Nagorno-Karabakh, as a whole it seems safe to agree with Tadeusz Swietochowski’s assessment that ‘massive eruptions of violence in the form of mutual inter-communal massacres began with the 1905 Russian Revolution, and would re-emerge each time the Russian state was in a condition of crisis or overhaul—during the civil war in 1918 and during the perestroika from 1988 on.’50

The Soviet era & the suppression of the conflict: 1921–87

At this point, the political struggle for Karabakh began, and was to last for a long time, as it took the Soviet leadership three years to settle the issue. Initially the pendulum seemed to swing in favour of Armenia. In December 1920 the revolutionary committee of Soviet Azerbaijan, under Soviet pressure from central
authorities, issued a statement that Karabakh, Zangezur, and Nakhchivan were all to be transferred to Armenian control. Stalin (then commissar for nationalities) publicised the decision on 2 December, but the Azerbaijani leader Narimanov later denied the transfer. Four months later, the pendulum swung back. The ‘Treaty of Brotherhood and Friendship’ between the Soviet Union and republican Turkey included a provision that both Nakhchivan and Karabakh were to be placed under the control of the Azerbaijani SSR. It appears that this was a concession on the part of the Bolsheviks to the newly founded Turkish republic in Ankara—Lenin and Stalin were initially positively inclined to Kemal Atatiirk, whom they saw as a potential ally at the time. Atatiirk was hostile to any territorial arrangements favouring Soviet Armenia, since a strong Armenia could have potential territorial claims on Turkey. Even given Stalin’s tendency to divide the Caucasian peoples to prevent unified resistance, the idea of separating the Armenians into two entities—an Armenian republic and Nagorno-Karabakh—must have been welcome. Furthermore, this decision not only divided the Armenians but also the Azeris, into the Azerbaijani republic and Nakhchivan.

However, the game was not over yet. On 4 July, a meeting of the Kavburo (Caucasian section of the Soviet Communist party) voted in Stalin’s presence to include Karabakh in the Armenian SSR. The following day, Narimanov protested against this decision and the Kavburo once again reversed its decision, agreeing to Karabakh’s remaining in the Azerbaijani SSR, although the region was to be granted substantial autonomy.

During 1922, while unrest was still being reported in Karabakh, discussions took place concerning the potential status of Karabakh within the Azerbaijani SSR. Finally, it was decided to give the region the rank of an autonomous oblast (the oblast included the mountainous part of Karabakh and consequently was called the Nagorno–Karabakh Autonomous Oblast, hereafter the NKAO) and a decree from Baku on 7 July 1923 officially established this state of affairs. A month later, the capital of the Nagorno-Karabakh Autonomous Oblast was moved from Shusha to Khankendi, not ten kilometres to the north, and the city was renamed Stepanakert, after Stefan Schaumian, the ‘great Armenian Bolshevik’ of the Baku commune. The NKAO was officially proclaimed in November 1924. Interestingly, a 1926 map in the first volume of the Great Soviet Encyclopedia had the NKAO touching upon Armenia at one point; however, one of the border changes of the oblast that were made evidently cut the region off from the Armenian republic and, by 1930, maps had been adjusted accordingly, leaving the Lachin corridor under sovereign Azerbaijani territory, separating the NKAO from Armenia proper.

In 1924, Nakhchivan received the status of an autonomous republic (ASSR) within the Azerbaijani SSR, despite the fact that the region had no land connection with mainland Azerbaijan. Nakhchivan’s belonging to the Azerbaijani republic was actually decided at the same time as the discussions on Nagorno–Karabakh. Nakhchivan’s status was, it seems, decided in talks between Soviet Russia and Kemalist Turkey, without involving any Armenians, at the treaty of
Moscow in March 1921. This treaty stipulated that Nakhchivan would remain an autonomous region of Azerbaijan, and that the region’s status could not be altered without Turkey’s explicit approval. It is clear that this deal was clinched by Turkey in view of Ankara’s military offensive in the Caucasus immediately following the Ottoman signing of the Sevres treaty in August 1920. Turkey, aware of Soviet Russia’s need for allies at the time of the civil war, successfully
buried the Armenian question with the Treaty of Moscow, followed by the Treaty of Kars of 13 October 1921, between Turkey and the three South Caucasian republics, which in principle was a ratification of the Moscow treaty by the three republics. There is a point in Richard Hovannisian’s statement that ‘Soviet Russia, on the international front, sacrificed the Armenian question to cement the Turkish Alliance.’ Thus, ultimately it seems clear that the Armenians in this particular instance were not in favour with the Soviets. In a sense this is surprising given that historically the Armenians had been far more benevolently disposed towards—as well as favoured by—Russian rulers than the Azeris. In retrospect, this decision may have been to Azerbaijan’s immediate favour, but in the long run the Armenians’ feeling of frustration with the loss of western Armenia despite Western promises, and the loss of Nagorno-Karabakh and Nakhchivan, despite Soviet promises, proved to have a catalytic effect.

The Armenians were naturally disappointed with this situation, especially given the fact that they had earlier been promised Karabakh by the Soviets. Furthermore, parallel events in the early 1920s must be mentioned to clarify the Armenian question in its entirety. In August 1920 the Treaty of Sevres was signed, in which Woodrow Wilson himself had drawn the boundaries of a future Armenian state. This state was designed to include portions of Eastern Anatolia, or what Armenians call Western Armenia. Moreover, it was designed to include Nakhchivan—despite its predominantly Turkic population—as well as most of the NKAO.

Thus, once under Soviet rule, it became the persistent aim of Armenian elites to reverse the situation and persuade Moscow to turn Karabakh over to the Armenian SSR. It has to be noted, at this point, that the Soviet decision was actually quite arbitrary in several ways. Firstly, Nakhchivan received the status of an ASSR, and there is no reason why Nagorno-Karabakh should not have been eligible for the same status. In fact, an arrangement in which the status of these two regions would have paralleled each other (such as a Nakhchivan ASSR under the Azerbaijani SSR, and a Nagorno-Karabakh ASSR under the Armenian SSR or vice-versa) would indeed have been more logically persuasive and would have helped to prevent rather than catalyze future conflict. A counter to this claim, is that according to the Azeris, there are sizable Azeri minorities in Armenia and Georgia as well as in Dagestan (especially in the Derbent region) which did not receive any autonomous status at all although geographically these populations are geographically concentrated in specific areas. The loss of Derbent is particularly inexplicable to the Azeris, who claim that it in this context it was not evident that the Armenians in Karabakh would even receive autonomous status. Nakhchivan is not encircled by Armenia, as Nagorno-Karabakh is encircled by Azerbaijan: Nakhchivan has a border with Turkey (if only seven kilometres) as well with Iran. There were in fact a number of minorities in the south Caucasus, including the Armenian minority in Georgia, who never received autonomous status. It is no exaggeration to say that both Nagorno-Karabakh and Nakhchivan were exceptions in the Soviet system of federalism: there was no other case of an
autonomous region or republic whose titular nationality is the same as the central state’s titular nationality, as is the case with Nakhchivan. Nor is there an incidence of a national group which was endowed with both a union republic and an autonomous region or republic in another union republic, as with Nagorno-Karabakh. In general, only indigenous groups without a mother nation in another, Soviet or non-Soviet territory, were given autonomous status. The only other example of a nation with two political entities are the Ossetians, with an autonomous republic in Russia and an autonomous region in Georgia. National minorities living outside their national republic were normally not eligible for autonomous status. Systematic implementation of such a principle would also have been impossible in practice, as the list of minorities on ‘the wrong side of the border’ would be long. One only has to cite a few examples: Tajiks in Uzbekistan; Uzbeks in Tajikistan; Russians in Ukraine; Russians in Kazakhstan; Armenians and Azeris in Georgia, etc. Hence the peculiar construction that emerged out of perceived necessity in the Caucasus can in itself be termed a source of conflict.58

Whatever conclusion can be drawn from the territorial delimitation, already by the 1930s the Armenians were attempting to regain control over both Nagorno-Karabakh and Nakhchivan, at a time when a number of territories saw their status changed from above, such as Abkhazia’s relation to Georgia. Indeed, changing the status of a territory was not an alien event to the Soviet leadership—consider Crimea’s 1954 transfer from Russia to Ukraine. However, the Armenians found no central support from the centre. In 1936, the dissolution of the Transcaucasian Federative Socialist Soviet Republic, including the three south Caucasian republics, led to the further distancing of Nagorno-Karabakh from Armenia; the only administrative contact between the two was now their common appartenance to the Soviet Union. Naturally, internal borders in the Soviet Union carried little significance; Karabakh Armenians seeking higher education could do so either in Baku or in Yerevan; the contacts with Armenia lived on. To Stalin’s dismay the Armenian leader of the time raised the Karabakh issue, only to be assassinated in 1936.59 Whether he was killed because of these demands or met the fate of so many other people for arbitrary reasons, however, remains unclear.

In 1963, with the more open climate created by Krushchev’s destalinization, a petition signed by approximately 2,500 Karabakh Armenians was submitted to Krushchev, protesting the Azeri attitude towards the region and claiming the Azeris were intentionally economically neglecting the Nagorno-Karabakh autonomous oblast. Moscow kept its silence, acted as if nothing had happened, and unrest erupted in Karabakh, leaving eighteen casualties. Troubles broke out in 1968 as well.60 Another important event with respect to the survival of Armenian nationalism occurred in conjunction with the commemoration of the fiftieth anniversary of the Armenian Genocide on 24 April 1965. An unsanctioned demonstration took place in Yerevan which led to overt demands for the return of ‘Armenian lands’ in Turkey; stones were thrown and the authorities had difficulty in restoring order. The Soviet authorities, hitherto careful to prevent nationalist expression from taking place anywhere in the union, now decided to
erect a memorial to the Genocide on a hill overlooking Yerevan. As Suny notes, 
‘tolerance of Armenian nationalism increased to the point where at public 
concerts...artists fearlessly proclaimed their national pride...and audiences in turn 
transformed such evenings into public demonstrations of their patriotism.’
Nationalism in Armenia had been on the rise since the 1960s; in Azerbaijan, on 
the other hand, very little of the kind was happening. Any expression of national 
pride remained strictly forbidden and russification progressed at a much faster rate 
than in Armenia. Many Azeri intellectuals now recall having been preoccupied in 
the 1970s and early 1980s with the actual danger of a future loss of national 
culture and separate identity had the Soviet Union survived.

**Perestroika & the re-emergence of conflict: 1987–91**

In 1979, a census recorded that, of the population of Karabakh 79 per cent were 
Armenian, whereas in 1939 they had composed 91 per cent of the population. 
The Armenians blamed the change on the Azerbaijani government, claiming that 
the Azeris were intentionally trying to manipulate the demography of the region, 
as they claimed had been done in Nakhchivan, where Armenians had represented 
15 per cent in the 1920s, reduced now to only 1.4 per cent. Following this, the 
Armenian republic’s leadership became more vocal on the Karabakh issue and 
frequently voiced their demands at Union meetings. Thus the tensions remained 
during the whole Soviet era, simmering but with small sporadic eruptions. All 
 attempts to campaign for the unification of Karabakh and Armenia were branded 
as retrograde nationalist propaganda and suppressed. It was not until Glasnost in 
the late 1980s that the situation would change as it became safer to express 
demands in the new, more open atmosphere in the Soviet Union. However, it is 
possible to draw back the changes in overt expression longer, especially on the 
Armenian side. In 1984, the well-known Armenian writer Zori Balayan published 
a book which was widely perceived in Azerbaijan as including defamatory 
language with respect to Turks in general and Azerbaijani Turks in particular. 
Interestingly, this book which could readily be viewed as nationalistic, was 
allowed to pass the rigid censorship that existed at the time and was published.

The number of sporadic incidents grew quickly from 1987 onwards, letters 
demanding unification starting to flow in to the Moscow authorities. In August of 
1987, a petition prepared by the Armenian academy of sciences with hundreds of 
thousand signatures (in Armenia) requested the transfer of Nagorno-Karabakh and 
Nakhchivan (where a 1979 census had recorded over 97 per cent Azeris) to the 
Armenian SSR. In October, Armenians rejected the nomination of an Azeri 
Sovkhoz director in the predominantly Armenian village of Chardakli in 
northwestern Azerbaijan. This led to a crackdown by the local party units on 
villagers. According to Armenian sources, the objective of the local 
(Azerbaijani) party units would have been to drive out the Armenian 
population. The news of Chardakli promptly reached Yerevan where 
demonstrations demanding the closure of polluting industries were taking place.
Following a relatively common trend of the Glasnost period (see e.g. the case of Georgia in chapter four), the ecological demonstrations quickly transformed into political, nationalist demonstrations demanding for the return of Nagorno-Karabakh and Nakhchivan to Armenia. This time the local police intervened to break up the demonstration. As Moscow refrained from action, speculation continued that Moscow would approve the transfer, especially given the fact that Gorbachev had a number of high ranking advisors of Armenian origin. In mid November 1987, an economic advisor of Gorbachev’s, Abel Aganbeyan, told the French newspaper *L’Humanité* that the NKAO would soon be transferred to Armenia. The significance of this declaration, when relayed back to Armenia, is easy to imagine.

Gorbachev, according to his memoirs, was convinced of the inviolability of internal borders, although vaguely sympathetic to the Armenian cause. Subsequently, he had come to favour granting Nagorno-Karabakh ASSR status, to put it in line with Nakhchivan. This indeed seems to be a solution that might have defused tensions at an early stage, reaching a compromise while safeguarding the territorial integrity of Azerbaijan. Nevertheless, Gorbachev did not actively endorsed this idea until 1989. In his own words:

There was a time when this proposal was on the point of being implemented. However, it was just at this moment that the Supreme Soviet in Yerevan passed a resolution to incorporate Nagorno-Karabakh as part of Armenia and so everything fell apart. It fell apart because of internal antagonism, because the battle for power, for replacement of the ruling elite, was already in full swing there. If fell apart because the Armenian national movement, which was formed on the basis of the Karabakh committee, was in a hurry to seize power.

The idea, then, might have been a good one had it been imposed earlier. In fact, Politburo member Yegor Ligachev had put forward a suggestion to upgrade the NKAO to an ASSR in June 1988. However, the proposal included enlarging its borders to include Azeri-populated areas and was therefore rejected by the Armenian side. At that moment, however, it is highly unlikely that either party to the conflict would have accepted it; indeed, it remains uncertain as to whether the implementation of such a decision would actually have hindered the eruption of the conflict.

February 1988: the explosion

Following the Chardakli events, the Azeris in Armenia faced increasing difficulties and harassment, as Armenians started driving Azeris out of Armenia. At the end of January 1988 the first refugee wave of several tens of thousands of people reached Baku, and several thousand refugees were relocated in Sumgait, in Baku’s industrial suburbs. Before the end of February, two more waves of refugees were
to reach Baku. Demands for Karabakh’s unification with Armenia increased, and on 10 February the Azerbaijani Information Agency declared that Azerbaijan would never agree to such demands. On 11 February, a demonstration in Karabakh protested against the cultural and economic policies of the Baku government towards the Nagorno-Karabakh autonomous oblast, and on 20 February the Soviet of the oblast passed a resolution (with 110 for and 17 against) appealing to the Supreme Soviets of Armenia, Azerbaijan, and the USSR to be transferred to the Armenian SSR’s control. Amazingly enough, the Azerbaijani party leader, Kamran Bagirov, although present at the meeting was unable to stop the resolution being passed. Nor was he able to stop the ousting of the NKAO’s loyal party leader, Boris Kevorkov, by an outspoken nationalist, Henrik Pogosyan.

On 22 February candidate Politburo member Georgi Razumovsky appeared in Stepanakert, speaking to the local party organization. The next day, Vladimir Dolgikh, another candidate member of the Politburo, spoke to the Armenian party meetings, and on 24 February Razumovsky travelled to Baku for similar purposes. Hence it would be wrong to say that the central organs of the Communist party ignored the conflict. On the contrary, they were present very early at its three centres, before violence actually broke out. However, the information the emissaries provided to the media was confusing. Dolgikh, for one, was reported to have stated that in Nagorno-Karabakh, things have gone as far as clashes between groups of Armenians and Azerbaijanis, and there have been casualties. On the other hand, USSR deputy prosecutor general Katushev, in Stepanakert, claimed the next day claimed that ‘none of the…rumours…has any base in fact; not one person…has been killed.’ This statement was confirmed by a first deputy minister of the interior on 25 February. The question is, then, whether the emissaries’ information sources were so poor or confused that they ended up providing contradictory information—or if they intentionally tried to blur the picture of events.

The latter case’s likelihood is intimately related to the question of the Kremlin’s interests in the Caucasus. Did the leadership of the union have any interest in letting the conflict escalate instead of stopping it? According to certain observers, notably in the Caucasus, the Kremlin at this time feared that the Caucasus, as well as the Baltics, were escaping from central control. Following this line of reasoning, the authorities in Moscow would therefore have resorted to traditional divide and rule policies in order to regain control over the region. This would have involved letting Azerbaijan and Armenia concentrate on their mutual enmity in order to avoid a quest for further autonomy. Likewise, South Ossetian and Abkhazian claims in Georgia were encouraged to curb Georgian secessionism (see chapter four). This argument is naturally controversial and displays several flaws. Most importantly, an active policy of destabilizing the Caucasus must at this point have seemed very dangerous, and the risk of its back-firing must have been considered as substantial by anyone. Instead of enabling Moscow to reassert its control over the region, it could very easily have led to the exact opposite.
Moreover, Soviet policy would arguably have been more likely to resort to brute force to curb any form of unrest than articulating an elaborate plan to use it to its benefits.

Notwithstanding the reports of the Politburo’s emissaries, it seems clear that between 21 and 25 February, tensions in Armenia escalated as ecological demonstrations in Yerevan once again turned to irredentism. A ‘Karabakh Committee’ was formed, and the Armenian Diaspora in the West inflated the numbers of demonstrators, talking about ‘one million people on the streets of Yerevan’, in a country whose entire population is 3 million. The Armenian spiritual leader, the Catholicos, joined in the demands on 25 February, requesting that Gorbachev respect the NKAO Soviet’s decision. Gorbachev then met with two leaders of the Karabakh movement in Moscow, Zori Balayan and Silvia Kaputikyan, on 26 February, and asked for a one-month moratorium on demonstrations in order to assess the issue. However, when Kaputikiyan returned to Yerevan the same evening she told the crowd ‘the Armenians have triumphed’, despite the fact that Gorbachev made no promises of any kind.79 Later, she claimed in an interview to have meant that ‘we triumphed morally. We Armenians are accustomed to drawing inspiration from defeat…And that’s what I had in mind. We triumphed morally.’80 The likelihood of this explanation is nevertheless debatable—in fact it would appear to be an excuse for another attempt to pressure Moscow by announcing a victory.

Simultaneously, in Karabakh the situation was all but calm. In fact, the atmosphere in Stepanakert was militant. Rumours said that Moscow was ‘almost ready to say “yes”,’Y that is, to accept a transfer, and all that the Karabakh Armenians had to do now was ‘to voice their demands more resolutely’.81 Izvestiya correspondents were informed that Karabakh’s transfer to Armenia was far beyond any ‘arithmetic’ calculations of economic benefits, but a ‘sacred cause’; furthermore leaders of Krunk, Stepanakert’s Karabakh committee, predicted that ‘a guerrilla war will begin.’82 Such views seemed to be shared not only by the leadership, but judging from the number of signatories to petitions and also the participation noted in demonstrations by Karabakh’s Armenian majority. Hence, as Stuart Kaufman notes, ‘popular attitudes seem to have been ripe for the emergence of open elite outbidding.’83

Sumgait: the escalation becomes irrevocable

The conflict was to erupt for real on 26 February, after rumours of violent riots in Stepanakert leading to the death of an Azeri reached Agdam, an Azeri city some miles away from Karabakh’s eastern border. Demanding information on the events in Stepanakert, a crowd of Azeris were nevertheless told that no such thing had occurred. Certain sources also claim Bagirov himself stopped in Agdam on his way to Karabakh, where he attended the supreme Soviet meeting at which Pogosyan was nominated.84 In any case, dissatisfied, they marched on Nagorno-Karabakh. Apparently, some of them were halted by distinguished locals
preaching restraint. However, equally apparently, some others proceeded to Askeran, in the border area between Azerbaijan proper and the NKAO, where it came to clashes between the crowd, Armenian villagers, and police units. The result was two dead Azeris, one reportedly killed by a stone and the other one by an Azerbaijani policeman, and an unknown number of wounded on all sides.

On Azerbaijani radio, Deputy Attorney General Katusev reported the fact that ‘two inhabitants of the Agdam district fell victim to murder’, giving two Muslim surnames. This news, according to Tamara Dragadze, was announced to show the gravity of the conflict and to calm feelings. However, Igor Nolyain interprets the broadcast in a totally different light: as intended to escalate tensions by hinting at ethnically motivated murder. Whatever the intention, this was the result, and as Stephane Yerasimos states, the ethnic conflict followed its own logic. What could be a more logical place for retaliatory violence than Sumgait, Baku’s dark industrial suburb where, on top of everything else, huge numbers of furious and frustrated Azeri refugees had been resettled only days or weeks earlier? Admittedly, this line of thought has severe flaws. One could easily ask why Sumgait? Baku or Ganja, with their larger Armenians populations would actually have been more logical places for the violence to erupt.

On 26 February, agitation began in Sumgait, activists demanding revenge against Armenians for the Azeri deaths in Askeran. The unrest did not take on an additional dimension until word spread that the Armenians had declared victory in Yerevan after meeting with Gorbachev. The following three days were marked by hooligans going on rampage, looting Armenian homes, burning houses, and hunting for Armenians. The official figures show 32 dead (26 Armenians and 6 Azeris) for the three days of unrest, 27–29 February, although Armenian sources multiply the numbers of (Armenian) casualties by a factor of at least ten. The fact that the Soviet army and interior ministry troops were in the area did not change anything; in fact the army seems to have stood by and watched the pogrom take place. According to Nolyain, the Soviet authorities not only failed to prevent bloodshed, but deliberately sought to create a conflict between the two communities, both in Armenia and in Azerbaijan. This was done through the control of the media, by spreading exaggerated and provocative statements on both sides, and by deploying criminals from Soviet prisons in Sumgait to initiate the pogrom. The issue is covered in greater detail in chapter nine, as a case of Russian ‘divide and rule’ policy.

As far as Sumgait is concerned, the origins of the pogrom remain, in Kaufman’s words, ‘mysterious’. To conclude that the unrest erupted out of suppressed frustrations and primordial ethnic hatred seems too simplistic, fitting well with the official rhetoric that developed after the events, covering up the inability or unwillingness of authorities to prevent the events with reference to a ‘protracted ethnic conflict’—seemingly understood as a machine that could not be stopped even by the Soviet state. Nolyain’s research shows that the Soviet militia, which has curbed riots or peaceful demonstrations with overkills of violence in numerous cases, became ‘helpless’ in Sumgait. Several sources noted that some kind of
‘paralysis’ gripped the Sumgait militia—highly unusual for the reputedly ‘trigger-happy’ Soviet militias, or in Nolyain’s words, their ‘highly energetic manner, mutilating bystanders and strangling reporters.’ It seems clear, then, that the reason for the militia’s inaction was that they had simply been ordered not to intervene; given the fact that Deputy Interior Minister Nikolai Demidov admits having been in Sumgait during the pogrom, this seems odd—to say the least. Did the militia fail to act because of ‘paralysis’ or because they had clear orders to do so? The circumstances surrounding the pogrom and the attitude of law enforcement agencies are at the very least suspicious. Interestingly, for several days the press reported only on the violence on 28 February, whereas the violence obviously lasted for several days. Only by April did the Soviet press begin to refer to violence occurring on 27–29 April. However, the Sumgait unrest was only brought under control on 1 March. According to the *Washington Post*, ‘despite the heavy presence of armed militia, the protests and riots went largely undeterred until March 1, when troops and tanks were dispatched to Sumgait’. Despite the apparent difficulty of getting troops to Sumgait, troops were flown in to Yerevan on 25 February—that is the day before Sumgait erupted—apparently only as a preventive measure. This begs the question why troops could not be sent in to Sumgait as promptly as is usual habit in cases of civil unrest in the Soviet Union.

Moreover, there are several pieces of independent evidence which suggest that the riots were started by people coming from outside Sumgait. According to a Baku television reporter, 50–60 Azeris from Armenia came to Sumgait to broadcast events in Armenia, stirring up feelings in the crowd and provoking subsequent hooliganism. According to a *Washington Post* reporter, 30 Azeris from the Armenian city of Kafan told a Baku rally of atrocities committed against Azeris there. Consequently, youth from Baku went to Sumgait to start a protest. This piece of information is perhaps the most illogical. If people travelled several hundred kilometres to Baku to spread unrest, why take the trouble of travelling to Sumgait? There were hundreds of thousands Armenians in Baku who were perfect targets. The discussion on Sumgait is difficult to conclude; the event remains a mystery and makes no sense. There was no mobilized Azeri ethnic nationalism to speak of on 26 February 1988; people in Azerbaijan had hardly begun to be affected by the events in Armenia; most Azeris were in fact shocked by the event. The assertion that outside forces were at play seem to make sense; it nevertheless remains difficult, if not impossible, to prove.

The main question is nonetheless related to the chain of command. Could the inaction of the Sumgait militia have been due to the wishes of local commanders or the republican authorities in Baku? Perhaps this would be a more logical conclusion, at first sight, than any attempts to implicate the central authorities in Moscow. The question remains however: why were interior ministry troops not then flown in, as they had been, at very short notice, to Yerevan only hours before the riots took place? Or why were the troops in Yerevan not transferred to Sumgait? The bottom line is that the central Soviet authorities took the better
part of a week to decide that the ethnic violence occurring in Sumgait was severe enough to prompt intervention. Some connivance on the part of the central authorities, or at the very least of the central security structures, seems to have been present. The Soviet Union in February 1988 was not a state in dissolution but a state with a very strong and, in security matters, relatively effective and resourceful central government.

Whatever the real level and nature of Moscow’s involvement, it seems clear in retrospect that it did not require much to set Armenia and Azerbaijan on fire. If the aim of certain forces in Moscow was, as is often argued, to destabilize the area by creating an inter-communal war which would weaken both governments—which would in a sense be illogical since they were both loyal Communist governments—and enable Moscow to re-establish control over the area, these forces were only wrong in the sense that they did not know what kind of a momentum they were giving birth to. The Azeri-Armenian conflict soon slipped out of Moscow’s hands, and to date has only partially led to a reassertion of Russian power in the south Caucasus. On the other hand it has created a volatile situation which has on several occasions threatened to become internationalized. In fact, mutual hatred escalated to such a degree that any spark would have been capable of initiating the conflict; and the spark which was to make the escalation of the ethnic conflict irreversible, was indeed the Sumgait pogrom. After Sumgait, there seemed to be no way to diminish the conflict, and in any case this was made impossible by the hesitant approach of the Soviet authorities.

To the Armenians, Sumgait was like a reminder of the massacres of the First World War and equated the Azeris with the Ottoman armies. It only made them more firm in their belief that there was no way in which they could live with the ‘Barbarian Turks’. From this point onwards, Azeris were systematically chased from Armenia, notably from the Ararat and Zangezur regions where they lived in substantial numbers. Armenian frustration was worsened when, on 10 March, Gorbachev hinted that a transfer would probably not be allowed.103 By 21 March, however, tensions had reached boiling point in Baku, as a decision from Moscow was expected with Azeris fearing a transfer of Nagorno-Karabakh to Armenia.104 On 23 March, the presidium of the Supreme Soviet of the Soviet Union—that is the highest institution in the Union—rejected the demands of the Karabakh Soviet to be joined to Armenia without any possibility of appeal.105 Troops were deployed in Yerevan to prevent protests against the decision. In the following months, Azeris in Armenia were subjected to further harassment and were forced to flee. In the district of Ararat, four villages were burned on 25 March. On 7 June, Azeris were evicted from the city of Manis near the Armenian-Turkish border, and on 20 June five further Azeri villages were ‘cleansed’ in the Ararat region.106 In Baku, especially, but all over Azerbaijan, ethnic rioting in June led to fear among the Armenian population, some of whom sought refuge in Armenia. Meanwhile, demonstrations in Nagorno-Karabakh, where many factory workers kept striking, as well as in Armenia, continued. On 21 May, the republican leaders of Armenia and Azerbaijani were replaced,
following unrest in both republics that had erupted after sentences had been passed by a Baku court for the Sumgait events. Bagirov was replaced by Abdulrahman Vezirov, and Demirchian by Suren Arutyunyan, in an attempt by Moscow to take control of the situation.

The spiral of violence & the militarization of the conflict

On 13 June, the Azerbaijani Supreme Soviet rejected the 20 February vote as unacceptable. Simultaneously, Armenian supplies to the NKAO through the Lachin corridor were subjected to attacks and roadblocks. On 15 June, the Armenian Supreme Soviet answered by voting unanimously for unification with Karabakh; two days later the Azerbaijani Supreme Soviet, equally unanimously, rejected the decision, and accused it of being in violation of the Soviet constitution and of Azerbaijan’s territorial integrity. On 28 June, Gorbachev reaffirmed the inviolability of internal frontiers at the congress of the CPSU in Moscow. This statement, in particular, exacerbated the frustration of the Karabakh Armenians, who proceeded to unilaterally vote for secession on 12 July, seeing that nothing positive was to be expected from Moscow. On 18 July, the Presidium of the Supreme Soviet of the USSR declared the decision null and void, reaffirming Azerbaijan’s territorial integrity. By this time, Moscow seemed increasingly irritated with Armenian nationalism and moved subtly closer to Baku’s position, which it viewed as pro status quo and therefore in line with the interests of the centre. On the same day, a ‘special commission’ was established by the authorities in Moscow to monitor the developments in the two republics. Arkadiy Volsky, a mechanical engineer who admitted not to have any understanding of ‘national relations’, was appointed head of the commission.

After some months of relative calm, mass rallies erupted in Baku on 17 November, directed against the weakness of the Azerbaijani party leadership, which was seen as failing to assert republican control over the NKAO. The following day, a general strike took place in Armenia, in support of the demand for unification with the NKAO. On 21 November, the USSR supreme court pronounced the death penalty on an Azeri for his actions in the Sumgait pogrom. Following this announcement, anti-Armenian pogroms took place in Baku and Ganja, from where Armenians were expelled. A state of emergency was declared in Baku, Ganja and Nakhchivan on 26 November, and a curfew in Yerevan on 25 November. Later that month, the last Azeris were forced out of Armenia. The month of November was one of great refugee fluxes. According to unofficial sources, around 180,000 Armenians had left Azerbaijan, and 160,000 Azeris had left Armenia by the end of the month. Official Azerbaijani government sources reported 78,000 refugees from Armenia on 3 December, while the Yerevan military commander spoke of 31,000 Armenians from Azerbaijan and 40,000 Azeris from Armenia.

The conflict was interrupted temporarily by the Spitak earthquake in Armenia on 7 December. Whereas this natural disaster and its immense human and
material losses led to a temporary calming of the fervor, it offered a perfect opportunity for the Soviet government to take control of the events as the attention of the public was diverted from the conflict. Thus all eleven members of the Armenian ‘Karabakh Committee’ were arrested, on charges that they were obstructing the earthquake relief by refusing any aid coming from Azerbaijan. This only led to the movement’s increased popularity in Armenia, and to widespread disillusionment with Gorbachev, Perestroika, and the Soviet system as a whole. Troops were sent in to Azerbaijan and Martial law was declared in Baku.

On 12 January, 1989, the Soviet leadership decided to impose a ‘special government administration’ in Karabakh, without consulting with the Azerbaijani leadership. Thus the region was subjected to direct control from Moscow, although no changes were made regarding its legally belonging to Azerbaijan. Pogosyan, the NKAO head, was forced to retire, blamed for allowing nationalism to develop freely. Subsequently, Moscow’s ‘mediator’ in the conflict, Arkadiy Volsky, was appointed head of the provisional government of the oblast. Many Armenians saw this move as a transition period following which unification would be achieved, and thus a positive step. The NKAO was at least not practically under the jurisdiction of Azerbaijan. For the same reason Azeris were generally suspicious of Moscow’s intentions, but saw a positive element in the possibility for refugees from the NKAO to return. Up until this date, a report showed that 87 people had been killed by violence in the two republics and over 1,500 wounded.

This decision was instrumental in calming the situation for the following four months. However, whereas there were no direct hostilities or riots during the
period, there were no attempts to find a lasting solution to the Karabakh question either. Certain purges of the Armenian and Azerbaijani party structures were made against forces that had fanned or not sought to prevent ethnic strife. However, as a whole the measures taken were meager. Many analysts agree that the move was less conditioned by a desire to resolve the underlying grievances than by a simply desire to preserve central power in the south Caucasus.  

Thus Moscow simply put a lid on the conflict without making a serious effort to deal with the long-term consequences. It was therefore inevitable that the conflict would flare up again. In the precarious conditions that arise in ethnic conflicts, these months were actually a valuable period for initiating some conflict resolution mechanisms, such as organizing talks between the communities, providing a ground for confidence-building measures, or even dispatching peacekeepers (not just regular army units without a clear mandate, as was the case). This opportunity was lost in large part because of the incompetence of the men in Moscow, including Volsky himself who lacked the experience and background to deal with this type of problem. Thus this failure to act was also a result of the general decadence and lack of initiative in the Soviet system. This said, the chances of any administration being used to stop the escalation of the conflict at this point were very doubtful. In any case the conflict was soon once again left to its own devices. 

By early May, tensions had re-emerged in the NKAO after the relative calm that had reigned following Moscow’s take-over. Admittedly, this calm had been conditioned by the strict rules applied in the region, especially in Stepanakert. A curfew was in force, and military units patrolled boundaries between Azeri and Armenian localities. Street fights and clashes of an ethnic character began to
surface again both in Stepanakert and in Mardakert/Agdere to the north of the capital, and rallies emerged in Yerevan as well. Simultaneously the first ‘spontaneous’ fighting detachments of the conflict were formed by local Armenians in the Geranboy/Shaumian district north of the NKAO. At this time, reports surfaced that acts of sabotage in Baku had been perpetrated by the Armenians Secret Army for the Liberation of Armenia (ASALA) based in Beirut.

Meanwhile, in Yerevan, the jailed members of the Karabakh committee were released at the end of May, and from June the committee began to merge with other smaller political forces and a new movement was born: the Hayots Hamazgayin Sharjum, or Armenian National Movement (ANM). Levon Ter-Petrosyan emerged as the figurehead of the movement. In the first multi-party elections in May 1990, the ANM was able to become the single greatest group in the parliament, larger even than the Communist party. On 4 August, Ter-Petrosyan was elected chairman of the parliament.

Simultaneously, in a parallel development in Azerbaijan, the Azeri Popular Front (APF) or ‘Azarbaycan Xalq Caphasi’ was formed, and officially founded in July of 1989. Just as in Armenia, the main momentum of the movement’s rise was the Karabakh issue, but unfortunately in a no more conciliatory way than in Armenia. In fact, among the population, anger and frustration were growing against both the Karabakh Armenians, for their secessionism, and the republic’s government, which was considered too soft on the issue, and seen as subservient to Moscow, and ready to sell out Karabakh. Although the APF was originally formed as a movement for the promotion of democratization, pluralism and human rights, it drew its popularity from an increasingly rigid stand on the Karabakh question. The historian Abiilfez Elchibey was elected chairman of the APF in its founding session. Thus a scene began to develop where the overwhelming majority of political forces in both republics had adopted a non-conciliatory approach to the conflict—his being valid both for the respective governments and their oppositions. At the end of June, a strike paralyzed Stepanakert and tensions escalated throughout July.

In another development that month, Armenia implemented an embargo against Nakhchivan, and the newly formed APF responded by setting up an embargo against the whole of Armenia, which was badly hit by this development as over two-thirds of Armenia’s goods came through Azerbaijan. Thus Armenia’s decision to try to isolate Nakhchivan seems to have been, to say the least, less than carefully examined.

Meanwhile, the situation on the ground in Karabakh was deteriorating. In August, the Armenian members of the suspended Karabakh Soviet, led by representatives of the Dashnak party, set up a National Council and reaffirmed their aim of unification with Armenia. From the second half of 1989 onwards, skirmishes and shoot-outs between armed bands became the rule rather than the exception, and the Soviet army’s attempts to calm the situation by setting up checkpoints and searching cars and villages for arms were largely futile.
Moreover, the army outposts were frequently attacked by paramilitaries and thus large numbers of weapons gradually came into the hands of the militia on both sides. This aspect was very important for the unpredictability of the conflict: arms were overflowing in the region, as throughout the entire Caucasus. This fact contributed to making the conflict uncontainable as the monopolization of the use of force was no longer possible.

Then, on 28 November, the Soviet direct command was abolished, as if Moscow accepted its failure and left Nagorno-Karabakh to its fate. Thus the oblast was returned to Azeri control, and military rule was established. In response to this development, the Armenian Supreme Soviet on 1 December 1989, took the historical decision to promulgate the incorporation of Nagorno-Karabakh into the Armenian republic. The declaration read as follows:

1. The Armenian Republic Supreme Soviet recognizes the fact of the self-determination of the Nagorno-Karabakh Autonomous Province, a fact established by the Feb. 20, 1988 and July 12, 1988 decisions of sessions of the Nagorno-Karabakh Province Soviet, as well as by the Aug. 16, 1989 decision of the Congress of Authorized Representatives of the province’s population and the Oct. 19, 1989 decision of a meeting of the National Council. (…)

3. The Armenian Republic Supreme Soviet and the Nagorno-Karabakh Republic Council proclaim the reunification of the Armenian Republic and Nagorno-Karabakh. The rights of Armenian Republic citizenship extend to the population of Nagorno-Karabakh. (…)

6. The Presidium of the Armenian Republic Supreme Soviet, the Armenian Republic Council of Ministers and the Presidium of the Nagorno-Karabakh National Council are instructed to take all necessary measures arising out of this resolution to effect a real merging of the political, economic and cultural structures of the Armenian Republic and Nagorno-Karabakh into a unified state-political system.

This implied an attempt to portray the union of the two entities as a legal fait accompli, and translated into practice as a joint budget for the two entities was decided in the beginning of January.

In January 1990, the main scene of action moved to Azerbaijan. On 11 January, Armenian villages in the Khanlar and Geranboy/Shumian districts were cleansed of Armenians. For the first time, heavy weaponry such as helicopters and armed personnel carriers were used here; Baku, however, was to be the focus of the world’s attention the next weeks. On 11 January, the APF organized a rally in protest against governmental; inactivity, and on 13 and 14 January, Azeri refugees from Armenia started a pogrom on Armenians, leading to the death of at least 88 people. The Soviet militia, present en masse as it was in Baku, repeated its actions in Sumgait and did what it did in most cases of ethnic strife—nothing. The APF condemned the riots, denounced the republican leadership and Moscow
for not intervening and argued it did so to justify an invasion of Baku, as it feared the APF coming to power in Azerbaijan.143 These allegations were proven true less than a week later, as over 29,000 Soviet troops rolled into Baku on 20 January.144 In the chaos that followed the intervention and in the brutal suppression of the resistance in the city, casualties rose first to 83, then to over 100 according to official sources, and to over 500 and even thousands according to the APF.145 Meanwhile a state of emergency was proclaimed in Karabakh, and thousands of troops dispatched there as well. On 26 January, Soviet Defence Minister Dimitri Yazov conceded in a press conference that ‘the military occupation of Azerbaijan’s capital was designed to prevent the Azerbaijan Popular Front from seizing power from the Communist Party.’146

In this chaotic situation, the leaders of the popular fronts of the Baltic republics succeeded in arranging a meeting between their Azerbaijani and Armenian counterparts, that is the APF and the ANM, in Riga on 3 February.147 Although neither of the movements held political power at the time, they were to be the main actors in the domestic sphere of their respective republics before long. Thus the fact that the meeting took place was in itself a success; however its outcome was less successful. In fact it set a precedent, in a way, for the attitude of the parties towards the conflict: the Armenians invoked the principle of peoples’ right to self-determination, and the Azeris defended the principle of territorial integrity.148 The meeting ended there, with both parties only announcing their own point of view, leaving no room for compromise.

By April, Armenia’s protests against military rule in Karabakh became more vocal, and the Armenian leadership accused the Soviet military of enflaming the conflict, as they allegedly co-operated with Azeri OMON forces (Interior Alinistry special forces) in setting up ‘checkpoints’ in Karabakh controlling passports and residence permits, and searching for arms. Hence shortly before the late May celebrations of Armenia’s declaration of independence resulting in 22 deaths.149 These events occurred shortly after Armenian officials decided to include Nagorno-Karabakh in the approaching Armenian elections.150 In this case, the Armenian leadership went against the Soviet central government, rejecting a decree from Moscow ordering armed nationalist groups to surrender arms.151 Simultaneously paramilitary formations grew in number and strength on both sides, as the parties seemed to resort to build up for a military solution of the conflict. Again the Armenians were more active than the Azeris, who seemed to rely more upon the Soviet central government for a solution, despite the Baku events of January, and a considerable, and according to HRW ‘increasingly open’ flow of arms from mainland Armenia to Karabakh was reported.152 Observers have noted how planes loaded with military equipment, coming from Beirut, landed in Yerevan and how the materiel was subsequently transported to Karabakh.153 In this environment of heavily armed paramilitary forces, the escalation of the armed conflict became increasingly difficult to realize.

In August, Armenian paramilitary forces attacked eight Azerbaijani villages in the Kazakh district in northwestern Azerbaijan; Soviet military supported the
Azerbaijani self-defence forces, leading to the deaths of over a dozen people on each side. Meanwhile, in the Khanlar district, Azerbaijani OMON forces attempted to assert control over Armenian-populated villages, leading to clashes which left over a dozen dead.\textsuperscript{154}

Sporadic clashes had become more frequent by the first months of 1991, with an ever-increasing organization of paramilitary forces on the Armenian side, whereas Azerbaijan still relied on the support of Moscow. Interestingly, the main area of these sporadic clashes was not the NKAO itself but the Khanlar and Geranboy/Shaumian regions between the NKAO northern border and Ganja.

In response to this development, a joint Soviet and Azerbaijani military and police operation directed from Moscow was initiated in these areas during the spring and summer of 1991. The purpose of the operation was ostensibly to carry out identity controls, but in reality led to the clearing of up to 24 Armenian-populated villages on the northern periphery of the NKAO: reports talked of ‘search-and-destroy’ operations, with the aim of eradicating paramilitary forces.\textsuperscript{155} Interior ministry sources claimed to have confiscated substantial numbers of small arms from both Armenians and Azeris. The operation, entitled Operation Ring, was evidently carried out very harshly, with systematic Human Rights violations.\textsuperscript{156} After the conclusion of the operation, the Armenians who had been evicted took to arms to return to their villages leading to further clashes, and the number of casualties began to rise sharply. By June 1991, the casualties of the conflict were estimated at 816.

On 2 September 1991, the resuscitated Karabakh Soviet, renamed the ‘Karabakh National Council’, proclaimed the independent republic of Nagorno-Karabakh over the territory of the Nagorno-Karabakh autonomous oblast and the Geranboy/Shaumian district of the Azerbaijani republic. This move took place following the declarations of independence of most Soviet union republics following the failed August coup against Gorbachev. Obviously, Nagorno-Karabakh, like Chechnya to the north, thought it could jump onto the bandwagon of independence in this totally new atmosphere that was created by the spectre of the Soviet Union’s de facto dissolution.\textsuperscript{157}

During the autumn, Azerbaijani forces moved to counter Nagorno-Karabakh’s declaration of independence, and Armenians respond by establishing armed control over key villages. This led to a flare-up of armed conflict in a situation when the Soviet army was in a state of confusion regarding its future.\textsuperscript{158} However, a temporary pause was achieved through the mediation efforts of Boris Yeltsin and Nursultan Nazarbayev on 20–23 September, which produced an agreement to further talks between the republican leaderships,\textsuperscript{159} and a ceasefire a few days later.\textsuperscript{160} However, this did not mean a stop to the fighting, since the republican governments had very much lost control over the armed units which had been proliferating for over two years in both republics. Before the ink on the agreement’s paper had dried, in the words of Thomas Goltz, Azeri villages in Karabakh had been the target of renewed violence.\textsuperscript{161} As the Azerbaijani government realized the military force behind the Karabakh Armenians, it
proceeded to nationalize all military hardware in the republic and to recall all Azeri conscripts from the Soviet army. Furthermore, as a direct answer to the declaration of independence, the Azeri parliament, on 26 November, abolished the autonomous status of Nagorno-Karabakh, dividing its territory among the surrounding districts. Naturally, this move was more of theoretical political importance than of real value, since the military control of the region was rapidly slipping out of Baku’s hands. On 8 December, a referendum was organized in Karabakh to confirm the secession, and not surprisingly, 99 per cent of the votes cast were in favour, especially since the Azeri population boycotted the referendum. Simultaneously the Soviet troops were withdrawn from the region, which left the parties in a situation of direct confrontation, with no buffer between them.

As the Soviet Union ceased to exist, all leverage or even calming effect that Moscow might have had on the belligerents was removed. For the Azeris in particular, this was an unexpected and unwanted development. Whereas the Armenians had prepared themselves to solve the problems by themselves and with arms, the Azeris had been expecting Moscow to solve the conflict on their terms. Thus the rapid dissolution of the Soviet Union was a catastrophe for Azerbaijan, whose military preparation was no match for that of the Armenians. With a disorganized and badly motivated Azerbaijani army, the Armenians seemed poised to resolve the issue in their favour. However, one could question whether the declaration of independence of Karabakh implied a division between Stepanakert and Yerevan. The declaration apparently points at a divergence of policy—whereas at an earlier stage the concurrent aim of Armenia and the Karabakh Armenians had been a union of the two entities, i.e. reunification under Yerevan’s authority, the Karabakh Armenians seem to have changed their mind and now advocated an independent state.

However, the picture of a division between Stepanakert and Yerevan does not fully comply with reality. To a certain extent it may have been a diplomatic trick to reduce Yerevan’s responsibility and accountability for the actions of the Karabakh Armenians: in peace negotiations during 1993–96, Armenia has constantly argued that it is not strictly speaking a party to the conflict although it supports the right to self-determination of their ethnic kin in Karabakh. Consequently, the Armenian government is not responsible for the actions of the Karabakh Armenians and cannot speak for them, nor impose any policy on them, other than friendly advice. The exchange of government officials between the two capitals throughout the war—culminating in Karabakh’s president becoming Armenia’s president in 1998—seems to lend credence to this point. Moreover, Karabakh can be said to control Armenia far more than vice versa: a consideration noted by several Armenian observers.162

In 1992, Karabakh gradually escalated into full-scale war. However, before seeing the developments of 1992–94, it is necessary to analyze the attitudes and feelings present in both republics that led to this war.
The mirroring nationalisms

There is one point that strikes the observer of the Armenian-Azeri conflict: the lack of interaction and dialogue between the leaderships of the two republics even in the very early stages of the dispute. Indeed, there seems to have been almost no one in a position of power, in any of the republics, at any time, who was interested in sustaining a dialogue and finding a peaceful resolution to the conflict through compromise. This is particularly interesting for two reasons. Firstly, this has been an effective solution to other comparable conflicts; secondly the two republics were, for all practical purposes, part of the same country, a factor which should have worked against the escalation of the conflict.

The above-mentioned statement by Ted Gurr to the effect that ‘negotiated regional autonomy has proved to be an effective antidote for ethno-national wars of succession’\textsuperscript{163} clearly does not apply to the case of Nagorno-Karabakh. The reason for this is simple: there was no readiness nor a will to compromise on either side. The events and the escalation of tensions, rather than leading to the realisation that a peaceful solution must be found to avoid bloodshed, only served to antagonize the parties and lock them into their respective extreme positions. This is all the more remarkable as the Armenians and Azerbaijanis had a considerable advantage over parties to other conflicts in that institutions for initiating discussions, and eventually negotiating a compromise, were present at all levels in the form of the Soviet Union. Leaders of the two republics met frequently at union-level meetings, which under all circumstances provided a framework for dialogue; also most Azeris and Armenians could communicate using the Russian language. Nevertheless, the leaders during Communist times were unable to take advantage of the existing opportunities to reach a peaceful settlement to the conflict, something that appeared to be possible at least well into 1990.

The Communist leaders’ inability to provide constructive thinking might be explained by their belonging to a petrified and stagnant institution, which coloured their thinking and enhanced their narrow-mindedness. This would be a plausible explanation were the statement only valid for the Communists in the two republics. Unfortunately, this was not the case. As the opposition movements grew, beginning in the late 1980s, they invariably and with few exceptions took a nationalist overtone. The first non-Communist leaders of both Armenia and Azerbaijan, Levon Ter-Petrosyan and Abilfez Elchibey, were products of the popular fronts of their respective republics, both of which had nationalist orientations and were in fact strongly related to the Karabakh dispute. This was particularly the case especially in Armenia, where the ANM actually grew out of the Karabakh committee: in Armenia, a government was formed whose political origin was the very purpose of advancing the Karabakh issue.

It is thus truly amazing how the opposition movements grew strong without even once approaching one another or trying to surpass their governments by mutually attempting to solve the conflict. Contrary to the developments in many
other parts of the Soviet Union and particularly in the Baltic states, the Azeri Popular Front and the Armenian National Movement were as much responses to one another as parallel developments. The period from 1985 to the present has often been labeled as a period of nationalist revival in Eastern Europe and the Soviet Union. In Azerbaijan and Armenia, this argument can be taken one step further: It indeed seems appropriate to say that the Azeri and Armenian nationalism actually mirror each other—they emerged as responses to one another and owe their whole existence to one another. As Yerasimos notes:

If the Georgian nationalism positions itself in the middle, between that of Russia and those of the smaller peoples within Georgia, thus creating a hierarchy (which does not prevent—quite the opposite—the alliance of extremes), the Armenian and Azeri nationalisms send back each other’s images like a deforming mirror, as if they can exist only by opposition to one another.164

The mirror analogy is indeed well founded. For the popularity, and thus the existence, of the two movements was deeply rooted in the achievement of a victory in the Karabakh dispute. This is only proven by the fact that Ter-Petrosyan has until recently been sitting quite securely in his position, despite the economic crisis, blockades and isolation of his country whereas Elchibey was ousted from power due to the debacle in Karabakh that he presided over.

In an interesting article, Mark Saroyan coined the term ‘Karabakh Syndrome’. Although in his 1990 article he exclusively uses the term for Azerbaijani politics, it seems that this term could also be used to explain the general situation both in Azerbaijan and Armenia. By the word syndrome, we refer to something with medical connotations, something pathological. And indeed, the form in which the mirroring nationalisms developed, one could say, is nothing less than pathological, as are the atrocities committed during all stages of the conflict. Indeed, in the case of this conflict, one could claim that pogroms and localized ethnic unrest led to the escalation of political conflict—which gives the conflict a mass-led character, as compared to the elite-led conflicts in Moldova and former Yugoslavia, as Stuart Kaufman has found in his research on the post-Communist conflicts.165

The ethnic cleansing of Armenians from Azerbaijan took place in a violent and reactive manner. In Azerbaijan, the number of Armenians was noticeably higher and the community of a higher social status that that of the Azeris in Armenia, who lived mainly in rural areas. The ethnic riots that marred Baku, Ganja, Sumgait, and other Armenian-inhabited localities of Azerbaijan typically happened as reactions to rumours of events taking place in Moscow, Karabakh, or Armenia and followed the logic of urban ethnic riots. The eviction of Azeris from Armenia and Karabakh, on the other hand, took place in a less violent but more systematic way. Azeris were actively ‘advised’ or simply forced to leave these areas and in Armenia, the process was complete by 1989. Few outright ethnic pogroms
by the Armenian side occurred, and when it did this was the case in the initial phases of the process of ethnic cleansing. In particular, this was the case during the first phase of the conflict in 1992, as the Karabakh Armenians asserted territorial control over Nagorno-Karabakh and later its surrounding regions.

During February 1992 the small Azeri town of Khojaly was overrun by Karabakh forces, supported by the 366th CIS infantry regiment. The town was all but destroyed, several hundred people were killed and the rest of the population was forced to flee over the mountains to seek refuge. This event was the first instance of atrocities committed against Azeris to reach the headlines of the world media, whereas anti-Armenian events in Baku and other areas in Azerbaijan had done so in numerous instances. The ‘syndrome’ of mirroring nationalism was not to be stopped, all because no one was there who was strong enough to make sense prevail.

Full-scale war: 1992–94

By early 1992, the power vacuum created by the dissolution of the Soviet Union led to the loss of the last factor containing the conflict. Thus with the imminent withdrawal of the formerly Soviet forces, Karabakh became the scene of what gradually increased to a full-scale war. The Armenian side, having prepared itself to resolve the conflict using military means, lost no time in acting. From early February onwards, the Azeri villages of Malybeili, Karadagly, and Agdaban were conquered and their population evicted, leading to at least 99 civilian deaths and 140 wounded. After two days of artillery fire Armenian forces on 27 February, according to many impartial observers supported by the 366th CIS (formerly Soviet) motor rifle regiment, seized the small but strategically placed town of Khojaly, on the Agdam–Stepanakert road. This conquest was the first step in a series of atrocities to follow during the subsequent Armenian conquest of Karabakh and its surrounding areas.

The shock of Khojaly

The attack was ostensibly carried out as a response to artillery fire from the town on the Karabakh Armenian capital of Stepanakert, only seven kilometres away. However the events that followed showed another side of the conquest. Khojaly was the victim of ethnic cleansing of the worst kind. A significant part of the civilian population of the town, numbering 7,000 before the attack, was mutilated and killed, and the remaining population was forced to flee eastwards to Agdam to seek refuge. As is the case in most instances of ethnic cleansing, the atrocities carried out by the aggressor served a double purpose: they forced the population to flee and never to return, as well as intimidating inhabitants of nearby villages, causing them to fear similar actions. The death toll at Khojaly is debated; Armenians, naturally, tend to understate estimating the number of dead civilians at less than a hundred; furthermore Armenian sources, in the rare cases where
they mention the event, blame the Azeris for using Khojaly as a base for rocket attacks on Stepanakert. Moreover, they blame the Azeris for using the Khojaly residents as human shields, and claim that the civilians were caught in cross-fire rather than massacred.169 Other authors, including experts on the region close to the Armenian position, embark on an emotion-laden defence of the Armenian side’s ethnic cleansing policies, seeming to have difficulty in comprehending that both sides to a conflict commit atrocities and that no one side is totally blameless.

A quotation from Christopher Walker, a well-known expert and author of several books on Armenia, is enlightening:

In a controversial action, the Armenians took control of Khojalu in February 1992. Allegations of a massacre of the civilian population of the town were made, but several events surrounding its capture were not widely reported: first, the Armenians warned the people of Khojalu that they were planning to take the town, and told them to quit… Secondly, a week after the capture of the town the Armenians invited the Azerbaijanis to claim their dead. Neither of these open actions is characteristic of a group seeking to carry out a massacre.170

Walker seems to defend the view that warning a population of a forthcoming invasion voids any blame for future atrocities. In a way, this amounts to implying that as the inhabitants of the town did not ‘quit’—in itself a rather peculiar way of describing a refugee forced to leave his home—they only had themselves to blame if they were brutalized. This in turn is nothing but a justification of ethnic cleansing and the military conquest of land.

Despite the claims of Armenians and their proxies, it is beyond doubt that a massacre of civilians did take place. Whereas Azeri sources put the death toll at over 1,000, the official Azerbaijani investigation put the figure at ‘over 600’.171 Western journalists present in Karabakh and Agdam at the time, including Anatol Lieven and Thomas Goltz, published their accounts of the events, where evidence of a massacre is overwhelming.172 Human Rights organizations have estimated the figure at anywhere between 200 and 1,000.173 It should be recalled however, that just as in the Sumgait and Baku riots, the numbers are important only in illustrating the extent, but not the nature, of the events.

Interestingly, however, the participation of entire units of the 366th CIS infantry regiment was noted in the occupation of Khojaly and subsequent attacks on Azeri settlements.174 The 366th regiment, which was the last armed force preventing an all-out war between the parties, was withdrawn in March, i.e. before the final Armenian push on Shusha, the Azeri stronghold in Karabakh. The issue and its implications will be discussed further in chapter nine. The Khojaly events are practically the only instance of a large-scale massacre of these proportions conducted by the Armenian side. Needless to say, numerous violation of the laws of war were recorded during the 1993–94 conquest of further Azerbaijani territories—violations well-documented by Human Rights Watch—
such as firing at escaping civilians, or the closure of escape routes except over the Murov mountains, as was the case in Kelbajar. However, the Khojaly massacre stands out and was very effective as it to a large extent spared the Karabakh Armenians the trouble of evicting civilians from the Azerbaijani regions they were to conquer in 1993: as Armenian forces moved in, civilian Azeris had already fled their homes, fearing a massacre of the Khojaly type were they to have stayed. It is very possible that the aim of the Khojaly massacre was to create precisely this type of fear.

The Armenian upper hand

In the months following the Khojaly massacre, the Karabakh Armenians continued their offensive, supported by ‘volunteers’ (in reality, especially in later stages of the conflict, regular units of the Armenian army) from Armenia. The Report of Human Rights Watch/Helsinki clearly shows the involvement of entire Armenian army units in Karabakh, on a non-voluntary basis. Statements of Armenian prisoners of war confirm this fact. Although there have been a great number of volunteers, both from Armenia and the Diaspora as a whole, the issue of Armenian troop involvement is important in legal terms, as is discussed below. In May, the towns of Shusha and Lachin were conquered, creating a corridor between Armenia and Karabakh. Until then, the two entities had been separated by Azeri military presence in the thin corridor separating Karabakh from Armenia, a situation that made it difficult for Armenian supplies to reach Karabakh. Thus from a logistical point of view, this linkage was crucial for the future development of the war. Also from a military and political viewpoint, this event was of utmost importance. For every practical purpose, Karabakh could now be integrated into Armenia, although for political reasons this integration is still denied. A common budget was already in place for the two entities, and presently over 85 per cent of the budget of Karabakh is provided by the government of Armenia, which spends 5–10 per cent of its national income on Karabakh. The refusal of Armenian representatives to even discuss renouncing the Lachin area in international negotiations indicates the crucial importance of the issue for the Armenian side.

This development led to an Azeri counter-offensive in June 1992 after the Elchibey government managed to create a semblance of order in the newly created military forces of Azerbaijan. The offensive succeeded in recapturing Agdere/Mardakert, as well as the Shaumian region to the north of Karabakh. This Azeri counter-offensive proved to be short-lived, but led to the ‘cleansing’ of up to 40,000 Armenians settled in the area. During the offensive, international human rights bodies drew attention to the indiscriminate bombing of civilian areas by the Azerbaijani air force and artillery.

The Armenians, after having regrouped their forces and gathered strength, mounted a large-scale offensive in February 1993 which recaptured many parts of the Agdere/Mardakert region lost in June 1992; the eastern flank of the Kelbajar region of the Azerbaijani republic (outside Nagorno-Karabakh) was also captured.
Meanwhile, to the south and east of Karabakh, i.e. in the Fizuli and Agdam regions respectively, fighting started to erupt in the form of artillery duels and sporadic raids.

The fall of Agdere/Mardakert was an event which seems to have been related to internal Azerbaijani politics. The June offensive, which brought the region back under Azerbaijani control, had been the work of several more-or-less private armies. These included that of Surat Huseinov, the manager of a textile factory, who agreed to invest his fortune in supporting the newly-formed Azerbaijani military forces; of Iskender Hamidov, the leader of the Bozkurt or pan-Turkic nationalists; and of Yaqub Mamedov, the leader of the Mudafah Shahinlar, or Defence Falcons. Huseinov, however, was given much credit for the advances. He was appointed colonel and led the army formations, which were under his personal control rather than under the control of the Azerbaijani military leadership. Whereas these various forces, well-organized by Azerbaijani standards, were able to conquer back Agdere/Mardakert, Huseinov blatantly failed to defend Kelbajar against the Armenian counter-offensive.

In fact the Elchibey government in early February dismissed Defence Minister Rahim Gaziev as well as Huseinov. As Huseinov was stripped of his position of ‘generalissimo’ in Karabakh, due to the shady connections he and Gaziev shared with Moscow, Huseinov simply decided to leave the front and retreat his troops to Ganja, which remained his personal stronghold and from where he was to base his ‘march on Baku’ only a few months later. This led to the government to accuse Huseinov of betraying the nation, but in practice only meant that Huseinov’s men, previously at least nominally under state control, were reverted into what was effectively a private army. The sacking of Huseinov, admittedly, was part of a general reorganization of the army; nevertheless, the amount of power vested in the person of Huseinov, especially in his hometown Ganja, together with his unpredictability, was perceived (quite rightly, as would become clear within a few months) as a threat to the stability of the regime.

After the defection of this army unit, the chaotic condition of the Azerbaijani armed forces only worsened. The troops’ morale was at an all-time low, desertions were commonplace, politics were intermingled with the military, and the events on the battlefield went from bad to worse. In March and April 1993, the Karabakh Armenians took up a major offensive, this time supported by the Armenian Republic’s armed forces. Kelbajar, populated by a majority of Azeris and a minority of Kurds, and its surroundings, fell in the first days of April and over 60,000 civilians were forced to flee north over the Murov pass. A short while later, Fizuli, another homogeneously Azeri area to the southeast of Karabakh, was captured, and again the area was ‘cleansed’ of all Azeris in a matter of days.

Following these impressive military victories on the Karabakh Armenian side, the Armenians announced a ceasefire on 16 April. Meanwhile, international attention increased and Boris Yeltsin attempted to mount tripartite talks to put an end to the fighting. By this time the conflict had surpassed any predictions; the
number of Azeris forcibly displaced since the beginning of the conflict was approaching 1 million, and it seemed increasingly clear that the Karabakh Armenians were not happy with controlling Nagorno-Karabakh, nor even with a corridor to Armenia. What they wanted was to stitch Nagorno-Karabakh together to Armenia from north to south to make a fait accompli of its integration with Armenia. Moreover, they managed to isolate it from Azerbaijan by a cordon sanitaire of previously Azeri areas which, after having been emptied of civilian population, would enable the Armenians to have a buffer zone towards Azerbaijan. It does not seem as if they wanted to populate the area—with the notable exception of Lachin and to a lesser extent, Kelbajar, or actually integrate the areas south and east of Nagorno-Karabakh into their future political boundaries. This conquest rather followed military predicaments but was also carried out in order to obtain a bargaining chip in future negotiations, especially since the ease with which it was done imposed no particular cost on the Karabakh leadership.

Nevertheless, an international reaction, although embryonic, was emerging. It seems as if most of the actors on the international scene, including the Russians, thought the Armenians had gone too far. In this atmosphere, the UN Security Council passed Resolution 822, which called for the withdrawal of the (unidentified) forces occupying Kelbajar. Russia, the United States, and Turkey jointly proposed a peace plan, which was accepted by both the governments of Armenia and Azerbaijan. However, the Karabakh Armenians refused to accept any peace plan. This may be construed as an indication that the Armenian government’s control over its Karabakh allies was fading; however it seems equally likely that the Armenian government used the argument of not being able to control the Karabakh officials as an excuse, a pretext for pursuing its own goals and avoiding a diplomatic embarrassment. Indeed many analysts see the supposed Armenian-Karabakh split as a fig leaf for Armenia to keep up its semblance of non-involvement. Several outspoken Armenian observers contend that far from exerting any control over Karabakh, the Armenian government has in fact from the start been controlled from Karabakh. This rationale is strengthened by the sudden appointments of Karabakh officials to the Armenian government—the most blatant proof being the appointment of Karabakh president, Robert Kocharyan, as prime minister of Armenia in 1997 and his subsequent elevation to the presidency though a ‘palace coup’ (see below). The relationship between Armenia and Nagorno-Karabakh is highly complex, suffice it to note that the division between the two entities is real only at times and in certain spheres, and more than occasionally used as a political tool. In any case, no agreement ever materialized from the tripartite plan, and soon events in Azerbaijan were to confuse the scene even further.
Azerbaijan’s disastrous internal distractions

In June, Surat Husseinov emerged again from his stronghold in Ganja, profiting from the popular discontent of the Elchibey government’s handling of the war. The tension in Ganja had been growing ever since Husseinov repeatedly refused to return to the front in Karabakh and assume his duties as a field commander when ordered to do so by the defence ministry. In May, the 104th airborne Russian regiment stationed in Ganja—in fact neighbouring Husseinov’s barracks—suddenly decided to retreat from Azerbaijan, over six months ahead of schedule. This was an unprecedented act of the Russian army, otherwise so eager to hang on to bases in the South Caucasus. Only, the 104th regiment left almost all its weapons in Husseinov’s hands; this, together with the known close links between Husseinov and Moscow, was naturally very worrying for the Elchibey regime. Russia wanted to take control of Azerbaijan but did not want to do so visibly—if Husseinov took power and asked the Russians to come back—it would look so much neater. (The Russian influence behind Husseinov is discussed in detail in chapter nine.) At the beginning of June, tensions between the nervous government and Husseinov culminated when defence ministry troops were ordered into Ganja to restore order and assert control over the arsenal given to Husseinov by Russia. As the government forces moved on Ganja, Husseinov took civilian hostages as shields, whereby the government retreated, in an effort to avoid bloodshed. It was at this point, according to government sources, that some twenty government troops were ambushed and killed. Husseinov also captured several high-ranking government officials whom he held responsible for the fighting.
The following day, Husseinov told his men to march on Baku to ‘clean out the filth’ he proceeded to secure control of Ganja as well as Yevlah, to the east of Ganja, and the first detachment of troops marched on Baku. According to reports, the size of this detachment may have been as small as 50 and in any case less than 100 men. The government forces refused to fight, or were ordered not to. Husseinov’s forces marched until they were 50 kilometres from Baku; claiming they would not stop until Elchibey stepped down. Breaking several days of silence, Elchibey sent three helicopters to strike out Husseinov’s first venture, none returned, all switched sides and joined the rebellion.\textsuperscript{182}

The following events, those that brought Heydar Aliyev back to Baku, are somewhat confused; nonetheless it seems relatively safe to discard the theory that viewed Heydar Aliyev as an accomplice of Husseinov’s from the start and as a Russian stooge. Husseinov’s rebellion most certainly played into his hands, however. From the pieces that can be picked up, as Goltz does in his Azerbaijan Diaty, it seems rather as if a Turkish hand was behind Heydar Aliyev. This may seem illogical as Elchibey was without doubt Ankara’s man; however, Elchibey was by no means an ideal leader for Turkey. Elchibey’s erratic behaviour and his total failure to understand the workings and tact of international politics, coupled with his total inability to keep Azerbaijan together and to defend either the country against aggression or his own government’s authority against rebels was very disappointing for Aiikara. Several high-ranking Turkish officials privately express mixed feelings about Elchibey, seeing him as a liability as much as an asset. In fact, aside from his difficulties in putting the country together, Elchibey was seen as too pan-Turkic and too obstinately anti-Iranian and anti-Russian to actually further Turkish interests in the Caucasus and Central Asia. Elchibey’s anti-Iranian rhetoric and the subsequent deterioration of Azerbaijani–Iranian relations to below freezing point (see chapter eight) only heightened the existing Russian and Iranian fears of Turkish imperialism in the Caucasus and Central Asia without achieving anything positive for Ankara, Azerbaijan being too chaotic to actually be of any immediate use to Turkey. Holding on to Elchibey was a priority for Ankara only as far as his ousting would raise the spectre of a pro-Russian leader taking control in Baku.\textsuperscript{183}

Early in 1993 however, the situation in Azerbaijan was deteriorating so much that Ankara, as Goltz put it, ‘started looking out for alternative horses to back.’\textsuperscript{184} Heydar Aliyev, whose personal relationship with Süeyman Demirel had been growing even since they first met in Nakhchivan in 1992, was the best horse at hand. Goltz narrates how Aliyev on three occasions in the spring of 1993 was pushed by Turkey to assume a more active role in propping up the Elchibey regime, but refused to be associated with it. However in June the situation was critical and Demirel reportedly urged Aliyev to intervene. Aliyev nevertheless said he would do so only if Elchibey personally begged him to come. Indeed, after another telephone call from (Jankaya, Elchibey complied. The president nevertheless tried to save the situation by offering Aliyev the post of prime minister (an insignificant post at the time) in order keep control. However, both
Aliyev and Husseinov were aiming higher. Aliyev refused the offer, expressing his interest instead in the post of speaker in parliament. On 13 June, Isa Gambar resigned from the post, which he had held up until then; two days later Aliyev was elected new speaker by the parliament with a safe majority of 34 to three; interestingly, during this period, Aliyev referred to Mutalibov as a traitor and to Husseinov as a madman, hence very clearly adding evidence to the fact that he was not the Russian ‘agent’ observers later called him.185

Nevertheless Husseinov did not stop. He gathered his forces around Baku while foreigners evacuated; finally on 17 June the head of Azerbaijan’s security ministries officially announced what everybody could see for themselves: Surat Husseinov’s advance on Baku would not meet with any resistance. The same night, Elchibey left Baku, throwing in the towel and leaving for his native Nakhchivan; symbolically, and hardly coincidentally, Elchibey was to celebrate one year in office on the following day. By this act, he claimed to have sacrificed his own position to avoid bloodshed. His opponents simply contended that he had fled. As a response to this, Aliyev declared that he had taken over the functions of the president by virtue of his post as speaker of parliament. As Elchibey failed to present himself in parliament when asked to do so with a week’s notice, the parliament could constitutionally strip him of his powers. In his place, Aliyev was elected caretaker president until elections were held; in fact his full title was ‘Chairman of the National Assembly of the Republic of Azerbaijan and Reinvigorator of the Extraordinary Powers of President of the Republic.’186 With Elchibey removed the most direct obstacle to Aliyev’s power had been removed, this however did not mean that he was safe in his seat.187

Surat Husseinov, for his part, had aspirations of his own, making a confrontation between Aliyev and Husseinov likely, a confrontation which would be to Aliyev’s disadvantage who had no military to command, nor any consolidated control over any state organizations. However he had something Husseinov did not have: political experience comparable to anyone; a capacity for political calculation like no one else in the country; and connections in the establishment that he could reinvigorate. Husseinov initially wanted the presidency for himself, however, he soon came to realize that this was not possible. Furthermore, the final loss of Agdere/Mardakert, the last remaining Azeri stronghold in Karabakh, might have made Husseinov less hungry for power, seeing that, in the interim, being in charge meant being responsible in the case of military defeats, which in fact had been the major factor in clearing the way for Elchibey’s demise. On 27 June, Aliyev reached an agreement with Husseinov, whereby the latter accepted the post of prime minister, the post having been allocated dramatically increased powers in the meantime. In fact, the post was tailored to Husseinov’s wishes, as he was also given the defence, interior, and security ministries under his portfolio. On 28 June Husseinov ordered some of his forces to turn away from Baku and move to the front in Karabakh, where the Armenians were missing no chances to exploit the events.
The fact that a Russo-Armenian military co-operation treaty was signed just before the start of the turmoil in Azerbaijan is often taken as another indication of the Russian presence: although generalizations are inherently dangerous, one seems safe: there are no coincidences in the Caucasus. In the final analysis, it seems doubtless that Russia—whether the government as a whole or only certain state structures—was actually involved in the overthrowal of Elchibey. Husseinov was Russia’s man, and either coveted the presidency for himself or was prepared to share power with Mutalibov in Moscow. However, Aliyev, and Turkey had once again succeeded in preventing Azerbaijan from becoming a Russian colony. Concessions would be made, but Azerbaijan remained independent and remained in reality, if not in appearance, more firmly than ever linked on an axis with Turkey.

In retrospect, it would appear that Aliyev used Russia’s will to overthrow Elchibey, and the hidden support for Husseinov, for his own purposes. Hence where Russia thought it had placed a potentially friendly ruler in Baku, Aliyev, after making the initial and necessary concessions such as joining the CIS and distancing himself rhetorically from Elchibey’s overly pro-Turkish attitude, never gave up Azerbaijan’s sovereignty, and consistently refused, just as Elchibey had, to accept the stationing of Russian troops on Azeri soil. Moreover, he quickly consolidated his own power in order to control the whole country personally. He eventually managed to get rid of Husseinov after an attempted coup by the latter, and became Russia’s largest foe in the Caucasus, notably with the signing of the oil consortium in 1994. This led to a series of attempted coups and continued political instability, which Aliyev nevertheless managed to clear out with a mixture of luck, skill, and Turkish help.

The tide of the war

Naturally, complete chaos in Azerbaijan’s capital did not have any positive effect on the war in Karabakh. The Armenians were quick to exploit all given opportunities, as the events in Baku further weakened the already weak Azerbaijani army and cast doubt upon the Azerbaijani government’s ability to control the armed forces. Less than a month after Elchibey’s fall from power, the Karabakh Armenians broke their unilateral ceasefire and initiated an offensive the immediate consequence of which was to place most of Nagorno-Karabakh into Armenian hands, with the seizure of Agdere/Mardakert on 28 June. Seeing the disastrous condition of the Azerbaijani forces, the Armenians decided to seize this rare opportunity and continue their offensive directing their energy primarily at the Agdam region, a strategically located major Azeri settlement (with 150,000 inhabitants of whom 50,000 lived in the city itself) to the east of Karabakh, but also in the regions of Fizuli and Jebrail to the south and southeast of Karabakh. Within a few days, the massive attack on Agdam had broken through the Azerbaijani defence lines—which subsequently fled ahead of the civilian population—and by 4 July the city was under siege.
heavy fighting, the Armenians initiated a decisive attack on 21 July and routed the Azeri defenders, capturing the city on 23 July. The civilian population was forced to leave, and the city burned and looted.\textsuperscript{191} As soon as Agdam was under siege, the Armenians concentrated their troops in the southwestern part of Azerbaijan, in the regions of Fizuli and Jebrail.\textsuperscript{192} The offensive on Fizuli began as soon as Agdam was secured. Strategically, Fizuli was immensely important to Azerbaijan,
as it is the gateway to the strip of territory which passes south of Karabakh and stretches through the Jebrail, Qubatli, and Zangilan regions to the Armenian border with Iran, to the south. Now that the Armenians had secured control over Nagorno-Karabakh as well as the Lachin and Kelbajar areas linking the enclave with Armenia, their only security concern was the danger of this link being cut off by an Azerbaijani offensive. Such an offensive could, as long as the Zangilan-Fizuli strip was in Azeri hands, be conducted on two fronts, one from Zangilan in the south and another from the Ganja and Khanlar regions in the north. Such a geopolitical situation would naturally leave the Armenians of Karabakh in an extremely vulnerable position, like an arm stretching out of Armenia into Azerbaijan—an arm that could relatively easily be torn off. Hence it was strategically vital for the Armenians, given the present unforeseen opportunity, seize this strip of land. According to one Western diplomat in Baku, ‘I wouldn’t describe the Armenian operations as an invasion. It’s more like armed tourism. The Azeri government is a shambles and can offer virtually no resistance.’

The offensive on Fizuli did not last long; the city, with its population of 40,000 was forced to surrender on 23 August. Meanwhile, the town of Jebrail was the scene of fighting and was secured by Armenian forces shortly after the fall of Fizuli. At this point only 15 kilometres separated the Armenian forces from the Iranian-Azerbaijani border; in October the situation became critical as they pushed southward to the Iranian border, seizing Zangilan. Thus refugees swam over the Araxes to Iran, were they were welcomed by Iranian Azeris. However, the Iranian authorities, already overwhelmed by millions of refugees from Afghanistan and Iraq, were afraid that too much fraternizing between refugees and their citizens would lead to increased pressure on the government to intervene on Azerbaijan’s side. Thus the refugees were soon forced to return to Azerbaijan. As an alternative the Iranians set up and funded refugee camps within Azerbaijan. Nevertheless, Iran strongly condemned the Armenian actions, and was reported to have amassed a significant number of troops on the border—a fact which in turn triggered an immediate response from both Turkey and Russia. The existence of major troop movement in Iran was nevertheless never corroborated by independent sources. Russia also warned the Armenian republican leaders that continued attacks would jeopardize bilateral relations. Nonetheless, the Armenians were obviously able to see through the bluff, and indeed called it. Even so the Armenians did not move towards the Iranian border, probably for two main reasons. Firstly, this would have entailed trapping some 80,000 Azeris in the Zangilan and Qubatli regions, giving them no option but to cross the Araxes into Iran, something which would have necessitated an Iranian reaction of some sort, albeit reluctant. Secondly, this might have turned the international spotlight on the region, spurring increased international involvement that could have jeopardized—although this is doubtful—Armenia from pursuing its objective of cleansing and occupying the Zangilan-Fizuli strip. The logical procedure the Armenians followed was to leave a short strip of land across which civilians could escape into western Azerbaijan, and concentrate on securing control over the
Qubatli and Zangilan districts. Again, the Armenians were interested in acquiring land, not in massacring the civilian population, since that would achieve nothing and only have the potential to alter the pro-Armenian world opinion in Azerbaijan’s favour.

The remaining Azerbaijani forces in the north could do nothing but try to divert the attention of the Karabakh Armenians by counter-attacking the Agdere/Mardakert region. The strength of the Azerbaijani forces was, however, insufficient for such a move, and they were instead forced to abandon Qubatli in the south to advancing Armenian forces. A ceasefire was announced by the Armenian forces, who basically needed to regroup and as it seems, wait for new supplies of arms and troops from Armenia. At the end of October, the ceasefire broke and Armenian forces rapidly seized the town of Goradiz on the Azerbaijani–Iranian border, just southeast of Fizuli, thereby cutting the Zangilan region off from the rest of Azerbaijan. It was at this time that the Azeri refugees began fleeing into Iran. This Armenian move seems to have been caused by an apparent decline in Armenian strength to the east of Karabakh, as Azerbaijani forces showed signs of recovery in the Agjabedi region east of Agdam.

At this point, it is interesting to note is that the Azerbaijani forces encircled in the Zangilan region were reported to be shelling the Armenian republic’s territory to the west (the regions of Kafan and Megri) and not Karabakh Armenian forces to the north and east of them. This would seems to indicate that the troops who were to invade the southwesternmost corner of Azerbaijan were Armenian republican forces and not Karabakh forces. It should be noted that these cities had been shelled by Azeri forces on numerous earlier occasions, probably for the simple reason that they were easy targets.

By the end of October, the Armenian forces had taken Zangilan and pushed back the remaining Azerbaijani forces to the Iranian border. Meanwhile, the civilian population that had resolutely refused to leave were forced to flee en masse over the Araxes into Iran. At the same time some 1,000 Iranian troops were reported to have crossed into Azerbaijan at the beginning of September, establishing a presence in a nominally Azerbaijani–controlled buffer zone along the Araxes, and then returned to Iran. Naturally this led to worries in Moscow, but more especially in Ankara, over the danger of an escalated conflict. Fifty thousand Turkish troops were amassed at the Armenian border, and the conflict was probably at its highest ever risk of escalation. Nevertheless this did not prevent the Armenians from evicting all Azerbaijani forces and civilians from the entire Zangilan-Fizuli strip. The strip has since been controlled by Armenian forces, with the exception of smaller portions of the border including the town of Goradiz which did not fall into Armenian hands until later, in 1994. At this point the Karabakh Armenians reached their maximum territorial extension, and the areas they control today are basically those that were conquered by the end of 1993. The ethnic cleansing systematically carried out on all occupied territories during the 1993 offensive resulted in a total of over half a million refugees in
Azerbaijan, in addition to those that had arrived since the beginning of the conflict.203

Towards the end of 1993, however, Aliyev appeared to have restored some order in the army, and on 22 December the Azerbaijani forces initiated a large-scale counter-offensive, along the entire front-line, but particularly around the Agdere/Mardakert and Kelbajar regions, as well as in the east of Karabakh.204 Initially, the offensive was able to recapture some territories, in particular to the north of Kelbajar, and it seems that Russian support for the Azerbaijani forces had made this possible. Azerbaijan had joined the CIS and Aliyev was skillfully tempting Russia with the prospect of military bases, and was able to acquire Russian weaponry (see chapter nine). However, this did not mean that Azerbaijan was allowed to gain the upper hand. The Azerbaijani offensive was soon halted, as regular Armenian army forces stepped into Azerbaijan again, this time on a larger scale than ever, to save the Karabakh Armenians from any setbacks. Thus in February 1994, the Azerbaijani counter-offensive was forced back, and lost most of its earlier gains; Armenian forces moved north from Agdere/Mardakert into the Terter region, only 30 kilometres southwest of the strategically located town of Yevlah.205 On 26 February a Russian-brokered ceasefire entered into force, but this interruption in the hostilities was not to last long. In April, major fighting erupted in the areas of Agdere/Mardakert and Agdam, leading to another Karabakh Armenian offensive. It has been speculated that the Armenians attempted to seize Yevlah, which lies near a lake reaching up to the Georgian border, a move which would have split Azerbaijan in two and separate Baku from Ganja, the second largest town. Whatever the case, the offensive failed but resulted in another 50,000 Azeri civilian refugees.

On 16 May, a new ceasefire was announced by the Russian defence minister, Pavel Grachev. Two months later, the defence ministers of Armenia and Azerbaijan, as well as the head of the Karabakh Armenian armed forces, signed a document giving the ceasefire a legal basis. This ceasefire is still in force, having held ever since. However, it is important to note that artillery duels and low intensity conflict has continued ever since on various levels. OSCE observers claim an average of one person a day has been killed along the front since 1994, amounting to over 1,600 people by early 1999.206

Thus by any standard, the war in Karabakh led to the military victory of the Karabakh Armenians. Azerbaijan was plagued by international isolation, a weak and ill-equipped army, and internal turmoil throughout the war; this is the reason why the tiny Karabakh Armenian population, supported by three million-strong Armenia, was able to inflict such a humiliating defeat on the much more numerous Azerbaijani.

Armenia, for its part, suffered from none of the problems visible in Azerbaijan. They had a favourable world opinion—at least until the attacks in late 1993—a motivated army, good organization and leadership, and political stability. The main problem in Armenia was the desperate lack of energy. During winter, many houses could not be heated as no energy reached Armenia due to the Azerbaijani-
Turkish embargo and internal troubles in Georgia. Nevertheless, the Armenians managed to de facto alter internationally recognized borders by force, without even receiving a direct condemnation by any major power or organization except Turkey and to a lesser extent, Iran. Neither were any international sanctions even discussed. In this sense, the Armenian campaign was a clear-cut success.

The hard road to stability in Azerbaijan

The first coup attempt that Aliyev had to face was that orchestrated by Husseinov in October 1994. Husseinov was obviously not content with his role as prime minister, and is alleged to have collaborated with the ousted president Ayaz Mutalibov, at that time living in Moscow, in trying to topple Aliyev. The coup attempt came shortly after the signing of the ‘deal of the century’—a fact which has increased speculation on Russian (and Iranian) involvement. Husseinov acted mainly behind the scenes but is believed to have orchestrated the assassination of two high government officials while Aliyev was in New York attending a UN summit. On Aliyev’s return to Baku, members of the interior forces (OPON) loyal to deputy interior minister Rovshan Javadov were arrested for the murders. This prompted a standoff with the OPON forces which captured the prosecutor general of the country. Aliyev denounced not only Javadov but also explicitly Husseinov, and more implicitly, Russia for the disturbances. Aliyev demonstrated his popularity by gathering over 10,000 supporters in front of the presidential palace, something which brought both Husseinov and Javadov out into the open, denying Aliyev’s accusations. By 5 October, Aliyev appeared in front of a crowd with Husseinov, publicly reprimanding him for the previous days of unrest. The next day, Husseinov was sacked by Aliyev. Thus the coup attempt, which was chaotic from the outset, was thwarted and Husseinov fled to exile in Russia whence he was extradited to Azerbaijan in 1997. The one clear consequence of the unrest was the strengthening of President Aliyev’s position, as his most powerful rival had been discredited and eliminated from political life. The ease with which this was achieved, nevertheless, led to speculations that Aliyev himself had provoked or engineered the unrest in order to sack Husseinov. Perhaps such allegations are somewhat exaggerated; however it is conceivable that Aliyev was well-informed about events and, in any case, was prepared to respond and to capitalize on his popularity and charisma by rallying the people around him, thus preventing the rebels from advancing towards the presidential palace.

After Husseinov’s rebellion, the largest threat to Aliyev’s power was dealt with. However, contenders remained, the most threatening of these being Rovshan Javadov, with whom Aliyev had chosen to compromise, perhaps due to Javadov’s relatively prompt decision to side with Aliyev as soon as it became clear the Husseinov-led coup would fail.

In March 1995, however, Javadov again led a mutiny of his OPON forces, demanding Aliyev’s as well as parliamentary speaker Rasul Guliyev’s resignation. Aliyev reacted more harshly this time, ordering the army to attack Javadov’s
power-base in Baku. After an unsuccessful attempt to storm the OPON barracks, the government troops finally stormed the headquarters, leaving over 50 casualties. Javadov himself was wounded and later died in hospital. Javadov’s fate clearly served as a reminder to any would-be coup-makers of the dangers involved. Again, this time, there were speculations that Aliyev had provoked the showdown by cracking down on the organized crime activities led by the Javadov clique. Since then Baku has been relatively calm and no further significant threats to Aliyev’s rule have been recorded, unlike in neighbouring Georgia where President Shevardnadze has survived two well-planned assassination attempts.

The de facto integration of Karabakh into Armenia

The territories that fell under Armenian control, in particular the areas of the former NKAO, slowly but steadily became integrated with Armenia. Nagorno-Karabakh and Armenia are still separate political entities, but for most practical matters the two entities are one. For example, any visitor to Yerevan will note the presence in the city of Nagorno-Karabakh military personnel in full uniform. As such the integration of the two entities is a practical success as far as Nagorno-Karabakh’s quest for secession from Azerbaijan is concerned. The only obstacle is that no political settlement can be reached with Azerbaijan to cement this state of affairs.

For the time being, the Karabakh Armenians are working on improving their communications with Armenia; there being no rail or air links, a road over the mountains to Armenia is the enclave’s only life-line. The Diaspora has funded a US$11 million project to make this winding mountain road safer and able to carry larger amounts of goods, a project that has now been completed. Interestingly, the goods that reach Karabakh most often originate in Iran, which has an important border trade with Armenia. On the border between Armenia and what used to be parts of Azerbaijan, there is neither a demarcated border nor stringent passport controls, as even foreigners can pass without having their documents controlled. As long as there is no negotiated solution to the conflict, the integration of Karabakh into Armenia means that it will be increasingly difficult for Azerbaijan ever to regain control of these territories using diplomatic means. Thus, certain circles in Azerbaijan advocate a military solution. It seems likely that they are anticipating oil revenues, which in turn would permit the creation of a large and well-equipped army, to be able to press for a resolution on their own terms, in face the of an international environment where they would receive only limited support for their negotiating position.

The search for solutions

As long as Armenia and Azerbaijan were part of the Soviet Union, the international community had no ability nor jurisdiction to interfere in the conflict. Any resolution lay entirely in Soviet hands... In any case, the conflict
was relatively low-scale at the time. The flaring of the conflict into a full-scale war in fact coincided with the break-up of the Soviet Union and the independence of the two republics. Thus other players now had the opportunity to intervene and seek a negotiated solution. Russia, naturally, remained a major influential power, but had lost its monopoly position. In the beginning of 1992, a whole range of countries began to take an interest in the situation. Immediately following the Khojaly massacre, in particular, international attention was concentrated on the conflict. France and Iran offered their services, with some momentary assistance on the Iranian side.\(^{217}\)

Turkey initially tried to pursue a neutral policy. President Özḷ argued for a negotiated solution to the conflict, and proposed to offer Turkey’s services. Consequently Foreign Minister Hikmet Çetin went on several tours of shuttle diplomacy in the region and in major western capitals.\(^{218}\) Prime Minister Demirel even attempted to use his personal contacts with President Bush to involve the United States in a resolution to the conflict.\(^{219}\) However, angered by Armenian intransigence and actions in Karabakh, Özḷ issued a statement that ‘it is necessary to put some fear into the Armenians over Karabakh.’\(^{220}\) This statement discredited Turkey as a neutral mediator in the eyes of the Armenian side. Thus in subsequent CSCE negotiations, the Armenians have refused to accept Turkey’s participation in any planned peacekeeping operations. Furthermore, the Turkish–Azerbaijani blockade on Armenia contributed to disqualifying Turkey as an impartial actor.

Unilateral mediating attempts followed by Iran, Russia, and other countries, but whenever they did manage to reach a ceasefire this was mainly short-lived, and any attempts at a political settlement never appeared. The ceasefires, although signed by the belligerents, were in retrospect never seriously followed, nor was this the intention of all belligerents simultaneously until the middle of 1994. Rather, a ceasefire was used as a means of regrouping forces and reformulating strategy.

The role of the CSCE/OSCE

As far as international negotiations are concerned, the United Nations has remained on the periphery of the conflict, limiting its role to issuing Security Council resolutions condemning fighting in general and affirming the territorial integrity of ‘all states in the region’, thus abstaining from defining an aggressor.\(^{221}\) Instead, the UN delegated the resolution efforts to the CSCE (Conference on Security and Co-operation in Europe). The CSCE is the only institution to have made significant efforts, so far mostly in vain, to achieve— over and above a ceasefire—a lasting political solution to the conflict. In March 1991, the CSCE formed an eleven-member committee to handle the conflict. The CSCE was at this time looking for a new role in the wake of the Cold War, and seemed to think that conflict management in the former socialist countries of Eastern Europe and the Soviet Union might be a role for that organization could fill.
Furthermore, the CSCE has an organizational structure where all member states are equal; there are no great-power vetoes.222

The UN was more than happy not to take on a complicated conflict in the former Soviet Union, especially given its overload in conflict resolution in the post-Cold War era. Moreover, one can speculate that political interests were part of the scheme to entrust the CSCE with the Karabakh conflict. After all, the UN did take on the Abkhazia conflict. Why not the CSCE if it were becoming the prime regional organization? Could the answer be found elsewhere? It is interesting to speculate that by entrusting the CSCE with the Karabakh conflict, it would make possible the exclusion of one country the West wanted to keep out of the Caucasus: Iran. Being a member of the UN, but for natural reasons not of the CSCE, Iran was automatically and very tactfully expelled from mediation in the Karabakh conflict. Whether this is a coincidence, a contributing factor or the main reason for the UN’s decision to delegate responsibility to the CSCE will probably never be clear. Nevertheless, the question is interesting in itself.

The mediation process can be divided into four phases. The first was the short phase of Russian weakness and predominance of the CSCE mediation over unilateral mediation attempts by other countries, mainly during 1992. The second phase was the reassertion of Russian interests which accompanied the policy shift occurring in the second half of 1992, which entailed the replacement of a Euro-Atlanticist perspective, in the words of Mohiaddin Mesbahi, with a neo-Eurasianist one.223 This translated into practice of lending support to one party or the other depending on the immediate interests of Moscow, and led to the diminishing influence of the CSCE in the conflict. The third phase, from December 1994 to the end of 1996, was characterized by increasing co-operation and confidence-building between the OSCE and Russia. This led to few practical gains in terms of approaching a resolution to the conflict. The fourth period began in January 1997 as first France, and then the United States became permanent co-chairs of the Minsk group, together with Russia. This period can be said to have lasted until the end of 1997, and the deposition of Levon Ter-Petrosyan as Armenian president, indicating the victory of the hardliners over the pragmatists in Armenia and the rejection by Armenia of the OSCE’s step-by-step plan. The fifth phase is the current search for a reopening of negotiations after this event, in which the November 1998 ‘Common State’ proposal must be viewed as a significant, albeit unfortunate, element.

In any case, the committee initially envisaged an eventual peace conference in Minsk (which has still not materialized) and therefore the entities having the aim of mediating the conflict received the informal name of the ‘Minsk Conference’ and for the negotiating team, the ‘Minsk Group’. The Minsk Group was created at a time of Russian weakness, as the Russian state and its foreign policy was in a formative phase.224 As a result, Russia initially adopted a relatively low profile in the mediation process. However the CSCE’s mandate was weak; it had no experience in conflict resolution; and the parties were not interested in a negotiated solution, this being valid especially for the Karabakh Armenians who
were increasingly aware of their military superiority. Furthermore, there seemed to be no readiness to provide troops for a peace-keeping operation among the member states. It should be recalled that the Bosnian crisis was unfolding at the same time, and that the problems faced by international peacekeeping forces in Bosnia-Herzegovina doubtless discouraged anybody from sending troops to distant Karabakh.

The Minsk Group was originally dominated by smaller, disinterested countries. This had positive and negative aspects: the mediation process was trusted by all parties to be impartial since countries such as Sweden, Italy, or Finland had little or no interests in the South Caucasus. However, these countries could only act as mediators in the true sense of the word; they had no incentives, no carrots or sticks to convince the belligerents to adopt a more compromising attitude. Moreover, as pointed out by John Maresca, the group was (until 1997) ‘too large and too low level for serious negotiation, [having] no way of guaranteeing that the much larger CSCE itself would either agree or actually produce a peacekeeping force.’ This circumstance has been realized by the group and negotiations are now conducted almost exclusively by the troika of co-chairmen.

However during 1993, the Karabakh Armenians push southward towards the Iranian border, threatening Nakhchivan, led to a potential internationalization of the conflict, in which both Iran and Turkey (recalling its protector status over Nakhchivan) could get directly involved. Thus international support for the CSCE efforts to stop the war increased, and the United States, Russia, and Turkey put pressure upon the warring parties to accept and take part in the mediation of the CSCE.

In June 1993, the Minsk Group reached an agreement which set a deadline of six months by which to agree a permanent ceasefire. However, it also stipulated that Armenians evacuate Kelbajar, which formed a second corridor between Karabakh and Armenia. The Karabakh Armenians, despite being pressurized by the Armenian republican government to accept the plan, believed that holding Kelbajar was crucial for protecting the lifeline between their territory and Armenia. In any case, the agreement was overturned the very next month as the Armenians launched a fresh attack on Azerbaijani territory. This event typifies the lack of interest the Karabakh Armenians had in stopping the war. But, seeing their position and logic, why would they wish to stop it? After having violating a number of the laws of war, carried out ethnic cleansing and massacres on the civilian population, they received no clear-cut condemnation from any significant state or international organization. Quite the opposite, the CSCE was making considerable efforts to bring them to the negotiating table. Thus from their point of view, it must have seemed absolutely safe to start a new offensive, achieve their war aims, and only then agree to sit down at a negotiating table.

Although the CSCE was the organization in charge, one should not lay all the blame at their feet—it should be recalled that Nagorno-Karabakh was the first major conflict in which the CSCE was involved. Lacking any firm guidelines and any practice in peace-making, the CSCE did whatever was in its power to stop...
the war. However, once it became clear that the parties had no wish to comply with its resolutions, there were no measures the CSCE could take to ensure compliance. There were even substantial difficulties in finding a sufficient number of states prepared to put troops at the organization’s disposal for a peacekeeping mission. As MacFarlane and Minear note, ‘the fact that OSCE personnel were unwilling to discuss potential western contributions may have reflected not merely diplomatic discretion but also the difficulty of lining up participants.’

The question of peacekeeping was further utterly complicated by opposing opinions on the composition and leadership of an eventual peacekeeping force. Russia has consistently made it clear that it prefers a Russian-only peacekeeping force, similar to the one in Abkhazia. For obvious reasons, the OSCE has refused to allow such a force under the OSCE mandate. OSCE officials have stressed the concern that a Russian-dominated operation would lead to the OSCE acting ‘essentially as a cover for a Russian peacekeeping operation’. Turkey and the US, especially, opposed the Russian attempts to carry through its wishes. Later, Russia argued for a force at least half of whose components were Russian; the Western states retorted that a third of Russians and another 17 per cent of other CIS states would be acceptable. Russia naturally saw peacekeeping operations as a golden opportunity to place its troops in Azerbaijan, which is the only South Caucasian republic with no Russian military on its soil. As for the issue of leadership of the force, Russia naturally insisted on heading the force, in line with Russian doctrine of exclusively Russian peacekeeping on the territory of the former USSR. Nevertheless, the OSCE referred in this instance to established UN practice that the force commander not come from the largest contingent of forces. These complications, coupled with opposing views from the belligerents on the composition of forces, eventually led to the unusual situation of a ceasefire without peacekeepers, which has, nevertheless, held considerably well.

The Russian challenge to CSCE mediation & its consequences

The CSCE’s task was further complicated by Russia’s role not only in the issue of peacekeeping forces but in the entire mediation process. Whereas from the outset Russia was involved in the Minsk Group, it became increasingly clear that Russia would not allow an international organization to take its place and hamper its interests in the Caucasus. The Russians sometimes even actively undermined the peace efforts of the CSCE as they conducted parallel unilateral mediation attempts without informing the CSCE. The final ceasefire of 16 May in fact occurred at a time when Jan Eliasson, then chairman of the Minsk Group, was in the region to promote the CSCE peace plan. Despite his being in the region at the same time, and despite Azerbaijani requests that he should be a party to the talks, Eliasson was not invited to take part in the ceasefire negotiations; such humiliation naturally lowers the standing of the CSCE. The Russian actions were so blatantly uncooperative that the American representative to the OSCE John Maresca later denounced it in quite open terms:
At first, Russia fully supported the Minsk Group. But in 1993 Russia reactivated its earlier independent mediation effort… Russia wished to re-establish its dominance in the region and to exclude outsiders, namely the US and Turkey… Moscow would like to re-establish control of the former [Azerbaijani] Soviet frontier with Turkey and Iran, and to share in Azerbaijan’s oil riches. To accomplish these aims, Russia has been pressuring Azerbaijan to accept the re-entry of Russian troops as… border guards… For leverage, the Russians have used an implicit but dramatic threat: if Azerbaijan does not comply, Russia will step up its backing for Armenia… with disastrous military results for the Azeris.229

In practical terms, the existence of parallel mediation tracks led to the parties’ attempts to play one mediation off against the other, to ‘shop around for more advantageous terms’, in the words of Maresca. Thus the CSCE’s mediation efforts started out with quite a limited chance of success and became impossible as Russia began to undermine its activities. At the CSCE Budapest summit of December 1994 (where the CSCE changed its name to the OSCE), the CSCE had to acknowledge this state of affairs by agreeing to integrate its mediation process with the Russian one—a clear setback in terms of the organization’s authority, just as it was changing its name to the OSCE—one step up from a ‘conference’ to an ‘organization’. As a result the Russian mediator was given the post of permanent co-chairman of the Minsk Group, together with the rotating OSCE co-chairman, first held by Sweden and since April 1995 taken over by Finland, which held the post until the end of 1996. During this period of negotiations, few actual steps toward a resolution were undertaken. The mediation process can be seen as having been instrumental in keeping the parties from descending into renewed skirmishes, although a military stalemate seemed in place, decreasing the risk of renewed warfare: the Karabakh Armenians were hardly poised to conquer any new territories, and the Azeris had little prospect of regaining any, as was proven by the huge losses in the counter-offensive in early 1994.

Rather, the mediation efforts were helpful in cementing the existing ceasefire. Furthermore, this period was important for the harmony of the peace talks, strengthening the unity of the mediators and restoring the credibility of the Minsk process by incorporating Russia into it. This was to a large extent due to the choice of the co-chairmen of the OSCE: Sweden and later Finland, two countries which had been neutral during the Cold War and were to some extent trusted by Russia; and furthermore, two countries with a high degree of experience of relations with Russia. It is relatively safe to say that Russia would have been considerably more reluctant to allow great powers like France and the United States to become co-chairmen in 1997 had it not been for the confidence-building work undertaken by the OSCE and Russia between 1995 and 1996. This was, according to Finnish co-chairman Heikki Talvitie, the main accomplishment of his mediation period.230 However, the Minsk process became
for the parties not mainly a forum for negotiations, but rather, as Gerard Libaridian has put it, a ‘propaganda forum for both sides.’

Another important event was the Lisbon OSCE summit in December 1996. A draft statement prepared by the Minsk Group had been approved or at least accepted by all countries of the OSCE, including Azerbaijan. The document called for a settlement of the conflict based on Azerbaijan’s territorial integrity, a legal status for Karabakh giving it the highest degree of self-government within Azerbaijan, and security guarantees for Karabakh’s population. Armenia used its right of veto to force the summit to omit a statement on settling the Karabakh conflict from the meeting’s final document. The summit had been preceded by intense lobbying by Turkish and Azerbaijani as well as Armenian delegations. Faced with a unanimous vote against it, Armenia finally vetoed a statement which had not been the subject of negotiations as it would have upheld the territorial integrity of Azerbaijan. The official Armenian position was that the resolution would have prejudiced the negotiations by predetermining their outcome. In any case, the event showed that Yerevan was struggling hard not to give up any of the gains from the war; thus Armenian representatives were reluctant to sign any document which reiterated the territorial integrity of all member states.

The Azeris, on the other hand, pressed for a declaration supporting the highest degree of autonomy for Nagorno-Karabakh. The summit was saved after an intervention by Turkish president, Sisleyman Demirel, when the Azerbaijani president agreed to compromise on the inclusion of a provision on autonomy as a solution to the conflict. Thus the outcome was a separate chairman’s declaration on the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict. As the drafts on the conflict could not be incorporated in the final document of the summit, the chairman attached a special note to the document which made clear the position of all OSCE member countries except one: the defence of the principle of territorial integrity. This meant a diplomatic victory for Azerbaijan although technically Armenia had been able to make its veto prevail.

In a sense the summit coincided with a turning point in the history of the conflict; it can broadly be said that, before this summit, there was a general tendency for the international opinion to favour Armenia; after the summit most international powers have been increasingly turning to Azerbaijan, for mainly economical reasons related to the oil riches of the country; nevertheless the summit itself had little importance in this shift. It also signalled an increase in the level of international attention paid to the conflict. The Lisbon summit subsequently supported the maintenance of the territorial integrity of Azerbaijan and an extensive, internationally guaranteed autonomy for Nagorno-Karabakh. This summit roughly followed Azerbaijan’s position on the conflict, accepting what President Aliyev had termed the unacceptability of the creation of a ‘second Armenian state’ in the South Caucasus. As a corollary, Armenia and Nagorno-Karabakh felt the Lisbon summit prejudiced further negotiations by siding with one of the parties to the conflict and defining the model of solution prior to actual negotiations. Armenia and Nagorno-Karabakh have consistently resisted
the OSCE’s insistence that negotiations follow the Lisbon principles; Armenia even considers the Lisbon principles the main impediment to a solution to the conflict.  

1997–98: a semblance of progress—but a backlash?

In December 1996, Finland’s tenure as co-chairman was expiring, and both France and the United States voiced their interest in replacing Finland, pointing to the increasing interest of great powers in the region. The OSCE’s choice of France as Finland’s successor disappointed the United States and angered Azerbaijan, which perceived France as pro-Armenian and asked the OSCE to reconsider its decision and appoint the US to the post. This in itself was a watershed, as previously the US had also been perceived by Azerbaijan as pro-Armenian. Azerbaijan had long had a positive relationship with the US State Department, but had been wary of the pro-Armenian Congress’s influence and therefore had not promoted increased American involvement. What had changed was firstly that Azerbaijan judged the influence of the oil lobby in Washington to have superseded that of the Armenian lobby, or simply that the congress had little influence on US foreign policy in Congress as compared to the State Department. Furthermore, the Turkish-Israeli ties were strengthening considerably and there are indications that the Jewish lobby in Washington was beginning to lend its support to Turkey as well as Azerbaijan against the Greek and Armenian lobbies. In any case, Azerbaijan by now felt it could trust the US; two years earlier, neither France nor the US would have been acceptable to Azerbaijan.

As the issue of the co-chairman was becoming embarrassing for the OSCE, a compromise solution was adopted: the United States were made a third co-chairman despite Russia’s initial opposition. Hence ever since, a troika composed of Russia, France and the US have been leading the negotiations on Nagorno-Karabakh. By May 1997, the US publicly declared its interest in quickly achieving a solution to the conflict. At roughly the same time, Robert Kocharyan, President of Nagorno-Karabakh, was appointed prime minister of Armenia. This event meant a strengthening of Stepanakert’s position in Yerevan and a counterbalance to Ter-Petrosyan’s more liberal position. In July, president Aliyev visited Washington on an official invitation, an event which Baku did not fail to utilize to its maximum in propaganda.

In September 1997, the OSCE troika suggested a new peace proposal for Karabakh. This plan provided for the institution of a step-by-step solution, whereby the issues of troop withdrawal from Armenian-occupied territories and the return of refugees, as well as the lifting of blockades and deployment of peacekeepers, would be solved in an initial set of negotiations; the issue of the status of Nagorno-Karabakh would be left until a second stage. This proposal was immediately rejected by the Karabakh Armenian leadership, which refused any plan which would restore Nagorno-Karabakh to Azerbaijani sovereignty, but was endorsed by Baku. Yerevan’s response was nevertheless the most
important, in that Ter-Petrosyan accepted the principles of the plan, thereby opposing Stepanakert’s position.\textsuperscript{238} Among other statements, he claimed that it was ‘not realistic’ to demand Nagorno-Karabakh’s unilateral secession from Azerbaijan.\textsuperscript{239} By accepting the peace plan, Nagorno-Karabakh would, in the final negotiations on its status, be deprived of its main bargaining chip: the occupied territories in Azerbaijan. Thus it was relatively predictable that Stepanakert would reject such a suggestion. Ter-Petrosyan’s view was based on a recognition of the national interests of Armenia, as opposed to the interests of Karabakh.

From Yerevan’s perspective, a pragmatist like Ter-Petrosyan realized that the achievement of international recognition for Nagorno-Karabakh or its attachment to Armenia was effectively impossible. Moreover, time was not on Armenia’s side. Baku’s international standing was rapidly rising, as were Azerbaijan’s prospects for wealth—in the midst of the squabble in Armenia, Azerbaijan celebrated the official start of Caspian oil production on 12 November.\textsuperscript{240} Meanwhile, Armenia remained economically deprived, with few possibilities of overcoming the Azerbaijani-Turkish blockade on the country. Armenia was still in a position of military superiority, but Azerbaijan’s prospective wealth meant that this situation could rapidly be reversed. Hence it was necessary for Armenia to settle its differences with Azerbaijan before its bargaining position deteriorated even further.

However, few Armenians were ready to accept this line of thought. Within his own cabinet, Ter-Petrosyan found harsh resistance from leading ministers. Naturally, the leading opponents were Prime Minister Kocharyan and Interior and National Security Minister Serzhik Sarkisian, both of whom had previously been involved in the administration of Nagorno-Karabakh, as well as the powerful defence minister Vazgen Sarkisian. Moreover, the opposition united in its opposition to the president’s policy, which they deemed as defeatist and treacherous. Ter-Petrosyan seems to have believed that the ‘silent and sensible majority’\textsuperscript{241} was supportive of his conciliatory position, expecting peace to help in improving Armenia’s disastrous economic situation and living standards. In retrospect, it is clear that he was mistaken as concerns public opinion.

By mid November, the opposition had organized itself against the president’s policy and increasingly virulently condemned his position on the conflict. Practically all political parties, save the ruling Armenian National Movement, took part in this. By mid January 1998, following a few weeks of relative calm, the rift within the governing elite became clearer. Kocharyan publicly ruled out subordinating Karabakh to Azerbaijan, while allegations were made that Nagorno-Karabakh officials were planning to topple Ter-Petrosyan.\textsuperscript{242} By the end of January, the differences had resulted in a leadership crisis in Armenia, and the opposition now openly called for Ter-Petrosyan’s resignation. Key allies of the president resigned and defections in the ruling party in parliament appeared, further weakening the president’s position.\textsuperscript{243} On 3 February, this ‘palace revolt’ forced President Levon Ter-Petrosyan to resign. In his place, Kocharyan was named acting President according to the constitution.\textsuperscript{244}
Presidential elections were scheduled for 16 March, and three main contenders emerged: Kocharyan, the Soviet-time Communist Party leader Karen Demirchian, and the main opposition leader under the fallen regime, Vazgen Manukyan. Among these, Demirchian was likely to be the most compromise-oriented candidate of the three, with Manukyan and Kocharyan staunchly defending the independence of Nagorno-Karabakh. The election came to be dominated by Kocharyan and Demirchian, Manukyan proving unable to gather the level of support he had commanded in 1996. In the first round of the election, Kocharyan polled close to 40 per cent and Demirchian 27 per cent of the vote, amid allegations of irregularities, confirmed by international observers, who nonetheless deemed the magnitude of the irregularities insufficient to have influenced the outcome of the vote. In the run-off with Demirchian, Kocharyan won over 60 per cent of the vote and was elected president. This despite the technical illegality of his candidacy: Kocharyan is actually not an Armenian citizen, although the constitution stipulates that the president must have been a citizen for ten years. Kocharyan, as a citizen of Nagorno-Karabakh, might naturally have used the Armenian parliament’s 1 December 1989 decision on the unification of the two entities to legitimize his eligibility. Interestingly, this argument was not used, probably in order not to draw international attention to the decision—it would have given Baku an opportunity to point to Armenia’s involvement. The irony is that an Azerbaijani citizen now is the president of Armenia. Kocharyan’s arrival in power was initially greeted with gloom by those who had hoped for a peaceful solution to materialize. It meant that the OSCE proposal was once and for all buried and that the mediation process was, in many ways, back to
square one. However, certain observers identified a positive aspect: Ter-Petrosyan, although willing to compromise, had seen his political basis to do so eroding. His legitimacy was simply too eroded for him to carry through a compromise solution against the hard-line opposition.

On the other hand, Kocharyan—with his strong identification with Stepanakert—could hardly be blamed for betraying Karabakh, even were he to advocate a compromise. According to this line of thought, Kocharyan—as president of Armenia—would soon realize what Armenia’s interests were and be forced to act accordingly. As a result the likelihood of a solution may have increased rather than decreased. However, this argument presupposes that Kocharyan will change the way he views the issue, something which can hardly be taken for granted. With his roots in Karabakh, Kocharyan is unlikely to agree to surrender the independence Nagorno-Karabakh fought for and won in the war effort in which he played an important role. The bottom line remains that until and unless a clear majority of the Armenian people favour concessions to Azerbaijan, the situation will remain roughly the same unless substantial concessions emanate from Baku, something which is unlikely to happen for several reasons: primarily since Baku believes time is on its side, as mentioned above, but also as the Azerbaijani opposition would be actively opposed to such concessions. In fact, in such a case, Aliyev could very well face a situation similar to that of Ter-Petrosyan.

In November 1998, the OSCE troika presented a proposal to the parties that has come to be called the ‘common state’ approach. The OSCE returned to a ‘package’ solution, thus abandoning the phased approach. One new aspect of the proposal was to avoid the use of terms such as ‘autonomy’ and ‘territorial integrity’ which had in the past evoked polemics from the rival sides, these terms having become heavily value-laden. Although the exact details of the proposal have not been made public, it seems clear that the idea envisages that Nagorno-Karabakh and Azerbaijan form a ‘common state’. OSCE mediators have declined to specify, however, whether the two entities would enjoy equal status as is demanded by the Armenian side.

Basically, the proposal intentionally left open for direct negotiation between the parties the question of whether Nagorno-Karabakh and Azerbaijan would have ‘horizontal’ or ‘vertical relations’. The ‘common state’ concept is a brainchild of the then Russian foreign minister, Yevgeny Primakov, and his deputy Boris Pastukhov, and has been used by Russia in negotiations over Transdniestria and Abkhazia. The concept is inherently vague, and the belief of the authors of the concept is that it is vague enough to bring the opposing sides to the negotiating table. In the other two cases, Transdniestria and Abkhazia have interpreted this principle as entitling them to separate statehood first, and to negotiating the ‘common state’ later as equal parties. The Moldovan and Georgian governments, on the other hand, have interpreted the concept as precluding full independence for the breakaway regions, although entitling them to full autonomy within a single state. In the view of analysts at the respected Jamestown
Foundation, the proposal ‘has deepened the stalemate, postponed the resolution of conflicts, and maximized Russia’s leverage upon all parties as arbiter.’

As the proposal meant that the OSCE stepped back from its Lisbon principles of advocating Nagorno–Karabakh’s autonomy within Azerbaijan, the Armenian side predictably endorsed the plan. In the words of Nagorno–Karabakh leader, Arkady Gukhhasyan, the plan ‘envisages direct negotiations between Azerbaijan and Karabakh as coequal parties, poses no ‘preliminary conditions’—that is, does not postulate Azerbaijan’s territorial integrity—and introduces ‘unconventional elements’ necessary, in the Armenian view, in order to overcome the contradiction between the territorial integrity principle and the national self-determination principle’, hence fulfilling many of the earlier demands of the Armenian side.

Azerbaijan, on the other hand, almost immediately and predictably refuted the proposal. According to Azerbaijan, the plan ‘departed from the OSCE’s own norms, blindsided Azerbaijan virtually on the eve of the OSCE’s year-end conference, and appeared designed to shift onto Baku the blame for the mediators’ ineffectiveness.’ According to Vafa Guluzade, the Minsk Group introduced a potentially dangerous element into the negotiations by accepting the ‘common state’ idea as the basis of a settlement. He blasted the Group for having ‘set themselves the task not of settling the conflict, but of inventing something in order to begin negotiations… There are no US or French positions here. The “common state” is an invention of Russia’s Foreign Ministry. The latter is attempting to impose it on Georgia in the negotiations on Abkhazia, but Georgia is rejecting it. This idea was applied in Moldova’s Transdniestria region. Now the Russian Foreign Ministry is also attempting to apply its tactics in Azerbaijan, and it looks as if the United States and France are hypnotized.’

Guluzade singled out several major drawbacks in the OSCE’s abrupt shift. First, the ambiguous concept of ‘common state’ was an inherently contentious and unstable basis for any settlement; second, the OSCE’s lurch from insistence on ‘territorial integrity’ to an opposite principle undermined the OSCE’s own influence; and third, the shift rewards Armenia’s intransigent elements, showing that the overthrow of Ter-Petrosyan has paid off. As regards to rewarding Armenia’s intransigent elements, Kocharyan indeed stated that ‘the change of leadership in Armenia played a major role in securing these gains for the Armenian side,’ hence crediting the deposition of Ter-Petrosyan for the advances. Whatever the case, the result was a prolongation of the conflict and a further delay in its solution. Guluzade’s statement that the OSCE espoused an ‘opposite principle’ to that of territorial integrity is nonetheless questionable; the common state approach does not mean a denial of the principle, although by refraining from mentioning it, it represents a deviation from the erstwhile approach which held territorial integrity central to any solution.
Direct negotiations: a new stage?

The months following the Azerbaijani refusal of the common state proposal were characterized by widespread pessimism regarding a solution to the conflict. Violations of the ceasefire occurred again at a higher frequency than previous. Nevertheless, by the spring of 1999, efforts to break the deadlock were once again undertaken, especially in Washington which sought a larger role in the peace process. The US hosted a tête-à-tête meeting between Presidents Aliyev and Kocharyan in Washington on 26 April, a meeting that was, however, not particularly productive. Increased American involvement was made clear by a visit to the region by the US special advisor to the secretary of state for the NIS, Ambassador Stephen Sestanovich.

On 16 July, the presidents met at an unmediated meeting in Geneva; both expressed satisfaction with the outcome of the meeting and in general there was a new air of optimism in the declarations made by the two leaders, although they refused to communicate the exact topics of discussion or the agreements they had reached. On 22 August, a second meeting took place in Geneva, while on 11 October yet another meeting was convened at Sadarak on the border between Armenia and Nakhchivan. Although both leaders have emphasized that these meetings are no substitute for the Minsk Group negotiations, it has become clear that a new stage has been inaugurated in the negotiation process. Both leaders in their public appearances now seem to show a more thorough understanding of the other side’s concerns and speak of the need for ‘mutual compromise’. Nevertheless, this new positive atmosphere does not warrant excessive optimism about a rapid resolution to the conflict. A positive momentum has begun, but the obstacles to a solution, listed below, remain. Both leaders have, moreover, attracted domestic criticism following their meetings.

On the Armenian side, the leadership of Nagorno-Karabakh has denounced its exclusion from the talks; its leader GukhASYan has maintained that Yerevan is not at liberty to discuss Karabakh’s future with Baku. Likewise, the radical Dashnaksutiun’s leader, Vahan Hovhannisyan, has come out against concessions and against international peacekeepers. In Azerbaijan, opposition parties have reacted strongly to Aliyev’s alleged concessions, arguing that the government is following a defeatist policy, under pressure from Washington. In particular, unsubstantiated rumours began circulating, nourished by the refusal of both leaders to discuss the results of their meetings. In Azerbaijan, rumours circulated that Aliyev would agree to the inclusion of the Lachin corridor into Nagorno-Karabakh, leading to furor among the opposition leaders. In fact, the strong reaction was paralleled by an opinion poll, in which 49 per cent of Azeris in Baku stated that they were opposed to concessions on the issue. Another 40 per cent stated that any compromises should be limited.

Comparing the reactions in the two countries, it would definitely seem as if the situation in Azerbaijan is now more opposed to concessions than would be the case in Armenia. Perhaps this is due to the fact that most rumours that circulated
spoke of Azeri concessions being on the agenda; however Aliyev seems to suffer some of the problems Ter-Petrosyan suffered in 1997–98. In fact, Aliyev’s popularity suffered from the tainted presidential elections of October 1998 and from government attempts to make the functioning of the opposition difficult. Heydar Aliyev unquestionably remains the person most Azeris view as the best person to lead the country, as several polls have suggested. However, the public debate regarding possible concessions shows clearly that concessions from the Azerbaijani side, like any concessions from the Armenian side, need to be presented to the public; moreover a certain amount of time is needed for such concessions to be popularly accepted. In an ideal situation, the government would involve the opposition in the matter, but such a development cannot be expected given the present polarization of Azerbaijani politics. Unfortunately, the Karabakh issue is also a tool in the Azerbaijani domestic political sphere much as it was in Armenia in 1997–98. The direct negotiations effectively came to an end with the assassination of Vazgen Sarkissian and Karen Demirchian in a terrorist attack on the Armenian parliament on 27 October 1999. Armenia’s political scene has since developed a considerable instability, and President Kocharyan’s legitimacy has considerably eroded. At present, his position is too weak to have a compromise solution accepted in Armenia. Being a chief architect of Ter-Petrosyan’s demise, Kocharyan is unlikely to commit the same mistake as his predecessor.

The position of the parties & obstacles to a solution

At present, what are the obstacles to a solution? We should bear in mind the main points of contention. The respective standpoints of Azerbaijan, Armenia, and the Karabakh Armenians are in essence the same as they were before and during the war. Azerbaijan insists on the restoration of its territorial integrity, implying the return of the territories occupied by the Armenians, including both Nagorno-Karabakh itself and its neighbouring territories. The Karabakh Armenians, backed by Armenia, view the ideal solution as the granting of independence and international recognition to the Republic of Nagorno-Karabakh, which would include the Lachin corridor. They reject any solution in which Nagorno-Karabakh would fall within the (even nominal) jurisdiction of Azerbaijan. Most importantly, they refuse to enter into ‘vertical’ relations with Azerbaijan. Therefore the minimal solution the Karabakh Armenians are ready to accept is a form of union, confederation, or federation which would guarantee Armenia and Nagorno-Karabakh unrestricted contact opportunities.257

Most foreign players have positioned themselves between these extreme viewpoints, defending the territorial integrity of Azerbaijan but at the same time the right to self-determination of the Karabakh Armenians. This also seems to be the position of the OSCE and its member countries, as can be observed in the stormy Lisbon summit of December 1996,258 and lately in the OSCE’s peace proposals. The first and most important issue impeding a solution is naturally the question of Nagorno-Karabakh’s status. Unification with Armenia or
independence is still the aim of the Stepanakert government. In negotiations, they have the upper hand by dint of the fact that this has in practice already been achieved and therefore any other solution would be a concession from their side. Azerbaijan, on the other hand, is not ready to allow the partitioning of its territory, but is prepared to give the Armenians a ‘highest degree of self-rule and autonomy’, claiming that it would be ‘less than independence but more than autonomy.’ Azerbaijan thus refuses to grant Nagorno-Karabakh the right to secession, but is ready to accord the ‘highest degree of autonomy’ to the enclave. This proposition, however, remains on an abstract level only, and there is a need to articulate it and translate it into a concrete proposal. When asked about the details of the Azerbaijani position, officials are unwilling or unable to elaborate. Beyond the obvious statement that exact details have to be worked out during negotiations, Azerbaijan’s position is that Nagorno-Karabakh would enjoy self-rule but no role in foreign affairs, defence, and nation-level taxation. As regards the thorny issue of the Nagorno-Karabakh army, Azerbaijani foreign minister Tofiq Zulfugarov was unequivocal and somewhat ironic:

In any form of solution within the framework of the Azerbaijani state, what would be the need for a separate Nagorno-Karabakh army? Against whom would it be directed—obviously against Azerbaijan. Can you have within one state two separate armies which are moreover pointed against each other? Give me an example of any such solution that works, and we shall study it.260

Nevertheless, the fact that Azerbaijan does not clarify its stance, and its vision of the future of Nagorno-Karabakh within Azerbaijan, is a problem. The fact is that when asked in detail, Azeris—be they intellectuals, journalists or government officials—seldom have a coherent view of what such ‘broad autonomy’ would mean in practice. This in turn further increases the Karabakh Armenian’s suspicion that Azerbaijan has no intention of giving Nagorno-Karabakh any real autonomy in the long run. Karabakh officials thus put the problem as follows:

There are many different levels of autonomy, the highest being independence. Azerbaijan had to decide which one it was talking about. Was it Bosnia, Tatarstan or what? The problem is that they are unwilling to concretize their proposal.261

Lately, the leadership of Stepanakert has voiced its interest in discussing a loose confederation with Azerbaijan. Kocharyan also endorsed this plan, reiterating that Stepanakert must be given an equal status with Baku in such a confederation.262 In other words, the insistence of Stepanakert remains on the subject of what the Armenian side terms ‘horizontal’ relations with Azerbaijan. Consequently, the positions of the parties remain relatively distant, although a certain softening of maximalist aspirations has taken place in the past year. In the words of Armenian
deputy Foreign Minister Baibourtian, the Armenian side has ‘no preconditions’—referring to Azerbaijan’s precondition of territorial integrity—and advocates a confederal or federal solution. Something that seems to be a precondition, though, is the advocacy of ‘horizontal’ relations between Baku and Stepanakert a precondition on which the Armenian side is presently uncompromising.263

A second consideration is the areas of Azerbaijan, outside Nagorno-Karabakh, that are occupied by Armenian forces. The Karabakh Armenians are ready to hand over most lands to the east, north, and south of Nagorno-Karabakh to Azerbaijan, but refuse to surrender the areas to the west, especially the Lachin corridor, which links Nagorno-Karabakh to Armenia. In the words of one Karabakh official, ‘We will never be an enclave again.’ Azerbaijan, on the other hand, unconditionally urges the return of all lands outside Karabakh to Azerbaijan, and furthermore demands that this be done as a prerequisite for direct negotiations on status. This in itself amounts to a deadlocked situation, as Stepanakert refuses to give up this main bargaining chip. Meanwhile, Azeri refugees in eastern Azerbaijan increasingly lose hope of ever returning to their homes. The Azerbaijani government also hinders this population from resettling elsewhere and integrating into Azerbaijani society, as this would mean that the eviction of this population was a fait accompli; the use of the refugee issue would become impossible. In this sense allegations have been made that the Azerbaijani government is using the refugees as pawns in a political game. However, the failure of the phased solution plan and the resignation of Ter-Petrosyan in early 1998 changed the situation of the refugees. Whereas until then many of them had held high hopes of an impending solution and return, after these events many seem to have lost hope of returning to their homes in the near future. Consequently, many of them have taken steps to find a permanent home in other parts of Azerbaijan.264

The issue of Lachin is perhaps one of the most difficult nuts to crack in the entire conflict. For Nagorno-Karabakh not to ‘be an enclave again’, some form of effective guarantees for contacts with Armenia must be necessary. The Azerbaijani side, however, remains suspicious of what Stepanakert will use this corridor for. As Zulfugarov has stated, ‘a corridor can not be for economic purposes. Any solution would require the two republics [Armenia and Azerbaijan] to develop economic linkages in the form of a free-trade area. We buy goods from western Europe, from America, without a corridor.’ Zulfugarov, although not expressing it directly, is clearly suggesting that the corridor is intended for military purposes, for the event of an Armenian military intervention to support Nagorno-Karabakh—and is as such unacceptable to Azerbaijan. However, a positive and interesting fact is that the Yerevan government holds a more liberal view on the issue of Lachin. When Baibourtian was asked whether Lachin, given effective international security guarantees for Karabakh, could be returned to Azerbaijani jurisdiction, his answer was simply ‘yes’. Hence there might be a way out of the Lachin imbroglio.

Odier important practical issues are the safe return of refugees and the creation of buffer zones once occupied territory has been returned. As regards refugees, a
problem is that according to the few reports that exist from the occupied territories, the houses of the Azeris who fled have been looted, often burnt, and sometimes mined by the Karabakh Armenians. Thus a return of refugees could potentially lead to a desire for revenge among civilian Azeris; one can easily imagine the reactions of frustrated people to such conditions. Here landmines are especially important. Moreover, the issue of international guarantees and peacekeeping troops are essential but can only be decided in conjunction with a solution to the core issues. Nevertheless, the question of guarantees will be crucial to any solution of the conflict given the distrust that reigns between the parties. Armenians, for example, are deeply suspicious of the international community’s actual will to protect Nagorno-Karabakh. In the words of Baibourtian, ‘Armenia has been given guarantees before [referring to the time of the First World War primarily]; any nation which has suffered a genocide needs to be careful.’

A third point, although not at the core of the problem, is the fact that Azerbaijan is partitioned between mainland Azerbaijan and Nakhchivan. The two parts of the country have no territorial connection, and are separated by Zangezur, which belongs to mainland Armenia. Azerbaijan would naturally want to connect the two parts of the country, whereas Armenia does not want to give up any land, largely because that would cut off Armenia from Iran, one of its main trading partners, and encircle it even more in a hostile, Turkic world.

A very important impediment to the resolution of the conflict is in the realm of attitudes. As noted throughout the text, the conflict has considerably reinforced distrust and hostility attitudes between the parties. One main facet of this is that the Armenian side, as is clear from Baibourtian’s statement above, sees the present and the future within the historical perspective of being encircled in a Turkic world which has potential and actual genocidal intentions over Armenia and may be intending to pursue these in the future. In the words of one analyst:

The Armenian side is negotiating with the past and not the future. So far, the events of 1915 dominate Armenian consciousness and the entire peace talk process, Armenian fears and apprehensions are rooted in this past experience. It is still characteristic for Armenians to be convinced that all things Turkic (which includes Azerbaijan) are to blame for the Armenian national tragedy … for them, Karabakh is a continuation of the events of 1915.

An active process is under way in both republics to radicalize public opinion and deepen mistrust; a process which includes indoctrination of school children against the ‘enemy’. On a social level, there is extremely little contact between Azeris and Armenians; a visit of a handful of Azeri journalists to Yerevan in 1998 was a breakthrough in this sense; the journalists in no way found Armenia to resemble the stereotypes presented in Azerbaijan and reported this; the same happened when Armenian journalists as a response visited Baku. On the whole,
however, confrontational attitudes and the advocacy of military solutions remain strong. In the words of Libaridian:

> Each party has impugned the worst intentions on the other, and each party has more often than not behaved in a manner justifying the other’s worst fears. This is more than mistrust at work; it is the dehumanization of the adversary that makes even dialogue, let alone serious negotiations, difficult.268

Fifth, the continued ambiguous Russian role in the region remains a major impediment to any solution. Practically all observers doubt whether Russia is actually interested in a solution to the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict—a solution would impede the use of ‘divide and rule’ tactics on Russia’s part. The important place Russia holds in the Minsk Group naturally increases the difficulties of solving the conflict, given the questionable character of Russia’s intentions. The suspicions engendered by this circumstance are also salient: the suggestion that the November 1998 ‘common state’ approach is a Russian approach, utilized in Abkhazia and Transnistria as well as Nagorno-Karabakh, which would seek to prevent any long-term solution to these conflicts, is a clear example.

### Models of solutions

#### A return to the status quo ante

The first solution, attempting to bring back the *status quo ante*, is advocated by Azerbaijan. The main argument in this solution is that the territorial integrity of independent states shall be respected, and logic follows the principle (discussed in its legal aspects) that national minorities have the right to autonomy and to exercise their culture and religion, but not to secession and armed uprising. The main obstacle to such a solution, naturally, is the categorical Armenian rejection of this argument. The Armenians argue that they cannot live together with the Azerbaijani after the events in the war. Furthermore, they argue that the Karabakh Armenians do not recognize the legitimacy of the Azerbaijani government, and claim the right to complete self-determination. Thus it seems very unlikely that such a solution could be enforced in practice. The Armenians are by force of arms controlling Karabakh and its surrounding regions, that are left as deserted lands. Thus having achieved their war aims, it is inconceivable for them to give up their hard-won territory and accept Azerbaijani sovereignty. Such a solution can only be achieved through arms, as the Armenian population have shown their readiness to fight for what they consider to be their right. In any case, the use of force against them would lead to a mass exodus to Armenia before any form of autonomy could be established. Thus, it seems unlikely that Azerbaijan’s full territorial integrity can ever be peacefully re-established, and
certainly not unless unless the Armenians in Nagorno-Karabakh are forcibly evicted.

A second solution is the acceptance of the Karabakh Armenians’ right to self-determination and their subsequent independence or annexation by Armenia. This solution would effectively put an end to the conflict, provided that Azerbaijan recognizes it. Furthermore, it would fulfil the self-determination argument and conform with the right of peoples and minorities to decide on their own future. This argument doubtless has many proponents in the West, particularly in minority rights organizations and the like, not to speak of the Armenian Diaspora. However, it is not an argument devoid of problems and contradictions. The most obvious objection to it is that it would actually recognize the use of force and ethnic cleansing in the alteration of internationally recognized borders. Given the present international atmosphere, it would seem as if the perpetuation of the present situation, Nagorno-Karabakh’s secession from Azerbaijan—and the creation of an independent Karabakh and/or its annexation to Armenia—can be ruled out as a solution to the conflict. This is primarily due to Azerbaijan’s categoric refusal, but also because of the reigning general uneasiness concerning secession felt by all international players, as has been outlined above. In particular, given the delicate geopolitics of the Caucasus as a whole, it is feared that the granting of independence to Nagorno-Karabakh would have repercussions on the whole region’s stability, leading to increased tensions in Abkhazia, South Ossetia, and Chechnya, as well as within Azerbaijan itself, given the existence of a vocal Lezgin minority in the country, among others. Hence it would set a far clearer precedent for other irredentist movements than did, for example, Bosnia. The Bosnian Serbs, just like the Karabakh Armenians, have achieved most of their war aims. But the Dayton agreement does not acknowledge the use of force by the Serbs, and prevents, at least in theory, the partition of Bosnia-Herzegovina. Thus an international acceptance of the independence of Karabakh or of its unification with Armenia would be a doubtful act in terms of international law.

Another problem is that the Azeris, not unjustifiably, see that in military terms things can not be any worse than they are, and that time is in their favour. The country is expecting billions of petrodollars to start flooding in within the next few years, and that would enable it to build up a strong and well-organized army. In turn, this would mean that Azerbaijan would have an increased leverage on the Karabakh Armenians and would be in a position to impose a solution on the other side. The Azeris are actually silently voicing their belief that in the long run, the tiny number of Karabakh Armenians, or even the resource-poor Armenian republic, will not pose a military obstacle to the more numerous Azeris in reconquering Karabakh. Another point in this context is that the Azeri refugees are growing increasingly restless in their camps. A recent analysis of their condition shows that tension is rising among the refugees, who intend to take the matter in their own hands if nothing is done to give them back their lands. As one of the camp leaders stated, there are 1 million refugees; out of these it would
be easy to assemble over 150,000 fighters, who are doubtless sufficiently frustrated
to take such action. Needless to say, the tensions among the refugees is of great
concern to the Azerbaijani government, recalling that the two previous
governments where both toppled because of their failure to turn the tide of the war.

Furthermore, the independence of Karabakh would bring up the question of
the Lachin corridor and the Kelbajar region. It is doubtful whether the Armenians
would let go of Lachin even were Azerbaijan to impose it as a condition for the
independence of the region. The Lachin issue is in fact a major bone of
contention which may prove to be the most difficult to crack in the whole
conflict. For whatever the solution of the conflict, Lachin remains crucial to both
parties. For the Azeris, it is the principle of their territorial integrity that is at stake;
whereas they could let Karabakh go and still save face, as the region is not
inhabited by Azeris in any case, the Lachin area was homogeneously Azeri and
giving it up would be a deep humiliation. Similarly, the Armenians would argue
that without the land connection of Karabakh to Armenia through Lachin, there
can never be any security for Karabakh Armenians. If Azerbaijan was allowed to
reassert control over Lachin, Karabakh would constantly remain vulnerable to the
wishes of Baku; they would always have a hold on them.

Quite aside from these considerations, the feasibility of an independent state of
Nagorno-Karabakh can be questioned. The territory of the enclave itself is
debated. Although the natural solution would be to use the borders of the NKAO,
the Armenians demand the incorporation of the Shaumianovsk district to the
north of the enclave, as well as the Lachin corridor, both of which are technically
parts of Azerbaijan proper. However, it seems as if certain standards of democratic
governance are feasible in Nagorno-Karabakh. The presidential elections of
November 1996 of the enclave, although condemned by the OSCE as they were
an attempt to legitimize the independence of Karabakh, were considered to be
free and fair by international observers. This said, the crackdown on opposition
after the failed assassination attempt against President Gukhasyan in early 2000
displayed a clear move toward authoritarianism. However, the main problem lies
in the Azeri minority of the enclave, which amounted to almost a quarter of the
population in 1988. If these people are considered to be a part of the enclave’s
population, then a popular consensus among the inhabitants of Nagorno-
Karabakh on the aim of sovereignty ceases to exist, as an important section of the
population would be categorically opposed to independence. There is also
considerable doubt regarding the treatment of the Azeris in an Armenian state.
This circumstance could actually be termed an issue within an issue; in this sense
one can speak of the existence of an Azeri minority in Nagorno-Karabakh whose
rights need to be protected. This minority would be likely to challenge Armenian
rule in the enclave, supported by the Azerbaijani government. Hence it seems as
if the establishment of a new political entity would threaten the primary political
rights of a minority within this entity; furthermore this puts in doubt the
prospects for political consensus within the new boundaries. It should not be
forgotten, either, that the entity has aggressive designs on its neighbour—the
occupation of Azeri territory beyond the NKAO’s borders testify to this. But together these facts tend to lend credence to the argument that the secession of Nagorno-Karabakh is not a viable solution to the conflict.

As can be seen, there is a deadlock. For both sides, crucial interests are at stake, and there seems to be little room for compromise. This fact also relates to the contentious issue being the very question of Karabakh’s territorial affiliation. Hence there is no applicable precedent or resolution mechanism in the history of international politics that can easily be adopted to the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict. Clearly, any solution that is acceptable to both parties must be ploughing new ground in the field of conflict resolution.

A re-negotiated autonomy

The first point that comes to mind is whether it is possible to re-negotiate Nagorno-Karabakh’s autonomy within Azerbaijan, possibly coupled with international guarantees. As a concept, autonomy solutions are advantageous, as the nature and degree of self-rule can be tailor-made to fit the needs and wishes of a particular ethnic minority, and the individual aspects of their territory. Hence different profiles of political power distribution can be articulated.271 It may include issues such as territory, language, natural resources, legal systems, taxation, etc. A theoretical scheme involving eight dimensions and three degrees of autonomy has been developed by researchers such as Nordquist. This framework can be briefly sketched as follows:

This scheme shows the potential for allocating different degrees of autonomy for different aspects of autonomy. Naturally, if the left-hand column is consistently applied, there is not much autonomy left. Similarly, if the right-hand column is followed, the situation will be very close to independence. With the help of the three-leveled, multi-dimensional framework outlined, it is feasible to reach a negotiated compromise suiting the particular needs of the Karabakh Armenians. Baring in mind the Azerbaijani position of according Nagorno-Karabakh the highest form of autonomy short of independence, it seems a priori possible to achieve a compromise which would also satisfy the Karabakh Armenians. Nevertheless, the ambiguities in the Azerbaijani stance on the subject need to be clarified for this assumption to be correct. The reluctance of the Azerbaijani side to do this may be the result of a mixture of a genuine inability to formulate a proposal, coupled with an actual intention to refrain from any clarification on the matter.

Without anticipating the results of such negotiations, it is necessary to analyze which aspects of autonomy would be most important for Nagorno-Karabakh. It is probable that the Armenians will focus on security, language/cultural rights, executive, legislation, and international relations; and accord medium importance to economy, natural resources, and judiciary.
A high degree of autonomy in international relations would allow Nagorno-Karabakh to enter into agreements with Armenia, which it considers essential for its survival. One could imagine a guarantor role for Armenia, similar to the ones exercised by Turkey, Greece, and Britain in Cyprus. Azerbaijan might retain a right of veto over such agreements. The question is whether an Azerbaijani vetoing power would be acceptable for the Armenians given the importance they attach to their link with Armenia. Secondly, in terms of language, Armenian would be the official language of Nagorno-Karabakh as it was in the Soviet era. Thirdly, in terms of security, a high degree of autonomy would enable Nagorno-Karabakh to organize its police forces locally and independently. In this context, it is likely that Azerbaijan would see the need to keep some form of control over the security forces of Karabakh, in order to prevent the fragmentation of the armed forces of the republic—something which could engender further conflict.
The existence of two separately controlled military structures antagonistic to each other in a country is definitely not desirable. As demilitarization may not be politically feasible, a link in the security field is warranted. A medium/high degree seems to be a possible compromise, where Nagorno-Karabakh would not be stripped of its ability to self-defence but where Azerbaijan would retain some influence over the Karabakh Armenian military and paramilitary formations. Fourth, a locally elected governor/president, as well as local legislation with a central veto right may satisfy the concerns of each side. These provisions would enable Nagorno-Karabakh to exercise a high degree of self-rule, including the right to conclude agreements with Armenia, while the territory technically remains within Azerbaijan. The Azerbaijani central government would keep a veto right on certain issues, while having an initiative regarding natural resources, development, and economical issues. The Azerbaijani right of veto will certainly be opposed by the Armenian side. But unless Azerbaijan retains this right, Nagorno-Karabakh would actually be de facto independent as its self-determination would be absolute. Hence without this veto right, one can argue that the solution would not be one of autonomy but rather de facto secession. Doubtlessly, this would result in a singularly high level of self-rule for Nagorno-Karabakh. Nevertheless, this compromise might be the most satisfactory for both parties. Significant ambiguities and obstacles to its implementation persist, which can only be worked out at the negotiating table. Assessing them here would be a purely speculative exercise, and would exceed the scope of this study.

The Karabakh Armenians' primary concern is security and self-rule, as well as relations with Armenia. The provisions listed above, if coupled with international guarantees, seem to satisfy these concerns. As far as Azerbaijan is concerned, its main concern is to prevent the fragmentation of its territory. This arrangement, although certainly stripping the Baku government of direct control over Karabakh, would safeguard the territorial integrity of the country, and ensure Azerbaijani presence in the enclave.

In the present case, and to use Karl Deutsch's terminology, the involved countries are far from, and are not evolving towards a security community, where states expect no armed conflict with other members of the international system. Rather, they are in a situation of a security dilemma, where the players, while trying to create security actually end up undermining their own security. In practice, defensive actions by a state to improve its security are interpreted as hostile by the counterpart, which takes counter-measures, etc. The situation in this sense is by no means unique in international relations. It shows distinct similarities with the situations in Cyprus, Bosnia-Herzegovina, and the Israeli-occupied territories in particular. Just as the Turkish Cypriots feel the need of a Turkish guarantor role for their security, the Armenians in Karabakh have a similar orientation towards Armenia, both communities actually desiring partition and unification with their motherland. Greece and Azerbaijan, and the Greek Cypriots and the Azeri minority of Nagorno-Karabakh, equally vehemently oppose this guarantor role, seeing it as unacceptable. Naturally, the case is more
articulated in Cyprus but the similarities are striking. In the Turkish-Greek context, the events of the first quarter of this century come to mind as a precedent —although neither ideal nor desirable. The minorities question, potentially explosive, was resolved through exchange of populations. Although such a solution indeed proved stabilizing in the long run, virtually uprooting a conflict, it is highly questionable in terms of ethics and morality. Furthermore, the practical implementation of a population exchange may not be possible in the case of Nagorno-Karabakh.

The prospects of a renegotiated autonomy are difficult to assess. The lack of mutual confidence and trust is a major obstacle for the future of a renegotiated autonomy. In such a situation, in fact in every situation except secession, the two enemies are forced to co-operate within the structure of a single state. Autonomy decreases interaction and presumably thereby the potential for tensions, but in the final analysis the difficulty of inducing co-operation between two groups, who do not actually want to co-operate remains. The feasibility of the suggestions listed above will become clear only if the parties agree to sit at the negotiating table. Indeed, bringing them to peaceful negotiations might be as difficult as reaching an agreement once negotiations have been started. Autonomy, then, despite the Soviet legacy remains one of the primary models of resolving the conflict. There are, nevertheless, other solutions that deserve to be mentioned.

In a discussion on autonomy, it should be noted that this solution to a large extent implies a territorial and legal separation along ethnic lines of the population of a state. Hence, the autonomous position of a minority may actually impair the
inter-ethnic relations and dialogue between the two communities. It may isolate the groups from each other rather than integrating them in a common state structure. Hence autonomy may increase the potential for further conflict in certain cases, as it may be understood as an initial separation awaiting eventual divorce. Thus while advocating autonomy as a solution to ethnic conflicts, one must also be aware of the dangers involved with this concept.

A suggested territorial swap

A glance at the settlement patterns before 1988 shows that Armenians were living in Armenia and in Nagorno-Karabakh; Azeris lived in mainland Azerbaijan and in Nakhchivan, but also in substantial numbers in Zangezur, the thin strip of land separating Nakhchivan from Azerbaijan.

This pattern is naturally highly conflict-prone even if the Karabakh issue were settled; Azerbaijan would still be divided into two territorial units. In this perspective, a lasting solution to the conflict needs to take into consideration not only the status of Nagorno-Karabakh but the communications between all separated territories. As the Armenians argue that the Lachin corridor is a necessity for the security of Karabakh, one could imagine a mutual boundary change whereby Armenia is granted Karabakh and Lachin, thus establishing a land connection between the two entities; Azerbaijan would, as compensation, receive a land corridor to Nakhchivan, through Zangezur. Such a solution has the
advantage of eliminating many potential future conflicts that may erupt due to the problems of communication between Armenia and Karabakh or between Azerbaijan and Nakhchivan.

The main obstacle to this solution—which has actually been advanced, among others, by Turkey’s current prime minister Bülent Ecevit—is that it is unlikely to be accepted by either side. The Azeris, as stated above, are very reluctant to renounce sovereignty over Nagorno-Karabakh. Even more, they categorically refuse to even discuss yielding sovereignty over the Lachin corridor, as it was homogeneously Azeri-populated before 1988 and was a part of the Azerbaijani republic itself, not of the NKAO. Hence there is reason to believe that even given the land gain of Zangezur, the Azeri side would be unlikely to accept such a solution. The Armenians would certainly appreciate having Nagorno-Karabakh and the Lachin corridor annexed to itself, however, the price they would have to pay for this would be their border with Iran, which indeed has proven to be a life-line for the country. Without this border, Armenia would be landlocked between hostile Azerbaijan and Turkey, and potentially hostile Georgia. Thus Armenia is even less likely than Azerbaijan to accept this solution. For this reason, such a territorial swap is unlikely to be translated into practice although in the long term it might actually be the most durable solution to the Armenian-Azerbaijani conflict.

However, a possible although quite unique solution—and bearing in mind the unique conditions of the conflict a unique solution is required—would be to put this corridor under nominal Azerbaijani jurisdiction, but under international control, guaranteeing Armenia full rights to continue its relations with Iran along this route. Simultaneously, a similar system could be arrangement for the Lachin corridor. Thus, we would have a situation where the respective ethnic territories are linked, but where international presence would ensure the stability and durability of the settlement.

This solution might seem far-fetched at first sight, but the more one looks at it the more interesting it seems—by default, as other more conventional suggestions fail. Most other solutions would have the potential to lead to renewed disputes in the future. However, a territorial swap is an alternative which presents a compromise where both parties have something to gain; and most importantly it has the potential to prevent, or at least decrease the risk of future irredentism. Any observer of the contemporary Azerbaijani society would testify that among the population, there is a considerable frustration and a feeling of the country’s alienation by the world community. Moreover, there is a strong revanchist atmosphere, comparable to the French attitude towards Germany before the First World War. If the conflict is resolved in a way that is not perceived as satisfactory by the Azeris, then any chances for the arrival of peace are low. Thus if a durable peace is to be established, the solution must be one that calms the tensions between the populations rather than exacerbating them—the solution must be legitimate for all parties.
Joint sovereignty

A variant aimed towards the same goal—communication between Armenia and Karabakh, and between Azerbaijan and Nakhchivan—without resorting to substantial border alterations, has been put forward by the former US special negotiator on Karabakh, John J. Maresca. Maresca’s proposal can be summarized in a few key points:

- Nagorno-Karabakh would be reconstituted as the Republic of Nagorno-Karabakh, a self-governing legal entity within and freely associated with Azerbaijan.
- All refugees would be permitted to return to their homes.
- All of Armenia and Azerbaijan would be a free trade area, and the two states would agree on mutual transit rights across each other’s territory.
- The settlement would be guaranteed by the CSCE and the UN Security Council, and US-led international efforts should invest in reconstruction of the area and the construction of road connections between Azerbaijan and Nakhchivan, and between Armenia and Karabakh.

This proposal presents a very comprehensive and far-reaching solution to the conflict. However, it requires a certain degree of mutual confidence and trust, which is totally absent on the ground, and can hardly be imposed by outside powers. The United States can certainly ensure the compliance of the Azeri and Armenian governments. However it is a totally different issue to prevent the renewed violence which would be a likely corollary of the return of refugees. The rift between the two communities is such that it is unrealistic to expect Armenians and Azeris to coexist peacefully in the near future. Forcing the populations to live together would probably backfire into new hostilities; hence a transitional period is necessary, where mechanisms such as confidence-building measures are implemented. Furthermore, the ‘free association’ of Nagorno-Karabakh to Azerbaijan is likely to be interpreted in Baku as capitulation and therefore unacceptable. From a broader perspective, the elements of Maresca’s proposal dictate a kind of confederal relation between Armenia and Azerbaijan. At the very least, the governments of the two states must be in contact, and cooperate closely to ensure the implementation of the agreement. This is not a realistic assumption at this time either, notably as mutual transit rights and the like would considerably decrease the sovereignty of the two states. The fact that mutual suspicion remains, and is likely to exist in the foreseeable future, points to the risk of renewed conflict and revisionism in both camps. This discussion within the Nagorno-Karabakh framework also illustrates the difficulties of implementing the Dayton peace accord in Bosnia-Herzegovina. The experiences in Bosnia may actually be valuable for a solution to the Karabakh conflict, in case the stability in the Balkans is preserved.
This said, certain elements of the plan are valuable and need to be further developed: the idea of a free-trade zone and of international aid regarding communications and reconstruction may be crucial as corollaries to any solution of the conflict.

One point which deserves special attention is the Shusha-Lachin corridor which separates Karabakh from Armenia. As has been discussed above, both parties are intransigent on this issue for historical and security reasons. In many respects, this issue can be termed a ‘key’ to the conflict. For example, the Azeris see Armenian concessions on Lachin as a prerequisite for a solution. To solve this seemingly intractable problem, a regime of joint or international sovereignty has been advocated by certain scholars.\(^{275}\) One could imagine a solution whereby the Lachin corridor would remain under *de jure* Azerbaijani sovereignty but controlled jointly by Azerbaijani and Karabakh Armenian forces, under the supervision of international peacekeepers. Such a solution would satisfy the need for security for the Karabakh Armenians, while safeguarding Azerbaijan’s sovereignty over the area. The town of Shusha could be subject to a reverse arrangement: being situated within Nagorno-Karabakh, it would remain under nominal Karabakh jurisdiction, but under joint control. Hence irrespective of the form of the eventual solution, two types of territories with different status should be defined: 1) Nagorno-Karabakh itself; and 2) territories to be placed under joint control and sovereignty.\(^{276}\) This solution, if adopted, would unravel one of the tightest knots in this conflict. However, for it to be successful, the Azerbaijani side needs to be made aware of the necessity of granting this concession to the Armenians despite any adverse effects on its sovereignty over its land.

Other suggestions & models

Besides these principal models of resolution, there have been a number of less successful suggestions for the resolution of the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict. For example, a solution based on the one in Cyprus 1960–63 has been advocated, whereby Karabakh Armenians would be guaranteed an influence in Azerbaijani decision-making. However this suggestions fails to recognize the territorial character of the conflict. Another variant has been to advocate a solution of the Chechen type, whereby the final status of Nagorno-Karabakh would be deferred for a number of years pending a normalization of the relations between the peoples and the return of refugees. This suggestion has failed to gain popularity for the same reason as the ‘phased’ approach to resolution was rejected: there would be no guarantee for the sovereignty of Nagorno-Karabakh. Moreover, Azerbaijan fears that such a solution, much as has been the case in Chechnya, would lead to the perception of Azerbaijan as having de facto recognized the independence of Nagorno-Karabakh.

Another proposal that has been made recently is to grant Nagorno-Karabakh a status of neutrality, coupled with international guarantees. According to the plan, presented by Nikolay Hovhannisyan of the Armenian Academy of Sciences, the
NKAO would be renamed the Nagorno-Karabakh Neutral Territory (NKNT), which would be guaranteed by the UN security council, Armenia and Azerbaijan. NKNT would have its own constitution, and be governed by a locally elected legislative and executive bodies, under the supervision of a plenipotentiary spokesman of the UN security council, approved by Armenia and Azerbaijan, whose main function would be to monitor the neutrality of the NKNT. The territory would have its own military and police forces, foreign representation, and its own flag, coat of arms, etc. Moreover, according to the suggestion, the Lachin corridor would be associated with the NKNT. The problem with this solution, of course, is that it is simply a covert form of granting Nagorno-Karabakh total independence with the restriction of its political neutrality. It would have all the assets and symbols of a state except in name, and, moreover, would practically include the Lachin corridor. In other words, it is a solution which suits the interests of the Armenian side almost completely, rejecting the territorial integrity of Azerbaijan. Therefore it remains unacceptable to the Azerbaijani side, as it would indeed create ‘horizontal’ relations between Stepanakert and Baku. However, it is important in that it is an example of the attempt to move away from value-laden terms such as statehood and independence on the Armenian side; and hence a step towards a compromise. The idea may in principle be used and explored in further detail, something of which the author is fully aware; however, in its present form it is not suitable for discussion as a blueprint.

The so-called Tatarstan model is a solution that has, surprisingly enough, not been treated to any significant extent. The Tatarstan model implies the creation of an ‘associated state’; that is a state within and associated with a larger state. Other examples of such solutions include the Niue islands and New Zealand. Tatarstan claims statehood and enjoys a substantial degree of self-determination, verging on independence in the economic sphere, and pursues its international relations in a relatively independent manner (having opened ‘representation offices’ in over 15 countries); however it acknowledges being associated to the Russian Federation on the basis of a ‘Treaty on Mutual Delegation of Authority and Jurisdictional Subjects’. Hence while remaining a sovereign state, it forms a part of the Russian Federation, subordinating to its institutions and delegating significant powers to federal authorities. Indeed, this model seems to offer a constructive blueprint for negotiations. It does comply with the Azerbaijani position of offering Nagorno-Karabakh a ‘highest’ degree of autonomy; moreover it has the advantage of avoiding the use of the term ‘autonomy’ which is tainted by the past from an Armenian perspective. Whereas a main controversy lies in the definition of the future relations between Stepanakert and Baku as ‘horizontal’ or ‘vertical’, the associated state model may be helpful in providing a ‘diagonal’ type of relations. Whatever the terms used, it is likely that a future solution will bear some resemblance to the Tatarstan model, while accounting for the specific conditions and circumstances of the Nagorno-Karabakh ‘conundrum’.
Pillars of a solution

The final solution to the conflict is naturally dependent on the evolution of the positions of the parties and on the domestic and international pressures on the negotiators—should negotiations be undertaken, something which itself is by no means certain. Hence the applicability of theory is not absolute, as it is not scholars, immune from political considerations, but statesmen who would ultimately be taking the decisions. Theories of conflict resolution are, however, helpful in providing mechanisms by which a solution can be reached, and models of possible solutions that the parties can consider. In this sense, the achievement of a compromise may be facilitated.

The solution to the conflict will ultimately be determined by the evolution of what we may term the ‘ripeness’ of the conflict. Thus the outcome of the conflict may not necessarily be determined by a negotiated political solution but equally possibly by other solutions, such as war (conquest) or unilateral capitulation.

The intention of this study has not been to advocate one single model for the resolution of this conflict. Nevertheless, the overview has shown that certain key points are important and may be conceived as the pillars of any future agreement:

- The preservation of the territorial integrity of Azerbaijan and the respect of the right to self-determination of the Karabakh Armenians seem to be inescapable elements of any solution. For this purpose, a renegotiation of the autonomy of Nagorno-Karabakh within and loosely associated with Azerbaijan seems to be the most feasible solution; however, given the historical connotations of autonomy, it may be necessary to try to envisage less value-laden terminologies. In practice, however, the most feasible status of Nagorno-Karabakh is a high level of autonomy in the true sense of the word; this may take the shape of an agreement of an ‘associated state’ such as Tatarstan. As discussed above, the enclave would enjoy substantial privileges, verging on those enjoyed by independent states, in self-rule and international relations.
- The return of the formerly Azeri-populated territories neighbouring and surrounding the NKAO, and the restoration of full Azerbaijani sovereignty over these areas is an equally crucial element of an agreement. This can also be said of the return of refugees to their former places of residence, although this is a potentially explosive issue, especially as regards Azeris with their home in Nagorno-Karabakh.
- For the key territories of Shusha, Lachin, and Shaumianovsk/Agdere, joint or international control in at least a transitional phase is inevitable. This requires the presence of international peacekeeping forces which may also be instrumental in facilitating the return of refugees. The international community, as proposed by Maresca, ought to assist in the construction of improved communications between Azerbaijan and Nakhchivan, and between Armenia and Karabakh.
• Besides the mainly political character of the conflict, the economic dimension of conflict resolution must not be ignored. The very existence of the aforementioned communications, and the right of Karabakh to conclude agreements with Armenia, necessitate the establishment of a free-trade zone incorporating the two republics. Ideally, this would also include Georgia, South Ossetia, and Abkhazia, thereby forming a South Caucasian free-trade area which may be conducive to peace in the entire region. Such an arrangement is desirable as in the long term it decreases the importance of boundaries and state sovereignty—something which would be instrumental in decreasing the tensions between central governments and minorities.

Conclusions

Among the conflicts that have raged in the Caucasus since 1988, the one over Nagorno-Karabakh may stand in a distant second place as regards human suffering and material destruction compared to the one in Chechnya. In the European perspective, it is also superseded by the war in Bosnia in terms of atrocities and international attention. However the conflict in Nagorno-Karabakh has carried a geopolitical significance and a risk of degenerating into a regional conflagration that is arguably larger than any other conflict in post-Soviet Eurasia. Indeed, Nagorno-Karabakh is the single conflict that has led to threats actually being voiced of a ‘Third World War’.

In the Caucasus, the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict is the only conflict which involves two sovereign states as primary parties—Russia must be considered a secondary party to the conflict in Abkhazia, whereas Armenia can hardly be described as such in the case of Karabakh. The conflict thereby has the direct corollary of poising the military machines of two states against one another. More importantly, however, the conflict has raged in the immediate vicinity of three states that happen to be regional powers: Russia, Turkey, and Iran. At different points in time, both Turkey and Iran were seriously considering intervening in the conflict only to be harshly reprimanded Russia; Russia, on the other hand, has continued to interfere in the conflict as it saw fit in order to pursue its professed aim of regaining control and influence over the South Caucasus.

In this context, it should be noted that despite the horrors involved for the victims of the Armenian-Azerbaijani war, the conflict was in a global perspective a comparatively small one, with an estimated death toll of less than 30,000 people. Horrific as this may be, it fades in comparison with the 30,000 people that perished in single battles of the Iran-Iraq war, to name a recent example, or with the death toll of the Bosnian war, estimated at over quarter of a million people. The warfare in and around Karabakh in 1992–94 was, after all, a war with little sophisticated equipment; heavy arms were used rather sparingly simply due to their unavailability. Moreover, the Armenian advances in Azerbaijan in the later stages of the war have been called ‘armed tourism’, rather than actual war, by foreign military commentators recorded by Thomas Goltz. Still, despite the
comparatively limited scale of the war, it posed a significant challenge to the fragile peace and stability reigning between the three regional powers. Considering that since the war, Armenia has received weaponry from Russia to the value of over US $1 billion, and that Azerbaijan is expected to receive oil revenues enabling it to acquire similar amounts, it is possible to imagine a nightmare scenario in which a renewed armed conflict between considerably strengthened adversaries would erupt. Such a clash would certainly have a stronger impact on Turkey as well as Iran than did the 1992–94 round. In addition, the Russian defeat in Chechnya implies that these two southern powers will be likely to take Russian warnings less seriously than they would have in 1993, particularly in the case of Turkey which now claims to possess the second strongest army in the world after the United States—hence implying a stronger conventional military capacity than Russia, whose military credibility today mainly lies in its possession of nuclear weapons. Russia, in the words of Stephen Blank, is unable to build up a credible offensive military capability, but does, and will for a long time, maintain the capacity to create significant trouble for the states in its neighbourhood.279

In other words, the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict still has the potential—increasing by the day as negotiations seem unlikely to break through the deadlock—to turn the Caucasus into what it was in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries: a battleground between Russia, Turkey, and Iran. Such scenarios may seem exaggerated in view of the increasing salience of economic interests that link the three powers into a certain level of interdependence. However, the specific elements of the conflict are worrying. In the event of renewed warfare, it is not unreasonable to assume that the scale of warfare will be such that Nakhchivan will be involved in it; and in this case Turkey is unlikely to remain an outside observer. Indeed, the conflict still has the potential for internationalization incomparable to any other conflict in the Caucasus. Mediators from the OSCE, whose task has certainly not been an easy one, are in the meantime running out of options in their uphill struggle to find a solution to the conflict, adding desperation to despair. Especially disappointing was the fate in early 1998 of those circles in Armenia, led by former president Ter-Petrosyan, who adopted a conciliatory stance. The events in Armenia clearly showed that the majority of political forces in Armenia are not ready for a compromise on Nagorno-Karabakh. The ‘palace coup’ against Levon Ter-Petrosyan is likely to reduce the readiness to compromise of Armenian leaders and will certainly influence the actions of Azerbaijani leaders, and perhaps also Georgian ones. Presidents Shevardnadze and Aliyev now certainly pay more attention to the danger of their respective radical opposition in their decisions regarding the respective conflicts. It is a fact that in both countries, as in Armenia before Kocharyan’s advent to power, the regimes in power are relatively moderate whereas the opposition is generally less conciliatory. The Azerbaijani opposition, for example, refuses to grant more than cultural autonomy to Nagorno-Karabakh, something which will obviously never be accepted by the Armenian side.
On the political as well as societal level, the mutual ‘dehumanization’ of the enemy, as Gerard Libaridian termed it, continues to prevent even the initiation of confidence-building measures between the parties that could turn the downward spiral around, as has been the case in South Ossetia. There are virtually no economic, cultural, or other contacts between the two communities today, and the best term to describe the bilateral relations is the familiar zero-sum-game. Is then everything pointing toward disaster? In fact, Libaridian has rightly noted that the parties may already implicitly have solved the question of Nagorno-Karabakh’s status. Whereas Azerbaijan is ready to accord the region a high level of autonomy, Armenia—including the Karabakh Armenians—have reluctantly renounced the goal of total independence and now view their future in a common state structure with Azerbaijan. These two positions are then in fact not diametrically opposed as the situation seemed to be only a few years ago. Similarly, virtually all political forces in the two countries see the future of the Caucasus as a future in cooperation; as soon as the conflict has been solved—on one’s own terms, of course—the professed aim of regional cooperation would accordingly be realized. The importance of this circumstance must not be underestimated; the crucial realization that the future is one of coexistence is present. Another important factor which would facilitate coexistence is that despite the policies of ethnic cleansing pursued primarily by the Armenian side, the civilian population has largely been spared—with a small number of exceptions—the massive and systematic atrocities characteristic of the wars in Bosnia or Rwanda. Despite the propaganda emanating from both sides, there have been no large-scale instances on either side that deserve the term genocidal activities. For example, when the Armenian forces concluded their invasion of Azeri lands south of Nagorno-Karabakh by attacking Zangilan, a narrow strip of territory between the front and the Iranian border was left under Azerbaijani control for the evacuation of refugees. The Armenian side was primarily interested in territory, not in annihilating the population, as did the Bosnian Serbs for example. The consequence of this is that the level of mutual hatred can probably be overcome. In the words of MacFarlane and Minear, ‘the absence of intense recrimination may enhance prospects for resettlement and reconstruction.’

Given the existence of positive elements, solving the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict is thus not impossible although it remains a very difficult task for the international community. The issues involved in the conflict are themselves alone complicated enough, posing geography against demography, economy against ethnicity, territorial integrity against self-determination. Difficult as any solution may be to implement, the situation is worsened by the fact that outside factors keep influencing the relationship between the parties to it, in almost every case in a negative way. The emergence of regional alignments in Eurasia, with a stronger axis tying Armenia to Iran and Russia, and an emerging Azerbaijani-Turkish-Israeli alignment with tacit American support, implies a regional polarization which again impedes the resolution of the conflict by increasing the regional
consequences of any change in the present South Caucasian status quo. As the area’s strategic importance is increasing, partly for reasons related to the extraction and export of Caspian oil, this has a negative effect on conflict resolution. The parties sense the opportunity to play great powers against each other for advantages; the result is the emergence of opposing alignments that is happening today. In particular, Russia’s doubtful objectives in the region are a serious impediment to peace.

The question, really, is if Russia wants the conflict to be resolved in the near future. The recent ‘common state’ proposal originating in the Russian foreign ministry is an example of a move which ostensibly was carried out in the interests of peace but in practice led to a prolongation of the deadlock. Allegations that this scheme in fact has been used by Russia in several conflicts such as Abkhazia and Transdniestria in order to perpetuate Russian influence must be taken seriously; the Georgian government was so negatively inclined to the concept that it threatened to boycott in the OSCE any proposal of solving the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict along these lines. Whereas Russia is the main impediment to a lasting peace, other regional players have hardly exerted a coherently positive influence. Iran’s desire to keep Azerbaijan weak also implies that Tehran does not have an impartial attitude in the conflict; similarly Turkey’s difficult relationship with Armenia also acts as an impediment. Last but not least, the inconsistent attitude of the United States in the conflict has had negative repercussions, in particular due to the partisan politics in the US Congress. In this context the prospects of resolving the conflict in Nagorno-Karabakh become gloomy: there is a level of mistrust and suspicion between almost all parties involved either in the conflict or in the mediation process that directly impedes serious and constructive negotiations.

Between April and October 1999, the hopes for a resolution to the conflict increased dramatically through the positive atmosphere surrounded by the direct negotiations between Aliyev and Kocharyan. But the political instability in Armenia and the weakened position of President Kocharyan dashed any hopes of a speedy solution to the conflict. By mid-2000, the Azeri refugees scattered in Azerbaijan are unlikely to return to their homes in the near future; nor are the Karabakh Armenians likely to gain international recognition for their aim of independence or union with Armenia. Despite a slow increase in low-level contacts and co-operative schemes at grassroots level, the Armenian-Azerbaijani conflict is unlikely to find a lasting solution in the short term, and it may very well continue to destabilize the region for a long time to come.
Georgia discerns itself from its Transcaucasian neighbours in one main aspect: its ethnically heterogeneous population. Whereas Armenia is now basically a mono-ethnic state after the forced exodus of its Azeri population, Azerbaijan harbours Lezgin, Kurdish Talysh as well as Russian populations. Azeris nevertheless make up for just over 90 per cent of the country’s population. Georgians, on the other hand, compose no more than 70 per cent of the Georgian population according to the 1989 Soviet census. Moreover, the term Georgian is used to denote people speaking a Kartvelian language, including Georgian proper as well as sub-ethnic groups speaking related Kartvelian languages, such as the Mingrelians and the Svans, as well as the Muslim Georgians, the Ajars—all groups whose identity is fairly strongly Georgian but with a remaining separate and distinct identity. A narrower definition of ethnic groups—albeit a very narrow one—would hence imply an even smaller proportion of Georgians. Totally, over 80 ethnic groups are represented in Georgia, something which is nevertheless not rare in the former Soviet Union. The ethnic break-up of Georgia of 1989 is as follows:

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As is clear from the table, the largest minorities in Georgia are the Armenians, the Russians, and the Azeris. These have nonetheless not been a major problem,
except for the enduring fear of disturbances among the Armenians, who live homogeneously in the Akhalkalaki district on the Armenian border—over which a war was fought in 1918 between the independent Georgian and Armenian republics. Among the Russians, a tendency toward out-migration emerged in the 1980s, very much due to the anti-Russian atmosphere in Georgia at the time. Azeris have basically remained calm; a provocation in 1989 consisting of false reports of ethnic clashes between Georgians and Azeris in southeastern Georgia almost led to a mobilization of the Georgian National Movement and a ‘march on Marneuli’ similar to the march on Tskhinvali of November of the same year. However, this was averted by calming influences within the movement and direct contacts with the Azerbaijani Popular Front.\footnote{In recent years, sabotage activities on energy and other supplies to Armenia passing Georgian territory have been blamed on the Georgian Azeris.}

Armenians, Azeris, and Russians did not enjoy any autonomous status, in line with Soviet nationality theory, as they all had motherlands in other republics of the union. There were, however, three autonomous areas in Soviet Georgia, one autonomous oblast and two autonomous republics. The largest of these was the Abkhazian ASSR, with a population of roughly half a million people, of whom slightly over 90,000 were Abkhaz in 1989, and whose majority was composed of mainly Mingrelian Georgians. The other ASSR in the republic was created for the Muslim Georgians, the Ajars, in the southwestern part of the country bordering Turkey. The Ajar proportion of the population is not known, as Ajars are counted as Georgians in censuses since 1926, but Ajars are assumed to be a slight majority in Ajaria of perhaps 60–65 per cent. The only autonomous oblast on Georgia’s territory belonged to the Ossetians, the South Ossetian Autonomous Oblast. Speculations on why South Ossetia was not given ASSR status centre on the role of North Ossetia and on the allegations of the Ossetians not being indigenous, as has been argued in Georgia, to South Ossetia. Having moved to the area several hundred years ago, the argument that the Ossetians are recent settlers is nonetheless highly controversial. In any case the two Ossetian areas form a special case in Soviet nationality policy. North Ossetia is considered to be the indigenous homeland of the Ossetians, and the North Ossetian ASSR was therefore, so to speak, the mother republic of the South Ossetians. Hence the autonomous unit of the Ossetians within Georgia was put on a lower administrative level than North Ossetia.

Georgia has arguably been the Transcaucasian republic worst hit by internal strife. Since 1988, it has seen two wars with ethnic minorities as well as a short two-phase civil war. It has also suffered the largest amount of Russian interference in its domestic affairs, with varying degrees of overt Russian support for the rebellious minorities in the country and allegations of Russian involvement in the assassination attempts on its president, Eduard Shevardnadze. The roots to these events are to be found mainly not in the pre-Soviet history as in the case of Armenia and Azerbaijan, but actually in events during the Soviet era, indeed in the Perestroika period under Gorbachev. Nevertheless, previous events, since the end
of the eighteenth century, have played a background role to the events of the 1990s.

**The historical background**

The main component of Georgian identity is linguistic; with religion coming second, and the Ajars—Muslims but speaking Georgian and with a Georgian culture with heavy Turkish elements—are considered by most Georgians to be Georgians. Georgian (Kartuli) is the sole literary language of the Kartvelian family of languages, which also includes the unwritten Svan and Zan, the latter divided into the closely related Mingrelian and Laz, mainly spoken by the Laz in north-eastern Turkey. The speakers of these languages in Georgia, in the generally accepted view, form a single nation using Kartuli as their literary language. The Georgian alphabet, particular and original to the language, dates back to the fifth century AD. The tribes that later came to compose the Georgian nation began to form at the end of the second millennium BC. The West Georgian kingdom of Colchis came into existence in the sixth century BC, which was followed by other kingdoms and principalities. Religion was the most important element of formation of the Georgian nation; Georgia adopted Christianity in 331 AD. However, the eastern Georgian kingdoms, which were christenised before the Western ones, had to fight the Zoroastrian Iranian empire. In this era, religious affiliation was of course much stronger than any embryonic or vague ‘ethnic’ identity, to the extent that ethnicity as we understand it was understood at all at that time. Georgia as an ethnic territory was first created in the tenth century, defined as the lands in which church services and prayers were held in the Georgian/Kartuli language.

Also in the ninth century, the principality of Abazg—or Abkhazia, ‘Abkhazeti’ in Georgian—expanded over western Georgia, and became the Abkhazian kingdom with a capital in Kutaisi. This kingdom soon replaced Greek with the Georgian language. The expansionist tendencies of this kingdom led to the enlargement of its realm to the east; in 978 the Abkhazian kingdom and the Georgian kingdom unified through dynastic succession, in practice carrying out the unification of Georgia. It adopted the name of ‘Sakartvelo’, the Georgian term for the country until this day. This process was completed when the emirate of Tbilisi, the last remnant of Muslim and Arab rule, was incorporated into Sakartvelo, becoming its capital in 1122. By the thirteenth century, Georgia had expanded to cover an area more than double its present territory, expanding into what is today Armenia and Azerbaijan. The Mongol invasions in the early thirteenth century halted Georgia’s expansion and eventually led to the breakup of the state. Two rival dynasties emerged, one in eastern and the other in western Georgia, and Georgia never recovered the status it had had in the early thirteenth century. The wider region had lost much of its importance as a trade route, whereas the South Caucasus’s geopolitical importance was growing, much to Georgia’s detriment. The regional order that developed in the following
centuries left Georgia caught between the expanding Ottoman and Iranian empires, especially after the latter was reunited in the first years of the sixteenth century. Georgia had furthermore broken up into several principalities in the fifteenth century, a fact which sealed its fate. Little by little, Georgia came under the influence and rule of the Islamic empires. This once again led to the division of Georgia, as western Georgia fell under the domination of the Ottomans and eastern Georgia under Safavid Persia, after the division of the Transcaucasus in 1555.

By the eighteenth century, a new force emerged in the Transcaucasus: Russia. The Turco-Iranian rivalry soon changed into a triangle, with the addition of Russia as an actor in the region. In the middle of the eighteenth century, Georgia managed to regain some form of autonomy under the rule of Erekle II, who was de facto the only independent monarch of the Caucasian region in his time. As Georgia became a relatively autonomous player, it attracted the interest of the Russian empire, which was increasingly looking southward in its quest for warm-water outlets. To Georgia, equally Orthodox Christian Russia looked like a logical ally, given the situation of the country squeezed between two hostile Muslim empires.

Ronald Grigor Suny has described the dilemma of Georgian rulers of this time very eloquently: ‘The choice faced by all rulers of early modern Georgia was between faithful service to their Muslim sovereigns or the elusive prize of independence.’ Nevertheless, in 1762, Erekle II took over the throne, and under his rule Georgia actually became the nucleus of what Suny calls a ‘fragile Caucasian empire’. Simultaneously relations with Russia grew. During the Russo-Turkish war of 1768, Russia used the Georgians to stop a Turkish advance in the Caucasus. Erekle agreed to this and was promised support for Ottoman reprisals. However it was the western Georgian rulers of Imeretia, for whom Turkey was much more a threat than for the eastern Georgians, that welcomed the evolving links between Russia and Georgia. Nevertheless the promised Russian support failed to appear, and Russian generals behaved in a highly condescending, often treacherous way, leaving the Georgians at the mercy of much larger Iranian or Turkish armies. This led Erekle to think that what he, and Georgia, needed was a strong, written commitment from Russia.

In 1783, Georgia recognized the protectorate of the Russian tsar in the Treaty of Georgievsk. The favour was returned by three promises, none of which were to be kept by Russia: the guarantee of the throne to Erekle and his descendants; the independence of the Georgian church; and the defence of Georgia in case of attack from one of the Muslim empires.

In 1795 Georgia was attacked by Persia largely because of its ties to Russia, and Russia did nothing to support Georgia. In 1801, the east Georgian kingdom was annexed to Russia and became the Tiflis province (gubernia). From this point the ruler of Georgia was appointed by the tsar, breaching the 1783 agreement; and the Georgian church soon lost its independence. Imeretia was conquered in 1810; with some of the Georgian princes choosing to accept Russian hegemony while
conserving some form of self-rule; hence Guria remained autonomous until 1828, Samegrelo and Svaneti until 1857, and Abkhazia until 1864. These regions of western Georgia were called the Kutaisi Province, or Kutaisskaya Gubernia. With hindsight one favourable consequence of Russian rule was the unification of all of what Georgians today consider Georgian lands in 1828, with the conquest of the Meskheti and Javakheti districts, and finally the Batumi area with the 1878 Treaty of Berlin.6

Abkhazian autonomy was abolished in 1864, a year coinciding with the final defeat of the Circassian rebellion of the North Caucasus. Perhaps because of their close ethnic affinity with the Circassians, the Abkhaz were a target of the deportations that took place at the time, which led among other things to the obliteration of the entire Ubykh people. Interestingly, and in a sense logically from a Russian point of view, the Muslim population was the main target of the deportations. As almost all Circassians, Chechens, and Dagestanis were Muslim, the deportees taken from among these peoples were chosen indifferently. Among the Abkhaz, however, who were divided between Christianity and Islam, it was almost exclusively the Muslim Abkhaz that were exiled; hence the situation today where most Abkhaz in Abkhazia are Christians, whereas all Abkhaz in exile in Turkey and the Middle East have an Islamic ancestry.

The repercussions of the rebellions in the North Caucasus did not limit themselves to the Abkhaz. All non-Russian populations were now treated with suspicion, and a policy to divide seemingly homogeneous nations was adopted. With respect to Georgia, an attempt was made by Russian authorities to deny the existence of a Georgian nation. In censuses, such as the one in 1897, a total of 11 different ‘ethnic groups’ were isolated from among the Kartvelian population. As Russia had noticed the failure of russification of Georgia, the next logical step was simply to divide Georgians into sub-ethnic groups, with the aim of preventing unified nationalism and rebellion. This same policy was carried out with more success in the North Caucasus in tsarist as well as Soviet times, notably in Circassia. Nevertheless, according to Georgian scholars, late nineteenth-century Russia adopted a divisive approach to weaken Georgia: the promotion of minorities in the territory. Schools were opened in Mingrelian and Svan, for example, in an attempt to promote the distinct identities of these groups. In the case of the Abkhaz, this strategy was made easier as the Abkhaz language is unrelated to the Georgian. Consequently, the teaching of Russian to the Abkhaz led to the gradual replacement of Georgian with Russian as the second language for the Abkhaz.

With the advent of the Soviet Union, this process accentuated further, as Russian became the ‘language of inter-ethnic communication’. This was a decisive factor which promoted the alienation of Georgians and Abkhaz from each other, whereas ties had previously been relatively close and problems relatively few, the two peoples sharing elements of a common historical heritage. Georgians generally believe this was a plan by the Russians and later the Soviets, to depict
the Georgians as alien, as the ‘other’, to the Abkhaz resulting in anti-Georgian sentiments developing among the Abkhaz.\textsuperscript{7}

At the beginning of the twentieth century, political participation in Georgia was comparatively high, especially in the western parts of the country. Social democracy was particularly popular in the country. Within the framework of the revolution, most important Georgian socialists later chose the more liberal Menshevik side over Lenin’s Bolsheviks. One among several notable exceptions was Josip Jugashvili, better known as Stalin. With the February revolution of 1917, the Soviets took power in Tbilisi and Baku. The Tbilisi Soviet became dominated by its chairman Zhordania, who argued that the revolution involved three groups: the workers, the revolutionary soldiers, and the progressive bourgeoisie. Zhordania believed it imperative for the bourgeoisie not to be alienated by the workers, as had been the case in the first Russian revolution of 1905.\textsuperscript{8} However, the peace within the three groups quickly broke down, mainly as discussion of Georgian autonomy provoked a sharp reaction from the revolutionary army, most of which was composed of Russians, politically close to the social revolutionaries. This fact illustrates the inherent problem of the time, as noted by Suny: that the three groups the revolution depended on according to Zhordania were based on three different ethnic and political groups: workers were generally Georgian and Menshevik; soldiers were mostly Russian and social revolutionaries; and the progressive ‘bourgeoisie’ were predominantly Armenian, who were in turn politically divided between Dashnaks and more liberal groups.\textsuperscript{9}

By mid 1917, the Bolshevik forces had gained support among soldiers. This radicalization of the army was a significant setback for the Georgian Mensheviks. However, when the October revolution took place in Petrograd, the Mensheviks were able to disarm the Bolshevik soldiers, who subsequently departed to the north. As the Mensheviks consolidated their rule in Tbilisi, this did not mean an end to problems. The result was that Armenians lost control of the municipal Duma, which they had dominated before the revolution. As Georgians took over, the tensions between the communities rose. Meanwhile, the Turkish army moved towards the Caucasus, as the Russian soldiers had vacated the front. The Turks were welcomed by the Azeris to the East, but resisted by the Armenians and the Georgians. In a sense, the Transcaucasus fragmented clearly along the ethnic lines that are still seen today. Many factors, including Turkish pressure but also the fear of Bolsheviks, led the Transcaucasian Seim to declare independence from Russia on 22 April 1918, a move which was reluctantly accepted by the Armenians and Georgians, opposed by the Bolsheviks and SRs but enthusiastically supported by the Azeris.

A month later, the Transcaucasian Federation that had been created broke up into its constituent units, Georgia declaring its independence on 26 May. Georgia broke first from the Federation, mainly because of the general tensions described above but also because of the more direct border conflicts with the Dashnaks, who claimed the Akhaltsikhe and Akhalkalaki regions for the Armenians.\textsuperscript{10} Georgia was recognized by the Ottomans within a week, after having ceded certain
portions of territory to the empire. Meanwhile, the connection with Germany intensified, and within a few weeks German soldiers had arrived in Georgia. In a sense, the alignment with Germany was a huge strategic mistake. Nevertheless it was concluded at a time when the central powers seemed poised for victory; Georgians were unable to predict the imminent withdrawal of Bulgaria and the Ottomans from the war, followed by Germany itself bidding for armistice before the end of the year, leaving Georgia to its fate. 11 Within Georgia, the Bolsheviks were already carrying out subversive activities. This included stirring up disaffected peasants of the Zugdidi region but more importantly in South Ossetia. 12 In Abkhazia, a Soviet commune survived for 40 days in 1918 before it was annexed by the Georgian Mensheviks. 13

The professed aim of the Georgian Mensheviks was to create a state similar to Western democracies of the time. Although a sincere attempt was made, the circumstances of the time were hardly the best to achieve such a goal. As Stephen Jones notes, the conditions were hardly propitious for democratic development. Georgians were at war with the Turks, the Russian Volunteer Army, and the Armenians. They were subject to an economic blockade by the allied powers, faced problems of internal Bolshevik subversion, and after rapidly emptying the government treasury, experienced economic chaos and hyper-inflation. Nonetheless, the Georgian socialists established a democratic legislature, a quasi-independent judiciary, and tolerated competing non-socialist interest groups and organizations. 14

The Menshevik government, initially tolerant towards minorities, turned increasingly to Georgian nationalism in its quest to keep the state alive. Conflicts with the minorities was also a factor in the worsening of relations and the increasing attempts at Georgianization. The result was increased tensions and conflicts with Georgia’s minorities, which then, as now, constituted a little less than one third of the country’s population. As Jones has rightly noted, the events of the time have come to play a crucial role in reinforcing stereotypes on all sides today. He goes on to note that ‘the experience of Georgian rule reinforced the minorities’ alienation from the new Georgian state and led Georgians to view the minorities as a ‘potential “fifth column.”’ 15 In Abkhaz historian Gueorgui Otyrba’s opinion, ‘[the Mensheviks] ruled Abkhazia with an iron hand until the Bolsheviks established control in 1921,’ whereas Georgian sources tend to state that Abkhazia was given full rights to manage its internal affairs.

Georgia was recognized by Russia in May 1920, with a territory including the former Gubernii of Tbilisi and Kutaisi, but also including the regions of Sukhumi (that is, Abkhazia), Batumi (Ajaria) and Zakatalo (presently a part of Azerbaijan). However the same year the Russian Bolsheviks initiated their campaign in the Transcaucasus, and on 25 February 1921, Tbilisi fell into Bolshevik hands. Almost immediately, on 4 March, the Soviet Socialist Republic of Abkhazia was
proclaimed. Legally this proclamation made Abkhazia a signatory in its own right to the Soviet Union, separately from Georgia. But already in late 1921, Abkhazia entered into a ‘treaty relationship’ with Georgia, apparently under pressure from Lenin. Hence Abkhazia did not form a part of Georgia at the time of the Soviet Union’s formation. The Abkhaz take this fact as a basis for their right to independence from Georgia, and their legal position as a separate entity. According to the Abkhaz, the treaty relationship of 1921 was signed under pressure from Stalin and Orzhonikidze—conveniently two Georgians. The inclusion of Abkhazia as an ASSR under Georgian jurisdiction on in 1931 was accordingly seen as illegal, an act carried out by the ‘Georgian Stalin’ against the Abkhaz. The argument must naturally be taken seriously, and in legal terms lends a certain credence to the Abkhaz claims. Nevertheless, the Abkhaz SSR was not the only such entity that was later reduced to an autonomous position. As Gachechiladze notes, such Soviet republics existed in Crimea, the Don, Terek, Stavropol, and Odessa, as well as the Khorezm and Bukhara Soviet socialist republics, which were all either totally abolished or given lower ranking in the Soviet hierarchy. Naturally, the institution of an Abkhaz SSR would indeed have been an anomaly in the Soviet Union and in Soviet nationality theory, mainly as SSR status was only granted to substantially sized nations with a significant degree of national identity. Whereas Abkhaz could satisfy the second condition, they could hardly satisfy the first. This is not to say that the Soviet criteria were necessarily fair; however, from the perspective of Moscow at the time, would the granting of SSR status to Abkhazia not be prejudicial unless the same status were granted to all the national minorities in the North Caucasus? And although Moscow might very well have wanted to weaken Georgia by such a step, it would have potentially grave consequences for the union itself. Hence it seems to be an exaggeration to define the reduction of Abkhazia’s status as a solely nationalist act on the part of Stalin.

The discussion ultimately highlights the difficulties of using the legal status of territories in early Soviet times as a basis for claims to statehood today. If Abkhazia can claim independence on the basis of the 1921 proclamation of the Abkhaz SSR, so could Crimea, Khorezm and Bukhara. The point is that the Bolsheviks created or eliminated autonomous and ‘independent’ units in a haphazard way which is very difficult to use as a precedent in present-day international law. Meanwhile, it is the only legal basis that exists and it is equally difficult to disregard it: if the entire national delimitation of the Soviet Union is deprived of legal value, the issue of borders, which were as a whole created arbitrarily from Moscow, would not be long in appearing. Thus putting the legal basis of the national delimitation of the Soviet Union in question would not only mean putting the creation of autonomous units in question, but also questioning the very existence of some—and the borders of all—of the independent states of today. The practical consequences of such an approach are impossible to predict. In this sense the border issue in the former Soviet Union bears many similarities to the decolonization process in Africa, and much as the OAU has
Georgia and its Soviet-time autonomous territories
concluded in the African case, the states of Eurasia have no other choice than to accept the ‘colonial’ borders, unfair as they may often be, inherited from the Soviet Union.

In any case, Abkhazia entered the Transcaucasian Federative Republic as an entity associated with Georgia in 1922, as a ‘treaty republic’. This position was lost in 1931 when Abkhazia was reduced to the status of an autonomous republic of Georgia (which was still part of the Transcaucasian Federation), apparently on the orders of Stalin. When the Transcaucasian Federation dissolved in 1936, Abkhazia was a part of the Georgian SSR.

Since the formation of the Soviet Union, the Ossetians have been divided between the Russian Federation and Georgia, in two autonomous units, the North Ossetian ASSR and the South Ossetian AO. The Ossetians in Georgia arrived in their present location as a result of the Mongol invasion in the thirteenth century, becoming the subjects of Georgian feudal lords. With the annexation of Georgia by Russia in 1801, the two component parts of the Ossetian people were united in the same state. Georgia’s separation from Russia in 1918 meant that the South Ossetians were cut off from their compatriots in the north by a fait accompli; much like what happened to the Lezgins in 1992. The Ossetian fears were hardly eliminated when the Georgian leadership pledged to guarantee all political and social rights for the minorities living in Georgia; consequently the Bolsheviks were able to carry out subversive activities in Ossetian lands. As Georgia was Sovietized in 1921 into the Transcaucasian Federative Republic, a South Ossetian Autonomous oblast was created in April 1922, two years before the North Ossetian AO (later ASSR) was created out of the unified mountain (gorskaya) republic of the North Caucasus. From a Georgian perspective, this decision was seen as being taken in order to weaken any Georgian attempts to regain independence; indeed in 1919–20 as well as in the 1980s and 1990s Russia used South Ossetia for these purposes.

The Georgian national revival

During the time of the New Economic Policy (NEP) of Lenin, Georgia, like the entire Transcaucasus, was spared from the civil war and war against Communism. However, Tbilisi was not a Georgian city in terms of population, as the largest nationality was the Armenians; and Georgians also deplored the territorial concessions given to Azerbaijan (the Zakatalo region) and to Russia (the Sochi region). Such elements increased the already existing frustration of many Georgians with having been subordinated once again to Russian rule. On the other hand, Georgia and the Georgians enjoyed some privileges when compared to other peoples of the Union. With the formation of the Transcaucasian Federative Republic, lasting until 1936, Tbilisi became its capital and indeed the administrative, political, and cultural centre of Transcaucasia. Furthermore, Georgians held a disproportionately large number of the positions in the administration of the federative republic. Often, Russians and the minorities in
Georgia see many of the events of the time as privileges enjoyed by Georgia and Georgians, understood by the fact that Stalin, of course, was a Georgian. Mark Kipnis has noted that despite the crushing of the 1924 rebellion in Georgia, and the violent repression of all dissent in the republic, fewer Georgians than other nationalities were enrolled in the Soviet army in the Second World War. However, Georgians reject this view, and argue that Georgia was not privileged at all, rather claiming such statements to be fairytales used by Russians against Georgia. As Georgia lost over 300,000 men in the Second World War, almost a tenth of the population, how can one claim Georgia was privileged?22

Eduard Shevardnadze

In any case, the death of Stalin led to a diminishing of Georgia’s favourable position—and awareness of this marked the unrest which erupted in Tbilisi and other cities in 1956, in conjunction with the news of the denigration of Stalinism at the famous twentieth Congress of the Communist Party.23 The unrest has often been analyzed as a defence of Stalin as an answer to Krushchev’s denunciation of Stalinism,24 however, with the benefit of hindsight it seems more accurate to describe it as a national reaction against what was perceived as the Russian defamation of a Georgian who was still perceived as the greatest hero of the Georgian nation—the deeds of Stalin were, of course, unfamiliar to most people of the union, including Georgia. To many Georgians, Krushchev’s attack on Stalin at the ‘secret speech’ at the twentieth party convention represented just another attempt of Russians to suppress Georgia; and that Stalin’s death would lead to renewed attempts at russification. The blame placed on Beria, another Georgian, was seen as a corroboration of this theory.25 As protest demonstrations emerged a few weeks later, around the third anniversary of Stalin’s death, the Georgian authorities seemed prepared to make concessions and allow the
demonstrations. However, Soviet troops composed of non-Georgians were deployed against the demonstrators,

Zviad Gamsakhurdia

killing an estimated 500 people.26 Nonetheless, following this bloody intervention, some concessions were made to expressions of Georgian national identity, primarily in the cultural sphere. The revival of Georgian nationalism which was under way related to—and positioned itself against—two distinct but related phenomena: the threat of russification and the minorities in Georgia, seen as pawns at Moscow’s disposal for the weakening of Georgia.

As Georgian nationalism was developing, it left little room open for the development of the minorities in Georgia, or of their participation in Georgian society. For example, Georgians were the nationality in the Soviet Union with the highest share of population in higher education. However the minorities did not fare equally well. Armenians, for instance, comprised almost 10 per cent of the republic’s population in the early 1970s, but had only 3.6 per cent of the student population.27 However, one should note that compared to minority peoples in the North Caucasus, minorities in Georgia fared considerably better. As Suny notes, however, the Georgian control of party and republican institutions did not lead to

[an] egalitarian application of Leninist nationality policy, but in officially sanctioned discrimination against minorities within the republic… National autonomy in Georgia had come to mean, on the one hand, resistance to central Russian authorities, and, on the other, the exercise of local power against the unrepresented local minorities.28
With the advent of Vasili Mzhavanadze to power in Georgia shortly after the deaths of Stalin and Beria, Georgia became increasingly burdened by corruption and shady economic activities. The Georgian economy grew slowly, but private individuals were able to amass fortunes through illegal economic activities in the ‘parallel economy’. Georgia evolved into one of the most corrupt republics in the union, something which was beginning to attract harsh criticism from Moscow in the early 1970s. This paved the way for the ascendancy to power of Eduard Amvrosisdze Shevardnadze, until then minister of internal affairs of Georgia. With help from Moscow, Shevardnadze managed to succeed Mzhavanadze in September 1972. Shevardnadze seemed to have come to power with a mandate from Moscow to fight against corruption, which is exactly what he did, bringing the worst offenders to justice, although it proved impossible to completely eradicate such practices. Moreover, he attacked ‘isolationist’ Georgian nationalism, and urged Georgians to learn Russian, something which they were notorious for not doing. These measures, particularly the latter, did naturally not initially help Shevardnadze’s popularity. His adulation for Brezhnev and comments such as ‘for us Georgians, the sun does not rise in the east but in the north, in Russia’ are still facts that tarnish his legitimacy today.

Already in the 1950s a group called the Gorgosaliani, named after the founder of Tbilisi, existed, which sought to spread accurate information regarding the annexation of 1921 and the repressions of the 1930s. The group included two young men, Merab Kostava and Zviad Gamsakhurdia, the son of Konstantin Gamsakhurdia, one of Georgia’s most renowned literary figures.
Later, in the 1960s, the national movement seems to have organized itself into the form of an illegal group of students in the technical university of Tbilisi. As this group developed, Gamsakhurdia and his associates reacted to the destruction of Georgian architectural monuments and the theft of religious treasures; the latter case evolved into a scandal which found its way up into the highest offices in Tbilisi. In 1974 Gamsakhurdia and his sympathizers formed a human rights protection group, which became a Helsinki Watch group after the signing of the Helsinki accords in 1975. Interestingly, Gamsakhurdia also raised the issue of the plight of the Meskhetian Turks of Georgia and their continued deportation. From early on, Gamsakhurdia was on the side of the ‘irreconcilables’, seeing no compromise to Georgia’s independence, and preaching avoidance of conflict with minorities, as such conflict would hamper the road to independence. However, the emerging Georgian nationalist intelligentsia was heavily anti-Russian, and had a relatively strong religious component. It is important to note that these movements were among the rare instances of dissent in the Soviet Union at the time, and had ties with the Russian dissidents of the time, including Sakharov. However, in January 1977 KGB repression hit most Russian dissident groups, and in April the suppression moved to Georgia, with Gamsakhurdia and Kostava being arrested that month.

Such measures did not succeed in curbing the movement. New figures emerged in support of the two jailed leaders, and several underground (Samizdat) publications were created, among them the Georgian Chronicle. New influential dissidents included Tamar Chkheidze and Avtandil Iminadze, and later Giorgi Chanturia and Irakli Tsereteli. In the midst of the changes in the Soviet constitution in the late 1970s, the Georgian government made public plans to amend the Georgian constitution, in order to remove a clause which defined Georgian as the sole state language, replacing it with a clause giving equal status to Russian and other languages in the republic. This move was highly unpopular, not unexpectedly as suggestions to hold certain courses in institutions of higher education in Russian two years earlier had provoked an outrage. In April 1978, during the discussions on reform of the constitution of the republic, a crowd of an estimated 5,000 people, mainly university students, took to the streets in protest. Shevardnadze’s response was, in retrospect, wise: after having been booed by the crowd, he decided to reject any changes to the disputed clause, hence giving in to popular pressure. In the words of Ronald Suny, a ‘highly unusual concession to an open expression of opposition to state policy, a clear indication of the uneasiness and caution of government policy toward the new nationalism.’

This policy was actually continued, and something quite exceptional evolved: a Soviet republican government shaping its policy according to public opinion polling. Only six months after the April 1978 events, Shevardnadze was promoted to candidate member of the Politburo—hence signalling that Moscow did not oppose the policies of the Georgian leadership. Moreover, the economic success of Georgia under Shevardnadze increased his fame, and he was awarded the title of ‘hero of socialist labour’ in 1981. A setback for the national movement came in
April 1979, when Gamsakhurdia was pardoned after having repented his views, admitting his ‘errors of judgment’ on nationwide television. As Merab Kostava refused to surrender, he remained the untarnished leader of Georgian dissidents until his release in 1987 and his death under mysterious circumstances in a car crash in 1989. Gamsakhurdia on the other hand had to face a tarnished image of himself and public disappointment with his surrender.

The re-emergence of Abkhazian separatism

The constitutional reform of 1978 led to tensions within the minorities as well, in particular with the Abkhaz, who saw this as an opportunity to regain the status Abkhazia had held until 1931, or to be incorporated into the Russian North Caucasus.

During the Stalinist years, both Abkhazia and Georgia suffered from the destruction of their cultural and political elites.38 Abkhazia further suffered from the overwhelming pressure of Georgian migration into the autonomous republic, leading to a Georgianization of Abkhazia. Whereas other national minorities in the Soviet Union were forced to adopt a Cyrillic alphabet, a Georgian alphabet was imposed on Abkhazia; and all native language schools were temporarily closed, as was the case in South Ossetia.39 Hence the combined effect of the deportation of certain Abkhaz from their native lands, the massive influx of Georgians, and the efforts to destroy Abkhaz culture and society had a traumatic effect, despite the fact that the Abkhaz escaped the wholesale deportation of peoples of the Second World War.40

On the other hand, it is useful to compare the situation of the Abkhaz with that of the autonomous region of the North Caucasus. Indeed, in this comparison it appears that the Abkhaz did enjoy a certain degree of autonomy, whereas the North Caucasian peoples were more or less ruled directly from Moscow. This may very well have been the consequence of the hierarchical structure of the union, where Moscow had to go through Tbilisi to rule Abkhazia, in a certain sense, rather than of the policies of the republican Georgian government. Nevertheless, it is hard to disagree with Jiirgen Gerber, who states that:

compared to the nations of the North Caucasus, whose autonomous status within the RSFSR were of a purely formal nature, the Abkhaz had incomparably larger opportunities to keep their language and culture. The Abkhaz, like the Ossetians, could doubtlessly profit from the well-built educational institutions in Georgia.41

In retrospect, the demographic structure of the territory can be seen as the most lasting aspect of Georgian rule. It must be noted that even the numbers are the subject of disagreement. In 1886, the Abkhaz constituted 41 per cent of the population of their present-day territory. Hence it must be noted that Abkhazia has always to a great extent been multiethnic; moreover confusion arises from the
fact that one of the largest groups in the census of ‘Sukhumi region’, today’s Abkhazia, is the ‘Samurzakanians’, their name deriving from the older name of Gali region, Samurzakano. Most of the Samurzakanians must be thought to have been Mingrelians, and a minority Abkhaz. But the figure for 1926 is 27 per cent, despite the fact that the Abkhaz population doubled from 28,000 to 56,000 in this time. By 1959, however, the Abkhaz share plunged to 15 per cent, in absolute numbers increasing only by 10 per cent in 33 years, whereas the population of the territory doubled from 201,000 to 404,000 in the same time span. Since 1959, the Abkhaz have somewhat recovered, their population now growing relatively rapidly, but still constituting only 18 per cent of the population of the republic in 1989, 94,000 out of a total of 525,000.42

The controversies between Abkhaz and Georgians were suppressed during the Soviet era, but without much success. Disturbances took place in 1957 and 1967, but came to the open in 1977 with the constitutional reform under Brezhnev. The Abkhaz used this opportunity to campaign for linguistic rights and even secession from Georgia in view of incorporation in the Russian Federation—by itself a peculiar demand, given the treatment of North Caucasians in Russia. A letter signed by 130 Abkhaz intellectuals was sent to the USSR Supreme Soviet in 1977 protesting against the influx of Georgians, assimilationist policies including Georgianization in Schools, and economic exploitation.43 A commission from Moscow, led by the Party Central Committee Secretary Ivan Kapitonov, arrived to assess the Abkhaz claims, and endorsed some of them, forcing the Georgian government to admit that some of the claims were legitimate.44 Shevardnadze also takes pride in having prevented ethnic bloodshed from erupting at the time. Some concessions were hence made, including the institution of a university in Sukhumi, the Abkhazian capital, and further cultural rights. Nevertheless there

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<td>44.8%</td>
<td>67,494 (33.5%)</td>
<td>158,221 (39.1%)</td>
<td>199,595 (40.9%)</td>
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<td>Russians</td>
<td>971 (1.4%)</td>
<td>(?)</td>
<td>12,558 (6.2%)</td>
<td>86,715 (21.4%)</td>
<td>92,889 (19%)</td>
<td>79,730 (16.4%)</td>
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<td>14,045 (7%)</td>
<td>9,101 (2.2%)</td>
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<td>1,037 (1.5%)</td>
<td>11%</td>
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<td>64,425 (15.9%)</td>
<td>74,860 (15.3%)</td>
<td>73,350 (15.1%)</td>
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was no fundamental change, and Abkhazia’s autonomy, in the view of one Abkhaz analyst, remained largely theoretical. The Abkhaz later termed it a ‘total fiction’. However, the Georgians (Mingrelians) who were the largest population group in Abkhazia, reacted against these concessions, feeling that excessive privilege was given to the Abkhaz, especially as this period was also that of a Moscow-based attack on the Georgian language. In response, certain Georgian forces picked up an argument which challenged the Abkhaz being indigenous to their lands, claiming that in settling there they had displaced Georgians who had lived in the area. It should be noted that despite their minority position, the Abkhaz were after the concessions of 1978 in a position of secure control of the republican administration and the local economy: 67 percent of government ministers and 71 percent of Obkom department heads were Abkhazian. Hence the ease with which the Abkhaz could later use the state apparatus of their ASSR for their secessionist aims.

Nonetheless, the Abkhaz were not satisfied and public unrest erupted in October 1978, with troops being sent in to quell demonstrations and a form of martial law was imposed in Abkhazia for a while. Tensions rose to a head in Tbilisi as well in 1981, as demonstrations against Abkhazian privileges were held. Nevertheless, open conflict was averted in the very authoritarian system that the Soviet Union still was at the time; harder suppression of expressions of nationalism by both Georgians and Abkhazians in the autonomous republic are reputed to have been enforced by the KGB. The Abkhaz saw the demographic situation as a successful result of Georgian aspirations to incorporate Abkhazia into itself, and as a long campaign of violation of Abkhazia’s sovereign rights, aimed ultimately at the
destruction of Abkhaz ethnic identity and assimilation of the Abkhaz into a Kartvelian identity.50 In this context, again, Stalin is seen as representing the interests of his native Georgia, which supposedly made him anti-Abkhaz.

**Perestroika & the road to independence**

Mikhail Gorbachev’s arrival in power also meant a change of power at the republican level in Georgia, as Gorbachev invited Shevardnadze to become the foreign minister of the Soviet Union to replace the ageing Gromyko. As a result, a new party leader was appointed who was successful in preventing the reforms of the centre from rapidly spreading to Georgia. Jumbar Patiashvili, the new head of the republic, was a relatively conservative and insecure leader who refused to initiate a dialogue with the emerging popular movements.51 As Jones and Parsons have noted:

> The effects of Perestroika were at first slow to reach Georgia, dripping through the filter of conservative party opposition until popular opinion, encouraged by awareness of what was happening elsewhere in the Soviet Union, began to put pressure on the leadership for faster change.52

When the popular movement emerged, it did so in a more pronounced way than perhaps anywhere else in the union. The reason for this is perhaps the same as why the Georgian republican leadership was trying to prevent the implementation of an open dialogue with non-party intelligentsia: that the Georgian popular movements and feelings were strongly nationalist in character. A startling example occurred when Shevardnadze, then still Soviet foreign minister, invited Secretary of State James Baker to his apartment in Moscow in May 1989. Baker was reportedly astonished to find Shevardnadze’s wife to be a fervent Georgian nationalist, who declared that ‘Georgia must be free.’ Admittedly, this took place just after the April 1989 army crackdown in Tbilisi when emotions were running high, but still testifies to the strength of the nationalist feeling.53

After the policy of democratization that had been initiated by central authorities in January 1987, the Georgian political atmosphere developed rapidly. By early 1987, the opportunity to set up national and regional organizations openly was being used to embark on a revival of the Georgian culture, language, and national identity. Although the emerging organizations were not openly secessionist, it was quite obvious that they intended to prepare the ground for an independent Georgia whenever the political circumstances would permit it. Nevertheless, ecological issues gathered much attention in the initial period, just as was the case in Armenia in 1988. Ecological issues were sufficiently non-political to be tolerated by the regime, did not pose much of a risk to activists, and hence served as a cover for nationalist forces. In Georgia, the focus of attention was a ‘Caucasian Railway’ project, which attracted heavy opposition because of its environmental consequences, as well as the planned destruction of historical
monuments in its path. In the minds of the demonstrators, the railway also posed a further danger, in that it would create a direct rail link to Russia, hence tying Georgia to Russia even further and possibly leading to immigration of non-Georgians to the republic. This project actually resulted in the first media debate in a true sense in Georgia, and hence the first expression of Glasnost. As Zurab Zhvania, presently the speaker of the Georgian parliament, remarked, it was ‘the question which connected the already ripened desire for broad changes.’ The nationalist movement also profited from the fact that a number of dissidents were released from prison in April 1987, hence providing the movement with experienced leadership. The first organization to be established was the Ilia Chavchavadze Society (Ilis Chavchavadzis Sazogadoeba) in October 1987. However, already by the following year, internal dissent emerged within the society, and one of its leaders, Giorgi Chanturia, left the society when he could not find support for his more uncompromising views. Actually the society was a meeting place for people with differing political views, whose main link was their opposition to the Soviet regime. As Gerber notes, ‘uniting persons from the most different societal spectra under a single organizational roof later proved to be a great handicap for the Ilia Chavchavadze Society.’

In 1988, the atmosphere took a more tensed stature, as two radical groupings diverted from the society. One was the National Democratic Party (NDP) led by Giorgi Chanturia, which had been in clandestine existence since Chanturia’s time in prison in 1981, and connected to the party with the same name that existed during the 1918–21 interlude; and the Society of St. Ilia the Righteous, led by Zviad Gamsakhurdia and Irakli Tsereteli. The two movements formed a loose alliance despite the personal rivalry of the two leaders, which lasted until the aftermath of the April 1989 Soviet military intervention in Tbilisi. Kostava seems to have played the role of a unifying factor (and had been the authority that permitted Gamsakhurdia’s return to politics, despite his ‘recantation’ to achieve a pardon.) These two movements shared the common feature that rather than advocating a cultural programme, they were outright separatists, rejecting the moderate ‘Baltic’ road taken by the Ilia Chavchavadze Society. Chanturia’s movement advocated membership in NATO, and moreover had a strong religious undertone, as he proposed a parliament with a popularly elected first chamber, and the Holy Synod of the Georgian church forming the upper chamber.

During 1988, the Georgian political arena became increasingly chaotic, with polarization between radicals and the Communist party, the radicals being very active among the population, organizing strikes and demonstrations. This led to an open attack on Gamsakhurdia, Kostava, and Chanturia in Pravda. The increased popularity of the radical movements nevertheless became obvious as over 200,000 people demonstrated in Tbilisi in November 1988 against amendments to the USSR’s constitution which would have further curtailed Georgia’s internal sovereignty. During this time, the Georgian Communist party successively lost its legitimacy and authority in Georgian society. Meanwhile, intellectuals were beginning to reassess the ‘official’ history of
Georgia and were increasingly critical towards it, publishing articles criticizing and revising the official standpoint. In particular, the issue of the independent Georgian republic of 1918–21 came under debate.

In response to these developments, the Communist party helped create a semi-official movement called the Rustaveli society, which was moderately nationalist and supportive of the reformist policies emanating from the centre. Although some moderates gravitated towards the Rustaveli society, the political scene was already dominated by increasingly outspoken nationalists. By early 1989, the Party’s hold on power had led it to add a very Soviet ‘touch’ to the elections to the USSR Congress of People’s Deputies held in March. A large number, compared to other republics, of the seats were contested by a sole candidate and the voter turnout was stated as a rather Brezhnevite 97 per cent. As a result, deputies were ‘elected’ without any popular legitimacy whatsoever.

In the meantime, things were beginning to brew in the autonomous regions as well, and inter-ethnic relations gained salience in Georgian politics. Georgians in Abkhazia and South Ossetia had begun to complain about anti-Georgian policies in these enclaves. Moreover, the increasing Azeri and Armenian populations in southeastern and southern Georgia respectively were a target of Georgian discontent. In Abkhazia in particular, Georgians were all the more upset by their lack of influence in policy-making and regional institutions as they actually formed a demographic plurality, just short of a majority in the autonomous republic.

On 17 June, a new ‘Abkhazian Letter’ was signed by 58 Abkhazian ‘Communists’ and addressed as an open letter to the Presidium of the nineteenth conference of the CPSU, outlining the Abkhaz grievances with Georgia. As this petition was left unanswered by Moscow, the ‘Abkhazian Forum’ organized a petition on 18 March 1989 which renewed the claim from the 1970s to be raised to the status of Union Republic. Simultaneously, the Ademon Nykhas, the newly-formed South Ossetian popular front, expressed its support for the Abkhaz secessionist claims, as it was equally worried by the new rhetoric coming from various elements in Tbilisi. The South Ossetians were particularly angered by a law enacted in November 1988 which strengthened the position of the Georgian language throughout the entire territory of Georgia. The Abkhaz petition, and isolated instances of interethnic violence in Abkhazia, were the main reasons for a counter-protest staged by the Georgian radicals in Tbilisi in April 1989.

However the demonstrations in Tbilisi soon changed their orientation, as in so many other instances in the Soviet Union of the time, developing instead into a massive demonstration for Georgian independence. Factories went on strike, and people from all over Georgia poured into the capital. With Shevardnadze and Gorbachev in Great Britain, the Georgian Communist leadership demanded permission from Moscow to use special forces to dissolve the demonstrations. On 9 April, airborne and interior troops broke up the demonstrations, leaving 19 casualties, 16 of whom were women, and dozens of wounded. Many opposition
members were arrested, including Chanturia and Gamsakhurdia. The intervention was intended to intimidate the nationalist movement and to deter popular movements from opposing the republican government to the extent they had done previously. In fact, the intervention only exacerbated the tensions and further destroyed the legitimacy of the Communist government in Tbilisi. Shevardenadze was called to Tbilisi to start an investigation, and soon Patiashvili was removed from office and replaced.

Within some months, the Georgian authorities themselves were forced to adapt to the reigning atmosphere. The new party leader, Givi Gumbaridze, was instrumental in precipitating the very collapse of his regime. Following the path of the Lithuanian Communist party, Gumbaridze allowed nationalist policies to be incorporated into the party programme. By early fall, the Communist party
itself called for national sovereignty, Georgian citizenship, supremacy of Georgian law over union law, and worked for the settlement of Georgians in minority areas as well as the Georgianization of place names.\textsuperscript{68} Despite these very significant concessions to the nationalists, however, the Communist party never regained its legitimacy after April 1989. Certain radical groups also refused to participate in the political sphere created by the Communist party, which they argued would be tantamount to recognizing Georgia’s continued state of colonization. Instead they aimed to create a fait accompli by holding separate elections to a ‘National Congress’ intended to lead the country to independence. Nevertheless all opposition movements did not participate in this, and most importantly, Gamsakhurdia did not. Instead, he concentrated his energy on the elections to the supreme Soviet, which were held in October 1990. These elections were not uncontroversial, primarily as parties active in only one part of the country were prohibited from appearing—a clause intended to disenfranchise the national minorities, preventing them from being represented, and which Gamsakhurdia had forced through the legislature by a rail blockade.\textsuperscript{69} The election was nevertheless held on 28 October 1990, in a chaotic political climate, involving violence and questionable electoral methods. It led to a landslide victory of Gamsakhurdia’s Round Table of National Liberation alliance, the Erovnuli-Ganmatavisuplebeli Modzraobis Mrgvali Magida.

Gamsakhurdia had based his campaign on attracting popular attention with his support for the rights of Georgians in Abkhazia and South Ossetia. In the 250-strong parliament, Gamsakhurdia’s hastily formed coalition won a majority of 155 seats, while the Communists barely managed to climb over sixty. As is the case when party lists and candidate— are nominated over a short period of time, many opportunists and lightweight politicians were able to gain seats in the parliament. Thus the Georgian parliament was elected in conditions that allowed populists and not intellectuals to rise to power; the Georgian intelligentsia was almost entirely excluded. This fact naturally made Gamsakhurdia’s quest for absolute power easier, as many deputies were not fully aware of what powers they were actually giving him.\textsuperscript{70}

Moreover, Georgia at this time, like the rest of the Caucasus, was being saturated with weapons. Strong paramilitary formations emerged, such as the Mkhedrioni (‘Horsemen’) led by Jaba loseliani,\textsuperscript{71} which emerged in the late 1980s as the most formidable of the militia in Georgia. As Georgia did not have an army of its own, and was confronted with armed conflicts, Gamsakhurdia tolerated the paramilitaries as they were better soldiers than his own National Guard. However, he always knew that these forces, which as other militias in the region were bound more by personal loyalties than by allegiance to the state or government,\textsuperscript{72} were a potential and very real threat to his position, and eventually caused his downfall.

The Gamsakhurdia government’s stance toward minorities was dichotomized into a certain respect for the indigenous rights of the Abkhaz and to a lesser degree the Ajars, but total disregard for the Ossetians, perceived as alien to
Georgia. Gamsakhurdia hence quite openly advocated the cleansing of Ossetians from Georgia, aiming at driving them back to their ‘homeland’ in the north.

**The escalation of tension with the minorities**

Abkhazia: the beginnings, 1989–91

Gamsakhurdia had focused his campaign on the rights of the Georgians in Abkhazia and South Ossetia, and hence his election meant a deterioration of relations between the Georgian government and the minorities. Virtually all minorities, including the Armenians, Azeris and Muslim Georgians of Ajaria protested the new policies of homogenization, Georgianization and Christianization of Georgia announced by the Gamsakhurdia regime, which turned increasingly chauvinistic with time. As a result, the Ossetians and Abkhaz, who had a quasi-state structure in their autonomous region around which they could mobilize the people, viewed that remaining within an independent Georgia as unthinkable, since it would mean the destruction of their autonomy and possibly also of their cultural rights. Other minorities, possessing no official structures, had considerably larger difficulties to defend their rights than the smaller, autonomous minorities with the actual state structures they possessed.

The main problem, however, was the total lack of will to compromise on both sides. The Georgians viewed the Abkhaz and Ossetians merely as a tool and instrument of Russia in its attempts to destabilize Georgia and prevent its accedence to independence. Despite the fact that the claims of the minorities to linguistic and cultural rights were very similar to those of Georgia itself, the Georgian nationalists never recognized the demands or claims from the Abkhaz or Ossetians as legitimate: they were seen as artificially created by Russia, with no domestic roots of their own. This extreme interpretation of the minorities’ demands was not improved by the fact that these demands often centred on the role of the Russian language. As the Russian language had gained an incomparably stronger status in the autonomous areas when compared to Georgia proper—a considerable number of Ossetians and Abkhaz actually declared Russian to be their first language—thus further strengthening Georgian suspicions of Russia’s hand behind every minority act. Furthermore, Georgians saw the minorities as either ‘immigrants’ or ‘guests on Georgian territory’. As such it follows that they have no rights except for those granted to them by the Georgian ‘hosts’. The term ‘immigrants’ was used for the Ossetians and Russians in particular; however the Abkhaz were not always recognized as the autochthonous ethnic group they actually are. In some of the Georgian nationalist literature, which seems to have been influenced by a Stalinesque writing of history, the Abkhaz are described as an originally Georgian tribe, which over time has become a mixture of Georgians and Circassians. As such they are not seen as an autochthonous ethnic group.73 In brief, the Georgian nationalists never understood
that the centrifugal forces they represented at the union level through their attempts to break out from the Soviet Union spurred the creation of other centrifugal forces on a republican level, in the shape of the autonomous minorities. In a sense, the problem in Georgia is a problem of double minority status, sometimes even extending to triple minority status. For example, Georgians were a minority in the Soviet Union; Ossetians were a minority in Georgia; and Georgians in turn were a minority in South Ossetia. This complicated situation led to a security dilemma on the part of the minorities. If the status quo reigning in the Soviet Union was to be displaced, Ossetians (to take this fairly clear-cut example) would face the question of their status in the new Georgian state. As they saw this prospect as less than encouraging, they opted for an attempt to remain within the Soviet Union. This would in turn amount to secession from Georgia, which prompted a security dilemma on the part of the Georgians of South Ossetia, who were worried about their position in a South Ossetia which was no longer a part of Georgia.

The existing tensions between Abkhazia and Georgia were exacerbated by Perestroika, as both Georgians and Abkhazians, in the words of one analyst, found opportunities to ‘revindicate their respective claims to independence.’ In June 1988, 60 leading Abkhazians signed a letter to the Soviet leadership outlining their grievances with Georgia. In March 1989, a petition was organized by the same forum, demanding the reinstitution of the Abkhaz Republic as a union republic of the Soviet Union, which would amount to secession from Georgia. The proposal received support from large parts of the non-Abkhaz population of Abkhazia as well. Nevertheless, ethnic unrest spread in Abkhazia, with clashes in the Summer of 1989 leading to over a dozen dead and several hundred wounded.

In August 1990, Abkhazia’s supreme Soviet followed the predicament of the petition two years earlier, actually taking the matter into its own hands. The supreme Soviet proclaimed Abkhazia a full union republic, hence seceding from Georgia. However, Abkhazia left the door open to restructure its relations with Georgia on a federative basis, as had been the case until 1931.

The main catalyst in the conflict was the March 1991 All-Union referendum on the Union Treaty proposed by Gorbachev. The Georgian leadership prohibited the country’s population from taking part in this referendum; nevertheless the Abkhaz and South Ossetians, with a positive attitude towards the preservation of the Soviet Union, organized the referendum and voted overwhelmingly in favour of it. This move seems to have been less conditioned by a positive desire to be tied to Russia than to a belief that within the federative Russian state, minorities stood a better chance than within an increasingly chauvinist Georgia. The Georgian government declared these referenda null and void, and proceeded to declare Georgia’s independence in April 1991. In January, Georgia had been declared an unitary state with no internal boundaries, hence implicitly abolishing the autonomous status of all three autonomous entities of the country. The Abkhaz, in this context, ruled out the possibility of remaining
within an independent Georgian state, and open conflict was a fact. War had already come to South Ossetia in January, which for some time attracted most of the Georgian leadership’s attention. Abkhazia was, for the time being, spared large-scale ethnic unrest. Nevertheless, in the words of Paul Henze, ‘amateurish military adventurism on both sides exacerbated the situation to the point where mitigation became impossible.’

The escalation to war in South Ossetia

South Ossetia, as opposed to Abkhazia, is by Soviet standards a territory with substantial titular population. The South Ossetians formed just over two thirds of their AO’s population in 1989, roughly 65,000 out of a population of 98,000. However, only 40 per cent of the Ossetians in Georgia lived within the South Ossetian AO; there was almost 100,000 Ossetians scattered in other regions of Georgia. Consequently, the potential for fighting in South Ossetia was similar to that of Abkhazia: a comparatively small minority which, however, had ethnic brethren in the North Caucasus. The disturbances which came to a point in 1989 developed within a relatively short period of time. In November 1988, a law strengthening the position of the Georgian language in the entire territory of Georgia was introduced. This can be seen as the initial stage in a ‘war of laws’ which began in its earnest in the fall of 1989. In the spring of 1989, the leader of the Ossetian popular front, the Ademon Nykhas, addressed an open letter to the Abkhaz people, supporting their secessionist claims. Isolated instances of violence begun to erupt in Soudi Ossetia, and guerrilla attacks by both Ossetian and Georgian armed bands were reported in July, although the reliability of these reports are questionable. Many of them may have been spread by radical elements in order to fuel tensions. Nevertheless polarization was not total at this point; the Ademon Nykhas and the Ilia Chavchavadze Society made a joint statement calling on Ossetians and Georgians not to succumb to extremism.

In August, measures were taken to make Georgian the sole official language for use in public life. Such a provision would have affected South Ossetia—where only 14 per cent of Ossetians knew Georgian—to a higher degree than Ajaria and Abkhazia, given South Ossetia’s lower status in the hierarchy of autonomy. In early September, Ossetian authorities proposed giving equal status to Russian, Ossetian and Georgian in the oblast; by the end of the month the oblast soviet decided to institute Ossetian as the state language of the region. This clearly marks the fact that September was the month in which the conflict escalated. In particular, it was in September that the movement for unification with North Ossetia gained strength. The Ademon Nykhas sent a petition to Moscow asking for the unification of North and South Ossetia. Excerpts of the appeal are quoted as follows:

It seems to us politically and economically absurd that within the framework of a democratic state the small Ossetian people should
be divided into two administrative units; and we demand that the question of the unification of North and South Ossetia be examined at the CPSU Central Committee Plenum on nationality questions.82

By late September, tensions had mounted to such a level that additional MVD troops were brought in to secure order. Inter-ethnic clashes began to erupt despite attempts to calm the situation, and on 10 November the oblast soviet demanded that South Ossetia be upgraded to an autonomous republic. Not a week later, Georgia declared its right to veto all-Union laws, and affirming Georgia’s right to secede from the union. This clearly exacerbated the tensions in South Ossetia. During the autumn of 1989, inter-ethnic clashes left several dead, mainly Georgians, in the region.83 What can be called the first stage of the conflict lasted from November 1989 to January 1990, and was prompted by the ‘March on Tskhinvali’ organized by Gamsakhurdia and Gumbaridze on 23 November, under the pretext of defending the Georgian majority population of the city.84 The march was joined by between 12,000 and 15,000 people, but were met by an Ossetian mob while trying to enter Tskhinvali from the South. An armed clash was prevented only by armoured forces of the Soviet ministry of interior, which had been called in at the request of the South Ossetian Oblast Soviet, and which prevented the Georgian mob from entering the city. In the following two days, instances of inter-ethnic rioting led to the death of six people, and the injury of an additional 140.85 Gamsakhurdia then pledged to drive out the entire Ossetian population of the region, and the first clashes erupted in villages on the outskirts of Tskhinvali.86 Clashes continued until January 1990, when intra-Georgian feuding seems to have been the main reason for the calming of tensions.

In the first half of 1990, the situation remained tense, although a certain stability seems to have reigned. In April 1990, the Supreme Soviet of the USSR enacted a law which generally enhanced the position of autonomous regions and republics vis-à-vis the central government. This law had the effect of increasing the polarization between the nationalist leadership of Georgia against the nationalities on Georgian soil, as it entailed the increased identification, in Georgian eyes, of the interests of the minorities with the interests of Moscow. In August, the Georgian law banning regional parties from the upcoming elections was enacted, and was instrumental in disrupting the delicate stability which had been building. The South Ossetian Supreme Soviet countered this move in mid-September by unilaterally upgrading its status, defining South Ossetia as an ‘Independent Soviet Democratic Republic’. The Georgian parliament immediately revoked the decision, but the approaching Georgian elections distracted the Georgian leadership from dealing with South Ossetia immediately. The elections were boycotted by South Ossetia as well as Abkhazia. When elections to the Supreme Soviet of the ‘new’ South Ossetian republic were held in early December 1990, Gamsakhurdia turned his back on the declaration he had made that Abkhazia and South Ossetia would retain their autonomy—however
he had shown intentions of revoking Ajaria’s autonomy from the start, as will be seen below. Thus two days after the South Ossetian elections, the Georgian Supreme Soviet abolished the South Ossetian Autonomous Oblast on 11 December, instituting a state of emergency the next day in what was now called the ‘Tskhinvali and Java regions’. Simultaneously Georgia initiated a blockade on South Ossetia, which would last until July 1992, when USSR MVD troops were sent to secure order. The response from Moscow came in early January, with Gorbachev annulling both the South Ossetian and Georgian decisions to alter the oblast’s status. However, Moscow had obviously lost its ability to put action behind its words, as it did nothing even when Georgia refused to comply, considering Moscow’s decision a gross interference in internal Georgian affairs.

In early 1991, the Soviet military forces, present in South Ossetia despite Georgian protests, contributed to keeping the conflict down. This despite the fact that Tbrez Kulumbegov, chairman of South Ossetia’s Supreme Soviet, was arrested during talks with Georgian authorities. As in the case of Abkhazia, the March all-union referendum took place in South Ossetia, and led to an equally resounding ‘aye’ as in Abkhazia—per cent of the vote was in favour of the Soviet Union’s continued existence—predictably, as those opposed to it obeyed the Government’s boycott of the vote. Similarly, Ossetia refused to take part in the Georgian referendum on independence, as South Ossetia obviously no longer considered itself a part of Georgia. These developments contributed to the escalation of tensions. Ossetians complained of being evicted from villages around Tskhinvali; Georgians were complaining of similar practices by Ossetians. According to Alexei Zverev, the fighting on the Georgian side was done mainly by members of the Merab Kostava Society, allied to Gamsakhurdia, most of whose membership consisted of Georgian residents of South Ossetia. They were opposed by Ossetian self-defence forces which had rapidly grouped.

In any case, Tskhinvali’s Georgian population gradually began leaving South Ossetia, leading to accusations of ethnic cleansing. However, the refugee flow was not limited to Georgians. As low-intensity conflict plagued the enclave, the outflow of Georgians was accompanied by a flux of Ossetians to North Ossetia, variously estimated at between 30,000 and 100,000 people. These mainly included those Ossetians that lived in Georgia proper. By mid-1991, the Georgians were bombarding the South Ossetian capital with artillery, in a way intended to force the population to flee. In November, a number of hostages were taken, and Tskhinvali was surrounded by Georgian troops, which seemed poised to ‘resolve’ the question once and for all. The South Ossetian leadership declared full mobilization, and a full-scale clash was prevented, as in many other instances in Georgia, by internal dissent in Tbilisi in the end of December. The consequences for South Ossetia had this not happened can only be guessed, but it is clear that had it not been for the internal Georgian problems, the conflict in South Ossetia would not have been recalled as the ‘mildest’ of the three conflicts in the Transcaucasus.
The fall of Gamsakhurdia & the loss of South Ossetia

Gamsakhurdia’s position had become increasingly threatened as his presidency developed. This was to a great deal caused by his own erratic behaviour, his failure to manage the economic transition, and most of all his autocratic tendencies. In the words of Stephen Jones:

Gamsakhurdia’s other characteristics were a sense of paranoia, a conspiratorial frame of mind, virulent anti-Communism, and a tendency to self-glorification… Gamsakhurdia viewed himself as the last in a long line of Georgian national heroes, all of whom, in his words, have embodied sacrifices on the altar of the fatherland. The struggle for Gamsakhurdia was between ‘good and evil’… Comparing himself to de Gaulle, Gamsakhurdia argued that a strong presidency corresponded to the ‘historical laws and characteristics’ of the Georgian people.92

Gamsakhurdia’s autocracy was then related to a perception of a need for strong governance for the fulfilment of independence. Ghia Nodia has put the contention in the Georgian context in the following way:

The rise of independence as a viable political project also put into question its putative harmony with democracy. Two opposing attitudes began to develop. One viewed democracy as an ultimate goal, but ranked it second behind independence. According to this way of thinking, a nation had to lay a solid basis for its independence before it could build democracy. Until Georgia secured its territorial integrity and established a free enterprise system, it might be wise temporarily to prefer strong autocratic rule. Another view held that while Georgia could not be democratic without being independent, this did not imply that democracy was less important than independence. Democracy was not a kind of luxury to be achieved in the distant future: the way to democracy should be democratic too.93

Gamsakhurdia decimated democratic governance by a number of actions. For example, he changed local government from being locally elected to centrally appointed prefectures; his ban on the Communist party after the failed coup in Moscow of August 1991; or the break-up of an opposition demonstration by police the following month.94 In retrospect, however, it is hard to disagree with observers like Nodia who feel that Gamsakhurdia’s practical ‘authoritarianism’ was limited: ‘it was his style more than his actions which gave him the image of a dictator.’95 His main drawback was his equation of any opposition with KGB agents; Gamsakhurdia’s evident identification of Georgia with himself led to an interpretation of most everyone who disagreed with him as a traitor to the country. This in turn led to most of Gamsakhurdia’s erstwhile allies turning against him and joining the opposition, which, it must be noted, was no
more courteous in its attitudes and discourse than the president himself. In late 1991, the opposition had radicalized to a degree where civil war emerged, between armed formations led by Ioseliani and Kitovani and the government. Gamsakhurdia was forced to flee the capital in January, eventually being granted political asylum in Johar Dudayev’s Chechnya. This time of turmoil was used by the Ossetian leadership to organize a referendum on 19 January, in which over 90 per cent of the voters expressed their wish to join Russia. This referendum received a mixed reaction in Russia, with some factions seeing it as a popular choice worthy of being supported—particularly as it suited the interests of the ‘war party’ in Moscow—and others seeing it as a complicating factor.96

The new Georgian regime, led by Shevardnadze after March 1992, initially seemed to adopt a more conciliatory stance vis-à-vis South Ossetia. In any case, Shevardnadze’s arrival in power, as in the case of Abkhazia, was thought to be instrumental in calming tensions. Whatever Shevardnadze’s actual intentions were, he was never able to fulfill them. The new Georgian government showed signs of a conciliatory policy, with Shevardnadze visiting Vladikavkaz as well as Tskhinvali. There was also a decrease of hostilities in the early months of 1992, while the ‘State Council’ led by shady figures including Ioseliani, Kitovani, and Tengiz Sigua, was establishing itself in power. A temporary ceasefire agreement was signed in May; however the calming of tensions seems to have been equally due to the Georgian forces loyal to the state council being busy with the civil war against the Zviadists (followers of Gamsakhurdia) who had staged an uprising in Mingrelia and parts of Abkhazia. In any case Shevardnadze soon proved unable to control the diffuse paramilitary forces which formed the Georgian army, loyal only to their respective leaders.97 Hence, fighting reemerged within a few months, with Georgian artillery attacks on Tskhinvali picking up speed starting from late April; and as a busload of Ossetian refugees were massacred later in May, the situation continued to worsen.

At this point, several external factors intervened, which threatened to regionalize the South Ossetian-Georgian confrontation. These were the Russian, North Ossetian, and North Caucasian factors.

Russian hardliners, including the speaker of the Russian parliament, Ruslan Khasbulatov (a Chechen) and vice-president Aleksandr Rutskoi, made harsh statements against the Georgian government, using terminology defining the South Ossetians as Russian citizens, thereby implicitly recognizing South Ossetia’s accession to Russia. While Yeltsin sought negotiated solutions, Russian helicopters attacked Georgian national guard armoured forces, and Russian troops were relocated into North Ossetia from other areas in Russia.98 Khasbulatov reportedly threatened to bomb Tbilisi in a telephone conversation with Shevardnadze, and hence by June 1992 Russia was on the brink of war with Georgia.99 This Russian response was very much dictated by North Ossetia. The North Ossetian government had cut off a pipeline carrying Russian natural gas to Georgia, and was applying strong lobbying efforts in Moscow. In addition, the Confederation of Mountain Peoples of the Caucasus in June brought a battalion of
volunteer fighters to North Ossetia, ready to fight in the South. Although the North Ossetian leadership prevented it from actually travelling to South Ossetia, the gravity of the situation and the possible escalation of this hitherto localized conflict to a Caucasian war posing Georgia against Russia was instrumental in engineering a rapprochement between Shevardnadze and Yeltsin.

On 22 June, the two leaders signed the Sochi agreement in the presence of the leaders of North and South Ossetia, who however did not sign it, the southerners especially being unhappy with its formulations. The ceasefire nevertheless came into effect on 28 June, and a peacekeeping force composed of Russians, Georgians, and Ossetians was set up. On 14 July the first peacekeepers were deployed, and the ceasefire has held ever since. Nevertheless, no solution has been found to this conflict, although it would appear that this conflict has been the one of the three Transcaucasian conflicts to come closest to a solution, very much due to its limited scale. In spite of this, its estimated death toll of 700 people is terrifying enough for the participants.

The war in Abkhazia: 1992–93

The Abkhaz leadership for some time attempted to negotiate a solution with Tbilisi. In June 1992, Abkhazia’s President Vladislav Ardzinba sent a draft treaty to the Georgian State Council in which a federative or confederative solution to the problem was suggested, which would have safeguarded Georgia’s territorial integrity. However, this conciliatory step was rejected by the new Georgian leadership. Meanwhile tensions again rose amid unproductive talks. Abkhazia retaliated in July by reinstating its 1925 constitution which defines Abkhazia as independent but ‘united with the Soviet Socialist Republic of Georgia on the basis of a special union treaty.’ Thus, in practice Abkhazia declared its independence, despite warnings from the Georgian population’s representative Tamaz Nadareishvili, who held the post of deputy chairman of the Abkhaz parliament. However Abkhazia did so in a less provocative way than either Nagorno-Karabakh or South Ossetia had done, as it left a door open for staying attached to a restructured Georgia. Nevertheless, Ardzinba declared Abkhazia would independently seek membership in the CIS.

All this occurred at a time when Shevardnadze was highly unpopular in western Georgia. In mid July, he had been greeted with stone-throwers and crowds calling him ‘Judas’ in Senaki, west of Kutaisi. However, Shevardnadze openly opposed a suppression of ‘Zviadists’, as the supporters of Gamsakhurdia came to be called, and even tendered his resignation should the state council take such steps. By the end of July, Ardzinba’s rhetoric had heated up, and he claimed Abkhazia was ‘strong enough to fight Georgia’ should this prove necessary — indicating promises of outside support. Meanwhile, the very legality of the Abkhazian declaration of sovereignty was in question. According to Georgian deputies in the Abkhazian parliament, a quorum of two thirds was needed for such a decision, which was not the case as a simple majority had been present.
The Georgian reaction came on 14 August, in the form of military action led by Tengiz Kitovani, then defence minister and leader of a major paramilitary formation turned Georgia’s national guard, and one of the men behind the coup against Gamsakhurdia. Kitovani apparently acted without Shevardnadze’s explicit approval—the latter claiming not to have sanctioned such action. In any case, the Georgian forces advanced through Mingrelia, in the pretext of searching for a government minister kidnapped by Zviadists whom the state council said had been taken to Abkhazia. Consequently, the forces advanced on Sukhumi and shelled the parliament, forcing the Abkhaz leadership to retreat to Gudauta in the northwest of the republic. Sukhumi was taken on 18 August. However at this point the retreating Abkhaz forces found support from the north, as North Caucasian volunteers, mainly Circassians and Chechens, came to their rescue. The volunteers acted on behalf of the Confederation of Mountain Peoples of the Caucasus, of which Abkhazia was a member; Sukhumi had even been the seat of the organization.

By early September, the intervention of Boris Yeltsin had nevertheless led to a tripartite ceasefire agreement also signed by Shevardnadze and Ardzinba which proved to be abortive; Shevardnadze’s fragile position became obvious as Kitovani refused to retreat, and the Abkhaz took this as a pretext to embark on a reconquest of Abkhazia. Whatever the case, the Abkhaz were displeased with the agreement, which stipulated the deployment of Georgian forces in Abkhazia; hence only a pretext was necessary now that the Abkhaz felt strengthened by outside support. In a matter of weeks, the Georgian forces were pushed back, with the assistance of Russian units to the Abkhaz side, in particular air force units bombing Georgian positions.

On 1 October, the joint Abkhaz and North Caucasian forces launched an offensive on the city of Gagra, in northwesternmost Abkhazia, which had been controlled by Georgian forces. This offensive led to the establishment of Abkhaz control over the strategic Abkhaz-Russian border. An interesting fact is that the Abkhaz troops were armed with T-72 tanks, Grad rocket launchers, and other heavy equipment that the Abkhaz had not possessed. This heavy arsenal, which appeared seemingly from nowhere, was the first and primary cause for Georgian suspicion of Russian assistance to the Abkhaz rebels. The fact that over 100,000 landmines were put out during the war is another factor indicating Russian military support for Abkhazia, as there were simply no such amounts of armoury in the region. The Russian factor became increasingly clear as unmarked Sukhoi fighter planes started bombarding Sukhumi, despite the fact that the Abkhaz possessed no air force at all. Abkhaz and Russian sources claim these raids were answers to Georgian bombardment of the (highly important) Russian military laboratory in Eshera, Abkhazia. It is also necessary to note the downing of a Russian helicopter by a surface-to-air missile emanating from Georgian-controlled territory, tragically brought down while evacuating refugees, as a key event which radicalized the Russian military in the conflict. The Russian
pattern of intervention in Abkhazia and other conflicts is viewed in detail in chapter nine.

The Russian support seems to initially not have been sanctioned at the highest echelons of power. For instance, during Yeltsin’s intervention in early September, inviting Shevardnadze and Ardzinba to Moscow, the Russian president made it clear that Russia desired the preservation of the Georgian state, although he criticized Shevardnadze for deploying heavy arms against the Abkhaz. Nevertheless, Russian involvement grew increasingly obvious during the course of war.

During winter, fighting temporarily died out. But by late February, bombing of Georgian-controlled Sukhumi gathered momentum, and Georgian forces responded by shelling the Abkhaz stronghold, Gudauta. As the Georgian forces went on the offensive, they were soon countered by heavily reinforced Abkhaz troops. The Abkhaz in fact rolled back the Georgian offensive and approached Sukhumi by mid-March. As Abkhaz forces incurred heavy losses in their attempts to seize Sukhumi, a ceasefire was agreed in Moscow on 15 May. The ceasefire soon broke down as the Abkhaz continued their attempts to seize Tkvarcheli and Sukhumi. By June, both Tkvarcheli and Sukhumi were under Abkhaz siege, and diplomatic efforts resulted in the evacuation of civilians. The Abkhaz initiated another offensive in early July, in which Shevardnadze was nearly killed by an Abkhaz artillery shell. Military observers calculated that over 1,000 people were killed on the Georgian side alone in the first days of July, as the Abkhaz drive to capture the Ochamchira—Sukhumi road supplying the Georgian forces in Sukhumi intensified. On 6 July, Shevardnadze declared Martial Law in Abkhazia. The Abkhaz forces then succeeded in cutting off the Ochamchira-Sukhumi road, and finally surrounded Sukhumi by 9 July. Shevardnadze escaped death a second time as his headquarters were shelled on the same day, but pledged to stay with what he termed ‘the heroic defenders of the city’. However, a Georgian counter-offensive was successful in preventing the Abkhaz from taking the city.

In the last days of July, a fragile ceasefire was reached through Russian mediation, the so-called ‘Sochi agreement’. The agreement provided for the withdrawal of Georgian troops from Abkhazia, demilitarization of both sides, and the return of a ‘legal government’ to Abkhazia, the composition of which would be determined later. Russia took the role of guarantor of the agreement. As a result, Georgian heavy weaponry was shipped from Sukhumi to the port of Poti, further south on the Black Sea coast. The Abkhaz weapons, on the other hand, were stored near the front and were returned to the Abkhaz by Russian ‘safekeepers’ when hostilities restarted. To make matters worse for the Georgians, the ceasefire led to widespread disappointment among large parts of the population. In Mingrelia, this led to an upsurge of support for the Zviadists, and Gamsakhurdia reappeared on the political scene to ‘reclaim’ his position as head of state. A third of the Georgian troops fighting in Abkhazia went over to the Zviadists, who also took control of the weapons that arrived at the port of Poti from Sukhumi. The
Zviadists explicitly tried to prevent the withdrawal of Georgian forces from Abkhazia, and captured several towns in northwestern Georgia, including Senaki. As the Zviadist military challenge to Shevardnadze’s government became stronger, the temptation to act became irresistible to the Abkhaz; indeed, the Zviadists presented the Abkhaz with a window of opportunity that few belligerents are given. Hence, during a bout of intra-Georgian turmoil, the Abkhaz launched an offensive on 16 September and successively captured Ochamchira. On 25 September, Abkhaz forces surrounded Sukhumi, cut off the Georgian supply routes to the city at the Kodori river 25 kilometres south of the city, and successively tightened the stranglehold. By the following day, the Abkhaz had come within a few kilometres of the residence of Shevardnadze, who had arrived to lead the defence of the city, and was forced to escape by helicopter. Sukhumi was in the hands of the Abkhaz. Yeltsin initially condemned the Abkhaz for breaking the ceasefire; however Grachev’s statements showed a totally different perception of events. Grachev claimed that only the ‘immediate withdrawal’ of all Georgian troops in Abkhazia could bring an end to the conflict. As a result of the capture of Sukhumi, Abkhazia came under the control of the Abkhaz leadership, as Ochamchira and Gali fell only days later. Russia ‘condemned’ Abkhazia and instigated economic sanctions on it, but did not step in to disengage the belligerents. Most Georgians who lived on the territory of Abkhazia were forcibly evicted in a systematic campaign of looting and ethnic cleansing, and UN observers have concluded that all sides were guilty of substantial Human Rights violations.

Georgia’s trouble was, however, not over. The Zviadists now moved to capture the strategic port city of Poti as well as Samtredia near Kutaisi, and blocked food supplies to Tbilisi. Fighting advanced towards the second city of Georgia, the Zviadists being only 20 kilometres away on 20 October. Russia made it blatantly clear that Georgia’s problems would continue until, and unless, the country entered the CIS and accepted Russian troops on its territory. The Zviadists now threatened Kutaisi and appeared to plan an attack on Tbilisi itself. As Shevardnadze was forced to accept Russia’s de facto ultimatum (on 8 and 9 October respectively) with the prospect of Tbilisi starving and the complete disintegration of Georgia nearing, Russia offered its assistance in a ‘neutral military operation’. This military assistance led to military advances in Mingrelia during October and November. Samtredia was taken back on 23 October, Senaki on 1 November, Poti on 3 November and Zugdidi three days later. Zviad Gamsakhurdia fled to Abkhazia, but died in mysterious circumstances in a remote village in western Georgia in the very last days of 1993. Most analysts believe he committed suicide, although the truth may never be known.

Fighting in Abkhazia waned by the end of September, resulting in Abkhaz control over almost all of the Abkhaz ASSR’s territory. The only exception was the Kodori Gorge to the east of Abkhazia as well as isolated areas in the Gali region. In fact over 70,000 Georgians left Abkhazia along the Kalasuri river through the Kodori gorge, into Svaneti and greater Georgia. Nevertheless,
Georgian forces retained control over parts of the area until March 1994, when the Abkhaz initiated a well-planned operation forcing the Georgian forces to escape through the gorge. The border area is populated by Svans, who captured many of the weapons the retreating Georgian forces were carrying; they also prevented and still prevent the Abkhaz forces from entering the Kodori valley. In fact, the Svans seem to control the region with little concern for the wishes of Tbilisi.138

A Russian-brokered ceasefire came into effect in late October 1993, which has endured with the exceptions of the above-mentioned fighting in the Kodori gorge; the renewed fighting in May 1998; and continuous terrorist activities on both sides that have accentuated during 1998. It provided for the interposition of a ‘CIS’ peacekeeping force along a natural ceasefire line that would follow the Inguri river.139 Buffer zones were created on both sides with only police units allowed in a 12 kilometre-wide zone—only personal weapons would be allowed there. Beyond this zone, there is also a heavy weapons restricted zone.140 Such rules have, nevertheless, been circumvented by both parties. In April 1994 an interim peace agreement was reached, which ‘established general procedures for movement toward a political settlement.’141

The war led to perhaps 10,000 deaths. Beyond this, the hardest toll was borne by the Georgians, who were systematically cleansed from mainly the Gali region in Abkhazia. This group of perhaps 200,000 people were subjected to a form of ethnic cleansing best described by the words of a UN official visiting Gali in early 1994, calling the area ‘an empty desert’.142 The presence of these refugees—or internally displaced persons, officially—can be strongly felt very much by any visitor to Tbilisi; most noticeably by the fact that the once-famous hotel Iveria in central Tbilisi is now home to a large group of refugees.

Post-war developments in Abkhazia

The Abkhaz leadership under Ardzinba emerged from the war strengthened. With initial Russian support, Ardzinba installed an autocratic regime. The republic’s infrastructure was heavily destroyed by the war, and the Abkhazian state’s income sources, and in particular sources of hard currency, have been very limited. What helped the Ardzinba regime, nevertheless, was simply Abkhazia’s socio-economic structure. Abkhazia is often described as a heaven on earth, where almost everything can be cultivated without much labour. As a result the regime does not need to import food; Abkhazia is self-sufficient in these terms. This is true also for electricity: several hydroelectric plants exist, and the population enjoys much better supplies of electricity than for example, Tbilisi. These factors have helped the isolated Ardzinba regime to stay in power without much opposition. It has also inhibited the settlement of the conflict as the Abkhaz leadership is not pressed domestically to any considerable extent to find a speedy resolution to the conflict.
Potential disturbances in Georgia

Georgia’s problems with its minorities are not limited to Abkhazia and South Ossetia. The status of Ajaria is one important element in the future of the Georgian state; furthermore the compactly settled Armenian population of the Akhalkalaki and Akhalsikhe region of southwestern Georgia are an additional headache impeding Tbilisi’s full control over its territory. Furthermore, the existence in Mingrelia, bordering Abkhazia, of a vocal political opposition loyal to the late President Gamsakhurdia, is an additional and similar problem. Finally, the issue of the return of the Meskhetian Turks, deported to Uzbekistan during the second world war and evicted from there in 1989, is a looming problem. Georgia’s future is hence also dependent on these problems which Tbilisi cannot effectively deal with today because of the overt separatist challenges and economic problems.

The question of Ajaria

Among the three autonomous regions of Georgia, Ajaria was the most anomalous. The Ajars are in essence Muslim Georgians. They lived in the same portion of territory which was home to the Meskhet or Ahiska Turks, who were deported to Uzbekistan during the Second World War. Ajaria was incorporated into the Ottoman Empire in the fifteenth century, and gradually converted to Islam, mainly over the course of the seventeenth century. After the Russo-Turkish War of 1877–78, the region came under Russian control. From 1918–22 it formed part of Georgia, and subsequently became an autonomous unit. The creation of an Ajarian autonomous unit within Georgia was an anomaly in the Soviet structure; it was the only autonomy granted on a religious and not an ethnic basis, thereby in a sense contradicting Leninist nationality theory. In practice, Ajar autonomy was probably granted in the context of Soviet Russia’s rapprochement with republican Turkey in the 1920s, which, as we have seen, influenced the Soviet leadership’s decisions on the status of Nagorno-Karabakh and Nakhchivan. Turkey, with its long history of rule over Ajaria, naturally was interested in the autonomy of the region on its border just as it was interested in Azerbaijani jurisdiction over Nakhchivan.

The Ajars speak Georgian with many Turkish loanwords, and have a strong sense of common identity with Georgia. The only distinctive factor separating them from other Georgians is their Muslim faith. However, this factor led to their suffering during the attack on Islam in the Soviet Union in the late 1920s, and many of them were deported to Central Asia, and the Ajars were officially classified as Georgians from 1930. Hence the lack of any official statistics for Ajar demography. They were counted as a separate nationality only in 1926, when they numbered slightly over 70,000. Hence they may today be estimated to number 160,000 to 190,000. During the period of Georgianization, particularly during the 1970s, a policy of total assimilation was implemented against the Ajars.
This policy continued into the 1980s, including Christianization efforts which were vigorously resisted. Likewise, the Georgian nationalists under Gamsakhurdia suggested that Ajaria’s autonomy should be lifted, and proposed a referendum on the territory’s status, which was never held.\textsuperscript{47} The question of the strength of the Ajarian identity is difficult to assess. Nevertheless, during the latter Soviet era it was clear that Islamic sentiment in Ajaria was not disappearing, despite the above mentioned attempt to eradicate it. Ajar seem to recognize themselves as Georgians, while emphasizing their Muslim identity which separates them from the majority Kartvelian population. Thus the specific Ajar identity can not be questioned. Some Georgians, on the other hand, argued that the very existence of an Ajarian autonomous republic perpetuates what they term the ‘artificial’ Ajar identity and that in order for the Ajars to be integrated into their ‘original’ Georgian identity, their autonomy should be abolished.\textsuperscript{148}

In 1989, Ajaria joined South Ossetia and Abkhazia in demanding the Soviet government to be distanced from Georgian rule. Ajaria had a distinct interest in keeping its autonomous status. All the more so as the republican leadership naturally seeks to retain its power base. However, Gamsakhurdia’s arrival in power in 1990 drastically altered Ajaria’s prospects: Gamsakhurdia advocated to retain the autonomous status of South Ossetia (initially) and Abkhazia, whereas he proposed the abolition of Ajaria’s separate status.\textsuperscript{149} Nevertheless, Gamsakhurdia to some extent distanced himself from such proposals, in the sense that he argued the initiative should come from the local population; seemingly Gamsakhurdia had believed that the autonomist sentiments in Ajaria were simply engineered by the Ajar leadership in an attempt to retain its power-base, whereas the population itself was not interested in the persistence of an Ajarian autonomy. However, the fact that the Communist party polled over 65 per cent in Ajaria in the elections which brought Gamsakhurdia to power were a clear signal that a majority of the population there thought otherwise.

Controversies relating to the Ajar election law in 1991 (basically regarding the eligibility of non-permanent residents of Ajaria to stand for elections there) led to demonstrations on 22 April of that year for the preservation of Ajar autonomy and against the earlier anti-Islamic practices imposed in the region. Demonstration might have been spurred by inaccurate rumours that Ajaria’s autonomy had been or was being abolished.\textsuperscript{150} Gamsakhurdia, in his typical style, blamed the agents provocateurs introduced by the Kremlin to weaken Georgia. However, the roots of Ajar unrest could be related to the incoherent state approaches to religion that accompanied Perestroika. In fact, restrictions on Christianity were considerably softened all over the Soviet Union, including Georgia and Ajaria, where a substantial population is Christian Georgian. However this was not the case for Islam. Quite the contrary, a campaign intensifying ‘Atheist upbringing’ targeting Islam specifically in Ajaria was embarked upon, making the Ajars feel a distinct discrimination toward their religion. This sense of discrimination no doubt played an important role in the dissatisfaction of the Ajars.\textsuperscript{151} By July 1991, Gamsakhurdia
during a visit to Ajaria emphasized that the local population should have the final say on the issue of Ajarian autonomy.

Since then, Ajaria’s leadership has consistently worked for the preservation of its autonomy and has been able to do so as the Georgian leadership has been—with the risk of euphemism—occupied elsewhere. The manner in which Ajaria has pursued this policy was nevertheless radically different from the other autonomous regions, Abkhazia and South Ossetia. The emerging leader of Ajaria, Aslan Abashidze (who came to power in 1991), has set the republic on a difficult trek towards the peaceful achievement of mainly economic self-determination, in a way reminiscent of Tatarstan and Bashkortostan. Abashidze’s trump cards have been firstly on the extreme political instability of Georgia which led Shevardnadze to accept concessions in order not to get an additional trouble-making minority; and secondly, his success in establishing good relations with both Turkey and Russia. Abashidze encourages the placement of a Russian regiment in his republic, obviously expecting this to contribute to Ajaria’s safety vis-à-vis any possible Georgian aggression, and hence making Ajaria immune to Georgian attempts at power politics. When he visited Abkhazia without consulting the Georgian government, Russian defence minister, Pavel Grachev, also passed by Ajaria for talks with Abashidze, in a clear show of solidarity. As far as Turkey is concerned, Ajaria experiences its economic upswing through cross-border ties with Turkey. The port of Batumi is one of Georgia’s major ports, and even plays an important role in pipeline politics, oil from Azerbaijan being exported via a mixture of pipelines and trains to Batumi for loading onto tankers there. Turkey’s role, nevertheless, goes beyond economy. As an emerging power in the Black Sea region, posing as the leading external force behind the GUAM alliance, Turkey’s influence on Georgia is considerable, especially as Georgia wants to diversify its relations and minimize its dependency on Russia—hence improving its relations with Turkey. Thus Ajaria is lucky in having found support from both regional powers in the western Caucasus, Turkey and Russia. In this light, it seems difficult to imagine a Georgian attempt to curb Ajaria’s autonomy; moreover Turkey certainly has a calming influence on any separatist ambitions in Ajaria. For example, Turkish prime minister, Mesut Yilmaz, visited Ajaria in June 1998, declaring that Turkey ‘recognizes Georgia’s territorial integrity unconditionally’ and ‘regards Georgia’s stability as no less important than Turkey’s own stability.’

Abashidze has furthermore become one of Georgia’s most popular politicians, and his endorsement of Shevardnadze was important for the latter’s re-election in 1995. Abashidze often accompanies Georgian delegations on foreign economic trips, and is viewed as a possible successor to Shevardnadze by certain analysts, despite his close links with Moscow. However, the price for Ajaria’s stability has been a Soviet-style coercive regime, a fact which became obvious in the irregularities and even violence reported in the election in Ajaria in 1995. Still, within the Georgian context, Ajaria is a relative success story. It has escaped the turmoil of post-Soviet Georgia and is virtually free of ethnic tensions, at least on
the surface. It remains to be seen whether the economic upswing of the region will ensure its continuing peace and prosperity. The main problem as of late 1998 is the possibility that Abashidze is tightly tied to Moscow. This has shown itself in two related ways: first, Abashidze is unyielding in his advocacy of Russian troops in Ajaria, whose numbers have increased since 1995. For example, Abashidze in July 1998 declared he would not let Georgian border troops take over control of Ajaria’s border with Turkey.153 Perhaps as disturbing to Tbilisi, a high-level Ajar delegation visited secessionist Abkhazia in March 1998.154

The Javakheti dilemma

Abashidze’s flirtation with separatists in September of the same year extended to the Armenian population of Javakheti (Akhalkalaki and Akhaltsikhe regions) close to Ajaria. Answering to demands for the autonomy of Javakhk, the main Armenian organization in Georgia, Abashidze suggested that the two districts could become a part of the Ajar autonomous republic.155 Georgian analysts were not slow in seeing this development as being orchestrated by Moscow, in an attempt to destabilize Georgia at a moment when the final decision on the oil transportation routes from Azerbaijan was to be taken. Russian military bases in Javakheti are an important lever in this sense, not only militarily and politically but also economically as the bases comprise a large sector of the otherwise undeveloped economy of the region, being one of the main providers of both employment (local Armenians are a large part of the bases’ personnel) and social services, including hospitals.

The Armenians in Georgia are chiefly located in three areas. Javakheti, Tbilisi, and Abkhazia. Indeed, these groups are distinct and have few organizational links to one another. In Abkhazia, Armenians in 1979 were more numerous than the Abkhaz themselves; however since then a gradual decline of Armenian population in Abkhazia has been observed, especially during the war. Nevertheless, the Armenians in Abkhazia were either neutral or supported the Abkhaz in the conflict; an Armenian battalion called the ‘Marshal Bagramian Battalion’ even fought on the side of the Abkhaz in the war. As a result, Armenians have not been forced to flee Abkhazia the way Georgians were. As for the Armenians of Tbilisi, they form an intrinsic part of the population of the city, where they were once the largest ethnic group but now comprise around 12 per cent. Armenian communities have existed in Georgia since the Middle Ages, however a great influx of Armenians from ‘western Armenia’ occurred after 1828 as well as during the First World War.156 Their contacts with Armenia remain, and seem to be intensifying, as communications are unhindered and relatively inexpensive—something which is also true for the Azeris of the Marneuli region south of Tbilisi and their contacts with Azerbaijan.157 In Tbilisi and Abkhazia, Armenian numbers increased until the 1970s but then began to decline, partly due to instances of ethnic tensions with Georgians. However, most were attracted by the growth of the city of Yerevan, where most migrants went; furthermore, some moved to
Russia. In Tbilisi, a large Armenian intelligentsia existed in the nineteenth century, which moved to Yerevan after the formation of the Armenian Democratic republic in 1918, and subsequently Soviet Armenia.

The Armenians of Javakheti were originally from the province of Erzurum in the Ottoman Empire, and were either forced to seek refuge in Russia or chose to do so voluntarily. They were allocated their present territory by Russia in the aftermath of the treaties of Turkmanchai and Adrianople with Persia and the Ottoman Empire respectively. The territory itself was annexed to Russia with the wars that were ended with these treaties. The inhabitants of the region at the time, the Meskhetian Turks, had seen their numbers dwindling as most moved to the Ottoman empire with the Russian conquest; the remaining were deported to Central Asia in 1944. The Armenians in Javakheti enjoyed and still enjoy wide cultural autonomy. Indeed certain Georgian analysts observe that the region is in practice as much ‘Armenia’ as ‘Georgia’. It is distinctively easier to get around using Armenian than Georgian in this region; indeed, foreign visitors claim that at first they have difficulties determining which country they are in. This is particularly the case for the rayons of Akhalkalaki and Ninotsminda, composing ‘core’ Javakheti, where over 90 per cent of the population is Armenian. On the other hand, the region of Meskheti to the west of Javakheti is relatively ethnically mixed.

The first tensions emerged, not surprisingly, before and during Gamsakhurdia’s rule. In 1989, Armenians reacted to the doctrine of ‘hosts and guests’ which the Georgian nationalists developed. Thus they argued for the creation of an Armenian autonomous unit in Javakheti. When Gamsakhurdia appointed a local prefect, local Armenians refused to accept the appointment; until today strong mistrust is voiced against Shevardnadze’s appointed prefect and other officials appointed from Tbilisi. The ethnic Armenian local government leader of Akhalkalaki has reportedly been beaten by a local crowd five times.

Citizens of Javakheti, on the whole, do not seem to feel discriminated against by the Georgian government. Several reports from the region show reasonable inter-ethnic harmony. However, there does seem to exist a fairly strong fear for the future, a sense of insecurity. This was very clear in August 1998, when Georgian army units were to hold joint exercises with Russian units in the region. As the Georgian units advanced, they were met by a group of 25 heavily armed Armenians, reportedly possessing ‘mortars and other artillery’, and subsequently withdrew. The local Armenians had not been informed of the planned exercises, and seem to have been struck by panic and believed that the Georgian army was coming to deport Armenians from their homes. The origin of this rumour is unknown but in itself an interesting question; Georgian parliamentary speaker Zhurab Zhvania blamed unnamed ‘destructive forces’ for the incident.

Armenians from Javakheti have refused to serve in the Georgian army, in very much the same way as the Lezgins in Azerbaijan. On the other hand, they provide up to two thirds of the personnel of the Russian military base in Akhalkalaki. There has even been speculation regarding the creation of an all-
Armenian battalion under the auspices of the Russian army. Indeed, it does not seem too far-fetched to assume that Armenians of Javakheti are trying to organize themselves militarily beyond the less organized paramilitary formations that have existed since the time of the Karabakh war, in which a unit of Javakheti Armenians did fight. The armament of the Javakheti Armenians is a distinct problem, albeit one which does not distinguish the situation from other parts of the Caucasus. It is believed that there are firearms in every home in Javakheti; the very fact that local population had access to such heavy armament speaks for itself. Who, then, is behind these events? In the first place, the nationalist organization Javakhk is orchestrating national sentiments; the organization is believed to have close links with the nationalist Dashnaktsutun. As talks of the re-organization of Georgia as an asymmetric federation (see pp 194–7) have gained salience, Javakhk has claimed the need for a referendum on the autonomy of Javakheti in such an event. The position of Javakhk is at times contradictory; certain statements from the organization seem conciliatory towards Tbilisi whereas others are more militant in their claim for Armenian self-determination. This incoherence seems to lend a certain credence to Georgian reports regarding the dominance of clans in the politics of Javakheti, and disagreement between clans on the future status of the region.

Armenia’s role in the issue is relatively complicated. Despite the fact that Armenia and Georgia fought a short but bloody war over the region during their brief interlude of independence in 1918–20, Armenia seems to have had a calming influence on Javakhk. In its isolation, Armenia is dependent on Georgia for many of its supplies coming from Russia. Indeed, Georgia is Armenia’s only supply route except Iran, given the joint Turkish-Azerbaijani embargo of the country. As a result, Armenia has consistently claimed that Javakheti is an internal Georgian affair, most recently in bilateral meetings after the August 1998 incident. The Armenian government even intervened to calm sentiment some years ago when Javakhk was planning to hold a unilateral referendum on autonomy. This said, both states are well aware of the important influence Yerevan has on Javakheti Armenians on this issue, especially at a time when Georgia can hardly handle yet another separatist movement on its soil.

Reading between the lines, one may sometimes get the impression that Armenia is using the issue to try to distance Georgia from Azerbaijan and Turkey. For example, President Kocharyan’s foreign policy advisor, Ara Sarkisian, was quick to note that Javakheti was Georgia’s internal affair. However, in the next breath he mentioned his belief that two political alliances are being formed in the region, Iran-Armenia on the one side, and Turkey-Azerbaijan, on the other side. But Russia and Georgia can join the alliance Iran-Armenia. Such an axis can become the axis of stability, because neither Iran, nor Russia differ today with their expansion. Hence, while discussing the Javakheti problem, Sarkisian urged Georgia to ally itself with Armenia, whereas at this point in time Georgia was already strongly linked to Turkey and Azerbaijan, and definitely not to Russia, a fact of which Sarkisian must have been well aware. The purpose of the statement
may have been to highlight a link between these issues from Armenia’s point of view. Javakheti is, coincidentally, important for Georgian-Turkish links as well, as both the planned railway connecting Kars with Tbilisi and more importantly the Baku-Ceyhan pipeline are scheduled to pass either through Javakheti of very close to it—two projects that Armenia opposes. As a whole, nevertheless, the mutual vulnerability of Georgia and Armenia to each other seems to be a stabilizing factor: Georgia, of course, knows that Armenia always has this card left to play should it become necessary.

Rather than Armenia, most Georgians believe Russia is behind the attempts to destabilize Javakheti. As mentioned above, the Russian military base in Akhalkalaki is of utmost strategic importance—especially in the light of its proximity to the planned route of the Baku-Ceyhan pipeline, which Russia opposes. Russia’s role in general is treated in detail in a later chapter; however as regards Javakheti, the reliance of the local Armenian population on the Russian military base for its security and for employment and other social services is crucial. As Georgia wishes to gradually remove Russian bases from its territory, the fact that these bases are all (except the base in Tbilisi) located in strategic locations (Ajaria, Abkhazia, and Javakheti) where Tbilisi’s control over its territory is most elusive, does not bode well for the future. Indeed, attempts by Georgia to force the withdrawal of Russian troops from Akhalkalaki is likely to lead to trouble with the local population, which seems to see Russia as a guarantor against any attempts by Georgia to suppress autonomy claims from the Armenians. In any case, a Russian troops withdrawal, were it to follow the pattern established over the last ten years, would doubtless leave large amounts of armament in the hands of Javakheti. As such Tbilisi is in a way held hostage by the Russian military presence, forced to accept its continued existence for fear of the armament of forces hostile to the government—this is as valid in Ajaria, Mingrelia or Abkhazia as in Javakheti.

If one is to doubt the occurrence of coincidences in regional politics, the emergence of disturbances in Javakheti, Mingrelia, and Ajaria specifically in the fall of 1998 can be readily seen as related to the final decision on the main export pipeline of Caspian oil from Azerbaijan, which was expected in October 1998 but has been delayed several times. The US, Turkey, Georgia and Azerbaijan all support the Baku-Ceyhan pipeline for various, mainly political reasons. It seems more than a coincidence that Aslan Abashidze brought up the issue of incorporating Javakheti into the Ajar autonomous republic in September, and that the Zviadist rebellion near Kutaisi took place only ten days before the planned Baku decision. Rather, the ‘hidden Russian hand’, in the words of Thomas Goltz, is seen by many analysts as being behind these events. By destabilizing Georgia, Russia—or certain Russian forces—would hope to ‘convince’ the business interests with the final say over the pipeline issue to avoid a concentration on an ‘unstable’ Georgia for the export of Caspian oil. Whatever the case, Javakheti is a problem that needs to be followed very closely, being one of the main potential conflict areas of the Caucasus today. It might be an
exaggeration to call it ‘the next Nagorno-Karabakh’, as certain analysts, including Paul Goble, have done.\textsuperscript{171} At present, the geopolitical situation is such that the events are to some extent controlled by Georgia and Armenia, neither of whom desires a deterioration of the situation. But the present situation is far from stable; the Georgian leadership must continue to address this question in a constructive way, as has been the case so far. Ultimately, however, Georgia is not in control over the situation; the future of Javakheti depends equally, if not more, on the positions of Russia and Armenia toward the issue.

The Meskhetians or Ahiska

The situation in Javakheti is made even more complicated by the Meskhetian dimension. The Meskhetian, or Ahiska Turks are a people whose ethnic origins are debated. They are either seen as Turkified Georgians, or related to Turks or Azeris. In any case their language is very close to the Turkish spoken in Turkey. The Meskhetian Turks were deported from their homeland in western Georgia, in the ‘Meskheti’ part of today’s Meskhet-Javakheti—between Ajaria and Javakheti—in 1943–44, allegedly as Stalin feared Turkey would enter the Second World War on the German side, and that the Meskhetian Turks would be a fifth column in the Soviet Union’s borderland with Turkey. This was almost certainly a factor, but the deportation must also be seen in the general logic that Russian rulers had been applying since 1864: to remove as far as possible Muslim minority groups in the strategic northern and western Caucasus. In this context, the Meskhetian Turks were classified as Azerbaijani in the Soviet census of 1939.\textsuperscript{172}

The more precise date of the deportation of 90,000 to 150,000 Meskhetian Turks has been estimated as 15 November 1944.\textsuperscript{173} The deportation of the Meskhetian Turks, unlike that of the other deported peoples, was hence not justified by co-operation with Hitler’s armies, as the case had been for Chechens, Ingush, Karachais, Balkars and Volga Germans. During deportation, the fact that the Meskhetian Turks were not charged with any specific crime led to their enjoying a privileged position compared to other deported peoples after settling in Kyrgyzstan, Kazakhstan or Uzbekistan; however their suffering, especially during transport, was considerable and over 15 per cent, up to half of certain groups, of the deportees are reported to have perished in the first years of exile.

When many punished peoples were rehabilitated in 1956–57, the Meskhetian Turks, like the Crimean Tatars among others, were not mentioned. In 1968 a decree stated that they would have the same rights to settlement as any other USSR citizens, without giving them any specific right to return to their former homeland. The Meskhetian Turks have been further victimized in their exile; many Meskhes had settled in the Fergana valley (on Uzbek and Kirgiz territory). In June 1989, anti-Meskhetian riots broke out in this area, with Central Asian youths setting Meskhetian houses alight and chasing away the inhabitants. The reason for these riots seems to have been jealousy at the Meskhetian’s superior living standards and economic well-being in an area heavily struck by
unemployment. Whatever the case, over 90,000 Meskhetian Turks were resettled from Uzbekistan to other parts of the Soviet Union. A misery within the misery was that some of the Meskhets were relocated in and around Nagorno-Karabakh. When the Armenians took control of the area, the Meskhet refugees, being Muslims just like the Azeris, were once again forced to flee.

The humanitarian situation of the Meskhetian Turks is clearly a pressing problem, for example in the Stavropol and Krasnodar regions where many of them are now settled, although their settlement there is made difficult by local authorities. Their children have had to go to schools in a number of different languages which naturally has been very disruptive to their education. The frustration incurred by many of the Meskhetian Turks is exemplified by a statement recorded by Human Rights Watch:

They tell us we’re unwanted… Where can we live, if they won’t even let us onto the lands of our ancestors? We haven’t made outer space habitable yet, so we have to live on this great earth, for which we Turks have also shed our blood.

In the 1960s and 1970s, the Meskhetian Turks were divided on whether to seek permission to return to their ancestral lands or to seek to migrate to Turkey. Interestingly, the dissident group in Georgia headed by Zviad Gamsakhurdia supported the return of the Meskhetian Turks in the 1970s. Indeed a small number of them took up residence in Georgia during this time. A problem, however, has constantly been that the Georgians and Armenians who resettled into the homes of the Meskhetian Turks have vowed to take up arms against any return movements, making such action extremely dangerous unless it happens on a large scale and with government support. As a result, in the post-Soviet era the Meskhetian Turks have sought to lobby the Georgian leadership with Turkish help. The Georgian response has vacillated. Many Georgians have advocated that the Meskhetian Turks should be sent to Turkey, ‘where they belong’. The Turkish authorities have, nevertheless, been reluctant to accept them, probably as they are afraid of experiencing a massive migration of ethnic Turks from different parts of the Balkans, the Middle East and the CIS. Other examples are that Turks in Western Thrace and Bulgaria, as well as Turkish Cypriots, face difficulties in obtaining Turkish citizenship. Rather, Turkey wants these minority groups, perhaps for strategic reasons, to remain in or return to their ancestral lands.

The Georgian government is naturally fearful of the consequences of the repatriation of the Meskhetian Turks, given the near certainty of the eruption of local violence as a consequence, and the further irritation of the Javakheti Armenians. Indeed, repatriation would almost certainly be seen by Armenians as a way of counter-balancing Armenian presence by settling hostile Turks in the area. As a result, Shevardnadze from 1992 argued that the return of the Meskhetian Turks was impossible under the current economic and social conditions of Georgia. In December 1996, nevertheless, he signed a decree planning for the
return of a limited—5000 persons—number of Meskhetian Turks by the year 2000, a plan that has not been implemented. As Liz Fuller notes, ‘Shevardnadze would have been committing political suicide if he had made provision for the deported Meskhetian Turks to return to Georgia before reaching a settlement to the Abkhaz conflict that would create secure conditions for those ethnic Georgians who fled Abkhazia during the 1992–1993 war to return to their homes’.177

Another fact which has prevented the return of the Meskhetian Turks is the (sometimes forced) settlement of Armenians on their former lands. The Armenians of Javakheti are, for obvious reasons, opposed to the return of the Meskhetian Turks. In September 1998, Meskhetian Turks demonstrating in Tbilisi for repatriation were deported to Southern Russia, with the pretext of them being loyal to the Zviadists.178 Given the current relations between Turkey and Georgia, it is reasonable to think that Shevardnadze will adopt an increasingly positive attitude towards the Meskhetian Turks. If Georgian-Turkish relations are moving toward a long-term alliance, then indeed the Meskhetian Turks could be exactly what the Armenians of Javakheti fear: a counterbalance to Armenians and Russian presence in Southwestern Georgia. Much like the Crimean Tatars in Ukraine, the Meskhetian Turks could play the role of a group in clear opposition to separatist forces on the same territory, and therefore regime-friendly. Whether the return of the Meskhetian Turks could therefore be in Georgia’s strategic interest, or merely an additional source of unrest, is a question which is under discussion in Tbilisi these days.

The ‘Zviadists’ in Mingrelia

As we have seen, the Mingrelians, who formed the main support base of the late President Gamsakhurdia, played a key role during the conflict between the Georgian government and Abkhazia in 1993. There are even allegations that the Zviadists were supported by the Abkhaz, for obvious reasons. Whatever the case, it is true that the position of the Zviadists in the conflict over Abkhazia was relatively ambivalent. It is often said that the Mingrelians are the most fervent Georgian nationalists; however their intervention in 1993 was very instrumental in bringing about the near collapse of the Georgian state and thereby the return of Russia’s influence over Georgia that Gamsakhurdia had so dreaded. In the Caucasus, the alliance of extremes are nevertheless not impossible, as Stephane Yerasimos puts it.179 Hence the suggestions of Russian support to Zviadists in recent years, notably in relation to the attempts on Shevardnadze’s life, may in fact not be as illogical as they may at first seem.

On the whole, the case of the Zviadists is not so simple as to be called an ethnic problem. The Mingrelians, who make up most of the Zviadists, can in no way be considered a separatist minority. Theirs is not a conflict over territory but over government—the government of Georgia. As noted earlier, the Mingrelians do have a sense of a distinct identity; nevertheless their Georgian identity is very
clear and strong, and they are often jokingly called the most patriotic Georgians—as exemplified by Gamsakhurdia himself. Thus the Mingrelian question is a problem of a political conflict with a sub-ethnic touch, which only complicates this political conflict. The Zviadist threat to the Georgian state is nonetheless clear and present. Although open conflict had been absent since 1993, the Tbilisi government constantly knew that its control over western Georgia was, at best, elusive. In 1998 the situation worsened considerably with the attempt on Shevardnadze’s life in February, for which a Zviadist group from Zugdidi claimed responsibility. Only weeks later, supporters of the group attacked UNOMIG’s headquarters in Zugdidi and took four UN observers hostage, whom they intended to exchange for the arrested would-be assassins of Shevardnadze.

Then, in October, a military rebellion took place in Senaki, under the leadership of Akaki Eliava, who had been a field commander of the Zviadists in 1993 but had received amnesty. With over 200 troops and four hostages, including Georgia’s national security minister, Eliava marched on Kutaisi, demanding Shevardnadze’s resignation, claiming that Georgia’s territorial integrity would not be re-established as long as Shevardnadze was president.180 On being greeted with artillery fire, the rebels agreed to talks and retreated to Senaki. The rebellion was later crushed and most of the soldiers taking part in it were arrested; Eliava himself fled.181 The mutiny nevertheless poses an interesting question: how could Eliava think he could take Kutaisi, Georgia’s second largest city, with 200 men and 20 tanks?

As former Georgian security chief, Irakli Batiashvili, stated after the rebellion, ‘I have known Akaki Eliava long enough to understand that he wouldn’t have tried to occupy Kutaisi with two hundred soldiers and twenty tanks. He is too prudent for that. Someone obviously promised Eliava help, and that someone has to be found.’182 Allegations have naturally been made that Russia was behind Eliava; however, typically for the region, others have suggested Shevardnadze instigated the rebellion himself to boost his popularity. That might seem somewhat far-fetched, but the allegations reveal the character of politics in the region. Whatever the case, the Zviadists remain a constant irritation to Tbilisi. If nothing else, they are a convenient buffer zone for Abkhazia, effectively preventing, for the time being, any storm operation of the 1995 Croat type. In the words of Dodge Billingsley, western Georgia will remain a ‘security catastrophe’ for some time to come.183

Peacekeeping184

As noted above, peacekeeping forces were installed after the ceasefire agreements in both conflicts, another fact which distinguishes them from Nagorno-Karabakh, where a ceasefire has held for over four years without the interposition of peacekeeping troops.

The cases of peacekeeping in Georgia have led to adaptation problems of Russian and International (UN/OSCE) peacekeepers to one another. This stems
largely from the different conceptions of peacekeeping of the UN system and of Russia. The UN conception of peacekeeping confines itself to interposition and monitoring of a ceasefire, involves very lightly armed or unarmed troops, and requires the consent of both parties to a conflict, the Russian conception is rather more coercive in nature. For example, MacFarlane and his associates cite Russian sources that define peacekeeping operations as either ‘counterinsurgency warfare’ or ‘limited war’. This has led to problems in the relations between the peacekeeping units, which may, nevertheless, also have been constructive in a certain sense. In Abkhazia, however, UNOMIG was prevented access to certain areas by Russian peacekeepers when allegations of Russian partiality toward Abkhazia were to be investigated. The Russian peace-keeping force, furthermore, found it hard to accept that it was UNOMIG’s mission to monitor it. In both cases, the peacekeeping forces suffered in legitimacy by being led by a country which was rightly perceived as having been a party to the conflicts, having actively supported one side during the hostilities. The difficulty of both Georgia and international organizations in co-operating with Russian peacekeeping forces must be seen in this light, one example being that units which actually fought on the side of the Abkhaz, for example the ethnic Armenian Marshall Bagramian battalion, were quickly converted to peacekeeping forces under nominal Russian control. The consequences of such controversial acts—to put it mildly—are not difficult to imagine, be it in reliability or with respect to relations with Georgian civilian population.

In the case of South Ossetia, a tripartite peacekeeping force was established under the auspices of a Joint Control Commission responsible for seeking a political solution to the conflict. The force has been led by Russian forces but contains both Georgian and Ossetian contingents. Interestingly, North Ossetian forces have also taken part in peacekeeping operations, with Georgian acceptance. Clearly, the peacekeeping force was not established under the auspices of any international organization, being the product of a bilateral accord between Georgia and Russia; neither did it have any humanitarian duties, its primary task being to ‘immediately and severely punish’ any violation.

The OSCE mission in Georgia has had as one of its tasks the monitoring of the ceasefire. However, given the comparatively well-functioning ceasefire, the OSCE’s main occupation has been to advance the prospects for a negotiated solution to the conflict. In this endeavour, the OSCE’s task included contacts with political circles and the population, for the purpose of initiating confidence-building measures on the societal level. As such, peacekeeping was inextricably linked with conflict resolution.

In the case of Abkhazia, the situation has been more complicated, for a number of reasons. First of all, the ceasefire in Abkhazia has arguably been the least secure one of the three Transcaucasian conflicts. This has translated through continuous guerrilla activities by especially Georgian paramilitary organizations outside the control of the state, such as the ‘White Legion’ and the ‘Forest Brothers’.
As already noted, the ceasefire in Abkhazia stipulated the creation of a security zone of 12 kilometres as well as a heavy weapons restricted zone stretching further from that line. Furthermore, the CIS peacekeeping force’s tasks included, unlike the case of South Ossetia, humanitarian issues—chiefly the promotion of the safe return of displaced persons, notably in the Gali district. The CIS peacekeeping force has in practice been a Russian-only force, although lately there has been speculations that Ukraine might take part in it, fuelled by Georgian attempts to diminish the strength of the Russian component. It composed of initially 3,000 troops, taken from Russian bases in Abkhazia. These troops were heavily pro-Abkhaz in their orientation, as with the example of the Marshall Bagramian battalion. Other parts of the forces also held grudges against Georgia, partly related to bombardments during the war. However, some of the troops, which had no training in peacekeeping, were gradually replaced by better trained units from elsewhere in the Russian Federation. Meanwhile, the size of the peacekeeping force sank to under half of their original number, partly due to financial constraints. A number of irregularities have been reported regarding the CIS peacekeeping forces: widespread reports of extortion of bribes, looting and theft are among the worst offenses.

Much as was the case for the OSCE in South Ossetia, the UN delegated the task of monitoring of the Abkhazian ceasefire and of the CIS peacekeeping forces to UNOMIG, the UN Observer Mission In Georgia, whose strength grew from an original 40 to presently over 130 persons. UNOMIG also played a substantial role in the resettlement of many Georgians during 1996 and 1997 to the Gali region, in ‘moderating local perspectives on the issue on IDP return’, as well as furthering ‘the local authorities’ understanding of international human rights norms.’187 This said, it is in place to agree with MacFarlane and his co-authors that the CIS peacekeeping force and UNOMIG were less than successful in the larger picture of securing IDP return. The questionable performance of the peacekeepers in protecting returning civilians against reprisals from Abkhaz militias—including the murder of over twenty returnees in March 1995, some reportedly observed by UNOMIG officials—must be considered a failure on the part of the UN. Here the limited mandate of UNOMIG was a cause of frustration for members of the force: UNOMIG falls under Chapter VI of the UN charter, as an observer mission, distinct from a peace enforcement mission under Chapter VII. This limited mandate seriously hampers the effectiveness and legitimacy of UNOMIG in Georgia. The problem of CIS peacekeepers and their loyalties remain, moreover, as exemplified in the May 1998 events when peacekeepers did nothing to stop the enforced exodus of over 30,000 Georgians who had been repatriated.

In a regional perspective, nevertheless, resettlement has occurred, which by itself is a sign of a certain grassroots conciliation—if embryonic and subsequently undone by the May 1998 events—that has been totally absent in the Azerbaijani–Armenian case. peacekeeping in Georgia as a whole can be seen as having a positive and a negative aspect. The positive, of course, is that the peacekeeping
forces have been instrumental in preventing a large-scale return to violence, although the May 1998 events were the largest breach of ceasefire to date in the entire Caucasus save Chechnya since open hostilities ended in the respective conflicts. However, the negative element is that the peacekeeping forces were deployed to freeze a situation whose political desirability was highly questionable. The thought was, perhaps, to achieve a short-term political solution that would alter the situation on the ground. But as that has not happened, in the five and six years that have elapsed respectively since the end of hostilities an abnormal situation has been frozen. Looking east to Nagorno-Karabakh, that might have happened would there not have been any peacekeeping forces; as MacFarlane et al note, this situation has played into the hands of the Ossetian and Abkhaz sides in their quest to prevent a return to Georgian jurisdiction. In a sense, the peacekeeping forces have given an additional degree of security to the Ossetian and Abkhaz sides, which has in turn given the leaderships of these enclaves the necessary room and courage to avoid serious negotiations and compromises.

The search for solutions

In the search for solutions to these two conflicts, an interesting fact is that two separate agencies have specialized on the conflicts. In the case of Abkhazia, the United Nations has been the direct mediator, whereas in South Ossetia, the OSCE has been charged with the resolution of the conflict. Politically, it must be noted that besides the mediating organization, there are at least three actors in the conflict in Abkhazia-Georgia, the Abkhazian government, Russia, and perhaps also the Georgian guerrillas in Abkhazia—and four in the case of South Ossetia: Georgia, Russia, as well as the South Ossetian and North Ossetian leaderships. This multitude of players complicates the solution to the conflicts, much as in the case of Nagorno-Karabakh. Generally speaking, the two conflicts have followed the ‘example’ of Nagorno-Karabakh: a reasonably lasting ceasefire, but entrenched positions regarding a political solution which in turn has led to deadlock.

Abkhazia: from bad to worse?

It is interesting to reiterate the fact that, in 1992, Abkhazia did not technically secede from Georgia in the sense that it reverted to its 1925 constitution, which stipulated that the ‘Soviet Socialist Republic of Abkhazia was united with the Soviet Socialist Republic of Georgia on the basis of a special union treaty’—a definition of relations that seems rather anachronistic today. Nevertheless, it entails that Abkhazia had technically not proclaimed full independence and did not commit de jure secession, although the war led to de facto secession.

The initial negotiations in December 1993 hence led to a ‘memorandum of understanding’, which in retrospect was achieved swiftly given the short time that had elapsed since the end of open hostilities. This agreement was renewed in a more detailed form which stipulated an ‘understanding on certain provisions of a
future agreement concerning a state within the boundaries of the former Georgian SSR…including the establishment of a federal legislative organ and a supreme organ of executive power, acting within the bounds of agreed competence.\textsuperscript{188}

This agreement, then, was naturally very vague and was no more than a blueprint for further negotiations, or in the words of one analyst, not a solution but a statement of intent to work towards one.\textsuperscript{189} Moreover, it was signed under significant pressure on the two parties from Russia and as a result was not anchored well within any of the two parties. The first rounds of talks in 1994 also boded well; the Abkhaz even accepted in principle the return of the refugees, an acceptance which was conditional, as will be discussed below. However, as concerns the political status of Abkhazia, the Abkhaz side was at this point intent on restructuring relations with Georgia on the basis of a union of two sovereign states.

However, the real aim of the Abkhaz was full independence. This became clear in later negotiations, culminating in November 1994, when the Abkhaz declared they would ‘not accept any settlement based on the idea of Abkhazia as an integral part of Georgia’.\textsuperscript{190} On 26 November, Abkhazia declared independence, a decision which almost led to renewed hostilities, both sides mobilizing their forces in the aftermath of the ruling. The Georgian mobilization may be seen in the context of Russia’s headache with Chechnya which emerged on the surface at that time; the Georgians may have thought that Russia was distracted and would not interfere with a Georgian operation.\textsuperscript{191} That however did not happen. Russia’s relations with Abkhazia had already worsened considerably on the political level at this time, however the local Russian peacekeepers were sure to interfere on the side of the Abkhaz. The Kremlin had imposed a blockade on Abkhazia after the breach of the Sochi Agreement of July 1993; this blockade had been largely lifted as a result of Abkhazia’s willingness to compromise—on paper—on the issue of refugee return. Nevertheless relations continued to deteriorate as Yeltsin’s strength compared to his opposition increased; after all the main objective of supporting the Abkhaz had been reached, Russian troops were posted in Georgia and that country was now more or less back in the fold. The Abkhaz, with their uncompromising attitudes, were thus a disturbance to Russia, albeit a potentially useful one should Georgia again distance itself from Moscow.

The event which contributed most to the worsening of Abkhaz-Russian relations was the war in Chechnya. First of all, Abkhazia could not remain pro-Russian in this conflict after the support it had received from the Chechen rebels. Abkhazia retained its neutrality, but was in practice tilted towards the Chechen side; some volunteers from Abkhazia did take part in fighting in Chechnya, although this did not amount to anything near the support they had received from Chechnya in their war with Georgia. Nevertheless, certain elements within the Russian military soon suspected that Abkhazia was harbouring training camps for Chechen rebels. Although this was probably not the case, Georgia’s generally clearly pro-Russian stance in this conflict was helpful in improving Russian attitudes towards Georgia. The Chechens had naturally fought with the
Abkhaz and were therefore not the best friends of Georgia (although the situation had been different under Gamsakhurdia, who maintained very good relations with Dudayev); moreover, the Georgian leadership in principle supported Russia’s territorial integrity, as that would be conducive to restoring its own. This redressing of Russia’s hitherto heavily biased policy in the conflict led to a renewed insecurity on the part of the Abkhaz. Forces in Russia were still supporting Abkhazia politically, militarily, and economically, but Abkhazia could no longer count on comprehensive and total Russian support in the case of renewed warfare. For one, Russia now had an increasingly bitter experience of Chechen separatism, and was therefore less inclined to support secessionist forces abroad, as it is clear that the general tendency of separatism among autonomous minorities in the Transcaucasus was a crucial factor in the northward spill-over to Chechnya of the same trend—a fact which brings an ironic smile to the faces of Georgian and Azerbaijani analysts and officials.

As Abkhazia is concerned, however, the fact remains that no substantial advances in conflict resolution have been made by early 1999. On the societal level, animosities still run high between Abkhaz and Georgians, very much due to the atrocities committed by both sides during the war, which led to mutual accusations of genocide. In this sense, the conflict in Abkhazia shares another similarity with Nagorno-Karabakh: the increasing and deep mutual mistrust between the affected peoples. For example, a recent opinion poll showed 87 per cent of Abkhaz are against early return of Georgian refugees. Economic links are as good as absent, economy being used as a weapon very much as has been the case between Azerbaijan and Armenia. Moreover, in the political sphere, there is deep disagreement on core issues, including the following:

- the recognition of the territorial integrity of Georgia
- the characterization of the future united state as federal or confederal in nature
- the issue of joint or separate military forces.

The parties basically agree on the continuation of relations within the framework of a single state. Moreover, they also agree in principle that the status of Abkhazia should be determined by referendum. However, the problem is again related to refugees. Georgia claims that a referendum before the repatriation of the Georgian refugees would be tantamount to recognition of ethnic cleansing. The Abkhaz, for obvious demographic reasons, want a referendum to be held before the return of the Georgians. As for the issue of refugees’ return, Georgia demands the return of all Georgians that were forced to flee their homes. However, the Abkhaz blame the Georgian population of the Gali region for ‘numerous acts of murder and other atrocities, as well as looting their Abkhazian, Armenian, Russian, and Greek neighbours’ and claim that ‘the local Georgian population, which in the course of a year-long war either witnessed or participated in the brutal outrages of Georgian soldiers against the civilian Abkhazians, Armenians, Russians and Greeks…red to leave Abkhazia fearing acts of revenge… It was not the policy or intentions of the
Abkhazian government to expel from Abkhazia Georgians or any other ethnic group. Naturally Georgians feared for their lives and many may have fled before the actual invasion of Gali; nevertheless the total destruction and looting of the region and the reports of Human Rights observers testify to substantial violations of Humanitarian law. Independent observers, needless to say, would heavily contest this Abkhaz portrayal of events for foreign consumption. As Human Rights abuses are concerned, the general conclusion must be that of the UN fact-finding mission of October 1993, namely that both parties made themselves guilty of substantial and gross violations of humanitarian law.

As this passage makes clear, the perceptions of recent events as well as of history are considerably different on the two sides. In practice, the differences have resulted in very little progress in negotiations. In short, the situation as the displaced persons are concerned in Abkhazia is reminiscent of the one in the Prigorodniy district of North Ossetia, discussed in chapter six. The Abkhaz reserve the right to refuse the return of any persons who ‘were involved in the hostilities’; the well-known fact being that it is tremendously difficult, if not impossible, to determine such involvement. In other words the victor reserves the right to defend ethnic cleansing in order to prevent the reversal of the situation achieved through warfare.

The reason for the insistence on the part of the Abkhaz to refuse repatriation of all displaced Georgians is obvious: the expulsion of Abkhazia’s Georgian population, coupled with the diminishing Russian, Armenian, and Greek populations, left the Abkhaz in a situation of demographic plurality, although the Abkhaz are still far from being a majority. Whereas Abkhaz constituted less than a fifth of the region’s population before the war, it is now believed that they are close to a majority of the region’s population. The return of all or even half of the displaced Georgians would again entail that the Abkhaz would be relegated to second place demographically, something which would clearly impede their ability to influence the decision-making process of the region. Preventing the repatriation of Georgians is therefore, from an Abkhaz perspective, a high priority. In a sense, just like the Karabakh Armenians vow never to become an enclave again, the Abkhaz aim at never becoming a minority in their native land again.

The result of this situation has been that the two sides fundamentally disagree on the positioning in time of the referendum on Abkhazia’s future status that they both have espoused in principle. On the societal level, furthermore, any rapprochement has proved elusive. MacFarlane et al point to the practical non-existence of NGO links between the two communities, or of ‘parallel unofficial dialogue between the two populations’ that, as shall be seen, have emerged in the case of South Ossetia. As they rightly conclude, relations between the two communities remain deeply embittered—an embitterment which can only be expected to increase with time given the continuing low-intensity conflict in the Gali region, the renewed eviction of Georgian resettlers, and the impasse in the negotiations. Having said this, attempts to organize NGO exchanges especially through the London-based International Alert have taken place in recent years.
The UN, which had no role in the ceasefire but has been rather active in the search for political settlement to the conflict, has been the main international mediator in Abkhazia, has failed to achieve a solution to the conflict despite several rounds of shuttle and conference diplomacy. Direct talks were held between the two presidents for the first time since 1994 in 1997, but the Abkhaz especially were unwilling to compromise, rejecting proposals for autonomy and pursuing their aim of a return to an ‘association agreement’ like the one that governed relations until 1931.198 Hence the negotiations failed to bring about any improvement; rather, the parties now seem to have drifted further apart. The latest attempt to solve the conflict took place in April 1998. A draft agreement was elaborated under the auspices of the CIS, which provided for the following (although at the time of writing full details had not yet been publicized): the establishment in the Gali region of a joint Georgian-Abkhaz administration, with Russian, UN, and OSCE representation, the main task of which would be the repatriation of Georgian refugees, which in turn would give way to the lifting of Georgian economic sanctions on Abkhazia. As for the status of Abkhazia, Georgia would be restructured as an asymmetric federation, with Abkhazia as a constituent part. An Abkhaz would be the head of the Federal Senate.199 However, the Abkhaz side almost immediately ruled out this solution, denouncing the proposal as a concerted Russian-Georgian effort to exert pressure on Abkhazia.200 Abkhazia’s foreign minister also stated that Abkhazia was not interested in discussing Abkhazia’s status, which was already defined in the republic’s constitution; only the issue of political relations with Georgia could be discussed. 201 Abkhazia also demanded the withdrawal of CIS peacekeepers and the end of Russian mediation.

Almost immediately after these events, the security situation in Abkhazia, especially in the Gali region, deteriorated sharply. By mid-May, the incidence of Georgian guerrilla operations in Gali, including the killing of a relatively large number of Abkhaz police and militia, had led to escalating tensions between the two governments, with the Abkhazian side claiming the Georgian government was sponsoring the guerrillas or at the very least allowing them to operate freely. 202 In retaliation, the Abkhaz started setting alight to the houses of Georgians who had trickled back to their houses in Gali, totally an estimated 30,000–40,000 people. 203 On 21 May, Georgia put its armed forces on full battle alert, and the situation was on the brink of full-scale war.204 According to Georgian sources, over 30,000 Georgians were forced to flee the Gali region.205 It seems in retrospect as if only the Georgian government’s decision not to send the Georgian army into Abkhazia prevented the return of large-scale war. Still, the events lend credence to the opinion of UN representative Liviu Bota that neither side wants peace. Needless to say, peace prospects were wrecked by these events; attempts during the fall of 1998 to bring about a meeting between Shevardnadze and Ardzinba have been fruitless. In early 1999, Turkey temporarily looked poised to assume a mediating role in the conflict: on 6 January the Abkhaz foreign minister Shamba announced that meetings to ‘restore mutual confidence’ would take place in
Turkey in February, with the participation of certain North Caucasian republics. It remains to be seen whether Turkey can be a more successful mediator than Russia; it has the advantage of being seen as truly objective, unlike Russia, by both parties; however its drawbacks are that it has no particular leverage on the belligerents, and that Russia will certainly try to prevent Turkey from assuming a central role in the conflict’s resolution.

The conflict in Abkhazia remains volatile and a question which very much remains related to Georgian-Russian relations. In case Russia ceases to be an implicit guarantor of Abkhazia’s position, and if Georgia manages to establish a better-trained and equipped army, it is possible that Georgia might return to the military option in order to restore control over the region.

South Ossetia: a solution on the horizon?

In South Ossetia, matters indeed look more promising. Although political negotiations are in a deadlock reminiscent of the Abkhaz situation, improvements on a social level are noteworthy. In the words of Archil Gegeshidze, advisor to President Shevardnadze, there has been a rapprochement between the two peoples even more than between the two governments. Observers have hence reported an increased fatigue and desire for normalization in the relations between the two communities. This has translated into practice as growing contacts between NGOs on both sides, with the active involvement of the OSCE and its ‘unofficial dialogue’. Most promising, there have been reports of spontaneous return of IDPs in both directions, that is of Georgians back to their homes in South Ossetia and of Ossetians to their homes in central Georgia. These movements have reportedly not been impeded by either side. Repatriation has been a consistent aim of both sides—very much due to the fact that both sides harbour comparable sized groups of displaced persons; Shevardnadze and Ludvig Chiribov, South Ossetia’s leader, declared that 1998 would be the year of return of all refugees. However, the picture is not entirely clear, as the Abkhaz position on return evidently influenced South Ossetia’s parliament, which in early 1997 passed a similar resolution, entitling only ‘those ethnic Georgian refugees who recognize South Ossetia’s constitution and were not involved in the 1992 fighting’ to return; South Ossetian authorities forced returning Georgians to sign a document accepting South Ossetia’s constitution.

On the whole, the result is nevertheless that the situation in South Ossetia is considerably more promising than the one in Abkhazia. It seems, then, as if the case of South Ossetia is a case of ‘down-up’ conflict resolution, where social progress acts as a motor for political progress. Shevardnadze has also repeatedly lauded Russian-led peacekeeping efforts in South Ossetia, seeing them as a positive force, unlike the case in Abkhazia. In the political field, matters have been moving relatively slow but considerable progress in rhetoric, at least, has taken place. An important development, although in the realm of semantics, is that the term ‘South Ossetia’ is again gaining acceptance in Georgia. Until a
couple of years ago, many Georgians would correct foreigners using this term and urge them to refer to the region as either ‘Tskhinvali region’ or ‘Inner Kartli’. As Shevardnadze himself noted:

You can see what is happening in South Ossetia—no one should be irritated by this name. The authorities of the region do not hamper the return of people to their homes but create an incentive for both Georgians and Ossetians to return there… The final settlement of the Georgian-Ossetian conflict is not far away.211

In another statement, Shevardnadze has stated that ‘the actions which triggered the exodus of ethnic Ossetians from Georgia in 1990–91 were just as criminal as the expulsion of ethnic Georgians from South Ossetia’. A joint statement with Chibirov issued at the same occasion spoke of ‘growing mutual trust’, ‘positive developments’ and the like.212 The lack of a break-through in negotiations is in part related to a vacillation and weariness to compromise on the Ossetian side. South Ossetia in a sense suffers less economically from the conflict than does either Abkhazia or Nagorno-Karabakh, as economic links exist and no blockades are in operation. There being no immediate incentive to compromise, Ossetian leaders would like to achieve the same status for their region as Abkhazia within a restructured Georgian federation. Consequently, they have claimed that Georgia should become a ‘symmetric’ and not ‘asymmetric’ federation.213 The status issue, or in other words the level of autonomy to be granted to South Ossetia remains one of the main problems of the negotiation process. The problem is accentuated, as hinted at above, by the relativity of the Abkhazian and South Ossetian conflicts to each other: the resolution of one would certainly lead to important consequences for the negotiation process in the other.

A perhaps larger problem which has marred the peace process in South Ossetia has been the issue of South Ossetia’s relations with North Ossetia-Alania. Georgian officials have been very clear on the matter; any solution requires South Ossetia to renounce any aims of unification with North Ossetia.214 North Ossetian officials, interestingly, have echoed this approach, especially after the election of Aleksandr Dzasokhov, a former union-level figure of Soviet times, to the presidency of North Ossetia-Alania in mid 1998. Dzasokhov, whose influence on South Ossetia is considerable according to all assessments, categorically rejected South Ossetian leaders aspirations to unification, instead endorsing the concept of federal states as ‘the ideal framework for endowing the regions of the Caucasus with the maximum self-determination’.215 However, the South Ossetians have been reluctant to renounce unification with their northern brethren as a long-term political goal. Indeed, Ossetian figures have argued for a decade now that it is illogical for the small Ossetian people to split into two different states; and in March 1997 negotiations were almost torpedoed when a South Ossetian official sought recognition of ‘special relations’ between South Ossetia and North Ossetia-Alania as ‘two parts of the same people aspire to reunification’.216
Likewise, Chibirov himself stated in 1996 his confidence that ‘some day’ South Ossetia would unite with the North Ossetia–Alania. As MacFarlane and his associates note, ‘in principle, a settlement of the Ossete question is not difficult to conceive…the Ossete leadership would abandon its effort to secede and accept a form of autonomy within the republic.’ Nevertheless, they continue, ‘the application of (federalism as an constitutional organizing principle) remains ill-defined and ambiguous.’ In this sense, the situation is reminiscent of the one in Nagorno-Karabakh, where the Azerbaijani government has failed to express in practice what it means by ‘high level of autonomy’. In both cases it seems that this lack of clarity is partly due to a lack of knowledge on the government side of these principles—hence involuntary—and partly due to an insecurity to as far one is willing to compromise—hence voluntary.

As South Ossetia is concerned, it was widely believed that Shevardnadze was hoping to bring about a solution before the presidential elections in 2000, in order to boost his status in those elections. Whatever the case, he has to go about the issue with care; too far-reaching a compromise could make him appear as having betrayed the Georgian nation by coalescing with the enemy—an accusation already hurled at him often for his acceptance of Russia’s demands back in 1993. The same is true on the Ossetian side; a faction of the Ademon Nykhas recently termed Chibirov ‘Georgia’s puppet’, accusing him of selling out the present status of Ossetian independence for a return to Soviet-time status which they deem unacceptable. Such feelings illustrate the very difficulty of achieving a compromise: factions within each party will undoubtedly condemn any solution short of their own maximalist aspirations.

The conflict in South Ossetia, then, is clearly moving toward a reconciliation and a negotiated solution. The populations involved are rebuilding lost trust, and have accepted the need to coexist, and moreover, have translated it into practice. The experiences from South Ossetia, especially the activities on the societal level of the OSCE and NGOs hence deserve to be analyzed in further detail, and elements therefrom may be helpful in promoting similar reconciliation in Abkhazia and Nagorno-Karabakh.

Conclusions

The situation in Georgia, while having stabilized substantially both politically and economically since 1993, remains unpredictable and insecure. Whereas progress can be observed on the issue of South Ossetia, a solution is not to be anticipated in the near future as even a full willingness to compromise on both sides would require long and difficult negotiations. However, the situation is stable. The situation in Abkhazia, on the other hand, is the worst of the three Transcaucasian conflicts, as exemplified by the substantial hostilities of May 1998. To add to this situation, the insurgents in Alingrelia are active and unpredictable, and the situation among the Armenians in Javakheti is increasingly unstable. Many foreign observers in Georgia now fear that armed conflict in Javakheti is a real threat, and
may be difficult to avert should forces outside Georgia fuel it. It is a fact that the Georgian leadership does not control most of western Georgia; the independent-minded Abashidze in Ajaria being only one example of this. Georgia faces continuing Russian interference, behind the scenes, of forces in Russia which seek to destabilize the country for a variety of reasons; this problem is something Georgia at present can do very little about except reduce damage when rebellions or assassination attempts occur.

In the creation of an asymmetric federation, which doubtlessly seems to be the right model for the future of the Georgian state, Georgia has a long and rocky road ahead of itself. In such a federation, not only Abkhazia, South Ossetia, and Ajaria need to be consulted; the Armenians of Javakheti are certain to seek a place for themselves in a restructured Georgia; even the Azeris of Southeastern Georgia may want to improve their political status somewhat, particularly if the Armenians do. The creation of an asymmetric federation is thus a bandwagon on which all substantial minorities in the country will seek to find a place for themselves. As a result, the restructuring of Georgia cannot be constrained to a series of bilateral accords between Tbilisi on the one hand and Sukhumi, Tskhinvali and Batumi on the other; in the end determining the final structure of Georgia in a peaceful way, and avoiding foreign destabilizing interference, seems at present to be a daunting task.
Nobody spoke of their hatred towards the Russians, for the feeling that filled the mind of all Chechens was much stronger than hatred. It was no normal hatred that they felt for these Russian dogs, it was such a repugnance, that they did not even want to consider them Human Beings. They were filled with disgust and were unable to understand the meaningless cruelty of these creatures, and felt the need to exterminate them, just like wolves, rats, or poisonous spiders.

—Leo Tolstoy, ‘Hadji Murat’ (1904)

The war in Chechnya between 1994 and 1996 has been by far the most tragically destructive conflict on the territory of the former Soviet Union, surpassing even the Tajik civil war in numbers of people killed, wounded, or made refugees. The war in Chechnya also distinguished itself by the discrepancy between the adversaries: the great power Russia having at its disposal the bulk of the former Soviet army, and the tiny but stubborn Chechen nation. Given this uneven match, many observers indeed agreed with Russian officials that Chechnya would be subdued within days of the Russian military intervention.

Nevertheless, this did not happen; in one of the most singular events of military history, the Chechens actually inflict a humiliating defeat on Russia with their excellent command of the tactics of guerrilla warfare. Consequently the war had grave consequences for Russia’s status as a great power, which are examined in chapter eight. However, the roots of the Chechen conflict and the reasons for its eruption and eventual outcome are in themselves a puzzle. An understanding of the Chechen war necessitates an understanding of these events, but to an even larger degree of the impact on the Chechens and other peoples of the genocidal deportations of the Stalin era.
Prelude: deportation & return

The genocidal deportation of 1944

In November and December 1943, the entire Karachai people was loaded on cattle wagons and transported to Central Asia and Siberia. In February of 1944, the turn came for the Chechen and Ingush, and in March for the Balkars. As John Dunlop notes, ‘deportation had been a staple element of Soviet domestic policy since the advent of forced collectivization.’ Most of the Chechens and Ingush were settled in Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan, although smaller communities ended up in Siberia or Uzbekistan.

The deportations seem to have been planned since the fall of 1943, according to sources that emerged with Perestroïka. The Soviet leadership, in particular Beria, had sent a group to compile information on anti-Soviet activities in Chechen-Ingushetia; the report of this group proves clearly that the main target of the regime had been the Sufi tariqat of the region, which were seen as being the most dangerous threat to the Soviet regime. Practically, the Soviet leadership was successful in preventing the news of the deportation of the Karachais from reaching Chechnya; rumours existed of a plan to deport all the Chechens, but for obvious reasons was not taken seriously at the time. Moreover, the leadership had understood that the only way to deport half a million Chechens and Ingush—much larger groups than the 68,000 Karachais—was deception; history had showed that only blinding speed, trickery, and overwhelming force, in the words of Dunlop, could accomplish such a task. Hence Red Army day, 23 February 1944, was chosen for the occasion; the huge amount of trucks and personnel that executed the task was explained by an effort to repair roads and infrastructure. People were fooled into gathering at certain locations, and loaded up on the 12,000 train carriages that were waiting. Over 190 trains were shipped off to Central Asia and in a week’s time 387,229 Chechens and 91,250 Ingush had been deported.

Needless to say, the deportation was accompanied by cruelties of an unimaginable character. The train carriages on which the deportees were loaded had no sanitary arrangements; people were often fed only once during the week that the transport took; the result was epidemics of typhoid, and people dying of starvation or cold. The most outrageous examples of atrocities was the high mountain areas from where the NKVD found it impossible or too difficult to deport the people, because the Studebaker trucks that were used could not reach the isolated locations or for other reasons. In such areas, for example the Khaibakh area near the Georgian-Chechen border, the people that were too old, sick, or otherwise unable to walk were considered ‘untransportable’ and subsequently burnt alive in a stable. Among the people burnt in this locality were some inhabitants from the small settlement of Yalkhoroi; an interesting detail that surfaced only later is that the grandmother, aunt and two cousins of Chechnya’s first president Johar Dudayev were killed in Khaibakh. The later investigation of
this massacre after Stalin’s death is deemed to have been one of the factors contributing to—or at least speeding up—Krushchev’s rehabilitation of the deported peoples in 1957.4

Among those that were loaded on the cattle-wagons, up to 60 per cent of certain individual groups are believed to have perished from cold or malnutrition, and generally a third of the Karachai-Balkars, and over a quarter of the deported Chechens and Ingush are estimated to have died within five years of the deportations, as it was upon arrival in the harsh climate of Kazakhstan that the worst sufferings took place. First of all, the deportees were not adequately allocated the food rations and other supplies necessary for life, and as a result many, in particular children, died as a result of undernourishment and disease. Moreover, the local people in the areas of destination had been psychologically ‘prepared’ that traitors, rebels, and even supposedly wild tribespeople, incidentally cannibals, were to be relocated there. Although this made it difficult for the deportees to integrate into their new environment, it is by no means rare to hear mention of Kazakh or Kyrgyz families helping their new neighbours, sharing the little property or livestock they owned with the deportees. Housing was one of the worst problems and many deportees lived in dug-outs for years.

By September 1994, only one sixth of the families deported to Kyrgyzstan had been given permanent housing. In areas of Kazakhstan, the situation was even worse, with only a couple of dozen of the planned thousands of houses having been built even by 1946.5 The result of the deportations, for the Chechen people, was then a death toll of over 100,000 people. According to the calculations of historians such as Nekrich, Conquest and Bugai, the total demographic loss of the Chechens was much higher than that. Between 1926 and 1937, the Chechen population increased with a rate of over 36 per cent.6 During another eleven-year period, 1959 to 1970, the figure was over 46 per cent. By contrast, during the twenty-year period 1939–1959, the Chechen population increased only with 2.5 per cent.7 As a result, it is safe to assume that under relatively normal conditions—accounting for the war—the Chechen population would have been around or over 600,000 in 1959, instead of the roughly 420,000 that were reported in that year’s census. Hence the direct and indirect (from absence of growth) losses of the Chechens actually amount to over 200,000.8 Despite the deportations, however, the Chechens and Ingush kept their pride. The famous lines by Alexander Solzhenitsyn note that ‘only one nation refused to accept the psychology of submission…The Chechens.’9 According to many sources, the Chechens were the only people the authorities hesitated to ‘mess with’; as Vanora Bennett quotes a returnee, ‘sometimes [they] would try to split up families, or take away our rights…but then they’d be found dead on the highway…and after a while they learned to treat us with respect.’10
Reasons for the deportation

The official justification of the deportations was the alleged collaboration of the Chechens and Ingush with the German armies. The hollowness of this argument is easily penetrable by the fact that the German armies only reached to the Russian-inhabited Malgobek district in what is today Northwestern Ingushetia. As Dunlop examines, nevertheless, there had been isolated groups operating with the aim of helping Germany to control the North Caucasus. Rebellions had nevertheless erupted while Hitler and Stalin were still allies; in 1940 an insurrection led by Hasan Izrailov emerged, announcing that ‘the real object of this war is the annihilation of our nation as a whole’—a statement which proved to be chillingly correct. Izrailov was well aware of the difficulty of mounting a successful rebellion against the Soviet power; however he noted that ‘the brave Finns are proving that this great empire built on slavery is devoid of strength when faced with a small freedom-loving nation. The Caucasus will be a second Finland and we will be followed by other oppressed nations.’11 Izrailov’s rebellion spread quickly and controlled significant areas of Chechnya within a few months, convening a national congress.

Another rebel leader, Mairbek Sheripov, joined Izrailov in February 1942, widening the territory outside Soviet control. The two leaders issued a joint appeal to the Chechen nation, where they declared that the Germans, who were now at war with the Soviet Union, were welcome only if they recognized Caucasian independence. Indeed the very mention of Chechen nation was an important distinction from previous rebellions; Izrailov was an intellectual and a former Communist party member and had no connections with Sufi brotherhoods, a serious liability at the time but an interesting proof of the evolution of a distinct sense of Chechen nationalism. The terms of the declaration also show that the Chechen leaders were well aware of the way in which the Germans ‘liberated’ Ukraine, and were suspicious of the Germans. It also seems as if the Germans, on their part, had learnt from the Ukrainian campaign and the German general staff issued a directive to its troops in the Caucasus ordering them to observe a very different conduct toward the local population in the Caucasus than in other areas of the Soviet Union. Nevertheless, the Soviet air force in the spring of 1942 bombed the Chechen–Ingush republic savagely.

The only German connection in Chechen-Ingushetia was small groups of parachuted saboteurs in mid 1942. At most, Dunlop notes, 100 Chechens were actively pro-Nazi, the Izrailov-led rebellion being very domestic by nature. By contrast, 17,413 of Chechens had sought enlistment in the Red Army in three separate voluntary mobilizations in 1942–43. Hence it seems safe to say that the claim of collaboration with Germany was by any standard a fabricated reason. As Abdurahman Avtorkhanov puts it:

The motive given by the Soviets to justify the deportation—collaboration with the Germans during the war—was ridiculous...As to the government's
claim that anti-Soviet detachments were active deep within Chechnya–Ingushetia, this is absolutely true...Armed resistance against a foreign conqueror was an old-established tradition in those parts long before Hitler or Stalin appeared. Indeed the Imamate of Shamil fell only 63 years before the installation of the Soviet government...On a small stretch of land in the Caucasus two worlds came face to face: a colossal police despotism and an enclave of true human aspiration. The struggle between good and evil, between democracy and totalitarianism, was being enacted in the Caucasian mountains for decades while the outside world remained largely ignorant and indifferent.12

The lands that the Chechens and Ingush were forced to leave were consequently redistributed among the neighbouring populations, their autonomous republics were dismantled, and the areas were given to the neighbouring republics. This fact led to serious problems when the deported peoples returned to their homes, finding other people living in their houses. It is no exaggeration to say that most conflicts between North Caucasian peoples today are results of the deportations; the roots of the Ingush–Ossetian, Circassian–Karachai conflicts, and the conflict between certain Chechens living in Dagestan with a Lak community,13 are all to be ascribed to the deportations.

An interesting point in conjunction with the deportations is the fact that the population of Dagestan was not deported. In fact, the leaders of Soviet Dagestan knew that Russia had a deep respect for the fighting ability of Dagestanis, with the 1920–21 uprising in fresh memory. Dagestan was larger and even more inaccessible than Chechnya by certain standards; Dagestani leaders warned Stalin that in case of a deportation, there would likely be a rebellion of unseen proportions—and, luckily for the Dagestani people, Stalin decided not to include the Dagestanis in the deportations. Nevertheless, the decision to deport Chechens but not Dagestanis, Karachais but not Cherkess, Balkars but not Kabardins, shows the subjectivity with which Stalin and Beria picked the target groups. Whether this was exclusively because of their personal suspicion of certain peoples or not will never be established with certainty.

The return & rebuilding of the nation

After the death of Stalin, restrictions upon the deportees, which until then had not been allowed to travel beyond three kilometres of their settlements, were gradually lifted. They were soon able to travel freely in Kazakhstan and even set up radio stations and newspapers; some see these facts as attempts to keep the Chechens and Ingush in Kazakhstan and prevent them from travelling back to the Caucasus. The issue of an autonomous region in southern Kazakhstan seems to have been discussed. Krushchev emerged as the new leader of the Soviet Union and in 1956 held a secret speech at the twentieth congress of the CPSU, denouncing the excesses of Stalin’s rule, in particular citing the deportation; the
very speech that was interpreted in Georgia as an attack on their nation was greeted by the Chechens in exile with relief and renewed hope: they now saw a possibility of returning home.

Starting in 1954, some groups of Chechens and Ingush travelled illegally to their homelands, so to speak paving the way for the rest. Many were sent back, but the process was unstoppable. During 1956 alone, an estimated 25,000 to 30,000 people returned; many of them even brought back the bodies of relatives who had died in exile.14 As the regime first offered them autonomy within Uzbekistan, then tried to make them return to other localities in the Caucasus, still later trying to implement a ‘phased’ return, it finally capitulated to the reality: the Chechens and Ingush, as well as the Karachais and Balkars, were returning in vast numbers no matter what the authorities told them or offered them. As Dunlop puts it, ‘trying to control the influx of Chechens and Ingush to their homeland was, it seemed, like trying to direct the ocean tides.’15 Already by 1959, their proportion of the Chechens and Ingush in the population in their resuscitated ASSR amounted to 41 per cent.

However, their return did not mean that their full civil and political rights were restored. First of all, the borders of the ‘new’ Chechen–Ingush ASSR did not conform with those before the deportation. The neighbouring republics (which had not been subjected to wholesale deportation) retained parts of the territory of the ASSR. In particular, North Ossetia retained the traditionally Ingush–populated Prigorodniy district near Vladikavkaz, and Dagestan retained parts of Eastern Chechnya where a Lak community had been forced to settle. Both issues, and the conflicts originating therefrom, will be discussed later. As the Chechens settled back in their native lands, their population nevertheless began increasing rapidly, as if a concerted effort was underway to make up for the losses of the deportations. Indeed, the Chechen population of the Soviet Union doubled between 1959 and 1979; as a result the proportion of Russians in the Chechen–Ingush ASSR decreased steadily from half of the population to less than a third in the same period.16

This was not only related to the Chechen demographic boom, but also to an exodus by the thousands of ethnic Russians: between 1979 and 1989, the Russian population decreased by over 12 per cent in absolute numbers, according to official census data. Another important factor was that the Chechen and Ingush were still discriminated against in terms of education and participation. Whereas the ban on punished peoples from having access to higher education was lifted, the number of Chechens with higher education skyrocketed from almost nothing in the early 1960s to almost 50 per thousand people—still below 5 per cent of the population; over 15 per cent of Chechens lacked any education whatsoever in a country which otherwise bragged about its education for all people. Indeed, the most concerted effort to suppress Chechen and Ingush identity was in education, especially the primary and secondary schools. In most autonomous republics, the natives could choose whether to put their children in Russian schools, where the native tongue was studied as a second language, or the opposite—native language
schools with Russian as a second language. In Chechen-Ingushetia, the second option was not available; for a time in the 1960s the Chechen language was even totally absent from school teaching altogether.

Meanwhile, the Slavic population in the ASSR still controlled the political and economic life of the republic. Most Chechens still lived on the countryside, and those who did move to the cities—primarily to Grozny—had great difficulty finding employment, often discriminated against compared to the Russian population. Coupled with the demographic boom mentioned above, this led to widespread unemployment and many Chechens and Ingush were forced to find seasonal labour in other parts of the USSR. Emigration also gained momentum, as many Chechens moved more permanently to Moscow and Leningrad, where they hold a strong position (together with other Caucasians), although often vastly
overestimated by Russian analysts, in the ‘gray’ and ‘black’ sectors of the Russian economy

In the political sphere, the Chechen-Ingush ASSR was dominated by ethnic Russians. Russians held the highest positions in the party and state apparatus of the republic, including for a long time the post of first secretary of the Communist Party, a post which in most autonomous regions and republics was reserved for a national, at least as a figurehead. Only after several years of Perestroika and democratization, in 1989, did a Chechen come to the most prestigious position in the republic—Doku Zavgayev, who although having come to power as a reformer, proved to be unable to adjust to the political developments that followed. The republic as a whole also seems to have been discriminated in terms of health care; Dunlop cites that the mortality in infectious diseases was almost the double of the average of the Russian Federation; Chechen-Ingushetia also lagged behind in terms of living space, hospital beds and doctors per capita. The period between the rehabilitation and Perestroika was not a period of social calm either; the frustration of the Chechens and Ingush and the local Russians’ fear of the natives led to tensions boiling under the surface. Already in 1958, one of the ‘worst instances of social unrest in the post-war Soviet Union’ occurred in Grozny, when a private fight with lethal consequences degenerated into ethnically based clashes, with local Russians demanding that the Chechens and Ingush be returned to Central Asia, …looting occurring before
troops restored order. Chechen-Ingushetia was an exception in certain ways compared to most other autonomous entities in the Soviet Union, and clearly these factors help to explain why just Chechnya turned out to be the incomparably staunchest anti-Russian separatist entity in the Union.

First, the Chechens are the most numerous of the North Caucasian peoples, with a population of 957,000, of which 734,000 were living in the republic in 1989. The number of Russians was comparatively low, close to 300,000, whereas the Ingush numbered roughly 164,000 in the joint ASSR. Thus the demographic weight and structure to carry out independent policies on the part of the titular nationality was present. In this context the Chechens were so much more numerous than the Ingush that they gained a near-monopoly in the political sphere in the Perestroika era, hence alienating the Ingush from the republic. But an important effect of this was that the demographic structure of the republic, unlike the cases of Dagestan, Karachai-Cherkessia, or Kabardino-Balkaria, enabled one majority ethnic group to embark on a credible struggle for autonomy. In this sense, recalling the earlier discussion of Stalin’s intentions during the national delimitation of the North Caucasus, certain demographic conditions are remarkable: North Ossetia was the only North Caucasian autonomous region with a single titular ethnic group in a majority position; besides North Ossetia and Chechen-Ingushetia, only the by comparison integrated Chuvash republic in the Volga region had a native demographic dominance of over two thirds. As the next chapter will describe, North Ossetia never posed a danger of separatism for the central government. Indeed, in no other North Caucasian republic does one group possess even a demographic majority. This fact, together with the observation that only Chechnya was able to produce a credible autonomy struggle, points to the importance of the divisions between North Caucasian peoples in their failure to develop independence movements.

Secondly, the Chechens strongly recall the crimes committed against them, with the Caucasian war in the last century and the deportations of the Second World War as central items of recollection—‘Zentrale Erinnerungsmotive’, in Uwe Halbach’s words. This made them receptive to the emergence of a strong, charismatic and anti-Russian leader. Indeed the intensity of the hatred for Russia is arguably stronger as a whole among Chechens than in other parts of the North Caucasus.

Thirdly, Chechnya is blessed with natural resources few other autonomous entities are endowed with—primarily oil and gas. Thus given its resources and its strategic location for trade—including the fact that the Baku-Novorossiysk pipeline passes through the republic—Chechnya is a potentially viable state, unless blockaded by Russia as was the case between 1991 and 1994.

However, whereas these factors laid the ground for the subsequent events, the most crucial element was that the Chechen political elite underwent a radical change with the failure of the August coup of 1991, whereas in most other North
Caucasian regions a perpetuation of the Soviet elite could be observed, lasting with some cracks until the present.

The revolution

In fact, political movements independent of the Communist party erupted already in 1990. After coming to power, Doku Zavgayev permitted the publication of independent newspapers and journals, thus lightening press censoring, and refrained from cracking down on the ‘informal groupings’ which appeared as a result.

The two groupings which emerged were first the Vainakh Democratic Party, led by Zelimkhan Yandarbiev (later Dudayev’s chief ideologue and Chechnya’s second president) and from November 1990 the Chechen Pan-National Congress. Besides these two, there were also smaller movements, either Islamic or nationalistic in orientation. The national congress started to get organized in the summer of 1990 as an umbrella organization containing the major nationalist groupings that were emerging. In this sense the Congress should actually be seen as a parallel development to the Popular Fronts which emerged at roughly the same time in the Baltic states and Transcaucasia. Its motives were similar: to unite all nationalist/democratic forces in the republic and press for the reformation of the political system.

The congress held its opening meeting from 23–25 November 1990. The meeting was attended by Air Force General Johar Musayevich Dudayev, who was at the time little known in Chechnya, and with few ties to his homeland, having served in the military outside the republic for close to thirty years. Despite being married to a Russian and a product of the Soviet system, Dudayev nevertheless was well respected as he had been the first Chechen to reach the rank of general in the Soviet military. Dudayev was elected the leader of the congress mainly because of the impressiveness of the speech he held; indeed it is difficult to dispute Suzanne Goldenberg’s assertion that Dudayev ‘became a Chechen national leader almost by accident.’ Indeed, Zelimkhan Yandarbiyev, later Dudayev’s vice-president, recalls in his memoirs that Dudayev became known in Chechnya for his ‘short but brilliant remarks’ at the congress; and that as a result of his speech, Dudayev was interviewed by activists from the Vainakh democratic party, and subsequently proposed as chairman of the congress’ executive committee.

Dudayev held high prestige as he was one of very few Chechens to have reached an important position in the Soviet Union. He was born in the Yalkhori settlement, in Western Chechnya near Ingush-populated territories on 15 April 1944, during the deportations. Spending his childhood in Kazakhstan, he returned to Grozny in 1957. He began his education in Vladikavkaz, then entered military high school in Tambov in 1965, proceeded to the ‘Yuriy Gagarin’ Air force academy. Upon completion of the academy, he served first as a fighter pilot in Siberia, then with distinction in Afghanistan, and finally achieved the position of major general in 1988, posted as head of a long-distance nuclear bomber
division in Tartu, Estonia. Until this point, he had not shown any penchants towards nationalism or democracy. But in 1989, he allowed an Estonian flag to fly over the base, and in the summer of 1990 held an open day for the public.

When Dudayev was elected leader of the congress in November 1990, there is nothing that suggests he had any plans to leave the air force. His election was almost certainly to a large extent a coincidence; the speech he held at the opening congress is often said to have been what made the delegates select him. Other reasons to elect Dudayev were there, however: he was, along with Ruslan Khasbulatov, the highest-ranking Chechen in the former Soviet Union and as a high-ranking military officer commanded a great deal of respect in Chechen society. An additional advantage was his belonging to a small, in fact insignificant clan, the Yalkhoro clan identified with his native settlement. Choosing a representative of a large clan would almost certainly have led to that clan dominating the congress, hence removing its nationwide legitimacy. On the other hand, with Dudayev in the lead, no major clan or teip would a priori be in a position to control the movement, thereby contributing to its pan-national character and hence possibility to represent the entire Chechen people.

Now a newly elected leader, Dudayev showed his determination by demanding the proclamation of Chechnya’s sovereignty on 27 November. The aim at the time was to raise the status of Chechen-Ingushetia to an Union Republic, equivalent to the fifteen republics of the union. Faced with the demands of the newly formed congress, the Supreme Soviet of the ASSR complied. It issued a declaration of sovereignty, very much due to the pressure of the nationalists in the congress; however this decision was nothing exclusive to Chechnya, being in line with the ‘parade’ of sovereignty declarations of both union and autonomous republics that was going on at the time. Dudayev then returned to Tartu and his nuclear bomber squad. However his tenure there was not to last long; in January 1991 the Baltic republics’ independence movement had gathered strength and on an occasion when Moscow wanted to fly in troops to crush Baltic separatism, Dudayev denied the incoming planes landing permission, refusing to ‘allow the use of force against a democratically elected government’. Consequently, before even being relieved of his position, he resigned and returned to his native Chechnya. Meanwhile, the March 1991 referendum on the preservation of the Soviet Union was held; the Chechen-Ingush had the clearly lowest turnout (58 per cent) of all autonomous republics in the Russian Federation, ten percentage points lower than the Komi Republic. Among those who voted, slightly over 75 per cent voted in favour; nevertheless, the Chechen-Ingush republic stood out as a territory where no majority of eligible voters had voted for the preservation of the union.

Once in Grozny, Dudayev assumed control over the national movement, with a view to developing it in a more radical direction. He invited Yandarbiev to join him along with Yaragi Mamodayev, Beslan Gantemirov, and Yusup Soslambekov. Whereas Yandarbiev became Dudayev’s ideologue, Mamodayev, a businessman from the petroleum sector formed the financial basis of the movement;
Gantemirov, a shady leader of a paramilitary group with a criminal record became the leader of the ‘national guard’; and Soslambekov became the demagogue of the revolution, what Gall and de Waal call ‘the people’s tribune in Grozny in 1991.30

In May, Dudayev proceeded to action, claiming that the declaration of sovereignty had stripped the supreme soviet of all powers, which were accordingly now vested in the Pan-National Congress of the Chechen People.31 Its executive committee, chaired by himself, was now planning to assume power.32 During this time, Dudayev also paid attention to establishing contacts with the outside world, most successfully with the fiercely anti-Russian Georgian president Zviad Gamsakhurdia.33 In June, Dudayev convened a session of the congress. In this session, the radical wing of the movement grabbed control, and many of the moderate members, including the actual founders of the congress, left the movement.34 Hence, at the second convention of the congress in June 1991, its original rhetoric had changed; it turned to denouncing the colonial structure of the Soviet Union, and identified the Communist party and other institutions as instruments of colonial oppression.35

The congress, which in the meantime had grown to be the strongest political formation in the republic, was composed of 60 members, many of which were clan elders, a factor which was crucial in assuring the loyalty of many Chechens. At the congress, Dudayev proposed to change the structure of the republic, by first of all adopting a new constitution, holding a referendum on the future status of the republic, letting the individual inhabitants decide on their citizenship, and holding presidential elections.36 The Ingush, who had been left out of these developments as the Chechen national movement developed a more narrow definition of Chechen identity, as opposed to the common Vainakh identity shared with the Ingush, were to be allowed to decide their own state affiliation. Furthermore, Dudayev issued an appeal of solidarity to all other North Caucasian Nations, recognizing the necessity of co-operation for the survival of these nations. Concretely, he proposed a re-establishment of the Mountain (Gorskaya) republic of the 1920s.

Shortly after this convention, things in Moscow took an abrupt turn with the 19 August coup against Gorbachev. Doku Zavgayev was reportedly in Moscow at the time of the coup, and his deputy was nowhere to be found. Clearly, Zavgayev preferred to wait and see what would happen in Moscow rather than take an early stand. Possibly, he was positively inclined to the coup-makers, as a hardened attitude from the centre would have allowed him to crack down upon the increasingly powerful opposition in the republic. In any case, his failure to take a stand against the coup was to precipitate his downfall.

Johar Dudayev, on the other hand, did not wait. Seizing this opportunity to assert his leadership, he issued a statement the very first day of the coup, calling on the people of the republic to obey Boris Yeltsin’s condemnation of the coup. For his own part, Dudayev denounced the ‘committee for the state of emergency’ as a ‘coup d’état by a group of government criminals and a very serious crime against the peoples and the constitution.’37 In conformity with Yeltsin’s decree, a general
political strike was declared, and any actions to support the coup were declared illegal. Dudayev also set up contact with Yeltsin and his two Chechen allies, Khasbulatov and Aslanbek Aslankhanov (who was defending the ‘White House’ in Moscow at the time, and a member of the Presidium of the Russian parliament). Indeed Dudayev seems to have resorted to action after Khasbulatov, in his position as acting chairman of the Russian parliament, called for the removal of all regional leaders who had supported, overtly or tacitly, the coup. Moreover the Dudayev clique, according to Yandarbiyev’s memoirs, also created paramilitary formations at this time.

On Zavgayev’s return to Grozny, Dudayev condemned him for cowardice and treachery, and instigated a demonstration on Grozny’s Liberty Square. Consequently the congress passed a resolution asking for the dissolution of the Supreme Soviet of the republic and Zavgayev’s resignation. It called for a transfer of power to itself, pending early parliamentary and presidential elections. Yeltsin at this point supported the ousting of Zavgayev, whom he considered a traitor for having supported the coup. Thus when Zavgayev wanted to install a state of emergency to suppress Dudayev’s general strike, he was told by Moscow that any crackdown on demonstrators would be unacceptable.

In the following weeks, the general strike turned more violent. On 1 September, the congress created its own legislative body. In the next few days, armed men seized government buildings and centres of mass communications, before forcibly disbanding the Supreme Soviet (in full session) on 6 September. Zavgayev publicly announced his resignation the same day, very possibly under pressure from General Aslankhanov. Dudayev quickly proceeded to consolidate his power. On 15 September, power was officially transferred to a provisional council, and election dates for parliamentary and presidential elections were set for 19 and 27 October respectively. From Moscow, Ruslan Khasbulatov on 7 September had commented on the events by saying that he was glad Zavgayev had fallen. However, Dudayev’s quick moves to consolidate and legitimize his power took everyone by surprise. Indeed, many observers have argued that Khasbulatov had promoted Dudayev’s ousting of Zavgayev in order to get rid of the latter. Sergei Shakhrai, deputy Russian prime minister at the time, stated that it was commonly accepted that Khasbulatov had put Dudayev in power. Thus to Khasbulatov, Dudayev was seen as a lesser threat compared to Zavgayev, not having lived in Chechen-Ingushetia, and originating from a very small clan, which had no political importance in the republic. This fact, although it was seen as detrimental to Dudayev and enabled Khasbulatov to use Dudayev as an instrument, might very well have been an advantage, as argued above; thus the powerful clans in Chechnya did not feel threatened by him, as his acceding to power did not mean that their influence would decrease compared to other clans. In any case, Khasbulatov believed that he could easily oust Dudayev and place someone loyal to himself as leader of the republic, particularly after Dudayev’s raid on the parliament, which could be used as a reason for arresting him.
After the raid on parliament, many of Dudayev’s comrades-in-arm abandoned him. However, Khasbulatov’s calculations misfired. Contrary to all predictions, Dudayev was able to retain power with the support only of a few associates, hold elections and declare himself President within weeks. Despite the fact that many political figures wanted to postpone the election at least until November, including most of Chechnya’s intelligentsia, Dudayev stood firm on the decided dates, claiming that any postponement would enable Russia to intervene. In Moscow, conservatives led by Alexandr Rutskoi had a parliamentary resolution passed which urged elections in Chechnya to be postponed, while condemning the illegal armed formations in the republic.

Dudayev reacted to this resolution by issuing a decree of general mobilization. According to Chechen sources, 62,000 men came forward; furthermore volunteers from all over the North Caucasus reportedly rushed to support the Chechen bid for independence. A war of words escalated between Dudayev and Yeltsin’s administration in Moscow; nevertheless this did not change Dudayev’s plans. On 27 October, he was elected president with 85 per cent of the vote, in an election contested by three other participants and heavily criticized by Moscow; according to international observers the elections proceeded reasonably fairly. Following this, Dudayev was sworn in as president, taking his oath on a Qur’an. On 2 November, the independence of the ‘Chechen Republic’ was proclaimed, an act which broke all ties with Moscow, but also led to tensions with the Ingush population, which was not represented in the congress and did not have its name included in the new state. The Ingush and Chechens nevertheless solved their problems peacefully; a separate Ingush republic was declared on 4 June 1992, while the Ingush in a referendum voted to remain in Russia. The delimitation of the Chechen-Ingush border has moreover not been clarified, but this circumstance has not led to any significant problems; Ingushetia’s own problems with North Ossetia have overshadowed any possible dispute with Chechnya; as will be seen, Ingushetia has in recent years moved closer to Chechnya’s position.

Yeltsin reacted to the declaration of independence by refusing to recognize Chechnya, something Dudayev returned in kind, by refusing to recognize Russia. Yeltsin also issued a decree on 9 November instituting a state of emergency in Chechnya, which Dudayev answered by declaring Martial Law. The state of emergency decree was counter-productive for Yeltsin in two ways: first of all, it enabled Dudayev to rally the population behind him, mobilize a feeling of national unity, and simultaneously discredit the opposition as pawns of Moscow. The Chechen leadership, aware of the irony, expressed their gratitude to Yeltsin for his decree, which helped them to solve all their internal problems.42

Second, the decree was against Russian law, as a state of emergency must be approved by the parliament before entering into force. And as Yeltsin did not consult parliament, knowing very well that his decree would not pass, the state of emergency was illegal. Two days later, the Russian parliament convened and humiliated Yeltsin by annulling the emergency rule, by a vote of 177 to four.
On 9 November, however, Yeltsin had sent troops to Chechnya and ordered Dudayev’s arrest. Meanwhile, Dudayev took his own measures. He managed to have over 600 prisoners escape from jail, and turned them into a personal guard later led by a young convict, Ruslan Labazanov. As interior ministry troops landed in Grozny, Dudayev’s troops occupied the airport, forcing planes to leave, with only minor skirmishes occurring. As the parliament lifted the state of emergency, a total troop withdrawal was ordered. Of course, this did not mean that the Chechen leadership was safe from Russian military actions. The Russian troops were withdrawn, but only to North Ossetia, well within striking distance to Grozny—in fact within a hundred kilometres, a fact which recalls the small distances that form a particularly important factor in Caucasian—and especially North Caucasian—politics. Nevertheless, the Russian fiasco increased Dudayev’s popularity tremendously: as Gall and de Waal quote a Dudayev critic: ‘Before 9 November Dudayev was zero. Afterwards he became a national hero’.43

As he could not subdue Dudayev with arms, Yeltsin settled for the use of other means to achieve the same goal—the ousting of Dudayev to bring Chechnya back under firm Russian control with a puppet government. Thus financial restrictions, an economic blockade which hit Chechnya particularly hard were instituted, as well as subversive actions, which took the form of arming and supporting the opposition to Dudayev.

1991–94: de facto independence & Russian subversion

With the immediate threat of Russian military intervention temporarily removed, Dudayev moved on to consolidating his power and creating a Chechen state. By the summer of 1992 Chechnya indeed bore all the marks of an independent state; there were no Russian flags in Grozny, and more importantly, there were no Russian soldiers—something which was not true for any other post-Soviet or even East European state at that time. In addition, Dudayev managed to get impressive lists of armaments from the Soviet army depots in Chechnya.

However, the general did not enjoy total support, and the subsequent economic crisis and hardships made large numbers of Chechens less enthusiastic about the confrontation with Moscow, and thus less supportive of the government. Despite the existence of such feelings, Dudayev continued to pursue his militant anti-colonial rhetoric, and skilfully painted up Russia as the reason for all the hardships the Chechen nation was forced to go through. This rhetoric was instrumental in helping Dudayev to retain a certain degree of popularity among vast tracts of the population. In particular, Dudayev condemned Moscow for involvement in the quite frequent coups against his rule. What is more, the new regime in Grozny tried to assume a greater regional role, as the leader of the whole Caucasus against the ‘declining’ Russian empire, in a general uprising of the ‘suppressed Caucasian nations’ against the ‘hated foreign invader’.

Such rhetoric was of course a constant irritation for the Kremlin, and posed the threat of a regionalization of the conflict, especially in the immediate aftermath of
the Soviet Union, when Moscow’s ability to keep the Russian Federation together was by no means secured. Hence Dudayev’s and Chechnya’s militancy from a very early stage posed a serious, although sometimes overestimated threat to Russia’s continued existence in its current form; as a result Yeltsin’s government did its best to unseat the regime in Grozny, by both direct and covert means. To a great extent, a ‘hidden Russian hand’, to borrow a term from Thomas Goltz, is clearly observable behind most of the seemingly ‘domestic’ attempts to oust Dudayev from power. Furthermore, the policies of the Kremlin are doubtless responsible for a great part of the economic decline of Chechnya by cutting most economic links with the breakaway republic and imposing an embargo on it.

The economy indeed became Dudayev’s Achilles heel. The Russian embargo, which turned into a near-blockade as Georgia closed its border with Chechnya after Dudayev had given asylum to Gamsakhurdia, was of course a part of the problem. But Dudayev’s managing of Chechnya’s economy was dismal. As Fiona Hill notes, ‘Dudayev’s background…prepared him admirably for the job of creating the Soviet armed forces…but it did not provide him with the fundamental knowledge for building a new state.’ His confrontational attitudes to Russia led to an exodus of some 150,000 ethnic Russians, who formed the backbone of the economy, being the bulk of skilled labour, engineers, doctors, or teachers. In other words, Chechnya suffered the problems of the Central Asian republics but on a larger scale; the proportions of Russians leaving Chechnya was much higher. Dudayev, it seems, understood that the problem of economic management needed an expert, and tried to engage Salambek Khajiev, a former Soviet petroleum minister and a Chechen, as prime minister of the new state. However, Khajiev declined the post as he found Dudayev had a ‘typically stateist conception of things. He was a typical military man: force, order, submission…he had a typical old way of thinking, that everything should be firmly in the hands of the commander of the division.’ As Khajiev refused, Dudayev found no one to when he could assign the task, and took it upon himself on an acting basis. As Dunlop notes, he ‘understood almost nothing of economics.’

The result was frightening. Chechnya’s industrial output fell by 30 per cent in 1992 alone and by 61 per cent in 1993; agricultural production by 46 per cent in 1992. These figures were debilitating even in the framework of the Soviet Union; comparative figures for Russia or other republics usually hovered around 15–25 per cent. The criminalization of Chechnya that is so often mentioned must be seen in this light. As two respected Russian analysts note, ‘when legal sources of existence disappear, criminal ones are developed.’ The oil industry in Chechnya was practically being dismantled, while the pipeline passing through the republic was tapped of significant amounts of its content, which were sold on the black markets of the CIS. Nevertheless, the amounts of illegal tapping are often exaggerated—the Chechen ‘businessmen’ doing the criminal acts simply did not possess the means to handle the amounts of oil that they are accused of having siphoned off. Another important factor was that the unclear nature of Chechnya
and the relative anarchy there attracted less reputable characters from all the CIS and beyond. The same Russian experts note that 100–150 unsanctioned international flights passed Grozny a month in these years, implying that all types of goods could be smuggled through Chechnya to Russia; traffic with different centres in Russia continued from the same airport despite the blockade—and the very fact that this was happening implies that someone in Moscow let it happen.

The only part of the economy that was working was the black market, and especially arms trade. It is thought that by 1994, over 150,000 weapons had reached Grozny one way or the other, for a population of 400,000. In Moscow, the Russian authorities spared no ammunition in denouncing Chechnya as a terrorist state, being the chief centre of narcotics smuggling in the entire Eurasian region. However, more responsible sources in Russia acknowledge that what was happening in Chechnya was impossible without complicity at high levels in Moscow. Indeed, officials in Moscow have accepted that corruption at Russian ministerial level took place in relation with Chechnya. Russian oil reached Chechen refineries; and Chechen and other petroleum products passed through the pipeline which reaches to the Black Sea at Novorossiysk. According to Elaine Holoboff, the corrupt Russian petroleum industry was protected by figures like the head of Yeltsin’s bodyguard, Colonel Korzhakov and several ministers of the time.

Politically, Dudayev was a contested leader, and did not show much of a lenient attitude towards political opposition. As many analysts have noted, the General ruled in a somewhat autocratic fashion. Recruitment to high government position seem to have been a privilege of members of his own clan. From a plethora of publications existing in 1992, only two major newspapers were allowed to subsist, Ichkeria and Svoboda. Although the civil war that developed might be seen as a partial reason for this, it does point at a lack of freedom of press.

While analyzing the deficiencies of the Chechen regime, one should be careful not to fall into the trap of many Western and other observers who have relied upon Russian sources and reports in their assessment of the Chechen regime. In her recent book on Chechnya, Vanora Bennett spends a lot of energy—and well so—on explaining the general condescension in Russia towards Caucasians, in particular towards Chechens, and the general acceptability in a Russian environment of statements and attitudes that would seem outright racist and therefore unspeakable in a western European environment: ‘…people who had seemed perfectly normal and open-minded suddenly launched into what would seem rabid racist rants in England but were taken as a part of civilized conversation in Moscow.’

Indeed, in the hierarchy of ‘nationalities’ in Russia, ‘the Chechens were the worst of all. Their name was never invoked without a shiver, an unspoken hint of nameless violence and dread.’ And as Bennett notes, this type of attitude engulfed almost the entirety of Russian society, including the media. True, the Russian media openly displayed the dismal condition of the Russian army in the
war; the criticism it hurled at the country’s political and military leadership was considerable and severe; but this hardly ever meant assessing the Chechen people and leadership or their side of the war objectively. The Russian press, although in many respects quite independent from the political power, has not lagged far behind official Kremlin statements in expressing their contempt for the Chechen nation in general and General Dudayev in particular. Hence most Russian analyses of the situation in Grozny have to be seen as heavily coloured by the traditional Russian condescending attitude towards the Chechens. Furthermore, any judging of Dudayev for having failed to create a pluralist democracy in his republic has to be seen in the light of the circumstances under which Chechnya achieved its statehood.

Even if it is not a valid excuse in any way for lack of democracy—being more of an explanation—it should be noted that with the exception of the Baltic states with their longer experience of statehood in the inter-war era, none of the former Soviet republics have developed into full-fledged democracies. Hence it is unrealistic to expect that Chechnya, lacking the political experience in governance that the union republics after all had, would develop in a more democratic way. In Chechnya’s defence it can be said that two peaceful transitions of executive power have taken place; Yandarbiyev’s accession to power in May 1996 was exceptional, taking place during a debilitating war and after the death of a President; nevertheless Chechnya managed to carry out a peaceful transition of power in January 1997. When Yandarbiyev, and for that matter Shamil Basayev, were defeated in the presidential elections, Aslan Maskhadov ascended to the presidency without any of the kind of tensions predicted by Western and Russian sources, who were certain Chechnya would erupt in civil war. In this particular aspect of democracy, Chechnya has actually reached as far or further than any of the Central Asian or Transcaucasian states with which it is most readily comparable. Furthermore, a quick glance at other continents shows that post-colonial states seldom turn into democracies for a number of reasons, many of them related to the legacy of colonialism. In particular, an argument which is highly valid in the case of the Soviet Union, the political culture of the past is characterized by authoritative rule over the dependent territories. Hence the future leaders of post-colonial states who grow up in a colonial atmosphere where it was natural for government to be justified by force. In Chechnya’s case, moreover, it would be a gross understatement to call Moscow’s fashion of ruling the country during the last two centuries ‘authoritarian’. In fact the Chechens have been subjected to rule by coercion, terror, and deportations, a tradition which cannot help but color the political characteristics of the country at independence. In the political sphere, Chechnya in a way actually developed along parallel lines to Russia itself, as a growing struggle for power between the President and the parliament emerged soon after independence. The parliament criticized Dudayev for ruling the country in a military, not a political way; for neglecting the economy; and for imposing a patrimonial, presidential regime in an unconstitutional way.
In Chechnya, the framework of a working democracy was actually present from the start. On 12 March 1992, a constitution was adopted which defined the state as a ‘democracy governed by the rule of law’. Hence a theoretical division of powers was instituted, with the creation of a constitutional court to fulfil the three-fold division between executive, legislative, and judiciary powers. In October 1992, International Alert published the results of a fact-finding mission to Chechnya, noting that it had ‘made impressive beginnings… Chechen society is characterized by a remarkable degree of political openness and freedom of expression’. However, despite the impressive beginnings, such a state never came into being. In fact, the executive branch of the state, as personified by President Dudayev, proved to be very jealous of any attempts from the parliament or the opposition to acquire the share of power that the constitution of the republic actually entitled them to exercise. Already in March 1992, an attempt was made to carry out a general strike in Grozny. As the government forces suppressed this attempt, Dudayev’s popularity was still so strong (it was, after all, only five months after he had brought independence to the country) that the demonstrations that erupted were in favour of the regime, not against it. The anti-government protests seem to have been orchestrated by people who were worried about the regime’s monopolizing the oil industry of the republic. At the centre of this early opposition was Omar Avtorkhanov, with a power-base in the Terek area of northwest Chechnya, who was soon to become the leader of the relatively unified resistance against Dudayev.

As the protests had taken place during the month of Ramadan, when Muslims are supposed to refrain from violence, the general took this opportunity to discredit the opposition by making reference to Islam, claiming that by resorting to violence during Ramadan, the opposition had broken the most holy principles of Islam. This is illustrative of Dudayev’s political skill in using all possible means to discredit the opposition by equating it with Russian-supported and anti-Islamic sentiments, hence appealing to the strongest sentiments of the people. Furthermore, this and other statements reiterated the general’s adherence to Islam and his piousness, were intended at appealing to the traditionalist segment of society; as Halbach notes, political parties were (and are) only at an embryonic level in Chechnya, and Islam is clearly the strongest political and social force in the Chechen society. Consequently, any ruler in Chechnya has to take religion into account. The question of Islam is further complicated in Chechnya by the importance of Sufi brotherhoods of the Naqshbandi and Qadiri tariqats. President Dudayev himself reportedly belongs to a Qadiri brotherhood, who throughout the Soviet rule were more anti-Soviet and anti-Russian than the Naqshbandi, who are more aristocratic in character and were easier for the Russians to co-opt. Islam and the different tariqats are thus an important factor in Chechen politics, but because of the secrecy of the brotherhoods, it is very difficult to adequately appraise the role of Sufi brotherhoods in present-day Chechnya.

In the beginning of 1993, Chechnya’s internal problems got worse, and as Gall and de Waal note, ‘the fragile political stability in Chechnya disintegrated.’
parliament seemed to favour negotiations with Moscow to normalize relations with Russia, while keeping Chechen sovereignty. As Dudayev was strongly opposed to this, in February he proposed a revision of the constitution to decrease the powers of the parliament compared to those of the president. As a result of these proposals, the power struggle between parliament and president grew in intensity, and reached a climax in April with demonstrations asking for the president’s resignation. On 17 April, Dudayev by a decree dissolved the parliament and imposed a curfew, while de facto changing the structure of the state to a presidential regime tailored to his own wishes. In this turmoil, the population seemed to divide quite equally between supporters of Dudayev, demonstrating on Freedom Square in Grozny, and supporters of the parliament on the nearby Theatre Square. These antagonistic demonstrations went on for two months, and according to observers the supporters of the regime were mainly rural mountaineers, while urban and lowland people tended to support parliament.\textsuperscript{58} The political spectrum also politically divided into two camps, a national-radical grouping supporting Dudayev, and a national-democratic group opposed to him.

The parliament decided to hold a referendum on 5 June, in which the people would be asked whether they had confidence in the president and in the parliament, respectively, and if Chechnya needed the institution of a presidency. On 3 June, Dudayev closed down Chechnya’s constitutional court, which had ruled that his dissolution of parliament had been unconstitutional. The next day, the day before the scheduled referendum, government forces violently dispersed the demonstrators on Theatre Square and took control of the headquarters of the opposition. Interestingly, this action was surprisingly similar to the way Boris Yeltsin crushed his own parliamentary opposition later the same year. The estimated casualties of the crackdown differ, ranging from 14–60. Although some of the main opponents to the regime were former allies of Dudayev’s, he immediately blamed the riots on Moscow, and demanded an official explanation for the recent subversive events. Although Moscow’s involvement was probably relatively limited in this particular event, large parts of the population were ready to accept Dudayev’s version, largely due to the profound mistrust for Russia that the deportations brought in Chechnya.

The main result of the June violence was to alter the structure of the opposition to Dudayev’s regime. Whereas previously it had been largely parliamentary, and had tried to use relatively peaceful means to influence the government and bring about change on vital issues, it now turned increasingly into an armed opposition. Hence a trend that had started already in 1992 was strengthened. In May 1992, Omar Avturkhano\textsuperscript{59} had begun his open resistance to Dudayev from his stronghold of Znamenskoye in the Terek district, in the northeast of Chechnya. He became the central figure of the opposition against Dudayev, very much because he had never accepted the legitimacy of the latter, whereas most of the other opposition figures had their background in Dudayev’s administration. In December 1993, he formed a provisional council, which
established contacts with Moscow and was recognized by Russia as the legitimate political authority in Chechnya.60

Two main figures of the opposition were former close allies of the General. The first was Beslan Gantemirov, the former mayor of Grozny who defected to the opposition in April 1993, and established a base in his native Urus-Martan, in western Chechnya. The second, Ruslan Labazanov, head of Dudayev’s presidential guard and a convicted murderer, defected and established himself in Argun, East of Grozny. Other figures who supported the opposition from distance in Moscow rather than opting for armed resistance were Yaragi Mamodayev, the former Prime Minister under Dudayev; Salambek Khajiev, the former head of the petroleum research institute of Grozny and Soviet minister of oil in 1991; and of course Doku Zavgayev. Hence 1992–93 was a period of political fragmentation in Chechnya. Dudayev’s hold on power in the centre strengthened, but this very fact led to a conversion from parliamentary to armed opposition to his rule which led to a situation of civil war in the breakaway republic. Naturally, Moscow was not slow in exploiting the internal divisions of the Chechens. It should be noted, however, that most opposition figures, save Avtorkhanov, were not favourably disposed to Russian involvement, although they received arms and financial support from the Kremlin.

In early 1994, the power-struggle grew more intense, as Ruslan Khasbulatov entered the scene, his political career in Moscow having been effectively put to an end by the defeat of the parliamentary opposition against Yeltsin. Hence, after release from prison he returned to his native Tolstoy-Yurt, only 30 kilometres from Grozny, where he hoped to be a uniting and conciliatory force due to his prestige as former Russian speaker of parliament. However, due to his past, he was categorically unacceptable both for Moscow and for Grozny. Further, he was soon discredited by the close relationship he had with certain conservative circles in the Kremlin. The different opposition groups were far from unified, as none wanted to accept the other as a superior. Instead, they formed autonomous guerrilla bands, which could only occasionally co-ordinate their efforts. Gantemirov commanded around 800 men. Labazanov mustered roughly 200 fighters, mostly former convicts like himself. Despite his lesser strength however, he was probably Dudayev’s most dangerous enemy. This was due to his reputed ferocity and the determination emanating from the blood feud he had announced against Dudayev, after his brother was killed in the June violence.

In the summer of 1994, Chechnya descended into civil war. Avtorkhanov managed to receive the active support of the Russian Federal Counterintelligence Service (FSK). In June, the council issued an appeal to Moscow to help it in its quest to re-establish ‘constitutional order’ in Chechnya, and in August it declared Dudayev deposed, claiming to have established control over most of Chechnya’s territory.61 For four months, clashes between government forces and opposition continued. The failure of the opposition to achieve their primary aim, to take Grozny and depose Dudayev, was mainly due to their failure to co-operate. Rather, Dudayev used the rifts between the opposition leaders to ensure their
failure. Only in September, after Dudaev had inflicted a harsh defeat on the
opposition, did Gantemirov, Avtorkhanov, and Khasbulatov agree to co-operate.
All of them shunned contacts with Labazanov, whom they saw as a common
criminal.

Having united their forces, the opposition managed to come very close to
Grozny’s centre in an October attack. By this time however, the evidence of
Russian involvement was clear. At the end of August, Dudaev managed to
capture a lieutenant colonel of the FSK in Grozny, whose presence in Chechnya
blatantly exposureed this involvement. By September, the opposition was using
heavy Russian arms in their confrontations with Dudaev’s forces, including
advanced assault helicopters. Despite denials of involvement from Moscow,
anonymous sources in the Russian defence ministry acknowledged the fact that
these helicopters belonged to the Russian army.62 Any remaining doubts about
the degree of Moscow’s involvement were dispersed on 26 November, when
government forces captured 70 Russian ‘mercenaries’ who supported the
opposition’s attempt to take Grozny by storm. Russian defence minister, Pavel
Grachev, denied any involvement, claiming that a Russian-led operation would
not have been so ignorant of military tactics; in fact if the Russian army had been
involved, an airborne regiment would have been able to take Grozny within two
hours.63

However, as the captives were shown on television, they were rapidly
identified by their families as Russian army soldiers on active duty. The soldiers
themselves reported that the FSK had ordered their involvement in Chechnya.
Finally, on 2 December, evidence of the FSK’s involvement was certified in the
daily Izvestiya, as family members of the said soldiers confirmed that they were
regular soldiers and not frauds like Grachev and others had claimed.64 Clearly,
tensions between Moscow and Grozny were rising, and the embarrassment of
having been humiliated by a breakaway ‘bandit’ was simply too much for
Moscow. However, steps to avert the crisis getting out of hand were taken,
supported by certain factions in the Russian leadership. Nevertheless, it is
interesting to note that Dudaev’s popularity had plummeted by fall 1994. As
Anatol Lieven notes:

It was apparent to me when I visited Chechnya in August and September
1994 that Dudaev was extremely unpopular with much of the population,
that ordinary people in Grozny were infuriated by the collapse of wages,
public services and public order, and that his support was now largely based
on the more conservative mountain areas, and on his own presidential
guard.65

However, the Russian intervention united the Chechen nation behind Dudaev,
irrespective of what people otherwise thought of him. The testimonies of many
fighters in the war, recorded by foreign journalists, all point to the fact that most
fought solely for the nation or their family, and many did not even like or
support Dudayev. Hence it seems no exaggeration to claim that the Russian intervention actually prevented Dudayev’s eventual downfall in one way or another.

The failure of negotiations

The history of self-proclaimed Chechnya from 1992–94 is thus a history of economic debacle and worsening political problems; nevertheless negotiations of different kinds between Moscow and Grozny also took place during the entire period. These started immediately after Yeltsin’s abortive resort to military force in November 1991. The Russian parliament actually proposed sending a delegation to negotiate with ‘all political forces’ in Chechnya; however Dudayev declined the proposal, noting that negotiations were impossible until Russia recognized Chechnya’s ‘legally elected President and the Independence of Chechnya.’ Despite this type of statement, which were nevertheless quite frequent, the two sides held talks on over ten occasions during 1992 according to then-minister of nationalities Sergei Shakhrai.

The first talks took place in March in Sochi and were relatively unofficial in character, basically aimed at paving the way for more formal negotiations. Interestingly, the parties agreed on a basic formulation on the ‘recognition of political independence and state sovereignty’ of Chechnya: the parties tried to form a framework whereby Chechnya would be ‘independent’ and ‘sovereign’ but still tied to Russia by association or similar legal means. However, the Chechen side saw this meeting as a political victory. Indeed, the Chechen parliamentary chairman termed the discussions a recognition on Russia’s part of Chechnya’s independence. On 12 March, the Chechen parliament adopted a constitution which defined Chechnya as independent and as an equal subject of international law—the latter statement being the one that offended Moscow the most. Dudayev, at this point, nevertheless seems to have been ready to negotiate directly with Moscow, at least judging from some of his speeches—at other occasions his anti-Russian rhetoric was equally significant. But letters sent to Yeltsin in Spring 1992 speak of the need to ‘admit that errors and insulting mistakes were made by both sides…let us return to the sole base on which mutual understanding and a neighbourly atmosphere can be built.’ Indeed, Dudayev often stated his conviction that Chechnya needed to live with Russia. However, the controversy was that Moscow wanted Chechnya to be a part of Russia—in and not with.

In the meantime, however, Moscow—or certain forces there—planned a coup in Grozny. On 31 March, the day the Federation treaty between Moscow and the subjects of the Russian Federation was to be signed, only two would-be subjects refused to attend: Chechnya and Tatarstan. However other events were taking place in Grozny: a column of buses, filled with armed ‘putschists’ according to Yandarbiyev’s memoirs, entered Grozny in the morning and seized radio and TV stations, announcing that the Chechen opposition had assumed power and that
Doku Zavgayev would sign the Federation treaty in Moscow that very day. Similar (dis)information was being broadcast from Moscow as well. However, Dudayev’s national guard was soon successful in taking back the radio station; the guard did reportedly not even have to move on the TV station as armed civilians had already completed that task.\footnote{70}

Negotiations of a similar type took place in Moscow in late May, again headed by Yandarbiyev on the Chechen side, and confirmed the March agreement. In September however, the Chechen government announced that it had established the presence in Western Dagestan of a relatively large unit of Russia elite troops. Investigations showed that these had arrived there to suppress possible ‘bread riots’—a somewhat odd task for Spetsnaz. In any case local Chechens, Avars and Kumyks in the area physically blocked the unit on its way to the Chechen border, thwarting the operation. Later in September, new attempts at talks took place, this time between the Russian and Chechhyan parliaments. According to Magnusson, the Russian delegation went home with a feeling of popular dissatisfaction with Dudayev, which may be a reason for what happened next: the Russian leadership seems to have concluded that it could create a pretext for an intervention and depose Dudayev without too much trouble; however the point that was missed was that the opposition to Dudayev did not oppose his ideals of independence from Russia. In October, in any case, the Prigorodniy war broke out between the Ingush and Ossetians to Chechnya’s west.

As chapter six will examine more closely, the Russian armed intervention there served a double, if not triple purpose: besides quelling the warfare there and implicitly supporting North Ossetian paramilitary forces, the Russian army moved towards the undemarcated borderlands between Ingushetia and Chechnya, and it became clear that Russia was trying to test Grozny’s determination. As Russian forces entered three districts claimed by Chechnya on 10 November, Dudayev threatened war, and the Confederation of Peoples of the Caucasus threatened to send half a million volunteers to support him. The tense situation was resolved through negotiations, and the Russian troops pulled back. This short summary of events tells the reader only one thing: Moscow switched between attempts at military intervention and negotiations—a strategy that only exacerbated Dudayev’s already suspicious view of Russia and made negotiations in good faith impossible. To this naturally added the general problem that decision-making in Russia was ‘decentralized’ to such a point that different organs of the state acted totally independent and irrespective of one another. But Moscow was not the only side creating confusion. Dudayev’s erratic behavior had much the same effect; as Gall and de Waal quote Emil Pain, ‘one moment he seemed ready to make terms, the next he would take a hard line, utterly confusing Moscow policy-makers.’\footnote{71} Despite these facts one must note that a major problem was Moscow’s unwillingness to negotiate with Chechen government officials directly and officially. By comparison, the Russian agreement with Tatarstan of early 1994 was preceded by intense direct negotiations which never came into being in the case of Chechnya. According to Gail Lapidus:
Direct bilateral negotiations between officials of both governments at the highest level were never conducted. Indeed, a number of critics of Russian policy, including Tatarstan’s President Mintimer Shaimiev, have focused on the demonization of Dudayev, and President Yeltsin’s refusal to meet with him, as major policy errors. Dudayev himself was willing, even eager, to meet with Yeltsin, according to all accounts… However, the successful efforts of hard-line advisers around President Yeltsin to convince him that Dudayev was neither a serious nor a legitimate political actor ruled out the direct negotiations for which Dudayev had repeatedly called…the conditions proposed by Moscow and the names of those appointed to conduct talks with the Chechen side were further proof that the negotiations were not taken seriously.72

By January 1993, a working group with leading Chechen parliamentarians as well as Shakhrai and Ramazan Abdulatipov (an Avar and chairman of the Russian parliament’s council on nationalities) had worked out a draft proposal to negotiate a treaty on ‘the delimitation and mutual delegation of power’ between Chechnya and Russia. However, Dudayev strongly opposed the protocol and disagreed with several of its provisions, in particular the use of the term ‘delimitation of powers’ which he saw as compromising Chechnya’s independence. Moreover, Dudayev was instrumental in making negotiations difficult as he declared his unwillingness to see Shakhrai, a Terek Cossack and a supporter of the cause of the Cossacks, as the main negotiator on the Russian side.73 After this, the strategy of Yeltsin and Shakhrai towards Chechnya became one of avoiding any direct contacts with Dudayev. Meanwhile, Dudayev demanded equal negotiations; that is, either with the president of Russia or with its prime minister. However, Yeltsin himself seems at times to have been inclined to meet Dudayev. This was particularly the case in early 1994, after Khasbulatov returned to Chechnya, his political career in Moscow effectively terminated after his imprisonment after Yeltsin’s standoff with parliament in October 1993. When Khasbulatov returned, the popularity he commanded worried both Dudayev and Yeltsin, both of whom saw him as a threat. In January 1994 a draft agreement was reached between military forces of Russia and Chechnya which provided for increased military co-operation which would satisfy the security concerns of both parties. Nevertheless, nothing ensued from this agreement.

Gall and de Waal note that a meeting seems to have been planned during March–May 1994; however on 27 May a bomb almost killed Dudayev and his family; Dudayev naturally accused Russia even more hotly than usual, calling Yeltsin a drunkard on Russian television. After this, a meeting was out of the question.74 The Russian strategy turned into stronger support for the opposition in Chechnya and gradually increased military intervention.
The tragedy

Hence on 6 December a meeting was held between Grachev and Dudayev in Mozhdok, North Ossetia, where both parties agreed to seek a peaceful solution to the conflict. But while Grachev was trying to make peace, others were planning for war. After a meeting of the Russian security council on 9 December, Yeltsin ordered his government to restore order and disarm all armed factions in Chechnya. The Chechens were given until 15 December to disarm, while negotiations went on. In spite of this, Russian forces launched an attack on Chechnya from three directions on 11 December, four days before the expiration of the ultimatum. As the Chechens did not comply but unified around its leader to protect their newly won independence, war was a fait accompli.

The reasons for the war

The Russian behaviour towards Chechnya prompts a number of question. The first is why the conflict had to turn into an armed confrontation; the second is why the invasion happened in the end of 1994, three years after the Chechen declaration of independence. What was the imperative that forced Russia to regain control over Chechnya, regardless of the cost? In fact, Russia never accepted Chechnya’s independence, and as has been seen constantly sought to undermine Dudayev’s role with the aim of ‘restoring constitutional order’ in the breakaway republic.

One reason for the imperative of bringing Chechnya back to the Russian fold is the strategic importance Russia has traditionally assigned to the Caucasus in general and Chechnya in particular. Russia’s strategic interest in the Caucasus lies in keeping a buffer against the Islamic world to its South. This was a main reason for Russia’s advance in the Transcaucasus. And as the break-up of the Soviet Union meant the independence of the three Transcaucasian states, this was a formidable setback of a historical perspective for Russia. Hence for Russia, political control over the Transcaucasus remained a cornerstone of the country’s foreign policy priorities. On repeated occasions, Russian officials have reiterated their belief that the main threat to Russia is from the South. Former Defence Minister Pavel Grachev has excelled in painting the Muslim world and Islamic fundamentalism as a threat not only for Russia, but for the West as well. It follows that the North Caucasus military district is the single military district given most importance by Russia.

Russian officials have often cited the danger of secessionism spreading from Chechnya over the North Caucasus and to other parts of the Russian Federation. Accordingly, granting Chechnya independence would potentially have a snowball effect, as other republics of the federation would be incited to follow suit. This popular domino theory certainly played a role in the Russian determination to settle the question of Chechnya. However, this argument has obvious inconsistencies. The Chechen state was allowed to survive for three whole years
without any comparable movement erupting anywhere in Russia. Admittedly, Tatarstan and Bashkortostan had declared independence as well, but both of these republics came to an agreement with Moscow in 1994, before the Russian invasion of Chechnya started. So why did the Russian government not try to reach a similar solution with Chechnya? The answer to that question is to a large extent to be found in the deadlocked positions of Yeltsin and Dudayev, and their personal antagonism which prevented them to even sit at the negotiating table. Yeltsin, in particular, whose ego seems to have suffered greatly from the several humiliations Dudayev inflicted upon him, demanded the latter’s resignation as a precondition for negotiations.

Another issue that has often been mentioned is Chechnya’s importance in Russia’s oil industry. Although it is true that Chechnya for a time had a near-monopoly in the Soviet Union on certain types of aviation fuel, Chechnya’s oil production was by no means of any vital strategic importance for Moscow. In fact, both the oil and gas production of Chechnya totalled less than 1 per cent respectively of Russia’s total production. However, the importance of Chechnya in the transportation of Caspian oil from Azerbaijan and Kazakhstan is of a more distinctive nature. In fact, a direct reason for the war to erupt suddenly in the end of 1994 might have been the signing in autumn of 1994 of the Baku oil consortium, heavily contested by Russia, whereby the Azerbaijani state signed an agreement with Western oil companies on extracting large quantities of oil from the Caspian Sea shelf.

Although the agreement is signed, the issue of carrying the oil from the Caspian Sea to Europe is still undecided. Turkey and Azerbaijan, with some Western support, want to build a pipeline from Baku to the Turkish Mediterranean port of Ceyhan through the territories of Armenia, Georgia, or Iran, thus avoiding passage through Russia. Russia insists on shipping the oil through an existing pipeline to its Black Sea port of Novorossiysk. The crux is that this pipeline passes through Grozny. Western companies could not be counted on to support the Russian solution unless the North Caucasus, where the pipeline passes, was stable and calm. This despite the reluctance of the oil companies to finance the Baku-Ceyhan pipeline. Thus it was imperative to bring the rebellious Chechens under control. In a sense, they could be tolerated as long as they were only a disturbance. But now, they were a distinct obstacle in Russia’s oil politics in the Caspian Sea. This in turn meant that Chechnya was an obstruction in Russia’s attempt to exert its influence over the Transcaucasus.

A related issue is that the strategically important communications between Russia and the Caspian Sea and the South Caucasus pass through Chechnya—in particular the highway and the railway connecting Russia with Dagestan, Azerbaijan and Armenia.

Another frequently used argument was the increasing role of Chechnya as a hub of international crime, from which Chechens—who were and are blamed for most of Russia’s rising criminality—could safely pursue their policy of destabilizing Russia through narcotics and arms trade and hijacking of trains and
airplanes all over Russia. In this, the Russian arguments appealed to widely spread prejudices among Russians on the criminal nature of the Chechen people. Here again, the argument does not stand a closer analysis. Certainly, the Chechen community in Moscow and St Petersburg play a role in criminality in Russia. However, they are by no means alone in this. Other Caucasian nations as well as Russians stand for a great part of the rising crime rates as well. Even then, a war would hardly lessen the Chechens’ criminal activities in Russia. It would rather increase the tendency, due to increased frustration and desperation with the Russians.

If, then, the Russian arguments do not give a satisfactory answer to our questions, certain circumstances might enlighten our understanding of the issue. One is that on 12 December 1994 one year had passed since the Russian parliamentary elections. During this year, the president had no right to dissolve the Duma if it passed a non-confidence vote on the government. Now, Yeltsin had greater power to rule independently from a parliament he knew was against any armed intervention—as it had proved by revoking his state of emergency decree in 1991. A second circumstance is the change in the constellation of powers in Moscow. The December 1993 elections resulted in a dramatic upsurge in the popularity of the nationalist and Communist forces—the so-called red-browns. Since then, Yeltsin has constantly moved away from his liberal and reformist support base, and aligned his policy closer with the conservative and nationalist forces. Hence, his pillar of support was increasingly confined to the ‘power’ ministries, the army, and the security services.

Lastly, one must include purely attitudinal reasons for the war. Central figures in the Russian government which had a strong influence on Yeltsin, conscious of the loss of prestige and strength that came with the fall of the Soviet Union, were determined to put an end to the rebellion of a troublesome Muslim people in the Caucasus, which tarnished Russia’s position as a world power. Especially the fact that Grachev himself was forced to carry out the invasion earlier than intended due to pressure from hawks in the power ministries, especially the FSK, points in this direction.

Ib Faurby, a prominent scholar of military strategy, discerns three scenarios by which Moscow attempted to oust Dudayev from power. The first scenario presupposed that Dudayev’s opposition would grow stronger and that to encourage the opposition forces and to support them with money and weapons would suffice, and that ultimately a Moscow-friendly regime could be established in Dudayev’s place, without any direct Russian intervention. However, this scenario proved unrealistic in the summer and fall of 1994, as the opposition proved to weak to pose a serious threat to Dudayev’s power. Hence the first strategy, which was implemented from 1992 until the summer of 1994, failed. This leads us to the second scenario, which supposed that although the opposition would not challenge Dudayev’s power, it would at least be able to conquer parts of Chechnya and force a situation where Moscow could intervene with a ‘peacekeeping’ operation to prevent further bloodshed in a Chechen civil war.
Hence Moscow would intervene but would be able to color the action with humanitarian terms.

However, the November events where Russian direct intervention and subversion was blatantly exposed ruined the framework of the second strategy, which also failed after having been only implemented between summer and winter 1994. Moreover a full-scale Chechen civil war never occurred, largely due to the strong historical and cultural forces prohibiting Chechens from shedding Chechen blood; indeed the standoffs between Dudayev’s forces and the opposition never became very violent, as no side wanted to fire first, for fear of losing popularity and respect among the population—but also because of the fear for a blood feud.85 This left the Russian leadership with only one scenario: a direct Russian military operation against Dudayev’s regime. The decision to abandon the two first strategies and implement the third one seems to have been taken as late as at the security council meeting of 29 November. Hence the reasons for the military intervention being present, its timing are best explained by a combination of two factors: the actualization of Chechnya’s disturbing role with respect to the Azerbaijani oil consortium, and the failure of bringing down the Dudayev regime by means short of direct military intervention. Naturally, both factors depended on a belief that Chechnya would be easily subjugated.

Disastrous military intervention & steamroller tactics

The actual military invasion of Chechnya started on 11 December 1994, at 0700 hours.86 According to the initial military plan, three detachments were to enter Chechnya from three different directions and advance on Grozny. One detachment started from Mozhdok in Northern North Ossetia, another from Vladikavkaz, and a third from Dagestan in the east. Faurby outlines three phases of the offensive. In a first phase, these forces were supposed to encircle Grozny, leaving an opening to the south from which the Chechen forces could escape out of the city. At this phase, Grozny was not to be stormed. In the second phase, Dudayev’s forces would be pushed southward and isolated in the mountains, while the Russian forces gradually established control over the lowlands, and instituted the Moscow-friendly opposition in Dudayev’s place in Grozny. At this stage the Russians hoped to get popular support to switch to the opposition. The third and final phase was expected to be long-lasting, ranging up to perhaps three years, where the rebel forces in the mountains would gradually be isolated and eliminated.

As the events rapidly were to show, this plan was never materialized. As could have been predicted, the Russian forces soon ran into serious trouble. Both in Ingushetia and in Dagestan, the Russian army was stopped or otherwise hindered by the local population. Faced with this, Major general Ivan Barbichev, the commander of the western group, refused to use force against the civilian population, which slowed down the pace of the attack and led to an absence of co-ordination between the three forces. Interestingly, this refusal to obey orders
proved no hindrance in the general’s further career. However, the Russian forces
did enter Chechnya, and once there, they faced a much stronger resistance from
the Chechens than they had expected. Hence the Russian invasion forces were
forced to ask for large reinforcements from other parts of the country. This
embarrassing fact showed that the Russian army was guilty of one of the most
dangerous mistakes in military planning—underestimating the opponent.
Grachev’s ‘prophetic’ statement that Grozny could be taken in two hours by
paratroopers proved to be a source of ridicule. Only by the end of December did
the Russians reach Grozny; hence they had lost the main asset of an offensive
war: the effect of surprise.

However, the Russian advance did not lead to the rebels fleeing southward
through the corridor that had been left for them. On the contrary, they used the
corridor to receive reinforcements of troops and weapons. On 26 December, the
security council decided that Grozny should be conquered promptly, despite
objections from the military side on the readiness of their forces for such an attack.
The city was to be attacked from four directions, and the four detachments would
meet each other in the city centre.87 The plan was carried out on New Year’s
Eve, in an attempt to regain an effect of surprise. However, this plan failed as
well. Of the four main detachments, only one managed to reach Grozny’s centre,
while the three others hardly managed to enter the city.

This was due partly to the harsh resistance by the Chechen forces, which were
organized in groups of two to four men, equipped with anti-tank weapons. The
Russians made a series of tactical mistakes, among whom the gravest one was to
try to occupy a city with tanks, unprotected by infantry. These unprotected tanks
became easy targets for the small, mobile groups of Chechen defenders. The
planning of the operation was dismal. In a detailed study of the battle for Grozny,
Timothy Thomas quotes Nikolay Tsymbal as follows:

As far as I can judge, we have an infamous operation that lacks even an
integral plan. Military convoys are for some reason marking time on the
approaches to the city and regrouping. Military commanders have not even
worried about feeding soldiers. Nor about removing the dead and injured
from the battlefield, something we made sure was done during the large
scale World War II operations.88

As the storm of Grozny was a complete failure, the Russian army reverted to
well-known tactics dating back to the siege of Stalingrad: to use heavy artillery
and air to bomb the city, after which they conquered the city methodically block
by block. Only after two months did the Russian army manage to establish
control over the city—at a price of thousands of its own casualties, over 20,000
killed civilians, total destruction of the city and hundreds of thousands of
refugees.89 Furthermore, the Chechen resistance was not crushed; as they lost
control of the city, the Chechen defenders left it without a real fight and moved
back to other major settlements such as Argun, Gudermes, and Shali, where
heavy fighting continued. By May, the Russian army, with more support of air force bombings, managed to take control of most of the lowlands of Chechnya, whereas the defenders were pushed back into the mountains. In June, the Russian advance continued and Russian forces even entered the mountains and attacked Chechen positions there. At this point, the Chechens were at the verge of losing the war, and being forced to revert to becoming armed bands in the mountains while Russia consolidated control over Chechnya’s lowlands.

Budennovsk: a narrow escape from defeat

At this point came the highly publicized hostage taking led by Shamil Basayev in a hospital in Budennovsk, deep inside Russia proper. Besides the political implications of this event for both sides, with discussions on Chechens resorting to terrorism among others, it led to the military accord of 30 July 1995, which led to leading figures proclaiming that the war was over. According to the deal, an immediate ceasefire was implemented, while Chechen forces were supposed to surrender their weapons and Russian troops were partly to withdraw from Chechnya. Whereas this accord did lead to a temporary cessation of hostilities, it could never be fully implemented. Few weapons were turned over, and the scheduled exchange of prisoners did not take place. Furthermore the ceasefire never managed to prevent incidents from disturbing the process. Clashes still occurred, a Russian general was injured in an assassination attempt, and a bomb was disarmed at the presidential palace in Grozny. According to Faurby, the main effect of the accord was to enable Chechen soldiers to travel freely within Chechnya without being attacked by Russian forces. Hence they were able to penetrate into the Russian-held areas and regroup their forces. This also meant that the fighters were able to melt into the population again, and any previous frontlines dissolved as the Chechen and Russian forces were to be found all over Chechnya.

Towards the end of 1995, the tensions started to escalate into war. In mid December, sporadic fighting in Gudermes started to escalate into open warfare. The Chechen fighters first seemed to control the city, but soon lost it to the Russians. The war did not reerupt on all fronts at this point, however. While incidents rose in number, talks were still going on, and the Russians managed to hold ‘elections’ in the republic, which although being heavily criticized and boycotted by all forces loyal to Dudayev, reaffirmed Zavgayev’s prime ministership in Moscow’s puppet government. From the middle of February, fighting intensified on several fronts, with Chechens blowing up gas pipelines as the Russians were pounding Dudayev’s base in the mountains near the Ingush border, Bamut, with heavy artillery. Within Grozny itself, the Chechens exposed the fragility of Russian rule by carrying out a six hour long battle in the city centre.
Following these developments, the Russian army staged a renewed offensive in March, only to experience Yeltsin’s talk about withdrawal and peace negotiations in April. This led to heavy criticism and doubt concerning the decision-making in Moscow, with speculations of the existence of several independent power centres in the Kremlin, acting without concert or even antagonistic to each other. General Aleksandr Lebed, among others, blasted the President for having betrayed the soldiers in Chechnya by sending them into battle with heavy casualties and then immediately withdrawing the forces from the areas they had just conquered. Lebed on another occasion alleged that Yeltsin was not even signing his own orders.98 The month of April was also the time of an important incident in the war. On 16 April, Johar Dudayev was killed in a Russian helicopter attack on the settlement of Gekhi-Chu, not 100 kilometres from Grozny.99 Although Russian officials decline allegations that the attack was directed personally against Dudayev, evidence came up almost immediately which proved Moscow’s direct intent to kill the Chechen leader. In fact, Dudayev at the time of the attack was speaking with mediators on a radio telephone connection. It seems as if the Russians used high technology equipment which enabled them to localize the village in which Dudayev was staying, and thus launch an attack on the village, and succeed in eliminating him.100 However great a blow this was for the Chechens, the loss of
their leader did not change their determination to fight for independence, as the Russians might have thought. Rather, their determination became even stronger, although Dudayev’s successor, Zelimkhan Yandarbiev, initiated negotiations shortly after coming to power. Yandarbiev had been the founder of the Vainakh Democratic party in 1991, and had from the start been Dudayev’s chief ideologue.101 His belief in independence and the struggle against Russia was as strong as Dudayev’s. Nevertheless, although he was nominated as Dudayev’s successor, his power over the military leaders such as Aslan Maskhadov, the chief of staff, or Shamil Basayev, was distinctively less compelling than Dudayev’s. He also lacked the charismatic personality of Dudayev and his ability to make the people rally behind him, being more of a poet and intellectual in character.

Despite the negotiations, the war went on. At the beginning of May, Urus-Martan was shelled by Russian forces, which was significant since until then the population of the town had supported the opposition to Dudayev; however with this event the inhabitants sided with Yandarbiev. This is one of many examples of how Russia alienated the population which was not already against it, and pushed it into the arms of the rebel government.102 Despite these incidents, a ceasefire was signed on 30 May, which was supposed to be followed by disarmament negotiations.103 However, this ceasefire was not respected by certain elements on both sides, which again points to the lack of authority of both the Russian government and the Chechen leadership over their own forces. On 10 June, an agreement on Russian troop withdrawal was signed. This agreement and Yeltsin’s willingness to compromise at the time in retrospect seems to have been highly circumstantial. Indeed, Yeltsin believed that unless he managed to bring an end to the highly unpopular war, he would not be reelected in the June presidential elections.

The Chechen comeback & victory

On 17 June, Aslan Maskhadov announced that the Chechen leadership would not initiate any armed hostilities until after the second round of the Russian parliamentary elections.104 However, already on 23 June, tension started to rise as the Chechens protested against a Russian military build-up near Vedu, in Southeastern Chechnya. By the beginning of July, the Russians, who had profited from the truce by regrouping their forces and receiving reinforcements, started to carry out provocations against the Chechens, including the issuing of several ultimata against the leadership. Meanwhile, the Russians began to shell Chechen bases in southern Chechnya. On 9 July, the settlement of Gekhi was heavily attacked by air, and Chechnya started to slide back into full-scale war.105 At this point, however, it was quite clear even to international observers that Russia was the party that had provoked the fighting. With Yeltsin safely reelected, the administration decided to take a different tack’ on the breakaway republic. This was heavily criticized by the US state department, among others.106 As the fighting continued, the Chechen forces retaliated massively.
In the worst outbreak of hostilities in several months, a Chechen force of almost 1,500 fighters headed by Shamil Basayev on 6 August launched a massive attack on Grozny. This attack was very awkwardly timed for Moscow, as Yeltsin was to be formally sworn in as president on 9 August, only three days later. Indeed, it seems as if the Chechens, who already had showed a certain ability to humiliate Yeltsin, chose this as a punishment for the latter’s two-faced behaviour during the Summer of 1996. The presidential inauguration was indeed troubled by these events, and matters were only made worse as on that very day over 7,000 Russian troops were surrounded by a far smaller number of Chechen rebels in Grozny. By 7 August, the rebels had established control over most of Grozny; by 12 August they controlled the whole city. Meanwhile, Yeltsin was forced to appoint Aleksandr Lebed, a known opponent of the war, as his personal envoy in Chechnya to find a negotiated solution to the conflict. On his appointment, Lebed reiterated his belief that the conflict could not be solved by force. Quite rapidly, Lebed was able to move onto talking terms with Aslan Maskhadov, who personally headed the negotiations on the Chechen side. On 23 August, a ceasefire came into effect, and on 31 August, Lebed announced that he had reached an agreement in the Dagestani settlement of Khasavyurt with the Chechen leadership on pursuing peace.

To recapitulate, the war in Chechnya led to the total destruction of Grozny and many other Chechen towns and villages. According to estimates, the death toll in Chechnya ranges between 45,000 and 60,000 people. Compared with the Afghan war, the Chechen war was far more lethal for the Russian army. 1984 was the worst year for Russia in Afghanistan, with almost 2,500 soldiers being killed. In Chechnya, the Russian losses surpassed this number within four months of the intervention, a figure which shows all too clearly just how deadly the war was for Russia. At its most intense, the shelling of Grozny, counted by the number of explosions per day, surpassed the shelling of Sarajevo by a factor of at least fifty. Any visitor to Sarajevo will see that the city is largely already rebuilt and that most buildings are only lightly damaged. By contrast, Grozny has literally been razed to the ground. A formal peace treaty was signed in May which finalized the war. Since then and more clearly since the fall of 1997, the Russian government or at the very least certain elements in it have actually implicitly recognized Chechnya’s statehood.

Why did the Russian army fail to invade Chechnya?

The question that comes to mind, then, is why did the feared and respected Russian military, the inheritor of the Red Army, fail to squish a separatist movement in an area the size of Belgium and with a population of less than one million? A number of reasons can be raised to answer this question, especially in the military field.

First of all, despite Grachev’s insistence that the operation begin at earliest on 15 January, the invasion was carried out at a stage when the Russian army was
not ready for it. The soldiers did not have adequate combat training; even the pilots had only one tenth of the training they needed to carry out bombings of specific targets. More importantly, they were not trained for city combat, and did not even possess correct and updated maps of Grozny. The troops also lacked basic supplies, even warm food. The numerical superiority that has always been the trademark of the Russian military strategy, and is especially necessary in an offensive war, was absent. As Mihalka quotes a Russian military source, the moment chosen for the invasion was the worst possible. Reserves had been reduced, old soldiers driven out, and new ones did not even know how to use a weapon. Indeed, the first deputy commander of the ground forces, Colonel General Eduard Vorobyov, refused to lead the invasion, as the forces were not ready for it. Sometimes, the Russian army suffered so severely from a lack of soldiers, that eighteen-year-olds with only two or three months of training were sent to fight.

Whereas the Russian government had boasted of Dudayev’s unpopularity, it later explained its failure by the numerical superiority of the Chechens—the plentiful existence of volunteers being a factor Moscow had not accounted for. According to Western military observers, Dudayev commanded a regular army of perhaps 15,000 fighters at its height, especially during large operations such as the reconquest of Grozny. The troops at the disposal of the Russian army, needless to say, far exceeded this figure. However, co-ordination problems plagued the Russian army. This was the case because the operation was not under the leadership of any one unit of the armed forces, rather being a co-operation between the ministry of interior, the army, the FSK and the border troops. This circumstance led to tremendous problems of co-ordination, as the leaders of the various units often had conflicting intentions and plans. In certain operations, Russian soldiers were even killed by friendly fire. Even among the highest ranking leaders in the Kremlin, the ideas of how to conduct the war differed greatly; furthermore, the fact that the politicians had a great influence over the decisions led to a number of operations being carried out against the military leaders’ better knowledge; the chief example is of course the first storm on Grozny on New Year’s eve 1994/95.

However significant the military problems might have been, the main factor in Russia’s failure was the low morale of the troops. Totally contrary to the main historical task of the Soviet army—to protect the Russian motherland—the operation in Chechnya was carried out within Russia against Russia’s perceived own citizens. Hence the Russian soldiers were very poorly motivated for the war effort, and this fact was made worse by the presence of Russian media—the Chechen war has actually been called Russia’s first televised war—which showed the misery of the soldiers and the demonstrations against it in Russia. Furthermore, the war was to a large extent a war waged against civilians, and on top of everything many of the civilian casualties were ethnic Russians. Hence desertions were commonplace, and the morale was so low that Russian soldiers were ready to sell their weapons to the Chechen soldiers. The condition of the
soldiers was also very bad; in fact most young Russians who join the army are actually in poor health, badly educated, and with a criminal background.\textsuperscript{115} Reports have also noted that the Russian soldiers passed most of their time either drunk on cheap Vodka or high on some form of drugs.

On the Chechen side, on the other hand, motivation was high. The Chechens were fighting to protect their lands in the tradition of their forefathers, against the hated Russian invader. They did not seem to show much fear of dying, either; one anecdote, whether true or not, illustrates this matter: during the storming of Grozny, a Russian tank is supposed to have become lost in the city. In front of it, a Chechen fighter jumps out from a building, unarmed expect for a knife between his teeth. Seeing the determination in his eyes, the Russian soldier supposedly understands that he will never be able to win a war against these Chechens, and jumps out of his tank and surrenders. In fact, whole units of Russian interior ministry forces are reported to have left the war and gone home; General Babichev’s refusal to attack civilians has already been cited.

To sum up, the war in Chechnya did not at all turn out to be the same glorious victory that the United States had experienced in Kuwait. On the contrary, Chechnya proved to be just another Afghanistan, with the only difference that this war was even more deadly, even less successful, and that the opponents were even more determined.

Consequences of the war for Russia\textsuperscript{116}

If at this point one recalls some of Russia’s intentions and objectives in the Chechnya war—that is, those that were not directed simply by imperial or colonial ideals—the gravity of the matter appears in a different light. In fact, Moscow saw Chechnya as a dangerous precedent that could lead to a domino-effect and spread separatist tendencies into other North Caucasian republics and throughout the Russian Federation. Furthermore, Chechnya was a destabilizing factor in the Caucasus and an obstacle in projecting Russia’s political and economic influence into Transcaucasia. Perhaps the most direct reason for the war to be undertaken suddenly in the end of 1994 after three years of de facto Chechen independence was the signing in autumn of 1994 of the Baku oil consortium, heavily contested by Russia, whereby the Azerbaijani state signed an agreement with Western oil companies on extracting large quantities of oil from the Caspian Sea shelf.\textsuperscript{117}

Using the complexities of the three Transcaucasian states, Russia in the 1990s managed to regain control over Armenia and a strong leverage on Georgia through the Russian military bases Georgia was forced to accept on its territory, although these were never ratified by the Georgian parliament. Moreover Russia signed accords enabling Russian troops to be stationed on the Georgian border with Turkey and the Armenian border with Turkey and Iran. Only Azerbaijan has obstinately refused to accept the stationing of Russian troops on its territory, including its borders. A rebellious Chechen republic (and later an unstable
Dagestan, as will be discussed below) between Russia and Transcaucasia is seen in Moscow as a serious impediment to Russia’s influence in the entire region. Thus the need to ‘bring order’ in Chechnya, which had been present all along, became immediate. With Chechnya firmly under Russian control, the Western companies would tend to favour the Azerbajani oil being shipped through Russia, where there was the only existing pipeline—which would eliminate the cost of building a new pipeline.

However the Russian policy has, again, been counterproductive. It is hard to see how vast quantities of oil can safely be shipped through Chechen territory within a foreseeable future, especially given the renewed war in 1999 and the increasing instability in the entire North Caucasus. The Turkish-Azeri suggestion of a new pipeline to the Mediterranean was not initially viewed favourably by the consortium, which did not see it as a safe solution given the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict, Georgia’s internal problems with Abkhazia and South Ossetia, and the Kurdish PKK rebellion in south-eastern Anatolia. The main problem has nevertheless been the expected cost of the proposed pipeline, ranging between the US$2.7 million estimated by Turkey and the close to $4 million estimated by the consortium. Further, the staunch US opposition to a drawing of the pipeline over Iran made this option difficult despite the fact that certain oil companies, including American companies, favoured this option. After Moscow started its war in Chechnya, the Iranian and Turkish solutions gained strength and popularity; thus Russia might have lost the chance of carrying the bulk of Azeri oil precisely due to its Chechen war.

Another factor in the Russian decision, as stated above, was the fear of Chechnya’s example to be followed by other autonomous republics of the Russian Federation, especially areas such as Bashkortostan and Tatarstan, where separatist ideas have been strong. In this respect, one might think that the brutality and recklessness of the Russian invasion in Chechnya would deter other like-minded forces in other republics of Russia. But whereas this logic is in many ways correct, the risks of the conflict spreading to other areas are very real. It should be noted that Russia’s military engagement in Tajikistan did not deter the Chechens from pursuing their aims. Russia is now waging a war on two fronts, and given the abysmal performance of the Russian army, a doubt can seriously be raised on Russia’s ability to cope with yet other rebel movements. Furthermore, Russia’s actions in both Tajikistan and Chechnya are understood by many Muslims as a war not only against its own minorities but also against Islam. This is a factor not to be underestimated, especially in the North Caucasus where Soviet rule never managed to significantly decrease the importance of Islam.

The most direct danger, from the Russian perspective, would be the rebellion spreading to Dagestan and/or Ingushetia. Throughout history, Dagestan has risen against Russia together with the Chechen in many instances; however the socio-economic characteristics of Dagestan are in many respects different from those of Chechnya. Dagestan is dependent upon Russian aid for 80 per cent of its budget—a factor which might have influenced the calm attitude of the republic’s
leadership. Another factor is that the leadership in Dagestan was not renewed in the same way as in Chechnya, at the dismemberment of the Soviet Union. In fact, scholars have observed the continuation of ‘Soviet hegemony’ in Dagestan:

While Soviet hegemony might have ended, an indigenous, Sovietized elite within Dagestan maintains Soviet structures and Soviet power... The Dagestani government’s ‘subservient’...approach to Moscow would seem to confirm this view of a Sovietized Dagestani leadership.

Thus it is clear that the lack of response on the part of Dagestan to the Chechen war was explainable by the persistence of a Moscow-oriented government in the Republic. In fact, an independent Chechen republic to the immediate west of Dagestan was a potential danger for the Dagestani leaders, as it indirectly threatened their own power position. Just as Dudayev had overthrown the Sovietized leadership of his republic (personified by Doku Zavgayev, the leader of the Supreme Soviet in the republic), the Dagestani leadership saw the same risk for themselves. If the attitudes of the Dagestani leadership is indifferent to the fate of its Chechen neighbours, the same cannot be said of the Dagestani people. First of all, the common religion and the existence of the Naqshibandi and Qadiri Sufi brotherhoods in both republics is an important factor, especially in conjunction with the perception of the Russian war against Islam. The tariqats have historically answered promptly to the Qu’ranic duty to wage jihad to reconquer territories lost to infidel invaders—their response has usually been much stronger than that of the Ulama, that is the official religious leaders.

In this context, it should be recalled that the concept of ghazawat (which the Chechen leaders use to call on other Muslim peoples to rise, to enflame the whole Caucasus in a holy war against Russia) historically has a distinct appeal in Dagestan. The ghazawat created a tradition which forged strong links between the Chechen and Dagestani peoples. This is just one element of the closely interconnected history of the Vainakh and the Dagestani peoples; another is the Confederation of the (Mountain) Peoples of the Caucasus, which was created in 1989 with the immediate aim of protecting the interests of the Abkhaz in their confrontation with Georgia. The confederation was actually in a sense the recreation of the ‘Confederated Mountain Republic’, existing between 1918 and 1921, which was led by the Chechens and the Dagestanis.

In fact, the war already spilled over into Dagestan on at least one occasion. In January 1996, a group of rebels led by Salman Raduyev raided a Russian helicopter base in Kizlyar, in Dagestan. They were forced to retreat into the small village of Pervomaiskoye on their way back to the Chechen border, with hostages, trying to negotiate their safe return. The Russian army answered by an all-out attack on the village, which was all but leveled to the ground. A Dagestani member of parliament is reported to have condemned Dagestan’s decision to side with Moscow and not with Dudayev, seeing the devastation of the village.
Thus Russia’s war in Chechnya, in a way, has led to an increased risk of spreading the rebellion. The end of the war left the entire North Caucasus in limbo, with an unstable and devastated Chechnya in its midst. The rampant criminality in Chechnya in fact soon spread to neighbouring regions, as will be discussed below.

In summary, the war has counteracted Russia’s own interests in controlling the flow of the Caspian oil and has led to a lesser degree of Russian control and influence both in the North Caucasus and in Transcaucasia. It has revealed the abysmal condition of the Russian armed forces, emptied Russia’s treasury, weakened the political consensus in Russia to a level of non-existence, and led to a condemnation of Human rights abuses by the West—although the Western reaction, in general, can only be termed lame.

**International reaction & attitudes**

From the outset of the Chechen war, virtually all international players rushed to proclaim the crisis an internal Russian affair. This was the case equally for the leaders of Western, Islamic or Third World countries. Initially, there seemed to be a consensus that Chechnya should not be allowed to become an obstacle in the Western relationship with Russia and Yeltsin. It was simply not seen as enough a reason to severe relations with an ‘emerging democratic Russia’.

The United States

The United States was from the beginning very careful in its stance towards the conflict. US secretary of state, Warren Christopher, even made a misplaced statement comparing the war in Chechnya with the American civil war, in an obvious support of Russia’s purposes with the intervention. However, as the Human Rights violations became blatantly exposed in mass media, it turned increasingly difficult to defend this view. By early 1995, the United States government saw itself compelled to voice its mild criticism of the Russian conduct. President Clinton expressed his disappointment, notably after pressure from the republican-led senate, which had long been criticizing Clinton for his fixation with Yeltsin. The US administration, however, never even threatened to impose any conditions on economic aid to Russia, although Congress repeatedly advocated this. The criticism remained weak, as the US contended that Russia had ‘not fulfilled all of its commitments under the OSCE and the Helsinki final Act’, which clearly is an understatement of gross dimensions. The very statement that the Human Rights violations were an internal matter of Russia’s, furthermore, show a very poor knowledge of international law. Indeed, it is a cornerstone of international humanitarian law that mass violations of Human Rights can never be considered the internal matters of any state, but transcend boundaries and are a matter of concern for the entire international community.
Russian foreign minister, Kozyrev, was even forced to acknowledge this at a later stage.\textsuperscript{128}

\textbf{Western Europe}

The European states and the EU adopted a tougher stance from the beginning. Although they respected Russia’s territorial integrity and affirmed that Chechnya was a part of Russia, the criticism of Human Rights violations was substantially stronger. The EU commissioner, van den Broek, condemned the disproportionate use of force by the Russian army. Alain Juppe, then French foreign minister, issued a statement that the EU considered using economic pressures on Russia to compel it to respect Human Rights standards. An interim accord and a partnership agreement between the EU and Russia were cancelled, while the union ‘utterly condemned atrocities against civilians in violation of basic Human Rights.’\textsuperscript{129} Certain European states, notably the Scandinavian and Baltic countries, advocated sanctions against Russia.

\textbf{The Islamic World}

The reaction of the Muslim world against the brutalities committed against a Muslim nation had a natural potential to be much stronger than those of the Western World. However, the popular reaction was far stronger than the response of the governments of Muslim countries. Perhaps this is natural to a certain extent, but the fact remains that the response from the Islamic world to Russia’s conduct remained very silent—in fact more silent than what could have been expected, even after the meek response to the events in Bosnia-Herzegovina. The two most directly affected countries were Turkey and Iran, both of which border the Transcaucasus. Turkey has a considerable North Caucasian, including Chechen, minority (as do Jordan, Israel and Syria but in much lesser numbers). The Turkish government hence has had to take into account its popular opinion, which was vocal in staging demonstrations in Istanbul and Ankara. Notably, the Turkish nationalist ‘Gray Wolves’ have been lobbying for Turkish recognition of Chechnya and the supplying of arms to Dudayev. It is interesting to note that the Chechen government has an unofficial ‘embassy’ in a villa on the Bosphorus, which is maintained and funded by the nationalist party. Russia has also accused Turkey of supplying aid and technology to the Chechens, most notably the rebels’ communication systems.\textsuperscript{130} It is also widely believed that the said Gray Wolves organized arms shipments to Chechnya, probably with, at least partially, the knowledge of Turkish authorities.

At the same time, however, Turkey had to consider its own Kurdish secessionist problem, which actually ruled out any direct support for Chechnya as Russia was constantly hinting at its ability to support the PKK and the Kurds.\textsuperscript{131} For this reason, Turkey was again caught in a precarious balance, unable to pursue an independent policy, very much like the case had been in the
Armenian-Azerbaijani conflict over Nagorno-Karabakh. Iran, likewise, has remained comparatively silent on the Chechen issue, but for totally different reasons. As with Turkey, Iran has been under strong domestic pressure to support the fate of Muslims in Chechnya, as well as in Tajikistan, both nearby areas where Russia is seen as systematically slaughtering Muslims. Nevertheless, Iran in the post-Cold War era has developed very close relations with Russia, with which it has common strategic interests: first, keeping Turkey’s influence in the Caucasus and Central Asia low; and second, as regards the oil and gas resources of the Caspian Sea, where both Iran and Russia press for a joint exploitation of resources. Russia, moreover, has been supplying Iran with both materials and technicians for its nuclear programme, and Russia has actually turned out to be one of Iran’s few friends in an otherwise hostile world. Hence for different reasons, both Turkey and Iran—just like the United States—have had to assign a lower priority to promoting the Human Rights of the Chechen people, when compared with their own national interests.

In most other Muslim countries, from Libya to Indonesia including Egypt, Jordan, and Pakistan, demonstrations have been held in support of the Chechens. However, these countries all lack the position held by Turkey or Iran with regard to pressurizing Russia. Saudi Arabia, however, is alleged to have donated funds to the Chechen side. However, Russia has in general had to suffer a severing of relations with the Muslim world, as it increasingly is being depicted as an anti-Muslim country, supporting the Bosnian Serbs, the Armenians in Karabakh, and bloodily suppressing Tajik and Chechen Muslims. The Organization of the Islamic Conference (OIC) on one occasion also condemned Russia for its indiscriminate bombing of civilian areas.

Eastern Europe & the CIS

None of Eastern Europe or the independent republics of the former Soviet Union saw Russia’s invasion of Chechnya as an isolated event. To a much higher degree than in the West, the leaders of these countries saw Russia’s invasion of Chechnya as confirming a larger pattern: Russia’s switching from a pro-Western and co-operative policy to a more introvert, revisionist attitude, which aimed at restoring the status and borders of the former Soviet Union. Mohiaddin Mesbahi has called this a change from an ‘atlanticist’ to a ‘neo-eurasianist’ policy, the proponents of the latter being concerned by Russia’s loss of power and influence in the former Soviet south, whence the major threat to Russia is seen as emanating: the perceived Islamic threat. For the republics of the Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS) and Eastern Europe, this policy change is of utmost importance as it entails a Russian objective to reassert its influence over the areas lost with the fall of the Soviet Union. Reports have shown in detail how Russia is systematically interfering in the affairs of the CIS states, thereby jeopardizing their independence. Hence Poles and Balts, especially, have been among the most vocal supporters of Chechnya’s struggle for
independence, adopting slogans such as ‘Today Grozny, tomorrow Kiev, the next
day Warsaw’. Polish delegates to international bodies such as the Council of
Europe have refused to use the term ‘separatists’ for the Chechen fighters, arguing
that the Chechens never agreed to accede to Russia; similarly high Polish
officials have publicly supported the Chechens’ right to self-determination. A
number of conferences on Chechnya have taken place in Poland with the
participation of the Chechen government, to Russia’s dismay, and a Chechen
‘information office’ has been opened in the Polish capital.

The Baltic republics, in particular Estonia, feel particularly indebted to Johar
Dudayev. In early 1991, Dudayev was the head of a strategic bomber unit in
Tartu, Estonia. When the Soviet army wanted to fly in anti-riot troops to
suppress the Balts’ nationalist demonstrations, Dudayev refused to grant the planes
landing permission, as he refused to allow troops to suppress unarmed civilians
and a democratically elected government. All three republics seem to have
been very close to recognizing Chechnya’s independence; hence it came as no
surprise when the Estonian government supported the Chechens’ right to self-
determination. Estonia’s defence minister even declared that ‘if the time comes,
we’ll fight like Chechnya.’ In February 1995, the Estonian parliament
unanimously called for the recognition of Chechnya, a move which prompted
an immediate and harsh Russian reaction. In Latvia, a majority of the
parliamentarians wrote an open letter to the Russian Duma condemning ‘Russian
imperialism and scorched earth tactics’ and accusing Russia of committing a
Genocide. In Lithuania, 46 of 56 municipalities of the country signed a letter to
the parliament urging for the recognition of Chechnya.

Ukraine has also been one of Russia’s main critics in the action, the Ukrainian
parliament having debated several times a resolution condemning Russia’s
conduct. Ukraine has also been accused by Russia of sending mercenaries to
support the Chechen rebels; however Ukraine has rejected the claim although
acknowledging that a limited number of Ukrainian nationals do fight as
volunteers on the Chechen side. Russian complaints of mercenaries do not
limit themselves to Ukraine. Evidence has been found of citizens of Estonia,
Latvia, Lithuania, Azerbaijan, Georgia, Belarus, and Poland fighting on the
Chechen side. In addition, a number of Abkhaz and other North Caucasian
Mountain Peoples have supported the Chechens in a similar way that the
Chechens came to the rescue of the Abkhazians in their war with Georgia. It
should be noted, however, that the North Caucasian solidarity was considerably
stronger in the Abkhaz case, for a variety of reasons, including the institutional
problems of North Caucasian Mountain Peoples co-operation.

In the Transcaucuses, Azerbaijan has constantly been accused of sending
mercenaries to Chechnya. Russia has even accused Azerbaijan of sending a whole
army contingent to Chechnya, and for a time sealed off the Azeri–Russian border.
The accusations must nevertheless be refuted as unrealistic. As Russia’s own
ambassador in Azerbaijan, Valter Shoniya, has noted, ‘if Azerbaijan had any
volunteers, they would go to Karabakh.’ Nevertheless it seems certain that
isolated groups of Azeri Grey Wolves have participated in the war, as have Georgian nationalists true to the late President Gamsakhurdia.

Taken together, it is clear that the Chechen war has alarmed the Eastern European and CIS states to a much higher degree than other countries. These states are still the most vulnerable to Russian expansionism, and are the ones that have perhaps needed to see the reality of the Russian conduct in Chechnya: This is not a matter isolated to Chechnya or the Caucasus but one that deserves to be given importance to by the West as well. However, the influence of these countries worldwide is low, as the Western countries are committed to pursuing a policy of appeasement towards Russia.

The International Court of Justice

An interesting aspect of international reactions to the crisis has been the stance of the International Court of Justice (ICJ). The ICJ actually presented a very independent attitude as compared to Western states, a stance which has even been termed revolutionary by certain international lawyers. For example, it urged the Council of Europe to refuse Russia membership, and moreover appealed to the United States to freeze a US$6.8 billion IMF loan to Russia, deploiring the bleak reaction to the ‘enormous’ crimes committed by the Russian military. This undoubtedly points to an increasing involvement in world affairs of the ICJ, which until today has not had a practice of taking a stance on issues in this way.

**Legal considerations: the decolonization aspect**

When it comes to legal considerations the issue of the Chechen state is complicated, and the legality of the Chechen Republic that emerged in 1991 is indeed contested on good grounds. The Russian argument is clear: Chechnya’s proclamation of independence of 1 November, 1991, is seen as illegal, as Chechnya was an integral part of the Russian Federation—the proclamation was a breach of Russia’s territorial integrity. Similarly, Dudayev’s election as president was also illegal since there was no provision for a presidency in the Chechen-Ingush Autonomous Republic, and as it was carried out by methods and agents having no legitimacy. Consequently, Russia had every right to bring back ‘constitutional order’ in Chechnya, with the use of force if necessary. Thus the war is an internal, constitutional matter of Russia. Direct legal references are also given. The Russian constitution cannot be used in this case since it entered into force long after the declaration of independence.

However, the Soviet Constitution of October 1977, and the April 1978 constitution of the Russian Socialist Federative Soviet Republic (RSFSR) can be applied. According to the relevant provisions, a Union Republic had the right to secession, which was not granted to Autonomous Republics, which was the status of Chechen-Ingushetia. This also explains why Baltic and Transcaucasian states, for instance (which were Union Republics) were granted independence but not
Chechnya. Another, additional explanation is that there is no precedent of a Chechen state to base the claims of the Chechen people on. The right of peoples to self-determination is not applicable either, as peoples are not the subjects but the objects of international law, although they are principally granted the right to self-determination. International law is the law of sovereign states only. Following this view, being the official Russian line and supported in the West as well, the only legal criticism that can be voiced against Russia is the massive breach of Human Rights that have been carried out by the Russian army, which constitute a breach of Russia’s obligations to international treaties and conventions in the Human rights field, including the Helsinki final act.152

However strong these arguments have been perceived as being, they are by no means unchallengeable. As far as self-determination is concerned, it should be recalled that the Chechens are not a national minority (as they have no mother nation abroad), nor is Chechnya a mere province of Russia. The Chechens are a people, with a clearly distinct and defined language, a culture and a history of their own, and living in a well-defined territory. A national minority (with a homeland in another state), for instance, has according to principles of international law—that can certainly be criticized on moral grounds—the right to cultural and political self-determination within the framework of the state to which it ‘belongs’—not the right to secession. However, the Chechens, being a people, can claim with some justification that they are the direct holders of the right to self-determination. Thus their claim cannot simply be ignored on the basis of international law being the law of sovereign states. The fact that they do not possess a sovereign state is the result of over two centuries of colonial rule. Lack of statehood has not been considered an obstacle for other colonies’ right to self-determination. Neither should it be in the case of Chechnya. Moreover, the cited state-centric approach to international law is challenged, especially in the sphere of Human Rights, and peoples and even individuals can, under certain circumstances, become subjects of international law.153 Naturally, self-determination does not imply the right to secession or a state of one’s own. Especially given the existence in the Russian federation of entities claiming to be sovereign states but that are associated with the Russian Federation (Tatarstan, Bashkortostan), the right of Chechnya to form an independent state is certainly dubious.

Secondly, it is argued that Chechnya had no right to secession under the provisions of the Soviet constitution. But when the declaration of independence was issued, the Soviet Union was already falling apart. Two months later, it ceased to exist. And when the Russian Federation itself seceded from the Soviet Union, the Soviet constitution could logically no longer be implemented on Russian soil. Thus the argument that the Soviet constitution gave no right for autonomous republics to secede becomes difficult to pursue, if Russia itself no longer belongs to the Soviet Union. In fact, as one scholar has argued, the Chechen declaration of independence came during a period of constitutional vacuum in Russia. In the words of Soili Nysten-Haarala:
Chechnya-Ichkeria has proclaimed its Declaration of independence during a time of constitutional vacuum in Russia, just as Finland did in 1917. Like Finland, Chechnya had been forced to become a part of Russia. Any constitution enacted outside Chechnya cannot impose on her the duty to be ‘an essential part’ of Russia.¹⁵⁴

Although this precedent to the Chechen case is interesting—a constitutional vacuum did exist in the former Soviet Union in late 1991 and 1992, the legal procedures to be adopted in such cases have never been clearly defined, and thus it is difficult to argue what provisions are relevant or not. There is definitely no international legal provision that declares a right to secession in such situations.

Interestingly, there exists too a precedent for a Chechen state which is used as a legal argument on which to base the demand for independence. This is the Confederated Mountain Republic, which was proclaimed in 1918 and was recognized by Turkey, Germany, Austro-Hungary and even the new Soviet government in Moscow. A delegation of this confederated republic was even invited to the Paris peace conference in 1919. Marie Bennigsen Broxup argues that ‘this precedent, which is forgotten in the West and in Russia, gives an indisputable legal basis to the independence struggle of the North Caucasus and of Chechnya.’¹⁵⁵ Whether this claim can be substantiated is another matter.

Whatever conclusions one may draw from the legal debate are actually, fortunately or unfortunately, largely irrelevant. As in the case of Nagorno-Karabakh, both parties can argue certain elements of international law in their favour, and hence the legal deadlock is as impenetrable as the political deadlock. However, this section has sought to show that there is a certain measure of legal ambiguity in the question, that the legal approach espoused by Russian and many Western observers is not without flaws.

The post-war era

Russian-Chechen relations since 1996

The Khasavyurt agreement did not include any provision on Chechnya’s further status. Nevertheless it stipulated that the settlement of this issue is left to be decided on 31 December 2001. According to Russian prime minister, Viktor Chernomyrdin, a referendum held five years after the establishment of normal living conditions in Chechnya should decide the state affiliation of the republic.¹⁵⁶ Further, in accordance with the agreement, both Chechen and Russian forces were withdrawn from Grozny. This agreement was met with jubilation in Chechnya, save the puppet government of Doku Zavgayev, who denounced it as a major provocation. In fact, the agreement meant a de facto recognition of the rebel leadership as a legitimate government in
Chechnya, especially as Lebed appeared unprepared to accept the legitimacy of the Zavgayev government, which was not even included in the talks.

In Russia, the agreement was greeted with relief among the population, but not among great parts of the leadership. Indeed, many observers would agree with Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn’s statement that the agreement meant that Russia lost the war in Chechnya. Furthermore, Lebed’s rapid success in reaching an agreement in a war that had been considered insoluble, was badly seen by his many enemies in Moscow. Lebed’s already considerable popularity skyrocketed after the deal, establishing his position as one of Russia’s most popular politicians. Lebed’s popularity might be high among the people, but he became even more of a threat for high officials such as presidential chief of staff Anatoly Chubais, interior minister Anatoly Kulikov, and even Chernomyrdin. Hence tensions between hard-liners in the Kremlin and Lebed increased, and finally in October Yeltsin dismissed Lebed as head of the security council, citing the need for unity in his administration.\(^{157}\) Lebed’s sacking might have implications for the survival of the peace deal, as will be discussed more fully in chapter six. Lebed himself predicted that due to the people ruling the Kremlin, the situation in Chechnya would most likely go the worst possible way, whereas the Chechen foreign minister said the sacking would have tragic consequences for Russia.\(^{158}\) Suffice it to say here that it showed the lack of readiness of Russian leaders to accept new ways of thinking in solving the difficult problems of Russia. Lebed nevertheless remains a major figure on the Russian political scene, especially after his election as governor of Krasnoyarsk Krai, and ranks high among possible future leaders of the country.

The Khasavyurt agreement ended the long and bloody war in Chechnya, but at that point it did not effectively reduce the risk of new hostilities. It did not constitute a full-fledged peace treaty (it is composed of only three pages) but rather a commitment to conduct further talks on detailed issues. As Olgar Bekar has noted in an article published shortly after the end of the war, a number of issues were left unanswered by the agreement:\(^{159}\) the status of Chechnya vis-à-vis the Russian Federation; the disarmament of semi-regular or irregular Chechen armed formations; the exchange of prisoners of war; the question of Russian economic aid for the reconstruction of Chechnya; and the Russian legal arrest orders on the Chechen leaders. However, besides the main question of status, two particular questions need to be addressed. One is Chechnya’s potential destabilizing effect on the North Caucasus, in particular Dagestan. However another, much larger question is inescapable: how to reconstruct a totally devastated Chechnya. As Aleksei Malashenko has noted:

No television reporting—even the most capable—can give you a sense of what a large city is like once it has been razed to the ground… Not a single large enterprise in Chechnya is functioning…the water supply system has been almost completely destroyed. Ecological catastrophe looms over Djohar-Gala [Grozny], which now has over 300,000 inhabitants. The sewage system was devastated… Most of Chechnya’s livestock are dead.\(^{160}\)
Indeed, reconstruction and financial issues were perhaps the most pressing issue in post-war Chechnya. Maskhadov had demanded US $260 billion in war reparations—a sum equivalent to 60 per cent of Russia’s entire annual GDP—in August during a meeting with Yeltsin. Yeltsin countered that he had already allocated US $138 million to Chechnya for 1997; however in an almost surreal event, the Russian president admitted that more than US $100 million of that total had disappeared, saying that ‘The devil only knows where the money is going.’ Already in November 1996, Lebed’s successor Ivan Rybkin travelled to Chechnya and pledged over US $150 million in subventions for Chechnya in Russia’s 1997 budget. Nevertheless, Russian officials linked the payment of large sums of compensation to Chechnya’s withdrawal of its declaration of independence; reconstruction thus became a political tool. By June, Moscow spoke of US $90 million, whereas in August Rybkin spoke of US $120 million, also noting that barriers to delivering the money had been removed.

Whatever the case, the money by no means compares to the eventual cost of reconstructing Chechnya, which is closer to the astronomical sums mentioned by Maskhadov than to the aid that seems to be forthcoming from Moscow. On 12 May, meanwhile, an official peace agreement ‘on peace and the principles of Russian–Chechen relations’ was signed which nevertheless did not elaborate significantly on the Khasavyurt agreement; nothing concrete was specified on reconstruction, or on Chechnya’s status. However, a separate agreement on economic co-operation was signed on the same day, thereby ensuring Moscow’s commitment to aid. Later, Chechnya started courting the Muslim world, in particular Saudi Arabia, but although some contracts on reconstruction and some aid was achieved, Chechen leaders reconciled to the fact that they—much like in the war—had to rely on themselves, and that the only aid that would come would be through Russia.

The unstable political situation in the republic, described below, also contributed to the lack of foreign investment. The main economic issue between Johar-Gala (the new name for the city of Grozny) and Moscow has, predictably, been the oil pipeline from Baku to Novorossiysk. Because of the importance of this pipeline to both Russia and Chechnya, and as the production start of Azerbaijani oil was nearing, both parties sought a compromise. However the Chechens, claiming to be an independent state, demanded royalties according to international transport rates, rather than getting a share of Russia’s. While Moscow refused, Azerbaijani officials began exploring other opportunities and oil companies were increasingly doubting the feasibility of the Baku-Novorossiysk route, thereby lending credence to a Georgian or Georgian–Turkish option. A Baku-Supsa pipeline was completed in early 1999, meaning that Azerbaijan was able to export certain amounts of oil without needing to use the Baku-Novorossiysk line. US companies and especially state interests were increasingly strongly speaking out in favour of other pipeline solutions, and both Aliyev and Shevardnadze were visited Washington in 1997 and 1999. As a result, Russia accepted Chechen demands in early July 1997. But problems were not solved; as...
Russia, Chechnya and Azerbaijan formed a trilateral commission, Dagestan and Ingushetia also wanted a larger share of transit, to ameliorate the disastrous economic situation in both republics.\textsuperscript{166} The agreement signed in September 1997 was nevertheless to be renewed early 1998 already.\textsuperscript{167}

As far as status is concerned, Moscow obviously believed it could use the question of reconstruction aid as a political tool to compel Chechnya to step down from its claim to full independence. This strategy is clear if one analyzes the negotiations in February 1997 to define the relations between the two sides. The Chechen side, led by Movladi Udugov, centred on ‘the conclusion of a peace treaty by reaching an agreement on political questions’; economic issues would follow. By contrast, Moscow insisted on first discussing economic issues and only after their settlement proceeding to political ones.\textsuperscript{168} As Cem Oguz has noted, ‘this has been an important indication of Moscow’s intention to use economic matters as a policy of carrot and stick.’\textsuperscript{169} This strategy clearly proved a failure; Maskhadov never retracted one step from the goal of full independence, and Chechnya proved that it would choose continued economic deprivation over acceptance of Moscow’s suzerainty.\textsuperscript{170}

Moscow seemed to have misjudged Aslan Maskhadov. Although he became accepted and respected by many officials in Moscow for his cool-headed, pragmatic approach, he never lost his determination to pursue the victory on the battlefield of which he, after all, was the military mastermind. In any case, the prospects for Moscow’s strategy were small; The way the Chechens fought the war would hardly suggest that economic sanctions, or lack of aid, would change their mind. Had Maskhadov been more compliant to Moscow, his own position would indeed have been challenged by hardliners like Basayev or Raduyev. Gradually, an awareness grew in Moscow that economic means would not bring about a change in Johar-Gala’s position; moreover, economic deprivation would foster instability in Chechnya, which in turn would adversely affect the entire Russian North Caucasus. Moscow, indeed, has an interest in the economic recovery of Chechnya.

An interesting tendency was the readiness in certain high circles in Moscow to accept some form of face-saving variant of Chechen independence. Indeed, during the signing of the May 1997 peace accord Yeltsin referred to Chechnya as ‘Ichkeria’, the self-proclaimed name of the Chechen state which Russia does not accept.\textsuperscript{171} Indeed, an increasing number of statements from Moscow seemed to indicate that Russia was becoming willing to concede Chechnya’s independence. As Paul Goble has noted, the Russian and Chechens may be able to tacitly agree, for the time being, to a formula whereby Chechnya is independent in everything except in name.\textsuperscript{172} Public opinion polls in Russia now show that many Russians would let Chechnya become independent—but that they see economic support as conditional on remaining in the Russian Federation. Interestingly, the peace treaty itself can actually be interpreted as Chechnya standing outside the Russian Federation; Francis Boyle, a professor of international law, has concluded that the May 1997 treaty implies that Russia has recognized Chechnya as an independent
RUSSIA’S WAR WITH CHECHNYA

state. First of all, Boyle notes that the title of the treaty is the most revealing: ‘Treaty on peace and the principles of interrelations between the Russian Federation and the Chechen Republic of Ichkeria.’ The term ‘treaty’ is generally used for agreements between sovereign states, whereas the terms ‘accord’ or ‘compact’ are used for agreements between a federal centre and its component part. Hence the terms used, in particular the term ‘treaty of peace’ point to Russia’s treating Chechnya as a de facto independent nation-state. Furthermore the words ‘principles of interrelations’ point to this fact, as normally interrelations between a centre and a region is laid down in the constitution of the federal state, which in this case is not mentioned (unlike the case of Tatarstan). Hence Boyle concludes that there is no reason why other states around the world and international organizations should not treat Chechnya as a de facto independent state now that Russia itself has done so. Indeed, Chechnya was increasingly being treated as a state, although everyone pretends not to. Much like Tatarstan, Chechnya was speeding up its international contacts, setting up unofficial embassies around the world, which today number almost twenty.

The most important challenge that Chechnya gradually began to pose was its destabilizing effect on the North Caucasus, and in particular on Dagestan to its east with which it shares many similarities in terms of history, customs, and religion. The complexity of Dagestan, with its dozens of ethnic groups, grave economic conditions, and ensuing problems, is examined in detail on pp 172–82. In summer 1997, certain forces within the Chechen government spoke of demanding the return of the Aukhovsky district of Dagestan, populated in part by Chechens and belonging to Chechnya before 1944. Already during the signing of the Khasavyurt accords (Khasavyurt lies in this region) Maskhadov had spoken of singing the agreement on ‘sacred Chechen land’, raising numerous eyebrows both in Dagestan and Russia proper. In July, a gathering of over 20 Chechen political parties under the chairmanship of Udugov, then deputy prime minister and one of Chechnya’s strongest figures, asked among other things for the return of this territory. Udugov soon clarified his political aims with the creation of the movement called the ‘Islamic Nation’, unifying political forces from Chechnya and Dagestan, and aiming at creating an ‘Imamate’ of the type of Imam Shamil’s nineteenth-century state.

During 1998, Shamil Basayev became a main driving force behind the idea, and in May 1998 convened a ‘Congress of the Peoples of Chechnya and Dagestan’ with the support of Udugov, now foreign minister of Chechnya. In July, Basayev resigned from his post as acting prime minister and claimed to focus now on building up an ‘Islamic paramilitary brigade’, intended to ‘tackle the problems facing Muslims in the North Caucasus’. The resignation seems also to have been prompted by disagreements with President Maskhadov, not least on the issue of Dagestan; Maskhadov does not seem to pursue the idea of stirring up Dagestan, rather trying to build friendly relations with the Soviet-era regime surviving there. In any case, the result has been a further destabilization of Dagestan, which already lived in a tense semblance of stability. However, since
the middle of 1997, the number of occurrences of criminality, violence and low-intensity conflict on Dagestan’s territory had become a serious problem. It is difficult to claim that Chechnya has had no role in this. The result was increasing suspicion between Moscow and Johar-Gala. By mid 1999, the situation was beginning to get out of hand as armed Chechen groups outside Maskhadov’s control began skirmishes with Russian troops guarding the Chechen-Dagestani border. The impetus seems to have been these troops acting as an obstacle to the different forms of more or less illegal trade activities that Chechen groups carried out through Dagestan’s territory. As Maskhadov’s authority dwindled (see pp 246–8) the role of Basayev and a Jordanian-born field commander and representative of the traditionalist Wahhabi form of Islam by the name of Khattab increased. During 1998 and 1999, Basayev also gravitated towards the Wahhabis, although at first he seems to have attempted to keep his distance from the movement.

In September 1999, Basayev and Khattab, supported by an estimated 1,000 soldiers, invaded several villages in the Botlikh region of southwestern Dagestan. These villages are populated by people belonging to the Andi ethnic group, who are registered as Avars. The stated aim of the action was to create a unified Islamic state through the union of Chechnya and Dagestan. It is unclear what the military calculation of the field commanders was; whether they really believed they could conquer the entirety of Dagestan with 1,000 men, whether they expected widespread public support in Dagestan, or whether their aim was simply to create attention. In any case, the invasion backfired drastically, especially as Basayev and Khattab invaded villages despite the opposition of their inhabitants. In fact, clashes between the villagers and the Islamic militants invading them occurred, further distancing Dagestani public opinion from the field commanders (see chapter six).

The invasion led to the dismissal of Russian Prime Minister Sergei Stepashin, whose public statements to the effect that Russia could lose Dagestan were perceived as overly defeatist. In his place, Vladimir Putin was appointed by President Yeltsin to form a new government. Putin soon proved to be a hardliner, focusing his efforts on a military solution to the invasion. Putin promised victory within two weeks, a statement reminiscent of Grachev’s above-mentioned claim of taking Grozny within two hours. This time around, the Russian Federal forces had the upper hand, as the local population in Dagestan supported the central government. Scores of local volunteers emerged to fight the ‘Chechen invaders’, and within three weeks the Federal forces had actually forced Basayev and Khattab to pull back into Chechnya. They nevertheless staged two new attacks, one in the Novolakskii district on the northeastern border of Chechnya, but were forced back again.

The invasion coincided with the bombing of several apartment buildings in Moscow, that were instantly blamed on ‘Chechen terrorists’ by the Russian authorities, although no proof was available. In retrospect, it seems doubtful whether Chechen groups were actually involved. As Alexander Lebed later claimed, Basayev would conceivably not have bombed civilian apartment buildings at random, but rather attacked targets such as the interior ministry, high-
ranking generals, etc. No Chechen group claimed responsibility for the actions, although this could have been expected from a terrorist group. Whatever the case, the bombings provided Putin with public outrage strong enough to warrant renewed military action against Chechnya.

Within days, Putin had gathered a strong military force on Chechnya’s borders, and ordered the creation of a Cordon Sanitaire along the breakaway republic’s borders. The Russian forces advanced into Chechnya, conquering the uninhabited northern third of the republic up to the Terek river without much actual fighting. The Russian forces on this occasion seem to have learnt from the 1994–96 war not to try to occupy settlements but to concentrate on strategic heights and other landmarks. This initially helped the Federal forces in keeping the number of losses down. By mid-October, Federal forces seemed intent on keeping control over the lowlands and continued to shell areas south of the Terek river, but unwilling to engage the Chechen forces in fighting in towns, villages, or the more complicated terrain south of the Terek. Notwithstanding, the offensive created a refugee flow of Chechen civilians, mainly to Ingushetia which was again flooded with a number of refugees approximating its own total population.

It is unclear what the Russian leadership under Putin sought to accomplish, other than bolstering Putin’s chances in the presidential elections of 2000 by showing determination and a strong hand. If the aim was to conquer Chechnya, the Russian military is well aware of the tremendous losses it would see inflicted should it have tried to engage the Chechens in the terrain in which they are experts in fighting. The result would be skyrocketing human losses, and consequently increasing discontent among the Russian public opinion. It was in any case doubtful whether the federal forces had the capacity to carry out such an operation. Another option would be to follow the example of NATO in Yugoslavia and continue bombing Chechnya’s economic installations (oil refineries etc). However the problem is the lack of a stated aim with the military operations. In a sense, Moscow has again put itself in a swamp from which it will have difficulties in finding a way out.

Chechen domestic politics

The military victory of the Chechens in August 1996 was so sudden that they had hardly expected it themselves even in the first days of August or two weeks after it when Russian General Pulikovsky threatened to bomb Grozny, the fighters there as well as all civilians in the city, into pieces. However by September the Chechen leaders understood that now that the war was over, and that they needed to commence the transition into something they had fought for but were not prepared for: ruling Chechnya. Elections were scheduled for January 1997, but the problem was to outline the structures of the Chechen state which came into existence de facto with the Khasavyurt accords. Before the war, experiments had taken place regarding Islamic rule but had not received support from the
population. Dudayev’s Chechnya had undoubtedly been a secular state, but the war had changed this.

As Dudayev often noted, Russia pushed the Chechens towards Islam, whereas their society actually preserved a number of traditions which were difficult to make compatible with Islam. The prime example is that Chechen customary law, Adat, was revered to such an extent that the imposition of sharia seemed difficult. With the war, the religiosity of the people nevertheless skyrocketed, and demands for Chechnya to become an Islamic state ruled by sharia steadily gained salience, as did fringe Islamist groups that gradually came to dominate Chechen politics. Many analysts have predicted that this is a passing tendency, a need for self-assertion after the humiliations of the war. Accordingly, Chechnya needed to impose a legal system different from that of Russia; what could be better than Islamic law, especially after a war which many people in their minds saw as a holy war?

A problem is that no consensus has existed in Chechnya on which brand of Islam to adopt. The official Hanafi Sunni version that Chechens nominally belong to would be the first answer; however this conflicts sharply with the importance of Qadiri and Naqshbandi orders in Chechen society, which virtually define most Chechens’ understanding of Islam. The Sufi form is not suitable for state-building either, simply because of its secretive character which suits a movement in opposition rather than in ruling position. The third variant that has emerged in recent years in Chechnya and neighbouring Dagestan is the so-called Wahhabite, purist version of Islam, the state religion of Saudi Arabia. However the term Wahhabite has been inflated in the Caucasus and Central Asia to define almost any non-indigenous forms of Islam. The self-designation of this group is ‘Salafites’, implying a tendency that has existed through Islamic history that calls on believers to return to the supposedly ideal and pure form of belief and way of life of the early Muslim communities. The opposition to the Wahhabites is also very strong, as many Chechens see it as imposing an alien way of life not corresponding to Chechen tradition. As a result of this dilemma, President Maskhadov has paid lip service to the concept of an Islamic state, but has condemned Wahhabism as a destabilizing factor. Nevertheless, the increasing strength of Wahhabism, and the apparent adoption of this belief by Shamil Basayev, were crucial factors in the disturbances culminating with the renewed Russian attack of fall 1999. From the point of view of the local population, the destabilizing effect of Wahhabism on both Chechnya and Dagestan was once and for all proven with Basayev and Khattab’s ill-planned invasion of western Dagestan in September 1999.

Presidential and parliamentary elections took place in Chechnya on 27 January 1997. Standing as main candidates were the incumbent Zelimkhan Yandarbiyev, Chief of Staff Aslan Maskhadov, and Field Commander Shamil Basayev. Maskhadov won an overwhelming victory, with 65 per cent of the vote. Basayev clinched 24 per cent and Yandarbiyev a mere 10 per cent. The elections then served to anchor the more moderate and peace-seeking policies of Aslan
Maskhadov as compared to his main rival, Shamil Basayev. In elections that were unanimously described by international observers as fair and free, the Chechen people proved to the world that the Russian-inspired picture of the Chechens as violent, uncivilized, and unprepared for a democratic society that has been disseminated through the world was distinctively false. Observers noted with stupification that people were queuing peacefully from the very early morning to vote. Many Chechens when asked simply responded that this is what they had been fighting for, so why be violent now?

Whereas the main part of Chechnya’s society set out to reconstruct their lives, the creation of a reasonably democratic state in Chechnya became the litmus test of a leadership which had shown its military capacity with little doubt. Maskhadov’s most direct problem was how to assert central authority in a society split into many clans which had no history of ruling a state commonly. Observers quickly noted that Maskhadov’s authority was limited. Real power, it seemed, remained in the hands of an 18-member council of former field commanders, headed by Vice-President Vakha Arsanov. The existence of this council in a society saturated with arms, with few prospects for a return to normal life of the thousands of young men returning from the war is indeed crucial to the future of Chechnya. While the arguments that Chechnya will degenerate into civil war are highly exaggerated, the potential for a certain level of chaos and a society with a high degree of violence and criminality is indeed present. While on the top a semblance of unity or at least a system for decision-making exists, the situation in society has worsened considerably since the war. The practice of hostage-taking has skyrocketed, and Chechnya has, together with Dagestan, acquired a reputation for being a region into which Westerners, or even Russians, should not venture. Despite Maskhadov’s efforts to put an end to such terrorist acts, his failure to do so has only proven that the government in Grozny has only limited control over its territory. The beheading of four British workers in late 1998 was indeed a severe setback in Chechnya’s attempts to boost its international image. Indeed, Maskhadov described the gravity of the event by saying that ‘we won a war; now we have lost another’.

A Western analyst likened the power struggle in Chechnya to ‘Wolf cubs fighting under a rug’, paraphrasing Churchill’s term for the struggle for power in the Kremlin after Stalin’s death. It is clear that governance, in particular democratic governance, in Chechnya is absent today. Before the Russian military action of 1999, Maskhadov can not be conceived of as having any control over the territory of the republic. His presidential powers had long been curtailed by the council (shura) of military leaders, and in practice Chechnya was from early in 1998 a lawless country. In a sense, one can by late 1999 claim that although Chechnya won the war, it lost the peace. Maskhadov’s government proved unable to bring stability, order, or predictability into Chechen politics and society. The utter lawlessness in the region, coupled especially with the practice of abduction of foreigners for ransom, made Chechnya a closed territory for even the most daring humanitarian aid agencies or NGOs. Granting that the odds were
bad—a devastated economy, close to no contact with the outside world, unemployment of over 80 per cent among young men, a country steeped in weapons, a radical religious revival and deep frustration among the population—it is nevertheless necessary to note that the Chechen leadership was unable to prevent the consolidation of the image of Chechnya as comparable at best to the American wild west of the past century. Thereby obliterating all chances of the republic receiving foreign investments. With the renewed Russian military action, Chechnya’s prospects for the future are indeed grim.

Conclusions

Beyond the fact that the 1994–96 Chechen war is an example of human suffering at its worst, it is also the case of a war that could have been prevented had it not been for personal enmities between the individuals governing Russia and Chechnya. Moreover, it is the history of an overkill of brutality and violence that should put in question to much more significant a degree the nature of the Russian Federation. It is indeed an irony that Russia was accepted as a member of the Council of Europe in the midst of this war, whereas Georgia could accede only with difficulty in 1999, over five years after its war with Abkhazia. Beyond this, the Chechen war presented an extraordinary example of the fact, known for some time by military strategists, that a war involving a great power and a small, coherent, and homogeneous indigenous population in difficult terrain mastered by the defender, is not a war which the great power can win.

As the Vietnam and Afghanistan wars showed before Chechnya, the motivation of the central government forces and the level of local support for the resistance are the determining factors—factors that help to explain why Turkey, despite great difficulties, has apparently managed to subdue the Kurdish Marxist PKK rebellion. The Chechen rebellion, unlike the PKK, enjoyed the full support and solidarity of the overwhelming majority of the local population once the war had started. As will be analyzed in later chapters, the Chechen episode has great consequences for Russia, as epitomized by the title given by Anatol Lieven to his book on Chechnya: *Tombstone of Russian Power*. Indeed, the Chechen war—or rather the picture of Russia that emanated as a consequence of the war—revitalised attempts by Turkey and the United States to assert their influence in the Transcaucasian and Central Asian regions. What was supposed to be a small, victorious war—to cite the title of the book by Carlotta Gall and Thomas de Waal—to reassert Russian primacy over the Caucasus, in fact turned out to be the diametric opposite.

The most tragic consequences of the war are nevertheless those inflicted on the Chechen people. The time and resources it will take to make up for the physical destruction of Chechnya is impossible to estimate; as for the psychological scars inflicted, they can probably never be mended; the severe problems facing Chechnya today are partly related to the terrible frustration of its people. Due to the degree of destruction inflicted upon the republic, the task of creating a
functional society is incomparably more difficult in Chechnya than in any other Caucasian conflict. An earlier draft of this chapter was thought of to end with the following line: ‘today Chechnya stands in front of a new challenge, perhaps even greater than the last one: Having won the war, can Chechnya also win the peace?’ As mentioned above, even before the events of fall 1999 it was already clear that Chechnya had lost the peace when it, not unpredictably, failed to create a functioning society and state. The question was now also made irrelevant as civilian Chechens are once again fleeing a renewed Russian military action as the young men again take up arms. The question now is rather whether Chechnya in the foreseeable future will have the chance to enjoy a lasting peace at all. Unfortunately, few regions of the world by mid 2000 seemed to have a longer road to stability and development.
Conflicts in the North Caucasus

Although the conflicts that have attracted most international attention in the post-Cold War era have been those of the Transcaucasus, another area of both potential and actual turmoil is the North Caucasus. The first example of serious conflicts in the area, naturally, is the war in Chechnya. However, the existence of this war, and its astonishing cruelty and devastation, have been instrumental in obscuring the other grievances that exist in the area, and that have the potential to escalate into open conflict. These can be divided into two main categories, which, however, spill over into one another. The first type of conflict is those among the peoples of the region; the second type is conflicts between these peoples and Russia.

Doubtless, the main example of the unrest in the North Caucasus has been the short but bloody war between the Ingush and the Ossetians. However, this war distinguishes itself only by being the only one of the conflicts in the region that has escalated into war. Among the other known problems, three issues call for special attention: first and perhaps most pressingly, the bid for unity of the Lezgian people in Dagestan and Azerbaijan; second, the latent problem between the Turkic Karachais and the Circassian peoples in the two neighbouring republics of Karachaevo-Cherkessia and Kabardino-Balkaria; and thirdly the condition of the most complex of all the North Caucasian republics: Dagestan.

It seems logical in this study to start with the most well-known of these issues: the war that raged in November 1992 in the Prigorodniy Rayon between the Ingush and the North Ossetians.

The Ingush-Osetian conflict

As many—not to say most—of the conflicts in the Caucasus, the grievances between the Ingush people and the Ossetians can be squarely attributed to the actions of Russia in the region. It is distinctive as its roots are quite recent, dating back only to the middle of this century.
Background to the conflict

In the past, there are no records of specific conflict or hostilities between Ingush and Ossetians. Of course, mutual suspicion may have existed to a certain degree, based on a few demographical circumstances. The first is that the Ingush, just like all other indigenous Caucasian peoples, are a mountain people; they historically have their home in the mountains, from which they have resettled to the valleys and towns only later in this century, partly due to Russian coercion. In contrast, the Ossetians are so-called ‘foothillers’, people that live in the hills or in the plains, at lower altitudes—just like other non-indigenous peoples such as the Turkic Kumyks.

As in other parts of the Caucasus, foothillers and mountaineers are mutually suspicious of each others’ lifestyles, customs, and habits. Nowhere, however, have such tendencies resulted in organized violence—not to speak of war. Generally, Caucasian peoples are interested in keeping out of trouble as long as nobody intervenes in their internal affairs. This can be seen also in the so reputedly blood-thirsty Chechens, the ethnic ‘cousins’ of the Ingush; no evidence can be brought to support the argument that the Chechens or any other North Caucasians have taken up arms against any friendly power. Hence the mutual suspicion between Ossetians and Ingush rather led to them both minding their own business than anything else.

A second element is ethnicity. As noted above, the Ingush are indigenous to the Caucasus, while the Ossetians are ‘immigrants’—albeit early ones, settling in the Caucasus in the sixth century AD. The two peoples speak unrelated languages, Ossetian being distantly related to Persian and Ingush being a Caucasian language closely related to Chechen. This fact, at least until russification, meant that the two peoples had difficulties in communicating with one another, which usually took place through the use of a Turkic language, often Kumyk. Difficulties in communications is a factor that accentuates rather than attenuates tensions.

A third point is religion. The Ingush are Sunni Muslims, with a strong Sufi influence, in particular in the form of the Qadiri tariqat; however Ingushetia was the last region of the Caucasus to be converted to Islam, due to its inaccessible location in the central Caucasian mountains. In contrast, most Ossetians are traditionally Orthodox Christian, although a Muslim minority exists (only in the north) which seems to be relegated to the former feudal upper class. However, it must be noted that pre-Christian pagan traditions are heavily intertwined with both Islam and Christianity in Ossetia, as is the case in Abkhazia.

Thus the two peoples had developed no brotherly relations throughout history; however nor were they at each other’s throats either. What was to complicate their coexistence was foreign involvement. With the Russian advance in the North Caucasus, the Ossetians soon became Russia’s main ally in the region, and to a great extent converted to Christianity; however the Ingush did not fiercely resist
the Russian advance either, a fact which differentiated them from their Chechen kin.

The Soviet era

In the beginning of the Soviet era, both Ossetians and Ingush were part of the Mountain (‘Gorskaya’) republic, which was subsequently dissolved in 1924. As the Ingush were allocated their own autonomous oblast in 1924, the presently disputed territory was a part of Ingushetia in its entirety and from the beginning; this did not change when the Chechen-Ingush Autonomous Oblast (later ASSR) was created in 1934. Naturally, the delineation between Ingushetia and North Ossetia was precarious, as the border passed through the densely populated areas surrounding the city of Vladikavkaz (Ordzhonikidze), North Ossetia’s present capital and historically a city also heavily populated by the Ingush.

The root of the problem was however the events of the Second World War, when the Ingush were among the peoples deported to Central Asia and Siberia. As the Chechen-Ingush ASSR was abolished in June 1946, its territory was broken up and distributed among its neighbours. Most importantly, the Prigorodny Rayon of Vladikavkaz, which surrounds the city on the North, east, and South, was given to North Ossetia. The region, prior to the deportations, had accounted for almost half of Ingushetia’s territory.

When the Chechen-Ingush ASSR was reinstanted in January 1957, it actually gained some territory, to the north; however the Prigorodny Rayon remained within North Ossetia. As the returning Ingush came to their former settlements, they found Ossetians living in their homes, which had themselves been (at least partially) forcibly resettled there. As the Ingush tried to buy back their homes, they were counteracted not only by the local Ossetians but even more by the North Ossetian authorities, who did their best to prevent the Ingush from returning to their places of residence. Even in later years, legal instruments were instituted to make their return impossible: in 1982 and 1990, decrees were signed limiting the issuing of the compulsory propiski (internal passports) in the Prigorodniy. However, the Ingush defied all obstacles, and continued to move into the Prigorodniy, settling there both legally and illegally. The 1989 population census recorded almost 33,000 Ingush living in the entire North Ossetian ASSR, 17,500 of which in the Prigorodniy. In reality, there were many more Ingush in the region. In certain areas of the Prigorodniy, they formed a huge majority of the population.

The relations between Ingush and Ossetians were not harmonious at this time, either. Sporadic violence on ethnic grounds existed, and in January 1973, the Ingush staged a demonstration in Grozny regarding the Prigorodniy issue, forcing a candidate member of the Politburo to come and address the crowd. Generally speaking, the Ingush were frustrated by their career and academic lives being hindered in North Ossetia because of their ethnicity.
In October 1981, widespread unrest erupted after the murder of an Ossetian taxi-driver by his Ingush passengers. As a response, the Ossetians demonstrated to expel all Ingush from the Prigorodniy; the Ingush, meanwhile, prepared themselves to defend their homes. The reaction from Moscow was immediate; troops were sent in to restore order, and a curfew was imposed. The intervention succeeded in suppressing the demonstrations, hence preventing an escalation of the conflict. The North Ossetian republican leadership was blamed for having allowed the unrest to take place, and was replaced; a Russian (presumably less biased in the conflict) replaced the Ossetian republican head. However, the new leadership took no measures to solve the underlying problems—hence the problems were only allowed to worsen with time. And with perestroika, the general lighter atmosphere led to their breaking out, like so many other problems in the Union. In particular, the Ingush activists were now more free to voice their claims without having to fear the harsh repression of the Brezhnev era.

The fall of the Soviet Union & the escalation of the conflict

In September 1989, the second congress of the Ingush people was held in Grozny, which reaffirmed the Prigorodniy’s being an unalienable part of Ingushetia, while advocating the re-establishment of a separate Ingush territorial entity, apart from the Chechen-Ingush ASSR. Meanwhile, the North Ossetian leadership only hardened their opposition to any territorial solution. These events also mirror the increased isolation of the Ingush in 1991, as the Chechen-Ingush ASSR seemed to turn into a Chechen-dominated and anti-Moscow institution, under General Dudayev’s leadership. Hence the Ingush had twice been the reason to distance themselves from Chechen claims to independence: first, they were not represented in the all-Chechen congress which later replaced the Zavyagin government and feared to be ignored in a Chechen state; and secondly they would have few hopes of regaining the Prigorodniy unless they retained good relations with Moscow.

The Russian leadership did not miss this chance to draw a wedge between the Chechens and Ingush: Boris Yeltsin, campaigning for his presidential election at a rally in Nazran in late March, expressed his tacit support for the Ingush claims—although this would hardly serve his election, as there are twice as many North Ossetians as Ingush. Hence the statements at least partly served a more complex purpose, trying to prevent unified resistance by Chechens and Ingush. Nevertheless, by this time Ingushetia was one of the most pro-Yeltsin territories in the whole of Russia. By contrast, North Ossetia was one of the most conservative and pro-Soviet areas of the union, and seemed to rejoice in the August 1991 coup. Consequently both territories were in a precarious situation as the Soviet Union fell apart and the ultimate jurisdiction over them was replaced by the Russian Federation under Yeltsin.
The Ingush pursued their pro-Russian policy, and had early on abandoned any hope of reaching a solution through negotiations with North Ossetia, instead focusing their energy on achieving their goals through Moscow. Here, they were much more successful, at least initially. In March 1990 already, a commission (the ‘Belyakov’ commission) was set up to investigate the claims of the Ingush. Nine months later, it concluded that the Ingush claim was well-founded, and that the Prigorodniy ought to be restored to the Chechen-Ingush ASSR from the North Ossetian ASSR. It also requested the Supreme Soviet of the RSFSR to take the matter on its agenda.

North Ossetia, faced with this new political situation, became dominated by the Communist forces wanting a return to the old order and has in fact kept its Soviet name until very recently. As a Russian observer has noted, ‘the destruction of the Soviet statehood and the military-administrative system of the Soviet superstate was perceived within little Ossetia not as a liberation and the beginning of national revival, but primarily as the destruction of the complex of external security and internal stability.’ With this logic, North Ossetia was one of the republics which was often named as seeking more autonomy in the immediate aftermath of the USSR’s dissolution, confused as to what it actually wanted but distancing itself from the Yeltsin regime. However, the Ossetian society in the first nine months was in crisis. Flooded by tens of thousands of refugees from the South Ossetian war with Georgia (North Ossetian sources put forward the probably exaggerated number of 100,000), and isolated in an Islamic North Caucasus with a religious revival brewing, the Ossetian leadership despite its aversion for democratic reform in Russia had little option but to seek an alliance with Moscow. This isolated feeling contributed to the importance accorded to the Prigorodniy Rayon, whose Ingush population was seen as a ‘fifth column’. As Fiona Hill puts it, the Prigorodniy is a vital piece of real estate for North Ossetia, an alleviation to its high population density and served as a place to settle the refugees from South Ossetia. However, the territorial argument is true for Ingushetia as well if not more pressingly: the Prigorodniy represents fully a third of the non-mountainous Ingush lands and traditionally their main urban centre.

Meanwhile, the situation on the ground was getting worse. In March 1991, Ingush armed bands tried to forcefully take back their houses, and in April, clashes took place between Ingush and Ossetian paramilitaries, leaving one dead Ossetian and 14 wounded Ingush. This resulted in a North Ossetian state of emergency the following day, which somewhat froze the situation temporarily.

The August coup in Moscow was detrimental to the Ingush in at least two dimensions: first, it led to a dramatic loss of Moscow’s influence and power in the regions, hence the Ingush could not rely on the centre to resolve the issue in their favour; and secondly, the Chechen declaration of independence took place, and the Ingush, seeing no place for themselves in Dudayev’s state, had no choice but to secede from it (in a peaceful way, negotiated with the Chechens despite the fact that the border between the two republics was undemarcated and thus subject to contention) and establish a ‘republic’ of their own. However this republic had no
capital, no fixed boundaries, no administration, and no power structures of its own.

By October, the Ossetians took advantage of the Ingush’ weakness, and created a National Guard of around 5,000 men, equipped with 20 armoured vehicles. In November, the Ingush held a referendum which supported the establishment of a separate Ingush republic within Russia, but including the Prigorodniy. After the subsequent dissolution of the Soviet Union, and throughout 1992, the war of words between the North Ossetians and the Ingush escalated, however without any larger disturbances. On 4 June 1992, a separate Ingush republic was officially declared by a Russian Supreme Soviet ruling, and a ‘transitional phase’ ranging until March 1994 was proposed to resolve all the questions related to it, including administrative issues but mainly its territorial delimitation. The issue of the Prigorodniy but also the delimitation of its eastern border with Chechnya. A provisional administration was set up under a Russian general, Viktor Yermakov, but these decisions came very much too late—no work had even started on determining Ingushetia’s borders before the clashes of November 1992 broke out.

Ever since 1989, then, both parties had been making themselves ready for a confrontation. According to Human Rights Watch/Helsinki, both the Ingush and the Ossetians were acquiring arms at a ‘furious pace’. Weapons, moreover, were readily available in the region. The Ingush got them through Chechnya, in particular after 1991, and the North Ossetians took advantage of the war in South Ossetia to arm themselves. Russian weapons intended for support to South Ossetia or for peacekeeping operations there ‘found their way’ into North Ossetian hands. Naturally, the Ossetians were in a more favourable position, as they could make use of their republican administration to legitimize the existence of rogue paramilitary units as different kinds of ‘militia’.

Tensions between the two communities seem to have escalated since 1991, as crime grew into an increasingly serious problem—and often with ethnic undertones. The Ossetians complained of Ingush violence and extremism, while the Ingush allege that their kinsmen were being harassed and killed by Ossetian uniformed men. As the Ossetians paramilitaries grew increasingly powerful throughout 1992, the Ingush in the Prigorodniy responded by arming themselves, organizing village guards, and constructing barricades. Clashes between these Ingush groupings and the Ossetians had become a serious problem by September/October 1992.

October 1992: war

On 20 October, a gas pipeline passing through the Prigorodniy (carrying Russian gas to Armenia and Georgia) was blown up, and North Ossetian officials were hinting at Ingush sabotage while explaining the event. The same day, a 12-year-old Ingush girl was crushed by an armoured personnel carrier from the North Ossetian OMON forces, in the settlement of Oktyabrskoye, whereby the local
Ingush tried to take the law into their own hands and hang the soldiers in the tank, resulting in an exchange of fire, although with no further casualties. In the village of Yuzhniy where the girl’s body was found, however, matters took a turn for the worse. In fact, the Ossetians had argued that the event was a simple accident, but as two more Ingush were killed the next day, the Ingush were not in a condition to accept this explanation. Hence clashes erupted in Yuzhniy, leaving up to six dead.

On 24 October, the Ingush in the Prigorodniy established a co-ordinating council, which decided to organize self-defence units to patrol Ingush settlements. The council also decided to close entrances and exits to all Ingush settlements and to subordinate volunteer organizations to the Ingush authorities. The Ossetians naturally saw this as a threat to their sovereignty, and actually regarded it a casus belli. As barricades were raised blocking the entrance to almost all Ingush villages in the Prigorodniy, the North Ossetian leadership ordered all barricades to be removed, or else combat actions would be undertaken. Nevertheless, the Ingush did not give in, especially as further killings took place in the following days. A mass meeting was staged in Nazran, which initiated a more or less spontaneous armed march on the Prigorodniy. The Ingush subsequently took control of most of the Prigorodniy, and marched on Vladikavkaz. As the North Ossetians became aware of this, they soon managed to rally a whole range of forces to push back the Ingush: Ministry of Interior troops, Republican guards, OMON forces, and South Ossetian refugees and local Cossacks. Interestingly, the South Ossetians (who had fled Georgia and been resettled in the Prigorodniy) were reputed among the Ingush for being significantly more ruthless and cruel than the North Ossetians.

By 30 October, large-scale violence had broken out between armed Ingush and North Ossetian forces in several parts of the Prigorodniy. Meanwhile, Ingush bands from Ingushetia tried to break into the Prigorodniy, and succeeded in disarming a unit of Russian MVD troops in the village of Chermen.

On 31 October, around 3,000 Russian paratroopers and MVD forces were flown in to ‘restore law and order’. A state of emergency was declared by President Yeltsin to enforce the actions of the troops. The orders were clear: to separate the fighting parties from one another. However, many questions have been raised to the Russian intervention; the Ingush, in particular, argue that the Russians took the side of their ‘fellow Christians’, the Ossetians, and actually worsened the situation of the already weaker Ingush. What is clear, however, is that the Russian intervention failed to prevent the conflict from expanding. On the contrary, the death toll continued to rise in the immediate aftermath of the Russian forces’ arrival. As the Russian forces moved in, their headquarters were set up in Vladikavkaz—a fact which naturally compromised the Russians in the eyes of the Ingush. It has been alleged that the Russian forces were more or less co-ordinated with the Ossetian republican units.

The Russian ‘peace forces’ did not stay at controlling the Prigorodniy. Within a few days, they moved into Ingushetia proper, and by 10 November they had
reached the (still undemarcated) border between Chechnya and Ingushetia. This in turn led to a stand-off with the forces of Chechen President Dudayev, who declared a state of emergency, fearing that this was a provocation which would enable Russia to attempt a reconquering of Chechnya. Only by the timely intervention of Russia’s then vice-premier, Yegor Gaidar, did the situation quieten down and Russian forces were withdrawn from what the Chechens regarded as Chechen territory.

According to official sources, a total of 644 people had been killed in the conflict by June 1994. The overwhelming number perishing between 30 October and 4 November: over 150 Ossetians and 300 Ingush.\(^{28}\) However, it should be noted that significant numbers of people were killed even in 1993 and after, which tends to show that the conflict has not been settled. As Tscherwonnaja expresses it, the conflict moved from being acute to chronic.\(^{29}\) The state of emergency on the region was renewed consecutively until finally lifted as late as in February 1995.\(^{30}\)

The Russian intervention

The Russian intervention in Prigorodniy seems largely to follow—and confirm—the pattern of Russian activities in other parts of the Caucasus. Hence it was instrumental in ensuring permanent Russian military presence in the area, and was successful in re-establishing total control over this strategic part of the North Caucasus. As Julian Birch has noted, the Russian intervention can be questioned both regarding its motivation and its impact. The motivation can be seen as either pro-Ossetian, or neutral and peace-making; similarly the impact can be regarded as either positive, bringing about an end to the conflict, or as the cause of even more bloodshed.

As the Russian government had been relatively favourable in its attitude towards the Ingush claims to territorial rehabilitation, it might seem illogical to assume that the Russian intervention was pro-Ossetian. However, two circumstances would explain this seeming lack of coherence. First, the activities of the Russian armed forces do not always represent the policy of the centre. This is a recurrent fact which has been observed in Abkhazia as well as in Chechnya. Hence the fact that certain formations of the army supported the Ossetian side might only mean that the commanders of that unit ordered this, not that central orders were such. This is all the more plausible as most of the military view the Ingush as a traditionally disloyal people, like their Chechen kin. The Ossetians, in contrast, have always been the established allies of Russia in the Caucasus. Hence it seemed logical for the Russian military to disregard Ingush claims, as the first priority was to secure the continuation of the age-old strategic partnership with Ossetia. A second element is that after mid 1992 a policy shift occurred in Moscow, which has been described by Mohiaddin Mesbahi as a switch from a Euro-Atlanticist to a Eurasianist perspective.\(^{31}\) This shift will be examined in detail in \textit{chapter nine}. Suffice it to say here that the Russian policy turned back
toward a conservative, ‘Great Russian’ approach. And in this framework, Ossetia had an important place, while Ingushetia did not.

The argument that the conduct of the Russian forces may not have been sanctioned by the centre is strengthened by actual criticism coming from the Russian security council regarding the events in November 1992. According to the report, the troops did not disarm or liquidate armed formations, participated in looting, and were otherwise idle during the early days of their arrival. The security council report concluded that this amounted to a failure to prevent civilian casualties and hence a failure to fulfil their mission. Besides this later official acknowledgment of irregularities, the Ingush are supported in their argument by several facts. For example, the North Ossetian Supreme Soviet was quickly given complete power in the Prigorodniy, by an amendment to the state of emergency. High-ranking Russian officials, such as deputy Prime Minister Khizha, also confirmed the policy of refusing to alter any borders within Russia, thus openly denying the right of the Ingush to territorial rehabilitation. But most of all, there is evidence suggesting the collaboration of Russian ‘peacekeeping’ troops with Ossetian formations. Indeed, the Ossetian forces operated together with Russian forces in Prigorodniy, patrolling together, both being directed from the Vladikavkaz headquarters. Russian officials also handed out weapons to North Ossetian authorities, which were subsequently redistributed to paramilitaries. Further, instead of separating the fighting parties as the situation was on the ground, the Russian forces either forcibly evacuated Ingush residents of the Prigorodniy or jointly attacked settlements controlled by Ingush paramilitaries with the help of Ossetian forces. The forcible evacuation may have been intended to bring an end to hostilities, but in effect it accounted for an act on the behalf and in the interest of the Ossetian side.

Further, based on simple facts, one can observe that the death toll did not halt with the Russian intervention; quite to the contrary, it went on increasing for a number of days, actually doubling before abating. This is due to the fact that Ossetian irregular forces were actually enabled to operate freely in their objective to clear the Prigorodniy of Ingush.

Another argument that has been voiced is that the Russian troops used the conflict as a pretext to intervene and involve Chechnya in the conflict. According to this point of view, the main objective was to directly or indirectly force General Dudayev to intervene on the side of the Ingush, thereby giving the army a reason to invade Chechnya. The main evidence supporting this hypothesis is that the Russian forces, who entered the Prigorodniy from the West and North, actually crossed the border to Ingushetia, pushing eastward towards the still undemarcated Chechen-Ingush border, where they were countered by Chechen forces which resulting in the stand-off mentioned above. An operation against Chechnya was halted by the threat of mobilization of the Confederation of Mountain Peoples of the Caucasus, which could have at that point led to a full-scale regional confrontation.
The outcome of the conflict & its aftermath

The Prigorodny conflict led to the decisive victory—at least in the short term—of the Ossetian side. A solution, including the return of refugees, has not been reached. As Svetlana Chervonnaya notes, the Prigorodny conflict is the Caucasian conflict where territory is scarcest. And considering the widely accepted perception of the sanctity of territorial boundaries in the post-Soviet area and in the whole world, there is no pragmatic reason for North Ossetia to accept any alteration of its boundaries. Especially given the fact that North Ossetia has Moscow in its back, and that its people’s attitude is as uncompromising as ever, there is no incentive on the Ossetian part to find a solution. The perpetuation of the status quo, then, is both desirable and feasible. Negotiations, no doubt, have been undertaken since the spring of 1993 for the return of refugees, but the harsh conditions imposed by the Ossetian government ensures that no effective agreement on the issue will be reached in the near future. Accordingly, only people who have not been involved in the conflict and who possessed a valid residence permit (propiska) at the time of the conflict have the right to return. This has two implications: first of all, the practical difficulty of deciding who was and who was not involved in the conflict; and second, the impossibility of the return of the Ingush who lived illegally in Prigorodny. The pace of repatriation falls short of even the expectations of the Russian government; the Ingush accuse the Ossetians of deliberately slowing down the process. Only in June 1994 was a coherent agreement reached on the return of refugees; however this agreement did not lead anywhere either. In 1995, new negotiations were set up, but broke off after three days as the parties were unable to agree. Yeltsin himself tried to broker a deal between the two presidents, Ingushetia’s Ruslan Aushev and North Ossetia’s Aksharbek Galazov, without particular success.

The war in Chechnya has further complicated the situation, as Moscow’s attention has been turned away from the Prigorodny conflict, and as over 150,000 refugees have flown into Ingushetia. In Prigorodny itself, clashes erupted in the spring of 1995, when Ossetians tried to prevent Ingush returnees from settling. Further casualties were claimed in May and June, pointing to a general instability and lack of law and order in the region. In Ingushetia, the existing tensions with Russia escalated in October 1995 in an odd event, where the Russian army attacked an airport, killing several civilians, due to an erroneous report that Chechen forces had occupied it. Matters worsened in February 1996, when retreating Russian troops killed seven civilians near the Chechen-Ingush border. In July 1997, violence escalated again. This time, returning Ingush refugees were subjected to grenade attacks in Prigorodny, and despite Nazran’s early warnings to the Kremlin that tensions were escalating and demands for presidential rule to be imposed on the Prigorodny, Yeltsin refused this option and instead imposed a ‘joint action programme’ which has been interpreted as heavily tilted toward the Ossetian standpoint.
camps in the Prigorodniy were attacked by armed mobs, apparently including North Ossetian paramilitary forces, and forced to flee back into Ingushetia.49

These events all point to spiralling violence, and Moscow’s amorphous policy towards the conflict enables the Ossetian leadership to hinder the return of the Ingush refugees both by overt and covert means. Hence, although organized warfare has not taken place since 1992, it is clear that this conflict has merely turned into a protracted one rather than abated. Tensions remain high, and the frustration on the part of the Ingush is only rising with the lack of attention for their grievances and the increasingly friendly relations between North Ossetia and the Kremlin. The harbouring of 35,000 to 65,000 refugees from Prigorodniy had already taken a hard toll on the small Ingush republic, when an additional 150,000 Chechens sought refuge in Ingushetia, fleeing the brutal Russian invasion of their lands. And given the fact the Chechen and Ingush languages and cultures are very similar, the increased contacts on the grassroots level are likely to influence the way the Ingush view Russia.

In 1991, the Ingush still saw Moscow as their ally, and their only means to achieving territorial rehabilitation and the return of the Prigorodniy. The events that have followed, both in the Prigorodniy itself and in Chechnya, have shown with all necessary clarity that Russia is not a friend nor ally of the Vainakh people. Quite the contrary, the rulers in Moscow are still—consciously or unconsciously—prisoners of the age-old enmity permeating the Russian attitude towards the Caucasian peoples, the Chechens and Ingush in particular. This fact is supported by statements of then Russian Deputy Premier Sergei Shakhrai and other high officials in the ‘power ministries’ which refer to the Ingush as a ‘traditionally disloyal nation which has strong separatist feelings.’ 50 This type of statement is all the more ironic as the Ingush refused to join the Chechen bid for independence, opting to remain within Russia. Any separatist feelings have been reinforced by the Russian policy in the Caucasus. Indeed, today, many Ingush do regret their decision to separate from their Chechen kin in 1991.

The conflict over the Prigorodniy district is interesting in the sense that the two peoples party to it at the bottom had no controversies to talk about.51 The conflict, which can be termed an exclusively territorial one, can be blamed squarely on the arbitrary Soviet and Russian policies in the Caucasus. Had it not been for the criminal deportation of the Ingush during the Second World War, and the subsequent changes in the borders of the Chechen-Ingush ASSR, there would have been no reason for conflict between Ossetians and Ingush. But with the Prigorodniy conflict, a deepening rift between two Caucasian peoples has been created. Indeed, the conflict is likely to re-erupt in some form sooner or later, as the Ingush increasingly take matters in their own hands and ‘illegally’ return to their homes in the Prigorodniy, thereby being confronted by an Ossetian reaction. The impact of this conflict, however, goes beyond the two peoples involved. To a great extent, it has ruined the unity of the Caucasian peoples that was institutionalized in the Confederation of Mountain Peoples of the Caucasus. This confederation, before the conflict, had been successful in solving territorial
disputes between Laks and Chechens in Dagestan; it had also shown a considerable political influence by organizing and co-ordinating North Caucasian support for the Abkhaz in their conflict with Georgia. Indeed, North Ossetians and Ingush had worked together in this framework. However, the Prigorodniy conflict considerably reduced the power of the confederation, given the fact that two of its components were in direct confrontation with one another.

The Confederation’s role has been minor in this conflict, however it is important to note that it could actually have been used as an institutional framework to find a solution to the Prigorodniy conflict. As Russian mediation is unlikely to be objective and disinterested, a local, Caucasian mediation could prove to have its advantages. The confederation had set up a committee to find a solution to the conflict and had also proposed replacing the Russian peacekeeping forces with a joint North Caucasian force, an idea which has been favourably viewed by most North Caucasians, and indeed by the Ingush. Although the North Ossetian side may prefer Russian mediation—or rather no mediation at all—given the fact that it is the only Christian member of the organization and the closest to Russia, the confederation was an option that was underestimated in the quest for a resolution of the conflict. Now, the confederation has lost its political role and has all but dissolved.

For the time being, there is no solution in sight for the Prigorodniy conflict. As in so many other cases, the conflict is likely to continue simmering, something which in the long run will only lead to worse confrontations whenever it is revived—which is inevitable.

The Northwestern Caucasus

The west-central part of the North Caucasus is inhabited by two groups of peoples. The first, the indigenous Circassian peoples, composed of the Adyge (having their own republic centred on Maikop) the Kabardins and the Cherkess. The Circassian languages are divided by linguists into a western and an eastern family. The western is spoken by Adyge and Cherkess, while the eastern dialect is spoken by the Kabardins. The dialects are mutually intelligible, considered to be part of the same language. Once a numerous and strong people (see chapter two) the Circassians now number less than 700,000 in the Caucasus, with a large diaspora in Turkey and in the Middle East estimated at one million. The Kabardins are the largest of the subdivisions, numbering almost 400,000.

The second group, the Karachais and Balkars, live in the high valleys of the central North Caucasus, speak a common language, part of the Western family of Turkic languages. They came to the mountain areas they presently inhabit in the thirteenth century, and number around 250,000, the Karachais being roughly twice as numerous as the Balkars. Throughout history, the Kabardins have been considered the most pro-Russian of all the Muslim Caucasian mountain people, and their feudal elite was co-opted to a great extent by the Russians during their conquest of the Caucasus. The
western Circassian tribes are substantially more anti-Russian in their attitudes than the Kabardins. Islam is generally speaking stronger among the Karachai-Balkars than among the Circassians, particularly after the deportations. The position of the Qadiri brotherhoods, which were imported from Chechen-Ingushetia, is strong. The Karachai-Balkars are also substantially more religious than the Circassians, to a large extent as a result of events of the Second World War.

The two groups roughly inhabit the same area, which since the 1920s is divided into two autonomous units within the Russian Federation: the Karachai-Cherkess and the Kabardino-Balkar republics. It is interesting to note that this division cuts across the ethnic divisions. As the Circassians typically live to the north, and the Karachai-Balkars in the mountainous south of both republics, it would actually have been possible to create two ethnically homogeneous, and in this sense potentially more stable units: for instance, a Karachai-Balkar republic and a Kabardino-Cherkess one. Instead, Stalin’s divide and rule policies saw fit to create two ethnically heterogeneous units. This naturally created trouble for the future; however the policies did not stop at this. The northern boundaries of these units was drawn further North than the territories actually populated by the Caucasian peoples. This led to the inclusion of heavily Slavic-populated areas; the matter was not improved by the fact that these Slavs were mostly Cossacks (especially in Karachai-Cherkessia)—having age-old animosities with the Muslims to the south. Hence the situation is that the Turkic side forms a plurality in Karachai-Cherkessia, and the Circassian in Kabardino-Balkaria. According to the 1989 population census, the demographic structure of the two republics was as follows:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Republic</th>
<th>Karachais/Balkars</th>
<th>Circassians</th>
<th>Russians</th>
<th>Others</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Karachai-Cherkessia</td>
<td>31%</td>
<td>9.6% Cherkess</td>
<td>42.5%</td>
<td>10.4%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>6.5% Abaza</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kabardino-Balkaria</td>
<td>9%</td>
<td>48%</td>
<td>32%</td>
<td>11%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The relations between the Karachai-Balkars and the Circassian peoples have been historically stormy—very much due to the fact that the former were the vassals of the Kabardin nobility from the fifteenth century onwards. On top of this lies the same distinction between foothillers and mountain peoples that can be observed elsewhere, for instance in neighbouring North Ossetia and Ingushetia. The Kabardins, in particular, with their history of nobility and being one of the most advanced Caucasian peoples, look down upon the Balkars as inferior and primitive. The Balkars, certainly, have a generally lower standard of education—which is no wonder given the disruption of the deportations.

Nevertheless, it should be noted that there is no particular contentious issue of the magnitude of the Prigorodniy Rayon, which could escalate into conflict.
However, a problem is that certain territories are disputed, mainly territories inhabited exclusively by Balkars before the deportations but now mixed, as on their return the Balkars were not resettled in their ancestral lands but in other parts of the republic. In the case of a division of the republic, these territories could form the basis of a conflict.

Although these republics, in the words of one analyst, are ‘situated in a region where conflicts rage with double the usual power, and there is a mountain ‘honor code’ linking families, clans and regions in ways that supersede administrative divisions’, interethnic relations have on the whole been relatively harmonious. Even in the aftermath of the return of the Karachais and Balkars from deportation in Central Asia, these peoples have been able to live together without serious problems, and mixed marriages are not uncommon.

At present, tensions exist on two fronts: between the two groups on the one hand, somewhat united, and the Cossacks on the other; and between the Turkic peoples and the Circassians on the other. Hence two potential conflicts exist, each of which falls into one of the two categories outlined above.

The Cossacks settled down in the area during the wars of the nineteenth century, having been used by the centre as a form of watchdog over the Muslim peoples. Recent discussions in Moscow to give Cossack paramilitaries a semi-official status have prompted a strong outcry from the side of the Muslim population. However, it is clear that the Russian government is returning to its traditional policy of using the Cossacks as a tool and ally in the North Caucasus. In 1993 already, some Cossack units were made part of the Russian armed forces. The same year, tensions rose in Karachai-Cherkessia as Cossacks were blamed for pig carcasses being put in mosques; Cossack units even patrolled the streets at night. The Cossacks’ mobilization was prompted by the decrease of Russian influence in the Caucasus from the late 1980s and by the parallel process of increasing national consciousness of the Muslim peoples. The Cossacks fear a division of the Karachai-Cherkess republic into Karachai and Cherkess units, a division which would divide also the Cossack settlements. Such a development is feared as the Cossacks are afraid of discrimination on both historical and present-day grounds; instead the Cossacks would like to have their stanitsy (settlements) ruled from neighbouring Krasnodar, a Russian provincial centre.

It is not impossible that Russia is using the Cossacks as a lever against separatism on the part of the Karachais and the Cherkess. According to this logic, the spectre of Cossack rebellion, possibly supported by Moscow, would deter the Muslim population from making their separatist claims more vocal. The Cossacks of northern Chechnya, for example, are encouraged by Moscow in their campaign to detach two districts from the semi-independent republic and join them to Russia.

The present tensions between the Karachais/Balkars and the Kabardins/Cherkess exist in several dimensions. Basically, the main problem is the wish of certain groups in all communities to detach their people from the present administrative structure and form new, ethnically (more) homogeneous units.
Such claims naturally have territorial implications, as no ethnically ‘clean’ division can be made of any of the two republics due to the overlapping settlement patterns.

The Karachais, led by a national movement called Jamagat, began lobbying for a division of their autonomous oblast in 1988. The centre answered by raising the status of the region to an ASSR; however the Karachais, in their quest for full territorial rehabilitation, saw a republic of their own—which they had enjoyed from 1926 to 1943—as the only possible solution. By 1990, the Cherkess had formed their own movement, called Adygey-Khasa, which defended the integrity of Karachai-Cherkessia, being rather anti-Russian than anti-Karachai in nature. A referendum held in 1992 showed that over 75 per cent of the population wished to retain a unified republic, hence proving that the Karachai demands had lost their following. Many Karachais now see the possibility of a future majority position in an unified republic as more favourable than a smaller Karachai republic. Higher birthrates and limited Russian emigration may make this possible within the not too distant future.

Karachai-Cherkessia’s political landscape was one of the last in the Russian Federation to be liberalized. The republic was ruled by former President Vladimir Khubiey since 1979. Khubiey had never been elected to the post but appointed to head of administration under Soviet rule and later re-appointed by Yeltsin. As pressure both locally and centrally for elections to be held grew, Khubiey defied a supreme court ruling of April 1997, trying to cling to power by postponing elections. By January 1998, Khubiey was the only non-elected republic leader in the Russian Federation, and public protests had emerged against the leadership, a new phenomenon in the republic. Sixty thousand signatures had been collected to force elections by June 1998. In September 1998, the republican parliament passed legislation that provided for the direct election of the post of President, elections that were later scheduled for 25 April 1999.

A former army general and commander of Russia’s ground forces, Vladimir Semenov, after his resignation from the army announced his interest in running for president. This was greeted with enthusiasm from the people, as high-ranking military officers in general enjoy respect in the North Caucasus. In particular, members of deported nationalities reaching the rank of general are viewed with admiration as their origins were generally to their detriment in the Soviet army. Johar Dudayev, and to a certain extent Ruslan Aushev in Ingushetia, are examples of high-ranking officers who managed to rally their people around them; Beppayev has the potential to do the same among the Balkars. If Semenov does achieve a leading post in the republic, this could mean yet another leader hostile to Moscow and positive towards Chechnya in power in the North Caucasus. Semenov is of Karachai nationality but with a Russian mother, therefore being able to appeal to the two largest communities in the republic. The main challenger to Semenov became Stanislav Derev, a Cherkess businessman heading several large industrial firms producing vodka, mineral water, and furniture. Derev has also been the mayor of the republican capital Cherkess. Derev could count on the
votes of the Cherkess and Abazin communities, as well as a substantial number of Russians, especially Cossacks with whom he has tried to maintain a good relationship. The unpopular incumbent Khubiev was at an early stage left far behind the two other candidates.

The results of the first round of elections, in which a high participation of 73 per cent was noted, showed Derev as a front-runner with 40 per cent of the vote, with Semenov coming in second with 17 per cent. Semenov’s low showing was explained by the fact that the Karachai vote had been split between several candidates, including Khubiev who received almost 7 per cent. As no candidate received a majority of votes, a runoff was held; however the campaign to the runoff elections was characterized by increasing tension between the Karachai and Cherkess communities and violent political acts, including an arson attack against Derev. It became clear that neither candidate would readily accept defeat.

The runoff was held on 16 May, and the elections were apparently marred by irregularities. A significant amount of polling stations never opened; it seems several mainly Cherkess areas refused to participate in the runoff as they accused Semenov’s fraction of manipulating the elections. The results of the poll completely overturned the first round, giving Semenov some 75 per cent of the vote and Derev 20 per cent. However, only 63 per cent of the voters cast their ballots. The legitimacy of the elections were doubtful, however the large number of votes cast for Semenov begs the question whether even a higher turnout would have made a difference in the outcome. Derev nevertheless demanded the poll be declared invalid and argued that unless that happened, the republic should be divided into separate Karachai and Cherkess entities. The Russian Central Electoral Commission was unable to resolve the situation, as seven of its 14 members voted to uphold the elections and seven for them to be declared invalid. On 10 June, the republican supreme court upheld the electoral results, however the federal supreme court urged the court to review its decision in the light of all available information. Derev nevertheless intensified his campaign of splitting the republic into ethnic entities. The fate of Russian-populated, mixed, and Cossack areas would nevertheless prevent such a decision from alleviating tensions between the two communities. In an attempt to calm tensions and prevent an ethnic conflict, Russian prime minister, Sergei Stepashin, unexpectedly visited Cherkessk on 24 May, dispatching interior ministry forces and urging the creation of a provisional government until the validity of the elections was decided. This intervention by Moscow is a positive sign, showing a constructive attitude rather than, as has often been the case, merely reacting to developments after they get out of hand.

In Kabardino-Balkaria, it is the Turkic people with their history of deportation which are the most vocal. Whereas the Kabardins’ political aims are restricted to more autonomy from Moscow and a proportional rather than equal distribution of political power with the Balkars (most political power is presently shared on a one-to-one basis) the Balkars seem to be the presently most determined troublemaker of the two republics. Already heavily inferior in number to the Kabardins,
the Balkars fear that the demographic changes in the republic, with lower growth of the Russian population than the natives, coupled with Russian emigration, will actually give the Kabardins a majoritarian position in the republic, something which by now (nine years since the last Soviet census) may very well be the case. The Balkars, just like the Karachais, claim full territorial rehabilitation, and some seem to envisage a separate Balkar republic, or at least a federative structure of the republic. The Balkars complain about being the ‘poorest segment of the population of the republic’, and the fact that all major political posts are held by Kabardins. The primary claim of the Balkars nevertheless concerns certain territorial districts which before the deportations were inhabited by Balkars, but are now disputed by both peoples. The simmering tensions first emerged in 1991, when a first Balkar congress declared the creation of a Balkar republic which would remain in a federalized Kabardino-Balkaria. However, a referendum among Balkars showed a surprisingly low level of support for such demands, and the question lost its momentum.

The Balkar grievances once again came out in the open in November 1996, when a congress of the Balkar people voted to establish a sovereign republic of Balkaria, requesting that the Russian presidency establish direct presidential rule in the region until necessary institutions were formed. The congress elected a former commander of the Transcaucasus Military District, Sufyan Beppayev, as chairman of the new Balkar state council. The Kabardin president of Kabardino-Balkaria quickly declared the decision unconstitutional, accusing the Balkar delegates of ‘unbridled nationalist extremism’ and of ‘flagrantly flouting’ the constitution of the republic. Criminal proceedings were opened against the initiators by the procurator’s office of the republic, while the central ministry of justice, while taking the matter quite easily, confirmed the unconstitutionality of the act. The situation was not improved, however, by the fact that the congress formed a ‘Balkar ministry of internal affairs’, which pledged to organize self-defence detachments in Balkar communities. These events took place only a week before the final date of submission of documents for the presidential elections in the republic, and should be seen as a political manifestation in this light. As the Beppayev group realized that their following was still low, Beppayev distanced himself from the earlier remarks. The incumbent president, Valery Kokov, was the only candidate, and ran unopposed (which is by itself unconstitutional) in the elections which were held on 12 January. Although the elections themselves took place without any misfortunes, the situation in the republic does not seem to be very stable, as a bomb blast occurred four days before the election in the parliament building of the republic. No one was injured, but this event is an indication of the political unrest which exists.

The west-central part of the North Caucasus, then, seems to be a place where the potential for further unrest is high. Certain elements in the two republics are trying to stir up a conflict. This fact is very much due to their resentments dating back to the time of deportations, with claims to rehabilitation that often inflict
upon the rights and territories of other communities, in this case the Circassians with which they have a historical uneasy relationship.

Then again, it is difficult to estimate the actual popular base of these demands. Referenda that have been held in the republics stress one clear fact: the overwhelming majority of all the four peoples desire the preservation of the status quo. Furthermore, the spectre of Chechnya, and to a lesser degree of the Prigorodniy conflict, will probably keep some calm in the North Caucasus for some time; however this is valid only in the short term. Whereas the initial response from Moscow on the unrest in Kabardino-Balkaria did not seem to differ from past trends, the Stepashin government attempted to adopt a constructive approach to the unrest in Karachai-Cherkessia. The arrival of the hardliner clique led by Vladimir Putin to power in Moscow, is nevertheless, likely to end such constructive attitudes. Little positive can hence be expected from Moscow. The potential of conflict in the two republics can be described as latent in Kabardino-Balkaria but close to acute in Karachai-Cherkessia. Naturally, given the links between the two republics, an armed conflict in one republic would have considerable potential to spread to the other.

It is possible that the Circassians and Karachai-Balkar peoples will continue to live together—or rather side by side—with only minor disturbances; on the other hand, the ease with which tensions have escalated into conflict in other parts of the Caucasus does not look promising. One notable fact, however, is that both of these people are Muslim; and in the post-Soviet Caucasus, no serious conflict has so far pitted one Muslim people against another. Whether this is a variable to be reckoned with or a mere coincidence, however, remains to be seen.

The Lezgin quest for unification

The Lezgins are a Dagestani people numbering roughly half a million, who live in the South of Dagestan and in the North of Azerbaijan. In number, they are the second largest Dagestani nationality after the Avars, although in Dagestan itself they form the fourth largest group, after the Avars, Dargins, and Kumyks. The Lezgins have been living on both banks of the Samur river in the Southern part of the mountain republic for millennia. Until the First World War, there was no territorial problem as far as the Lezgins were concerned as the Russian empire extended south until the Araxes, which formed the border with Persia. However, during the national delimitations of the early Soviet era, the Samur river was taken as a border between the RSFSR and the Azeri SSR. This still did not pose much of a problem, as this border was by no means an international boundary. The problem of the Lezgins is that since 1991, they have been divided between two sovereign states: Russia and Azerbaijan. This problem, of course, is a direct result of the break-up of the Soviet Union. Before Azerbaijan’s independence, the border between the RSFSR and the Azeri SSR was no hindrance to the Lezgins.

The first Lezgin claim to a territorial entity of their own dates back to 1965, when a national organization headed by the Dagestani writer, Iskander Kaziev,
protested the assimilation policies of the Lezgins, and demanded a unified territorial unit comprising territories of Dagestan and Azerbaijan.\textsuperscript{91} The argument was that a unified Lezgin entity would prevent assimilation and enable the Lezgin people to freely practice its culture and traditions. The Lezgins have been denouncing the policies of assimilation of the Azerbaijani government in particular. Whereas officially the number of Lezgins registered as such in Azerbaijan is around 180,000, the Lezgins claim that the number of Lezgins registered as Azerbaijan is many times higher than this figure, some accounts showing over 700,000 Lezgins in Azerbaijan.\textsuperscript{92} These figures are denied by the Azerbaijani government, but in private many Azeris acknowledge the fact that the Lezgin—and for that matter the Talysh or the Kurdish—population of Azerbaijan is far higher than the official figures. Lezgins are, generally speaking, well integrated into Azerbaijani society, and mixed marriages are common. Furthermore Lezgins in Azerbaijan on the whole have a better level of education than those in Dagestan.\textsuperscript{93}

For the Lezgins in Azerbaijan, the existence of ethnic kin in Dagestan is of high importance. Nariman Ramazanov, one of the Lezgin political leaders, has argued that whereas the Talysh, Tats, and Kurds of Azerbaijan lost much of their language and ethnic identity, the Lezgins have been able to preserve theirs by their contacts with Dagestan, where there was naturally no policy of Azeri assimilation.\textsuperscript{94}

The Lezgins, like many other minorities, started to organize themselves politically in the late Gorbachev era. In July 1990, the Lezgin Democratic union Sadval (unity) was founded in Southern Dagestan.\textsuperscript{95} It proclaimed as its political objective to draft an ‘acceptable proposal’ on the unification of the Lezgin people and submit it to the Azerbaijani and Russian governments.\textsuperscript{96} However, as Sadval saw little response from the respective central governments, it gradually grew more radical. In December 1991, during the constitutional vacuum after the break-up of the Soviet Union, an All-Nation congress of the Lezgin people declared the creation of an independent state of Lezgistan incorporating territories of both Dagestan and Azerbaijan. This action can be seen as an act of panic, as it became obvious to the Lezgins that the Samur river would now become an international frontier. The Lezgins were thus confronted with a direct threat of being separated in practice, rather than only in theory as previously. Almost immediately, Azeri Lezgins were drafted for service in the Azerbaijani army in the escalating war in Nagorno-Karabakh, adding to the feeling of insecurity of the Lezgins and prompting a series of protests, notably in March 1993.\textsuperscript{97} By the summer of 1992, as relations between Russia and Azerbaijan deteriorated, the Russian government proposed setting up strict border controls on the Azeri border; possibly, Lezgins crossing the border would have to apply for visas either way they were travelling, hence putting substantial obstacles to the contacts between Lezgins across the border. This proposal, as Elizabeth Fuller states, served as a detonator exacerbating the existing tensions.\textsuperscript{98} Demonstrations were
organized on both sides of the border by Sadval, which prompted high-level meetings between the Azerbaijani, Russian and Dagestani governments.

The Azerbaijani government felt seriously threatened by the Lezgin upheaval. Faced with an escalating war in Karabakh with which it was unable to cope, Azerbaijan could hardly have survived a second ethnic conflict on its territory, thus a compromise was arranged at the time, as Russia was equally weary of further unrest on its southern border—at least if it was unable to control it. The border controls, the Russian government argued, would only serve the purpose of preventing smuggling. Furthermore, Azerbaijan saw a Russian hand behind Sadval, intended to further destabilize Azerbaijan in order to force the country to accept Russian military bases and border troops, as had been done in Georgia.99 This dimension has further complicated the Lezgin question, as the resolution of the problem would be difficult without the co-operation of the Azerbaijani, Dagestani, and Russian governments.100

In October 1992, at a Sadval congress in Makhachkala, the Lezgins in Dagestan and Azerbaijan seemed to have important differences in their viewpoints on how to formulate the movement’s policy. Clearly, the Lezgins in Azerbaijan were more radical than their Dagestani kin, as they threatened to resort to arms if the Azerbaijani government did not accept their demands. The Dagestani Lezgins, on the other hand, seem less militant and more fearful of ethnic conflict, perhaps due to the general awareness in Dagestan of the fragility of the republic’s multi-ethnic stability. Their fear is well-founded. Take the example of Derbent, the historical city of southern Dagestan populated mainly by Azeris, Lezgins, Tabasarans, and Tats. In May 1994, the killing of several Lezgins in the city brought ethnic tensions to the point of civil war.101

Some Lezgins clearly seem favourably disposed towards a unified Lezgin republic, which would be under the sovereignty of the Russian Federation. Nevertheless, political movements opposing a change of borders have erupted on both sides; it has been alleged that these are controlled by the Azerbaijani or Russian governments. Matters hardly improved between 1992 and 1994; on the contrary, the escalation of the Karabakh war and the consistent refusal of Lezgins to serve in the Azeri army has been a simmering ground for conflict.

It is difficult at this time to assess what a degree of following the Sadval has in Dagestan and Azerbaijan respectively. However it can be assumed that—as is the case in most ethnic conflicts in their early stages—the militant forces have quite a weak popular backing.102 Most Lezgins, especially those in Azerbaijan, are doubtless worried about their position in an independent, unpredictable Azerbaijan. Simultaneously, however the very fact that many of them are well integrated into the Azeri society might work as a stabilising factor; the Islamic identity of both peoples (although the Lezgins are Sunnis of the Shafi’i school and the Azeris are mostly Shi’i) is also a factor which makes a Karabakh-style development unlikely. The Lezgins, moreover, although living mainly to the north of Azerbaijan, are not concentrated geographically like the Armenians in Karabakh. Despite these elements, the unstable current political situation, in
Azerbaijan and in the Caucasus as a whole, may very well contribute to an ethnic mobilization on both sides.

In March 1994, an explosion in the Baku metro killed twelve people and injured over 50. Investigations soon found evidence pointing to Sadval involvement in the terrorist act. More worrying for the Azeris, connections between Sadval and the Armenian security services were discovered, pointing to an Armenian intention of stirring up ethnic conflict in Azerbaijan. Two years later, in May 1996, two Sadval activists were sentenced to death and eleven to long prison sentences for this crime. In July, Ramazanov, who became one of the leaders of Sadval in Azerbaijan, was arrested by Azeri police. The accusations against him were heavy: he was branded as an Armenian agent, and accused of having organized training camps for terrorists in Dagestan. As a response to the arrest, some 300 Lezgins took four Azeri police officers hostage on the Dagestani border, demanding the release of Ramazanov. The following day, 14 July, Ramazanov was indeed released—an astonishing development considering the severity of the accusations against him. This quick conciliatory Azeri response to activism among the Lezgins seems to confirm the assumption that Azerbaijan will seek to avoid a second ethnic conflict at all costs. Indeed, the release of an alleged Armenian agent can not have been an easy decision to take. By extension, one could assume that if the Lezgins play their cards well, they are likely to extract significant concessions from the already cornered Azeri government. The danger, however, is that the Lezgins, feeling this opportunity, will increase their militancy and continue to press for a unified state—something Azerbaijan can never agree to. Besides the simple principle of upholding the country’s territorial integrity, granting the right to secession for the Lezgins would compromise Azerbaijan’s hard-necked refusal to grant the same right to the Karabakh Armenians. Continued Lezgin extremism, hence, risks creating an Azeri reaction. If one looks back to the late 1980s and the Azeri reactions to Armenian extremism, it seems likely that such a reaction would take the form of sudden, violent outbursts of anger and in the worst case ethnic riots of a ‘Sumgait’ type.

Such a scenario, however, needs not become reality. Given the fact that the primary concern of the Lezgin population is to have a guaranteed right of contacts over the Samur river, an agreement between the Russian (Dagestani) and Azerbaijani governments according certain rights to the Lezgin people should be instrumental in decreasing much of the popular base for Lezgin extremism. As the Lezgins have been first-hand witnesses to the cruelty and destruction of the ethnic conflict between Armenians and Azeris, it is likely that the overwhelming majority of the Lezgin population would prefer accommodation to conflict, even if this means renouncing territorial unity. Indeed, in April 1996, the claim for Lezgin statehood was officially rejected at Sadval’s sixth congress, as it was seen as detrimental to inter-ethnic relations between Lezgins and Azeris. Reports also show that tension between the communities has eased considerably, and that the Lezgins are presently not discriminated against in Azerbaijan.
The Lezgin problem remains one of the most acute and unpredictable of the contemporary Caucasus. This said, the conditions for a peaceful resolution of the conflict are present. No past conflict nor heavy mutual prejudices make management of the conflict impossible; nor has ethnic mobilization taken place to a significant extent. Hence there are no actual obstacles to a de-escalation of the conflict at the popular level. At the political level, however, the militancy of Sadval and the strict position of the Azeri government give cause for worry, and may prevent the settlement of the conflict through a compromise such as a free-trading zone. The Lezgin problem needs to be monitored and followed in closer detail, and its continued volatility is proven by the tension surrounding a recent Lezgin congress in Dagestan.\(^{106}\) This could be helpful in providing early warning signals of an escalation of the conflict, something which in turn can be capitalized upon to put pressure on both sides to solve their differences peacefully.

**Dagestan: complexity *par excellence***

Since the first Russian attempts to conquer the Caucasus, the mountain peoples of Chechnya and Dagestan have consistently been the most difficult to subdue, the most staunchly anti-Russian and the most conservative Islamic nations of the region. In history, these peoples periodically rose together in unified rebellions against the Russian overlords. Dagestan in fact often took the lead in these rebellions. The most well-known Caucasian leader, Imam Shamil, was himself an Avar. The last North Caucasian rebellion of 1920–22, which has been termed ‘the last ghazawat’, took place mostly in Dagestan as the Chechens were considerably less involved in the matter.\(^{107}\) Dagestani opposition to Soviet rule continued despite the defeat of the rebellion. Most notably, the argument has been advanced that the Dagestani peoples may have escaped the Stalinist deportations of 1943–44 by the threat of a pan-Caucasian uprising, which the Red Army by experience knew would have been very lengthy and costly to suppress.\(^{108}\)

In the early 1990s, however, Dagestan remained relatively calm and quiet. Even with Russia’s invasion of Chechnya, when many observers thought the Dagestanis would rebel in support of the Chechens, nothing happened—despite the fact that the north-eastern part of the republic, neighbouring Chechnya, has received its share of Russian bombs and missiles. Dagestan has hardly been the scene of any anti-Russian agitation, although the economic and political situation in the republic has been all but stable. Historically less rebellious regions such as Bashkiria, Chuvashia, or Yakutia have shown a greater tendency to nationalism than has Dagestan, for a number of political and economic reasons.

Dagestan is one of the most ethnically diverse and complex territories in the world. The largest republic of the North Caucasus with a population of roughly 2 million, Dagestan is home to over 30 indigenous peoples, the largest of which (the Avars) comprise less than 30 per cent of the republic’s population.\(^{109}\) This complex structure can be explained by the topography of the republic. The
population settled in valleys isolated from one another by high mountains and kept little seasonal communication with one another; hence through the centuries a large number of distinct, related but often not mutually understandable languages developed. National identity was, as mentioned in chapter two, not much of an issue in Dagestan or the North Caucasus in general until Soviet rule. Local identities (which may have coincided with ethnic identities) but especially the religious identity of being a Muslim were the chief identities of the Dagestanis. In the Soviet era, when Dagestan became an autonomous republic, the issue of the administration of the republic appeared, and hence the need for a system of distributing political positions along the ethnic groups occurred. The outcome was a system comparable to the Lebanese ‘confessional’ system, with the only difference that in the Dagestani case the criterion was not religion but ethnicity, as defined primarily by language, and that rotation on official posts was significantly more developed in Dagestan. This system has nevertheless been tampered with in the post-Soviet era, as will be seen below. As far as Dagestan is concerned, several main points need further attention: first, Russian-Dagestani relations; second, the Islamic revival that has been observed in the post-Soviet era, and third, the fragile multi-ethnic stability of the republic which is related to the problems of governance.

Russia & Dagestan

A main factor differentiates Chechnya from Dagestan in the post-Soviet period. In Chechnya, an anti-Soviet and anti-Russian nationalist leadership managed to grab power in the unruly days after the August 1991 coup; in the case of Dagestan, the Soviet-era government was able to retain its hold on power. This fact can be derived mainly from two circumstances: firstly, the existing Chechen animosity towards Russia was exacerbated by the deportations of the Second World War. As most Chechen leaders of today are born in Kazakhstan or Siberia, they have first-hand experience of the horrors of deportation, which fuelled their traditional anti-Russian feelings. In contrast bitter memories of the Dagestanis date back further, to the early 1920s. Secondly, in the Chechen-Ingush republic, one people, the Chechens, enjoyed a position of demographic dominance while having a substantial demographic weight of close to 700,000 people. This made the formation of a national front, the All-Chechen National Congress, and of a credible nationalist struggle against the central government considerably easier. In Dagestan, the practical difficulties of politically uniting over two dozen peoples under a common roof entailed that no anti-Soviet popular front could emerge—and the Sovietized government was able to stay in power without facing a credible challenge to its position. This government has remained true to Moscow despite the increasing quest for self-rule among the other North Caucasian peoples.

As Brian Murray has noted, ‘the indigenous Sovietized elite within Dagestan maintains Soviet structures and Soviet power... Sovietized Dagestanis are serving the role of an ‘absent sovereign’ following the end of Soviet hegemony in the
Similarly, Marie Bennigsen Broxup has argued that the Dagestani leadership ‘subserviently voted in favour of remaining part of an ‘indivisible Russia.’ Hence at the republican level, the absence of Dagestani hostility to Moscow can be ascribed to the survival of old, pro-Russian power structures in the republic.

Another factor is that compared to Chechnya, Dagestan has a significantly lower economic viability and is more dependent on Russia for its finances. Over 85 per cent of the republic’s funds are direct subsidies from Moscow; the economic condition of the republic has also deteriorated considerably since 1991. This gives an independent Dagestani state little economic viability, especially as Dagestan does not possess Chechnya’s oil resources. This has certainly been a reason for the lack of enthusiasm for separatism.

On a popular level, anti-Russian feeling certainly exists, although it is difficult to measure its extent and strength. The Russian army has not been careful in trying to prevent hostilities from spreading to Dagestan. In the initial phase of the invasion, the Russian forces on their way to Chechnya were stopped by civilians in Dagestan. In this case the Russian field commanders acted with reason, choosing to make their way peacefully. In later stages, the Dagestani route was avoided, and most forces were instead channeled through North Ossetia. The war actually spread to Dagestan on several occasions, most notably with the Chechen hostage-taking raid in Kizlyar and Pervomaiskoye, led by Salman Raduyev (see chapter five). Whereas this event initially directed the Dagestani’s anger against the Chechens, the abrupt and bloody Russian intervention, which killed many hostages together with the Chechen rebels, certainly revived anti-Russian sentiments. Upon seeing the devastation of the village of Pervomaiskoye, one Dagestani member of parliament was even reported as cursing the Dagestani decision to side with Moscow and not with Chechnya in the war.

Until 1998, Dagestan remained comparatively politically calm, despite widespread criminality including the emerging practice of abducting people for ransom, the increasing shadow economy controlled by the mafia, and an increasing number of political murders, certainly connected to the shadow economy. No actual conflict has arisen yet between the Kremlin and Dagestan; however a change of leadership is to be expected in the not too distant future, although it at present is difficult to predict how this will take place. The economic situation of the republic, if nothing else, needs to be managed; foreign and domestic investments are needed; and in the long run the citizens will demand a more democratic form of government. If, furthermore, Moscow continues to disregard the popular will of the Caucasians—and there are no indications to the contrary—the Dagestani might very well call for increased sovereignty. It is too early at this time to speculate on the outcome of such demands; however it should be noted that the Dagestani people are not susceptible to be significantly more pro-Russian than other Caucasian peoples. If history is any indication, the reverse is true. In this context, the religious awakening that is taking place in Dagestan is significant. Given
Moscow’s suspicious attitude towards Islam, the current tendency in Dagestan, which is truly growing to be—once again—the Islamic centre of the whole region, may very well attract Russia’s discontent.

The return of Islam

The Islamic revival in the North Caucasus actually started long before Mikhail Gorbachev’s advent to power, being traced back to the 1970s. 115 Admittedly, even in the heyday of Soviet atheism, the religious practices were never eradicated; far from it, they flourished in the underground Sufi form. The Naqshbandi and Qadiri tariqats, always powerful in the North Caucasus, became the focal point of Islam in the Soviet times, as official religion was persecuted by the authorities. What happened in the late 1980s was that religious practice came out in the open, in the end even encompassing the indigenous Soviet elites. As Fanny Bryan has noted, the Islamic opposition underwent a strategic change with Glasnost. From being in latent opposition, it became an active, aggressive movement on the offensive against the system.116 In 1989, the first religious demonstrations took place in Buinaksk and the capital, Makhachkala. The primary demand was the building of new mosques and the restoration of old ones. Before 1989, there were officially 27 functioning mosques in Dagestan, while by 1994 they were estimated at over 5,000.117 The mufti of the Makhachkala ‘spiritual directorate’, accused of collaborating with the state security organs, was ousted by a popular revolt in May of the same year. It is believed that many of these revolts were initiated and conducted by the powerful tariqats of the region. Furthermore, the hajj pilgrimage has been renewed in a large scale. Today, Arabic and Qu’ran classes openly take place in the schools of Dagestan,118 and political leaders, riding on the Islamic wave, have proclaimed their intention of making Islam the state religion of the republic. The Islamic wind is blowing in the politics of Dagestan, too. The Islamic-Democratic Party decided to rename itself as the Islamic Party; its leadership has changed and become more religiously coloured.

As Vladimir Bobrovnikov has noted in a rare field study on Islam in Dagestan, the Islamic revival has not taken place in a homogenous way. It has affected the northwestern part of the republic, populated by Avars, Dargins, and Kumyks, to a much wider extent than the central and southern parts, chiefly the places of residence of the Laks, Lezgins, and Tabasarans.119 The majority of newly opened mosques and Madrasahs are to be found in the northern and western parts of the country. The fact that the tariqats have been strongest in these areas is probably an important reason for these regional differences. As we shall see in the next section, the religious movement, far from being united, has divided along national lines, with each of the larger peoples setting up a spiritual directorate, or ‘muftiāte’, of its own. Nevertheless, this tendency is counteracted by currents which argue for unity in the name of Islam, currents which in the long run are likely to be victorious, at least if the religious movements are really such and do not turn out to be disguised nationalisms.
The Islamic revival in Dagestan is important, as it is instrumental in tying the Dagestanis (and other North Caucasians) to the larger world of Islam. In particular, the performance of the hajj plays this role. The believers having performed the pilgrimage who return to their native lands can be presumed to work for the establishment of Islamic education there. Moreover, as has been the case in other areas such as in Turkey, their devotion entails a long-term objective of strengthening religion, completely independent from the short-term political struggle in the country—a strategy which has shown considerable success elsewhere.120

Hence in terms of identity, Islam—just as it has in the past—might become the unifying force of the North Caucasians. Whether this is a positive or negative development naturally depends on one’s perspective of political Islam; Russia is likely to counteract this tendency, and even to use it as a pretext for reestablishing its hegemony over the region, reiterating its claim to be the defender of Europe and Christianity in face of an expansionist Islam. In Dagestan however, through its unifying power, Islam might be the main and crucial element in sustaining multi-ethnic peace and stability in the future. This logically brings us to our last point: multi-ethnic stability.

<table>
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<tr>
<th>Ethnic Group</th>
<th>Number (1989)</th>
<th>Percentage</th>
<th>1993 estimates122</th>
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<tr>
<td>Avar</td>
<td>495,000</td>
<td>27.5</td>
<td>524,000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dargin</td>
<td>280,000</td>
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<tr>
<td>Kumyk</td>
<td>232,000</td>
<td>12.9</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lezgin</td>
<td>205,000</td>
<td>11.3</td>
<td>231,000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Russian</td>
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<td>9.2</td>
<td>—</td>
</tr>
<tr>
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<td>98,000</td>
</tr>
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<td>Tabasaran</td>
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<td>Nogai</td>
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<td>19,000</td>
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<tr>
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<td>14,000</td>
<td>0.8</td>
<td>18,000</td>
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<tr>
<td>Ukrainian</td>
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<td>—</td>
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<tr>
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<tr>
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<td>Tsakhur</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tat (Mountain Jew)</td>
<td>4,000</td>
<td>0.3</td>
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Multi-ethnic Dagestan

The ‘nationalities question’ is more explosive in Dagestan than anywhere else in the Russian Federation, or for that matter in the whole of the former Soviet
Union. Given the number of distinct nationalities, the size of the republic, and the overlapping settlement patterns, a territorial division of Dagestan along ethnic lines is practically impossible.\textsuperscript{125} For this reason, it is more imperative than elsewhere to prevent national movements from pronouncing territorial objectives, as such claims would immediately spur counter-claims and in the end a chaotic and conflictual situation.\textsuperscript{126} The number of territorial conflicts that a division of Dagestan could conceivably lead to is practically unlimited; the spectre of a civil war in Dagestan is intimidating. Comparing with the Lebanese civil war, the number of groups in Dagestan is such that the number of possible coalitions is very large.

It seems, however, that many Dagestanis are aware of this problem. The ‘national question’ is something people in the republic are reluctant to discuss.\textsuperscript{127} However, past Soviet stirrings, as in the Prigorodniy and other places, have artificially changed the demographic structure of the republic. For example, as the Chechens were deported from their lands in what was then Eastern Chechnya, the territory forming the Aukhovsky (now Novolaksky) district was given to Dagestan, and a Lak community was forcibly settled on these lands with a considerable loss of life. At the return of these Chechens, called the Chechen-Akkintsy, from deportation, this territory was not returned to the Chechen-Ingush ASSR. As the Chechens tried to settle in their native lands in the late 1980s, they came into conflict with the Laks residing there, notably after the Aukhovsky Rayon had been re-established in May 1991 as a result of the April 1991 law on the rehabilitation of repressed peoples.\textsuperscript{128} In this event, a solution was found to the conflict by the mediation of the Confederation of Mountain Peoples of the Caucasus as well as of the Dagestani government. The Laks, in an rare concession, agreed to resettle elsewhere in Dagestan, and the funding for their new homes was to come from the central government. However, this concession was also due to the fact that Russian armed troops had been introduced in the region, which both population groups wanted to be withdrawn. The Akkintsy have also come into conflict with Avars which had been resettled in the Aukhovsky Rayon after 1944. The escalation of a conflict provoked by the Chechens threatening to move into two predominantly Avar villages in August 1992 was prevented by the intervention of Ramazan Abdulatipov and Ruslan Khasbulatov, both widely respected members of each community.\textsuperscript{129}

Since the late Soviet years, popular fronts have emerged among most of the larger peoples of Dagestan. Among these, the most active and radical is clearly Tenglik (‘Unity’) the popular front of the Kumyk nation, founded in November 1989. The Kumyk people are the second-largest Turkic-speaking people of the Caucasus after the Azeris, counting some 300,000 souls. The Kumyks traditionally live in the plains and foothills of the North Caucasus, in particular in the east of Dagestan, including the Caspian Sea coast. Small communities exist in Chechnya and North Ossetia as well. The Kumyks’ main grievance is that non-Kumyk peoples, primarily Avars and Dargins, migrated from the highlands to settle in historical Kumyk lands during Soviet times.\textsuperscript{130} The
Kumyks also feel discriminated against in the government of Dagestan, as well as in higher education. The territorial issue nevertheless remains the key bone of contention. Despite Kumyk protests, thousands of non-Kumyks were allowed to settle in Kumyk lands north of Makhachkala, lands from which Kumyks had been relocated to Chechnya in 1944.131

The demands of the Kumyks are unclear. According to Jibrail Khabibullah, a representative of Tenglik, the movement desires a form of local autonomy, with some radical groups even asking for a sovereign Kumyk republic on the Caspian Sea.132 Moreover, the Kumyks want to restructure the whole of Dagestan. As pronounced by Kamil Aliyev, the foreign relations secretary of Tenglik, the Kumyk proposals to ‘organize Dagestan’s national problems’ are as follows:

- national-regional autonomy (similar to Swiss cantons)
- furnishing national minorities and national groups with land
- cultural autonomy133

The Kumyks active in Tenglik seem to be convinced that such a restructuring of Dagestan, involving a new constitution and national parliaments, would ensure the ‘multipartite and multinational unity’ of Dagestan. They are equally convinced that an insistence on the part of the republican government on preserving the unitary structure of the country would lead to ‘democratic struggle’, whatever that entails.134

The arguments of Tenglik raise a very crucial and difficult question: which form of government is the most conducive to peace and stability in multi-ethnic societies? As an answer to this question, two main models are advocated. The first, and currently in place in Dagestan, preserves the unity of the state and provides for power-sharing mechanisms among the constituting peoples of the state. The second, as proposed by Tenglik, argues for a territorial delimitation and some kind of federal or autonomous structure.

The main contention thus lies between an approach which tries to integrate peoples of different ethnic groups in the management of a single state, and an approach which advocates that peace is best protected if groups stay apart and rule their own affairs to the highest extent possible.135

The theoretical details of the different approaches are not our subject here, however it should be noted that the power-sharing approach is divided into an ‘integrative’ wing, aiming at creating trans-ethnic political coalitions and alliances and intra-ethnic competition;136 and a ‘consociational’ wing which accords more political importance in politics to the ethnic groups as such, involving minority vetoes, proportionality in allocation of civil service positions and funds, etc.137 Basically, the integrative approach tries to cut through ethnic lines and diminish the salience of ethnicity in political and social life, whereas the consociational approach aims at protecting minorities and the achievement of consensus between the leadership of the respective groups. Dagestan has adopted a model reminiscent
of the Lebanese one, with a division of political posts at the local and national levels based on ethnicity.\textsuperscript{138}

In the Dagestani case, the ‘cantonal’ model proposed by Tenglik among others is, on closer inspection, extremely dangerous. It is highly divisive, and, what is more, impossible to translate into practice. Besides the number of ethnic groups and the problems arising therefrom, as well as the problem of what to do with the smaller peoples, ethnically mixed villages and cities would be cut into sections, one would assume, and the heritage of a Dagestani identity would fade away, leaving place for ethnic politics to fill its gap. The territorial claims of the many groups are moreover overlapping, and hence a territorial delimitation would certainly lead to conflicts. Whereas most popular fronts in the republic accept these arguments and are against a territorial division, Tenglik has obstinately continued to advocate a revision of the republican structure, for example in a Makhachkala congress in March 1994.\textsuperscript{139}

A main problem that has grown increasingly acute is that in the 1990s, the power-sharing system that existed in Dagestan was gradually disbanded at the hands of the present leadership. The fact is that Dagestan is now being run by a coalition of political forces mainly based on the Avar and Dargin communities. The main groups to openly contest this are the Kumyks and Laks; the other numerous people, the Lezgins, have so far concentrated political activities on the cross-border problems with Azerbaijan, and has therefore shown comparably little interest in the governance of Dagestan, a situation that can not be expected to continue indefinitely. The Russian government is, nevertheless, happy to work with the present leadership and is not pushing for a liberalization of the political sphere.

A major controversy arose, prompted by the upcoming election to the state council’s chairmanship; the chairman (who is effectively the highest official in the republic) is currently elected by a constituent assembly, and not by direct elections; strong forces, especially the Lak community led by Nadir Khachilayev, a member of the Russian State Duma and the leader of Russia’s Muslim Union, whose brother heads the Lak national movement, but also the Kumyks demand direct elections to the post.\textsuperscript{140} In early 1998, the current chairman Magomedali Magomedov, a Dargin, had succeeded in removing the constitutional clause which stipulated the need for ethnic rotation on the post, hence enabling Magomedov to run again for the post.\textsuperscript{141}

In May 1998, disturbances in Makhachkala erupted after the Khachilayev faction apparently tried to stage a coup in the republic by occupying the building of the Dagestani state council.\textsuperscript{142} Large numbers of Khachilayev’s supporters emerged and demands were made for the resignation of Magomedov. Negotiations resolved the immediate conflict, but the event shed light upon the problems relating to Dagestan’s present governance. Indeed, one of the main demands Khachilayev had made was for the post to be directly elected, and the rather drastic measures used can be seen as a way of drawing attention to the post-Soviet clique still ruling Dagestan. Nevertheless, Russian media as well as the
Dagestani authorities have advanced the claim that Khachilayev’s action is sponsored by Chechnya in an attempt to destabilize Dagestan, and Khachilayev remained on the run until he was arrested in the aftermath of the Chechen invasion of Dagestan in 1999. The impetus for such a move would be that a pro-Chechen Dagestani government would solve many of Chechnya’s problems of contact with the outer world; indeed, Chechnya needs Dagestan for its access to the Caspian Sea and to Azerbaijan. Shamil Basayev, the Chechen field commander and former prime minister, indeed supported the action and Khachilayev is reputed to have good relations with Chechnya; furthermore Basayev had made no secret of his wish to create a unified and independent republic of Chechnya-Dagestan. Perhaps Chechen involvement has been a factor, but it seems clear that the Dagestani leadership and its policies is by itself sufficient to fuel widespread opposition. This was also the essence of Chechnya’s then foreign minister, Movladi Udugov’s, reaction to the events. Khachilayev’s actions only prove that discontent with the government is growing. The later the real problems are dealt with, the more difficult will the ‘de-Sovietization’ of Dagestan be.

August 1999

The tensions between Chechnya and Russia, especially on the Chechen-Dagestani border, had begun to escalate by early 1999 (as discussed in chapter five). On 28 May, Chechen militants attacked a Russian checkpoint on the border, prompting a Russian helicopter attack on their positions. On 1 June and 17 June, similar attacks took place, and high-level talks between Russian and Chechen authorities increased; however on 23 July, a Chechen group attacked a Russian post in Kizlyar. It was by then clear that the Chechen leadership could not control the perpetrators of these acts. On 7 August, approximately 1,200 guerrillas under the leadership of Basayev and Khattab, calling themselves the Islamic Peacekeeping Army, invaded villages in the western Botlikh Rayon of Dagestan with the stated aim of establishing an Islamic state over Chechnya and Dagestan.

In retrospect, the attack appears to have been ill-planned. Instead of attacking Russian military posts, the militants attacked villages and occasionally found themselves in exchanges of fire with Dagestani villagers, thereby quickly alienating the population of the region, which is mainly composed of the Andi group. In other instances, elders from the villages were able to convince the militants not to occupy their village. A total of nine villages were nevertheless overrun by the militants. Meanwhile, Russian Prime Minister Stepashin was fired by Yeltsin, after having returned from a visit to Dagestan. Stepashin on his return had publicly stated his fear that ‘we may be losing Dagestan’, a claim that in retrospect seems to have been less than warranted. In his place, the hardliner Vladimir Putin was appointed, and immediately claimed to restore order within two weeks.

In an interesting development, the Russian military was supported by Dagestani police and volunteers, as the public opinion in Dagestan seemed less
than thrilled by the invasion of the Chechen-led militants. Despite several mishaps, the Russian forces were able to force the militants to retire back into Chechnya after almost three weeks. On 6 September, Basayev’s forces again attacked Dagestan. This time in the Novolaksky district north of Botlikh. By this time, the Russian forces numbered over 30,000 in Dagestan, and the militants were forced to retreat once again. It is difficult to assess the actual objectives of Basayev’s invasion of Dagestan. Did the militants really believe they could occupy Dagestan with less than 2,000 soldiers? Such a misjudgment seems unlikely for a fighter with Basayev’s experience. Did Basayev hope for a rebellion to take place in Dagestan? Such a strategy would have grossly overestimated Dagestani anti-Russian feelings, and obviously also the following of the Wahabbism in Dagestan.

In any case, the campaign proved to be a disaster not so much for Dagestan, but for Chechnya. The invasion gave Moscow a pretext to increase its military presence around Chechnya—a presence that was later used to launch a new war in Chechnya. Indeed, Basayev must accept the major part of the blame for this new war. Basayev’s invasion, and the mysterious bombs against civilian targets in Moscow that the Russian leadership without evidence blames on the Chechens, helped the Putin government gain popular backing for a new war in Chechnya, a war that is crucial to Putin’s future political career. As far as Dagestan is concerned, nevertheless, the August events may have had little influence on the domestic politics of the republic, but certainly increased the perception of dependence on Moscow for security that already existed among the population. It seems the Russian forces succeeded in not alienating the local population, very much because the Dagestani public opinion perceived the ‘enemy’ as being alien to both themselves and Russia, despite the participation in Basayev’s forces of a substantial number of fighters of Dagestani origin.

**Political prospects**

As Brian Murray has argued, the presence of a Dagestani identity with the historical figure of Shamil as its primary figure-head, connected to the common Islamic identity of all peoples, makes a ‘united Dagestan’ a realistic objective. As he rightly notes, ‘dividing Dagestan up into ethnic autonomous regions would repeat the mistakes of Soviet ethnic federalism and could have horrifying consequences given the republic’s ethnic geography.’ To further Dagestan’s peace and unity, however, the current power-sharing arrangement must be revised to answer to the post-Soviet reality. Many scholars in this respect would advocate the ‘Lebanon-type’ consociational approach. Given the complexity of Dagestan, some form of quotation of ethnic groups in state service is probably inevitable; in this respect, the Kumyk claims might be satisfied to some degree. However, as far as possible, the ethnic differences should be overbridged rather than emphasized. The fate of the Lebanese consociational system is illustrating of this problematic. This highlights the differences between multi-ethnic and ethnically bifurcated societies. In particular, the dangers of ethnic federalism, which effectively
bifurcate ethnic groups and hence aggravate rather than alleviate ethnic tensions, seems relevant to Dagestan. Dagestan has, despite its serious problems, arguably been the republic in the North Caucasus where ethnic tensions have been least acute. This supports the argument that its policy of power-sharing in the place of ethnic federalism (practiced elsewhere in the Soviet Union) is more conducive to peace than ethnic bifurcation.

What would suit Dagestan best, then, is a power-sharing agreement which is as integrative as possible, encouraging political movements transcending ethnic differences and political competition within ethnic groups—all to prevent the salience of ethnic politics. Simultaneously, a certain consociational touch is necessary to protect the interests of the individual ethnic groups. A certain proportionality in parliament and in civil service could be desirable, as would cultural autonomy. Given the grievances of the Kumyks, a form of veto right over affairs that directly concern the ethnic group might be necessary.

As a conclusion as far as Dagestan is concerned, the situation nevertheless remains worrying, especially given the persistence of an unrepresentative government with a power base in the two largest ethnic groups of the republic. The grievances of certain groups such as the Kumyks and Laks need to be addressed promptly to prevent further popular activism. However, the proposals to split up Dagestan into autonomous units, cherished by Tenglik, indeed seem to be a recipe for disaster rather than a recipe for lasting peace. Dagestanis do seem to share a certain overlapping common identity, heavily coloured by Islam, which may be capitalized upon to prevent communalism from expanding. Many Dagestanis are aware of the danger of the national question, and efforts are being undertaken both by government and opposition to seek to promote transnationality cohesion. There are promising trends, nevertheless the present structure of the republic needs to be revised sooner or later to cope with the new challenges that confront Dagestan in a new era.

Conclusions

The North Caucasus, seen from a regional perspective, remains an unknown and mystical area both in Western eyes and among most Russians as well. For centuries, because of the struggle for freedom of its many component peoples, it has acted as a barrier to Russian expansion southward in a much larger degree than has the Transcaucasus. Today, the North Caucasus remains a crucially strategic region, as it forms the southern tier, so to speak, of Russia.

In the wider perspective, the North Caucasus is a key factor for the stability or instability of the whole region. Russia’s communications with the Transcaucasus and by extension its ability to exert influence on the three independent republics of the region are dependent on stability in the North Caucasus. The war in Chechnya has shown the vulnerability of Russia to separatism in the Caucasus; furthermore, it has highlighted the question of Russia’s survival in its present territorial structure. However, the Russian-Chechen conflict is only the most
prominent among the challenges to peace and prosperity in the region. As has been outlined above, there are several serious problems which need to be addressed promptly to secure the fragile newly achieved semblance of stability in the Caucasus. As Russia has not yet matured to the point of being able to handle ethnic grievances in a tactful and effective way, the prospects for peace seem dim unless regional, intra-Caucasian institutions are used to further this purpose.

There is a need for an overarching co-operative organ including all peoples of the North Caucasus. The confederation of peoples of the Caucasus was in this sense an indigenous organ, whereas the central government in Moscow was considered by many natives to be an alien, unreliable power pursuing its own interests. It also encompassed virtually all nations of the North Caucasus, and succeeded in retaining an image of impartiality. By contrast, other regional organizations such as the currently very popular ‘Islamic Nation’ did not include certain peoples, notably the Ossetians, and are hindered by this fact. Moreover, the confederation was based on the development of peaceful inter-ethnic, primarily secular relations. On at least one occasion, it proved capable of settling an ethnic conflict peacefully, as well as its ability in mobilizing the North Caucasians for a common ideal, whatever one may think of it. The revival of the confederation or a similar organization, hence, is a sine qua non for lasting interethnic harmony and peace in the North Caucasus.
Turkey: priority to Azerbaijan

‘With the disintegration of the Soviet Union, a gigantic Turkic World is being formed, stretching from the Adriatic Sea to the Wall of China.’

—Süleyman Demirel

‘Yurta sulh, cihanda sulh.’
‘Peace at home, Peace in the world.’

—Mustafa Kemal Atatürk

The fall of the Soviet Union was warmly welcomed by certain circles in Turkey, which quickly rediscovered that Turkey actually had ‘lost cousins’ in the Caucasus and Central Asia. Enthusiasm was great, and sometimes overrode knowledge and reality. A simple example is that, during the early period of their struggle, the Chechens were depicted by Turkish media as a Turkic people, until Turkish reporters to their astonishment realized that the Chechens were not Turks at all, but indigenous to the Caucasus. Nevertheless, Turkey has moved to establish and entertain relations primarily with the Turkic republics of the Caucasus and Central Asia. Relations with non-Turkic republics have been distinctively less intense, although they are growing. The great game, as it has been called, for political and economic influence in Central Asia, nevertheless confronted Turkey with the geopolitical reality that its contacts with Turkic states would be to a large extent dependent on either of three non-Turkic transit countries, none of which were a priori clear candidates to support or allow Turkish influence in the region; two of them were even susceptible to block Turkey with all means: Armenia and Iran. Georgia was initially wary, but has moved closer to Turkey in recent years.

As far as the Caucasus is concerned, the Turkish position has been heavily determined by its priority to relations with its ‘brother state’, Azerbaijan. Partly for reasons related with Azerbaijan and its conflict with Armenia, and partly because of historic problems dating back to the last decades of the Ottoman Empire, relations with Armenia have constantly been below the freezing point. Towards Georgia, Turkey initially had an ambivalent position. To begin with,
Georgia was not seen as an important partner and was neglected in Turkish policy. Ambivalence towards Georgia was strengthened by Turkish perception of Georgia as anti-Turkish, at least as regards the Meskhetians and their professed right to return to their homeland, which as noted earlier has been categorically refused by Georgian authorities. Moreover, Turkey faced difficulties in developing a policy towards Abkhazia, given the existence of population groups with roots in Abkhazia considerably larger than the Abkhaz population in Abkhazia itself.

Meanwhile, Turkey saw the direct link between Nagorno-Karabakh and Abkhazia, and could not credibly pursue different policies in these conflicts. For this reason, but also because of its own Kurdish problem, Turkey consistently supported the principle of territorial integrity, including the case of Georgia. Turkey also has nominal interests in the North Caucasus, where it has remained a concerned observer of the situation in Chechnya. At the same time, Turkey has been unable to voice its opposition to the Russian action in the way it might have desired to do, partly because of respect for Russia’s territorial integrity—in very much the same way as with Georgia. Turkey has been careful not to jeopardize its important economic interests in Russia; but the main factor in the Turkish attitude has been related to the PKK rebellion in southeastern Anatolia. As a result, Turkey has had no option but to level its criticism of Russia to just above the level of Western nations. An important factor worth mention at this point is the importance of the Caucasian Diaspora in Turkey in Turkish policy-making towards the region. The Azeri, Circassian, Abkhaz, Georgian, and Chechen Diaspora groups are highly organized and exert a significant influence in Turkish society, including lobbying activities in the parliament. To a certain extent, then, Turkey’s policy toward the Caucasus is defined by the existence of strong Diaspora groups.

**Turkish policy: 1923–91**

As has been touched upon in earlier chapters, the last years of Ottoman rule included a Caucasian campaign, which culminated in Ottoman troops reaching Baku in 1918, in the very last months of the First World War. Although the Ottoman forces were forced to surrender all their gains very quickly as the central powers were rapidly losing the war, the aims of this conquest are interesting. The Young Turks, faced with the dissolution of the non-Turkic territories of the empire since the mid nineteenth century, had found that the emergence of nationalism was the reason for this process. To save the empire, they believed that they needed to create a national basis of their own for the empire’s survival, led by the ideas of people like Ziya Gokalp, and his motto ‘Turkify, Modernize and Islamize’. In this new ideology, the existence of Turkic peoples in the Caucasus and Central Asia fitted the designs of some of the Young Turks perfectly. Especially after the 1917 revolution in Russia, which led to the temporary loss of Russian control over the southern tier of the Russian empire, some Young Turks...
saw a window of opportunity for the creation of a new empire in place of the old one. This project, of course, failed almost immediately as the conclusion of the First World War led to the empire’s total dissolution with the Treaty of Sèvres of 1920. However the Caucasian campaign of 1918 must be seen not only in the context of the First World War but also as a ‘last thrust’ to rebuild a dying empire eastwards.

The Turkish republic of Atatürk, created in 1923 after a victorious war against the occupying Greek, British, French, and Italian forces, nevertheless abstained totally from rekindling this surge to the east, despite the official fact that one of the six principles of the Kemalist ideology was Turkish nationalism, which is inscribed in the Turkish constitution. Atatürk’s brand of nationalism, quite unique in the European context of the inter-war era, was not an ethnically based, exclusivist, and aggressive nationalism, but rather an inclusive civic variant whose principal function was to create a new nation within the borders of the multi-ethnic republic of Turkey. According to Atatürk’s maxim ‘Ne mutlu Türküm diyene’ (‘Happy he who calls himself a Turk’) anyone living within the boundaries of the new state was invited to take part in the nation-building process irrespective of ethnic origin. This was made easier by the fact that the Turkish language central to this process was a new modernized language, using the Latin alphabet, and hence not a mere continuation of the Osmanli language with heavy Arabic and Persian influences, written using the Arabic alphabet.

Concomitant to the civic character of Turkish nationalism, another maxim of Atatürk’s laid the grounds for the foreign policy of the Republic: ‘Yurta sulh, cihanda sulh’ (‘Peace at home, peace in the world’). This doctrine in practice meant that Turkey was an inward-looking country, which did not aspire to the territory of any other nation, but which equally demanded a total respect for its own territorial integrity. This doctrine in turn meant that Turkey officially gave up all plans to expand its influence in the now Soviet Caucasus and Central Asia. Basically, Turkey ‘forgot’—with the exception of a small group of scholars and emigré organizations of Caucasian or Central Asian peoples—the existence of its linguistic and ethnic cousins. This despite the emphasis of republican historiography on the Central Asian roots of Turkish civilization.

This policy was also conditioned by the international politics of the time. During Atatürk’s war for the liberation of Turkey, the Ankara government’s main ally was the Bolshevik government in Moscow. Both shared a number of common characteristics: fighting Western occupation powers; being new revolutionary forces that had toppled their respective ancien regime; and being internationally isolated. These factors brought the two regimes closer, despite their ideological differences. The Bolsheviks also saw a place for Turkey in their aspirations to a world revolution; nevertheless the Ankara government was very well aware of this and kept enough distance to allow it to stay clear of Soviet manipulation.

The constructive character of Kemalist-Bolshevik relations in the early 1920s nevertheless brought with it a number of factors which have shaped the post-
Soviet Caucasus. Indeed, the territorial delimitation of the Transcaucasus was certainly undertaken with Turkey’s interests and wishes in mind. Turkey’s clear-cut guarantor status over Nakhchivan is the primary example of this; moreover, the Turkish factor (as discussed in chapter three) was definitely a most important factor in the Soviet decision regarding Nagorno-Karabakh’s appartenence to Azerbaijan. Furthermore, the creation of an autonomous republic of Ajaria could very well not have been the case had it not been for Turkish pressure.

Turkish-Soviet relations remained cordial—on the surface—until the Second World War (in which Turkey remained neutral) although hostility under the surface was mounting as the significance of the ideological cleavage between the two regimes gained salience. The deportation of the Meskhetian Turks during the war can be seen as an example of this increasing hostility. Immediately after the war, the Soviet Union posed a distinct threat to Turkey, with open Soviet claims to control over the Turkish straits. This was a direct cause of Turkey’s bid to join NATO, a bid which was embraced by the United States in the framework of the emerging bipolar world. As a result of Turkey’s NATO membership, it was prevented from following an independent foreign policy with regard to the Soviet Union. In any case, Turkey throughout the post-war era had too many problems in its foreign relations and domestic affairs to be able to allocate any time, efforts, or resources to pursuing an active policy regarding the Turkic peoples of the Soviet south. In fact, the rather disastrous experience of the 1918 campaign was another reason for this. In the words of Mustafa Aydin:

Ever since the establishment of the Turkish nation-state...the Republican leaders, conscious of the dangers of any kind of pan-Turkish adventures such as had characterized the policies of the last days of the Ottoman empire, had been quite consistently categorical in their denial to express any interest in the so-called 'outside Turks', especially those within the Soviet Union.3

This cautious policy had led to a singular ignorance even in informed circles in Turkey of the Turkic peoples of Central Asia and the Caucasus. With the passing of time, Turks knew that there existed ‘Turks’ in the Soviet Union, that people with Caucasian roots: Cherkess, Abkhaz, Ajars, Chechens among other. But the ignorance went so far that most people were badly informed about these groups. Most illuminating is that many Turks initially thought the Chechens and Abkhaz were Turkic peoples only to find that these hardly understood a word of Turkish. Similarly, many Turks were surprised to find out that they could not understand Kazakh, Kyrgyz, Tatar or Uzbek, although differences in language can be overcome in a matters of months even the case of the most remote Turkic languages, or ‘Turkish dialects’ (Türk lehçeleri) as many Turks refer to the Turkic languages. Turkey had basically forgotten its cousins. Exceptions existed, though, and it is no coincidence that Siileyman Demirel has been a constant advocate of
active Turkish policy in the region: he visited Tashkent and Baku in 1967, where he was greeted warmly by crowds that had obviously not forgotten their Turkic origin.4

When the Soviet Union started falling apart around 1990, this ‘complete indifference of Turkic heritage in the Soviet Union’5 became a serious problem in more than one way. Turkey’s policy-makers were confronted with a situation for which they were not prepared—in fact, Turkey was distinctively unprepared. In 1989, President Ozal was asked by American journalists about Turkey’s stance towards the Nagorno–Karabakh conflict. His astonishing answer was that being Shi’i Muslims, Azeris were closer to Iran than to Turkey.6 This statement is interesting in this context to describe the lack of information of leading Turkish policy-makers. However, analysts familiar with Turkish politics will also see it in another light: it vividly illustrates Ozal’s penchant towards religion, by implying that religious affiliation was more important than ethnic ties so close that many Azeris do not accept the view that their language is distinct in essence from Turkish. The bottom line, nevertheless, is that until very late 1991, Turkey was reluctant to abandon its Moscow-centric policy as regarded the entire Soviet Union.

**Early euphoria**

When everything in Moscow came tumbling down, the Turkish policy underwent one of the most spectacular changes in the country’s foreign policy history in a very short time. This development must be seen in the light of Turkey’s geopolitical situation in 1991. With the Cold War over, the West and in particular the United States seem to have signalled that Turkey was no longer the strategically important country it had been when responsible for NATO’s southern flank. The reasons for Turkey’s involvement can be divided into external and internal dynamics, as has been done by Baskin Oran.7 According to Oran, the primary external factor was the US, which ’pushed Turkey towards these new countries’ due to its fear of Iranian influence spreading in the region. Further, the demands on Turkey by the Turkic states themselves were unexpected and Turkey had difficulties in adjusting to its new role; in fact while searching for its role Turkey ’misinterpreted the great change of the 1990s…it thought that Russia had disappeared [and] entered Transcaucasia like entering an empty space.’8 The consequences of this approach nevertheless gave way to a healthy and substantial re-evaluation of Turkish policies. Finally, influence in the new states of Eurasia was a way for Turkey to regain the strategic importance for the West it had had during the Cold War. The internal dynamics, on the other hand, had economical, political, and psychological elements. Economically, the new states of Eurasia presented a new market for Turkish exports, as well as new sources of energy that Turkey could help in developing and bringing to markets. Politically, after the 1990 rejection of Turkey by the European Community, a possible new role as a leader of the Turkic community of states would significantly increase
Turkey’s international standing, as well as undoing its feeling of isolation. Internally, the extreme-right political movement, with a regular support of just under 10 per cent has been very active both in Turkey, pressuring the government to pursue a more active policy, and in the new republics, especially in Azerbaijan—with sometimes very dangerous consequences, as will be discussed below. Moreover, the Caucasian Diaspora populations which makes up some eight million people or 10–15 per cent of Turkey’s population have had a substantial influence on state policy. Finally, the psychological element of the time was the feeling of isolation which had trapped Turkey with the end of the Cold War. The discovery of a possible new community of friendly nations with which Turkey had ties of kinship was a strong factor both at the popular level and in the elite, with obvious consequences for the formulation of policy.

With the emergence of the Soviet Turkic world, Turkey now could capitalize on its natural influence in this region to increase its strategic importance for the west, tightly connected as it was perceived to Turkey’s eventual membership in the European Union. In the second half of 1991, the leaders of the Central Asian republics, most of which had declared their independence after the failed August coup in Moscow, made their pilgrimage to Ankara—or so it must have seemed to many Turkish politicians, who in return promised them support and assistance. Turkish policy-makers in retrospect seem to have been caught by a common euphoria, led by Prime Minister Demirel who in February 1992 declared that a ‘gigantic Turkish world’ was being created from the Adriatic sea to the wall of China.9

Turkish dreams of the twenty-first century being a ‘century of the Turks’ were entertained also by Kazakhstan’s President Nazarbayev.10 Indeed, Turks were not the only ones to be euphoric: to a certain degree, the Central Asians echoed pan-Turkic sentiments; Kyrgyzstan’s Askar Akayev incidentally stated that Turkey was the ‘morning star guiding the paths of the Turkic republics’, a statement which naturally further encouraged circles in Turkey. The Central Asians were obviously at this point looking for Turkish economic and political assistance, and went to great lengths to charm their hosts. However, Turkey’s euphoria soon took on the role of ‘Big Brother’—a role that Central Asian states were significantly less ready to espouse; nevertheless Islam Karimov, president of Uzbekistan, stated that he looked on Turkey as an ‘agabey’, that is, Big Brother. Despite Turkish assurances that any further co-operation would be on an ‘equal basis’, the general attitude of certain Turkish policy-makers hinted otherwise. For example, still in late 1993 ambassador Umut Arik, the head of TIKA,11 told students of Ankara’s Middle East Technical University en passant that the languages of the Central Asian peoples are not sufficient to be state languages; they must be replaced with Istanbul Turkish.12

Although the examples of Turkey’s attitudes are taken from the Central Asian context, it points out the early confusion and euphoria of Turkey’s policies, policies that applied equally to the Caucasus. The nearby Caucasus presented a
situation which was distinctively more complex than in more far-away Central Asia. The consistently most important country of the entire Caucasus and Central Asia was from the beginning Azerbaijan, although many observers argue that ‘the keystone to Turkish policy is Armenia’, due to its ability to obstruct Turkey’s political and economic influence and sustain Russian influence in the region.\textsuperscript{13} Turkey was the first state to recognize Azerbaijan, several weeks before it recognized the other states of the region. Azerbaijan was crucial for Turkey in more than one way. Naturally, any substantial Turkish influence in Central Asia depended on influence in the Caucasus; and in the Caucasus, Azerbaijan was defined as the strategically most important country not only by Turkey, but by Iran and later the United States as well. For Turkey especially, Azerbaijan was a logical strategic pillar for influence in the wider region because of the close ethnic affinity, all but lack of linguistic difficulties, potential petroleum wealth, and its strategic location as the only Caucasian state on the Caspian Sea. Siiha Boliikbasi has outlined Turkey’s foreign policy priorities in Azerbaijan as follows:

- support for Azerbaijan’s independence
- support for Azerbaijan’s sovereignty over Nagorno-Karabakh
- a desire to prevent or limit a Russian return to Transcaucasia
- participation in Azerbaijani oil production, and export of significant amounts of this oil through Turkey
- preserving a friendly, though not necessarily pan-Turkist, government in Baku.\textsuperscript{14}

These principles are to be seen in the context of policy toward Azerbaijan; however, as Turkey’s policy in the entire Caucasus is concerned, a few more objectives can be added: in general, Turkey supports the creation in the long term of a co-operative environment in the Transcaucasus as a whole (involving solutions to all conflicts in the area) without which stable institutions and market economy cannot develop. In this framework, Turkey seeks a normalization of its relations with Armenia; nevertheless only under certain conditions, that will be discussed in detail below. Turkey, furthermore, seeks to promote its economic influence in the Transcaucasus, and through the Transcaucasus to Central Asia. Turkey is therefore a wholehearted supporter of the TRACECA project. In the absence of a rapprochement with Armenia, Turkey is capitalizing increasingly on relations with Georgia on every level, deemed crucial as the only road and rail connection to Azerbaijan. The discussion below will seek to investigate whether Turkey has been successful in fulfilling its objectives, and how they have developed during the time that has elapsed since the collapse of the Soviet Union.

**Turkey: Azerbaijan’s only ally?**

As has been seen in chapter three, Azerbaijan for a number of reasons remained internationally isolated during the whole conflict over Nagorno-Karabakh.
Russia, Iran, and the United States (initially) all pursued policies in the conflict inclined towards Armenia. Together with Israel, the only country to constantly express its support for Azerbaijan is Turkey. In all international forums Turkey tried to explain and promote the Azerbaijani interpretation of the conflict, and Turkey was certainly instrumental in preventing a pro-Armenian approach from totally dominating these fora and world media. Furthermore since 1992 Turkey and Azerbaijan jointly held an embargo on Armenia, and Turkey refuses to normalize its relations with Armenia as long as the latter occupies territories in Azerbaijan. However, despite its support for the Azeri cause, Turkey has largely stopped short of furnishing Azerbaijan with weapons or financial aid which would enable it to buy any; Turkey furthermore never threatened to intervene militarily on Azerbaijan’s side.

Since the break-up of the Soviet Union, Turkey from the start gave priority to Azerbaijan in its relations with the republics of the former Soviet Union. Thus Ankara recognized Baku on November 9, 1991, almost a month before it granted recognition to the other former republics. In the first half of 1992, however, the internal turmoil in Azerbaijan and the political instability of the country led to a difficulty in improving and developing relations. Ayaz Mutalibov, a Soviet technocrat with little legitimacy was not, from Turkey’s perspective, the best person with whom to initiate a lasting and constructive relationship. Nevertheless, even after Elchibey came to power, Turkey did not commit the mistake of tying its relations to one person, which otherwise could have been the case. Elchibey’s fancy for the Turkish model for Azerbaijan, his militant secularism and his very anti-Iranian views may certainly have spelled out what many Turks thought privately; Elchibey’s political views were in fact more than Turkey could ever have hoped for. The problem lay not in Elchibey’s views, but in his increasingly erratic behavior and his statements which antagonized both of Azerbaijan’s mighty neighbours, Russia and Iran. Elchibey was not and is still not a man with a sense of diplomatic finesse and does not claim to be; sometimes he might even have been a bit too pan-Turkic for Ankara’s taste. For example, Elchibey had reportedly even been ready to accept a federation with Turkey, and often spoke of the reunification of North and South Azerbaijan. Elchibey was certainly seen by certain circles in Turkey as a potentially destabilizing factor, not fit to govern, and counterproductive to Turkey’s objectives.

When the Elchibey government was ousted in June 1993 by the coup which, although orchestrated by Colonel Surat Husseinov, brought Heydar Aliyev to power, this development was seen as Turkey’s loss and Russia’s gain, as it was in a way a repetition of a phenomenon which had occurred in other former Soviet republics such as Georgia and Lithuania, that is a former Soviet leader returning to power. Indeed, voices both in Turkey and in the West saw in the power shift Turkey’s inability to keep a friendly regime in power and to keep its position in Azerbaijan. In Turkey itself, voices were heard that Elchibey’s fall would mean an end to the Turkish model. In any case, Russia’s ability to interfere in the internal affairs of the Caucasian states was reaffirmed, as evidence of Moscow’s
backing Husseinov was blatant. Seeing the replacement of Elchibey with Aliyev as a victory for Moscow would nevertheless be a serious mistake, as explained earlier. For although Aliyev made some accommodating moves towards Moscow, by joining the CIS for example, he staunchly refused to accept the stationing of Russian troops in Azerbaijan.

The fact that Aliyev did not turn out to be the Moscow-friendly leader the Russians had hoped for is best illustrated by the fact that the Russians actively tried to remove him after little more than a year; lingering allegations of Russian involvement in Husseinov’s coup attempt in October 1994 have been put forward by Baku. With respect to Turkey, it is clear that, unlike Elchibey who gave priority to Turkey, Aliyev plays the Turkish card whenever it suits his purposes, but can turn also his back on Ankara if necessary. In September 1993, he annulled many agreements signed between the Elchibey administration and Turkey, ordered Turkish nationals to apply for visas before entering Azerbaijan, and dismissed 1,600 Turkish military experts serving in the country. Only a year later, Aliyev courted Ankara and expressed his confidence in the brotherhood existing between the two countries. Furthermore, Aliyev attempted to broaden Azerbaijan’s links with the Muslim world and courted Iran and Saudi Arabia, selectively, even attempting to ameliorate his Islamic credentials. Thus, clearly, for Turkey the replacement of Elchibey with Aliyev meant a less reliable and more unpredictable regime in Baku. Nevertheless, much of Aliyev’s policy toward Turkey was intended to prove the point that it is not only Azerbaijan that needs Turkey; Turkey also needs Azerbaijan. From a relative position of force, then, Aliyev was able to address the Turkish parliament on 6 May 1997, stating that ‘we are one nation but two states’ (‘bir millet, iki dövlet’).

Nagorno-Karabakh: Turkey’s wake-up call

In examining Turkish policy in the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict, it should first be mentioned that Azerbaijan never officially asked for a Turkish intervention in the conflict. According to Azerbaijan’s ambassador in Ankara, Mehmet Novruzoglu Aliyev, the main support Azerbaijan wanted from Turkey was to try to use its Western alliance contacts to show Azerbaijan’s side of the story to the world.

In the framework of bilateral relations, Turkey concluded a number of economic and commercial agreements with Azerbaijan, started to broadcast Turkish state television channels into Azerbaijan, followed by private channels and Turkish newspapers. Further, Turkey has offered assistance in Azerbaijan’s transition to the Latin alphabet by sending books and typewriters to Azerbaijan. However, ultimately, Turkey’s image in Azerbaijan largely depended upon its policy and actions with respect to Karabakh. Initially, Turkey embarked on a policy of neutrality, which simultaneously enabled it to present itself as an impartial mediator between the parties. Although Armenia was wary of Turkish involvement from the beginning, it did not immediately denounce Ankara’s efforts. Hence Turkish diplomats, especially then foreign minister Hikmet Qetin,
embarked on several rounds of shuttle diplomacy to the region and European capitals, and were instrumental in bringing the issue to the agenda of the OSCE. Furthermore, on Azerbaijani request, Çetin used his connections in the West to try to bring the conflict to the attention of Western governments, notably by personally telephoning US secretary of state James Baker on the issue. Prime Minister Demirel defended his cautious policy by arguing that there was no legal basis for a Turkish intervention, and that in any case the Azeris had not asked for it.

However, the Turkish attempt at neutral mediation was not destined to last long, as statements by President Turgut Özal in particular were to compromise Turkey in Armenia’s eyes. After the massacre of Azeri civilians in the Karabakh town of Khojaly in late February 1992, large anti-Armenian demonstrations were held in Turkey, with tens of thousands of people demonstrating in favour of an intervention on Azerbaijan’s behalf. The Turkish government could not disregard these demands from the public, especially as most politicians shared the feelings of solidarity with Azerbaijan that the Turkish people were displaying. In particular, Özal on several occasions stated that the Armenians should be ‘frightened a little’, statements which sent shock waves through Armenians in Armenia and in the Diaspora, and enabled the latter especially to pursue a policy of discrediting Turkey as planning a ‘new’ genocide on Armenians. In any case, Turkey soon adopted a more pro-Azerbaijani stance, as Armenian military advances on Azerbaijani territory intensified.

To a certain degree, domestic pressures made it impossible for Turkey to maintain a neutral stance in the conflict. Public opinion, first of all, was strongly pro-Azeri, outraged over the Armenian military advances in Karabakh and Azerbaijan proper, and especially infuriated by pictures of the fleeing Azeri refugees. The Turkish press was filled with criticism of the government’s mild stance on the Armenian advances, and generally of the feeble performance of Turkey in the Caucasus and Central Asia compared to its aims of becoming a regional leader. Nor did the opposition did this opportunity to criticize the government. Criticism for standing idle while the Azeri brethren were being massacred came from virtually all political directions. The most natural critic was the leader of the Nationalist Labour Party (MHP), Alparslan Türkeş, who very early on, in late February, argued for a Turkish military intervention in the war, arguing that ‘Turkey can not stand idly by while Azerbaijan’s territory is being occupied.’ Former prime minister and leader of the Democratic Left Party, Bilâl Ecevit, argued that Turkey’s failure to demonstrate unambiguous support for Azerbaijan might undermine Turkey’s prestige in Azerbaijan and Central Asia. However, perhaps the strongest challenge to the government came from main opposition leader and head of the Motherland party, Mesut Yılmaz. By 4 March, he had argued for troops to be deployed along the Armenian border and reminded the public that Turkey retains a guarantor status over Nagorno-Karabakh, a statement which nevertheless remains questionable as to its correctness. On several later occasions, Yılmaz reiterated his belief that Turkey should deploy troops near
the Armenian border and Nakhchivan to show the seriousness of its opposition to Armenia’s behaviour. The government naturally could not stay without being influenced by this compact pressure.

Indeed, already at the beginning of March, Turkey announced that it would inspect airplanes headed for Armenia passing over Turkish airspace, in its effort to implement an arms embargo on the warring parties. Furthermore, Turkey helped enforcing Azerbaijan’s economic blockade on Armenia, refusing to allow aid for that country to pass through Turkey. By the middle of March, Demirel started altering his stance. In an interview with the Washington Post, he stated that he was under severe pressure to take more decisive action, and did not rule out Turkish military intervention.

Turkey’s dilemma in the Caucasus: the constraining factors upon Turkey

Despite the increasingly pro-Azerbaijani stance of Turkish politicians and the open demands for intervention, Turkey did not supply Azerbaijan with anything that could have helped it turn the tide of the war. Some Turkish retired army officers were encouraged to train the Azerbaijani army, and did so; Armenians claim that Turkey provided weapons, but in case such shipments took place, these weapons were insignificant considering what Turkey could have provided had it wanted to or been able to. Turkey’s policy in the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict shows clear restraint on the part of the policy-makers in supporting Azerbaijan to the degree most of them certainly wished to do. In fact, it is possible to discern at least five factors that constrained Ankara in the formulation and implementation of its policy towards Armenia and Azerbaijan.

An initial factor, in the domains of the principles of Turkish foreign policy, is the doctrine of Kemalism, which prohibits any kind of adventurism abroad. In the original interpretation of the maxim ‘yurtta sulh, cihanda sulh’, Turkish policy-makers refrain from involving the country in any adventures abroad. There are two possible exceptions to this doctrine: the Turks of Cyprus, and perhaps the Mosul area of Northern Iraq, areas which were both considered at the time of Atatiirk to be morally if not actually belonging to Turkey (part of the Misaki-Milli frontiers). In the case of Azerbaijan, this being an independent and sovereign country, Turkey should hence not involve itself in the conflict this country faces with another independent state. In practice, Turkish decision-makers naturally realized that involvement in the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict could lead to a further destabilization of the Caucasus, something which was definitely not in Turkey’s interests. Furthermore it is doubtful whether the powerful military would have followed orders of direct intervention; in the Gulf War, chief of staff Torumtay refused to agree with president Ozal’s participation in military involvement against Iraq, and resigned as a result of his orthodox following of Kemalism.
As a response to such prudence, opposition politicians—in particular the nationalists under the late Alparslan Türkeş, argued that Azerbaijan represents an important region for Turkey as does Cyprus. Nevertheless, the regime seems to have adhered to the original interpretation of the doctrine. Furthermore, it can be argued that Turkey’s regular incursions in Northern Iraq are incompatible with the doctrine, and that consequently Turkey could at least make some military moves such as troop deployments in Armenia’s vicinity or in Nakhchivan; as Mesut Yılmaz correctly commented, Turkey can move its troops freely on its own territory and is answerable to no one when it does so. 35 Turkey’s military manoeuvres in October 1998 which brought the country to the brink of war with Syria are one example; in fact Syria, a significant military power, saw the Turkish threat as strong enough to surrender its support to Kurdish PKK rebels in Turkey, expelling the PKK leader Abdullah Ocalan. Armenia, with its limited military capabilities, would certainly have been more malleable than Syria. But it is not the case that Turkey’s policies can be solely explained by this principle.

Secondly—perhaps most important constraint upon Turkey—was its Western alliance. As Western countries wanted to stay out of the conflict and some were favourable to the Armenian position, they exerted pressure on Turkey not to involve itself on Azerbaijan’s side. Furthermore it was generally believed that Turkish involvement would increase the risk of an escalation of the conflict, in the worst case leading to a confrontation between Turkey and Russia, possibly involving Iran as well. NATO was one of the organizations where Turkey was subjected to western pressure, with the argument that Turkey’s NATO membership does not permit it to pursue an ‘adventurist’ policy in its ‘near abroad’, to use an otherwise Russian term. In a wider context, Turkey’s relations with and will to integrate into Western Europe gives Western powers a certain amount of influence over Turkey. By using a mixture of carrots and sticks, the Western leaders ensured that Turkey did not diverge markedly from the official Western policy towards the conflict. Two factors in particular ensured Turkey’s compliance with the West.

The first factor was Turkey’s reliance upon US military aid for its war against the Kurdish separatist organization PKK (Kurdish Workers’ Party) in South-East Anatolia. 36 In fact, Turkey feared that in case it supported Azerbaijan to a greater extent the United States would retaliate by cutting US military aid to Turkey—indeed the pro-Armenian Congress could certainly have pushed through such a decision. The fact that the United States in the past had used this weapon in order to make Turkey comply with international Human Rights standards ensures that such a threat would be seen as real in Ankara. In the extreme case of a direct Turkish military involvement, Turkey would have to take into account the possibility of an arms embargo against itself. The importance of this factor is illustrated by the observation of many analysts that one of the reasons for the closer Turkish-Israeli co-operation in later years has been an attempt to diversify Turkey’s sources of armament at a time when Germany, in particular, but other Western powers as well, are increasingly reluctant to contribute to Turkey’s
crushing of its Kurdish PKK rebellion. The decision of the US Congress to suspend 10 per cent of US military aid to Turkey in July 1994 should also be seen in this context and the increasing number of military deals between Turkey and Israel testify to this.

The second factor is Turkey’s quest for full membership in the European Union (EU). Indeed, relations between Turkey and the EU have been strained in the 1990s by Turkey’s failure, in the eyes of the Europeans, to speed up its democratization process and to improve its Human Rights record, as well as the Kurdish question. In this context, bearing in mind that Turkey has been negotiating for a customs union with the EU, it is clear that any Turkish adventurism in the Caucasus would not serve its interests on the ‘western front’. On the other hand, a balanced Turkish policy in the whole region, involving a normalization of relations with Armenia, could serve Turkey’s purposes by highlighting Turkey’s importance as a stabilizing factor in the region and a bridge between the Caucasus and Europe. Moreover, in the event that Azeri oil were to flow to the Turkish Mediterranean port of Ceyhan, a route Turkey is ardently pushing for, this would increase Turkey’s economic importance for Western Europe and be instrumental in easing tensions. Perhaps the Europeans would be induced to put economic benefit before moral concerns for Turkey’s democratization and Human Rights record, hence easing their pressure on Turkey. Thus there would be an opportunity for Ankara to try to restructure its relations with the West to a mutually beneficial relationship where both sides are dependent on each other, rather than one where Turkey is more dependent upon Europe than Europe on Turkey.

The third factor concerns Turkey’s relations with the Russian Federation, and can be seen either as respect or fear for Russia’s might, or as a policy which gives priority to keeping good relations with Moscow for political but also economic reasons, given Turkey’s huge private business relations with Russia. Indeed, the large emerging Russian market has been penetrated by Turkish firms, especially in the construction field. The total volume of trade between the two countries ranged at between US$ 3–4 billion; in 1992 Turkey’s trade with Russia was five times larger than its trade with Azerbaijan and the Central Asian states combined. Hence Turkey needed to maintain reasonable relations with Russia for its own interests, given the fact that the hard currency earned by Turkish companies in Russia is important for the Turkish economy. Also, Turkey seemed interested in purchasing arms from Russia for its war in its southeast, to broaden its sources of weaponry as mentioned above. Furthermore, on every occasion that Turkey has signalled its intention to involve itself in Karabakh, Moscow has responded promptly, without trying to conceal its discontent with Ankara’s policies.

One such occasion was in April 1993, immediately after Armenian forces had seized the Kelbajar region of Azerbaijan and established a second land corridor between Nagorno-Karabakh and Armenia. As President Ozal accused Russia of supporting the Karabakh Armenians, he announced that Turkey would intensify
its military relations with Azerbaijan and send arms to that country. As a response, Russian defence minister, Pavel Grachev, during a visit to Ankara reportedly warned Ankara in quite undiplomatic fashion to stay out of Azerbaijan. Clearly, Turkey retained a certain degree of respect for Russia; in fact the Turkish chief of staff, General Dogan Güres, in June 1994 expressed his belief that ‘Russia is now posing a greater threat to Turkey than it used to during the Cold War.’ In this context, Turkey has been unwilling to risk its relations with Moscow for the sake of active unilateral support for Azerbaijan in the Karabakh war. This fact also illustrates the complex web of relations, much the result of Turkey’s geopolitical location, that Ankara has to take into consideration while formulating its foreign policy.

A fourth factor which both directly and indirectly constrained Ankara, particularly regarding its ability to put pressure on Armenia, is the legacy of the 1915 alleged genocide on Eastern Anatolia’s Armenian population by the Ottoman army. Without going into the details of the events of the First World War, which have been studied at length by other scholars, suffice it here to state that since the 1970s, Armenians, particularly in the United States, have been actively lobbying for an official recognition of the Ottoman persecutions on Armenians. Ankara, on the other hand, refuses to accept the historiography of the Armenians, instead claiming that it was a general time of chaos and war, which led to high numbers of lost lives both among Armenians and Turks (see chapter two).

In January 1991, Soviet Armenia refused to issue a declaration to the effect that it recognized the existing borders between Turkey and Armenia (see p303). Ankara feared that any further Turkish moves to actively support Azerbaijan would be inflated by the powerful Armenian Diaspora in the West so that Turkey would be pictured as planning new atrocities on Armenians. This fear was only proved correct with the reaction to the above-mentioned statement by President Ozal that the Armenians should be ‘frightened a little’. In general, Turkey has been carrying the burden of the massacres on Armenians for decades, including having dozens of its diplomats killed by Armenian terrorists, whose actions were met by a somewhat indifferent attitude in the West, in many cases escaping the hard condemnations that other terrorist organizations have faced.

Thus, since Armenia’s independence, Turkey has made a distinct effort not to make it seem as if from the outset it had a hostile attitude to independent Armenia. These circumstances in turn made it difficult for Turkey to be as anti-Armenian—or pro-Azeri—as it might have liked to be. In fact, statements by the opposition and public demonstrations tend to show that the government’s policy towards Armenia is distinctively more lenient than what the general atmosphere in Turkey otherwise would allow. In particular, right-wing media have been successful in stirring public anger against the atrocities committed by the Karabakh Armenians on the civilian Azeri population of Karabakh. In trying to calm the public, Prime Minister Demirel indeed stated that Turkish intervention on Azerbaijan’s side would only result in putting the whole world behind Armenia, illustrating the point made here.
Finally a point which might have influenced Turkish behaviour, as a precedent, is the international reaction which Turkey faced after its invasion of Northern Cyprus in 1974. In fact, certain parallels can be drawn between Cyprus and Karabakh. Both cases involved Turkish/Turkic kin who have been subjected to aggression and whose position and civil rights are in danger. Furthermore, Turkey, according to international treaties reserved a guarantor right in Cyprus, and the treaties between Turkey and the Soviet Union stipulate the Turkey must be consulted for an alteration in any case of Nakhchivan’s territorial affiliation, and according to certain Turkish politicians, Nagorno-Karabakh’s as well. Naturally, there are huge differences between the two, especially to the extent of Turkey’s guarantorship and the general constellation of power in the respective regions. However, the memory of the reaction it faced in Cyprus might have helped to calm any fervor among the Turkish leadership to rush to the support of the Azeri kin.

To recapitulate, heavy pressure was exerted on Turkey not to involve itself too deeply in Karabakh. Furthermore many Turkish interests, particularly its quest for integration into western Europe and its commercial relations with Russia discouraged Ankara from being more active in the issue.

The Azeri reaction

While observing the restraint in Turkey’s support for Azerbaijan, particularly given the euphoric statements on ‘brotherhood’ and Turkish leadership in the region that were common in Ankara during 1991–92, it is interesting to see what kind of a reaction Azerbaijan had to these developments. Basically, the Azeri reaction was two-fold: first of all, a popular feeling of deceit and Turkish betrayal; and second an understanding among the leadership of the constraints upon Turkey. The primary factor that angered the Azeris was the Turkish abortive energy deal with Armenia in November 1992 (see below). Had this deal become reality, it would have destroyed Azerbaijan’s main bargaining chip at the time—its energy blockade on Armenia. Although it was soon disbanded, the deal left a permanent scar on the perception the Azeris have of Turkey. The Azeri view was expressed as ‘They claim to be our brothers, but give bread to our enemies.’ 48

Whereas it might have been possible to explain to the Azeris why Turkey does not give direct support to Azerbaijan, it certainly was difficult to justify their need to co-operate with their enemy. Hence in many ways, parts of the Azeri population became disillusioned with Turkey. If they had hoped that Turkey would present itself as Azerbaijan’s main protector, it soon became clear that Turkey lacked either the capacity or the will to assume such a role.

Among the Azeri leadership, however, there is more of an understanding of Turkey’s difficulties. Turkey’s position as a member of NATO, in particular, as well as its own turmoil in the southeast form legitimate reasons as to why Turkey had no possibility to support Azerbaijan more than it did.49 This is not to say, however, that the Azeri leadership is satisfied with Turkey’s attitude. Clearly,
Turkey has lost a lot of its prestige in Azeri eyes and perhaps to a certain extent its privileged position in that country. However, the Azeris are faced with the cold fact that Turkey, despite its shortcomings, is the only country it can count on as an ally, which should ensure the continuation of cordial relations between the two countries.

The Javadov scandal

Beyond these more general difficulties, relations between Turkey and Azerbaijan hit a low point in 1995, when a scandal of potentially immense proportions was narrowly contained. As mentioned in chapter three, an aborted coup against President Aliyev took place in March 1995, led by Ravshan Javadov, the head of the interior troops. This coup, much like other coups in the Caucasian countries, is assumed to have been supported by forces in Moscow; however in this case, the coup makers’ foreign connections were in fact to Turkey and not to Russia. As Thomas Goltz has pointed out, something in this coup did not fit the ‘general picture’:

Ravshan Javadov hardly fit the profile of pro-Moscow putschist. Nor did any of the men that answered his call. Either by participation or by default, they included former ministers in the Elchibey government, Iskender Hamidov and Towfig Gasimov. Indeed, Javadov was appealing to the Popular Front to urge the people to rise and dispose of Aliyev. He also called on those Chechen fighters in Baku to join in the fray. Given the personalities and politics involved, it looked less like a pro-Russian coup attempt than one with distinct Turkish underpinnings.50

As a matter of fact, the primary Turkish origins of the coup very soon became clear; the evidence that has come up showed that circles within the Turkish intelligence service, or MIT (Milli Istihbarat Teskilati) co-operated with certain right-wing groups and were involved in criminal activities in Azerbaijan—a direct corollary of the Susurluk scandal of police and state relations with organized crime that has been unveiled lately.51 At this point, the event was an embarassment to Turkey for not having been able to control its own intelligence personnel and its right-wing extremists. But it was still manageable. When details of the unveiled Susurluk scandal were beginning to spill out in Turkey, the Azeri affair was one of them. To the horror of the Turkish side, everything was about to come out in the media; publicity had been averted during Aliyev’s visit to Turkey, although Aliyev had threatened to mention the event in his address to the Turkish parliament but had been persuaded not to do so. This series of events has had a substantial impact on Turkish-Azerbaijani relations, and have not been analyzed in detail to any significant extent. A review of the Turkish involvement is therefore relevant here, and gives the following picture.
The Turkish embassy in Baku had started to receive information on the upcoming Javadov affair some three months before the attempted coup. The Turkish ambassador in Baku, Altan Karamanoglu, informed Aliyev of the forthcoming insurrection. The decision to inform Aliyev was, however, taken at a higher level. The then foreign minister, Murat Karayalçin, recalls that over two months prior to the event, Karamanoglu telephoned him, asking his superior what Turkey’s role and position in all this was; Karayalçin answered that Turkey supported Aliyev. Although the two have different accounts of their meetings, it remains quite clear that the Turkish government was playing an open hand. President Aliyev, nevertheless, suspected Karamanoglu of involvement in the affair. After some time, the involvement of Ferman Demirkol, a Turkish citizen working for TIKA, in the affair, became clear: the Turkish intelligence agency informed the Baku embassy of this involvement on 28 February. The ambassador then called Demirkol to his office, informing him Turkey was in no way supporting any coup attempt and to pass this message on to Javadov. As Aliyev was preparing a trip to Copenhagen for a UN conference, and then to go on to Pakistan, the Turkish embassy had found out through its intelligence officers in Azerbaijan that Aliyev might be the target of an assassination attempt, and warned the president. Once in Copenhagen, Aliyev met with President Demirel who informed him the Javadov’s plan evidently was to assassinate Aliyev on his return, perhaps even at the airport. As a result, Aliyev decided to return unexpectedly early to Baku, and on 16 March launched an assault on Javadov’s headquarters which later resulted in the insurgent’s death.

Although Turkey was instrumental in preventing the coup, the level of Turkish involvement in it has never become fully clear. The only available evidence is the accounts of those involved. According to Murat Karayalçin, only he, the prime minister and the president were informed at government level, reducing the number of sources of information dramatically. Aliyev’s claim that Karamanoglu was involved must naturally be taken seriously, although the picture presented by the Turkish authorities is fully reasonable. However, Karamanoglu is known to be one of Tansu Çiller’s close associates; and certain circles in Turkey accuse Çiller of having been involved. Turkey claims only a few of its citizens were involved on their own initiative; nevertheless Javadov went to Turkey a few months before the event and met with a number of people; his meetings are being investigated. Needless to say, it is in Turkey’s interest to investigate these events. Whatever the case, a certain amount of irreparable damage had been done; as Thomas Goltz puts it, the pan-Turkist honeymoon was over; ‘although the ‘special relationship’ between Baku and Ankara would eventually be salvaged in part, the glow was gone forever.’

This deplorable episode in Turkish-Azerbaijani relations had one important consequence: Heydar Aliyev now abandoned his erstwhile policy of giving priority to Turkey in his relations with the West, of going through Turkey in many matters. Now, Aliyev sought more direct contacts with the United States in particular. There is also less of an imbalance in the relations between the
countries. Aliyev has to a large degree extent begun to act as Demirel’s equal in recent relations, and has had a more assertive policy. Nevertheless, the Turkish government of Mesut Yilmaz, which came to power in the summer of 1997, has gone out of its way to repair relations with Azerbaijan and to improve its relations with the Caucasus and Central Asia, relations that were to a large extent neglected during Islamist Erbakan’s tenure in 1996–97. Although the ‘glow’ may be gone, Turkey and Azerbaijan need each other and need to be able to rely on each other in the regional context. Hence the most lasting impact of the Javadov affair may have been to decrease Azerbaijan’s deference to Turkey in their bilateral relations.

**Turkey & Armenia: doomed to animosity?**

Turkey’s relation with Armenia have been conditioned by several factors which have impeded the creation of a constructive relationship between the two countries. The Nagorno-Karabakh conflict, as described above, has naturally played an important role. Two other, inter-linked issues have nevertheless had an equally important bearing on the relations between the two countries. The first is the above-mentioned alleged Genocide of 1915, for which Armenia has been seeking international and Turkish recognition; the second is the territorial issue: Turkish suspicions of Armenian territorial designs on Turkey, engendered by Armenia’s refusal unequivocally to recognize the Turkish-Armenian border.

**Initial good signs but rapid deterioration**

Despite these problems, the initial relations between the two countries proceeded relatively positively. At Armenia’s independence, high-level meetings took place which seemed quite hopeful; indeed Armenia and Turkey pledged to develop trade relations and ‘recognized the need to overcome psychological barriers between the two peoples’, referring of course to the legacy of the massacres of 1915. Armenia even initially welcomed Turkey’s services in the solution of the Nagorno-Karabakh dispute. The government of Levon Ter-Petrosyan, which pursued a relatively conciliatory policy towards Turkey, therefore abstained from pursuing the issue of ‘Western Armenia’ politically. However, the regime did lobby actively for an international recognition of the Genocide, with the aim of forcing Turkey to recognize it as well. The Turkish refusal to recognize the Genocide is heavily linked to the territorial question. Indeed, a recognition on Ankara’s part of the Genocide would result in a perception that Turkey has accepted Armenia’s moral right to the territories in Western Armenia.

When Armenia gained independence, Turkey recognized all of the successor states ‘within their respective borders’, a clause that was certainly added for Armenia’s sake. In fact, Turkey as a precondition for the establishment of diplomatic relations required Armenia to unconditionally recognize its present borders—referring to its Turkish border but also to that with Azerbaijan. In
practice, this meant that Turkey urged Armenia to recognize the treaties of Moscow (16 March 1921) and Kars (13 October 1921) which recognize Turkish jurisdiction over the territories Armenia calls ‘Western Armenia’, and especially the Kars area which Russia ceded to Turkey with these treaties. Armenia refused to do so, arguing that the imposition of preconditions was unacceptable, and has continued to call for the establishment of diplomatic relations without preconditions. The issue later came in the shadow of the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict, as Turkey identified Armenia as an aggressor in the conflict and began demanding the withdrawal of Armenia from the occupied territories in Azerbaijan as another prerequisite for the establishment of diplomatic relations. Armenia, of course, complains that it has no role in the occupation of these lands and therefore dismisses Turkey’s demands. The Armenian opinion is exemplified by Nikolay Hovhannisyan: ‘Armenia has never been an aggressor. It is well known that the Azeris began the war in Karabakh in 1991. Armenia is just trying to guarantee the security of the Armenian people in [Nagorno-Karabakh]. So all Turkish demands and preconditions were groundless and unacceptable for Armenia as humiliating to its national dignity.’

In this context, Armenia urges Turkey to separate bilateral relations from the Nagorno-Karabakh problem. In the opinion of Ter-Petrosyan’s advisor Gerard Libaridian, Turkish–Armenian relations could follow the model of Turkish–Greek relations, which exist despite the significant problems between the two countries, such as the status of the Aegean sea and Cyprus. The fact is, however, that Armenia and Turkey have not established diplomatic relations in the more than nine years that have passed since Armenia’s independence. The relations between the two countries worsened as Turkey, witnessing the Armenian advances in Nagorno-Karabakh and its surroundings, joined Azerbaijan in its economic blockade of Armenia, hence dealing the resource-poor country a heavy blow.

Nevertheless, in this context it should be noted that Ankara always made sure it left doors open for a rapprochement with Armenia. The fact that the Armenian government refused to recognize its borders with Turkey was by necessity alarming to Ankara. Turkish leaders, well aware of the feeling of most Armenians that they have a moral title to territories in Eastern Turkey, interpreted Armenia’s refusal to recognize its western borders as a proof of Yerevan retaining potential territorial claims on Kars and other regions of Northeastern Turkey to be unveiled at a later date. As long as Armenia does not recognize the border, the chance of an improvement in relations remains slender.

Moderate governments, prisoners of their own predicaments

Despite these fundamental differences, both Ankara and Ter-Petrosyan’s moderate government have attempted to ‘rescue’ the bilateral relations, making occasional conciliatory gestures and maintaining an informal dialogue. Hence on certain occasions Turkey did open its border with Armenia, thus allowing for humanitarian aid to pass through. In November 1992, Turkey even signed a deal
by which it would have supplied 300 million kilowatt hours of electricity to Armenia, which at the time was suffering from a severe energy shortage which threatened to leave thousands of people without heating in the winter. This deal received vehement criticism from the opposition and was seen as a stab in the back in Baku; thus already in January 1993, Turkey had to cancel the deal before it had even begun to be implemented. Another gesture on the part of Turkey was to invite Armenia to take part in the foundation of the Black Sea Economic Co-operation programme, which was, from the onset a Turkish initiative.

Furthermore, Turkish business circles are pressuring the government to open trade relations with Armenia. Turkey does have an interest in opening the border gate from the Kars province to Armenia; according to various reports, the population of the Kars district is decreasing steadily and the economic underdevelopment of the region is a distinct problem. The opening of a border gate could have significant economic consequences for the Kars province, for example in terms of transit traffic. Presently, the Turkish business circles functioning in the Caucasus are using Georgia as a bridge for their relations with Armenia, and indeed, quite successfully. Any visitor to Armenia will be surprised by the level of Turkish economic penetration in the country, be it in terms of foodstuffs, machinery, or construction materials. In a way the blockade is then only partially working; as such it is as harmful to Eastern Turkey as it is to Armenia.

In a sense, then, it is possible to speak of an era of moderate governments, both willing to improve relations, but unable to do so for both domestic and foreign policy-related reasons. In particular, it is often claimed, especially by Armenian observers, that Baku holds the key to Turkish-Armenian relations, as Heydar Aliyev has himself claimed more than once. In particular, Aliyev has made it very clear that the realization of the Baku-Ceyhan pipeline is directly dependent upon Turkey’s continued embargo on Armenia. The establishment of diplomatic relations, for example, would probably lead to an Azerbaijani distancing from the pro-Turkish policy that Aliyev is conducting.

The strategic context

Armenia’s close relations with Russia and Iran must also be seen in the context of its relations with Turkey. Indeed, Armenia often denounces Turkey and Azerbaijan for conducting pan-Turkist policies. In the opinion of Hovhannisyan:

The Armenians...are considered to be one of the barriers against the Turkish expansion towards Central Asia. The golden dream of pan-Turkists of all generations was to either liquidate the ‘Armenian WalP standing on the way of Turkish expansion to the Turkic world or to transform it to an ‘Armenian corridor’... A modus vivendi with Armenia would provide Turkey with a bridge to the area. But what kind of modus vivendi?...it is
clear that the Turkish expansion, pan-Turkism and Turkic belt from the Balkans to China and Siberia is a great threat to all non-Turkic peoples and countries located on that vast territory. The common danger will stimulate a rapprochement of Russia, Armenia, Iran and other countries.60

Along the lines of this passage, powerful circles in Armenia are openly using the professed threat of pan-Turkism to build a stronger axis of co-operation between Armenia, Russia and Iran. The main aim of such an axis, naturally, would be to prevent Turkish influence from spreading in the Caucasus and Central Asia. For example, in November 1998 Armenian foreign policy advisor Aram Sarkissian openly spoke for the establishment of a ‘geostrategic axis of stability’ in the South Caucasus and adjacent areas. According to Sarkissian, ‘neither Russia nor Iran have a potential for expansion, nor do they threaten the security of other countries.’61 The allusion to Turkey and pan-Turkist ‘expansionism’ is obvious.

The advent to power of Robert Kocharyan in Armenia meant that the ‘thaw’ in relations that had been occurring during the later years of Ter-Petrosyan’s rule was over. Where high officials of the Ter-Petrosyan government travelled to Turkey with short intervals, the new Armenian regime declared that it would openly pursue ‘Hai Dat’—the Armenian Cause—in its foreign policy. Foreign minister Vartan Oskanian was cited as stating that Yerevan will ‘put the recognition of the genocide on the agenda of a future dialogue with Turkey.’62 The Armenian Cause implies an aspiration to obtain theoretical recognition (at the very least) of Armenia’s right to the territories where Armenians predominantly lived until 1915; hence this implied a turn to irredentism of Armenia’s foreign policy.

This policy turn was accentuated by the legalization in May 1998 of the Dashnaktsutium, the radical nationalist party which formed the first Armenian republic, very powerful in the Diaspora as well as in Nagorno-Karabakh, but was outlawed by Levon Ter-Petrosyan’s regime due to the prohibition in the Armenian constitution of parties controlled from abroad: The Armenian Revolutionary Federation (the official name of the party) has its headquarters in Athens, presiding over more than a dozen regional branches, of which the Armenian branch is only one. However, Ter-Petrosyan’s move to outlaw the party, a mere six months before the 1995 elections, was widely perceived to be more political than legal, the ARF being the strongest challenge to his rule.63 Whatever the reasons were, Turkey was pleased by the banning of the virulently anti-Turkish party, which demands the recognition of the Genocide, the return of large territories in eastern Turkey as well as the whole of Nakhchivan to Armenia, compensations from Turkey for the 1915 events, the annexation of Nagorno-Karabakh, and close ties with Russia and Iran.64 Indeed Ter-Petrosyan was trying to capitalize upon this factor in his attempts to improve relations with Turkey. But whereas the party had been outlawed and one of its leading figures, Vahan Hovhannisyan, jailed, Robert Kocharyan not only legalized
the party but appointed Hovhannisyan as a top advisor, and included a prominent Dashnaks, Levon Mkrtchian, in his cabinet. Presumably Kocharyan’s move was a reply to the ARF’s backing of his candidacy in both rounds of the presidential election of 1998. However, Kocharyan has always been close to the ARF, which he allowed to operate freely in Nagorno-Karabakh when he was the president of the self-proclaimed republic until his appointment as Armenia’s prime minister. The ARF, after all, had dominated the legislature of Nagorno-Karabakh ever since its declaration of independence.

In terms of relations with Turkey, the advent to power of Kocharyan meant a drastic backlash as compared to the constructive atmosphere that had painstakingly been established, despite the significant problems existing between the two countries. However, Kocharyan did not close the door to Turkey; just like Ter-Petrosyan, he was forced to acknowledge the importance of Turkey for Armenia and the need to keep some form of dialogue open despite the less compromising stance of the new Armenian leadership. In the words of Nikolai Hovhannisyan, the aim of Armenia is ‘not to confront Turkey, but to engage it.’ Given the recent developments in Armenia and Turkey’s renewed efforts to exert influence in the Turkic world, any substantial improvement of relations with Armenia seems elusive.

**Georgia: from neglect to commitment**

From the onset, Turkey’s relations with Georgia were rather neglected compared to Turkey’s relations with other non-Turkic states of the former Soviet Union. One reason for this may have been that Turkey shared the West’s relatively concerted isolation of Georgia during the Gamsakhurdia regime. The advent of Eduard Shevardnadze to power did not immediately undo the negative consequences of Gamsakhurdia’s rule, however. A stumbling block in early relations was that before Shevardnadze had even consolidated his position as the country’s head of state, the war in Abkhazia broke out in August of 1992. This conflict confronted Turkey with a foreign policy dilemma.

**The Abkhazia dilemma**

There are strong Abkhaz and Georgian émigré lobbies in Turkey which were able to exert a significant influence on the country’s policy. It is believed that over half a million Turks have an Abkhaz identity; there may thus be five times more Abkhaz in Turkey than in Abkhazia. Between one and two thousand Turks are thought to have emigrated to Abkhazia, and have opened a Turkish school in Gagra. Meanwhile, there is an estimated 1.5 million people with Georgian roots in Turkey. However, most of them are not migrants from the last century but have lived in Turkey for centuries; moreover it is estimated that only 25 per cent of them speak the Georgian language. In other words, they are considerably Turkified, and nearly all are Muslim. Consequently they do not espouse a strong
Georgian nationalism and are relatively liberal in their attitudes to the Abkhazia question. A reason for the success of the Abkhaz lobby in affecting public opinion was that the other North Caucasian Diaspora movements supported Abkhazia, much as was the case in the Caucasus itself. Hence a population group of perhaps 6–7 million with North Caucasian roots were potentially positively inclined to the Abkhaz.

In a sense, however, Turkey’s own separatist problem in the southeast and Turkey’s clear commitment to the territorial integrity of Azerbaijan made it impossible for Turkey to support—or to be seen as tacitly supporting—separatists on Georgian territory. As a result, Turkey from the beginning of the conflict tacitly supported Georgia’s territorial integrity. Meanwhile, the Turkish government refrained from preventing Abkhaz groups in Turkey from extending their support to their kin in Abkhazia. This in turn led to certain suspicion in Georgia. Abkhazia’s leader Vladislav Ardzinba visited Turkey in July 1992, evidently seeking Turkish recognition of his breakaway republic. Nevertheless, his demands fell on deaf ears. On the whole, then, Turkey retained its neutrality in the conflict; however large segments of the Turkish public opinion were co-opted into supporting Abkhazia by the activities of the North Caucasian Diaspora. The conflict over South Ossetia on the other hand, presented no problem for Turkey, which kept its line of supporting Georgia’s territorial integrity.

Until 1996, Turkey as a result of these considerations kept a low profile in its policy towards Abkhazia, divided as it was between its strategic interests in favour of a close relationship with Georgia and its domestic considerations, with a pro-Abkhaz public opinion. The balance of these two forces nevertheless started eroding with time. As Qolakoğlu notes, ‘since 1997 official statements on the Abkhaz question have shown the primacy of [Turkey’s] strategic interests.’ Indeed, Turkey now holds a position similar to Georgia’s: that the Abkhaz should be granted wide autonomy within Georgia. On the other hand, Turkey would hardly remain silent over any Georgian attempts to suppress Abkhazia with arms. An interesting development in early 1998 was the planned negotiations between Abkhazia and Georgia, with the participation of North Caucasian republics, to take place in Turkey in February 1999. Turkey may be taking advantage of Russia’s failure to bring about an agreement by assuming a more central role in the search for a solution to the conflict. Such a development would naturally attract Russian suspicion, but it seems possible that Turkey as a disinterested mediator—in whose interest it is to bring an end to the conflict, something which is not necessarily true for Russia—may become a logical and active mediator, thereby significantly boosting its reputation in the region.

Initial Turkish neglect

In terms of bilateral relations, there was no political dispute between Turkey and Georgia which could pose a direct problem, as in Turkish-Armenian relations.
Potential territorial issues nevertheless exist, such as Ajaria which certain nationalist circles in Turkey lay claim to, or Kars which certain Georgian nationalists may desire. Indeed, Ajaria is the only territory—except the Mosul area—included in the so-called Misaki-Milli frontiers which had been defined by the nationalist movement, but which had been ceded with the 1923 Lausanne treaty. Thus these territories are the only ones which may constitute exceptions to the Kemalist prohibition on territorial claims. Nevertheless, on a state level, or even in the domestic political debates such claims were never an issue. As far as Ajaria is concerned, the Georgian government was fearful that Ajaria might develop too close ties with Turkey in its quest for autonomy from Georgia; nevertheless the Ajar leadership was careful in this matter—mainly due to its close ties with Russia.

Turkey was also careful not to make any false moves regarding the region. As Boliikbasi notes, however, Turkey ‘failed to recognize the importance of a special relationship with Tbilisi until it became clear in 1994 that the most realistic export route for Azerbaijan’s Caspian oil would be through Georgia.’

Meanwhile, large sectors of Georgian public opinion were generally rather suspicious of Turkey. This suspicion was related to the difficult historical relations between the Georgian kingdoms and the Ottomans, but also to the fact that historical Georgian-Turkish relations had been painted in a rather negative way in Soviet history-writing—the Georgians had always been told by Russians that if Georgia was to become independent, it would subsequently be ‘swallowed by Turkey’. Whether or not they believed it, Georgians could not help remaining suspicious of Turkey’s intentions. Hence Gamsakhurdia and Chanturia in October 1990, that is during the first multi-party elections in the country, asked Turkey to ‘clearly declare that she would not use force against independent Georgia.’ Nevertheless, the fact that Turkey was the first country to recognize independent Georgia was greeted well in Tbilisi at a time when Gamsakhurdia’s regime was internationally isolated.

However, 1994 was also the year of the beginning of Georgia’s stabilization and the year of the ceasefire in Nagorno-Karabakh. Until late 1993, Georgia had been engulfed in war; it was therefore difficult for Turkey or any other country, for that matter, to develop any constructive relations with a Georgia that was on the verge of disintegration. Furthermore, Turkey’s attention in the Transcaucasus was focused on the Nagorno-Karabakh problem, which had a potential to directly affect Turkey in a way the problems in Georgia could not.

The rapid development of the Turkish-Georgian partnership

Since 1994, however, an ‘entente’ between Turkey and Georgia has been developing into what may be termed a strategic relationship. From Georgia’s perspective, of course, the need to develop ties with Turkey springs from the Georgian feeling of vulnerability to Russia. Georgia seeks to widen its international ties in the economic, political and military spheres from too close a dependence upon Russia, which it fears would ultimately reduce Georgia to a
satellite of Russia’s. In the geopolitical position of Georgia, then, Turkey presented Shevardnadze with a clear opportunity to pursue this policy. Hence already in 1994, during Shevardnadze’s visit to Turkey it was noted that they had no divergence in view of the Abkhaz problem. Since then, the relations between the two countries have developed on all levels. A steady process of economic integration is under way between northeastern Turkey and Ajaria in Georgia, which has been mutually beneficial for the two regions. Furthermore, Georgia’s role in the projected transport corridor from Europe over the Caucasus to Central Asia requires a further co-ordination of transport and communications between the two countries. A railway from Kars to Tbilisi through Akhalkalaki is under construction, and the two states have now opened three border crossings and are improving the road connections across the border.  

For Turkey’s economic penetration into Transcaucasia, the importance of Georgia as a market but also as a transport corridor to Azerbaijan cannot be overestimated. In commercial terms, Turkey has rapidly developed into Georgia’s main trading partner with a share of over 30 per cent of Georgia’s foreign trade. More importantly, however, a strategic relationship between the two countries is developing. Given Turkey’s relations with Armenia and its desire for further influence in the Caucasus and Central Asia, Georgia is doubtless a key country. It is, given the Iranian-Armenian-Russian strategic alliance, Turkey’s only and fragile connection to Azerbaijan, and thereby to Central Asia, but also to the North Caucasus and in particular to Chechnya. As such Georgia holds an important place in Turkish policy-making. Beyond this fact, it is also the case that Georgia is one of the only two out of eight of Turkey’s neighbours (the other being Bulgaria) with which it enjoys good relations.

Turkey is becoming a staunch supporter of Georgia’s independence from Russia, and is highly critical of the presence of Russian troops in Georgia, especially along the Georgian-Turkish border which remains under Russian control. In the context of Ajaria, Turkey has been seen as a guarantor of Ajaria’s safety given the historical links between Ajaria and Turkey. However, the Turkish government is growing increasingly critical of Ajarian leader Aslan Abashidze’s pro-Russian stance. Indeed, in the summer of 1998 the Turkish prime minister, Mesut Yilmaz visited Ajaria and emphasized that Turkey ‘recognizes Georgia’s territorial integrity unconditionally’ and ‘regards Georgia’s stability as no less important than Turkey’s own stability’, in a clear message to Ajarian leaders of Turkey’s direct and strong connection to Tbilisi. In the aftermath of the assassination attempt on Shevardnadze in February 1998, Turkey issued a statement blaming Russia for ‘stirring up’ the Caucasus, thereby implicitly lending support to Georgia’s accusations of Russia’s role in the event.

The Turkish-Georgian relationship has also started moving into a military dimension. In September 1997, Georgia received a gift of two coastal guard cutters from the Turkish navy, in replacement for the vessels Georgia was supposed to receive from its share of the Soviet Black Sea fleet; moreover Turkey has agreed to train Georgia’s border guard troops as well as Georgian officers in
Turkish military schools. In May 1998, the Georgian and Turkish navies held joint exercises, proving the developing military relations between the two countries. In fact, these manoeuvres were a breakthrough in the sense that they signified Georgia’s military connections with a country other than Russia. Given Georgia’s more or less stated intention to develop relations with NATO as a counterbalance to Russian hegemonic ambitions, the move to conduct exercises with NATO was a sign that Georgia no longer intends to be confined to the Russian fold. After these events, Russia’s stance towards Georgia became harsher; in February 1998 the assassination attempt against Shevardnadze took place.

In a regional context, the current developments are precisely what Russia has been aiming at preventing since late 1993, when Russian support for Abkhaz insurgents brought Georgia into the CIS and led to the basing of Russian troops on Georgian territory: Georgia is distancing itself from the Russian-Iranian-Armenian axis and is instead rapidly becoming a crucial link in the Turkish-Armenian alignment’s influence eastwards into Azerbaijan and Central Asia. The national interests of Georgia—re-establishment of territorial integrity, true independence from Moscow, participation in the export of Caspian oil, and widening of its international relations to safeguard Georgia against Russian domination—clearly dictate the need for a close Georgian-Turkish and Georgian-Azerbaijani relationship. The speed of the development of Georgian-Turkish relations has indeed been remarkable. In Shevardnadze’s words, ‘in just a few years, Georgia and Turkey have achieved a level of mutual understanding that other countries take generations to reach.’

Chechnya & the North Caucasus: an ambiguous stance

The formulation of Turkish policy toward the North Caucasus, and in particular Chechnya, encountered similar problems as the formulation of its relations with Georgia during the Abkhaz conflict—with a difference only in magnitude. Whereas Georgian interest groups were active in moderating the pro-Abkhaz stance of Turkish public opinion, there was no question of the sympathies of Turks with regard to Chechnya: in fact, a massive support for the Chechen ‘David’ against the Russian ‘Goliath’ was obvious. The Chechen community in Turkey was assisted by other North Caucasian communities, especially Circassian ones.

On Chechnya’s declaration of independence in November 1991, a relatively well-organized effort took place in Turkey to secure public support for the recognition of Chechnya. In retrospect, it may seem as if this was the best chance the Chechens had; indeed the Turkish policy in 1991–92 was more susceptible than later to any anti-Russian influences. Capitalizing on this, Shamil Basayev and two associates on 9 November 1991 hijacked a domestic Russian airliner in Mineralnye Vody in Southern Russia, forcing it to land in Ankara. Although Turkish authorities did not allow Basayev to hold a press conference in Ankara as he had planned, Basayev was not arrested but allowed to return to
Chechnya. Nevertheless, the Chechen declaration of independence soon faded into oblivion as the Chechens were allowed to pursue their independent course for three years. In the meantime, Chechen relations with Turkey developed both on an official and unofficial level. One source of income for Chechens was to engage in so-called shuttle trading, bringing electronics, leather products or other items by air from regional centres, especially Istanbul and Dubai.

On a more official level, Dudayev discreetly visited Turkey several times between 1992 and 1994; the Chechens gradually set up an ‘information office’ in Istanbul in a villa by the Bosphorus maintained by the Turkish nationalists. Despite the fact that the Chechens are not Turkic, they were treated as Turkic brothers by the ‘Bozkurts’ in Turkey, who were naturally attracted by the symbol of the lone wolf that they share with the Chechens. Nevertheless, Turkey steered clear of any official relationship with the break-away republic.

With the beginning of the war, the latent pro-Chechen opinion in Turkey increased dramatically. The government found itself facing a massive public outrage against the Russian invasion and demonstrations at the Russian embassy and consulates. The North Caucasian organizations speeded up their efforts to collect money and send all kinds of supplies to Chechnya; although such claims have never been supported by hard evidence, it seems fairly clear that the Turkish nationalists also managed to ship arms to Chechnya, presumably with the help of Chechen organizations in Azerbaijan. (Corollary to the Javadov affair of 1995 had been that Javadov had urged the Chechens to support him; however as Dudayev lent support to Heydar Aliyev instead, the Chechen government secured the continued utilization of Azerbaijan as a base for its activities.) Nevertheless, the Turkish government claims to have had nothing to do with such activities and claims not to have any knowledge of arms shipments. In fact, it seems safe to assume that whatever shipments took place did so with the knowledge of the Turkish intelligence services; while Turkey could not afford to display any overt support for the Chechen separatists, neither could it afford to be portrayed as actively preventing aid to Chechnya, thereby making itself guilty, in the eyes of public opinion, of collaboration with Russia.

The strength of public opinion on the issue became obvious in January 1996, when a group of Turkish citizens of North Caucasian descent hijacked the Avrasya ferry headed from Trabzon to Sochi. As the ferry was steered through the Bosphorus and into the Marmara sea, the hijackers were surprised to see a large crowd gathered on the shore, waving Chechen flags and expressing their support for Chechnya. This crowd was certainly instrumental in helping the Turkish authorities convince the hijackers to surrender, which they did within two days. Contrary to Shamil Basayev, the hijackers were jailed; nevertheless they ‘escaped’ from prison under mysterious circumstances in 1997, only to make their way to Chechnya. The response of the Turkish authorities was hesitant, abstaining from condemning the hijacking; Prime Minister (Jiller stated that ‘the attention of the world public should be drawn to the Human tragedy under way in the Caucasus. A massacre is continuing in that region… The real problem lies in the
Clearly, (Jiller played right in the hands of the hijackers, whose stated intention had been to bring attention to Russia’s actions in Chechnya. In the words of one of the hijackers, ‘we have achieved what we set out to do: to call the attention of the world to the plight of the Chechens.’

As regards arms shipments, the words of a Chechen activist in Istanbul—who was nevertheless cautious not to say anything to annoy the Turkish government—recorded by Vanora Bennett make a lot of sense: ‘there was no need to send weapons to Chechnya. It made much more sense to send money to Russia, so the Chechens could pick it up and buy their weaponry directly from the Russian army.’

In a sense, the Turkish government faced a similar dilemma as in the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict: that of being constrained from pursuing the policy it might have wanted to. In fact, Chechnya in a sense posed a golden opportunity for Turkey to exert influence in the North Caucasus, a sort of ‘advance base’ from which it could counterbalance the Russian attempts to regain control over the region. Actually, one could imagine Turkey doing so discretely without attracting too much attention. However, Turkey has refrained from most of the subversive activities that actually could have forwarded the country’s interests in the Caucasus. Turkey did nevertheless keep almost daily radio contact with Johar Dudayev until his death. In a sense, naturally, one could say that Turkey did not have to do that; the Chechens managed to ‘help’ Turkey without any support, by showing the world the dismal status of the Russian army (and thereby reducing Russia’s ability to deter interested states from approaching the Caucasus) and by preventing Russia, by denying it territorial control over the entire North Caucasus, from being able to exert its influence to the Transcaucasus.

Nonetheless, from a very early stage Turkey was tightly constricted in its policies. The card Russia played with much success was the Kurdish card, as has been described in detail by Robert Olson in a recent article. Russia hence has made use of the principle of absolute reciprocity between the PKK rebellion in Turkey and its own Chechen problem. On any occasion at which Turkey voiced official criticism of Russian actions in Chechnya, Russia responded immediately by openly voicing the possibility of supporting the PKK. If Turkey had given any material support to the Dudayev government, Russia could always revert from its policy of preventing the PKK from operating on its territory. In fact, Russia seems to have used the Kurdish factor as a preemptive factor towards Turkey not only with regard to Chechnya but with regard to the entire Transcaucasus. Nevertheless, the Chechen question was, to the Russians, obviously reciprocal. In February 1995, the Russians secured a deal whereby they prohibited the PKK from organizing in Moscow, in return for a Turkish pledge not to sell arms to Chechnya and to stop volunteers from joining the separatists.

In July, Russia’s new ambassador to Ankara, Albert Chernishev, made a remark illustrative of Russia’s policy: ‘We must understand each another. People who live in glass houses shouldn’t throw stones… Turkey and Russia are in the same boat. If the boat sinks, we both sink.’ As a result, Turkey by necessity kept a low
profile toward Chechnya, while heavily criticizing Russia for its abuses in the republic. Indeed, Turkey’s protests were at a level just above those of western governments. Meanwhile, Turkey was itself busy with its war with the PKK which intensified after the beginning of Turkey’s interventions in Northern Iraq. However in recent times Turkey has been accused by Russia of planning to use Chechnya as a forward bastion in its attempts to lessen Russian influence in the South Caucasus. This Russian sensitivity must necessarily be seen in the light of the emerging Turkish alignment with Georgia and Azerbaijan, an alignment whose basic aim is to limit Russian influence in the region. However, an interesting fact is that from the point of view of oil exploitation, Chechnya’s interest coincides with that of Russia: an emphasis on the northern route through the North Caucasus to Novorossiysk, and not on a western route to Turkey.

Given the Russian perception the two conflicts, one can make the interesting conclusion that whereas Russia was defeated by the Chechen rebels, who subsequently succeeded in defending their de facto independence, the PKK rebels in Turkey were themselves militarily defeated by 1998, and forced to take their struggle to the political sphere by renouncing armed struggle in mid 1999, after their leader Abdullah Ocalan was captured, brought to Turkey, and sentenced to death. These different outcomes can be derived from two circumstances: first, the different condition of the Russian and Turkish armed forces: Turkey has a highly motivated and well-equipped army which is rapidly becoming one of the strongest in Eurasia, whereas the Russian army is in an advanced stage of decay. Secondly, the character of the revolts was different. The Chechen revolt was a national struggle for independence; although large traits of Chechens society did not support Dudayev’s policy, virtually all Chechens rallied around him in the face of Russian invasion. In contrast, the PKK revolt is as much a political rebellion with the aim of creating a Marxist-Leninist state in Kurdish-populated territories as a national one, and did therefore never received the coherent support of Turkey’s Kurdish population. Once Turkey’s treatment of the civilian population of the southeast improved by the mid 1990s—realizing that the earlier abuses only pushed the population in the arms of the insurgents—the PKK steadily lost support.

**Implications for Turkey in the CIS & regional power alignments**

In a way the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict can be seen as a test case for Turkey’s ability in the early 1990s to act as an independent regional power in the Caucasus and Central Asia. It seems likely, moreover, that analysts in Tashkent or Almaty, for example, have taken interest in Turkey’s activities with regard to the conflict. Clearly, the Turkish record seems to dismiss any illusion that may have existed about Turkey as a regional leader. Then again, what are Turkey’s interests in the region? Despite the rhetoric of the early 1990s of a ‘Turkic 21st century’, Turkey quickly overcame any illusions regarding its own power and capacities, and its
current policy is a distinctly more realistic one. Although in the longer term Turkey certainly intends to expand its relations with the Central Asian republics, it has no illusion of openly replacing Russia in the short run as the dominant power in the region. Rather, Turkey’s interest for the time being lies in expanding its cultural, political and economic relations with the Turkic republics. In this framework, Turkey is pursuing a number of policies which, although not reaching the headlines, are instrumental in bringing the people of the Turkic republics and Turkey itself closer, and the importance of which will only become apparent in the long run. One main example is that Turkey is providing scholarships for thousands of Azerbaijani and Central Asian students in Turkish universities, a gesture which will be instrumental in bringing about an elite in these countries which is familiar with and favourably disposed towards Turkey. Secondly Turkey is projecting its mass media into the region, particularly to Azerbaijan where a number of Turkish newspapers are being published, and where most Turkish private television channels can be viewed. Measures of this kind, given some years and coupled with increased economic interaction, are certain to establish warm and beneficial relations between Turkey and its ‘lost cousins’. The relative setback in Nagorno-Karabakh has to be seen as only a part of this puzzle of relations.

With regard to the geostrategy of the Caucasus, Turkey has established itself as one of the primary actors in the region. The very fact that Russia is worried about Turkey’s military capabilities to such an extent is very illustrative of this fact. Turkey holds a crucial and leading role in the emerging alignment of pro-Western, and in foreign policy matters proactive states which seek to create a mutually co-operative economic and political stability in the Caucasus: states that pursue geoeconomics while engaging in geopolitics, and reject the reactive geopolitical policies of Iran and Russia, which both have vowed to prevent Turkish and American influence in the region from expanding (see chapter eleven). The last few years have also seen the gradual improvement of Turkey’s relations with Ukraine and Moldova. Turkey’s interests in these countries are partly related to the Turkic minorities (the Gagauz in Moldova and the Crimean Tatars in Ukraine) but contain a heavy strategic component. Without wishing to alienate Russia with which Turkey has very important trade relations—another proof of the web of interdependence of today’s international relations—Ankara has become a tacit supporter of GUAM, the closer alliance of Georgia, Ukraine, Azerbaijan, and Moldova: it is simply in line with Turkey’s own interests to strengthen the independence and co-operation among these states.

One main interest of Turkey has been related to oil politics. Turkey early on declared it was interested in having Caspian oil flow to the Turkish Mediterranean port of Ceyhan; in the ideal situation, the re-opening of oil pipelines from Iraq and the export of Iranian oil through Turkey would make the country an energy metropolis. With regard to the energy resources of the Caspian Sea, Turkey’s policy goals have been summarized as follows:
• Caspian oil would be a major source for the growing Turkish domestic consumption, and would have the advantage of decreasing dependence on Middle Eastern oil and Russian gas. Furthermore, Turkey expected significant revenues from the transit of hydrocarbons headed to world markets, and an impetus to the economy through the construction of pipelines.

• Caspian oil had a distinct strategic importance as its export through Turkey implied an increased standing in regional politics and an increased importance of Turkey for the west, which would be an asset in its quest for membership in the EU.

• Domestic concerns played a key role insofar as the Çiller administration capitalized on the Baku-Ceyhan line as a tool for increased popularity. Indeed, Tansu Qiller made the pipeline issue one of the two main foreign policy goals of the country, the other being the customs union with the EU.\(^89\)

Despite the strong backing of the Turkish, Azerbaijani and US governments for the Baku-Ceyhan pipeline project, oil companies involved in the Azerbaijan International Operating Company (AIOC) was especially reluctant to finance this pipeline during the plunge of oil prices to US$10–12 a barrel in 1998, in addition to Iraq and Iran waiting for sanctions to be lifted. It seems as if substantial government subsidies from either the US or Turkey are necessary for the speedy realization of the Baku-Ceyhan project; indeed representatives of the oil companies complain that despite the heavy pressure on them to choose the Baku-Ceyhan line, not a cent has been promised in government support from any of the countries supporting it. In the long run, however, political considerations weigh heavily; on 29 October 1998, the ‘Ankara declaration’ supporting the Baku-Ceyhan route was signed by the presidents of Turkey, Azerbaijan, Georgia, Uzbekistan, and Kazakhstan as well as the US secretary of energy.\(^90\) It seems very unlikely at this point that oil companies will totally disregard this comparatively strong consensus among these states for Baku-Ceyhan. The most probable solution seems to be the postponement but eventual building of this pipeline. Nevertheless Turkey’s political investments in the pipeline issue dictate that the country will not give up on this issue, but will use all tools at its disposal to realize the project.

**Conclusions**

At an early stage the conflict in Nagorno-Karabakh, shattered the illusions of certain Turkish policy-makers about the capacities of their country with regard to its relations with its ‘lost cousins’ of the Caucasus and Central Asia. Indeed, as if subjected to a cold shower, the Turks which had not done so realized the complexity of their country’s relations with the United States, Western Europe, Russia, and the Middle East, and the constraints upon it that prevented Turkey from pursuing a truly independent policy in the region. Turkey found itself involved in a myriad of liabilities, as it was compelled to take into account the
stance of the West and that of Russia while formulating its policy in the Caucasus. The problems of formulating a policy towards Chechnya deepened this perception. In view of the difficult conditions it was subjected to, Turkey nevertheless managed to keep its relations with all involved powers, avoiding compromising its position in any centre where that would have been to its detriment. The price Turkey had to pay for this was a popular dissatisfaction in Azerbaijan and a manageable loss of prestige in the Muslim republics of the former Soviet Union. Thus, although momentarily Turkey did not show its ability to assert its influence in the Caucasus and Central Asia, it continued to maintain a pivotal role in the region, being the main link of these countries with the West and posing a developmental model for these countries, a quality which is not to be underestimated, as many more rounds are left to be played in the struggle for influence in this emerging region of world politics. In view of the larger geostrategic position of Turkey, which after all had other priorities than the Caucasus to look after as well as substantial internal problems, this could be termed a fair deal.

Meanwhile Turkey’s role is fundamental in the regional alignments that are developing; while Turkey has gone out of its way to ensure that it maintains at least working relations with the Russian Federation, which for the foreseeable future will remain an indispensable factor for anyone who wants to deal with the former Soviet Union’s successor states. The second half of the 1990s have moreover brought a strengthened Turkish economic penetration of the Caucasus, as well as a more concerted, gradual and realistic approach concerning political and military relations with Azerbaijan and Georgia. Its alliance with Israel has been instrumental in increasing Turkey’s self-confidence and assertion in its relations with all its neighbours, including the three Caucasian states and Russia; indeed it has helped Turkey to increase its feeling of security in a volatile region, and enabled it to become a more independent actor in regional politics of the Balkans, the Middle East and the Caucasus. The recent stand-off with Syria and that country’s compliance with Turkey’s demands illustrate the point. Furthermore, the renewed rejection of Turkish application to full membership in the European Union in December 1997—and especially the tactless way in which it was made—signified that Europe holds much less of a restraining role in the formulation of Turkish foreign policy. With accession to the EU a distant goal at best, one can speak of a Turkish comeback to the Caucasus and Central Asia—this time to be taken distinctly more seriously. Especially since the fall of the Islamist-led government of Necmettin Erbakan in the Summer of 1997, Turkey’s renewed interests in the Caspian region have become clear. In partnership with the United States, Turkey is set to be one of the major actors in the Caucasus and Central Asia for the foreseeable future.
I looked at him, shaken. What was right, what was wrong? True, the Turks were Sunnites. And yet my heart longed to see Enver coming to our town. What did they mean? Had our martyr’s blood really flowed in vain? ‘Seyd’, I said, ‘the Turks are of our blood. Their language is our language. Turan’s blood flows in our veins. Maybe that is why it is easier to die under the Half Moon of the Khalifs than under the Czar’s cross’.

Seyd Mustafa dried his eyes: ‘In my veins flows Mohammed’s blood’, he said coolly and proudly. ‘Turan’s blood? You seem to have forgotten even the little you learned at school. Go to the mountains of the Altai, and yet further to the border of Siberia: who lives there? Turks, like us, of our language and our blood. God has led them astray, and they have remained pagans, they are praying to idols. If these Jakuts or Altai-men were to become powerful and fight us, should we Shiites be glad of the pagan victories, just because they are of the same blood as we?’

‘What shall we do, Ali Khan? I do not know.’

As the Soviet Union fell apart in 1991, it was widely expected that Iran and Turkey would enter into a rivalry for influence in the Caucasus and Central Asia—an expectation which to a large extent has become reality, despite official efforts from both sides to deny this. In particular, the Turco-Iranian struggle has taken the form of a struggle between ‘models’—Turkey presenting a secular, Western-oriented democratic model, while Iran proposes a radical Islamic, anti-Western outlook with its own particular regime, which however allows for a substantial degree of democracy. In this respect, and perhaps except for Tajikistan, Turkey currently seems to have the upper hand, as most Caucasian and Central Asian leaders expressed sympathy for the Turkish model, as viewed in chapter seven, but have been very hostile to political Islam and therefore have refrained from overly close relations with Iran. In this struggle for influence, the Caucasus has taken a special place. The region is as noted at the outset of this study the historical meeting point of three empires: The Russian, the Ottoman Turkish, and the Persian. During much of history, Iran has considered the South Caucasus to be part of its sphere of influence and has played the role of a
hegemony in the area. With the disappearance of Russian control, such historical affinities re-emerged in Tehran.

Based on ethnolinguistic and religious affinities but also on strategic considerations, it seemed logical that both Turkey and Iran would give priority to Azerbaijan in trying to gain influence in the Caucasus. *A priori,* this seemed a logical conclusion, and the Azerbaijani leadership initially hoped that it would be able to use the Turco-Iranian rivalry to its own benefit. Turkey is closely tied to Azerbaijan in terms of language, ethnicity and culture. The Azeris also share many elements of Persian culture and, more important, are—like the Iranians—predominantly Shi'i Muslims, whereas the Turks are mainly Sunnis. Azerbaijan and Iran also have very strong historical links. Azerbaijan has for most of its history been a part of the Persian empire, an arrangement which came to an end with the Russo-Persian wars of the first half of the nineteenth century. Turkic dynasties have even ruled Persia at different times; the Safavid empire, which instituted Shi'i Islam as state religion in Iran, was Turkic in origin.

Thus the Azeris share common denominators with both Iran and Turkey. Furthermore, to the extent that this was the intention of these two regional powers, Azerbaijan would be the best country to choose in order to project power and influence into the Caucasus. Besides being overwhelmingly Muslim, in contrast to both Armenia and Georgia, Azerbaijan is the largest of the three South Caucasian countries, with a population of almost 8 million; moreover, it is rich in natural resources, primarily oil, which neither of the other two possesses. Geopolitically, Iran enjoys an over 700 kilometre-long border with Azerbaijan, which gives it the important advantage of direct access to that country. Turkey has a mere seven kilometre border with Nakhchivan, which is separated from mainland Azerbaijan by Armenia.

A further circumstance, however, complicates the Iranian relationship with its northern neighbour. The majority of the Azeri nation is resident in northern Iran, not in the Caucasian republic. Whereas the Republic of Azerbaijan contains roughly 6 million Azeris, between 15 and 20 million are estimated to live in Iran. This fact has been an important reason for the ambivalence of Iran towards Azerbaijan. Turkey has consistently—both officially and by its actions—put Azerbaijan in first place in its relations with post-Soviet states (see *chapter seven*); Iran has not committed itself in the same way. Turkey, after a period of uneasy neutrality, openly took Azerbaijan’s side in Azerbaijan’s armed conflict with Armenia over the Nagorno-Karabakh enclave; Iran has had a very ambivalent and, at first sight, illogical policy towards the conflict. Actually, given the militant Islamic rhetoric and policy of the country, Iran could have been thought to be the first country to rush to the support of the Azeris, fellow Shi'i Muslims, in their confrontation with the Christian Armenians.

Unfortunately for the Azeris, nothing of this sort happened. Whereas Iran declared itself ready to mediate in the conflict, it did not in any way support the Azerbaijani side. On the contrary, Iran has constantly sought to cultivate and improve its relations with Armenia. Whereas Turkey joined Azerbaijan’s blockade
of Armenia and Nagorno-Karabakh, Iran is one of Armenia’s main trading partners, and according to recent reports it is also very active in trading with the Karabakh Armenians as well, being the major supplier of foodstuffs and other commodities to the enclave. In fact, Iranian policy and conduct towards South Caucasus are heavily colored by what can be termed an ‘Azerbaijan factor’. To understand the underlying determinants of the policy and how it is shaped, it is necessary to first analyze the origins and evolution of the Azerbaijan question during this century.

The Azerbaijan question up to the Soviet breakup

The Russo-Persian wars of the first half of the nineteenth century ended in a decisive Persian defeat, which was finally confirmed by the Turkmanchay treaty of 1828. This treaty, and subsequent protocols to it, demarcated a border between the two empires along the Araxes River—a line that cut through the lands inhabited by the Azeri people. Iran was naturally not satisfied with this situation and found an opportunity to reverse it at the Paris peace conference of 1919. This was a time when the central power in Russia was weak, and Moscow was consumed with the 1917 Bolshevik revolution. In effect, it had lost control over South Caucasus and actually recognized the independence of the three states of Georgia, Armenia, and Azerbaijan. However, the Iranian claims at the Paris conference were left unanswered, and instead the three short-lived ‘democratic’ republics of South Caucasus lived on for three difficult years, only to be incorporated into Soviet Russia in 1920–21, after the Bolsheviks had secured power in Moscow and could reassert control over its peripheries. After these events, Iran seemed to accept the loss of South Caucasus, formalizing the border with the Soviet Union through a treaty in 1921.

Naturally, the division of Azerbaijan between two empires was a disaster for the Azeri people. Families were broken up, old patterns of contact, culture and trade were destroyed, and the very survival of the nation was endangered, given the long period of time that the two parts of Azerbaijan were separated from each other. In particular, 70 years of Soviet rule created important differences in lifestyle and identity between Iranian and Russian-ruled Azeris. As Tadeusz Swietochowski describes it, the Azeri people on both sides constantly sought to keep up relations over the border. This was particularly successful during the Baku oil boom in the late nineteenth century, when thousands of unemployed Azeris from Iran crossed the border to seek temporary employment in the oil industry. At certain points, Swietochowski notes that the contacts between North and South Azerbaijan were so close that folk tales and songs from one side spread quickly to the other.

These interactions continued during the period of the First World War. As one observer states, due to the lack of central authority in Iran at the time, there was actually no political frontier separating the two Azerbaijans, and hence no obstacle to contact. From 1921 onwards, however, this period of instability ended
in both Iran and the newly formed Soviet Union, and the border between the two states became increasingly closed to population flows. Consequently, the two parts of the Azerbaijani nation were separated for decades, indeed prevented from interacting with one another until the late 1980s.

The birth of the Azerbaijani Democratic Republic in 1918 did not pass unnoticed in Iranian Azerbaijan. An autonomist movement emerged under the leadership of Sheykh Muhammad Khiabani, who announced the formation of a local government. Khiabani seems to have been in favour of a reunion of both Azerbaijans, under the name of ‘Azadistan’ (i.e. ‘land of freedom’). However, this movement was crushed before acquiring sizable proportions. According to several authors, however, Khiabani’s movement carried more of a general democratic reformist orientation than a national one. Indeed, Nassibli claims that the movement had no national character.

The Azerbaijan question came back to the agenda during the Second World War, when a new political vacuum was created in Iran after the British and Russian invasion of the country in 1941. This vacuum was quickly exploited by Azeri nationalists, who managed to establish a short-lived Azerbaijani republic in 1945. Although many observers have argued that this was mainly the creation of Russian intervention, it seems clear that it was based on a strong, comparatively well-organized Azeri nationalist clique in Iranian Azerbaijan, without which it would never have come into existence. Naturally, the aggressive and interventionist Soviet policy towards Iran was equally important for its formation. The Azeris had preserved their ethnic identity and displayed a significant level of group cohesion; however the popular participation in the autonomy struggle was very limited. Fred Halliday, in this context, sees the Azeri nationalism of the time not as a secessionist attempt but rather as a struggle for autonomy within the framework of the Iranian state. When Soviet support was withdrawn and the Tabriz-based republic crushed by the central government, measures were taken to preclude the renewal of secessionist claims. Iranian Azerbaijan was administratively divided into two in 1946, with Tabriz and Rezaye as provincial centres. This policy, repeated in 1993 when a third Azeri province around Ardebil was created, shows the eagerness on the part of the Iranian authorities, whether Pahlavi or republican, to prevent the emergence of any signs of secessionism among the Azeris. The Pahlavi state’s repression in fact forced many Azeri intellectuals to seek refuge north of the Araxes, where they became an important element in the North Azerbaijani intelligentsia and remain so today.

Nasib Nassibli’s account of Iranian Azerbaijan in the 1960s and 1970s shows that the presence of the Shah’s repressive structures during this period was more pronounced than in other parts of Iran; showing the Pahlavi regime’s fear of the development of Azeri nationalism as well as political opposition in general in the Azeri-populated areas. The 1960s were indeed a time when the Azeris of Iran rediscovered their culture, language and music and accorded an increasing amount of importance to it. Meanwhile, the Pahlavi regime was actively propagating a historiography that denied early Turkic presence in Iran.
and downplayed the Turkic element in Iranian history. A pan-Iranist and monarchist ideology was promoted, which emphasized the religious and cultural affinities and downplayed linguistic and ethnic ones. The regime forbade the use of the Azeri language, especially in the education system. The tangible improvement of the economic situation in Iranian Azerbaijan during this period through the extraction of oil was a factor that helped the regime to conduct these policies without major unrest.

What is more difficult to explain is what has happened to Azeri nationalism since then, for the events during the Islamic revolution of 1978–79 show little sign of it. This was a period when many peoples—in the very multiethnic Iran—voiced their claims for national autonomy. Clearly, the Azeris are by far the largest non-Farsi-speaking ethnic group in Iran; however, smaller nations such as the Kurds or Baluchs were much more vocal than the Azeris. This fact can be explained by a number of factors. First of all, the Azeris are Shi'i Muslims, unlike most Kurds, Arabs and other minorities in Iran. Hence the switch from a Persian-oriented to a Shi'i-oriented state meant an actual rise in the prospects of the Azeris. Furthermore, the new constitution of the Islamic Republic enabled the Azeris to use their own language and express their own culture to a distinctly greater extent than had been the case under Pahlavi rule. The new state was one in which they were, so to say, full members. Secondly, the post-war era meant an increased integration of the Azeris into the political and economic life in Iran. One must also see that most Azeris in Iran, given their history as its rulers in certain periods, consider Iran to belong to them as much as to the Persians—certain Azeri political movements actually demand, not a unified Azeri state, but the incorporation of northern Azerbaijan into Iran. Indeed, even among the highest positions of the Islamic republic, a significant number of Azeris are found. It should be noted, nevertheless, that in the religious sphere a considerable part of the clergy of Azeri origin have often been at odds with Khomeini and his followers, some allying themselves with the latter’s opponent, Shariat Madari.

Halliday also puts forward two other arguments. The first is that the failure of the 1945–46 experience might have served as a lesson to the Iranian Azeris, making them realize that their only possibility was to exist within the Iranian state. The second argument is that the main grievances of the Azeris are with the Kurds, not with the Iranian state, and that the Azeris would not opt for autonomy, fearing that the Kurds would then do the same. However, these arguments are difficult to fit into the picture of worldwide ethnic mobilization and conflict. Population groups are usually not discouraged by past failures. If such experiences do have an impact, they rather tend to accentuate ethnic mobilization and group cohesion. Furthermore, it does not seem as if ethnic mobilization usually follows such a logical or rational pattern as would be required for this argument to be valid. It is conditioned more by emotions than a rational calculation of benefits.

This is not to say that unification movements are non-existent. On the contrary, reports seem to show that the movement is on the rise in both parts
of Azerbaijan, perhaps because the popularity of the Islamic regime is falling. A South Azerbaijan National Liberation Committee (SANLC) exists, operating from the Azerbaijani republic. The extent of its following is not known; however, its existence has been another thorn in Iranian-Azerbaijani relations, and Iran has forced Azerbaijan to profess its ‘neutrality’ towards the movement.27 Faced with this harsh reaction, the Azerbaijani government has been compelled to restrict the activities of the South Azerbaijani nationalists on its territory. In fact, very little is known of the actual level of Azeri nationalism in present-day Iran. The information that reaches the West might be only the tip of the iceberg. However, the harsh repression of any Azeri nationalist tendencies, as well as the Iranian state’s policy towards the Azerbaijani republic, seems to show that it constitutes a far larger problem for the Iranian leadership than can be observed—or it is perceived as such in Tehran.

The perceived Azerbaijani threat

If Iranian policy towards the newly established Azerbaijani state seems illogical at first, it can be explained by domestic considerations. With economic indicators pointing downward28 and with a constant fear of irredentism in its multi-ethnic society, the Iranian government was less than pleased by the emergence of an Azerbaijani state to its immediate north. Matters were not made any easier by the fact that this Azerbaijani republic was endowed with large resources of oil and natural gas for a comparatively small population, and was likely to become a country with a high standard of living within a few decades.29

The existence of a large Azeri minority in Iran could have been an incentive for the Iranian rulers to support the Azerbaijani republic, in order to preempt criticism from its own Azeri minority. The Iranian leadership, however, does not seem to have reasoned along these lines, instead, they saw fit to counteract the interests of the Baku government in a number of ways. This, despite the fact that not only the Azeris in Iran, but overwhelming public opinion, demanded that the government openly take the Azerbaijani side against the Armenian ‘infidels’.30

This circumstance can be explained by the perception of the threat that Azerbaijan posed to the Iranian regime. In fact, the leaders of the Islamic Republic seem to have seen the emergence of an Azerbaijani republic as a long-term threat to the integrity of the Iranian state, rather than as a short-term one. What they feared was not an immediate upheaval of the Azeri population in solidarity with their brethren, urging Tehran to intervene in Karabakh. The Azeris in Iran are, after all, quite well-integrated into the Iranian society, have a comparatively weak Azeri identity, and for the most part feel themselves at least as much Iranians as Azeris. As we have seen above, there are even Azeri movements in South Azerbaijan that urge the integration of the Azerbaijani republic into Iran. However, it is difficult to assess whether these movements are genuine or a mere fabrication of the Tehran regime.
The high level of integration of the Azeris is also a reason for the Iranian government seeing no imminent danger in pursuing an anti-Azerbaijani policy. The actual threat that Azerbaijan was perceived as posing to the regime was that, if Iran’s economic condition (and by extension its social cohesion) deteriorated, the national identity of the Azeri minority in northern Iran would grow in proportion to popular dissatisfaction with Tehran’s policies. This would be all the more dangerous if the Azerbaijani republic simultaneously prospered thanks to its oil revenues.

An illustration of the degree of Iranian fear of Azeri irredentism occurred in the summer of 1993. At this point, the Azeri military performance in Karabakh was plainly a disaster, and Armenian forces conquered territories of Azerbaijan proper east and south of Karabakh. In October, the situation became critical for Iran, as the Armenians pushed towards the Iranian border, threatening to send a massive refugee flow into the country. Indeed, a number of Azeri refugees did swim across the Araxes, where they were welcomed by their ethnic kin on the other side. The Iranian regime reacted quickly and moved to set up refugee camps for the fleeing Azeris—but on Azeri territory. Hence the refugees were forcibly moved back to Azerbaijan, where Iran already by November claimed to harbor over 40,000 people. Perhaps the main reason for this move seems to have been a fear on the part of the Iranians that allowing Azeri refugees to stay in Iran and fraternize with the Iranian Azeris could pose a danger. If the Iranian Azeri community became aware of the atrocities suffered by their kin in the war, there would be a high risk of increased pressure on the regime to intervene on Azerbaijan’s side; even more dangerous would be the risk of heightened Azeri ethnic mobilization in Iran in solidarity with the northern Azeris in their struggle against the Armenians.

The perception of threat, then, was so strong that Iran saw fit to set up expensive refugee camps outside its own territory. The action cannot be explained by simple humanitarian concern, as the easiest solution then would have been to set up camps on the Iranian side, where they presumably would be safer from Armenian attack. One should not, however, neglect the importance of economic factors in the decision. Iran, after all, already harbors over 2 million refugees from Afghanistan and Iraq. The prospect of additional thousands of refugees must have been an incentive to try to keep them outside Iran. However, these economic considerations as a whole seem to be secondary as far as the refugee issue is concerned. The speed with which the refugees were relocated indicates the perception in Tehran of a potentially explosive situation. As Dilip Hiro has noted in his excellent book *Between Marx and Muhammad*, Iranian President Ali Hashemi Rafsanjani became aware of the Azerbaijani threat:

Rafsanjani realized that in the long run, Azeri nationalism would prove as problematic for the Islamic regime in Tehran as it was proving then for the Communist administration in Moscow... The emergence of a strong,
independent Azerbaijani republic—whether Islamic or not—would fan the flames of Azeri nationalism within Iran.32

Thus from the time of Azerbaijan’s independence at the breakup of the Soviet Union, Iran was wary of the Azeri republic. Nevertheless, until mid 1992, strong currents in Iran were highly supportive of Azerbaijan. Iran attempted serious mediation efforts, not without success, as will be discussed below. Furthermore, Iranian nationalists have pressured the regime to side with Azerbaijan, reasoning that the Azeris of Azerbaijan are actually Iran’s own citizens, as the entire Azerbaijan belongs to Iran.33 Several radical newspapers have also urged the government to condemn Armenia.34 The early developments in Baku, prompted by the war, were only instrumental in turning Iran’s wariness into outright enmity.

As the leader of the Azerbaijan Popular Front (APF), the historian Abulfaz Elchibey, came to power in June 1992, Azerbaijan turned increasingly towards Turkey. Indeed, Elchibey was decidedly pro-Turkish, secularly oriented, pan-Azeri and vehemently anti-Iranian. This meant that Tehran had exactly the kind of government in Baku that it did not wish to have. President Elchibey did not show any diplomatic tact either. On several occasions, he blasted Iran as a doomed state and predicted that within five years Azerbaijan would be reunited.35 This policy was hardly the most effective way of allaying Iran’s suspicions. Nevertheless, the Elchibey period turned out to be very short in Baku, as the government proved incapable of dealing with the Karabakh war and attracted at least as much enmity from Moscow as from Iran. Moscow’s direct involvement on the Armenian side has been proven by eyewitness accounts and testimonies of individual Russian soldiers.36

Allegations of Iranian involvement have also been voiced by Azerbaijan, especially concerning the coup d’état that overthrew Elchibey in the summer of 1993. Azeri conspiracy theorists even see a joint Russo-Iranian action behind that coup.37 Although no credible evidence has been presented to prove such allegations, it remains clear that during Elchibey’s rule, Iran drifted towards close contacts with Armenia. Also, it must be noted that whereas Iran sought closer relations with all newly independent states, Armenia was one of the few to welcome such relations, whereas Central Asian republics showed little interest. However, Iran’s support for Armenia fell short of any military involvement of the Russian type. Rather, Iran supplied Armenia with necessary goods and energy, hence counteracting the Turco-Azeri embargo on the country—which actually considerably weakened Azerbaijan’s main bargaining chip against Armenia. Iran is today Armenia’s largest trading partner. The Azeris also suspect Iran of involvement in support of radical Islamic political movements in Azerbaijan, as well as of encouraging ethnic unrest among Azerbaijan’s Talysh minority, which lives near the Iranian border. Thus the curious legacy of the Elchibey era: an Islamic state, Iran, ended up supporting Christian Armenia against Muslim Azerbaijan.
When Elchibey was toppled in June 1993 and replaced by Heydar Aliyev, Azerbaijan’s Communist-party leader during the Brezhnev years and a former Politburo member, the time seemed ripe for a rapprochement between Azerbaijan and Iran. Aliyev quickly moved to restore some kind of balance in Azerbaijan’s foreign relations, seeking to distance himself from the tight alliance with Turkey that Elchibey had built, in order to diversify international contacts. His first step was to normalize relations with Russia, by acceding to the CIS. Further, Aliyev also brought his policy more into line with Tehran’s. Previously, Aliyev had not refrained from anti-Iranian statements. However, his sense of political tact and his awareness of Iran’s importance for Azerbaijan’s security led him to follow a conciliatory path.

In fact, immediately before acceding to power, Aliyev was the leader of Nakhchivan, the Azerbaijani enclave encircled by Armenia, Iran and Turkey. During the war, Aliyev had ruled Nakhchivan autonomously from Baku and had established good personal relations with Iranian leaders, unilaterally concluding several trade and energy deals with Iran without seeking Elchibey’s approval. In fact, Iran gave financial aid to Nakhchivan and put pressure on Armenia to refrain from attacking the enclave—something which clearly could have led to an escalation of the conflict, as Turkey considers itself a guarantor of Nakhchivan’s security by its 1921 treaties with the Soviet Union. As the leader of Azerbaijan, Aliyev continued to try to bring Azerbaijan closer to the Islamic world. He travelled repeatedly to Tehran and Riyadh, and even tried to enhance his Islamic credentials in spite of his having been in the forefront of Soviet atheist campaigns of the 1970s, when he was chairman of Azerbaijan’s Communist party.

Despite these developments, the relations between Azerbaijan and Iran have not improved significantly, and the basic guidelines of Iranian policy towards Azerbaijan do not seem to have changed. When Azerbaijan concluded the so-called ‘deal of the century’ in 1994 with a consortium led by Western oil companies, Iran was initially given a 5 per cent share of the deal. In April 1995, the United States forced Azerbaijan to exclude Iran from the deal, which naturally made the Iranians furious, accusing Aliyev of being a tool of the ‘great Satan.’ Iran immediately retaliated by cutting off power supplies to Nakhchivan, claiming non-payment of debts as a reason.

Since then, Iran has been countering all Azeri aims to export its oil, unless the projected pipeline would pass solely through Iran. One way to do this has been to refuse to co-operate in a planned pipeline route between Baku and the Turkish Mediterranean port of Ceyhan. This route was intended to stretch from Baku into Iran, then follow the Araxes River and enter Nakhchivan and from there to Turkey, where it would reach the Mediterranean. Such a route was drawn due to the impossibility of involving Armenia in any pipeline project, a route which would have been the most logical one geographically. Iranian officials clearly stated that if a pipeline went through Iran, it would go to the Persian Gulf and not to Turkey; this solution would give Iran more royalties and control over the outlet of Azeri oil—and hence important leverage on Baku.
Furthermore, a route through Georgia, which is being investigated currently, is a main deviation and not necessarily a safe route either, given the instability of Georgia (see chapter four). Hence in this way Iran actively managed to disturb Azeri hopes of exporting its oil without giving Russia a monopoly over transporting it.

As the exclusion of Iran from the international oil consortium had been a debacle in bilateral relations, Aliyev felt obliged to do something to save his relations with the Islamic Republic. In late 1995, Azerbaijan offered Iran a 10 per cent share in the extraction from another oilfield, Shah-Deniz, an offer Iran initially rejected as unserious. In May 1996, however, Iran finally accepted the offer, a decision which may be taken as an indication of the Iranian regime’s pragmatism. Although a certain degree of co-operation exists between the two countries, encouraged by Aliyev, the regime in Tehran still maintains a relatively hostile attitude to its northern neighbour.

The Russian-Iranian Axis over the Caspian Sea

Iran has found an ally in Azerbaijan’s other foe: Russia. In the post-Soviet era, American attempts to isolate Iran and promote its image as a regional pariah have fallen short of coercing Russia to limit its relations with Iran. On the contrary, Russia and Iran have improved and expanded trade relations as well as technical co-operation in the nuclear field—a fact which has proven to be a significant disturbance in Russian-American relations. Russian officials, however, have stated that they will not surrender to any pressures regarding their nuclear co-operation with Iran, something which has been noted with satisfaction in Tehran. Russian and Iranian interests converge in the energy field as well: the hydrocarbon resources would almost exclusively fall within the territorial waters of Azerbaijan, Kazakhstan, and Turkmenistan. Hence Russia and Iran both initially argued for the creation of an international regime in the Caspian, where all resources would be jointly exploited by the riparian states. This line of thought was based upon the legal argument that the Caspian is not a sea—it has no natural outlet to other seas—but rather, technically speaking, a giant lake, where the laws of the sea do not apply. By contrast, Azerbaijan and Kazakhstan argued that the Caspian is an enclosed sea, which gives them the right under maritime law to draw national sectors and exclusive economic zones and exploit resources unilaterally within them. Turkmenistan initially seemed to bow to Russian pressure and in principle accepted joint exploitation; however, recently the Turkmen government, guided by natural self-interest, seems to be inclined towards joining Azerbaijan and Kazakhstan. Turkmenistan, of course, is less affected than other states by the status issue as the country’s main wealth lies in natural gas resources that are mainly found under Turkmen soil, not under the seabed. Hence Turkmenistan is not as vulnerable as particularly Azerbaijan to a decision on the status of the Caspian Sea.
Consequently Russia and Iran exercised pressure on Azerbaijan, in particular, and also though not to the same extent on the two Central Asian republics on the eastern shore of the Caspian, to allow for joint exploitation of oil resources. For all of Aliyev’s intentions to improve relations with both Tehran and Moscow, however, he consistently refused to give away an inch of Azerbaijan’s sovereignty. Hence Azerbaijan remains the only South Caucasian republic without Russian troops on its soil; likewise there have been no signs from Baku pointing to any acceptance of the principle of joint exploitation. In June 1995, Iran and Russia agreed to co-ordinate their oil and gas policies, in a wider context of improving relations.\(^{49}\) Iran was particularly eager to co-operate with Russia as it was under the pressure of US isolation. Both for economic and political reasons, Iran therefore wants to prove that it can stand up against the United States. And given the present character of Russia’s domestic politics, anything that proves that Russia is not dependent on the United States is likely to be in the government’s interest. Co-operation with Iran, in addition to other factors, also serves this purpose; in particular the leadership of Yevgeni Primakov was consistently pro-Iranian. In the summer of 1995, Iran and Russia agreed to co-operate in offshore drilling and platform construction in the Caspian.\(^{50}\) In October of the same year, the two states also elaborated a draft proposal on the legal status of the Caspian, according to which each state would only be granted a 10-mile stretch of territorial waters for mineral extraction. In this context it should be no surprise that most of Azerbaijan’s and Turkmenistan’s oil and gas resources are much further offshore than this.\(^{51}\) Nevertheless, it should be noted that Iran at this point did not insist on joint exploitation to the same degree as Russia did. Rather, Iran pressed for an agreement among all riparian states in order to lessen instability and conflict.\(^{52}\)

However, in 1997 Russia and Kazakhstan signed a treaty on delimitation of the seabed of the Caspian, thereby implying that Russia, seeing the increasing futility of the condominium argument, abandoned the idea as it saw its own companies left behind in the actual extraction of oil. With Russia’s acceptance of the principle of territorial delimitation, Iran was left alone defending joint exploitation.

**Iran & the Karabakh war**

As Edmund Herzig has noted, the Karabakh war has been the most direct threat to Iran’s national security emanating from the north since the 1940s.\(^{53}\) Indeed, as previous chapters have shown, the conflict has been the worst—and from Iran’s perspective the closest—among a plethora of conflicts that have plagued the Caucasus since the late 1980s. Besides ethnic strife, both Azerbaijan and Georgia have been characterized by chronic political instability as well. Arms of all kinds and calibers have proliferated throughout the region, controlled not by the governments of the respective countries but by semi-official or private paramilitary formations.\(^{54}\) Hence the Caucasus as a whole is a source of instability
for all regional powers. For Iran, the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict has had a special importance for a number of reasons. First of all, the fighting, as noted above, has threatened to spill over into Iran at certain points, notably in the fall of 1993. Further, the two states involved in the conflict are both Iran’s neighbours, and hence the conflict directly affects Iran’s security. But most of all, the conflict has played a role in the larger regional constellations in which Iran has a prominent place.

This led Iran at an early stage—virtually as soon as the two belligerents became independent—to offer its good offices to seek a peaceful solution to the conflict. A first abortive ceasefire was negotiated in Tehran in March 1993 and a ‘Tehran declaration’ was signed in May of the same year. But, as Abdollah Ramezanzadeh states, Iranian mediation was hampered first by the repeated Armenian military conquests of Azerbaijani territory, and second by the advent of the Popular Front government in Baku. The first factor led Iranian radicals to condemn Armenia for using the ceasefires brought about by Iranian diplomacy to provide for rearmament, the second made mediation virtually impossible as President Elchibey refused to accept Iran as a mediator. To a certain degree, then, Iran has acted to resolve the conflict in a positive manner. But Tehran simultaneously used the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict to pursue foreign-policy goals.

Since the conflict erupted into war in 1992, Iran has attempted to exert its influence on Azerbaijan. For the most part, this has meant working against Azerbaijan through support for Armenia. This has, however, not always been the case. When the conflict threatened to spill over into Iran, Tehran actually raised its tone against the Armenians. It made a joint appeal with Turkey to the UN Security Council to condemn the Armenian aggression. Hence it seemed as if Tehran was becoming aware of the danger of a collapse in Azerbaijan, which could have important implications for regional security. At several points, Iran made clear that it sought to preserve the existing balance of power in the region. Here again, the Nakhchivan enclave was perceived to be of crucial importance. When Nakhchivan was under threat of an Armenian attack in September 1993, Iranian troops crossed the river Araxes, prompting a strong Russian reaction. Russia made it clear that good relations with Iran are conditional on Iran’s acceptance of Russian supremacy in the Caucasus. Nevertheless, Iran’s action was enough to intimidate Armenia; the Armenian foreign minister assured Tehran that there would be no more attacks on Nakhchivan.

Except for situations where it was absolutely necessary to restore a balance by preventing Armenia from creating chaos in the region, Tehran used the conflict to pressure Baku. This was generally done through different forms of support for Armenia. As stated above, Iran served as a purveyor of electricity and goods to Armenia, which suffered from the Turkish-supported Azeri blockade of the country. Transport was difficult through war-torn Georgia: Russian supplies had difficulties reaching their destination, and the pipeline bringing natural gas to Armenia was sabotaged on several occasions. However important trade relations might have been to sustaining the Armenian war effort, Iran’s support went
beyond these merely commercial relations. Reports have indicated that Iran served at least as a transit route for weapons en route to Armenia; similarly Armenian fighters have allegedly been trained in Iran. It is not impossible that certain Armenian movements have retained contacts with Iran from the time of the terrorist campaign against Turkey, which had its high tide in the early 1980s. Azeris argue that ASALA (the Armenian Secret Army for the Liberation of Armenia) still exists and is being trained in Iran, and that this organization has been one of the forces influencing the Armenian government of Nagorno-Karabakh.

In any case, Azerbaijan found itself quite isolated, both in the region and globally (see chapter three). With two powerful enemies—Russia and Iran—and only one reliable but cautious friend—Turkey—Azerbaijan fared very poorly in the war. By mid 1993, the ill-organized Azeri army was on the verge of disintegration, and the overthrow of President Elchibey took place with significant military involvement.

The inability of the Elchibey government to control the armed forces and conduct a sensible foreign policy must to a great extent be attributed to the president’s own inability to distance himself from his private, academic framework and to adopt the role of statesman. However, the government’s failure and eventual downfall is equally attributable to the foreign actors working against it. Among these, Russia was doubtless the most active and determined one; nevertheless, Iran played its part. It did so not only by its direct actions, which by themselves would not have had a tremendous impact on Azerbaijan, but simply because its hostility left Azerbaijan nowhere to go: the West was not interested, and Turkey was unable to help this newly emerging state.

If Iran and Russia counteracted Azerbaijan’s interests with significant success in the Karabakh war, they have simultaneously helped to create a very unstable regional situation, with a conflict in deadlock. The overwhelming majority of observers believe that a negotiated solution will not and cannot be reached in Nagorno-Karabakh as the situation is today. The option is that, within a few years time, oil-rich Azerbaijan will resort to military means to reassert control over the territory that it believes to be its own by right. Hence, the present situation is a highly volatile one. An awareness is growing in the region that if further bloodshed is to be avoided, international mediation efforts must effect an agreement in the near future.

In case no permanent agreement is reached, Iran may find that its policy has had potentially dangerous side-effects. First of all, the risk of further conflict in its neighbourhood means increased national-security concerns. As is the case with all armed conflicts, it is impossible to know the ultimate scope of the conflict. Many observers have warned that the Nagorno-Karabakh war could become a starting point for a larger regional confrontation, which in the worst case would involve Russia, Turkey and Iran. Of these three, Iran is the most likely to be dragged into the conflict. First, it is the only regional power to border both Armenia and Azerbaijan; second, its sizable Azeri population remains a factor of instability.
For these reasons it seems to be in Tehran’s direct interest to help find a solution to the Karabakh conflict. At times, its policy seems to show an awareness of this reality, however, all too often Iran finds itself involved in the intrigues and power politics of the region, due both to domestic and external factors.

**The Tehran-Moscow-Yerevan triangle**

The increased co-operation between Russia, Iran, and Armenia has led to speculation regarding an emerging set of regional alignments. This has been strengthened by recent Russian complaints of an anti-Russian coalition of former Soviet republics. The foremost among these alignments is indeed the growing regional co-operation between Russia, Iran and Armenia. Quite clearly, the existence of such co-operation shows that the age of Realpolitik is not over, given the different worldviews of the principal actors.

Russian-Iranian co-operation has been examined above, and the co-operation in the military, economic, and political fields between Russia and Armenia is well-known. Events in recent years, moreover, tend to show that Armenia and Iran are developing ties in many fields and that their co-operation amounts to more than just the struggle against the common foe, Baku. As early as February 1992, the Armenian foreign minister visited Tehran and discussed the Karabakh conflict and purchases of natural gas, among other agreements on economic and technical co-operation. After this, open contacts were more rare until Azeri-Iranian relations deteriorated in 1995.

In May 1995, less than a month after Iran had been excluded from the Azerbaijani oil consortium, Armenian Prime Minister Bagratyan, on a visit to Tehran, concluded a number of agreements on economic and political co-operation. Most important, Iran agreed to supply Armenia with natural gas and electricity for a period of 20 years. This agreement is especially interesting, as Iran cut electricity supplies to Nakhchivan only three weeks after the deal, indicating that there was more than just an economic side to the developing relations between Armenia and Iran. Incidentally, Iran’s close co-operation agreements with Russia were concluded only weeks after these developments. Iran simultaneously adopted a harsher tone towards Azerbaijan, warning it not to develop too-close ties with Israel, for example. Other high-level meetings discussing further bilateral co-operation were held in Yerevan in December 1996 and in Tehran in February 1997. The Iranian leadership also reiterated its readiness to mediate in Karabakh, something Azerbaijan is outspokenly against.

From an Azeri point of view, it is natural to see these accords and gestures of friendship as a threat to its security and as an attempt to corner Azerbaijan. However, the scope of this emerging triangle does not limit itself to Azerbaijan. One major reason for the existence of this regional triangle seems to be a common desire to reduce and prevent a further increase of Turkey’s influence in Central Asia and the Caucasus, which troubles both Iran and Russia. From
Yerevan’s perspective, Turkey remains perhaps the greatest threat to Armenia’s existence, and in any case a more powerful one than Azerbaijan.

In recent days, Moscow has been denouncing the emergence of an anti-Russian regional axis in the CIS. The nucleus of this axis is allegedly Ukraine, Georgia, and Azerbaijan, all countries that have voiced complaints about Russia’s hegemonic ambitions on the territory of the former Soviet Union. Uzbekistan is also periodically ‘included’ in this anti-Russian coalition, perhaps being the Central Asian state that has most strongly asserted its independence from Moscow. Moreover, Moldova is part of this informal alignment which consequently has been known as GUUAM, after the initials of the participant countries: Georgia, Ukraine, Uzbekistan, Azerbaijan, Moldova.

Russian conspiracy theorists naturally see Turkey’s hand behind the number of bilateral agreements reached between these countries. At present, however, it seems unlikely that such an alignment exists in any articulated form in the minds of decision-makers. However, the alignment indeed has a logic: all of these states have voiced their intentions to escape from Russia’s sphere of influence, and cooperation between them would indeed serve this purpose. Furthermore, they all expect Western and US support. Turkey’s perceived role as a regional American ally also fits into this picture and encourages these states to seek closer ties with that country. Hence the public Russian denunciations risk becoming self-fulfilling prophecies.

In this case, two countervailing alignments may be emerging in the ‘Northern Tier’ of the Middle East, one centred around Russia and the other around Turkey. The latter, if it comes into being, is likely to receive at least tacit support from the West, whereas an Iranian presence in the other will arouse Western suspicion. In such a regional constellation, Iran’s role is crucial. In its international isolation, Tehran is desperately looking for regional allies, which for different practical reasons it has found in Russia and Armenia. Without Iranian participation, this system of alignments would have no purpose except with regard to Russia’s role in the region. But Iran, in its competition with Turkey and its struggle to resolve some vexing internal and external dilemmas, is one of the driving forces behind these developments.

It is too early to evaluate the actual strength of these regional concords. A pattern seems to be there, but the complexity of regional and domestic politics in the Caucasus and its neighbouring states prevents any predictions. What is clear, for the moment, is that Russia, Iran and Armenia have a common interest that they are pursuing: to lessen Turkish influence in the region and to prevent the rise of an oil-rich Azerbaijani state. Whether Turkey is willing to answer this challenge, in view of its domestic problems and its Western alliance, is unknown. Turkish foreign policy since the establishment of the republic has been characterized by caution and a dislike for any kind of foreign adventurism.
Conclusions

As has been outlined above, the dissolution of the Soviet Union was an unwelcome surprise for Tehran, presenting totally new security challenges from its northern frontier. Instead of the predictable Soviet military threat, which had proved quite manageable, Iran was faced with a volatile set of ethnic conflicts in its proximity, which it had little ability to influence. To make matters worse, a considerable part of the Iranian population was potentially encompassed by these conflicts, something which in the worst case could prove to be a threat to the very existence of the Iranian state. Decision-makers in Tehran soon concluded that Azerbaijan was the main threat to Iranian security. They therefore immersed themselves in the intrigues and complexities of Caucasian regional politics, in order to prevent the flourishing of the Azerbaijani state. At first sight, this strategy may seem to have been successful. However, a side-effect has been the exacerbation of the conflict over Nagorno-Karabakh, which at present poses a medium-term threat not only to Iran’s security but to peace and stability in the entire region. Iranian policy towards the Caucasus reveals the difficult geopolitical situation in which the Islamic Republic finds itself. In its difficult quest to find allies in its proximity, Iran cannot help but become involved in extremely risky manouevres.
The most direct consequence of the dissolution of the Soviet Union for the Caucasus was the achievement of independence for the three South Caucasian states of Armenia, Azerbaijan and Georgia. Much as had been the case in 1918, the Caucasian states were set free of Russian control because of Russia’s more pressing domestic problems and issues. In 1918, the Bolshevik Revolution needed to be consolidated before the new leadership could embark on a reconquest of the territories ruled by tsarist Russia; in 1991, the new liberal democratic Russia needed to be built and consolidated, necessitating a loosening of the grip on the peripheries. At both occasions, Moscow recognized the independent Transcaucasian states of Armenia, Azerbaijan and Georgia, and for a short period did not have any outright or direct ambitions on them.

However, again both in 1920 and in 1993, i.e. two years after the respective declarations of independence of these states, a drive to reassert control over these states emerged. While the two periods hence show distinct similarities, the difference between them are equally important. Most importantly, while Bolshevik Russia in 1920–21 overran the Caucasian states militarily and incorporated them forcefully into the emerging Soviet Union, Russia in the 1990s was both unable and unwilling to employ such a tactic. Nevertheless, whereas Russia has not tried to conquer the South Caucasian states overtly, it has nevertheless employed many different tactics at its disposal to sustain and expand its influence on and control over this region. In this framework, it is necessary to differentiate between the North and South Caucasus. The North Caucasus, of course, is a part of the Russian Federation under international law, whereas the South Caucasus consists of three independent states. The patterns of Russian intervention must hence be judged differently in the two regions; Russia should be expected to have Vertical’ relations with its constituent units, the North Caucasian republics, whereas it ought to keep ‘horizontal’ relations— that is, on a formally equal level despite its greater size, resources and power— with the South Caucasian states. This said, however, evidence shows that circles in the Russian administration have less than fully acknowledged and accepted the independence of the South Caucasian states, instead continuing to see them as territories that need to be brought under some form of Russian influence.
Different branches of the Russian state in the early 1990s had widely divergent understandings on how to formulate Russia’s policies towards the South Caucasus, and moreover these different branches conducted and implemented different policies when in disagreement. The policy of official Moscow to the Caucasus, then, underwent distinctive changes during the 1990s, which had significant impact on the region. This chapter begins by analyzing the formulation of Russian foreign policy towards the Newly Independent States (NIS) of the former USSR, and especially towards the Caucasus. Having done this, an attempt is made to map the patterns of Russian intervention in the South Caucasian states and in the relations between them. Then the complex issue of Russia’s relations with the North Caucasus is viewed, before treating the question of the development of the nature of the Russian Federation and its prospects in the region.

**Russian foreign policy debate & foreign policy goals in the ‘Near Abroad’**

Over the years that have passed since the dissolution of the Soviet Union, the Russian foreign policy has gone through several readily discernible major phases. The immediate reaction to the dissolution of the empire that Moscow ruled was a state of confusion that lasted though the initial phase of the building of the Russian state. Indeed, Russia needed to define itself before defining any policy orientation towards its former dominions. De facto, this meant that Moscow relinquished control over the three South Caucasian republics both politically and militarily. However, there was no consensus in Russian political circles on this development. Official Moscow initially paid little attention to the former Soviet Union, instead attempting to direct Russia towards the west; opposition to this policy nevertheless grew quickly.

**Initial Western orientation & its critics**

The body that had a prerogative in defining Russian foreign policy in the immediate aftermath of the Soviet Union’s dissolution was the ministry of foreign affairs of the Russian Federation: in fact, Ukraine, Belarus, Kazakhstan and Russia had had foreign ministries of their own since 1944, which nevertheless had no real function. This bears considerable importance since it means that most officials of the ministry did not have their background in the Soviet foreign ministry but in the Russian foreign ministry which developed from being a mere ‘decorative function’ to an organ in the struggle between the Russian leadership under Boris Yeltsin with the Soviet leadership under Gorbachev.

In fact, analysts have brought forward the assertion that in Yeltsin’s power struggle with Gorbachev, the RSFSR platform became his primary base on which he staked his political future. Following this logic, the price that Yeltsin had to pay to unseat Gorbachev was the weakening of union institutions vis-à-vis
Republican ones, and ultimately the dissolution of the union. With no Soviet Union, Gorbachev’s power base would disappear; and in the event that the USSR be transformed into a loose confederation, as was the plan before the August 1991 coup, the function of the ‘union’ authorities would be severely diminished in favour of Russian and other republican organs. Hence in the aftermath of Russia’s declaration of sovereignty—which sent shock waves throughout the union—Russia began to formulate a foreign policy of its own, distinct in many ways from the one of the other power centre in Moscow, the union authorities. In the two months following the sovereignty declaration, the Russian foreign ministry was reorganized—in fact its substance and structure were created then. Andrei Kozyrev was appointed its foreign minister already at this point.

During the course of 1990 and 1991, the Russian foreign ministry established its international contacts. First and foremost, the RSFSR concluded bilateral treaties of different kinds with other republics of the Soviet Union; moreover, Russian officials travelled to western European countries and institutions on a frequent basis. The Russian republic considered itself and not the Gorbachev ‘clique’ to be the motor of the democratic reforms in Russia, and as more Europe-oriented than the USSR institutions. Gennadiy Burbulis, foreign policy advisor to Yeltsin, noted in April 1991 that learning from the European experience was crucial for the resolution of Russia’s pressing domestic problems. The consequence that follows from this picture of the early Russian—as opposed to Soviet—foreign policy is a set of priorities which made it anti-Soviet, inward-looking, pro-Western, and giving the peripheral republics of the union little priority. This is not to say that the Russian Federation leadership in any way sought the total dissolution of the Soviet Union. Indeed, Kozyrev in an interview stated that he ‘had not dreamed of the dissolution of the Soviet Union, having in mind however a ‘commonwealth or integrated structure of more or less independent states’ in its place. However, statements of Yeltsin and others show that the Russian leadership wished to abolish the ideological base of the union, Marxism-Leninism. The prospect of preserving a loose union without any ideological justification for its existence was, at best, wishful thinking. As Johan Matz has observed, what logic would hold a future union together if the Marxist-Leninist system was removed? Matz finds that Kozyrev seemed to envisage the future of the USSR along the lines of the European Union: voluntary integration to promote peace and prosperity would replace the imposed ideological base.

In a sense, then, the Russian leadership underestimated the centrifugal forces in the non-Russian republics of the union. Moreover, Yeltsin on several occasions ‘played with fire’, encouraging autonomous republics within the Russian Federation to declare sovereignty. The words spoken by Yeltsin in Kazan in 1991 have been recalled with irony later, especially during the Chechen war: ‘Take as much sovereignty as you can swallow!’ Similar statements were made elsewhere, and at times Yeltsin even seemed to suggest that Russia should become a confederation where the autonomous entities would have a right to secession.
However the gradual process of transformation of the union—however realistic it was—was exacerbated by the hardliner coup of August 1991, which emerged as a number of Gorbachev’s cabinet members seized power the day before the new union treaty was to be signed, which would have brought the end of the Soviet Union in its traditional centralized structure. But the failure of the rather disorganized coup that had aimed at conserving the union in its old structure only sealed its fate, obliterating the prospects of any plans to reform it. As many leaders of union and autonomous republics condemned the coup, Yeltsin prepared for battle in Moscow and the army changed side and opposed the coup-makers, the coup was thwarted within three days.

As Yeltsin emerged victorious in Moscow, Gorbachev returned with a considerably weakened legitimacy. Within weeks of the coup all union republics except Russia and Kazakhstan had declared full independence from the USSR. Some leaders still believed in the possibility of reforming the union, but as both Ukraine and Russia declared independence, Kazakhstan was in fact left as the only state remaining in the Soviet union before reluctantly declaring independence in late December 1991. According to certain analysts, Yeltsin had put himself in a difficult position by ‘saving’ Gorbachev. The opposition he had voiced against the coup-makers was not so much related to any support for Gorbachev but rather to an opposition in principle against unseating Gorbachev arbitrarily. Having acted in this manner, Yeltsin had blocked his own way to power: he could now hardly argue for the arbitrary unseating of Gorbachev having just prevented it from happening. Hence, in order to rule Russia he needed to dissolve the Soviet Union or at least remove its practical significance. As the latter option turned out to be impossible, the first was employed, with the energetic support of Ukrainian and other republican leaders.

The Russian state that was being created by this process was in 1991–92 in the process of building its institutions and securing the control over its territory. Its foreign policy was dominated by one of the two major schools of thought in Russia at the time, the reformist school termed ‘Euro-Atlanticist’ (as opposed to a more imperialistic ‘Neo-Eurasianist’ school) by Mohiaddin Mesbahi in a 1993 article. Mesbahi defines the main guidelines of this school as follows. Its primary philosophical underpinning is ‘the predominance of domestic consideration in the shaping of foreign policy’. Accordingly, the success of Russia’s economic reforms was a crucial determining factor in the formulation of its foreign policy. Kozyrev’s own words in early January 1992, also quoted by Mesbahi, clarifies the point: ‘The country’s greatness…is determined not by the scale of its empire but above all by the level of its people’s well-being. Along this line of thinking, Russia’s priority must be to integrate into the institutions of the developed western world—hence the Russian interest to be accepted into the G-7 economic grouping; only the Western form of development would make Russia a ‘great but normal power’. In terms of policy, Kozyrev actively backed the American military efforts against Iraq, American sanctions against Libya, established diplomatic relations with Israel (which had been frozen since 1967) and supported the
American-led peace process in the Middle East. Only with regard to Iran did Russian policy differ from that of the US, a matter which will be analyzed later.11

The pro-Western policy entailed carrying the ‘responsibility’ given to the country by its possession of nuclear weapons and a permanent seat in the UN security council; however it excluded the global hegemony ambitions that the USSR carried. Russia, due to its geographical position and extension, formed a bridge between Europe and Asia and derived therefrom its crucial global strategic value. Here, the Euro-Atlanticist view sees Russia as an agent of change that would bring the ‘less mature’ states of Central Asia into the Western family of nations. This school hence espouses a vision of a European Russia, economically integrated into the Euro-Atlantic world and on a par with its Western partners, which would automatically be a magnet for the ‘less developed’ states of the former Soviet Union. Rather than needing to coerce these republics into falling under Russian influence as had been the case in the past, Russia would be welcomed as a natural leader by Central Asian and Caucasian states in particular. Mesbahi summarizes the policy’s implications as follows:

A much closer overall security relationship with the West and rather a co-operative policy in the Persian Gulf/Southwest Asian region. The US preponderance in the Persian Gulf will not be questioned, Iran will be kept under a watchful eye, while the role of Turkey as the western endorsed model for the region will, with some reservations, be accepted. No controversial ‘and out of line’ stand will be adopted that might jeopardize the strategic direction of Russia for inclusion in the ‘civilized club’. Russia wants to be treated as a normal western great power with identical interests.12

As far as the countries of Central Asia and the Caucasus are concerned, the new Russian policy was correctly interpreted as a drastic alteration of priorities and hence the creation of a power vacuum there. In fact, the Russian leadership totally neglected these regions: American foreign minister James Baker visited the region before Kozyrev did, and the US, Turkey and Iran rapidly established embassies there. Militarily, Russian troops were pulled back in some instances, and the North Caucasus became a frontline district. Kozyrev initially may have viewed the advances of other states in the region as completely natural—but the majority of analysts in Moscow did not.

The main problem of this policy, of course, was the very meagre political ground on which it was based. Far from enjoying a consensus in Russia, many and soon most political forces viewed it as a surrender to the west and particularly to the United States. The policy, in fact, remained dominant only as long as the Russian foreign ministry retained a dominant role in the formulation of foreign policy. As Matz has observed:

The Russian foreign ministry in the autumn of 1991 found itself in a position where its relative influence over the formulation of foreign policy...
was reaching an unprecedented scale... The rivalling bureaucratic organisations that had used to struggle with the MFA over the influence of foreign policy making had thus vanished and the Russian MFA accordingly enjoyed a position where its officials were more or less free to define the parameters for a new post-Soviet language of national interest.13

Soon, however, the opposition to the foreign ministry’s policy and its dominant position grew. The parliament, in particular, by April 1992 chastised the ministry for what it deemed its incapacity to formulate a policy on the Russian Diaspora in the NIS; the events in Moldova were the main contentious issue at the time. The ministry of defence was also an increasingly vocal critic of the foreign ministry; as all non-Russian republics ‘grabbed their share’ of the military forces on their soil—in particular Ukraine—the Soviet military was in fact being dismantled, seemingly without protest from the MFA. The military establishment and the defence ministry saw events such as the Ukrainian claims to the Black Sea fleet and the consequences thereof as serious humiliations for the Russian army.

Meanwhile, the assumptions on which the Atlanticist policy was based did not hold. Russia’s abrupt economic decline continued, structural readjustment was slow, public international aid was ineffective while private investment was insignificant. Russia’s indebtedness grew, and the obvious failure of the government to create a new, ‘westernized’ Russia which could base its power on economic strength led to the increasing popularity of views that envisaged the ‘restoration of the importance of that instrument of state policy that had been prominent in both tsarist Russia and the Soviet Union: military power.’14 The liberal, westernized clique lost much of its initial popular trust, while conservative forces became increasingly popular and powerful. As a result, the conservative forces began to reassert their influence over foreign policy making, pressuring the president. These included the armed forces, the military-industrial complex, and the security services such as the KGB which had escaped reform.15

Their criticism of Kozyrev centred on his alleged adulation of the West and his ‘defeatism’; the more conservative Eurasianists argued that contrary to Kozyrev’s claims, the West is not necessarily Russia’s friend; there are no permanent friends, only permanent interests. This argument, with strong similarities to the neorealist school in international relations, holds that the West is not interested in a strong Russia, but is inciting Russia to become what Mesbahi has called an ‘enlarged Switzerland’—something which is definitively not in Russian interests.16 The West was seen as promoting a unipolar and not a multipolar world, a concept which the Atlanticist model seems to have accepted without concern for the imbalance that would ensue and influence Russia negatively, as the US would try to replace Russia in Central Europe, the Caucasus as well as Central Asia. Russia’s role as a Great Power must be strengthened, and alliances must be created to counter such ‘destabilizing factors’. According to the conservatives, the period of ‘romantic wishful thinking’ lasted too long and led to
an impermissible confusion of normative goals (such as democracy and human rights) with national interests—which led to a significant damage to the latter.\textsuperscript{17}

The underlying assumptions of the conservative thinking that has been termed neo-Eurasianism by Mesbahi are then very different from those of the Atlanticist school. First of all, Eurasianists believe that the success of Russia’s transition is dependent upon the restoration of Russia’s role in the world. The emphasis on relations with the West and the ensuing neglect of the NIS, the Middle East and Asia are rejected as concessionary politics. Neo-Eurasianism does not agree on the Atlanticist view of foreign policy as based on domestic factors; instead, they see the two as interdependent, none clearly superior to the other. Moreover, the survival of geopolitics as a defining factor of international relations is stressed: Kozyrev’s claims of a qualitatively new international environment are rejected. Proponents of this particular point have included Yevgeniy Primakov, then head of the security agency. The view of the West is not necessarily hostile but certainly non-euphoric.\textsuperscript{18} In a sense, this view argued for balance in a hitherto unbalanced foreign policy.

The return of imperial attitudes & the 1993 security doctrine

The effects of the strengthening of the Eurasianist worldview and the correspondent weakening of the Atlanticist position was soon reflected in government. In December 1992, the reformist prime minister Yegor Gaidar was replaced by centrist Viktor Chernomyrdin, whose main allegiance lies in the oil and gas industrial complex in which he had based his career. In the same month, Kozyrev ‘rudely awakened the slumbering audience of his CSCE colleagues assembled in Stockholm by denouncing western interference in the Baltic states, telling the conference to keep its nose outside the territory of the former Soviet republics, demanding an end to UN sanctions against Serbia and stating that Belgrade could count on full military support from Russia.’\textsuperscript{19} In the next breath, Kozyrev claimed to have only appeared as a hardliner to make his audience aware of the dangers of a policy shift in Moscow unless the west supported his country to a higher degree. The message, nevertheless, had come through. Kozyrev’s and Yeltsin’s later statements corroborate the fact that a policy had begun to occur by mid-1992. In early January 1993, Yeltsin heavily criticized the US bombing of Iraq, and intensified military sales and ties to Iran, and asserted Russia’s primacy in the post-Soviet space.\textsuperscript{20}

During 1993, then, Yeltsin’s government moved in the direction of the conservatives, but retained a balanced policy and kept up relations with the West roughly at similar levels as before. Meanwhile, the confrontation between Yeltsin and the conservative parliament was brewing, and ended with Yeltsin ordering the army to crackdown on the Supreme Soviet building in October after the parliament had refused to be dissolved. Yeltsin’s apparent victory was undone by a stronger reliance on and influence of the military in his rule, and by the election of an equally conservative Duma in December. These developments intensified
Yeltsin’s move towards a more assertive and revisionist foreign policy. In November 1993, a new Russian military doctrine was signed by President Yeltsin. The decree noted that Russia does not declare any country its enemy; however it identified threats to its security, including local wars near Russia’s borders, expansion of military alliances, and discrimination of Russian citizens abroad. Moreover, the doctrine pays special attention to the stability of ‘regions directly bordering the Russian Federation’. As Richard Staar among others has concluded, this implies that Russia ‘asserts a sphere of influence that coincides with the one maintained by the USSR.’ This intention was made clear by the provisions in the doctrine that called for the Russian military to deploy troops on the territories of CIS members, ‘either together with units of another state or as exclusively Russian formations at their own separate bases’, provisions that were actively followed by the Russian leadership since—but also before—the inception of this doctrine; in fact the draft of the doctrine existed months before President Yeltsin actually signed it. As Stanislav Lunev, a former colonel in the GRU has observed:

The adoption of this doctrine had a short and not very attractive history. The military doctrine prepared by the Defence Ministry lay for half a year on the desk of the president, who refused to sign the document until October 1993, the month of the bloody suppression of the first Russian parliament by the executive branch. After receiving the support of the military hierarchy and elite military units of the Moscow Military District in his fight against parliament, the Russian president approved the military doctrine as a means of paying off the debt he now owed to military leaders.

Lunev goes on to say that:

The reason that the Commander-in-Chief of the Russian Armed Forces refused to sign the document for so long is that this Russian military doctrine is more aggressive than any existing military doctrines. In fact, it far exceeds the aggressiveness of the analogous document which existed in the former Soviet Union in the last years of its existence. In particular, while repeating the general positions of its Soviet predecessor, Russian military doctrine foresees the possibility of the Russian army using a nuclear first strike against any country which has such weapons, even if the enemy uses only conventional weapons… This document also had a diplomatic function which included putting pressure, not only on Ukraine, but also on other former republics of the USSR which had refused to heed Moscow’s cries and were trying to build their own states independently of the opinions and intentions of the Kremlin leadership. Thus the military doctrine was directed toward creating and securing Russia’s dominant influence within the bounds of the former USSR, while assigning the other former republics the role of obedient younger brother. The authors of 1993 doctrine passed
over the question of Russia’s probable enemy in silence, implying the possibility of carrying on military operations in the future against all potential enemies, from the ‘near’ and ‘far’ abroad alike.\textsuperscript{24}

As far as the Caucasus is concerned, Elizabeth Fuller has called the period from independence until early 1993 a period of picking up the pieces. That is, a period of limiting the damage caused by the dissolution of the Soviet Union, in practice by embracing the one country that was willing to remain within a Russian sphere of influence: Armenia. Fuller then identifies a second phase, accordingly corresponding roughly to 1993, of aggressive reintegration—in practice compelling Azerbaijan and Georgia to join the CIS, the details of which will be discussed below. Finally, Fuller, writing in the summer of 1996, terms the period 1994 to the time of writing a period of consolidation of the influence acquired in 1993.\textsuperscript{25} While this analysis was certainly correct at the time of writing and shed light on the matter, it seems appropriate in retrospect to limit the period of consolidation to ranging from early 1994 until the middle of 1996, and the period from August 1996 to the present a gradual retreat. Russian interests in the region can be summarized as follows.

The South Caucasus forms a buffer zone between the Russian North Caucasus and the Islamic World to its South; in particular, the region is adjacent to Turkey and Iran, two states whose influence Russia sees as challenging to its own role. Among these two states, the Atlanticist view saw Turkey as a lesser evil compared with the spectre of radical Islam emanating from Iran. The later dominant conservative view nevertheless correctly noted that Iran’s ambitions were limited and in fact commensurate with Russia’s insofar as both states viewed it as a priority to prevent the rise of Turkish influence. The conservative forces in Russia see Turkey as a much larger threat than Iran for two main reasons: first, Turkey in 1992 immediately capitalized on its linguistic and ethnic ties with the Turkic peoples of Central Asia and the Caucasus to boost its influence in the region at Russia’s expense; and second, Turkey has a large and increasingly powerful military, which remains unchecked by political forces.

As mentioned in chapter seven, Turkey considers itself to have one of the strongest conventional military capabilities in the world, and seems to think that these capabilities can outweigh Russia’s in the regional context. Furthermore, the South Caucasus is a region where Russia, as Fuller notes, feels vulnerable.\textsuperscript{26} The region borders Russia’s unruly North Caucasus and the Caucasian states, as well as foreign powers, can have a destabilizing influence on this volatile part of Russia. Moreover, the South Caucasus is either the bridge or barrier for Russia’s relations with the Middle East. Under Russian influence, the region would enable Russian relations with the Middle East; under the influence of other states, it would prevent it. The South Caucasus is also a zone of important economic interests: the oil of Azerbaijan and the possibility of the Caucasus transporting Central Asian oil westwards add to the geopolitical and geoeconomic importance of the region. However the politics of oil go beyond this. As will be seen in chapter ten, the
South Caucasus is the crucial Western conduit to Central Asia. If controlled by Russia, it enables Moscow to control the amount of Western influence in the geopolitically crucial region between Russia and the volatile Afghanistan and Pakistan, the rising China, and the luring India. In the opposite case, Russia could be exposed to security threats such as political Islam: Russian analysts have warned that the Islamic movement that spread from Afghanistan to Tajikistan in the 1980s and early 1990s might—unless checked—spread into the Muslim regions of Russia. The spectre of political Islam rising in Tatarstan, 500 kilometres from Moscow, has been painted as an example of this threat despite the very dubious prospects of such a development, to say the least. Nevertheless, it is the perception and not the reality that guides policy, and the Russian fear of political Islam as the future threat from both within and without is well documented, increasing further the depiction of the South Caucasus as a crucial area to be maintained under Russian control.

The climax: the subduing of the Transcaucasus & the war in Chechnya

In the middle of 1993—that is, barely a year after the beginning of the policy shift—the assertive policy in the South Caucasus based on the motivations summarized above seemed to pay off. It is useful to remember at this point that the Russian policy towards the Caucasus was by no means unified at this stage. Not only did different power centres have different opinions on the priorities of Russian foreign policy, they also actively pursued the policies they deemed appropriate. For example, Fuller notes that ‘the Russian foreign ministry, the Defence ministry, and the Duma, had separate agendas in Georgia with regard to the Abkhaz conflict, and…the Russian Foreign Ministry and the energy lobby had, and still have, diverging agendas with regard to the Caspian.’27

As a result of the patterns of intervention that are analyzed in further detail below, the conservative forces in Russia during the course of 1993 were successful in bringing Azerbaijan and Georgia ‘into the fold’; both states reluctantly entered the CIS in the fall of 1993. Faced with the alternative of disintegration, Georgia was forced to accept Russian border guards on its Turkish border, whereas Azerbaijan staunchly refused any Russian military presence on its territory, despite its resounding defeat in the Karabakh war. Russian control in the Caucasus was on the verge of being re-established; Azerbaijan’s stance needed to be altered, but the country was brought under a semblance of Russian control; Surat Huseinov, an ally of Russia’s, was its prime minister. Only one element of irritation—and a sizable one—was left: the Chechens in the North Caucasus with their erratic and virulently anti-Russian leader, Johar Dudayev. With the other independent-minded republic within Russia—Tatarstan—brought under control by a treaty on the devolution of power (which has been considered unfavourable to the Tatars)28 in February 1994, Moscow could now concentrate on Chechnya. It is no coincidence that the situation in Chechnya turned for the worse starting with
the spring and summer of 1994. The only problem was that Chechnya could not be manipulated by Russian subversion as had been achieved in Georgia and Azerbaijan; the Chechen opposition was unsuccessful in toppling Dudayev.

As he went to the Budapest summit of the CSCE in early December 1994, Yeltsin’s rhetoric and policy had changed considerably: Yeltsin now spoke of the risk of a ‘cold peace’ developing between Russia and the West. Only days later, the Russian army entered Chechnya. This clear and discernible pattern of a gradual increase in the influence of conservative powers over Russian foreign policy-making did not stop here, however. Russia in the course of the 1995 increased its criticism of NATO expansion and developed its relations with Iran and Iraq considerably, in spite of loud American protests. In November 1995, Defence Minister Grachev made public that Russia would not abide by the accord on Conventional Forces in Europe limiting the level of armaments in the Caucasian military district. Moreover, Yeltsin announced that Russia desired the stationing of Russian border troops along all external borders of the CIS. As Yeltsin, despite this change of policy faced a defeat in the parliamentary elections of December 1995, he resolved to sack the near-entirety of the reformist and pro-Western members of his cabinet, appointing in place of Kozyrev the Middle East expert Yevgeniy Primakov, a known friend of the Iraqi regime.

Patterns of intervention

At the beginning of 1993, Russian prospects in the Caucasus were gloomy. Neither Georgia nor Azerbaijan were members of the CIS; Georgia had never been part of the organization, and Azerbaijan had withdrawn under Elchibey’s anti-Russian policies. Both countries were trying to escape Russian influence; Georgia had difficulties finding a sponsor abroad, its courtship of the West not having paid off. Azerbaijan, however, was actively appealing to Turkey—not without response. To the north, Chechnya was ruled by Johar Dudayev, withstanding virtually all covert attempts by Russia to overthrow his regime and de facto independent. To trace back a date when Russia’s territorial control southward had been weaker, one needs to go back to the late eighteenth century; Russia desperately was clinging on to the military bases it kept in Armenia and Moldova. But one circumstance offered a possibility to alter this state of affairs: the ethnopolitical conflicts on the territory of Georgia and Azerbaijan. In fact, a clear pattern of Russian intervention into the affairs of the NIS can be observed, in particular in the cases of armed conflict on their territory. Stephen Shenfield has summarized Russian policy as follows:

Russia first helps the side it favours up to the point at which a politicomilitary result that it considers satisfactory has been achieved. It then shifts to the role of an impartial peacekeeper, prepared to use force even against those maverick extremist elements of the previously favoured side.
who are determined to fight for a result better than the one secured for them by Moscow.\textsuperscript{34}

Russian responses to the evidence presented of heavy weapons suddenly coming into the hands of rebels in Georgia, Moldova, or elsewhere have always received the same answer: these weapons were stolen from Russian arms depots. In this context Hill and Jewett’s conclusion is worthy of mention:

If it is true, then Russian weapons must be the most poorly guarded in the world and Russian troops must be easily intimidated by local militias. Even within its own borders the Russian army seems incapable of holding on to its equipment.\textsuperscript{35}

Naturally one factor has been that Russian troops at all levels in the peripheries of the former Soviet Union have been making a fortune out of selling their regiments’ arms to the highest bidder; there are even reports of whole units serving as mercenaries in these local wars. But it is certain that such events could not have happened to the extent they did had it not been for a benevolent attitude to the practice from above. Few if any reports have leaked to the press of Russian soldiers or officers being prosecuted—much less convicted—for selling weaponry, otherwise a serious crime in any organized army. Studying the Russian role in Caucasian conflicts to which it is not a party, the most illuminating case is the one of Georgia and the conflicts in South Ossetia and Abkhazia. Hence these are analyzed first; thereafter the cases of Nagorno-Karabakh and Caspian oil are viewed.

Georgia: from confusion to assertiveness

As described in chapter four, Georgia was one of the most independent-minded republics in the Soviet Union. It declared independence already in April 1991, long before the bulk of Soviet republics that did so in the aftermath of the August coup of that year. As the CIS was being created, Georgia showed no sign of wishing to participate in any Russian-led commonwealth, terming it as nothing but a revived Soviet empire. Instead, the consecutive Georgian leaderships of Gamsakhurdia and Shevardnadze showed one common denominator: demanding the withdrawal of Russian military forces from Georgian territory. However, Russia was adamantly resisting withdrawal. From a strategic perspective, Georgia had two characteristics which made it irreplaceable to Moscow: its border with Turkey and its location on the Black Sea. As noted earlier, Russia has been more worried of Turkish than Iranian influence in the Caucasus, and perceives Turkey as a threat to its dominant position—a threat in both the political, economical and military fields. With Armenia never questioning the Russian border troops on its Turkish border, Russia’s focus on controlling the feared Turkish influence was the Georgian border.
With regard to the Black Sea, Ukraine’s independence and resolute claims to the Crimean peninsula severely limited Russia’s coastline on the Black Sea—one of its three points of access to warm-water seas, the other two being the Baltic (where the independence of the three Baltic states also formed a strategic setback), and the Arctic Ocean at Murmansk. In 1989, Moscow could in practice access the Black Sea from the Bulgarian-Turkish border to the Georgian-Turkish one; in other words Moscow controlled the western, northern, and eastern coasts of the Black Sea. Barely two years later, this access had shrunk dramatically to a little more than 300 kilometres, stretching from the Sea of Azov to the Georgian-Russian border. This shows the need to preserve military control over the Georgian coastline. Naturally, the build-up of the Turkish navy which today in practice controls the Black Sea contributed to Moscow’s worries.

Georgian officials nevertheless pursued their demands, and in February 1993 managed to clinch a deal whereby Russian troops would withdraw from the Turkish border by 1994, and from Georgia totally by 1995. The same month, Grachev stated that this deal would lead to loss of Russian control over the Black Sea and that ‘every measure to ensure that our troops remain there should be taken,’ As David Satter has concluded:

The breakup of the Soviet Union deprived Russia of deep water harbors on the Black Sea coast. Such ports, however, existed in Georgia. In the summer of 1992, Abkhazia, the northwest corner of Georgia, was visited by Russian defence and intelligence officials. A short time later, the Abkhazians declared their independence. When Georgian troops tried to crush the revolt, they were defeated by an ‘Abkhazian’ army which appeared out of nowhere and whose ranks were filled with mercenaries recruited by Russian intelligence. This army soon controlled almost all of Western Georgia. Facing military defeat, the Georgian government agreed to lease its Black Sea ports to Russia. In the meantime, the Abkhazians engaged in ‘ethnic cleansing’, leaving the Abkhazians as the largest group in the republic. Today, the Russian Coast Guard patrols Georgian waters. There are Russian ‘peacekeepers’ stationed between Georgia and Abkhazia who have taken few steps either to repatriate Georgian refugees or to help end the conflict. There are also 15,000 Russian troops stationed at military bases in Georgia and Russian border guards patrol Georgia’s southern border with Turkey. The Georgians resent the Russian presence but the Russians are blind to their wishes. ‘They don’t respect our interests because they don’t feel we are a sovereign state,’ as Alex Rondeli, an analyst in the Georgian Foreign Ministry, put it…recently.

The Russian intervention in the two ethnopolitical conflicts on Georgian territory is noteworthy, and points also to the confused and reactive policymaking in Moscow. Interestingly, however, Russia’s first involvement was in the overthrow of Gamsakhurdia by the paramilitary forces loyal to Tengiz Sigua,
Tengiz Kitovani and Jaba Ioseliani in December 1991; the weapons with which these paramilitary forces overthrew Gamsakhurdia and turned the centre of Tbilisi into a war zone can, it seems, not have come from anywhere else than the then Soviet military bases under Moscow’s jurisdiction. An investigation by *Moscow News* cites Sufyan Beppayev—the Balkar then deputy head of the Transcaucasian military district mentioned in chapter six—as admitting to having sent a detachment of several dozen soldiers to help Kitovani seize the Tbilisi Television tower.

In the case of South Ossetia, the patterns of intervention were rather less blatant. As mentioned in chapter four, Georgians often cite Russia to explain the escalation of both conflicts, and claim that Russian troops fought on the side of the Ossetians throughout the war; nevertheless such claims have remained unsubstantiated. The conflict in fact developed during 1991 and early 1992, that is before the Russian policy shift. However it is interesting to observe that increased Russian involvement came with the upsurge in fighting in May-June 1992. At this point, hardline figures such as Supreme Soviet chairman Ruslan Khasbulatov and vice-president Aleksandr Rutskoi spoke in a manner which implied a recognition of South Ossetia’s annexation to Russia. Khasbulatov, obviously referring to South Ossetia, stated that ‘Russia is prepared to take urgent measure to defend its citizens from criminal attempts on their lives’— thereby implying that South Ossetians are Russian citizens; moreover he was reported to have threatened Shevardnadze with war over South Ossetia, mentioning even a possible bombing of Tbilisi. Khasbulatov on another occasion said that unless Georgia complied with Russian demands, Russia might find itself ‘forced’ to annex South Ossetia. The solution to the conflict came in July, only shortly after the June events.

Although the effect of Russian threats on Georgia’s decision to sue for peace has not been determined, it is difficult to think that it had none at all. Indeed, the peace agreement signed within three weeks of Khasbulatov’s statements implied significant concessions for Georgia. In practice, it meant the loss of South Ossetia and its de facto independence, made permanent through the deployment of a Russian-led peacekeeping force along the South Ossetian-Georgian border. Russian troops were hence posted in what Georgians consider the heart of Georgia, only hours away from Tbilisi. Russian intervention in South Ossetia may not have been overt and physical, but was nevertheless very effective in achieving its aim: the weakening of Georgia and the interposition of Russian troops in South Ossetia. Ever since, South Ossetia has remained outside the Georgian government’s control. Furthermore, a complete picture of events needs to take into account the consequences Georgian non-compliance with Russia’s demands would have led to. Even if Russia’s threat of direct military action would not have materialized, other forces on Russian territory would certainly have intervened: the North Caucasian volunteer battalion was ready for action, as well as perhaps North Ossetian units—reports in June 1992 show clearly the level of North Ossetian disappointment with Moscow’s actions. In the aftermath of
the conflict, Russia pressed on Georgia to ‘resolve’ the question of South Ossetia, and to pay for two thirds of South Ossetia’s reconstruction for Moscow to ease the economic sanctions that it had imposed on Georgia.\(^{45}\)

Whereas Russia refrained to a large extent from direct intervention in South Ossetia, it soon became clear that Russia’s aims in Georgia were not achieved despite the weakening of the country that the civil war in December 1991 and the loss that South Ossetia amounted to. Georgia still obstinately refused to enter the CIS and continued to demand the withdrawal of Russian troops. Hence with South Ossetia pacified by July 1992, it did not take long until another conflict started brewing, that in Abkhazia. Russian policy with regard to Abkhazia is confusing, pointing to a clear dichotomy between different power centres in Russia. Most observers contend that President Yeltsin was caught unprepared by the conflict and even made an abortive attempt in September 1992 to negotiate a ceasefire.\(^{46}\) Moreover, Russia did not actively start the conflict in Abkhazia, as many Georgians claim; the direct reason was the armed attack of Kitovani and his followers on Abkhazia. However, questions may be asked regarding the factual declaration of independence—reintroducing the Abkhaz constitution of 1925 which describe Abkhazia as a sovereign state—issued by the Abkhaz leadership on 23 July 1992. Admittedly, too much legal importance should not be accorded to this declaration, which was rather anachronistic: it defines Abkhazia as a Soviet Socialist Republic which is in a treaty relationship with the Georgian SSR and a part of the Transcaucasian Soviet Federative Socialist Republic, a member of the USSR. The legal implications of such a declaration is thus relatively doubtful, to say the least. Nevertheless, it was understood in Georgia as a declaration of independence; and it was certainly meant to be a distancing of Abkhazia from Georgian sovereignty.

In mid June, the situation had shown signs of stabilizing with Georgian pressure on Abkhazia; a joint inter-ethnic guard was even formed to keep order in the republic.\(^{47}\) By early July, however, reports were beginning to surface showing the possibility of Abkhazia declaring its independence.\(^{48}\) The question, then, is what prompted the declaration at that particular time. Some authors have pointed to the existence of a ‘collusion’ between the Gamsakhurdia regime and the Abkhazian leadership.\(^{49}\) There is indeed circumstantial evidence pointing to such a collusion: during 1991, Abkhazia was basically quiet while South Ossetia was in flames; given Gamsakhurdia’s ethnic policies it would have been logical for him to be interested in subduing Abkhazia as well as South Ossetia; moreover, in January 1992 Gamsakhurdia came back to Georgia on a plane from Grozny to Sukhumi;\(^{50}\) and in the fall of 1993, the timing of Gamsakhurdia’s rebellion in Mingrelia indeed pointed to a tacit arrangement, if not co-operation, with the Abkhaz. When on 17 September, Gamsakhurdia called on Mingrelians to take up arms against the authorities, he indeed spoke on Gudauta television controlled by the Abkhaz rebels.\(^{51}\)

In any case it seems difficult to imagine that Abkhazia would not have been intimidated by the violence in South Ossetia; while declaring independence, its
leaders must certainly have been aware of the possibility of armed actions from the side of Georgian paramilitary forces; the conflict in South Ossetia erupted precisely due to a similar declaration of sovereignty. Alternatively, Vladislav Ardzinba and his followers may have considered that the Ossetian accords meant that Russian control over Georgia was established and that as a result Georgia would not be able to respond militarily if Abkhazia seceded.

The conflict began for real in mid August, with Kitovani’s incursion into Abkhazia, ostensibly in the search for a government minister abducted by Zviadist forces. On 14 August, just as the Georgian military operation was in its initial phase, Ardzinba stated that ‘I must say that the world knows in which situation Abkhazia has been placed… We are assured of its moral and material assistance… I am convinced that we have the appropriate support.’ Almost immediately, North Caucasian volunteers started organizing and were in Abkhazia within weeks. This despite the fact that the Abkhaz-Russian border was supposedly under the control of the Russian military. Meanwhile, Georgian troops which had advanced beyond Sukhumi overran Russian army weapon depots, leading to the Russian Defence Ministry sanctioning the use of force and permitting troops in Abkhazia to ‘shoot without warning’. However, Yeltsin invited Shevardnadze and Ardzinba to Moscow to solve the conflict peacefully.

Many analysts see Yeltsin’s intervention in early September as a genuine attempt to make peace in a region of vital Russian interests but where Yeltsin personally at this time had no imperial ambitions. As one analyst notes, however, ‘Yeltsin’s parliamentary opponents had no intention of allowing Yeltsin to prescribe Russia’s policy in the ‘near abroad’—least of all at a time when the Russian constitution still contained Soviet provisions that vested ultimate authority for foreign and security policy in the Supreme Soviet.’ By late September, indeed, the Supreme Soviet of Russia intervened more closely into the conflict, and issued harsh condemnation of Georgia, asking Yeltsin to stop the transfer of Soviet weaponry on Georgian territory to the Georgian government. Shevardnadze soon realized that Yeltsin was rapidly ‘tilting’ in a pro-Abkhaz way. As Evgeni Kozhokin, the head of Russia’s Strategic Studies Institute notes:

Moscow was clearly held responsible for what was accurately described as a purposeful and purposefully one-sided military intervention on behalf of Abkhazian separation. Thus, the Georgian government minced no words in blaming Moscow when Russian planes bombed Sukhumi in February 1993, or when a Russian army unit participated in an Abkhazian attack on Sukhumi a month later.

As they were able to assert their influence in Moscow, the interests within the Russian military that supported the Abkhaz actively were evidently endorsed tacitly—in any case not opposed—by the Yeltsin government. Simultaneously, the Transcaucasian military district continued allocating weapons to Georgia. In the words of Alexei Zverev:
Incredible as it may seem (although it was in line with a consistent Russian policy of supplying both sides in a conflict), at a time when Russian-supplied warplanes were bombing Georgian-held Sukhumi, other Russian units continued to supply the Georgian Army.\textsuperscript{57}

The Georgian attack of August can very much be seen in relation to this Russian policy. In the summer of 1992, Georgia had received relatively large amounts of arms from withdrawing Russian troops, while the Abkhaz at this point had very little equipment.\textsuperscript{58} Naturally, this situation was very soon reversed. The first Georgian accusations came in early October. Shevardnadze blamed Russia for intervening in the war, claiming that ‘a wide range conspiracy against Georgia is being played out. The enemies of Georgia have brought into play their most powerful reserves, the reactionary circles of Russia.’ This statement was prompted directly by the shooting down of a Georgian helicopter by a heat-seeking missile, which the Abkhaz scarcely had access to. But more deeply, the Abkhaz forces had recently carried out a successful offensive on Gagra in Northern Abkhazia, with equipment such as ‘large battle tanks and other modern armour that the Abkhazians could have acquired only from the Russian arsenal.’\textsuperscript{59} According to Georgia’s vice-premier Alexander Kavsadze, Russian forces had also prevented the Georgian forces from transporting heavy equipment to the battlefield by preventing transport planes from taking off.\textsuperscript{60}

In early 1993, Grachev made a surprise visit to Ajaria, commenting that Ajaria fell within the sphere of influence of Russia; Grachev is also reported to have said that if Shevardnadze wanted to see him, he would have to come to Batumi—a visiting defence minister addressing the host country’s president in this manner in naturally a violation of all diplomatic protocol.\textsuperscript{61} During the Abkhaz offensive on Sukhumi, the Georgian forces claimed to have observed thirty T-72 and T-80 tanks as well as artillery units under the command of Russian officers in the offensive. And while an unidentified submarine surfaced briefly outside Sukhumi, Russian news agencies reported that Sukhoi-25 fighters were bombing Sukhumi.\textsuperscript{62} Shevardnadze claimed that the 128th Motorized Rifle Regiment, stationed in Gyumri (Armenia) had been assisting Abkhazian forces.\textsuperscript{63} While this was denied by Russian defence ministry sources, the raid on Sukhumi is another matter. Grachev first adamantly denied any Russian involvement; rather, he accused Georgia of terror-bombing its own citizens in order to lay the blame on Russia, claiming that ‘a real war is waged in Georgia by the government against its own people.’\textsuperscript{64} Nevertheless another defence ministry spokesman soon stated that the raid had been aimed at military targets in retaliation for Georgian shelling of a Russian unit the previous day.\textsuperscript{65} Thomas Goltz was present in Sukhumi on the occasion, and his account of the events show that the target of the bombing had been very much civilian, pulverizing a residential house in Sukhumi.\textsuperscript{66} On 19 March, the Russian leadership was put in a rather embarrassing position. This time, Georgian forces actually managed to shoot down an Su-27 fighter—that is a more advanced plane than the Su-25—whose pilot was identified as a major in
the Russian air force. While Grachev—true to his habit—claimed that the Georgians were bombing themselves and that the plane was a Su–25 painted with Russian markings, UN observers identified the plane as a Su–27, which Georgia does not possess, as well as the deceased pilot as Major Vazlav A.Shipko of the Russian air force.67

This blatant exposure of Russia’s actions further worsened the already tense relations between the two countries. In early April, two Russian Su–25s were observed again raiding Sukhumi, and Russian sources claimed to respond to Georgian attacks on the Russian seismic research centre at Eshera, Abkhazia—thus acknowledging its involvement.68 Meanwhile, in Moscow, Yeltsin was turning increasingly silent on the conflict, in practice allowing the defence ministry to control Russian policy towards Georgia. This was exemplified as Grachev took over the leading role from Yeltsin in the Georgian–Russian talks over Abkhazia which were going on. In an attempt to counter-balance this, Shevardnadze flew to Ukraine and tried to enlist Kiev’s support by asserting that ‘Ukraine understands fully well this third force is interested in destabilizing not only Georgia.’69 Following these events, Russia’s attitude became more outspoken. As the UN became increasingly involved in trying to achieve a ceasefire, Kozyrev bluntly announced that Russia was not interested in UN involvement but desired to pursue its own efforts at mediation.70

In early July, the Abkhaz intensified their military operations on the entire territory of Abkhazia. Within a short while, the Georgian-controlled territory shrank to Sukhumi and the southwestern part of the republic including the strategically crucial road to Ochamchira and the Georgian mainland. At this point, the strength of the Abkhaz forces was remarkable, and the Georgian government asserted that units from the Russian 14th army stationed in Transdniestria, perhaps as many as 2000 troops, had been flown into Abkhazia.71 As Shevardnadze personally took the lead of the defence of Sukhumi, he narrowly escaped death from an Abkhaz artillery shell.72 The spectacular advances by the Abkhaz, who surrounded Sukhumi within days, indeed point to some level of external support: Abkhaz forces indeed used smaller naval vessels to land forces on Sukhumi, despite the fact that until then, they had mainly been using fishing vessels for such purposes.73

Meanwhile, Russia cut Georgia’s international telephone connections, ostensibly over non-payment of bills.74 However, a Georgian counter-offensive was successful in preventing the Abkhaz from seizing Sukhumi, and a ceasefire was negotiated in the end of July. The Russian-sponsored ceasefire provided for the withdrawal of both sides’ forces from the conflict area and the creation of a ‘legal government’ in Abkhazia. As Georgian forces were withdrawn by sea, although slower than provided for by the agreement, the Abkhaz handed some of their arms to the Russian forces in the region. In mid September, however, the Abkhaz suddenly took to the offensive, obviously having access to large amounts of arms that were supposed to be kept by the Russian forces in the region; by 26 September, the Abkhaz had entered Sukhumi and soon forced Shevardnadze to
flee by air, with an Abkhaz gunboat firing on the aircraft taking him and wounded soldiers out of the city. Shevardnadze and other Georgian officials bluntly commented that the Abkhaz advance on Sukhumi had been ordered by the Russian military headquarters, which had also ordered the Russian troops in Abkhazia to participate in the operation. Speaking to the Western media, Shevardnadze stated that ‘nobody should doubt that the mentality and reflexes of Russian imperialism are not dead.’

Russia’s contention is that it did not intervene in the fighting between the parties. Despite the fact that such statements are incorrect—given Russian support for the Abkhaz forces—it is also a fact that with 18,000 troops in Georgia at the time, Russia could easily have safeguarded the July ceasefire’s implementation—especially given that most of Georgia’s weaponry had been moved to Poti, the Abkhaz’ arms were in the hands of the Russian army, and that both sides were, to say the least, rather disorganized. The ceasefire was allowed to collapse because the Russian military leadership, which was supposed to ensure it, found that a further weakening of Georgia was in its interests—it was at that point not at all certain that Georgia would enter the CIS or allow Russian military bases.

After the loss of Abkhazia, the rebellion led by Gamsakhurdia in western Georgia gathered momentum, and posed a serious threat to the Shevardnadze regime’s continued existence. At this point, Shevardnadze was forced to comply and asked Russia for support to quell the rebellion, promising to enter the CIS and allow Russian bases in Georgia. However, such concessions had already been made during the battle for Sukhumi. As the request was answered by Russian military aid in late October and November which eventually suppressed the rebellion just as it was approaching Kutaisi, this begs the question why Shevardnadze’s plea for help was granted now but not earlier. The answer to this question is best explained by Hill and Jewett:

A lasting peace in Shevardnadze’s Georgia was not in Russia’s interest. Russia needed to ensure its continued presence on the Georgian Black Sea Coast. When Moscow’s economic blockade and its refusal to withdraw its troops failed to achieve these ends, Russia provided Abkhazia with enough firepower to force Shevardnadze to turn to Moscow for assistance… Russia ultimately assisted Georgia, not out of sympathy for Shevardnadze, or for a desire for peace, but because it had exacted the necessary concessions from Georgia and the victory of Gamsakhurdia would have meant another anti-Russian government in the republic. By propping up Shevardnadze, Russia has essentially produced a compliant government in the most anti-Russian region of the former Soviet Union.

The conclusions to be drawn regarding Russian involvement in the conflict in Abkhazia seem quite straightforward. At the outset of the conflict in August 1992, there was a dichotomy of policy: Yeltsin’s government was still under the partial influence of the liberal forces, which were interested in achieving a speedy
resolution to the conflict, and as it seems not particularly interested in using it for Russia’s imperial ambitions. However, from the start, the ‘party of war’ advocated another policy—but also implemented this independent policy: to support the Abkhaz forces with increasing intensity until the aim of weakening Georgia to a degree deemed appropriate was achieved. As these conservative forces in Moscow gradually increased their influence over policy-making, Yeltsin gradually lowered his profile in the issue, even empowering the defence ministry with the mediation. The policy hence indicates the initial confusion of Russian policy, but also to the increased grip on policy that the conservative forces secured during the course of 1993. From the evidence presented above, there seems to be no way of repudiating Russia’s interference in Georgia’s internal affairs. The degree of intervention may be the subject of discussion, as may the nature of the players in Moscow who perpetrated the intervention. Nevertheless, evidence presented shows that the assertion by some Russian sources that the Kremlin was uninformed of any intervention of Russian troops hardly stands a closer analysis. The flow of events follows a distinct pattern, in which the highest levels of the Russian military are involved; it is inconceivable that they were not aware of the policy. Moreover given the statements and actions of Grachev and other defence ministry officials, as well as the uniformity of the events, it does not seem illogical to assume that the actions of Russian forces in Georgia were orchestrated from very high levels of the Russian military hierarchy.

Regarding Georgian assertions that Russia was involved in the two assassination attempts on Shevardnadze in August 1995 and February 1998, however, the evidence remains elusive. According to the official investigation of the events, no direct proof of Russian involvement has been substantiated. In the 1995 case, the prime suspect is Igor Giorgadze, a former security chief whose father heads Georgia’s pro-Russian Communist party. Giorgadze fled to Russia after the failed 1995 assassination attempt. The very fact that Giorgadze is openly politically active in Russia points to Russia’s attitudes, given the fact that Giorgadze is wanted for high treason in Georgia. As for the 1998 attempt, investigations have established that the perpetrators had been trained at a camp in Chechnya for seven months; Georgian authorities have arrested five Chechens and 12 to 13 Georgians. Head investigator Agulashvili contended the Russian security service cannot but have known about the preparations, and concluded that ‘if Russian special services have not promoted the attempt on Shevardnadze’s life, they have not impeded it either.’

Since 1993, things have changed. Shevardnadze has actually transformed Georgia from near-total chaos to a country that—despite serious problems—has made substantial advances, especially in terms of economic development, political stabilization, and in terms of its international standing. Although Shevardnadze’s regime has remained fearful of Russia, it has by no means continued to be a compliant regime in the terms of Hill and Jewett. In line with its increasingly stable international status, Georgia has moved to widen its international relations considerably beyond the dependence on Russia that it had in 1993–94.
Shevardnadze’s rhetoric against Russia has increased with every assassination attempt against him, which he is convinced forces in Moscow have orchestrated; Georgia has continued its policy of preventing the CIS from becoming a Russian-led tool of supranational reintegration of the states of the former Soviet Union. Georgia is actively co-operating with Turkey and the GUUAM group in opposition to Russian interests, sides with the west in the planned deployment of oil pipelines, and cultivates its relationship with NATO. In mid-1999, the agreement enabling Russian border guards to guard the Turkish-Georgian border expires; while Tbilisi shows no inclination whatsoever to extend it, it is aware of the possibility of Russia ‘leaving behind problems’ when it leaves the border guarding; this is especially true as concerns Ajaria and Javakheti. The Georgian leadership has acknowledged these difficulties, and seems poised to let local Ajarian or Armenian population take part in the border troops, which would nonetheless remain under central control.80

Problems between Georgia and Russia seem poised to remain for the foreseeable future. While Russia has in no way stepped back from its intention of keeping Georgia under its control, it has only been able to achieve this in part. While it does have military installations in Georgia and exerts a considerable influence by its often implied capacity to stir up problems for the Georgian central government in Javakheti and Ajaria, it has not been able to prevent either an increasingly pro-Western orientation on the part of the Georgian authorities or the equally increasing anti-Russian rhetoric of the Georgian leadership.

Azerbaijan & Armenia: subtle but effective

During the late Soviet era, in particular 1990 and 1991, the Kremlin was relatively openly siding with Azerbaijan in the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict. Azerbaijan was the party which advocated the status quo, whereas Armenia embodied the revisionist forces of the union. Armenia, and Georgia were the republics of the South Caucasus that conducted independent policies; Azerbaijan remained firmly in the Soviet camp. Although the Popular Front was formed at roughly the same time as the Armenian National Movement, it did not acquire a position of power until late spring 1992, whereas Ter-Petrosyan had already assumed power in August 1990. Azerbaijan made no movement toward independence until the aftermath of the August coup 1991, in opposition to Armenia which in late 1990 had renamed itself ‘Republic of Armenia’ and asserted its continuity with the Armenian Democratic Republic of 1918–20. Armenia boycotted the March referendum on the preservation of the Soviet Union and resolutely moved toward secession. With independence, Armenian leaders initially distanced themselves from Russia, and hoped for a rapprochement with Turkey. However, as the difficulties in the Turkish-Armenian relationship became apparent (see chapter seven), Armenia was made abruptly aware of its geopolitical situation. As Nikolay Hovhannisyan notes:
the Armenian leadership began to understand that further change for the worse of the relations with Russia and the preservation of tension between the two countries is not in the interests of Armenia. The geopolitical situation of Armenia differs principally from that of Azerbaijan, as well as of Georgia. In this situation to continue to distance Armenia from Russia and to remain vis-à-vis with Turkey, who does not conceal its hostility towards us could mean great danger to the national security of Armenia. That is why at the beginning of 1992 the Armenian government adopted a new policy towards Russia. It decided to normalize its relations with Russia and to co-operate with that state in the political, economic, and if necessary, military fields.

And indeed, Armenia saw it ‘necessary’ to extend co-operation in the military field. It was even a priority issue. Armenia was the only South Caucasian state to join the CIS and its Mutual Security Pact willingly, which it did on 16 May 1992. If the assertion made in an earlier chapter that ‘there are no coincidences in the Caucasus’ is to be trusted, the fact that the Armenian offensive on Lachin and Shusha took place on 17 May is interesting, to say the least. Four days later, an agreement was signed regarding the continued stationing of Russian troops in Armenia.81 In Azerbaijan, the pro-Soviet Mutalibov regime had pursued a pro-Russian policy very much to the dismay of the people—public opinion having turned increasingly anti-Russian after the January 1990 military intervention—and was deposed in the aftermath of the Khojaly massacre of February 1992. Mutalibov was blamed for the military setbacks, deemed to have deliberately stalled the creation of a national army.82 However, the Azeri political situation only stabilized in June, with the Popular Front asserting power through the election of Abulfaz Elchibey as president. This meant a serious worsening of relations with Russia, which together with Iran vehemently opposed Elchibey’s pro-Turkish policies.

From mid 1992, coinciding with the policy shift in Moscow, Russian relations with Yerevan have deepened considerably whereas its ties to Baku have gone from bad to worse, with occasional thaws. Regarding actual intervention in the war, both sides have claimed Russian troops aided the other, both by providing weapons and by supplying army units and soldiers. Overwhelming evidence exists of the participation of Russian individuals as mercenaries on both sides in the war, as well as representatives from other countries—especially Afghan mujahedin in the case of Azerbaijan. Although such instances in no way directly implicate the Russian government, the fact that many of them were regular soldiers—or even whole units—of the Russian 4th and 7th armies, based in Azerbaijan and Armenia respectively. (The rank and file of the 7th army is thought to be composed of between 60 and 80 per cent local Armenians; the figure for the officer corps is 20–30 per cent.83 the Azeri component of the 4th army is nevertheless comparatively low.) The case of the 366th motorized rifle regiment based in Stepanakert provides an example. As noted in chapter three, both Azerbaijani and independent
sources assert that entire formations from the 366th regiment supported the Armenian war effort in February 1992, notably during the Khojaly massacre, only to be retracted the next month. However, when being pulled out of Karabakh, large parts of the regiment, having a significant ethnic Armenian component, joined forces with the emerging Karabakh Armenian army.84

Identifying direct evidence of Russian involvement is difficult. The condition of the military was such that isolated Russian soldiers on active duty may very well have joined either side for profit. Perhaps pushing the argument a little, one might imagine entire smaller units doing so, but it is difficult to imagine this happening without the knowledge of the superior officers; and again, there are few reports of soldiers being prosecuted for selling their weapons or defecting. While investigating Russian intervention, the words of Thomas Goltz are apt: ‘Finding a smoking gun is difficult, though there are bullet cases lying all around.’ Indeed, eye-witnesses from Khojaly, as well as Azeris and Turkmens having served in the 366th regiment en masse testified to the identity of some of their assailants: Russian and Armenian officers and soldiers of the 366th regiment.85

Goltz suggests an interesting interpretation of the Khojaly events. According to a German–Armenian photographer who had travelled with Armenian units prior to and during the events, the participation of dozens of tanks and APCs from the 366th in their attacks on Khojaly had been a welcome surprise. In other words, it was unexpected. Most civilians were nevertheless not killed and mutilated during the attack but in its aftermath, as they fled the town. Most observers, as well as Azerbaijani sources naturally assumed that the Armenians had carried out the massacre; in an example of bad taste, the Armenians contended that the Azeris had killed and mutilated their own people—much like the Georgians were said by Russia to have bombed their own people in Sukhumi.

The participation of the 366th regiment in the event nevertheless raises the question of its reasons for participating in a massacre. If either by sympathy for the Armenian side or for anger towards the Azerbaijani—the regiment was reportedly shelled by Azerbaijani artillery—large parts of the regiment joined forces with the Armenians, that seems intelligible. But why a massacre? It does not make any sense to assume that soldiers of different ethnic origins, only some of whom were Armenian, would suddenly start massacring fleeing civilians. One answer to the question, suggested by Goltz, is that other forces also had an interest in making ‘Khojaly a point of no return in the escalation of hatred between the two peoples’. This was very much the effect of the massacre; whereas Azerbaijani public opinion was not mobilized to a full extent before the massacre, it immediately became mobilized in the aftermath. The ‘evidence for this interpretation is thin but tantalizing’, as Goltz puts it. Two days after the event, Azerbaijan acquired a Russian military helicopter to fly in journalists to report the event. This helicopter was fired upon by another military helicopter, although neither the Armenians nor Azerbaijan possessed any such crafts at the time. The only plausible explanation for this is that Russian units needed to conceal their
activities on the ground and therefore needed to chase away the incoming helicopter.86

In another event, six Russian special forces soldiers (Spetsnaz) were apprehended by Azerbaijani forces in Karabakh in September 1992. Several interesting factors were revealed: Most importantly, the men were not listed as deserters in the 7th army’s headquarters in Yerevan despite the fact that they admitted having been ‘freelancing’ for close to a year. Moreover, they identified a colonel of the 366th regiment as having made regular trips to the headquarters of the 7th army in Yerevan to recruit ‘volunteers’ from among the Spetsnaz forces there. Meanwhile, there is equally ample evidence that ‘rogue’ units of the 4th Russian army in Ganja were performing similar activities on the Azerbaijani side. Several similar cases were reported during the war; in August 1993, 40 tanks driven by Russian servicemen took part in an Armenian offensive; Russia’s ambassador to Azerbaijan acknowledged this fact but insisted the Russian government bore no responsibility.87

Russian intervention is also strongly present in the political tide that brought the downfall of President Elchibey in June 1993. In fact the main character in the flow of events was Surat Huseinov, the warlord who had commanded some of Azerbaijan’s major offensives, such as the Mardakert offensive in summer 1992. Huseinov had from his base in Ganje consistently cultivated relations with the 104th airborne division, whose barracks neighboured those of his own forces. His advances on the Karabakh front were hence only partly the result of his then-reputed tactical skills and well-trained troops; in fact it had more to do with Russian materiel and Russian soldiers ‘on loan’. Huseinov’s fame was nevertheless to fall as quickly as it had risen. After Elchibey’s government refused to accede to the CIS, a series of events unfolded. Besides Karabakh, two other minorities became more vocal: the Lezgin organization Sadval (see chapter six) increased its operations, and in the south of Azerbaijan a Talysh-Mugam republic was declared in early summer.

As regards the 104th division, its help was suddenly less forthcoming. So was Huseinov’s war effort. In a disastrous move, he suddenly withdrew his forces from Mardakert in February 1993, opening the way for the Armenians to take back that region and subsequently initiate the offensive on Kelbajar. While Huseinov pulled back to his headquarters in Ganje, he was discharged from the army, but kept his private army which had never been under the institutional control of what was only in name the Azerbaijani national army. In May, the 104th division was ordered to withdraw from Ganja, an entire year ahead of schedule; it left behind much of its weapons to Huseinov’s forces.88 When in June troops loyal to Elchibey’s government tried to take control of Ganja, in order to prevent Huseinov from taking over the weaponry left behind by the 104th division, this backfired into a march on Baku by the rebellious forces under Huseinov’s command. It is obvious in retrospect that Moscow had been behind Elchibey’s downfall. Huseinov’s withdrawal from the front after Azerbaijan’s refusal to enter the CIS, and the removal of the 104th division leaving behind large amounts of
weaponry not to Azerbaijani authorities but to the warlord Huseinov speak volumes. Azerbaijan, just like Georgia, needed to be brought back into the fold.

As the army put up no resistance, Elchibey, who seemed to have learnt from Gamsakhurdia’s fate, resigned. However, before resigning, he made one move: he called on Heydar Aliyev to return to Baku and after negotiations offered him the post of parliamentary speaker, while trying to work out a power-sharing arrangement with him. As Elchibey left Baku, he had managed to prevent Huseinov from coming to power in Azerbaijan: it is widely believed that Huseinov wanted power for himself, and if not he would have supported the return of Mutalibov rather than Aliyev.89 Aliyev then moved to appoint Huseinov Prime Minister, with a portfolio increased to cover the ministries of defence and security. As Goltz notes, Russia responded immediately: literally within an hour of the appointment, Sadval was banned by Moscow, and the Talysh-Mugam republic dissolved. The symbolism was clear. However, Aliyev had not yet committed Azerbaijan to the CIS. Just as the Armenians were about to seize Jebrail on 20 August, a Russian deputy minister of foreign affairs flew to Baku with the simple aim of ‘ascertaining Azerbaijan’s position regarding the CIS.’ The Armenian offensive continued unabated, and on 5 September Aliyev flew to Moscow, and promised Azerbaijan’s application to CIS membership. He even spoke of Russian military bases in Azerbaijan, financed by the Azerbaijani government;90 On 20 September, the Azerbaijani parliament ratified the accession of Azerbaijan to the CIS. In November, Kozyrev threatened the Karabakh Armenians with retaliation if they did not stop their activities; Russia also sent 200 military ‘advisers’ to aid the Azerbaijani army. Branding tanks and helicopters it had not possessed previously, the Azerbaijani side then went on the offensive in late 1993, as discussed in chapter four.91 Russia’s policy and actions could not be clearer.

Nevertheless, Russia’s victory was far from complete. Although Heydar Aliyev brought Azerbaijan into the CIS, he developed into as staunch a defender of Azerbaijan’s independence as Elchibey had been. Despite his promises, he refused to allow Russian military on his soil—the 104th division’s withdrawal thus became permanent, although can hardly be thought to have been the original intention from the Russian side. Aliyev also continued a diversified foreign policy, and refused both to let Russia monopolize mediation in Karabakh and to allow a Russian-dominated peacekeeping force. Although Aliyev initially may have seemed to move away from Turkey, this proved to be only temporary and tactical; and in any case, Aliyev’s balanced foreign policy necessitated increased attention to other states, not only Russia but also Iran, Arab countries, and the West.

Nevertheless, this meant that Moscow soon understood that its victory had indeed been short-lived. As Moscow grew increasingly impatient with the Aliyev regime, the Azerbaijan state oil company (SOCAR) was re-negotiating the deal with a consortium of mainly Western oil companies. In spite of official Russian condemnation of the deal (see next section), the group reached an agreement establishing the Azerbaijan International Oil Consortium (AIOC) that quickly
earned the name ‘Contract of the Century’, due to its ground-breaking character and huge financial value.92 Within 24 hours of the signing of the contract, four political opponents of President Aliyev incarcerated on charges of treason, some of whom were reputed to be close to Moscow, escaped from detention. On 29 September, two high government officials (one was the deputy speaker of parliament) were murdered. Three days later, OMON forces under the command of the Javadov brothers stormed the prosecutor general’s office, triggering off a narrowly averted coup attempt93 (for details see chapter four). Aliyev managed to avert a coup through astute manipulation, dialogue with the opposition and an impeccable utilization of public support, and publicly humiliated Huseinov.

Although certain sources—notably in Russia—claim that the crisis was fabricated by Aliyev, such a theory does not seem very plausible. More likely is the suggestion that Moscow saw its control over Azerbaijan slipping away with the oil deal, and therefore provoked a crisis that would bring its ally to power. Direct evidence corroborating this version centres around the escape of Huseinov through the Russian installations in Kabała and from there to the Russian North Caucasus by helicopter.94 The fact that Huseinov was openly living in Moscow (much like Mutalibov and Giorgadze) until his extradition in March 1997 speaks for itself. As for Mutalibov, he was detained in Moscow in April 1996 after much pressure from Azerbaijan; however Russian authorities deemed the evidence provided by Azerbaijan’s prosecutor general ‘insufficient’.95 It seems plausible that Moscow is either betting on Mutalibov’s return to power or keeping his extradition as a carrot for Aliyev to make further concessions to Russia.96 Russia’s tacit support for coup-makers in Georgia and Azerbaijan is hence clear.

With regard to Georgia and Azerbaijan, a certain picture appears: during the first half of 1993, Moscow spent roughly equal amounts of energy on subduing both Georgia and Azerbaijan. With the June rebellion in Azerbaijan and the Georgian defeat in Abkhazia, both countries entered the CIS and Moscow initially thought it had achieved its aims. But Aliyev rather quickly showed his independent policies; Shevardnadze on the other hand was rather compliant in his policy towards Russia in 1993–95. Thus Moscow now concentrated on Azerbaijan, mainly due to the oil issue; however as Azerbaijan’s relations with the West increased rapidly in all fields and the country regained some stability, it soon became rather difficult to unseat Aliyev, especially after the failed attempt of 1994.

Since then, attention has focused on Georgia, besides the fact that much energy and attention was consumed by Chechnya; indeed Moscow realized that destabilizing Georgia would do very much the same effect for oil transportation as destabilizing Azerbaijan itself. Again, recalling Moscow’s sense of symbolism in apparent ‘coincidences’, the abortive rebellion of Akaki Eliava in Mingrelia in October 1998 certainly falls into this pattern as it occurred less than two weeks before the AIOC was supposed to decide on the final route of the main export pipeline of Azerbaijani oil. Whether Eliava would pose a credible threat to such a pipeline is nevertheless not certain; oil companies do not seem to think so.97 With
heavy pressure from Turkey, the US, Georgia and Azerbaijan to choose a Western pipeline to the Mediterranean port of Ceyhan, the oil companies nevertheless resisted due to the low oil prices and the repelling cost of this pipeline. Caught between politics and economy, the oil companies that were deciding on the issue may have needed a little ‘demonstration’ of the dangers a pipeline through Georgia could face. AIOC postponed its decision until the middle of 1999, more due to a wish to monitor the development of the oil price than anything else. With regard to Azerbaijan, Moscow now seems to be biding its time; with President Aliyev having celebrated his 75th birthday, Russia now seems to be waiting for the time after Heydar Aliyev’s retirement. It seems to be relatively safe to presume that not too long after this retirement, Mutalibov may try to find his way to Baku.

Caspian oil: a lost round

Regarding the exploitation of Caspian oil, there has been a basic controversy in Moscow regarding which policy to follow. The power ministries have consistently argued that Caspian oil must be exploited in condominium by all riparian states; by contrast the energy lobby, led by former prime minister Chernomyrdin has understood that such a claim is relatively futile and that Russia must enter the competition with Western companies to get its share of profits.98 Oil has definitely been one of the major issues in Russia’s policy towards the Caucasus. There are sources which assert that the downfall of Elchibey happened because he was planning to fly to London in early July to sign the AIOC contract there; irrespective of the credibility of such analyses, the role of oil in Russia’s backing of the Huseinov rebellion has been explained above. Russian policy was nevertheless dominated in 1994 by the power ministries; in May the following declaration was issued:

The Caspian Sea is an enclosed water reservoir…and represents an object of joint use within whose boundaries all issues or activities including resource development have to be resolved with the participation of all the Caspian countries. Any step by whichever Caspian state aimed at acquiring any kind of advantages with regard to the areas and resources…cannot be recognized…any unilateral actions are devoid of a legal basis.99

The dichotomy of Russian policy is clearly observable as concerns this deal. The partly state-owned Russian company LUKOil managed to get a 10 per cent share in the AIOC consortium, whereas the foreign ministry was rejecting the very validity of the deal. In 1995, Russia’s oil and energy minister expressed positive feelings for the AIOC contract; Chernomyrdin also alleviated fears that Russia would try to obstruct the contract’s implementation.100 Meanwhile, the Russian foreign ministry sent notes to Baku as well as to Almaty and Ashgabat, declaring
that Russia reserved the right to prevent unilateral moves regarding oil production.

As for the pipeline issue, Russia has vehemently advocated that the Main Export Pipeline (MEP) for Azeri oil should go from Baku through the existing pipeline system over Grozny to Novorossiysk. As noted in chapter seven, Turkey advocates a pipeline from Baku to Ceyhan, and Iran wants the pipeline to pass through Iranian territory to the Persian Gulf. Gradually, the oil companies have adopted the wise assumption that multiple pipelines are the only way to preserve stability. However, this does not solve the problem: which pipelines? It seems reasonably clear that the Baku-Novorossiysk pipeline will remain in use—it already carries so-called ‘early oil’, although large amounts of oil are lost either by criminal tapping in Chechnya and other parts of the North Caucasus, or simply through leakage. The question is whether the oil companies will invest large sums in repairing and upgrading a pipeline through the unruly North Caucasus and unpredictable Chechnya; nor do they desire to be exclusively dependent on Russia. Furthermore, they are unable at present to adopt the Iranian option despite its financial advantages, due to vehement American rejection of Iranian participation, and extraterritorial legislation from Washington has effectively translated this policy into practice.

The pipeline through Turkey has thus been actively supported by the US government as well as the Azerbaijani, Georgian, Turkish, Kazakh and Uzbek leaderships. It seems that for these states a pipeline that passes through neither Iran nor Russia gives them a lifeline to the western world and avoids a situation of dependence on these two allies. The main problem with the Turkish option is that the construction of the projected pipeline will cost between US$2.4–3.7 billion, a price the oil companies are unwilling to pay given the unstable character of oil prices and the uncertainty about how much oil there actually is in the Caspian. The Turkish and US governments have so far been unwilling to promise funding or credit for the construction of the pipeline, although Turkey is presently moving towards guaranteeing a maximum cost for the companies. Moreover, there are still several years to go until the Caspian oil production will be operating at maximum capacity—this in not to be expected until 2010—and the oil companies seem to be biding their time. In the meantime, a pipeline from Baku to the Georgian Black Sea coast began operating in mid 1999, and is capable of satisfying much of the current production. The reason why this pipeline cannot function as the MEP is partly its insufficient diameter; nevertheless even an upgraded pipeline would imply that oil tankers still have to pass the very congested Bosphorus and Dardanelles straits to carry the oil to markets, and the straits are already under heavy pressure and cannot carry the extra number of oil tankers that this would entail. For this reason, pipeline projects exist that would carry the oil from the western Black Sea coast to Europe; Russia proposes that a pipeline be built from Burgaz in Bulgaria to Alexandropolis on the Greek Aegean coast; Romania suggests that the oil can be
transported from the Romanian Black Sea coast directly to western European markets, and Ukraine has a similar proposal.

To sum up, there is a plethora of possible pipeline drawings; the important fact is nevertheless that Russia desired a monopoly over export routes, and seems set not to achieve it. None of the oil-producing states nor any of the oil companies seem willing to agree on such a solution, pushing instead the multiple pipeline solution which is already a reality though the Baku-Supsa pipeline. While the Baku-Ceyhan pipeline is likely to be selected as the ideal route but not constructed in the near future, Turkey does seem to have the winning cards on hand. Even a regime change in Iran will not change the fact that the geopolitical importance of the Caspian oil is derived not from its quantity, but from its location: it lessens the West’s dependence on the unruly Persian Gulf for its energy needs.

As concerns the legal regime of the Caspian Sea, it has been debated at great length since the issue became politicized in 1994. However the Russian position was weakened successively until mid-1998, when Moscow suddenly agreed to the delimitation of the bottom and subsoil of the Caspian Sea into national sectors, by proposing a draft treaty on the issue to Kazakhstan. Although this remains a bilateral agreement whose details need to be worked out, the fact remains that Moscow made a significant concessions on an issue which it had pushed with great energy for several years. This certainly meant a victory for the states that had advocated the sectoral delimitation, especially the state that had displayed the most defiant attitude towards Moscow: Azerbaijan. The ‘great game’ surrounding Caspian oil surely has many rounds yet to be played. But so far, Russia has lost one of the rounds played—the legal status of the Caspian—and seems to be in an disadvantageous position as regards the second: the MEP. In summary, as regards Caspian oil, Moscow turned out to be on the losing end very much due to its initial maximalistic demands. Having set out to have Caspian oil developed jointly among riparian states and exported through an exclusively Russian pipeline, the Kremlin is facing a situation where the oil is being extracted unilaterally by countries like Azerbaijan and Kazakhstan, and exported mainly through non-Russian pipelines, be they through Georgia or through Turkey.

Implications for Eurasian strategy

The Russian leadership’s foreign policy goals in the Caucasus has thus led it to resort to intervention in the internal affairs of the Caucasian states to the degree it has been deemed necessary to bring them back to some form of Russian control. In terms of regional politics, Russian foreign policy priorities have had equally significant consequences. As mentioned above, the primary Russian aim has been to prevent the expansion of Turkish and American influence in the region. Whereas this policy has naturally put Russia on a conflictual course with both Turkey and the US, it has led to an increasingly strong alignment with the Islamic Republic of Iran. The relationship between the two countries is multifaceted and
cannot be reduced to mere geopolitics. Economic factors are important, especially Russia’s conception of Iran as a market for goods it cannot sell on western markets.\textsuperscript{103}

Trade in more strategic equipment has had a larger role, though. Russia has contracted to sell $1 billion worth of weapons to Iran by the year 1999;\textsuperscript{104} and is planning to sell another $3 billion worth of weaponry to the country by 2007.\textsuperscript{105} But the bulk of the relationship is made up of political issues, and can be divided as follows: joint interests in preventing Turkish and US influence in Central Eurasia; nuclear co-operation enabling Iran to set up nuclear power plants, heavily criticized by the US; as well as suspected Russian support and assistance in Iran’s quest to develop ballistic missile technology. A high-profile issue has been the sale of a Russian light-water nuclear power plant to Iran. While President Yeltsin had given in to US pressure in 1993 and aborted the deal, it went through in 1995. In a sense, Russia’s justification for the deal was difficult to dispute; Yeltsin noted that the Russian reactor resembled one provided to North Korea by the US; moreover Russia reasoned that that if Pakistan, which had never signed the NPT nor accepted IAEA inspections could receive US high technology weapons, why would Iran, signatory to the NPT and allowing regular inspections by the IAEA, not be eligible to produce nuclear energy?\textsuperscript{106} While Iranian press jubilated as Russia resisted US pressure, a new contract was signed that provided for two more reactors to built.\textsuperscript{107}

Iran’s incentive to develop ties with Russia are relatively straightforward. US attempts to isolate Iran in world politics have paid off relatively well, and it faces serious problems with respect to its participation in the world economy as well as world politics. The rapprochement with Russia meant that Iran would need to relinquish a proactive role in Central Asia and the Caucasus; nevertheless the advantages of the relationship, especially breaking Iran’s isolation, by far outweigh the drawbacks as far as Tehran is concerned. Most notably, as seen in chapter eight, Iran’s security has been deteriorating since the end of the cold war; Iraq remains an increasingly unpredictable threat; Turkey’s military might may not be a direct threat to Iran but nevertheless worrisome; the Taliban advances in Afghanistan pose a direct threat to Iran and to Iran’s allies in Afghanistan, the Hazara; and to the north, Iran needs to worry about Azerbaijan’s possible stirring up ethnic nationalism within Iran. (This is true also for Turkmenistan, but to a much lesser extent—there may be one million Turkmens in Iran but up to 20 times as many Azeris). On top of everything, the Gulf War increased United States military presence in the Persian Gulf. As a result, the possibility of acquiring diplomatic support—as well as arms—from Russia was definitively welcomed in Tehran. Likewise, for Russia, an alliance with Tehran enabled the Moscow leadership to contain Turkish influence in its ‘underbelly’ in a much more active way than had Iran, for example, which offered its territory without preconditions for Turkish rail, road or pipeline links. Iran also shared Russia’s wish to prevent the development of a resource-rich Azerbaijani republic between the two states, which could be instrumental in severely diminishing Russian as well as Iranian...
influence in the region. Beyond the Caucasus, Iran and Russia share a fear of the Taliban regime in Afghanistan and its possible destabilizing effect on Central Asia, and jointly work to prevent it from controlling the entirety of Afghanistan by arming the Afghanistani opposition. For Russia, Iran was also a lever to prevent US domination of the Persian Gulf, which has increased since the Gulf War.

An interesting factor is that even in during its ‘atlanticist’ period, Russian foreign policy made an exception for the case of arms sales to Iran. As Freedman has put it, ‘only in the case of arms sales to Iran did Russia take a position markedly different from that of the United States.’ Since the strengthening of the conservative forces in Moscow, the Russian leadership has become increasingly ignored US warnings and statements regarding Iran. The appointment of Yevgeni Primakov, a Middle East specialist with very good relations with the Iranian as well as Iraqi regimes, to the post of foreign minister and later for some time to the prime minister post cemented this policy.

In view of Russia’s increasing difficulties of keeping Turkey and the especially the US (see chapter ten) out of its desired sphere of influence, the Russian-Iranian relationship is likely to grow stronger with time. The strength of the relationship is corroborated not only by statements by both leaderships commenting that Russian-Iranian ties are at their historical high, but by simple facts. The nuclear and missile technology relationship is an example; nevertheless other examples are present. Most worrisome perhaps, claims have been put forward that a part of the Russian arms delivered to Armenia though 1997 passed through Iran. Although both governments have refuted the claim, it is not illogical. As Russia has no border with Armenia, direct transfers would need to pass though Georgia; with Georgia’s strengthening relation to Azerbaijan, Russia was indeed unlikely to be able to transport armaments worth $1 billion without arousing Georgian suspicion. Indeed, one of Georgia’s most persistent complaints vis-à-vis Russia has been precisely Russian forces’ unwillingness to inform Georgian officials on the movement of troops and materiel. However, Russia could conceivably ship the armament over the Caspian Sea to Iran from where it would easily be transported to Armenia, given the excellent relations between Armenia and Iran.

In terms of the strategic alignments that have been mentioned in earlier chapters, Russia plays a leading role in the Moscow-Yerevan-Tehran alignment to which Syria in the south and Belarus in the north can be added. Indeed, Belarus and Iran have seen an improvement of relations lately; Belarus has also sought to improve commercial relations with Syria, and Armenia has developed military ties with that country. But whereas Belarus and Syria play peripheral roles in the alignment, Russia and Iran are its pillars and Armenia its geopolitical centre.

Reports surfaced in February 1997 of illicit Russian arms shipments to Armenia between 1993 and 1996 for a value of over a billion dollars, as well as (in the context) minor shipments to Abkhazia. This fact was revealed by the chairman of the Russian Duma’s defence committee, General Lev Rokhlin. The pro-government paper Sovetskaya Rossiya in April 1997 published a tentative list of
the equipment transferred to Armenia, which led to substantial concern in Turkey, the US, but foremost in Azerbaijan. While Russia and Armenia claim that these arms are solely for defensive purposes, the question is—against whom? In fact, the arms deliveries, for which Armenia was not required to pay, can only be directed at Azerbaijan and Turkey. Armenia is by necessity worried about an Azerbaijani military build-up aimed at conquering back Karabakh, whereas both Armenia and Russia are worried over Turkey’s increasing military capabilities. The close relationship between the two was cemented by the conclusion of a treaty in early 1997 on Russian military bases in Armenia. The agreement provides for 25 years basing rights, with automatic five-year extensions. It also stipulates that additional Russian troops may enter Armenia by mutual consent to deal with a ‘threat to the security of either side’. Russian leaders praised the treaty as ‘protecting Russian strategic interests in the Transcaucasus…where external forces are doing their utmost to prevent Russia’s close co-operation with the region’s countries’, while criticizing Georgia for being recalcitrant vis-à-vis Russian military on its soil.

However, the treaty is seen in Azerbaijan as directed against itself; indeed many western observers seem to agree. Stephen Blank notes that the treaty is ‘extremely close to an outright military alliance against Azerbaijan and allows Russia and Armenia to press Baku and Turkey.’ The treaty and the arms it brings to Armenia substantially violate the provisions on CFE treaty, and Azerbaijan and Turkey have grown increasingly worried as S-300 missiles are scheduled to be deployed in Armenia. In January 1999, this led Azerbaijani officials to publicly call for the establishment of NATO military bases in Azerbaijan, as will be discussed in the next chapter. In summary, Russia’s military moves in the region have deepened existing rifts, pointing to the establishment of countervailing blocks of states; one can observe increasing military co-operation between Turkey, Georgia, Israel and Azerbaijan with tacit support of the US, to balance the increasingly strong Iran-Armenia-Russia bloc. The consequences of such a development can be anything but positive.

Conclusions: the retreating hegemonic power

Russian military encroachments in the Caucasus have tried to secure Russia’s continued dominance over the region. However, it seems doubtful whether the actions conducted by Russia are bringing it any closer to this aim. As one analyst has noted, ‘the prospects of Russian foreign policy are bleak… Russia has declined, is declining, and is likely to decline still further.’ In 1993–94, Russia temporarily seemed to succeed in reversing its declining influence in the ‘near abroad’. In Central Asia, no republic conducted an openly anti-Russian policy; Russia showed its ability to effectively intervene in the Transcaucasus to reassert control over Georgia and Azerbaijan, and Armenia has, in the words of one analyst, committed ‘the country to satellite status for the life-span of the next generation.’

Turkey’s euphoria had given way to a seeming realization of the
bitter truth of Russia’s continuing hegemony, especially after the downfall of Elchibey; and the US was only acting through its oil companies in the Caspian.

By early 1999—that is five years later—the situation looks very different. While Russia can continue to rely upon its alliance with Armenia, Azerbaijan has resolutely adopted an anti-Russian rhetoric and has successfully resisted Russian attempts to base troops in the country. Instead, Baku is actively courting NATO and Turkey whom it sees as candidates to guarantee its security. The Russian border guards are scheduled to leave Georgia within a few months, and Tbilisi has joined Baku in decrying Russian intervention into their internal affairs. Both countries have played leading roles in an alignment with Ukraine, Moldova and Uzbekistan that seeks to limit Russian influence over CIS countries, instead looking to the United States as their protector. Turkey, acting in tandem with increasing American involvement in the region and with its military alliance with Israel, is making a renewed attempt—and a distinctively more credible one this time—to extend its influence in the Caucasus and Central Asia. Turkey and the US are now gradually beginning to challenge Russia’s dominant role in the Caucasus by stepping up economic and political activity there, and by closer security and military co-operation with the states in the region. Uzbekistan, Azerbaijan and Georgia have all signalled that they will not renew their participation in the CIS mutual security treaty, and behave increasingly independently from Moscow.

Rulers such as Heydar Aliyev, Eduard Shevardnadze and Islam Karimov now have a stable base to stand on, and control their respective countries to a degree which enables them to pursue independent foreign policies that put the interests of their own states before those of Russia’s. And with Russia betting on a defensive alliance with Armenia and Iran, the interests of these states are increasingly differing from those of Russia. Increasing openness in the region and strengthened interactions with the outside world have made it increasingly difficult for Russia to intervene as freely in the internal matters of these states; a hidden Russian hand might still be conceived of in explosions in Tbilisi or Tashkent or stirrings in Ajaria or Javakheti, but on the whole, there is little Russia can do except push hesitant states even farther away from itself.
At the dissolution of the Soviet Union, the United States policy toward the successor states of its former adversary was heavily dominated by concern for the future of Russia, and in particular concern for the control over the massive stockpile of nuclear weapons. To the extent the US at this time was interested in the successor states, it focused on states where Soviet nuclear weapons were deployed, such as Ukraine and Kazakhstan. The US helped secure the transfer to Russia of these weapons, preferring to contain the possession of nuclear weapons to one state, i.e. Russia, in line with the policy of horizontal non-proliferation espoused by Washington. At this point, the United States did then not have a clearly formulated policy toward the Caucasus and Central Asia, beyond principal support for the independence of the newly independent states. In general, the US leadership did not realize the existence and extent of potential US interests in what has only more recently become commonly referred to in the US as ‘the Caspian region’. The knowledge of the region, its peoples, problems and dynamics was very poor: except for a limited number of specialized academicians, virtually no one knew the region: As Frederick Starr, puts it, ‘the US government was woefully ignorant’ of the region.\(^1\) This problem was shared not only with European governments but also with the Turkey and Iran. The US lack of initiative permitted partisan politics in Congress to leave an imprint on American policy in the region which the administration has been unable to shrug off, especially as concerns the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict.

Ever since the liberalization of the Soviet Union, however, private US interests had been awakened as regards the oil of the Caspian Sea since roughly 1990–91. Shortly before the break-up of the union, several oil multinationals established offices in the riparian republics of the Caspian Sea; private investment started growing rapidly and by 1995, the oil interests had begun to make a difference in Washington: Washington by 1995 had ‘conclusively rejected Russia’s claims for an energy monopoly’.\(^2\) Still then, however, initial US reactions to the Russian invasion of Chechnya made it clear that the US then respected, although not accepted, the Russian notion of the entire Caucasus and Central Asia being a ‘Russian sphere of influence’. US policy has nevertheless changed considerably since then, pointing to an increasing engagement of the region. This policy can be roughly divided into three periods: first, a lack of clear policy and a Russia-
centred approach from December 1991 until 1994; secondly, the cautious formulation of a policy, prompted by oil and defence interests, but still respecting Russia’s hegemonic policies in the region, from 1994 until 1996; and finally, since 1996–97, an increased realization of US interests and a strategic engagement of the entire region.

**1991–94: incoherence & ‘Russia-first’ policy**

The initial period of independence of the successor states of the South of the former Soviet Union was a period of relatively weak American interests and the absence of defined policies. Nevertheless, the period has left an undesired imprint on American policy especially toward the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict. The US’s main concern of the time was economic reforms in Russia and support for the Yeltsin regime. The US paid lip service to reforms in all Newly Independent States (NIS) as they came to be called; however there was, it seems safe to say, no proactive US policy towards the Southern rim of the former USSR, although secretary of state James Baker was quick to visit these states at independence in 1992, declaring America’s firm support for their independence. Basic ‘working guidelines’ were nevertheless established, which stipulated some basic US interests in the NIS. These included recognition of the states as independent and viable entities, support for their transition to market economies and democratic societies, facilitation of their integration into international institutions, and encouragement of regional co-operative arrangements. Nevertheless, the main US interest of the time—that is besides the large interests in Russia’s transition to market economy and democracy—was to limit the spread of nuclear weapons, by convincing Belarus, Kazakhstan and Ukraine to hand their nuclear weapons over to Russia. In one US policy-maker’s words, ‘a preoccupation with the four “nuclear successor states” prevented the Caucasus and Central Asian states from getting much serious attention until 1994.’ Nevertheless, the US administration soon formulated three modest policy goals for the NIS:

- Firstly, the US declared its support for the independence of the NIS and vowed to help preventing them from gravitating into the orbit of Russia or, in particular, Iran.
- Secondly, the US vowed to support the establishment of liberal democratic regimes in the NIS, and has partly—but only partly—adjusted its policy according to the progress of the democratization process in these states.
- Thirdly, the US supported the export of the Caspian energy resources through a route that would not exclusively depend upon Russia, and that would most importantly not cross Iranian territory.
Proof of indifference: Section 9073 & the Armenian lobby

As far as the Caucasus was concerned, the US policy was rather erratic. The US established working relations with Armenia from the start, mainly because of the demands from the Armenian American lobby and its associates, but also because of a perception that Armenia was the state which was most successful in fostering a democratic political environment. Looking back at the domestic political situation in the Transcaucasus in the beginning of 1992, there was indeed basis for this assumption. Whereas the regime of Levon Ter-Petrosyan in Armenia was ruling with heavy popular backing, the Soviet Nomenklatura under Mutalibov in Azerbaijan was only very reluctantly being unseated in the spring of 1992; in Georgia, the Gamsakhurdia regime had led the country into acquiring an isolated status internationally, which was only worsened by the armed ouster of Gamsakhurdia in December 1991-January 1992. Only with the arrival of Shevardnadze to power did Georgia’s pariah stamp begin to wash away, which it then did rather rapidly. Shevardnadze was indeed a politician on the global level and was, despite his unpopularity in parts of his own country as well as in Russia, a great help for Georgia’s efforts to shape its relations with the West. Shevardnadze was recalled as a pro-Western Soviet foreign minister who had played a crucial role in ending the Cold War; the same reason that made sectors of the Russian army more than willing to support insurgents in Georgia made Shevardnadze a friend of the West. In particular, his popularity was high in the United States and Germany. The result was that US humanitarian assistance started flowing to Georgia relatively quickly. In the words of Jim Nichol, Shevardnadze’s ‘appeals for urgent humanitarian aid were sympathetically received’ in Washington. With regard to Azerbaijan, the situation was totally different. Azerbaijan was too busy with the war in Karabakh and internal squabbles to make a concerted lobbying effort in the West. In fact, Azerbaijan was unable to even make the Azeri side of the events in Karabakh reach news desks in the West. In contrast, the Armenian communities in the US and in France were well-organized and powerful, and were instrumental in bringing about a perception of Azerbaijan as an aggressor in the conflict, an anti-Azerbaijani stance that has begun to recede only recently. Partly as a result of this, the US recognized Armenia in December 1991, and Azerbaijan only in February 1992, officially because Armenia had adhered to the Helsinki principles earlier.

In mid-1992, the Freedom Support Act, a long-term programme of economic assistance to the former Soviet Union was enacted. It included a section, the by now infamous section 907a, which prohibits all US assistance to Azerbaijan due to its blockade of Armenia; Congress implicitly defined Azerbaijan as the aggressor in the conflict and section 907 must be interpreted as a punishment to Azerbaijan for its policy. The act stipulates that ‘United States assistance may not be given to the Government of Azerbaijan until the President determines, and so reports to Congress, that the Government of Azerbaijan is taking demonstrable steps to cease all blockades and other offensive uses of force against Armenia and Nagorno-
The act hence ignored the fact that Armenia was the author of an embargo on Nakhchivan, and hence presumably equally guilty as Azerbaijan. Moreover the use of the term blockade is misleading, as Turkey and Azerbaijan by no means have the capacity to blockade Armenia; the country does have economic links with Georgia and Iran, and as a result the term ‘embargo’ is the correct definition of the situation.

Section 907 was enacted mainly as a result of the strong lobbying efforts of the Armenian community in the United States, whose influential position in US politics is well-known, stemming from an impressive level of organization and lobbying skill as well as its importance in strategic states, notably in California where the votes of the Armenian community are thought to have decisive effects on the outcome of major elections, including presidential ones. Given the lack of a clear policy toward the conflict on the part of the state department and the White House, the Armenian Diaspora was successful in hijacking the policy of the United States to the conflict, taking advantage of the early stage of US relations with the Caucasian states: Azerbaijan did not even have an embassy in Washington at the time and was caught unprepared by the enactment of section 907. In the words of Robert Cutler:

United States policy on Karabakh through much of the 1990s until the present was dominated by the extremely well organized and politically well connected Armenian Diaspora. Legislation was passed which penalized both Azerbaijan and Turkey for their bans on trade with Armenia.  

Indeed, the Armenian organizations in the US take pride in their success but deplore their inability to curtail US assistance to Turkey. In the words of a leaflet from the Armenian Assembly of America, ‘with the help of our friends in Congress, we secured an $85 million earmark in US assistance for Armenia in 1996…we are currently advocating an increase to $95 million in assistance for next year. We achieved our second legislative goal with the passage of the Humanitarian Aid Corridor Act…which prohibits American foreign aid to any country that blocks the delivery of US Humanitarian assistance to a third country, is now the law of the land.’ The consequences of this act for US interests in the Caucasus may not have been clear to US policy-makers at the time but were certainly to become so by the mid-1990s. As MacFarlane and Minear quote an American diplomat:

We try to preach human rights and discourage governments from following ethnic policies. Then an ethnic lobby imposes something like this that isn’t in US national interest. The Ministry of Foreign Affairs [in Baku] beats us over the head with this every time we see them.

Section 907 was enacted at a time when Azerbaijan was heavily on the offensive in Karabakh, in the middle of 1992; at this time it may indeed have been feasible to view Azerbaijan as aggressive and having the upper hand. However the
events immediately following this offensive in any case totally changed the picture, with the Armenian side conquering large tracts of Azerbaijan’s territory. Nevertheless these changes did not make Congress repeal it; only gradually and slowly have certain exceptions been made to it since 1996.

The result of the act has been a feeling of deceit and humiliation on the popular level in Azerbaijan. In any case, the consequences of the act for the country were considerable. Whereas Armenia receives over a hundred million dollars a year in assistance—Armenia is actually the second per capita recipient of US aid in the world after Israel—^13—the US ban on institutionalized government-to-government aid to Azerbaijan had a considerably negative effect on international humanitarian efforts to relieve the suffering of the refugees in Azerbaijan. Section 907 stipulates that the US can have nothing to do with Azerbaijani governmental institutions. The result has been that in a post-Soviet country like Azerbaijan, where most relief institutions including hospitals are owned by the government, the US is prohibited from assisting relief. The following quotation is illustrative:

The truth of the matter was that there was a very real relief dilemma in getting American aid to its target, even when sent through NGOs and PVOs like the International Rescue Committee and CARE. Because the government of Azerbaijan owned most of the warehouses, clinics and even support vehicles involved in tending to internal refugees, the American organizations were obliged to keep their aid under tarps in the street, lest they violate Section 907(a) by having anything to do with Azeri officialdom.14

The problem, however, does not limit itself to humanitarian aid. In the opinion of Thomas Goltz, one of the prominent western experts on Azerbaijan, the effect of section 907 is ‘not about temporarily alleviating misery, but permanently changing society’.15 The fact of the matter is that the American aid that reaches Azerbaijan reaches only Non-Governmental Organizations (NGOs). In contrast, in other NIS most of the US assistance is spent working with government officials in promoting legal reform and liberal democracy. In Azerbaijan, US governmental organizations such as the National Democratic Institute are prohibited from operating in this manner; the US government cannot even invite an Azerbaijani governmental official to a conference in the US. Much of the aid as a result goes to organizations that are opposed to the current regime in Azerbaijan. In Goltz’s words, some of the US aid goes to

groups interested less in building civil society in conjunction with the government than solely in changing the government and replacing it with themselves…not only is the Congress of the United States depriving the current government of Azerbaijan of the democracy and pluralism building blocks we are supplying to every other post-Soviet society, it is, in effect, promoting revolution in Azerbaijan—and perpetual revolution at that.16
Perpetual, because if the current regime falls from power its proponents would suddenly become eligible for aid, whereas previous recipients would now be banned. The implicit result is that the US is de facto perpetually supporting the Azerbaijani opposition, whatever its political aims might be. Although Goltz’s interpretation is extravagant, it points to the illogical character of the provision as well as its, to say the least, unsound effects.

Lately, considerable efforts have been made to amend the section in order to enable humanitarian assistance to refugees in Azerbaijan at the very least, as will be seen below. The state department has always been negative to the bill; in 1992, it was feared that a pro-Armenian tilt in the US would lead to closer relations between Azerbaijan and Iran. The complicated and worsening relations between Azerbaijan and Iran, as explained in chapter nine, nevertheless prevented such a development; a potentially disastrous consequence of US policy in the Caucasus was hence avoided. Unlike Congress, the State department has consistently followed a policy of neutrality in the conflict. As the tide of the war in 1992–93, and the Armenian advances in Azerbaijani territory showed with clarity that the congressional interpretation of the conflict was at best obsolete, the state department’s stance in the conflict became more fixed. In May 1992, a statement stated that ‘the quality and character of its [the United States] relationship with Armenia and Azerbaijan will depend on their commitment to CSCE principles, including the peaceful settlement of disputes.’ After the Armenian advances of 1993, US officials rejected Armenia’s claim that it was not involved in the fighting. At the same time, they noted that any deployment of US troops in Karabakh was out of the question, with reference to sensitivity of the issue to Russia.

In terms of policy towards the conflicts in Georgia, The United States has kept a relatively low profile. The domination of Russia in mediation efforts to these conflicts has restricted the United States to playing a role merely through the OSCE and the UN. The US has participated in UNOMIG by providing observers. In terms of conflict resolution, the US has been absent from the negotiations and has been unable to influence them. In general, it is clear that the US did not significantly attempt to take advantage, as Turkey attempted to do, of the temporary Russian withdrawal from the Transcaucasus in 1992. Rather, it would appear that the US at the time preferred Russian domination over this unknown and troublesome area, with few US interests, to a volatile situation which had the potential to lead to a confrontation of Russia and Turkey. Implicit in this thinking was the concept, inherited from the Cold War period, of spheres of interest. Russia missed no chance to mention that it did not interfere with US policies in Central America, and that consequently the US had no business in disturbing Russia in its efforts to restore control over Transcaucasia. The United States leadership, moreover, seem to have found a certain logic in this line of thought. It should be mentioned that US caution in its relations with Russia was conditioned mainly by two factors. The first was a perception that Yeltsin was to be supported at every cost, being the symbol of democratization and liberalization.
of Russia which would prevent the country from slipping into aggressive authoritarianism and xenophobia; the second was that the US had a considerable respect for the military and strategic capabilities of the former Soviet Union: Russia was rightly identified as the direct heir to the Soviet military forces; however it was also believed to possess the conventional military capabilities of the Soviet Union. The United States initially perceived Russia as ‘almost’ an equal in military and strategic terms and acted accordingly. This perception nevertheless changed gradually.

1994–96: the formulation of a policy

While the State Department was busy dealing with Yeltsin and had various US and international bodies distribute credits to Russia to prop up the Yeltsin regime’s professed economic transition, the private sector had discovered the Caspian oil resources. Indeed, the importance of the Caspian and the Caucasus was discovered in Houston, not in Washington. As mentioned, the American oil multinationals were present in the region even before the dissolution of the Soviet Union and made sure they were not left out of the emerging consortia in Kazakhstan and Azerbaijan; on the contrary US firms took a leading role; in Kazakhstan, Chevron was the primary actor in the development of the Tengiz oil fields, contracting the deal already in late 1993; in the Azerbaijani ‘deal of the century’ of 1994, American companies held 40 per cent of the stakes. These private economic interests eventually led to an increasing governmental interest in the region.

The creation of an ‘Azerbaijan lobby’: Heydar Aliyev’s masterpiece

The interesting fact, in this context, was that the interests of the oil companies in many respects equaled those of Azerbaijan. First of all, Azerbaijan’s oil resources are predominantly offshore whereas the Kazakhstani oil fields are mainly onshore; this entails that Azerbaijan is distinctively more vulnerable than Kazakhstan—or for that matter Turkmenistan—to the legal status of the Caspian Sea. This in turn meant that the oil companies had a vested interest in the sectoral delimitation of the Caspian Sea, and hence in resisting Russian and Iranian claims to a ‘condominium’, where these states would do their utmost to prevent American companies from participating. This fact was also part of the design of Heydar Aliyev’s foreign policy. Starting with the ‘contract of the century’ and developing with the more than a dozen contracts that have been signed between Azerbaijan and oil multinationals, Aliyev’s consistent policy has been to try to attract as many foreign powers as possible into the politics of oil, thereby bringing about a vested interest in these countries in supporting Aliyev’s regime—and, by extension, displaying a more positive attitude toward Azerbaijan and its position in the Nagorno–Karabakh conflict. Aliyev had a consistent hierarchy of priorities given
to different states. The first priority was the United States; only then came Russia, Turkey, Iran, Europe, Middle Eastern States, and Japan.  

Aliyev’s strategy was clear: to attract a high level of private American interests in Azerbaijan, confident that this would increase the importance of the country in US foreign policy. In this strategy, Aliyev clearly counted on the influence of ‘Texas Oil’ in the domestic US politics, to counterbalance the Armenian lobby. Texas oil interests had a clear interest in attracting US attention to Azerbaijan for several reasons. First of all, the Caucasus and indeed Azerbaijan remained unstable areas, and there was at all times a risk involved in the multi-million dollar investments the oil companies undertook in the country. The fate of oil companies was increasingly tied to the fate of Aliyev’s regime, as certain Azerbaijani opposition figures claimed they would renegotiate the contracts should they come to power. And, in turn, the stability of the Aliyev regime depended partly on eliminating threats to it from abroad—especially from circles in Russia; and secondly on the resolution of the Karabakh conflict. The absence of a resolution to the conflict, and the predominance of the Armenian position internationally, could seriously threaten Aliyev’s regime. Hence it was in the interest of the oil multinationals to engage the US government in Azerbaijan, thereby first of all increasing the security of the Aliyev regime by increasing US stakes in the country, which in turn would lead to the US administration expressing its support for Aliyev. Moreover, involving the US in Azerbaijan entailed supporting the Azerbaijani attempts at removing section 907 from US legislation. Removal of section 907 would make the oil companies eligible for government-backed loans and financial assistance; more importantly, however, the US oil companies got clear signals from Baku that European or Middle Eastern oil firms might be favoured over American ones if the ban persists.

Even without such signals, such companies would have a comparative advantage if their bid for a piece of the oil riches is coupled with the support of their respective governments. The oil companies hence began using their powerful lobbying structures in Washington to further Azerbaijan’s interests, and thereby their own interests in the region. Meanwhile, several former high-ranking decision-makers in the United States had begun involving themselves with the Caspian oil issues, in particular with Azerbaijan, as Baku’s role as the hub of the Caspian oil industry became increasingly clear. Indeed, since 1996 and in some cases even earlier, Baku was the place of convergence of the paths of Zbigniew Brzezinski; his fellow former National Security Advisor Brent Scowcroft, former White House chief of staff James Sununu, former Defence Secretary Richard Cheney, former Treasury secretary Lloyd Bentsen, and former secretaries of state James Baker and Lawrence Eagleburger, to name only the best-known figures.

The increasing pressure resulted in a noted editorial in the Washington Post of 1 August 1996, under the headline ‘Armenia lobby’. In surprisingly harsh wording, the editorial condemned the predominance of the Armenian lobby in Congress:
The United States continues to intervene mischievously in the appalling conflict between Armenia and Azerbaijan. Its particular contribution is to increase the misery of a million Azeri refugees, and in that way to draw out hopes for a settlement... In short, the United States is punishing the loser and comforting the conqueror, occupier and evident winner of the war... Is there an American interest in denying normal humanitarian aid to a small country that—though not especially democratic—is reaching to the West and is critical to its region’s political stability and economic promise? The American Armenian community and its supporters, led by former senator Robert Dole, make no such showing. Rather, what is on display is ethnic political power.22

Caspian oil was appealing to the United States for several reasons. From a strategic point of view, Caspian oil had the potential to lessen Western energy dependence on the Persian Gulf, which has been a consistent liability in US energy policy. This would naturally entail that Caspian oil must be exported westwards—lest it again would end up in the Persian Gulf through a pipeline through Iran, thereby increasing further the importance of the Gulf. This was the first reason why the US later became an advocate of the Turkish pipeline option. The second reason, naturally, was the remaining policy of dual containment, with an explicit urge to prevent Iranian participation in Caspian oil extraction, and especially an Iranian pipeline which would give the country political leverage and influence in the Caucasus. As a result, Aliyev in 1994 took the dangerous step of excluding Iran from the ‘contract of the century’ despite the fact that it had been promised a five per cent stake. This was done, not surprisingly, after demands from Washington. Nevertheless certain instances prove the emergence of an American interests in the Caucasus. As Dimitri Danilov notes:

The statement by the Russian foreign ministry on the non-recognition of the oil contract of 20 September changed the situation again, leading the US on the one hand to oppose Russia’s having too strong a voice in Transcaucasia and, on the other, to strengthen its own role. At a meeting with Boris Yeltsin on 27–28 September [1994] in Washington, Bill Clinton called on him to disavow the Russian statement, while Yeltsin failed to make progress on the question of securing the recognition of Russia’s role as the main peacekeeper in the Karabakh conflict. Significantly, the US simultaneously demonstrated its intention of playing a more active role: a meeting of the presidents of Armenia and Azerbaijan with US mediation (where the US was represented by Madeleine Albright) was organized in New York on 27 September.23
The watershed: war in Chechnya

At the time the Russian army entered Chechnya in late 1994, the cautious character of American policy was clear. Secretary of State Warren Christopher even made a misplaced comment that compared the intervention with the US civil war;\(^{24}\) in another occasion he stated that Yeltsin had probably done what he had to do to prevent Chechnya’s secession. Another state department statement noted that the Chechen crisis would not harm the US-Russian ‘strategic partnership’. However, the criticism of this policy line became tougher with the revelations of massive Human Rights violations in Chechnya. The republican majority in Congress saw the opportunity to criticize the Clinton administration’s Russocentric policy, in line with the republican line of strengthening support for the NIS vis-à-vis Russia. Critics of US policy towards Russia also increased their voices gradually; Zbigniew Brzezinski, a former National Security Advisor under the Carter administration, even noted that the US administration had ‘joined the oppressors in actually vilifying the victims and justifying the oppression’.\(^{25}\) Official US criticism of Russia increased but remained meagre compared even to Western European states, not to speak of Eastern European ones: it only went so far as to claim that Russia had not fulfilled its commitments under the Helsinki Final Act, a gross underestimation.\(^{26}\)

Nevertheless, the US policy underwent a drastic change with the Chechen war, although this could not be noticed first-hand from the official statements, because the change was in the realm of the perception of Russia in Washington. Indeed, US military and civilian officials were rapidly exposed to the dismal status of the Russian army; reports that were reaching the West showed that this was definitely not—at least in conventional military terms—the ‘Big Red Machine’ which was at parity with or at least comparable to the military capability of the United States. The watershed, then was August 1996, when the Chechen fighters recaptured Grozny despite a significant numerical inferiority (see chapter five). It seems in retrospect as if the US leadership gradually lost all respect it had had for Russia as a great power with which it desperately needed to keep good relations. Moreover, August also meant that Boris Yeltsin was re-elected to the Russian presidency, and that as a result the US no longer needed to support his policies for fear of an anti-Western reaction in the Russian elections—which was perceived as possibly leading to the election of the Communist candidate Zyuganov. The changes in US attitudes did not become obvious at once; however it did so in early 1997, with the substantial reshuffle of president Clinton’s cabinet that accompanied his own re-election only months after Yeltsin’s.

The importance of the Chechen war in making public the inability of Russia to militarily assert its influence, and in general its dismal handling of the crisis, had two consequences. The first was that Russia could not be expected to take rational and predictable actions with regard to problems on its periphery; this entailed that there is still a Russian threat: Russia is basically able to create a lot of trouble for its neighbours but unable to mount a credible military offensive
capacity—leaving out the nuclear option. The second consequence, then, is the retreat of Russian influence. In the words of Stephen Blank:

Russian military and economic power is visibly retreating as Moscow’s capability to control its outlying provinces and neighbouring republics declines… This retreat of Russian power is another structural factor that plays an important role in shaping regional outcomes because it affects both local security calculus and the actions of the major foreign players… Due to the failure of coercive diplomacy and the shocking defeat in Chechnya, Russia is already effectively leaving the area as troop reductions, withdrawals and the accords with Groznyy and Baku all show.27

1997 & after: strategic engagement of the Caspian region

The most important change in the cabinet of the second Clinton Administration was from the viewpoint of the Caspian the ‘retirement’ of Warren Christopher as secretary of state, and his replacement with the more assertive Madeleine Albright. Soon enough, the increased attention the Caspian region had begun to enjoy in the West translated into a policy change. In 27 March 1997, that is barely two months after the beginning of the second Clinton administration, National Security Advisor Sandy Berger singled out China, Turkey and the Caucasus as areas of special emphasis and stressed Washington’s intent to step up its involvement in the Caucasus and Central Asia.28 In July of the same year deputy secretary of state Strobe Talbott said that Transcaucasia and Central Asia make up ‘a strategically vital region’ for the US, and that what happens there ‘matters profoundly’ to the US.29

The causes of this policy change are difficult to assess. Most analysts seem to adhere to the simplistic explanation that oil brings American interests. And indeed, oil is important. The United States presently imports 52 per cent of its oil consumption, whereas in 1983 the figure was only 31 per cent. And the increased dependence on imported oil has in practice meant an increased dependence of Persian Gulf oil, a situation which is distinctively worrisome for US policymakers engulfed in a dual containment of Iran and Iraq, the two most powerful states in the Gulf. Small wonder, then, that the US leadership greeted with pleasure the suggestion that the Caspian Sea might hold up to 200 billion barrels of oil. The Caspian was believed, and still so by some analysts, to have the potential to rank third in the world after the Gulf and Russia in terms of oil reserves. With Azerbaijan being not only a major producer of these hydrocarbon resources, but also a possible transit route westwards—the preferred direction for the West—for Kazakhstani and Turkmenistani resources through a Trans-Caspian pipeline, the reasons to effect a rapprochement with the regime in Baku seem clear enough. The Caspian would then be a major source of diversification of oil
imports for the foreseeable future; and hence be of significant importance to US national security.

An increasingly assertive policy

The result has been that the US administration is pressuring Congress in a much more assertive way than before to repeal section 907 of the Freedom Support Act. For example, Madeleine Albright stated in a letter to Bob Livingston, Chairman of the House of Representatives Appropriations Committee, of September 1998 that ‘Section 907 damages US national interests by undermining the administration’s neutrality in promoting a settlement in Nagorno-Karabakh, its ability to encourage economic and broad legal reforms in Azerbaijan, and efforts to advance an East-West energy transport corridor.’ In an even more clear manner, Albright’s advisor Stephen Sestanovich illustrated the State Department’s view of section 907 as follows:

As Secretary Albright and Deputy Secretary Talbott have testified before Congress, Section 907 remains a serious obstacle to our diplomacy in Azerbaijan… It is understandable that 907 is seen by some to raise doubts about US neutrality vis-à-vis Azerbaijan and Armenia in negotiations on Nagorno-Karabakh. We do not believe that 907 has advanced the objective its supporters intended when it was passed in 1992. To be blunt, it has done nothing to bring us closer to a lasting peace to the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict. Politically, Section 907 and related provisions are an impediment to our making progress on Nagorno-Karabakh, to our ability to work effectively with Azerbaijan on the east-west Eurasian transport corridor, to advancing in Azerbaijan the same reforms we have supported in other NIS countries, and to the ability of US firms to do business in Azerbaijan. The Azerbaijani Government is strongly pro-US. It is being helpful to us on Caspian energy questions, on non-proliferation, on Iranian terrorism—and on Nagorno-Karabakh. Section 907 has limited and will continue to limit the expansion of US-Azerbaijani relations—to no useful purpose.

In fact, 1997 meant that two tendencies became increasingly clear: first, that the oil lobby in the US became a counterbalance to the Armenian lobby in Congress on issues related to the Caucasus policy of the US—in some instances, there were even signs that the Jewish lobby, now supporting Turkey against the Greek and Armenian lobbies due to the Turkish-Israeli co-operation, lent support to Azerbaijan, albeit on a small scale. These developments prompted concern among the Armenian community, a proponent of which noted that ‘this year the major American oil companies are working…to further the Azeri government’s political objectives, and are clearly co-ordinating very closely with the government of Azerbaijan.’ In a situation where the US government’s policy towards
the Caspian region is already formulated in a dialogue with the oil companies, it seems as if Baku’s position is indeed gaining strength in Washington.

A corollary of increased US interest in the region has been conflict resolution. The Clinton administration has acted more resolutely to take a more assertive and active role in the negotiation efforts in the Caucasian conflicts. This has partly led to an attempt to pay more importance to Abkhazia, but has mainly been focused on a more active role in the Minsk Group negotiating over Nagorno-Karabakh. In January 1997, the US became the third co-chairman of the Minsk Group. The circumstances under which this happened deserve to be dwelt upon briefly. Russia was the permanent co-chairman of the time, whereas other OSCE countries held a rotating co-chairmanship, which was held by Finland. As France showed its interest in replacing Finland and was greeted warmly by other OSCE countries which were mostly interested in not getting involved in this seemingly intractable conflict, Azerbaijan objected and stated that it did not consider France an impartial mediator (due to the influence of the Armenian lobby in France) and instead desired the US to be assigned to the post. In a face-saving gesture for everyone, the OSCE decided to step up the Minsk Group to a troika of Russian, French and American co-chairmen.

What was significant was that Azerbaijan’s perception of US policy had grown in such confidence that Baku actually demanded Washington’s participation in the Minsk Group, something that had hardly been imaginable a few years earlier. Azerbaijan obviously deemed that the Armenian lobby in Congress had all but lost its influence over American policy-making on the conflict. The picture was completed with the official visit of Heydar Aliyev to Washington in July 1997, where a number of private co-operation deals were signed. The visit was soon capitalized upon by the Azerbaijani leadership, especially for domestic purposes; it was presented to the Azerbaijani public as a major foreign policy achievement and was repeatedly broadcast in the smallest detail on national television. Meanwhile, US officials now began putting increasing pressure upon the Armenian government to compromise on the issue of Karabakh’s status. In the words of a US diplomat in Yerevan, ‘we now put more pressure on the Armenian side than on the Azeris.’ This, of course, was particularly the case after the announcement of the step-by-step plan of the OSCE and the subsequent internal debate in Armenia leading to president Ter-Petrosyan’s resignation. (see chapter three). Armenia now feels, with some justification, that the US is exerting an unwarranted amount of pressure on Armenia to compromise for the simple reason that a solution to the conflict would greatly improve the possibilities for the speedy creation of an east-west transportation corridor, in particular with relation to the export of oil westwards through Turkey. The surprisingly harsh words of Peter Tbmsen at his closing press conference after three years as US ambassador in Yerevan are illustrative of this tendency:

No country recognizes Karabakh’s independence. This is US policy and it is the policy of the OSCE. In other words all of these countries [53 out of
recognize the territorial integrity of Azerbaijan, and that Karabakh is within the borders of Azerbaijan. Unless you want an unending future of conflict, tension and periodic wars, we urge that you talk to Azerbaijanis and the three sides reach a modus vivendi. No side can win 100 percent. As I said, there is not even a dialogue, much less any progress toward an agreement [these days]. We believe that Armenia cannot realize sustained, robust economic growth unless there is a solution to the Karabakh dispute. As I leave Armenia, I urge you not to become complacent and think that everything is OK—it is not OK. The seeds of war are there. You should try to remove them through political negotiations…there is no political negotiation, inevitably military tensions and military buildups go forward, eventually leading to another conflict and war.33

The stated goals of American foreign policy in the Caucasus and Central Asia also altered in this period. By early 1998, these were officially summarized as containing four elements:

• strengthening modern political and economic institutions and advancing market economy
• conflict resolution
• energy development and the creation of an east-west energy transport corridor
• security co-operation.34

Compared with the modest policy goals of the first period of the independence of these states, some obvious changes are due to the evolution of the region. For example, the first principle is very much the continuation of the support for their independence—something which was by no means certain in 1991, but has been achieved since then—and the aim of inciting these states to adopt a liberal market economy. Interestingly, the principle of democratic rule is not included in the stated aims; it can be assumed as being encompassed in the term ‘modern’ preceding political and economic institutions. Nevertheless the apparent decline of the importance accorded to the form of rule can be understood as suggesting an increased strategic interest, whereby the strategic interests of the US have superseded the more moral aspects of the earlier policy. For example, Turkmenistan’s president Saparmurad Niyazov was invited to Washington in April 1998 despite heavy criticism of Turkmenistan’s lack of regime transition and Human Rights abuses, coming from the US media, Human Rights organizations, and the state department itself.35

The pledge to help the oil-producing states export their resources westwards has been strengthened, and elaborated into a wider project, the East-West Transport Corridor, TRACECA. Thus the US policy has gone beyond oil, and a broader vision of an entirely new communications system across the Caucasus and the Caspian Sea to Central Asia has taken form, elaborating on the earlier pledge to support regional co-operation. However, the two other elements, conflict
resolution and especially security co-operation, are totally new and both would have been unthinkable in 1992–94. An active US role in conflict resolution in the Caucasian conflicts, but also in Tajikistan, would have been seen as a grave encroachment on Russian primacy in the NIS and would therefore have gone against the then over-reaching principle of deference to and support for Russia. However, the really novel principle is security co-operation. The US has been actively promoting the establishment of a Central Asian Peacekeeping Battalion, known as CENTRASBAT. The US held exercises in Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan involving over 500 US troops; while the US government was quick to announce that it did not mean to send any ‘signals’ to any state in the region, the military element in US relations with states of the former Soviet Union was not greeted by Russia. The statements of the US leadership included talk of ‘independent, sovereign states that are able to defend themselves.’

According to US Atlantic Command officials, America had three broad objectives for the exercise: promoting regional co-operation through combined military activity; reinforcing the sovereignty of the three Central Asian nations that make up the battalion; and encouraging the development of capabilities by these countries to meet the standards of both recent international peacekeeping efforts and civilian-controlled professional militaries in emerging democracies.

Nevertheless, the repercussions of this event go far beyond the stated aims, whether these repercussions are intended or not. Most importantly, the states of the region clearly interpret this move as a signal that the US is now seriously aiming at establishing its strategic influence in the region, and consequently that it no longer accepts the NIS as a Russian sphere of influence. The difficulty lies in pursuing this policy while simultaneously working for the integration of Russia into the global economic and political system; in other words, the US leadership knows that it will attract Russia’s wrath by ‘intruding’ into its ‘near abroad’; however presently—and this is the major difference—the US deems increasing its influence in the Caspian region more important than safeguarding its ‘partnership’ with Russia. Indeed, any hopes to convince Russia that the US is merely aiming at creating a win-win situation for everyone, which would also be in Russia’s interests, are naive. In the words of Stephen Blank, ‘Given regional conditions and mentalities, not to mention actual US policy, [US insistence on aiming to create a win-win situation] seems misplaced, if not naive. US officials concede that Russia finds it difficult to accept this notion…win-win ideas generally remain foreign to their cognitive universe and contradict the prevailing zero-sum Realpolitik Russian and Trans-Caspian mentality.’

The clear fact is that the US is now trying to prevent Russia from regaining its hegemony over Central Asia and the Caucasus; as long as Russia considers it to be in its national interest to maintain its southern periphery as its own exclusive sphere of influence, the policies of Russia and the United States are bound to clash. In particular, Russian analysts are highly suspicious of American military agreements with the NIS. In a recent article, the influential analyst Sergo Mikoyan noted that:
Washington’s goal seems to be to weaken Russian influence in the area or to force Russia out altogether. Such intentions can be seen in different actions and diplomatic activities. Most significant are the military agreements signed by the US with Ukraine (July 1993), Azerbaijan (July 1997), Kazakhstan (November 1997) and Georgia (March 1998). Since all these countries participate in NATO’s Partnership for Peace (PFP) programme, it is not clear why these special bilateral agreements were also necessary. The education of local military personnel in US military academies, supplying weapons and sending instructors can only be interpreted in Moscow as actions that are designed to undermine the newly independent states’ relationships with Russia.  

The increasing frequency at which the US and Turkey hold joint military exercises with NIS gives further fuel to the Russian fire. Mikoyan cites sources showing a dramatic increase in US/NATO military presence in the Black Sea. In 1991, three to four NATO exercises were held there whereas the figure for 1997 was between 10 and 15. In early 1999, the Armenian–Russian military alliance, examined in chapter nine, led to a somewhat sensational statement by Azerbaijani veteran presidential advisor Vafa Guluzade: Unless Russian military bases are withdrawn from Georgia and Armenia, Azerbaijan would be willing to host a ‘US, NATO, or Turkish military base in the Apsheron peninsula’ of Azerbaijan, which ‘would serve US strategic interests in the Caucasus.’ Although the statement was later stated to be a personal opinion, it is beyond doubt that any statement of this caliber must have been made with the knowledge of President Aliyev. Mr Guluzade is known for his cautious approach; although Azerbaijan presumably knows the lack of likelihood of the realization of such a project, the statement was intended to send certain signals to Russia and Armenia regarding their increasingly close security co-operation. The message, hence, was that Azerbaijan could make use of its rapidly developing relations with the US as a counterbalance to the Russian–Armenian alliance, which Stephen Blank calls ‘extremely close to a an outright military alliance against Azerbaijan.’

In this context, Georgia’s increasingly close ties to NATO and joint exercises with Turkey deserve mention; furthermore the relatively overt Georgian political aim of joining NATO within a period of five to ten years is illustrative of the movement of certain post-Soviet states to break away from Russia’s sphere of influence. In the words of Annette Bohr, ‘Uzbekistan has joined the ranks of Israel and Turkey in relying on the United States as the chief guarantor of its independent foreign policy and international security.’ Judging from current developments and trends, this group of states may be joined by Georgia and Azerbaijan as quickly as the strategic environment in the Caucasus will possibly allow it. The tendency is clear and the attempts by Russia to sustain its influence in the Caucasus is receding with ‘conventional’ means, that is everything except subversive actions.
Reasons for the policy switch

Behind this apparent switch in US policy, of course, lies the loss of respect for Russia and its capabilities in the Caucasus. Since August 1996, the US policymakers seem to have increasingly adhered to a perception of Russia as a receding power; the condition of its military, the health of its president, and the situation of the Russian economy all point to this and strengthen the American feeling of superiority. While searching the reasons for the switch in US policy towards the Caucasus, the oil factor is as has been noted often stated to be the primary reason.

However there is indeed, as Dilip Hiro puts it, something fishy about the monocausal ‘oil’ explanation. First of all, of course, most experts agree that the Caspian is by no means comparable in terms of oil reserves to the Middle East; it is more comparable to one or at best two North Seas; oil companies seem to refer to the projections of 200 billion barrels as mere wishful thinking.45 Terry Adams, a former president of the Azerbaijan International Operating Company, notes that:

There has been much speculation in the media that Azerbaijan and the Caspian will be like another Middle East. However, a more accurate comparison would be the North Sea. Coincidentally, Azerbaijan’s proven reserves of 17.5 billion barrels is exactly equivalent to that of the North Sea’s. But from the known database, geologically speaking, at least, the equivalent of two more North Seas may be found in the South Caspian.46

If the 200 billion barrels are wishful thinking, they are indeed very effective wishful thinking since the second Clinton administration seems to have swallowed these predictions without doubt. Indeed, the title of an article by Hiro is ‘Why is the US Inflating Caspian oil Reserves?’47 The fact is that the statements of the State Department constantly refer to the highest possible expectations of oil resources, considered improbable by the industry. To the question as to why this is the case, two answers are possible: the first is that Washington really believes in these figures; the second is that Washington is using the oil issue as an ostensible reason for its involvement, hiding some larger scheme which it desires not to make public.

One of the most ardent advocates of US interests in the Caucasus, Senator Sam Brownback, presented his view of US interests in the Caspian region, and the ways to achieve them, elements that are helpful in understanding the US policy there.48 Brownback outlines five areas of interest: First, the Central Asian and Caucasian states are a bulwark against the spread of Iranian ‘anti-Western extremism’; secondly, the oil potential of the region ‘could exceed’ four trillion dollars in value, and could reduce US dependence on Persian Gulf oil; Thirdly, the development of strong market economies in the vicinity of China and Russia could influence these states in their economic transition; fourth, the regional states are a bulwark against the possible proliferation southward from
Such points nevertheless do not fully explain the place of the ‘Caspian region’ in US global policy. Is the central factor of the increasing US interest really oil? And if so, how can the lack of serious and objective analysis of the actual oil reserves in the Caspian be explained? According to the BP statistical review of world energy, the proven oil reserves of Azerbaijan and Kazakhstan amount to 15 billion barrels, of a world total of just over 1,000 billion barrels. Now the actual reserves are certainly over 15 billion barrels, given the fact that the Caspian region has not been satisfactorily surveyed and drilled. Nevertheless, the figure 200 billion, which deputy secretary of state Talbott mentioned in July 1997 (and which reached upwards to 240 billion at times), does not actually have any substantial evidence to corroborate it; it remains highly speculative. The phrase ‘up to 200 billion’ has become the standard term in US statements. In reality, half of that figure seems to be more likely; this is to be certain a huge figure; nevertheless the question is why the US is insisting on the unlikely higher one. Nevertheless, the strategic importance of the Caspian becomes clear once it is noted that there seems to be a consensus on the view that a ‘secure supply of oil at stable prices’ is one of America’s ‘vital national interests’. Hence even if the Caspian in the final analysis would ‘only’ hold 7–10 per cent of world proven reserves, the importance of the region as a diversification of imports, especially given the complexity of American relations with the Gulf states and the region’s utter instability, the oil factor would certainly warrant a strengthened US engagement.

In Hiro’s analysis, however, ‘Clinton is trying to create a false sense of well-being among his constituents that they can go on indulging in ever higher consumption of petroleum and that limitless oilfields lie in Azerbaijan and Kazakhstan to be exploited by American and other Western companies.’ The logical conclusion of this thesis is that the increased strategic involvement of the United States, taking place at high risks in a potentially explosive region of the world and offsetting an important domestic pressure group, is based on a shortsighted attempt by politicians aimed at deceiving their own people to further their personal careers.

Political manipulations may have a role in the developments, but it seems rather far-fetched that the consistent and multi-faceted policy of increased involvement in this region that the US has been pursuing openly since early 1997 and tacitly before that, should be devoid of strategic interests. Furthermore, oil alone does not seem to provide a satisfactory explanation for the impressive US efforts to strengthen its influence in Russia’s ‘underbelly’—monocausal explanations are seldom reliable. Rather, a complete explanation necessitates an analysis of the global strategy of the United States, anchored in the defence establishment, and the place of the Caspian region in this strategy. The importance of oil is overestimated by many observers; in fact a closer look at both
statements and policy show this. For example, Sestanovich noted in April 1998 that:

> We cannot and should not look at Caspian energy policy in isolation from our overall goals for the region. Our promotion of an economically viable east-west Eurasian transport corridor to bring Caspian energy resources to international markets is part of a larger strategy that supports peace and stability, democracy and respect for human rights, market economic reform and development, openness toward the United States and to US business, and the region’s integration into Euro-Atlantic and global institutions.53

Likewise, Elizabeth Sherwood-Rendall bluntly stated that ‘the importance of Transcaucasian oil in driving American policy has been exaggerated. From the perspective of the Defense Department, the biggest concern was with the role of the new post-Soviet military establishments in the Caucasian republics.’54 The main US interests in the Caucasus have indeed been **strategic.** In a sense the Russian fears described by two Russian specialists have a point: ‘the United States [is] seeking the reorganization of interstate relations in the whole of Eurasia whereby there [is] not one sole leading power on the continent but many medium, relatively stable and moderately strong ones…but necessarily inferior to the United States in their individual or even collective capabilities.’55 The words of another Russian analyst illustrate that Moscow does not swallow the monocausal explanation centred on oil: ‘It is not so much oil as geopolitics which make Washington so vigorous in the Caspian Sea area. Winston Churchill called it Russia’s soft underbelly way back in 1919. And there is no sign that the West thinks differently today.’56

**The NATO connection**

Furthermore, the role of the Caspian region, and particularly the Caucasus, in the European security architecture is on the rise. As Stephen Blank notes, the region is ever more present in NATO’s strategic calculations.57 According to former secretary of state Warren Christopher and former Secretary of Defence William Perry:

> The alliance needs to adapt its military strategy to today’s reality: the danger to the security of its members is not primarily potential aggression to their collective territory, but threats to their collective interests beyond their territory. Shifting the alliance’s emphasis from defence of members’ territory to defence of common interests is the strategic imperative. These threats include the proliferation of weapons of mass destruction, disruption of the flow of oil, terrorism, genocidal violence, and wars of aggression in other regions that threaten to cause great disruption. To deal with such threats
alliance members need to have a way to rapidly form military coalitions that can accomplish goals beyond NATO territory.58

Add to this the fact that NATO attaches a special importance to the wider Mediterranean region, which is crucial to the security of large west European states like France, Spain and Italy, and in fact of the EU as a whole, as proven by the importance the EU attaches to its Mediterranean relations—hence ensuring that concern for the region within NATO will not be solely American. Blank argues that the Caucasus and the Caspian Sea are now included in the Mediterranean for strategic purposes, especially as the future outlet of Caspian oil is designed to be Ceyhan, in the Turkish northeastern corner of the Mediterranean. Increasing NATO concern for the region is also proven by the fact that Xavier Solana, then NATO’s secretary-general, intensified his trips to the Caucasus in 1998 and 1999.

As Blank notes, ‘NATO must not only integrate the entire region into the western economy and foster the development “pluralistic institutions”, but must also grasp the military nettle.’59 Indeed, NATO seems to be doing so. The increasing involvement of Central Asian and Caucasian states in NATO’s Partnership for Peace programmes in the long run implies their militaries’ adapting to NATO standards. The NATO operation in Kosovo was taken as an opportunity for Azerbaijan and Georgia to show their solidarity with NATO—and not only rhetorically. For example, Azerbaijan in July offered to contribute a platoon to NATO’s Kosovo operation, and was later invited to do so in the framework of the Turkish contingent.60 Following this development, Georgia decided to do exactly the same; although France offered to host the Georgian platoon in its contingent, it finally, just like the Azerbaijani platoon formed part of the Turkish contingent.61 Although the units sent were marginal, ranging between 20 and 30 soldiers, the political symbolism in two former Soviet states participating in a NATO mission in the Balkans was significant. These types of co-operation, including Turkish training of Azerbaijani, Georgian and Central Asian officers; US training of Georgian border guards and the gift of helicopters, naval vessels and the like by various NATO countries to Georgia, all increase force interoperability and NATO access to regional military facilities. According to a US Navy view, these forms of co-operation are part of an ‘effort to set terms of engagement favourable to the United States and its allies…and are designed to contribute to deterrence.’62 Hence it is clear that NATO, with the US and Turkey as forerunners, is engaging the Caspian region and particularly Azerbaijan and Georgia increasingly actively

US strategic interests: the gateway to Central Asia

To explain the American long-term strategic interests in the region, it is useful to consult the recent book The Grand Chessboard, written by the influential above-mentioned former National Security advisor Zbigniew Brzezinski. Brzezinski’s
work is important in two ways. First of all, because of the interesting world-spanning analysis made; but also because of the influence Brzezinski’s thoughts can be expected to have in Washington. In a sense, beyond simply describing American policy and interests, Brzezinski certainly has a role in shaping it.

According to Brzezinski, the end of the Cold War meant that the US achieved a global hegemony, albeit of a ‘new type’. In his words:

[America] stands supreme in the four decisive domains of global power: Militarily, it has an unmatched global reach; economically it remains the main locomotive of global growth…technologically, it retains the overall lead in cutting-edge areas of innovation; and culturally,…it enjoys an appeal that is unrivaled, especially among the world’s youth—all of which gives the United States a political clout that no other state comes close to matching. It is the combination of all the four that makes America the only comprehensive global superpower.

Basically, Brzezinski’s thought is based on three ideas: First, the idea that the US has a standing in global politics today incomparable to that of any other state in modern history: ‘American global primacy is unique in its scope and character’ (p194); moreover US global primacy is necessary to prevent the emergence of a destructive international anarchy which in the end would affect America itself deeply. Secondly, Eurasia is the centre-stage of world politics and the US needs to control the flow of events in Eurasia to sustain its primacy: ‘For America, the chief geopolitical prize is Eurasia…and America’s global primacy is directly dependent on how effectively its preponderance on the Eurasian continent is sustained… Eurasia is thus the chessboard on which the struggle for global primacy continues to be played’ (pp 30–31). Third, the US can not expect to keep this standing indefinitely. Given the exceptional circumstances connected to American primacy—it’s place in the world economy, its cultural appeal and democratic image, as well as the spectacular fall of its main rival, among other—make it inevitable that US influence will not last forever; indeed, ‘the window of historical opportunity for America’s constructive exploitation of its global power could prove to be relatively brief, for both domestic and external reasons’ (p210). Moreover, ‘global politics are bound to become increasingly uncongenial to the concentration of hegemonic power in the hands of a single state. Hence, America is not only the first, as well as the only, truly global superpower, but it is also likely to be the very last (p. 209). The point for America, then, is to forge an ‘enduring framework of global geopolitical co-operation’; (p. 214) in other words, to use the short window of historical opportunity to further the current situation of ‘relative global peace’ into a more co-operative world and hence prevent the emergence of a new global anarchy with potentially disastrous consequences.

Our interest here, naturally, is where the Caspian region, and in particular the Caucasus fits into this picture. If control of—or at least a major influence over—
Eurasia is indeed the aim of American strategy, Central Asia is interesting by its sheer geographical location at the Centre of Eurasia. Indeed, the region forms a major opportunity for influence for a number of reasons. First of all, the states of the Caspian region have recently acquired their statehood and therefore their paths to the future have not crystallized; they remain malleable by regional powers in their neighbourhood. It is from this perspective only logical that the US, with an interest in shaping the future of Eurasia, would seize this opportunity to prevent its challengers from spreading the influence and instead anchor its own. A simple look at the map proves that the region is indeed strategic: it borders Russia, China, Iran, Turkey, and Afghanistan; Pakistan and India also have stakes in the region although they lack a border with it. Most of the geopolitical players of Asia are hence represented, and often in competition rather than in concert. Giandomenico Picco noted that ‘the Caspian derives part of its appeal because of its neighbours…the Caspian is perhaps more important because of the value given to it by its different neighbours.’

By the very multiplicity of the interested players, however, none of them is able to exert a preponderant interest. The previous three chapters have shown that the former hegemonic power Russia has failed in regaining its primacy in the region; Turkey very briefly thought to replace it but almost immediately understood that its relative geographical distance, economic condition and internal problems made this impossible; and Iran has not even considered pressing for such a role, much like China. However, it is interesting to note that a coalition of America with one or more of these states would have a significantly better position to achieve a dominant influence. Currently the candidate for this partnership role is clear: America’s reliable ally for half a century, Turkey. The Turkish-Israeli alliance provides America with two rock anchors in the Middle East, whose interests are remarkably similar and whose co-operation, as mentioned in chapter seven, is increasingly strong. Israel’s own activities in the Caucasus are remarkable; the largest Israeli embassy in a Muslim country was inaugurated in Baku in 1997. And indeed, while defining the five geopolitically pivotal states of Eurasia, four of them are in the neighbourhood of the Caucasus. Besides South Korea as a Far Eastern Anchor for America, Brzezinski notes the crucial importance of Turkey, Iran, Ukraine and Azerbaijan. In Eurasia, then, Brzezinski notes that ‘the states deserving America’s strongest geopolitical support are Azerbaijan, Uzbekistan, and (outside this region) Ukraine’ (p149).

Conclusions

In America’s larger strategy, Central Eurasia is a singular opportunity to create a new region of democracy and stability in the middle of Asia, the establishment of which would imply a great success in America’s attempts to create the cooperative Eurasia that would be the base for future world politics. Direct and tangible interests are access to the new markets of the region, with a population that is approaching 100 million people—markets for Western goods but also
sources of energy, minerals and cotton, in a first stage before the industrialization of these countries. However, one can also imagine that a co-operative, market-oriented and democratizing—one should not have illusions of any rapid creation of Western-style democracies in the region—Central Eurasia would have a considerable influence on the developments in its surrounding regions. It seems that certain circles in the US may see Central Asia as a future bastion of stability in Central Asia; the term has indeed already been used for Uzbekistan. Unless American involvement, which is instrumental in deciding the balance among the interested actors in the region, occurs there is a clear risk for a further Balkanization of the area, given the existing internal divisions and possible foreign manipulation. Brzezinski hence coined the illustrative term ‘Eurasian Balkans’ for the entire region, due to its complex ethno-religious and socio-political characteristics. To name but one example, the centre of political Islam in the world has moved from Iran to Afghanistan and its support base, Pakistan; the fear of the Afghan Taleban movement’s ability to destabilize the southern states of Central Asia—much as it has been a main reason of the destabilization of Pakistan—is real and has given reason for great worry in many regional states. But, as Picco notes, it is the very volatility of the developments in and around the region that has increased its importance, including to the United States:

this simply makes the Caspian more and more relevant because so many options are thus opened, as are so many alternatives and so many combinations. Ideological, religious or cultural paradigms are nowhere to be found in the Caspian states. It is possibly their strength and potential in an as yet to be defined new international order. It is also why beyond any oil and gas figures the appeal of the Caspian currently remains so strong. The shifting sands around the region make it so important to know where the region itself will decide to move… And the result will have an influence far beyond the shores of the Caspian. For these reasons, it will continue to attract those who economically or politically believe they can play a role. But, as Picco notes, it is the very volatility of the developments in and around the region that has increased its importance, including to the United States:

The factor that makes the South Caucasus the most strategically crucial region of the Caspian to America is the very question of access. Central Eurasia is important partly because of its location; however it is its very location which makes access to it by a non-contiguous power difficult. In the current alignments of power, the US road into the Caspian Sea and Central Asia passes through Turkey and the Caucasus; from a Caspian state perspective, the question of oil pipelines westwards becomes crucially important to safeguard true independence and freedom of action vis-à-vis Iran and Russia, in particular: dependence on pipelines through either Russia or Iran would imply also a political and strategic dependence on these states, most likely resulting in these states slipping into the sphere of influence of the Russian-Iranian alliance. This is the central reason why the US has so ardently pushed for the creation of the Baku-Ceyhan pipeline, as underlined by the signing of the Ankara Declaration on Turkey’s republic day, 29
October 1998. The bottleneck of the pipeline question, as well as of the prospect of American, Turkish and other western influence in the region, is the South Caucasus. With a Russian-Armenian-Iranian axis ranging in a north-south direction and a US-Turkish-Azerbaijani-Uzbek alignment in the East-West direction, the crucial region is the Caucasus and the crucially strategic country is Georgia.

As a chain is no stronger than its weakest link, it is interesting to analyze the situation in and threats to Azerbaijan and Georgia. In terms of political orientation, both states’ leaderships have a firm popular support for their pro-Western and anti-Russian stance. Both regimes have, nevertheless, experienced violent attempts to alter the political scene of the respective countries. Coups against Heydar Aliyev in Azerbaijan took place in 1994 and 1995; nevertheless Aliyev seems to have established a firm control over the government apparatus and also over the territory of the republic, that is the territory that is not occupied by Armenian forces. In Georgia, Eduard Shevardnadze has been less successful in asserting control over his country’s territory, as has been described in chapter four. The Russian military bases remain a player within Georgian territory which is outside the government’s control; moreover rebels in western Georgia remind the world of their existence by staging mutinies with irregular intervals, and the Armenian population of Javakheti remains elusive to Tbilisi’s control.

The two narrowly failed assassination attempts against Shevardnadze raise the question of outside involvement, and the assertion that outside forces are trying to destabilize Georgia does not seem all too far-fetched. Without stability and a pro-western regime in Georgia, Azerbaijan would be cut off from its Western allies. Hence while it might seem difficult at the present moment—that is while President Aliyev is politically active and well—to destabilize Azerbaijan effectively, destabilizing Georgia would make very much the same damage to the ‘Western’ alliance in regional terms. Hence, while Brzezinski is fundamentally right in calling Azerbaijan a geopolitically pivotal country, equal attention should be paid to Georgia. While Brzezinski, at the time, seems to have missed this point, recent developments show that the US policy-makers have not. Indeed, in 1997–98, Georgia was given increased attention from the US; there are attempts to enact legislation in Congress that would make Georgia a recipient of US aid almost on par with Armenia. Visiting American senators told their Georgian audience that they were trying to push through a bill allocating over $100 million in annual aid; nevertheless such legislation has had difficulties in passing through Congress.

As a whole, the developments of the last few years have shown that the United States are in the Caspian region to stay; something which neighbouring countries have not failed to notice: as Ferai Tınç noted in the Turkish daily Hürriyet, the US has definitively abandoned a policy of viewing the Caucasus and Central Asia as a Russian backyard. This fact has substantial consequences for the Caucasian states. The new general geopolitical situation that these developments entail is most
worrying for Armenia. Due to its disputes with Azerbaijan and Turkey, Armenia is forced—to a large degree against its will—into a closer alliance with Russia and Iran, while necessarily facing the gradual worsening of its relations with the US. It seems as if Armenia’s freedom of movement is restricted in a way that it can not remedy in the short term: it has no way to distance itself from the Russian-Iranian alliance, lest it surrender all it claims on Azerbaijan and subordinates to Turkey, neither of which is likely to happen or be accepted by Armenian public opinion. On the other hand, Georgia and Azerbaijan can now contemplate a significantly more promising international environment. Indeed, they are now considerably closer to achieving the aim they have been aspiring to since independence: a strategic relationship with a state strong enough to safeguard their security and independence from Russia.

Whereas most Western observers would simply laugh scornfully at Georgians who hope that their country will be a NATO member in five to ten years, or to Azeris who wish to see American or NATO bases on their territory as soon as possible, the speed at which the US engagement of the Caucasus and Central Asia has developed warrants the question: Why not? With Russia increasingly unable to project its power and influence beyond or even within its borders, and embroiled in an economic crisis of a magnitude Westerners often have difficulty in comprehending, it nevertheless maintains a capability to destabilize its southern neighbours. But it is difficult to disagree with Vafa Guluzade that Russia ‘could do no more than complain about the idea; people like Zhirinovsky will shout and cry, but that is all.’ A quick survey of US strategy in the second half of the 20th century has makes it clear that the US prefers to keep military forces in the vicinity of regions it considers important for its national interests. The Caspian region, by its geography, does not allow for the most discrete deployment of military power—aircraft carriers—but requires a true military base of the type deployed in Inçirlik in Southern Turkey, which happens to be the most nearby American base to the Caspian Sea.

In view of recent US policies, a military base in the Apsheron peninsula—overlooking the Caspian Sea as well as the entire Caucasus—must indeed seem tempting. Whether the US will eventually deploy military units in the territory of the former Soviet Union or not, whether it will extend its security umbrella to Azerbaijan and Georgia or not, one fact is certain: US involvement is about to reach a point where it becomes irreversible; for simple reasons of international prestige as well as for the sake of real national interests, the United States is not likely to step back from its increasingly bold commitment to strategic involvement in the Caucasus and Central Asia. Meanwhile, the Russian-Iranian-Armenian alliance is only strengthening as a result of this very development, prompting the US to extend ever stronger security guarantees to friendly states, such as Turkey, Georgia, Azerbaijan and Uzbekistan. American influence in the Caucasus is steadily growing; however its influence remains largely unacceptable to both Iran and Russia. The stage is set for an increasingly serious struggle for
control over and influence in the region, the consequences of which remain to be seen.
The chapters in this study have sought to examine present as well as potential conflicts in the Caucasus, and the role of the four main outside actors that influence events and developments in this distressed region of the world. Each chapter, except the first two chapters, has concentrated upon a specific conflict or country; however, most events and processes treated in one chapter have a bearing or influence on the issues of most other chapters. The Chechen war would hardly have happened—at least not in the manner it did—had it not been for the unrest and separatist conflicts in the South Caucasus; likewise, Russia’s policy might have looked different had Turkey not been in a process of increasing its military capabilities while desiring to extend its economical and political influence over the southern rim of the former USSR. One can also argue, for example, that a resolution to one of the conflicts in the South Caucasus will have distinctive implications for the negotiating process in the other two.

The reason is naturally that the Caucasus is a region; but more than being a region, it is a security complex: the national security of one of the Caucasian states cannot realistically be considered apart from that of the other two. As far as the three regional powers are concerned, the security of the Caucasus does have a direct bearing upon the national security of these states that justifies their inclusion into the security complex. This is most noticeable as regards Iran and Russia: Iran’s security and in the extension its very survival in its present shape is inextricably linked to the situation in Azerbaijan and the question of the Azeris of Iran. Russia sees control over the South Caucasus as one of the most important elements in its national security, to such an extent that players within Russia have been propelled to conduct a series of direct interventions with a view to influence the leaderships and policies of these states. Most notably, the situation in the North Caucasus, an integral part of the Russian Federation, is directly affected by the situation in the South Caucasus. A loss of Russian control over the region is seen in Moscow as a severe setback in Russia’s ambition to remain a great power with a capacity to project its influence towards the Middle East; to this aim, Russia has relied upon its relationship with Armenia as an anchor in the Caucasus.

With respect to Turkey, Armenian potential territorial claims seem to be the most direct threat to Ankara, but certainly manageable. However, the Caucasus
matters to Turkey in other ways. First of all, perhaps ten to twelve million Turkish citizens—a sixth to a fifth of the population—claim Caucasian ancestry; the importance of North Caucasian, Georgian or Azerbaijani lobbies in the Turkish political sphere should not be underestimated. Moreover, the Caucasus represents an opportunity for Turkey to increase its influence in regional and world politics. With a doubtful relationship to the western European states to which Turkey has been oriented for the last 150 years, Turkey is pondering its prospects as a regional power in its own right; as such it needs to exert a certain amount of influence in the Balkans, the Mediterranean, and the Middle East, but also in the Caucasus and Central Asia. The Azerbaijan connection is its ticket to do so, currently enforced by its close relationship with Georgia without which its influence would be strictly limited. By contrast, it would certainly be an exaggeration to claim that the national security of the United States cannot be realistically considered without accounting for the Caucasus; however the US has found the region important enough for its national interests and hence in the prolongation of its national security to step up its presence there dramatically. The US, by means of its geographical distance, is the only power which has the option of withdrawing from the Caucasian ‘game’. All other states are compelled to take the Caucasus into account in the consideration of their national security.

Taking as a background the analyses made in the previous ten chapters, the purpose of this chapter is to put the Caucasus back in the context of the security complex in order to achieve a more coherent view of the regional dynamics. Beyond this, the role of the Caucasus is examined in the emerging strategic alignments on the Eurasian continent already described, as is the geopolitical significance of the Caucasus in world politics. Finally, the implications of the geopolitical situation and relationships for conflict resolution and conflict propensity are analyzed.

The security complex revisited: Caucasian geopolitics

While analyzing insecurity in the Caucasus, one is struck by the existence of two contending views regarding the roots of conflict. One perspective is to view the existing conflicts as a direct result of the destabilizing and deceitful policies of the four great powers that seek influence in the area. Very often, Russia is specifically blamed as the origin of all evil. While the actions of great powers have done their part to keep conflicts alive and perhaps also, intentionally or not, been a factor in their eruption, an explanation centreing on external factors cannot bring about a complete and satisfactory understanding of these conflicts. In fact, it is also possible to view the geopolitical situation in the Caucasus from a perspective centreing on the conflicts themselves; accordingly the conflicts are rooted in the relations between the concerned peoples and not in the actions of great powers; moreover the regional alignments and interrelationships between outside players are made possible by the existence of these conflicts. In other words, the conflicts
of the Caucasus are what have made possible the existence of regional alignments, which have developed along the lines of confrontation defined by the conflicts.

There is certainly some truth in both explanations, and the degree of truth varies from one conflict to another; for example, the conflict in Chechnya can hardly be ascribed to any foreign interference but rather to the developments within the two conflicting parties—Russia and Chechnya—and in the relationship between them. The eruption of armed conflict in Abkhazia, by contrast, seems to have much to do with the role played by Russia in the region. In the case of Nagorno-Karabakh, both interpretations work: one as the conflict being the work of Russian provocation, and one that sees the conflict as conditioned by the developments in and between Azerbaijan, Nagorno-Karabakh, and Armenia—and moreover, which views the Karabakh conflict as the de facto central defining factor in the Eurasian strategic alignments. In this view, the zero-sum relationship between Azerbaijan and Armenia is what has enabled foreign actors to get a foothold in the Caucasus by supporting one state against the other, leading hence to the alignment of forces around the two parties to the conflict. Here an attempt is made to analyze the region in two interconnected spheres: the first being the inner triangle Armenia-Azerbaijan-Georgia; and the second the outer triangle—which through time changes into a rectangle—of Russia, Turkey, Iran as well as increasingly the US.

The inner triangle

The relationship between the three Transcaucasian states has been touched upon in various chapters but deserve to be explored further here. As mentioned already in chapter one, the relationship between Armenia and Azerbaijan hardly deviates from the pattern of a zero-sum game. Anything that is seen as to the advantage of Azerbaijan is perceived as to the detriment of Armenia, and vice versa. This said, it is certain that both states have been forced to take part in various joint projects, typically large-scale transportation or development projects such as the Europe-Caucasus-Central Asia transport corridor project sponsored by the European Union. Whereas Azerbaijan does its best to minimize Armenian participation in all projects to which it is a party, this approach has only been partially successful.

Generally speaking, however, the rules of the zero-sum game are widely applicable to the relations between the two countries. This is naturally most notable in the military balance; arms shipments from Russia to Armenia are perceived as a direct threat to Azerbaijan. Armenia would see any strengthening of Turkish-Azerbaijani military co-operation in the same way; moreover Armenia would be forced to see the strengthening of Azerbaijan’s finances and oil income to that country as a threat to its security as it would mean a possibility to acquire armament that would offset Armenia’s military advantage over Azerbaijan. As a result the zero-sum game is applicable to economics as well; one of Azerbaijan’s main political weapons against Armenia has been and remains the embargo of that country that Baku enforces together with Ankara. As a result any improvement of
the Armenian economy is detrimental to Baku’s relative position in the ‘dyad’. The destabilizing consequences of this nature of the Armenian–Azerbaijani relationship are easy to imagine, especially with respect to the involvement of regional powers in the Caucasus. Azerbaijan’s foreign policy aims are first, to export its oil through a western pipeline that passes neither Russia nor Iran; second, to build up its economy and military to achieve a return of Nagorno-Karabakh and its adjacent areas through coercive diplomacy and, if that fails, military means; and third, to become the hub of the Caucasus and Central Asia, being the focal point that links Central Asia to the Caucasus, Turkey, and Europe.

As a result Azerbaijan’s primary ally is and will remain Turkey; however by virtue of its strategic importance Azerbaijan hopes to develop its economic, political, and military links to the US. Currently Azerbaijan seems to be relatively successful in developing its importance in world politics. In contrast, Armenia has had no choice but to enter into an alliance with Russia and Iran, both powers which desire to prevent what Azerbaijan seeks to achieve, namely increased Turkish and American influence and an East-West corridor that will decrease their relative importance. As a result Armenia, which in the early 1990s managed to maintain good relations with Russia, Iran as well as the US, now faces the consequences of allying increasingly openly with Russia and Iran: its relationship with the US is bound to lose some of its initial glow. The US increased interest in Azerbaijan, and the US criticism directed towards Armenia as regards the Nagorno-Karabakh question testify to this.

For its part, Georgia is put in a difficult position by the Armenian–Azerbaijani zero-sum relationship. Whereas Georgia has an interest in keeping good relations with both states, it has for a number of reasons developed better relations with Azerbaijan than with Armenia. First of all, Baku is without question the economic hub of the Caucasus, and arguably the economic centre of the entire southern rim of post-Soviet states. By virtue of its oil resources and its geographical position, occupying as it does the entire Caspian Sea shore of the Caucasus, Azerbaijan holds a central position in the various transport corridor arrangements that are planned or being put into practice. Georgia, on the other hand, is one of the two possibilities for transport and other links between Azerbaijan and Turkey and the West, the other being Armenia. Because of the impossibility of Armenian–Azerbaijani co-operation in any field, Georgia’s role in TRACECA and other projects has risen dramatically. For example, if a Baku–Ceyhan pipeline were to be built it will most probably cross Georgian territory, despite the fact that a drawing of the pipeline through Armenia makes more economic and political sense, were it not for the Karabakh conflict.

In this sense, Georgia has a vested interest in Armenia’s economic isolation. Furthermore Georgia shares with Azerbaijan the problem of separatist minorities that control part of both countries’ territories. As a result Tbilisi and Baku have an identical stance with regard to minority questions; both argue for the preservation of territorial integrity and vehemently deny minorities the right to secession. With regard to Chechnya, both states have in principle upheld the territorial integrity
of Russia for this reason; Azerbaijan has nevertheless developed direct relations with Johar-Gala, mainly or the sake of oil exports though Chechnya; Georgia has only lately begun to improve its relations with Chechnya. The united Georgian-Azerbaijani stance has put Georgia on a collision course with Armenia as regards principles of international law, but, more importantly, Georgia and Azerbaijan share an aversion for Russia’s attempts to dominate the South Caucasus and Moscow’s interference into the internal matters and foreign policies of both states.

In contrast, Armenia is seen by Georgia as siding with Russia, as being a sort of a Russian Trojan horse in the Caucasus. This has led to at times strained relations between Yerevan and Tbilisi, and the increasingly strong ties between Azerbaijan and Georgia both bilaterally and within the framework of the GUAM alliance (that includes a military component) has done nothing to defuse existing tensions. But at the same time, Georgia needs to keep working relations with Armenia for a number of reasons. Indeed, Georgian officials often speak of the danger of isolating Armenia. For Georgia, a direct threat to its security comes from the Armenian minority in Javakheti, as seen in chapter four. Worsened relations with Armenia could very well also worsen the relationship between the Georgian central government and the Armenians of Javakheti with possibly dire consequences, a danger that is seen as clear and present in Tbilisi. Geopolitically speaking, Georgia sees the disunity among Caucasian states as a main factor that enables foreign actors to get a foothold in the region, especially Russia. Instead, Georgia would prefer to see a united stance among the three states that would prevent destabilizing interference by outside actors. Isolating Armenia would only mean making it even more dependent on Russia and Iran, and increase the foothold of these states in the Caucasus, something that would be detrimental to Georgia’s security. Georgia’s main fear being Russian intervention in its affairs, it has desperately tried to attract Western, especially American, interests that would increase Georgia’s value to the West and hence enhance its security. Tbilisi has also found it shares many common interests with Ankara: while Turkey is eager to get access to Azerbaijan and Central Asia through Georgia, Georgia is equally eager to get access to the west through Turkey. Moreover Turkey as a NATO member and because of its own military capabilities can prove to be if not a guarantor, at least a factor in enhancing Georgia’s security. The joint navy manoeuvres that have taken place recently should be seen in this light.

To sum up, the three Caucasian states face very different security predicaments and foreign policy orientations that are conditioned by their history and geography as well as plain Realpolitik. It is important to note that two of the states saw a regional power as incomparably more threatening to its respective national security than the others: for Georgia, Russia was and remains a direct threat to its sovereignty by manipulating internal divisions between the Georgian government and its autonomous regions, and in fact putting into question Georgia’s existence as a truly independent state; by contrast, Iran and Turkey were seen as incomparably less threatening to Georgia’s national security. For Armenia, the chief threat was Turkey, initially more for historical than actual reasons; of course
Turkey’s siding with Azerbaijan increased threat perceptions. Armenia actually saw Turkey not only as a threat to its national security, but in a sense also as a threat to the survival of the Armenian nation, due to the Armenian perception of Turkey as a state with genocidal intentions. Whereas this perception was grossly exaggerated and even inherently mistaken, the perception itself is important as perceptions of reality, and not reality, controls policy. The threat emanating from Turkey was seen as so strong that Armenia actively cultivated security relations with both other major powers, chiefly Russia but also Iran and enlisted forces in America to decry Turkey’s intentions.

Azerbaijan’s situation was actually even more complicated: it saw both Iran and Russia as threats to its security, and could rely only on Turkey to support it—a major problem here being that Azerbaijan is cut off from Nakhchivan by Armenian territory and does therefore not have a continuous land connection to Turkey. Azerbaijan hence feels squeezed between three hostile states: Iran, Russia, and Armenia, all of which are in a position to threaten Azerbaijan’s security both by military means and by preventing Azerbaijan from bringing its oil to the market. Iran, as viewed in chapter eight, does not desire an oil-rich Azerbaijan on its northern border; Russia would consider an independently acting and wealthy Azerbaijan as an impediment to its control over the South Caucasus; finally Armenia’s stance needs no explanation. From this perspective, it becomes clear how desperate Azerbaijan is to establish military links with a foreign state, the only realistic option at present being Turkey. The discovery of Russia presenting Armenia with an entire arsenal, as mentioned in chapter ten, increased Azerbaijani fears; nevertheless the announcements in late 1998 of the deployment of S-300 missiles and upgraded MiG-29 jets in Armenia created an acute sense of insecurity in Baku, which resulted in the sensational demand for US military bases made by presidential adviser Guluzade.

The outer tri-quadrangle

The situation in the Caucasus hence forms an extremely unstable security complex, in which two states are existing in a ‘no war, no peace’ situation currently characterized by unsuccessful negotiations, an arms race, and increasing international involvement. Undoubtedly, an analysis of the security situation in the Caucasus must centre on the Azerbaijani-Armenian relationship, which at present is the situation that has the highest potential to degenerate into a regional conflagration. Although the conflict between Georgia and Abkhazia is perhaps more unstable at present, it does not carry the same destructive potential, as it does not involve two independent states. Moreover, regional and international powers do not have anything close to the same involvement in the conflict. Indeed, the main interests of foreign powers centre around Azerbaijan and Armenia. They are, so to say, the centre of the security complex.

As noted in earlier chapters, Turkey entered the Caucasus with great hopes in 1992, whereas Russia and Iran took on a reactive policy aimed primarily at
preventing the expansion of Turkish influence. Russia then seemed to pursue a relatively successful policy of reintegrating the South Caucasus into its sphere of influence; Iran was developing its relationship with Armenia but wary of Azerbaijan, and comparatively uninterested in Georgia. The US did not ‘join the game’ for real until 1997. Russia’s policy of intervention was aimed at reasserting control over recalcitrant Georgia and Azerbaijan; however, the consequences of its actions may turn out to have been the exact opposite. As Henry Hale has noted:

In virtually every case where the USSR or Russia directly intervened… this intervention galvanized support around the very nationalists that it sought to crush… While [such] machinations produced immediate results consistent with Russian strategic aims…the gains again proved to be superficial. Aliyev…has in fact become Russia’s foremost political nemesis in the Caspian region, skillfully playing his restricted hand to bolster Azerbaijan’s independence and economy… Shevardnadze also has proved challenging for Russia, turning an even weaker hand into a winning one and positioning his tiny republic as the key link in efforts to export the anticipated riches of the Caspian basin to western markets Russia’s misguided Machiavellism, then, has produced only superficial integration and has merely deepened a resentment that is undermining the chances for true integration in the long run.¹

In fact, Shevardnadze and Aliyev have basically done all they have been able to and more, to distance their countries from Russian control after consolidating their rule. In the mid-1990s, then one could observe two emerging triangular alignments—or perhaps better defined as states with convergent interests—among the six states of the security complex: The Moscow-Yerevan-Tehran and Ankara-Tbilisi-Baku triangles. At first sight there is a balance, with three states in each; but a closer look shows that the Russian-Iranian-Armenian alignment has a clear advantage over the Turkish-led alignment, by having two regional powers and one smaller state, instead of the opposite. Furthermore, while Georgia was politically in favour of the Turkish-led alignment, it was a country emerging from chaos and under heavy Russian influence. In this sense Turkey’s initial failure to assert itself in the post-Soviet Caucasus is clearly understandable in terms of the balance—or imbalance—of forces that reigned. Turkish influence was comparatively limited in the Caucasus as Russia managed to be, in fact, a sort of arbiter of events in the region.

By 1999, a dramatic change in the balance of forces had occurred. This can be directly linked to the addition of the United States as a player in the security complex, joining Turkey’s efforts to break through the Russian-Iranian resistance to Western involvement. The consequence of American interest in the Caucasus has been a boost in Turkey’s renewed efforts to assert its role in the region. Indeed, the US ‘evened up’ the balance among the now four regional powers to a
situation with one major and one secondary power one each side—Russia and the US and Iran and Turkey respectively.

**Caucasian strategic alignments in Eurasian geopolitics**

In fact, the two alignments that are the object of analysis can be drawn as a West-East and a North-South axis. The North-South axis consists of Russia, Armenia and Iran; the West-East axis ranges from the US over Turkey and Georgia to Azerbaijan, with the central Asian extension of Uzbekistan. The current balance of forces enables the West-East axis to have access to the Caspian Sea and Central Asia through Georgia and Azerbaijan. Indeed, Georgia emerges geographically as the crucial player in the competition between these two alliances. This conclusion is derived from two interrelated circumstances. The first is that Georgia is inherently more unstable than Azerbaijan in a variety of ways. Georgia has several minorities with which the central government has a hostile relationship, concretely Azerbaijan has managed its relationship with the Talysh and the Lezgins whereas Georgia’s problems with the Armenians and with Ajaria remain. In fact the Georgian government does not control the territory under its jurisdiction in the way Aliyev’s regime does. Moreover, Azerbaijan’s stability is derived in no little proportion from the expected oil revenues that also attract considerable foreign interest and investment to the country.

The second and most important circumstance that makes Georgia crucial are the Russian military bases on Georgian territory, bases that do not exist in Azerbaijan. In fact Georgia can be said to de facto form an unwilling part of the Russian-led alliance in military terms; Russian troops are indeed present without interruption all across the Caucasus to the Iranian border, hence ensuring a continuity in the military sphere for the North-South alliance. However, the picture is totally different in the political sphere. In fact, Georgia is heavily Western-orientated and the Russian military bases exist against the wishes of the Georgian government, as described in chapters four and nine; Georgia in fact desires to have its security protected by NATO and not by Russia. The remarkable situation is hence that Georgia forms a part of the West-East alliance while having Russian military units on its soil. As long as Georgia remains ruled by a pro-Western regime, the creation of a corridor linking the US and Turkey to the Caspian Sea and beyond is possible. As a result, the extension of the influence of these countries into these regions is possible. Should a pro-Russian regime be installed in Tbilisi, however, the picture could change dramatically. Imagining Georgia coloured in dark gray, the West-East axis would be denied access to Azerbaijan, the Caspian Sea, and Central Asia; Azerbaijan would be cut off from the West and much more easily influenced by Russia and Iran. The increased American aid and military relations with Caucasian and Central Asian states testify to an understanding of the importance of regime stability in these states for the realization of the new ‘Silk Road’.
The strategic alignments centring on the Caucasus cannot be fully comprehended without viewing their place in the wider strategic alignments of Eurasia. The connections beyond the Caucasus of those strategic alignments can in fact be divided into the CIS and the Middle East.

GUUAM & the emergence of axes within the CIS

Within the framework of the CIS, the three Caucasian countries have logically fallen into different sides of alignments of states that have emerged in this organization. Armenia has been more closely drawn into a loose group of states which for different reasons work for the strengthening of the CIS, but share few other similarities or interests. Besides Russia, which is using the CIS as a tool to regain its lost influence over the former republics of the Soviet Union, this group includes Belarus, Kazakhstan, and Tajikistan, and to a certain degree also Kyrgyzstan.

As mentioned, however, these states share few geopolitical interests except for the strengthening of the CIS as an institution, and can therefore hardly be called an emerging geopolitical bloc except in the sense that they remain within Russia’s sphere of influence. Georgia and Azerbaijan, on the other hand, have become involved as dynamos of a much tighter grouping of states which share significant common interests, the so-called GUUAM, together with Ukraine Uzbekistan and Moldova. The acronym of the alignment is derived simply from the initial letters of the five countries. These five states all resist any further strengthening of the CIS at the expense of the sovereignty of member states; they see the CIS chiefly as an instrument of Russian influence over the republics, and want to broaden their international contacts westward and seek their security through western security mechanisms—mainly NATO. Another crucial characteristic these states share is the existence of a separatist autonomous minority on their soil, which they perceive as supported by Russia. In the cases of Georgia, Azerbaijan, and Moldova, the Abkhazian, South Ossetian, Karabakh Armenian, and Transdniestrian separatist movements respectively managed to achieve de facto independence, and negotiations are equally deadlocked in all cases. In Ukraine, secessionist conflict in Crimea was temporarily averted relatively narrowly, but the situation is far from certain.2

The relations between the five states have intensified at a very rapid pace. From simply having been an alliance of common interests in the framework of the CIS, the five have realized the potential of their co-operation, which has in turn led to a quiet institutionalization of their co-operation. Naturally, the five try to keep a low profile in view of Russia’s hostile attitude, and hence no institutions as such have been or will be created in the near future. Representatives of the five countries do, however, meet and co-ordinate policy at CIS summits.

GUUAM co-operation has also moved into the military field. The four countries then members of GUAM, before Uzbekistan’s accession, in 1998 announced plans to create a common peacekeeping battalion ‘under the UN
aegis’, in a clear attempt to avoid in the future the present reliance on Russian peacekeepers, especially in Georgia. In early December 1998, Georgian officials proposed that the four countries should form such a peacekeeping force to ‘promote regional security and guard the proposed export oil pipeline for Azerbaijan’s Caspian oil.’ The proposition also included a reference to its establishment within the framework of the Partnership for Peace programme of NATO. In September 1998, the four countries had also agreed to co-operate on the subject of border troops. Furthermore, and perhaps more importantly from a geostrategic perspective, GUUAM is attempting to act as a single entity in its relations with NATO in a so-called ‘19+5’ formula. Although such attempts are still little publicized, they are being actively promoted by the group.

In the economic sphere, Ukraine and Moldova are interested in a role in the export of Caspian oil over the Black Sea to Europe; for Georgia and Azerbaijan, the two form a ‘bridge’ linking the Caucasian states to Europe in more than one sense. The four hope to play a significant role in the plans to revive the ‘silk route’ from Europe to Asia—the TRACECA project, which will offer new and alternative supply routes to the existing Russian ones. Numerous bilateral agreements have been reached among the four countries, most recently on Ukrainian-Georgian economic co-operation in December 1998. As far as the Caucasus is concerned, Armenia is totally excluded from the co-operation schemes of GUUAM, for the simple reason of Azerbaijan’s presence in the group. In general, Azerbaijan and in particular Baku has become the political and economic hub of the entire Caspian region. With its oil resources and demographic strength, Azerbaijan is increasingly becoming the most powerful state in the Caucasus and thus has an increasing capacity to keep Armenia out of economic co-operation schemes, either with reference to GUUAM or with the outside world.

In terms of Azerbaijan’s wish for a strong link to Turkey and the West, this makes the function of Georgia crucial to Azerbaijan: it is its link to the West, to Europe, to Turkey. This state of affairs has interesting implications for the Georgian-Armenian relationship. In pipeline politics, Armenia is excluded by Azerbaijan as a candidate to carry oil to the Turkish Mediterranean coast as long as the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict remains unsettled. And as Iran is impossible because of American objections, Georgia has more or less ‘by default’ become the choice of the Baku-Ceyhan project. This project, and the Baku-Supsa pipeline, carry considerable importance for the strained Georgian economy. As a result, Tbilisi from one perspective has a vested interest in the isolation of Armenia, a more logical transportation route for many products, from Azerbaijan and Turkey.

A significant development was Uzbekistan’s accession to GUAM, which thereby became ‘GUUAM’. The scene and timing of the event was no less significant: NATO’s 50th anniversary in Washington, DC. Coupled with the gradual institutionalization of GUUAM which has quietly taken place ever since, the grouping may be developing into a major player in Eurasian geopolitics. Nevertheless, several elements of insecurity do remain. In fact, it is possible to
discern within GUUAM a core group consisting of Georgia, Ukraine and Azerbaijan, whereas Moldova and Uzbekistan are not as consistent in their adherence to consultations and co-operation within the group. Uzbekistan’s rapprochement with Moscow in late 1999 especially caused concern over Tashkent’s intentions, but the Uzbek leadership has since reiterated its commitment to GUUAM, most notably during a seminar in the US Congress on the grouping in May 2000.

The Middle East

Another interesting development that is notable is how the Caucasus is increasingly being integrated into the security situation of the Middle East. Indeed, the alignments that characterize the Caucasian security complex can actually be drawn further down into the Middle East along the same criteria: one set of pro-Western, proactive states and one group of anti-Western, reactive states. The most notable inclusion to be made is Israel. Israel’s role in the Caucasus and Central Asia is more important than most analysts acknowledge. In a recent study, Biilent Aras outlines the basic reasons that have brought certain Caucasian and Central Asian states closer to Israel: first, the mutual fear of the expansion of Islamic Fundamentalism and the desire to contain Iranian influence in the Muslim republics of the former Soviet Union; secondly, the fact that Israel’s powerful image as a ‘model state: small but politically and economically strong, and both democratic and secular’. Related to this, Israel’s close relationship with the US and the West is seen by the concerned states as a ‘gateway to the Western world in general, and to the United States in particular’. Finally, Israel’s economic assistance has been welcomed by these states, all of whom desperately seek foreign investment.5

Indeed, Israel is among the three main states investing in the Georgian economy, for example.6 Among the states of the region, Uzbekistan and Azerbaijan are the ones to have attracted most Israeli interest. As regards Azerbaijan, Israel from the start took on an overtly pro-Azerbaijani stance in the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict; Israel is thought by some to have supplied arms to Azerbaijan.7 Co-operation in the field of intelligence has also taken place; economically Azerbaijan is interested in Azerbaijan’s technological expertise, while Israel hopes that Azerbaijan oil could reach Israel through an under-water pipeline from Ceyhan once the Baku-Ceyhan pipeline is realized.8 Naturally, Iran, as well as its ally Armenia, have repeatedly warned Azerbaijan against pursuing and developing its ties to Israel; such threats and warnings have not impeded the ties, rather the opposite. An interesting recent development has been that that Jewish lobby in the American Congress has been increasingly supportive of Azerbaijan. Indeed, the Jewish lobby has come to a split with its one-time ally, the Armenian lobby, because of its support for Turkey and Azerbaijan.9 Former Azerbaijani foreign minister Hasanov was quoted as having stated that ‘we don’t conceal that we rely on the Israeli lobby in the US.’10 Importantly, the prospect
of Azerbaijan playing an ever-increasing role in the Israeli-Turkish military relationship seems inevitable. As Azerbaijan feels increasingly threatened by Iran, Russia and Armenia, it finds no choice but to answer by forming an alliance with Israel and Turkey in the military field, and by extension will benefit from the close links with the US that these states enjoy. Hence it seems likely that Israeli-Azerbaijani military co-operation will increase in the immediate future.

The Israeli connection has also been instrumental in bringing Syria closer into the Iranian-Russian alliance. Syria’s security concerns have been aggravated by the Turkish-Israeli relationship, and Syria is already aligned with Iran, and possesses good relations with Russian security structures since the time of the USSR. Moreover, ties with Armenia have continued to grow ever since that country’s independence, helped by the fact that several high-ranking Armenian officials—including former president Ter-Petrosyan—have close personal links to Syria. It is also not unlikely that the Greek government of South Cyprus will pursue closer links with Syria and Russia; the planned stationing of Russian S-300 missiles on the island was not an isolated event but a part of a larger pattern of increased Russian presence in Greek Cyprus. In addition, it should be noted that the once excellent relations between Greek Cyprus and Israel have plummeted to such a degree since Israel’s alliance with Turkey that the Israeli president cut short a state visit to the island and returned home. In summary, the strategic alignments that are observable in the Caucasus have to a considerable degree stitched together with the alignments existing in the Middle East; in a sense this is a part of the inevitable reintegration of the region with its historical contacts to its South.

Implications for conflict resolution

In early 1997, the OSCE announced that the United States and France had stepped in as co-chairmen of the Minsk Group to complement Russia and succeed Finland. At the time, increased American involvement in conflict resolution was seen as conducive to a possible breakthrough in negotiations; many observers joyfully predicted that Nagorno-Karabakh would find its solution before the end of 1997. For the reasons described in chapter three, this was not the case. In fact, the years 1997 and 1998 proved a setback for conflict resolution and a deterioration of the security climate in the Caucasus. The deadlock in the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict deepened, Abkhazia was the scene of guerrilla warfare and renewed ethnic cleansing in May 1998, and the situation in the North Caucasus keeps deteriorating.

Renewed war between Ingush and Ossetians was reportedly only narrowly averted in the fall of 1998, and violence and killings continue unabated in Prigorodnyi. Meanwhile, the situation in Chechnya deteriorated rapidly during 1999, with events in Dagestan and politics in Moscow contributing to a renewed war that still continues with no end in sight as this book goes to press. Several analysts see the possibility of fresh war breaking out between Azerbaijan and
Armenia within the next couple of years, although no one is really sure how such a war would erupt.

The fact, however, remains that low intensity conflict is continuing along the ceasefire line, which it should be mentioned is not monitored by any peacekeeping forces. The morale of the Azerbaijan side is increasing, whereas Armenia is confident that it can sustain the current situation, partly trusting Russian weapons and support but also because of its conviction—that is questionable—that ‘Azeris can’t fight’. If Azerbaijan manages to acquire enough weapons to challenge Armenia’s current military superiority, it is not impossible that it will try to conquer back at least some of the occupied territories surrounding Nagorno-Karabakh. Statements from Baku increasingly follow this line of thinking, and seem unlikely to abate as negotiations flutter and frustration in the country increases.

The situation, to sum up, is worsening in all but one conflict: that in South Ossetia. Indeed, this is the only conflict where substantial progress has been made if not so much in the political field, very much so on the grassroots level: refugees are returning in both directions, seemingly without major problems. South Ossetia may not be willing to cede its independence, but the situation is stable compared to all other conflicts. In both Abkhazia and Nagorno-Karabakh, however, the total lack of any contact at grassroots level is perpetuating mutual hostilities and impeding conflict resolution.

It is presently interesting to contemplate the existence of any link between the worsening of the general situation in the Caucasus and the increased geopolitical involvement of major players in the region. In fact, the positive implications of US involvement in conflict resolution have been largely absent. Indeed it the statement by an Armenian official that it is more difficult to make the Minsk group chairmen agree on a proposal than to bring Baku and Yerevan together is illustrative of this point: the involvement of foreign players is an important destabilizing factor. In fact, where Nagorno-Karabakh is concerned, the present situation can be compared to the years of Swedish and Finnish mediation that may not have brought about any direct solution to the conflict; however the Minsk group enjoyed a substantially wider respect among the parties and was politicized to a much lesser extent. Presently, the OSCE mediators are constantly suspected of having a hidden agenda behind their proposals. The trust between the parties to the conflict and the mediators has evaporated. Indeed, there is some truth in the assessment that the mediators are pursuing their own subjective interests and not the disinterested objective of peace in the Caucasus—when they do pursue peace, they pursue a peace on their conditions. Thus while it was believed that great powers could exert pressure on the conflicting parties to reach an understanding, the opposite was true simply because the mediators were suspected of having a hidden agenda.

Of the mediators, the most blatant example is Russia. It is indeed curious that a mediator in a conflict is party to a military agreement with one of the belligerent parties that can actually be considered as an alliance against the other party to the
conflict. In this perspective, the Azerbaijani mistrust of peace proposals originating from Moscow is clearly understandable. Likewise, Russia’s stance in the Abkhaz conflict hardly led to the building of trust. In particular, the Georgian side still sees Russia as a party to the conflict as much as a mediator; moreover the Abkhaz leadership has understood that Russia does not support Abkhazia unless doing so is in Russia’s interest. Should it for one reason or another fall in Russia’s interest to help Georgia, it would undoubtedly be ready to abandon Abkhazia. In this perspective, Russian mediation in that conflict is hardly conducive to a settlement of the conflict. In fact, Russian mediation in Caucasian conflicts has done more to perpetuate deadlock than to resolve it. To what extent this is because of an intention in Moscow to achieve this very aim can be debated; the fact nonetheless remains. Similarly, there is no reason to believe that unilateral American mediation would be far more successful. Although the US may be trusted to a higher degree than Russia by the conflicting parties, the fact that it has its own interest in the Caucasus automatically creates distrust and suspicion. As far as the OSCE is concerned, the fact that it lets the interest of great powers affect the mediation that is actually done in its name does not bode well for the reputation and prospects of the organization. The case is however that no states are particularly interested in mediating in these conflicts, and the OSCE remains an organization that can easily be dominated by the great powers, with little institutional tradition of its own.

An additional consequence of the involvement of great powers in the Caucasus is that it by itself decreases the interest of the conflicting parties in negotiations. Instead, the opportunity to ally with one or the other great power provides an alternative to the compromises that are necessary in negotiations, and the adverse domestic consequences that compromise may lead to. Enlisting a great power means a possibility to alter the balance of power in one’s own favour, which in turn would ideally enable the concerned state to make use of its acquired strength in coercive diplomacy, or at the very least to improve its negotiating position. In the worst case, it implies a possibility to settle the conflict militarily, or as in Armenia’s case to maintain the status quo with the support of the concerned great power. The emergence of strategic alignments may not lead to bloc politics as was the case in the cold war; states on different sides of the ‘divide’ do have common interests in certain fields—the Russian-Turkish economic relationship is an important factor mitigating conflict between the two—or may be competitors rather than enemies—the relationship between Turkey and Iran is not overtly hostile but wary.

Basically, few states are involved in a zero-sum situation; Azerbaijan and Armenia, Iran and the US, and perhaps Azerbaijan and Iran are, but the vast majority of existing dyads do include certain areas of common interest. Likewise the Armenian-Turkish relationship comprises several possibilities for improvement, especially in the economic field. Nevertheless, the very existence of these alignments—although not monolithic—has adverse consequences for conflict resolution. This is again clearest in the case of Nagorno-Karabakh where
the two states seem to have successfully enlisted two foreign powers on their respective side; Russia and Iran for Armenia, and Turkey and increasingly the United States for Azerbaijan. In this political environment, the achievement of a negotiated compromise is made increasingly difficult. While contemplating a solution, the two states realistically assess their chances of achieving a better deal in the future; for example, if Azerbaijan is counting on the deployment of Turkish or American troops in the country within some years, would it not be tempted to discard a proposed solution that would force it to considerable concessions if it believes its negotiating position would be strengthened in the future? Likewise, why would Armenia have accepted the step-by-step solution to the conflict in 1997—which would have meant giving up control over Karabakh—if it knew that Azerbaijan remains weak for the foreseeable future, and that Russian arms deliveries to Armenia will ensure its military superiority for several years at the least?

The truth is that the involvement of great powers in the Caucasus is likely to continue and to grow as the strategic importance of the region grows. Alexander Rondeli’s observation mentioned at the outset of this study has proved to be true: the Caucasian states lose rather than gain from their important geopolitical position. This involvement is likely to further aggravate the already complicated security environment of the region and make any durable peace even more elusive, as the great powers concerned are unlikely to pursue a unified policy that would make this possible. As far as conflict resolution is concerned, the only possible positive effect of the emerging regional alignments is the deterrent effect they may have in preventing a renewed war between Armenia and Azerbaijan. Indeed, Azerbaijan knows that if it starts a war against Armenia, that would be tantamount to starting a war against Russia. In contrast, Armenia does not want a war with Turkey and may therefore be deterred from preemptive strikes against Azerbaijan.

However, praising this type of alignment may be an exaggeration. The situation in and around the Caucasus does resemble the situation in Europe before the First World War, although certain crucial differences are present: first of all the fact that interlocking relationships across ‘bloc lines’ impede conflict, especially economic interdependence; secondly, the fact that these alignments are not developed and strong enough to ensure military action of one state for the defence of the other also impedes the degeneration of the situation to war; and finally, the very fact that an alliance system led to war in Europe in 1914 is likely to calm tensions and prevent escalation. Nevertheless, the danger of regional powers being dragged into local wars is present; the greatest risk is by far the Armenian-Azerbaijani conflict which is central to the alignments’ existence. Russia is certain to get involved in one way or another in a renewed war between the two; and given Turkey’s new assertiveness, it is unlikely that Ankara could or would stay as passive as it did in 1992–94.

The present situation, where powers with their own interests and agendas in the region are the main states involved in the resolution of the conflicts, is hence
unlikely to achieve any progress in the short term. To hope that the great powers now involved in the Minsk group will step back after failing to reach a solution is nevertheless not likely. Giving the mediation effort back to smaller, disinterested states would perhaps be a good idea in principle; however it would not change much in practice since the interests of the great powers and their involvement in the region would not disappear; as such it would mean a return to the unfortunate situation before 1995 when Russia and the OSCE conducted parallel mediation efforts. As far as the Karabakh conflict is concerned, the only real possibility to achieve a solution is direct face-to-face negotiations between the parties to the conflict, which in turn presumes a real intent to sue for peace instead of using geopolitics to one’s favour. Although foreign involvement would not be eliminated, the possibility to reach an agreement would arguably be greater with direct negotiations than with foreign mediation in the shape it exists today.

As noted, however, this requires both parties giving up the ambition to enforce their own solution to the problem through foreign-supported coercive diplomacy or military action; unfortunately such an approach is visible in none of the parties. When Levon Ter-Petrosyan seemed to adopt such an approach, he was forced to step down from the presidency, as viewed in chapter three; this event proved that the political climate in Armenia was not ready for concessions and compromise; it is very doubtful if the Azerbaijani political climate is ready for substantial concessions; it is close to certain that the one in Karabakh is not. As far as Abkhazia is concerned, the situation seems to be controlled by Russia. In a recent study, Edward Walker notes how in April 1997 Moscow all of a sudden declared it would comply with a several years old Georgian request to sever telephone lines between Abkhazia and Russia—just as the Abkhaz and Georgians were making substantial progress in direct negotiations without Russian mediation. The Abkhaz pulled out of the negotiations as a result, in a sense falling into the Russian trap. In the light of this type of event, it seems clear that if Russia is at all interested in peace, it is only on its own terms and with itself as an arbiter. This makes the recent indications, noted in chapter four, that Turkey may be considering stepping up its role in the Abkhaz conflict increasingly interesting. As noted, Turkey is a country that can be thought of as neutral by necessity in the Abkhaz conflict, due to its internal and international characteristics. That Russia would allow Turkey to take over a major role in the settlement of the conflict is nevertheless unlikely; Russia’s insistence on primacy in peace processes in the ‘near abroad’ does not seem to be subject to change. One could imagine a joint Turkish-Russian mediation, which will nevertheless be inherently unstable.

In this framework, it is no coincidence that the conflicts in Chechnya (in the inter-war period) and South Ossetia have been the ones to show most progress; in both cases face-to-face negotiations between the parties with limited foreign involvement have taken place. Acknowledging the differences between the conflicts, the negative correlation between foreign (especially Russian) involvement in mediation and progress in resolution has nevertheless been
absolute. Chechnya is the only conflict where a peace treaty was ever signed, which is notable in spite of Chechnya’s return to war; South Ossetia with substantial face-to-face negotiations and limited Russian involvement comes second; the Prigorodniy ranks third, with negotiations under Russian central government control; and last, Abkhazia and Nagorno-Karabakh with heavy outside involvement, Russian and Western.

**Conclusions**

The last few paragraphs have presented a gloomy prospect for durable peace in the Caucasus. With great power involvement in the politics of the Caucasus on the rise, geopolitics have taken a grip on conflict resolution that is unlikely to loosen in the near future. Is there any hope for a resolution of the Caucasian conflicts and for durable peace? There are, as has been mentioned in various chapters, opportunities for peace, slender as they may seem today. In the South Caucasus, the last few years have brought an insight on the part of secessionist minorities that the creation of new states or the alteration of borders are unlikely to be recognized by the world community. The Karabakh Armenians, Abkhazians and South Ossetians have all agreed in principle to remaining within the borders of Azerbaijan and Georgia respectively—what remains to be determined is the nature of the state; minorities advocating confederation based on ‘horizontal’ relations and the central governments proposing high-level autonomy. There is, hence, a possibility to achieve a compromise with innovative forms of relations between the minority and the central government. The concept of ‘common state’ was an attempt at such innovation that failed because of its inherent ambiguity and as it was seen, probably not without reason, as a Russian instrument to keep the Caucasus amenable to its hegemony. Another fact that has been mentioned earlier is the fact that the Caucasian conflicts were largely spared the systematic instances of ethnic massacres that were characteristic of the wars in Bosnia-Herzegovina and Rwanda. This is a factor that would help facilitate peaceful coexistence for the various peoples of the Caucasus that have been in conflict.

What needs to be stressed is the importance of confidence-building and of conflict resolution at a grassroots level. In the cases of Abkhazia and Karabakh, the only contacts between the two communities occurs at the top of the pyramids of the respective societies—through the political elites. The advances in South Ossetia prove this point. Such contacts, be they academic, cultural or economic, are the only option at hand to accomplish the crucially important task of reducing the importance of state borders. The rigidity of political boundaries and the importance accorded to them are a major problem in the Caucasus of today. The concept of regional integration is actually espoused by almost everyone in the region; nevertheless the insecurity of the region and the mistrust existing between its peoples are impeding the true development of integration. In this field, however, the influence of foreign players may be positive, especially that of
western Europe whose own strategic interests in the region are still limited. The creation of a Europe-Asia corridor through the Caucasus will indeed be an opportunity to qualitatively alter the political reality of the Caucasus. It will bring interaction, which will in turn bring integration. The only danger is if certain areas are isolated and hence turn into spoilers—the main fear is here naturally Armenia. One important possibility that may be brought about by economic and other incentives is to agree to disagree on the issue of status, as Moscow and Johar-Gala, and to a lesser degree Tbilisi and Tskhinvali have done, although the deadlock is likely to persist. Everyone is aware of the economic gains that stand to be achieved through the opening of borders: the possibility of Abkhazia becoming a world-class tourist resort is the most obvious example. However, thorny issues remain as obstacles to such an opening. Mainly, the fate of the millions of refugees in the region that are deprived of the right to return to their homes is a problem that towers above the prospects for durable peace.

While possibilities and opportunities exist, the geopolitical reality cannot be overlooked. The peace-building process is difficult enough without foreign powers advancing their own interests in the region; the presence and activities of such forces indeed substantially complicate the process of conflict resolution. The geopolitical alignments that cut through the Caucasus and actually can be seen as centring upon the region must nevertheless be dealt with as a reality; so is the case with the danger of renewed conflict that seriously threatens to engulf the Caucasus—and perhaps wider areas—into violence again. No comparable conflict in the world today arguably has the potential to involve as many regional and global powers as does the Armenian-Azerbaijani conflict. The primary aim of international efforts must hence be to prevent the re-escalation of the conflict; meanwhile, it is necessary to exploit the war fatigue that is widespread in the region and turn it into constructive, positive achievements in bringing the peoples of the Caucasus closer to one another. This endeavor will be time and resource-consuming and will not be easy; however, no one ever claimed it would be.
1. The Caucasus: a region in conflict

4. In the words of United States deputy secretary of state Strobe Talbott, speaking at a Testimony before the Subcommittee on Foreign Operations of the Senate Appropriations Committee, Washington, DC, March 31, 1998
8. Kipchak stems from another name for the khanate of the Golden Horde, the Kipchak khanate, which was set up by the grandson of Chingiz Khan in 1227 and remained the strongest power north of the Caucasus until the fourteenth century.
12. Ibid., p188.
13. Ibid., p190.
15. However Buzan notes that a complex may arise out of strong positive security links as well, as among the Nordic countries. (p194)

2.
The legacy of history: underlying factors in the Caucasian conflicts

3. The Cossacks, rather than being a nation or ethnic group, are an amalgamation of mostly Slavic but also Tatar and Turkic elements. They are a kind of soldier-farmers who agreed to settle in newly incorporated areas of the Russian empire, having a recognized autonomy from Moscow. As the Cossacks fought with Denikin’s White armies against the Bolsheviks they were never recognized by Soviet leaders. However, the 1990s saw a revival of their role of protecting the Russian southern flank, officially acknowledged by Yeltsin himself. Following this they have established paramilitary formation with semi-formal status. The Cossacks’ relation with Caucasian peoples have been precarious and continue to be an issue of potential conflict.
4. Ghazawat, from Arabic ghazwa (meaning ‘attack’ or ‘offensive’), military resistance led by religious leaders belonging to the Sufi brotherhoods. It is often connected with Muridism, or the ideology of the Sufi brotherhoods in the Caucasus, which has strong ideals of mountain clan society and freedom coupled with military jihad.
7. Ibid., p62.
9. It is interesting to compare this development with the present day. If Chechens (in particular) had any illusions about the Russians, these must be finally extinct now that what the Chechens perceive as a genocide against Caucasians has been carried out by tsarist, Soviet, and ‘Democratic’ Russia. Further, it can be expected that this feeling is not limited to the Chechens—this conclusion must have been drawn by other Caucasian peoples as well.
12. See Swietochowski, Russia And Azerbaijan; especially chapter one, ‘The Parting of the Ways’. 

14. See Swietochowski, *Russia And Azerbaijan*, p11. An illuminating example is that prior to Russia’s arrival in the area, Armenians formed around 20 per cent of the population of what is was called ‘Eastern Armenia’. Already by the 1830s, Armenians had formed a majority in the same region due to the de facto population exchange encouraged by Russia.


20. Most of the North Caucasian languages have no, or very little, literary tradition. Some of them are not even actively written down; this fact has led to the dominance of the Russian language in all spheres of life. For instance, even the Chechens, who have achieved a better protection of their native language than many others due to their large numbers, use Chechen in everyday matters but when discussing politics, much of the vocabulary used is Russian. (See Suzanne Goldenberg, *Pride of Small Nations: The Caucasus and Post-Soviet Disorder*, London, Zed Books, 1994.)


27. For an example of this argument, see Valery Tishkov, *Ethnicity, Nationalism and Conflict in and after the Soviet Union*, London, Sage, 1997.

28. The present author is conducting a systematic investigation into this question, scheduled to be published in 2001.


32. Interestingly, in certain instances the central government, in particular in states trying to build a civic national identity, argues that granting autonomy to a minority population would be tantamount to defining that population as second-class citizens. The Turkish government, for example, sticks to its refusal of granting special rights to citizens of Kurdish origin as it is claimed that they are already enjoying all existing rights as first-class citizens of the Turkish republic; any special rights would imply their separation from the rest of the population and by extension their diminishment to a second-class status. Whereas this argument may seem foreign to many western observers, it is necessary to pose the question whether such a high number of Kurdish citizens would have reached influential positions in government and private life (three out of Turkey’s nine presidents were of Kurdish origin) had the Kurds had an autonomous status.

33. See Lapidoth, 1996:203. By the same token it can nevertheless be argued that the refusal to grant autonomy could be an even stronger incentive for a state affiliated with the minority to intervene.


35. The decision to put both territories under Azerbaijani jurisdiction seems to have been conditioned also by the Armenian resistance to the Soviet advance in 1921, whereas the Azerbaijanis were more positively inclined towards the Bolshevik government. Hence the decision can be seen as a reward for the Azeris or as a punishment for the Armenians. Furthermore, the close relations that existed at the time between republican Turkey and the Soviet Union might have influenced Stalin to favour the Azerbaijani side, as Turkey was negative to any settlement that favoured Soviet Armenia, which could have potential territorial claims on Turkey.


42. Ibid, p385

43. Ibid.


51. Ibid., p.171.


58. See chapter eight.


3.

The Armenian-Azerbaijani conflict over Nagorno-Karabakh


28. An interesting fact is that Sunni Azeris tended to migrate to the Ottoman empire (a movement which initiated long before the Russian involvement) whereas Shi’i Azeris moved towards Shi’i Persia.

29. In this respect the role of Armenians in Baku, or in Istanbul for that matter, can be compared to the Jews in Eastern Europe, the Indians in East Africa, or the Lebanese in West Africa. These population groups all form hard-working and intelligent communities, which are characterized by internal cohesion and mutual support, which nevertheless live in isolation from the natives, from which they are distinguished in terms of language, ethnicity as well as religion. As these groups come to dominate business life, the tensions with the native population increase, as the latter see them as greedy, exploiting people, who help each other but whose behaviour is alien to the local customs and traditions.


44. Swietochowski, *Russia and Azerbaijan*, op. cit. [27], p76.

45. For an Armenian view of the British policies, see Mutafian, ‘Karabagh in the Twentieth Century’, op. cit. [31], pp 118–124. See also Altstadt, *The Azerbaijani Turks*, op. cit. [10], 91–96.


51. This policy of Stalin’s is clear if one observes the national delimitations in the Caucasus. An example is the regions of Karachai-Cherkessia and Kabardino-Balkaria. It seems, indeed, as the delimitation is designed purely to cause dissent in the regions that would enable Russia to control the regions. Karachais and Balkars are in fact in most respects one people speaking the same Turkic language; similarly Kabardins and Cherkesses are both Circassian peoples. Thus the result of the national delimitation is that both regions include two titular nationalities without ethno-linguistic affinities, which have mutual prejudices and historical antagonisms against each other. For an overview of the subject, see Pustilnik, Marina, ‘Caucasian Stresses’, in Transition, 15 March 1995, pp 16–18, or Smeets, Rieks, ‘Circassia’, in Central Asian Survey, no. 1, 1995.
53. See Altstadt, The Azerbaijani Turks, op. cit. [10], p127.
54. See Mutafian, ‘Karabagh in the Twentieth Century’, op. cit. [31], p134.
57. The border between Nakhchivan and Turkey did not exist at the creation of the Nakhchivan AR but came into existence due to a border alteration in the 1930s between Turkey and Iran which granted Turkey this border but according to which Iran was compensated further south for this territorial loss. The border alteration was undertaken due to a Turkish initiative with precisely this aim in mind.
60. Ibid., p146.
61. Suny, Looking Toward Ararat, op. cit., [43], p186.
65. See Mutafian, ‘Karabagh in the Twentieth Century’, op. cit. [31], p144.
67. See L’Humanité, 18 November 1987. See also discussion of this declaration’s importance in Arie Vaserman and Rami Ginat, ‘National, Territorial or Religious


71. See e.g. Paul Quinn-Judge, ‘Gorbachev treads fine line on Armenian issue. Soviet leader’s conciliatory line may fuel more nationalism, but crackdown would stymie reform’, Christian Science Monitor, 29 February 1988, p10.

72. See Bakinsky Rabochy, 24 February 1988, p2.

73. See Bakinsky Rabochy, 23 February 1988, p2.


76. See Pravda, 26 February 1988, p2.


78. See Libaridian, The Karabagh File, op. cit. [63], p87.


80. See Cullen, ‘A Reporter at Large’, op. cit. [52], p66.


82. Ibid.


86. See Cullen, ‘A Reporter at Large’, op. cit. [52], p66.


92. See Cullen, ‘A Reporter at Large’, op. cit. [52], p66.
93. See Mutafian, ‘Karabagh in the Twentieth Century’, op. cit. [31], p150.
95. Yérasimos conclusions on the mixture of Sumgait’s derisory atmosphere and the arrival of refugees are of this kind. ‘Caucase: Le Retour de la Russie’, op. cit. [91], p66.
97. See Nolyain/Moscow’s Initiation of the Azeri-Armenian Conflict’, op. cit. [90], p546.
102. Lee, ‘Protests In Azerbaijan’, op. cit. [100],
105. The claim of the Karabakh Soviet was based upon Art. 70 of the Soviet constitution, which affirms the right of peoples to self-determination. However, the claim was rejected on the basis of Art. 78, which states that ‘territory may be altered only by mutual agreement of the concerned republics, and subject to the ratification by the USSR’. Thus the rejection of the demand by the Azerbaijani Supreme Soviet made the proposition impossible according to Soviet law. The legal aspect of the issue is further discussed below.
110. See Mutafian, ‘Karabagh in the Twentieth Century’, op. cit. [31], p152.
111. See *Kommunist*, 16 June 1988.
114. See Altstadt, *The Azerbaijani Turks*, op. cit. [10], p198.
121. See *Current Digest of the Soviet Press*, vol. XL nos. 50 and 51.
129. See Izvestiya, 10 May 1989, p2.
134. See Saroyan, op. cit. [115], pp 22–25 for an excellent overview of the APF’s emergence.
140. See Kommunist, 3 December 1989, p1.
150. The Times, 28 May 1990.
157. See discussion in Vaserman and Ginat, ‘National, Territorial or Religious Conflict?’, op. cit. [67], p355.
162. Personal communication to author from several sources; e.g. Manvel Sargsian, senior analyst at the Armenian Centre of National and International Studies and former representativ of Nagorno-Karabakh to Armenia, January 1999.
164. Yérasimos, ‘Caucase: Le Retour de la Russie’, op. cit. [91], p65. (Translation from French is my own).


173. Human Rights Watch/Helsinki estimates the number to range between 200–1,000. See Human Rights Watch/Helsinki, *Azerbaijan: Seven Years of Conflict in Nagorno-Karabakh*.


175. Human Rights Watch/Helsinki, *Seven Years of Conflict*.

176. Human Rights Watch/Helsinki, *Seven Years of Conflict*, p70 among other.

177. See Human Rights Watch, *Seven Years of Conflict*, p5.


179. Ibid., pp 325–326.

180. In the expression of Thomas Goltz. Personal correspondence.


185. For an overview of the parliamentary debate that brought Aliyev to power and the intrigues surrounding the events, see the excellent and well-informed analysis in Goltz, *Azerbaijan Diary*, chapter 22, ‘The Crowbar—or Heydar Comes Home’, pp 366–92.


196. I am grateful to Thomas Goltz for pointing this out to me.
204. BBC Monitoring Service, 1 January 1994.
206. I am grateful to Thomas Goltz for pointing this out to me.
213. See e.g. Carey Scott in The Sunday Times, 9 October 1994.
224. See Rexane Dehdashti, ‘Nagorno-Karabakh: A Case-Study of OSCE Conflict Dispute Settlement Mechanism’, in Michael Bothe and Natalino Ronzitti (eds), The


226. Personal communications from diplomats and military officials in Minsk Group member countries.


228. Ibid., p92, quoting a ‘senior diplomat from a neutral member of the OSCE’.


233. This was made clear by Armen Baibourtian, deputy foreign minister of Armenia, to the author during an interview in Yerevan in October 1998.


235. See e.g. The book Azerbaijan Oil in the World Policy, or the Turkish version Dünya Siyasetinde Azerbaycan Petrolu, Istanbul: Sabah Yayinlari, 1998, officially stated as written by Heydar Aliyev himself, although his role most probably was more that of an editor. Another interesting example is the chronology of Aliyev’s time in power so far entitled Years Gane By, Years Ahead, in which the two only photographs covering two entire pages are both pictures of Aliyev with President Clinton.


238. RFE/RL Newsline, 1 and 20 October 1997.


243. See RFE/RL Reports, 2 and 3 February 1998.


255. See e.g. ‘Armenian, Azerbaijani Presidents Meet’, RFE/RL Newsline, 12 October 1999.
258. For an overview of the summit, see Turkish Daily News, 3 December 1996, pp A1 and A6. Although Armenia prevented a resolution affirming the territorial integrity of all member states from being adopted, thereby preventing an implicit recognition of Nagorno-Karabakh’s belonging to Azerbaijan, the final document of the meeting included a separate statement on Nagorno-Karabakh, which was relatively favourable to the Azerbaijani side, in fact directing hard criticism against the Armenian side for blocking the peace process.
261. Quotation from a ‘leading foreign ministry official’ in Stepanakert in MacFarlane and Minear, Humanitarian Action and Politics: the Case of Nagorno-Karabakh, p88
263. Interview with Baibourtian, Yerevan, October 1998.
264. Interview with Karl Naucleer, head of the International Federation of Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies representation in Baku, October 1998.
266. Interview with Baibourtian, Yerevan, October 1998
4. Georgia: from unitary dreams to an asymmetric federation?

1. Interview with Avtandil Imnadze, Tbilisi, October 1998.
3. Ibid., p21.
4. Ibid., p23.
9. Ibid.
11. Ibid., pp 192–195.
15. Ibid., p509.


28. See Suny, op. cit [26], pp 304.


33. Interview with Avtandil Imnadze, Tbilisi, October 1998.

34. See discussion in Suny, op. cit. [26], pp 309.


36. On this period, see Kipnis, op. cit [21], pp 208–211.

37. Suny, op. cit. [26], pp 309.


51. See Suny, op. cit. [26], pp 318–320.
57. A detailed overview of the society’s emergence and programme is found in Gerber, Georgien, pp 161–70.
64. The petition was signed not only by many Abkhaz but also by a number of other nationals, such as Greeks, Armenians and Russians. See Fuller (ibid.), p5.
65. ‘Ademon Nykhas’ means ‘Popular Shrine’ in Ossetian.
68. Ibid., p301.
69. Suny, op. cit. [26], p325.
70. See Goldenberg, Pride of Small Nations, p98.
71. Mkhedrioni stands for ‘Horsemen’, or ‘Chevaliers’.
83. Ibid., p21.
84. See Birich, ‘The Georgian/South Ossetian Territorial and Boundary Dispute’, p182.
89. Ibid, p45.
94. Slider, ‘Democratization in Georgia’, p162.
97. See Charles H. Fairbanks, ‘The PostCommunist Wars’, in Journal of Democracy, October 1995, for an overview of the peculiar, unprofessional character of the guerrilla forces such as those of Ioselani and Sigua in Georgia, or those of Surat Huseinov in Azerbaijan.


120. Ibid., p54.


130. For a short overview of the military events, see Altmann and Nienhuysen, *Brennpunkt Kaukasus*, pp 44–49.


139. See MacFarlane et al., *Armed Conflict in Georgia*, pp 11–12.


141. Quoted from MacFarlane et al., *Armed Conflict in Georgia*, p 12.

142. Quoted from MacFarlane et al., *Armed Conflict in Georgia*, p12.

143. In the words of Darrell Slider, ‘Democratization in Georgia’, p168.


152. See *Jamestown Monitor*, vol. 4 no. 124, 29 June 1998.


156. See Gachechiladze, *New Georgia*, p89.

157. The present author paid US$7 for a bus ticket from Tbilisi to Yerevan in October 1998. Buses also connect Tbilisi with Spitak, Gyumri (Leninakan) and Vanadzor (Kirovakan). Approximately three buses per day connect Yerevan and Tbilisi. Buses from Marneuli, on the other hand, leave for Bakii every hour of the afternoon and evening, for a price of US$10.


160. Ibid.


168. If Baku Tries to Isolate Armenia from Participation in Regional Projects, Yerevan Will Take Counter-Measures, Says Advisor of Armenian President’ in *Baku Daily News Summary*, 1 September 1998.

169. See Akinci, ‘Javakheti’.


171. Quoted in Akinci, ‘Javakheti’.


184. A comprehensive survey on peace-keeping in Georgia, on which this section draws heavily, may be found in MacFarlane et al., Armed Conflict in Georgia, pp 49–63.
185. MacFarlane et al., Armed Conflict in Georgia, p58.
187. MacFarlane et al., Armed Conflict in Georgia, p53.
188. ‘Report of the Secretary-General concernig the Situation in Abkhazia, Georgia’, 6 March 1995.
189. Dale, ‘The Case of Abkhazia (Georgia)’, p129.
190. Ibid.
192. See MacFarlane et al., Armed Conflict in Georgia, p75.
193. Report of the Secretary-General of the UN concerning the Situation in Abkhazia, Georgia, 6 March 1995.
196. The Georgian population having been drastically reduced to some 40,000 in April 1998—now again less—the Armenian and Russian population have declined substantially. Although numbers are not known, it is to be assumed that due to war and economic deprivation, the Armenian and Russian populations may have been reduced to 40–50,000 each. Almost all Greeks have left for Greece; as a result the Abkhaz would form just around or over 50% of the population if no Georgians were allowed to return.
197. Personal Communication from S. Neil MacFarlane, September 1999.
100. RFE/RL Newsline, 18 May 1998.
103. RFE/RL Newsline, 22 May 1998.
108. MacFarlane et al., Armed Conflict in Georgia, p72.
5. Russia’s war with Chechnya

3. Dunlop, Russia Confronts Chechnya. p63.
8. Naturally this argument’s usefulness is debatable; one could accordingly pursue the argument with every census up until today, and talk about perhaps 400,000 as a demographic loss; although it is hardly scientific to speak of what might have happened, it shows the magnitude of the damage incurred on the Chechen people.
13. This region of Dagestan was a traditionally Chechen area and belonged to the Chechen-Ingush Autonomous Republic until its dissolution in 1944. As a big part of Chechnya was given to Dagestan, this area was not returned to the rehabilitated Chechen-Ingush ASSR. This became a problem as Chechens returned from Central Asia, and claimed the right to their ancestral lands, where presently Lak people were living (they had themselves been moved there forcibly with the loss of over 2,000 lives). However this latent conflict could be solved by the Confederation of the Alountain peoples of the Caucasus in 1990.
20. See Dunlop, *Russia Confronts Chechnya*, pp.87–88
24. The Russian term is ‘Obshch’natsionalniy S’ezd (or Kongress Chechenskogo Naroda’.
28. Two other Chechens, in particular, had distinguished themselves: Ruslan Khasbulatov, who became the speaker of the Russian Supreme Soviet, and Aslanbek Aslankhanov, who like Dudayev was a general in the Soviet armed forces, and defended the ‘White House’ in Moscow against the putschists in 1991.
29. For a short biography of Dudayev, see chapter five in Gall and De Waal, *Chechnya: A Small Victorious War*, op. cit. [21].’
30. Ibid., p.92.
32. See Dunlop, op. cit. [19], p.93.
36. A presidential post was not foreseen in the constitution of the Chechen–Ingush ASSR, a fact which has been used by Moscow to point out the ‘illegality’ of Dudayev’s rule.
38. See Hill, *Russia’s Tinderbox*, op. cit [31], p.80.
40. See Dunlop, op.cit. [19], pp.105–106.
41. The name of the state was changed in 1994 to ‘Nokhchin Respublika Ichkeriy’, or the Chechen Republic of Ichkeria, referring to an old symbol of Chechen nationhood.
42. See Panico, *Russia’s War in Chechnya*, p.7.
45. See Hill, *Russia’s Tinderbox*, p.78.
47. Dunlop, *Russia Confronts Chechnya*, p125.
52. Ibid., p8.
56. Sufism is defined as the esoteric dimension of the Islamic faith, forming an inner, spiritual path to mystical union with God. In the Soviet Union, Sufi *tariqats*, especially in the Caucasus but also in Central Asia, actually gained strength through the Stalinist suppression of official Islam. As the Sufi *tariqats* (‘ways’, or ‘paths’) were in nature secret, they were more able to escape Soviet power than the official arm of Islam, which is institutionalized in Mosques etc. Especially during the deportation in Central Asia, the *tariqats* were crucially important in preserving the national identity of the Chechens and the Ingush. It is estimated that over three out of four Chechen males are members of Sufi orders. The Naqshbandi *tariqat*, whose main adept was Imam Shamil, is a more scholastic and aristocratic order, whose feudal elite to a certain extent had been co-opted by the Russian/Soviet central government. For this reason it lost some of its popular support, in favour of the Qadiri *tariqat*, which is a more conspirational and anti-Russian order. It practices a loud *zikr*, with chanting and dancing, by contrast to the Naqshbandi, which practices a silent *zikr*. The Qadiri is incidentally stronger among the Ingish, whereas a majority of the Chechens belong to the Naqshbandi. According to Zelim Tsakhovrebov, President Dudayev (whose clan stems from western Chechnya, near the Ingush border—some of the president’s relatives are even registered as Ingush) is a member of one of the most radical Qadiri orders, the ‘Qadiriya Vis-Khadjy Zagiev’. See Zelim Tsakhovrebov, ‘An Unfolding Case of Genocide: Chechnya World Order, and the Right to Be Left Alone’, in *Nordic Journal of International Law*, 64(1995):3, p501–555. (Footnote 11, p505.) For a general overview of Sufism in the Soviet Union, see Alexandre Bennigsen and S. Enders Wimbush, *Mystics and Commissars: Sufism in the Soviet Union*, Berkeley 1985. See also Bennigsen, Alexandre, and Wimbush, S. Enders, *Muslims of the Soviet Empire: A Guide*, London, Hurst, 1985.
57. Gall and de Waal, *Chechnya*, p118.
59. Avtorkhanov is a graduate from the military academy in Ordzhonikidze (Vladikavkaz) and held a position in the ministry of interior of the Chechen-Ingush ASSR. He was the head of the local administration of the Terek Rayon.
61. Ibid., p12.
66. See *Ternesty Put’k Svobode* (The Last Path to Freedom), Grozny: 1992, p89.
69. Ibid., p413.
70. See Dunlop, *Russia Confronts Chechnya*, p170.”
73. See Dunlop, *Russia Confronts Chechnya*, p181.
74. Gall and de Waal, *Chechnya*, p147.
80. Regarding the Oil Consortium and the politics related to it, see Salih Aliev, *Oil and Independence* (paper presented at the international conference on the Caucasus and Central Asia, Bilkent university, Ankara, May 1995), or for a more recent overview, Elaine Holoboff, ‘Russia and Oil Politics in the Caspian’, in *Jane’s Intelligence Review*, February 1996.
82. Schneider, ‘Moscow’s Decision for War in Chechnya’, p161.
83. See Robert Orttung, ‘A Painful Price’, in *Transition*, 15 March 1995, p3–7. Orttung points out people such as A.Korzhakov, the head of Yeltsin’s presidential guard, as one of the main hawks.
NOTES: CHAPTER 2 431

86. Ibid., p18.
89. Ingemar Oldberg, Rysslands Krig mot Tjetjenien, p27.
96. OMRI Daily Digest, 18 December 1995.
97. OMRI Daily Digest, 4 March 1996.
99. See, for example, Elizabeth Fuller, ‘Chechnya after Dudayev’, OMRI Analytical Brief no. 81, 24 April 1996.
100. See e.g. Turkish Daily News, 23 April 1996.
101. See Fuller, ‘Chechnya after Dudayev’.
102. OMRI Daily Digest, 13 May 1996.
103. OMRI Daily Digest, 3 June 1996.
104. OMRI Daily Digest, 18 June 1996.
105. OMRI Daily Digest, 10 July 1996.
106. OMRI Daily Digest, 12 July 1996.
110. See Ingemar Oldberg, Rysslands Krig mot Tjetjenien, p20.”
112. See Ingemar Oldberg, Rysslands Krig mot Tjetjenien, p18.
113. Ibid., p19.
115. See Ingemar Oldberg, Rysslands Krig mot Tjetjenien.
116. This and following parts of the chapter borrow heavily from my article ‘A Chechen State’, forthcoming in the March 1997 issue of Central Asian Survey.
117. Regarding the Oil Consortium and the politics related to it, see Salih Aliev, Oil and Independence (paper presented at the international conference on the Caucasus and Central Asia, Bilkent university, Ankara, May 1995), or for a more recent overview, Elaine Holoboff, ‘Russia and Oil Politics in the Caspian’, in Jane’s Intelligence Review, February 1996.
121. *Ghazawat*, from Arabic *ghazwa* (meaning ‘attack’ or ‘offensive’), military resistance led by religious leaders belonging to the Sufi brotherhoods.
123. Vainakh (or Nakh) is the proper name of the Chechen and the Ingush nations (the latter also calling itself Ghalghai), whereas these latter terms were introduced by the Russians.
129. See Bovay, op. cit., p53.
130. See ‘FSB on Turkish Involvement in Chechnya’, *OMRI Daily Digest*, 15 August 1995.
131. On the interactions between the Kurdish and Chechen problems in bilateral Russian–Turkish relations, see Robert Olson, ‘The Kurdish Question and Chechnya: Turkish and Russian Foreign Policies since the Gulf War’, in *Middle East Policy*, no. 4, 1996.
134. See an overview in Kuzio, op. cit. [126], pp 106–109.
137. Kuzio, op. cit. [126], p106; Bovay, op. cit. p56.
140. For a recent example see Sevinç Karaca, ‘Chechen Conference in Poland’, *Turkish Probe*, 17 January 1997.
141. See Cornell, op. cit.
NOTES: CHAPTER 2 433

144. ‘Moscow Postures over Baltic Ties with Chechnya’, OMRI Daily Digest, 13 February 1995.
148. See the discussion including the impact on Russian-Ukrainian Relations in Kuzio, op. cit. [142], pp 554–557, and 560–562.
149. For an account the Caucasian mountaineer’s solidarity, see Dodge Billingsley, ‘Confederates of the Caucasus’, in Jane’s Intelligence Review, February 1997. Interestingly, despite the controversy between Chechnya and Russia that existed during the Abkhaz war, both supported the Abkhaz and seemingly had no problems co-operating in this war.
150. See Svante Cornell, Conflicts in the North Caucasus, Uppsala University, Department of Peace and Conflict research, 1998.
151. See Bovay, op. cit., p50–52 for an overview of the ICJ’s stance.
153. The practices of the European Convention on Human Rights, or the Organization of American States, show instances of this development.
155. See Marie Bennigsen Broxup, op. cit. Ref 13, p 110–11. (Translation from French is my own).
156. OMRI Daily Digest, 26 August 1996.
158. OMRI Daily Digest, 18 October 1996.
164. RFE/RL, 10 June 1997; 5 August 1997.
167. See Jamestown Monitor, 10 September 1997.
6. Conflicts in the North Caucasus

4. The city was called Vladikavkaz (Roughly translated as ‘Conquer the Caucasus’) until 1931, when it was named Ordzhonikidze after one of the great Caucasian Bolsheviks, Georgiy Konstantinovich Ordzhonikidze. Perhaps as Ordzhonikidze came into conflict with Stalin in the mid-1930s and died of a ‘heart attack’, the city was renamed Dzhaudzhikau in 1945, only to receive the name back in 1954. In 1990 it was once again renamed Vladikavkaz.
8. Ibid.


15. See Birch, op. cit., [2], p55.


17. See Tschershownaja, op. cit., [10], p744.


28. Human Rights Watch/Helsinki, op. cit., [5], p60. The Ingush give totally different figures, according to which the death toll is counted in tens of thousands. However, all impartial sources seem to show that the official figures are at least a good estimation of the reality.

29. See Tschershownaja, op. cit., [10], p750.


32. For the full text of the document, see Nezavisimaya Gazeta, 23 March 1994; for discussion of the issue see Human Rights Watch/Helsinki, op. cit, [5], p68–69.


34. Birch, op. cit, [2], p60.


37. See Hill, op. cit., [14], p50.

41. OMRI Daily Digest, 14 August 1995.
42. OMRI Daily Digest, 12 October 1995.
43. FBIS-SOV, 28 April 1995, quoting Interfax.
50. OMRI Daily Digest, 2 February 1995.
51. For a discussion of the similarity of the political orientation of the Ingush and the Ossetians, see Tschervonaja, op. cit., [38], p825–29.
52. For an overview of the confederation, see Dodge Billingsley, ‘Confederates of the Caucasus’, in Jane’s Intelligence Review, February 1997.
57. Bennigsen and Wimbush, op. cit., [54], pp 200.
58. Ibid., p203.
62. See Arutionov, op. cit., [60], p8.
64. Pustilnik, op. cit., [61], p18.
68. Ibid., p205.
69. See Hill, op. cit., [14], p63.
70. See Arutionov, op. cit., [60], p10.
82. See Krag and Funch, op. cit., [53], p32.
84. Krag and Funch, op. cit., [53], p32.
85. OMRI Daily Digest, 19 November 1996.
88. OMRI Daily Digest, 26 November 1996.
89. OMRI Daily Digest, 9 January 1997.
95. On Sadval, see Matveeva and Mccarthy, op.cit., [90], pp 27–33.

97. See Matveeva and Mccarthy, op. cit., [90], pp 21–22.

98. Fuller, op. cit., [92], p31.

99. On the Russian manipulation of ethnic tensions, see the chapter on Russia in this volume.

100. See Hill, op. cit, [14], pp 55–56.

101. See Cheterian, op. cit [94].

102. See Matveeva and Mccarthy, op. cit., [90], p30.

103. Fuller, op. cit., [96].

104. See Matveeva and Mccarthy, op. cit., [90], p29.

105. Ibid, p52.


109. See appendix 1. For a short overview and an ethno-linguistic map of Dagestan and the Caucasus, see also Mike Edwards, ‘The fractured Caucasus’, in National Geographic, February 1996.


112. Cheterian, op. cit., [94].


117. See Bobrovnikov, op. cit., [115], p233.

118. See Cheterian, op. cit., [94].

119. See Bobrovnikov, op. cit., [115], p234.


123. The Andi group is composed of the Andi and seven smaller peoples, the Akhvakh, Bagulal, Botlikh, Chamalal, Godoberi, Karata, and Tindi. These peoples have been registered as Avars since 1926.
124. The Dido group is composed of the Archi, Bezheta, Ginukh, Hunzal, Kapuchi, and Khwarshi. They have not been registered individually since 1926.

125. See e.g. Anna Matveeva, *Dagestan*, Former Soviet South Briefing, Russia and Eurasia Programme, Royal Institute of International Affairs, London, May 1997.


127. Goldenberg, op. cit., [65], p203.

128. See Hill, op. cit., [14], p57.

129. Abdulatipov is an Avar and, at the time of publication, deputy prime minister of Russia; Khasbulatov is a Chechen and was at the time chairman of the Russian Supreme Soviet. The two were the highest-ranking North Caucasians in the Russian Federation, a fact which contributed to their success in resolving the issue. See Clem McCartney, *Dagestan Field Report*, London, International Alert, 1995.


131. Ibid., p73.

132. See Cheterian, op. cit., [94].

133. Aliyev, op. cit., [130].

134. Ibid., p77.


141. See Smirnov, ‘A State Duma Member….’, op. cit. [142].

142. See Andrei Smirnov, ‘A State Duma Member Tried to Stage a Coup In the Republic’, in *Segodnya*, 22 May 1998.


146. For a recent overview of the most pressing problems of Dagestan, see Liz Fuller, ‘Fault Lines in Dagestan’, in *RFE/RL Caucasus Report*, vol. 1 no. 14, 2 June 1998.


148. Murray, op. cit., [110], p517.

149. Ibid., p516.


151. See table in Sisk, op. cit., [135], p35 for a comparison of the two models.

7. Turkey: priority to Azerbaijan

8. Ibid., p462.
11. TİKA (Türk İşbirliği ve Kalkınma Ajansı, Turkish Co-operation and Development Agency) is the agency specializing on development co-operation with the former Soviet republics.
12. Recorded by the present author on location in Ankara, 1993.
16. In February 1992, ex-Communist president, Ayaz Mutalibov, was ousted by a popular revolt led by the Azerbaijan Popular Front (APF). In his place, the parliamentary chairman Yakub Mamedov was installed as acting president. In May Mutalibov attempted to regain his position, but again the APF opposed him and forced him to flee the country. Until 7 June 1992 Isa Gamberov served as acting president until Abilifez Elchibey was elected President by popular vote in a multi-candidate election.


22. See FBIS-WEU, 3 March 1992, quoting Milliyet, same date.


27. See FBIS-WEU, 5 March 1992, quoting news agency Anatolia, same date.

28. See, for example, the religious-conservative dailies Türkiye and Zaman. For an English sample article, see FBIS-WEU, 5 March 1992, quoting Türkiye, 1 March 1992.


36. For a recent discussion on Turkish-US relations, involving the Kurdish and the aid issues, see Mahmut Bali Aykan, ‘Turkish Perspectives on Turkish-US Relations Concerning Persian Gulf Security in the Post-Cold War Era’, in Middle East Journal, Summer 1996.

37. Ibid., quoting Die Zeit, 8 April 1994.

38. See Aykan, op. cit. [32], p351.

39. On 9 March 1993 Turkey and Azerbaijan signed an agreement for the construction of a 1,060-kilometre pipeline which was planned to go from Baku into Iran, then back into Nakhchivan and from there cross over into Turkey. (See BBC Summary of World Broadcasts (Middle East), 16 March 1993.) However Azerbaijan’s political instability and its difficult relations with Russia make the pipeline project unclear. Furthermore the deal was signed without consultations with Iran, although the drawing of the pipeline would include Iranian territory. Iran, for itself prefers the drawing of a pipeline from Baku through Iran to the Persian Gulf, thus staying within Iran. Hence other drawings of the Baku-Ceyhan pipeline have been discussed, and to date a drawing over Georgian territory seems to be the most realistic alternative, although it would mean 1,650 kilometres instead of 1,060. Hence the Turkish ministry of energy declared that for the feasibility of such a project, a guaranteed throughput of at least 25 million tons of crude oil annually is necessary. For a recent assessment of the pipeline issue, see Nazlan Ertan, ‘Baku-Ceyhan: Pipeline or Pipe Dream’, in Turkish Probe, 17 May 1996, pp 19–20.


43. Ibid., quoting *The Independent*, 1 July 1993.

44. See *FBIS-WEU*, 6 June 1994.


46. See issues of the newspapers *Zaman* and *Türkiye*, as well as a statement by the head of the Turkish state’s Directorate for Religious Affairs, Mehmet Nuri Yılmaz, in *FBIS-WEU*, 5 March 1992, quoting Türkiye Radyolari, same date.

47. For an example on Demirel’s statements to explain the government’s Karabakh policy, see *FBIS-WEU*, 10 March 1993, quoting TRT Television, 9 March 1993.

48. This statement comes to come back over and over again in conversations with Azeris.

49. Interview with Dr. Novruzoglu, op. cit., [13].


51. The heavily censored report of the investigation into this scandal was published by the daily newspaper *Radikal*, prepared by Kutlu Savas.

52. See interview with Karayalçin in *Hürriyet*, 16 February 1998.


64. Demands which were reiterated at a congress in 1995. See *The Jamestown Monitor*, 8 December 1995.


NOTES: CHAPTER 2 443


8. Iran: a reluctant neighbour

part of a young-generation and a old-generation Azerbaijani in the days of the First World War.

2. For an overview of the competition between Turkey and Iran for influence in Central Asia and the Caucasus, see Philip Robins, ‘Silent Competition: Iran and Turkey in Azerbaijan and Central Asia,’ in Etniske Konflikter i Sentral-Asia of Kaukasus, Norwegian Institute for International Affairs, No. 172 (September 1993), pp 111–23.

3. Although the Turkish population is mainly Sunni Muslim, it should be noted that over 20% of the Turks belong to the Alevi sect, which belongs mainly to Twelver Shi Islam, but is based on a syncretic belief particular to Anatolia, and hence very different from Iranian Twelver Shiism.


7. On the Russo-Persian wars, see Muriel Atkin, Russia and Iran 1780–1828, Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1980.


12. Halliday, p75.


16. This episode has been the subject of quite some academic attention. See, for example, Louise Fawcett, Iran and the Cold War: The Azerbaijan Crisis of 1945, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992.

17. Halliday, pp 76–79.

18. See Nahavandi, ‘Russia, Iran and Azerbaijan’, p159.


20. Nesibzade, Iran-Zärbäycän Mésélési, p123.


23. ‘Irredentist Campaign Among Azeris in Iran’ OMRI (Open Media Research Institute, Prague) *Daily Digest*, 3 September 1996. The option of incorporating Northern Azerbaijan into Iran, although sympathetic to the Iranian rulers, is seen by some observers as being as dangerous for Iran as Azerian secessionism; the addition of six million Azeris would actually put the latter more at par demographically with Farsi-speakers in the Iranian population.

24. See Nahavandi, ‘Russia, Iran and Azerbaijan.’


27. ‘Iran Demands Extradition,’ OMRI Daily Digest, 10 September 1996.


37. Interestingly, certain Turkish observers claim that Turkey was involved in the coup. As Elçibey’s fall from power was perceived as a great setback for Turkey in the entire Caucasus, such statements seem highly illogical. The argument, however, is that Turkey had realized Elçibey’s inability to handle the government, and hence needed him removed as he was doing more harm than good. Such theories are naturally highly questionable and rather seem to be face-saving gestures over an obvious failure to keep an ally in power. Private Communication to Author, Ankara, 1995.


43. ‘IranOpts Out Of Shakh-Deniz,’ OMRI Daily Digest (December 11, 1995).
44. ‘Iran Finally Agrees to Stake in Shah-Deniz,’ OMRI Daily Digest, 13 May 13, 1996.
45. OMRI Analytical Brief, 26 June 1996.
46. Mehrdad Mohsenin, ‘Iran’s Relations with Central Asia and the Caucasus,’ in The Iranian Journal of International Affairs, Fall 1995.
47. For an overview of the issues of oil politics in the Caspian, see Elaine Holoboff, ‘Russia and Oil Politics in the Caspian,’ in Jane’s Intelligence Review (February 1996).
48. For a legal opinion stressing this principle, see Bruce M. Clagett, ‘Ownership of Seabed and Subsoil Resources in the Caspian Sea under the Rule of vol. 1 no. 3, Summer/Fall 1995. See also International Law,’ in Caspian Crossroads, ‘Talks in Tehran on Caspian,’ OMRI Daily Digest, 3 July 1995.
49. ‘Iran, Russia, and Oil,’ OMRI Daily Digest, 1 June 1995.
50. ‘Russia, Iran, and Oil,’ OMRI Daily Digest, July 18, 1995.
51. ‘Russia, Iran to Draw Up New Legal Status for Caspian,’ OMRI Daily Digest, 24 October 1995.
55. See Ramezanzadeh, ‘Iran’s Role as Mediator in the Nagorno-Karabakh Crisis.’
56. See discussion in Halliday, ‘Condemned to React,’ pp 84–85.
57. See Ramezanzadeh, ‘Iran’s Role as Mediator in the Nagorno-Karabakh Crisis.’
58. See Halliday, p84.
59. For an account of Armenian terrorism, see Michael M. Gunter, ‘The Armenian Terrorist Campaign Against Turkey,’ in Orbis, Summer 1983.
62. See discussion in Vaserman and Ginat, ‘National, Territorial, or Religious Conflict?’
64. See Herzig, Iran and the Former Soviet South, p21.

9. Russia: a retreating hegemonic power

20. Freedman, ‘Russia and Iran…’, p95.
21. See Krasnaya Zvezda, 19 November 1993, for an abridged version of the doctrine.
26. Ibid., pp 77–78.
27. Ibid., pp 75–76.


38. See David Satter, ‘The danger of Russia’s great power illusions’, in *Jamestown Prism*, vol.4 no. 5, 6 March 1998.


55. *Diplomatic Bulletin*, Nos. 7–8, April 1993, p59. This [Russian] claim [denying involvement] was exposed as groundless on March 18, 1993, when the Georgians shot down a Russian war plane over Sukhumi. The pilot was a Russian Major—a regular officer from a Russian air force unit stationed in Abkhazia. (Footnote in original text)


67. Ibid., p108.


89. Ibid, p27.
94. Ibid., p3.
96. See Fuller, ‘Russia and the Caucasus’, p82.
97. In the analysis of S. Neil MacFarlane, based on interviews with oil companies’ representatives. Personal communication, September 1999.
106. Freedman, ‘Russia and Iran…’, p94.
110. ‘Snowballing Revelations on Russian Arms Deliveries to Armenia’, *Jamestown Monitor*, 10 April 1997.
113. See Sovetskaya Rossiya, 3 April 1997. The list contains the following: 84 T-72 tanks; 50 BMP-2 Armoured Infantry Fighting Vehicles; 8 SS-1 (Scud) surface-to-surface missile (SSM) launchers; 32 SS-1 Scud B type SSM; 27 Surface-to-air missile (SAM) launcher vehicles; 389 SAM Missiles of different types; 26 SA-18 portable SAM gripstocks; 200 SA-18 SAM rounds; 945 AT-4 anti-tank missiles; 54 D-20 and D-30 towed guns; 18 D-1 towed howitzers, and 18 BM-21 multiple rocket launchers.


10. The United States: towards engagement


5. Ibid.


8. Ibid.


15. Ibid.
19. However the BP-Amoco merger entailed that Amoco’s share of over 17% is now mainly controlled by British interests. For an overview of business interests in the Caspian, see Julia Nanay, ‘The US in the Caspian: The Divergence of Political and Commercial Interests’, in Middle East Policy, vol. 6 no. 2, October 1998.
31. See quotation in Ottaway and Morgan, ‘Former US Aides Seek Caspian Gusher’.
45. e.g. Presentations by Terry Adams (Monument Oil) and Willy Olsen (Statoil) at the conference on ‘Energy and Security in the Caucasus and Central Asia’ sponsored by the Institute for East-West Studies and the Swedish Institute for International Affairs, Stockholm 3–4 September 1998.
47. Dilip Hiro, ‘Why is the US Inflating Caspian Oil Reserves’, in Middle Eastern Intelligence, 12 September 1997.
49. Ibid.
50. e.g. George S.Hishmeh, ‘Caspian Basin Seen Not Replacing Middle East as Oil Source’, USIA Washington File, 26 September 1997. (www.usia.gov/products/washfile.htm)
52. See Hiro, ‘Why is the US Inflating Caspian Oil Reserves’.


64. Ibid, p24.


68. See Turkish and international press, 30 October 1998.

69. See e.g. Laura Le Cornu, Azerbaijan’s September Crisis: An Analysis of the Causes and Implications, RIIA Former Soviet South Briefing, no. 1, January 1995.


11. The Caucasus in Eurasian geopolitics: from backwater to centre-stage?


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Abashidze, Aslan 165, 299;  
& Javakheti 169  
Abdulatipov Ramazan 209, 267  
Abkhaz 27–29, 31–32;  
exile of 132  
Abkhazia 104–105, 113, 127, 152, 220,  
369, 384, 387–388, 393, 397–398;  
demography 143;  
religion in 41–41;  
principality of 130;  
autonomy in Czarist Russia 132;  
Soviet Commune in 134;  
1925 constitution 157;  
reduction to ASSR status 136;  
separatism 142–145;  
declaration of independence 176;  
declaration of martial law 160;  
demand for union republic status 151;  
& Turkey 276;  
& war in Chechnya 177;  
& CIS peacekeeping 162;  
peacekeeping in 174–175;  
search for solutions 175–177  
Abkhazian letter 147  
Abkhazian SSR, proclamation of 135;  
treaty relationship with Georgia, 135  
Achaemenids 48–49  
Adams, Terry 372  
adat 235  
Ademon, Nykhas 147, 152, 182  
Adyge 252  
Adygea 3  
Adygey-Khasa 255  
Afghanistan 218–219, 331, 343, 351  
Aganbeyan, Abel 64  
Agdaban 81  
Agdam, unrest in 66;  
Armenian capture of 89  
Agdere  
(see also Mardakert) 73;  
Armenian capture of 83, 88;  
Azeri capture of 83  
Aghvank 52  
Agulashvili 341  
AhiskaTurks 163  
AIOC 305, 347–348, 349, 372  
Ajaria 129, 152, 342, 354, 163–166;  
& Russian military base 165;  
& Turkey 165, 297;  
& authoritarianism 165  
Ajars 128  
Akayev, Askar 280  
Akhaltsikhe 133  
Albania, Caucasian 50–52  
Albright Madeleine 364, 366–367  
Alexander the Great 49  
Alexandropolis 350  
Aliyev Heydar 86–88, 301, 354, 362–363,  
380, 388;  
& order in army 92;  
& Iran 314–315;  
& Turkey 292–283;  
& Turkish-Armenian relations 294;  
US visit 369  
AliyevKamil 268  
Aliyev, Memmed Novruzoglu 283  
Al-Jurhumi, Ubeid Shariya 51  
Almaty 303  
Andi 270  
Andranik, Armenian Dash nak general, 57
Ankara Declaration 305, 379
ANM (Armenian National Movement) 73, 75, 103, 342
APF (Azerbaijan Popular Front) 73–76, 129, 342
April 9th demonstrations, Georgia 147
Apsheron 371
Arabs, invasion of Caucasus 51; in Iran 311
Ararat (Armenian region) 69
Araxes river 2, 19, 21, 308, 258, 318
Ardzinha, Vladislav 162, 179, 297
Ardum 205, 214
Armenian Assembly of America 360
Armenian Diaspora 66, 94, 112
Armenian Genocide 62
Armenian Revolutionary Federation (ARF) see Dashnaktsutiun
Armenian Supreme Soviet 70; 1989 declaration 74–75
Armenians 260; in Georgia
(see also Javakheti) 3–4, 27, 61–62, 147, in 1970s 140;
in Turkey 18–20, 54; in Russian administration 54; in Karabakh 31–33;
refugees from Azerbaijan 80
Army of Islam 1918 57
Artsashes, Armenian King 2nd century BC 49
Artsakhian, Armenian dialect 52
Arutyunyan, Suren 70
ASALA (Armenian Secret Army for the Liberation of Armenia) 73, 319
Askaran 67
Aslankhanov Aslanbek 196–197
Atatiirk Mustafa Kemal 59, 274
atheism 22
Aukhovsky 232, 267
Aushev Ruslan 250, 255
autonomous territories, 24–31
autonomy 40, 115;
in Georgia 150
Avars 4, 258, 269
Avrasya Ferry 301
Avtorkhanov Abdurrahman 188
Avtorkhanov Omar 203
Azadistan 310
origin of term 50;
early history 45–52;
division of 20–23;
religion in 22;
Democratic Republic (Caucasus) 23;
sovietization of 58;
Soviet 22, 40;
declaration of independence 56;
joining CIS 92;
Democratic Republic (Iran) 22;
internal disturbances 85;
riots in 80;
1992 counter offensive 83;
1993 counter-offensive 92;
occupied territories 45;
security conception 38;
foreign policy 385;
relations with Iran 86;
& Chechnya 225–226;
& Russia/CIS 346
Azerbaijani identity 34
Azerbaijani Supreme Soviet 70
Azerbaiyan Xalq Cephesi (AXC) see APF
Azeri irredentism, Iran, 43
Azeri refugees 80, 113
Azeris 19;
ethnic roots 50–51;
ethnic cleansing of 43;
in Nagorno Karabakh 114, 117;
in Georgia 2, 3, 27, 29, 61–62, 147, 166;
in Dagestan 61, 260;
in Iran 22, 308–315, 382
Azov 334

Bagirov Kamran 65–66
Baibourtian Armen 109–110
Baker James 145, 326, 357, 363
Baku 16, 308, 343;
Khanate of 17–21, 53;
Commune 59;
oil boom 22, 54;
1905 disturbances 54–55;
1918 riots 57;
1988 pogroms 70;
1990 riots 75–76;
Soviet military intervention 75
Baku-Ceyhan pipeline xvi, 211, 294, 348–350, 379;
& Javakheti 168
Baku-Novorossiisk pipeline 349
Baku-Supsa pipeline 230
Balyan Zori 63, 66
Balkars 16, 26, 184, 252, 258
Baluch States 16, 23;
& Chechnya 225
Baluchs 311
Banat 215
Barbichevlvan 213
Basayev Shamil 202, 216, 235–236, 270, 300–301;
& Budennovsk 214–215;
& Dagestan 232–234
Bashkortostan 29, 165, 220, 227, 262
Batashvili, Irakli 173
Batumi 56, 165, 338;
treaty of 56
Beirut 76
Belarus 353, 390
Belyakov commission 244
Bentsen, Lloyd 363
Beppayev, Sufyan 255–257, 335
Berger, Samuel 366
Beria 186;
denigration of 139
Black Sea 16;

fleets 327
Blank, Stephen 126, 366, 370–371
Bolsheviks 13, 23–24, 308;
& Zugdidi region 134;
& South Ossetia 134, 136;
in Caucasus in 1918 57–59
Bosnia 41, 97, 109, 117, 125, 398;
Serb ethnic cleansing 43;
Serbs 113
Bosphorus 16, 350
Bota, Liviu 179
Botlikh 270
Bournoutian, George, 49
Boyle, Francis 232
Bozkurt 301
Brest-Litvosk Treaty 56
Brezhnev, Leonid 244
Brownback, Sam 372
Brzezinski, Zbigniew 325
Budapest 99
Buddhism 5
Budennovsk 214–215
Bukhara, SSR status 135
Bulgaria 299
Burbulis Gennadiy 325
Burgaz 350
Bush, George 95
Byzantine Empire 50

California 360
CAR 360
Caspian Sea xvi, 1, 17, 221, 316;
legal status 350
Catherine the Great 18
Catholicos of All Armenians 66
Central Asia 15, 330, 378
CENTRASBAT 370
Çetin, Hikmet 95, 283–284
Ceyhan 287, 304
CFE treaty 332
Chanturia, Giorgi 141, 146, 148, 298
Chardakli 63–64
Charles XII 16
Chechen Pan-National Congress 193–195
Chechen-Ingush ASSR 27, 243;
reinstatement of 190
Chechens 11–13, 16, 29, 34, 132;
rebellion 34; 
deporation 184–189; 
return of 189; 
discrimination 1957–91 190–191; 
in Russia 190–191; 
& separatism 191–192; 
& Abkhazia 159; 
in Dagestan 251; 
in Kazakhstan 189 
Chechens-Akkintsy 267 
Chechnya, 1, 8, xvi, 3, 29, 113, 125, 384, 386, 394; 
religion in 41; 
revolution 193–199; 
democratization 202–203; 
& destabilization of Dagestan 232–233; 
& oil politics 193; 
& Kurdish issue 224; 
& US policy 365; 
violations of laws of war 43 
Chekeress 4, 26, 252–258 
Chermen 247 
Chernishev Albert 302 
Chernomyrdin, Viktor 230, 328 
Chevron Oil 362 
Chibirov, Ludvig 180–181 
China 331 
Chingiz Khan 4 
Chkhheidze, Tamar 141 
Christianity 5, 11; 
in Ossetia 242 
Christopher, Warren 365–366, 374 
Chubais, Anatoly 230 
Churchill, Winston 374 
Chuvashia 262 
Cilicia 49 
giller, Tansu 291, 301 
Circassians 9–13, 17, 27, 132, 252–258; 
& Abkhazia 159 
CIS 224, 342, 354, 390; 
& Abkhazia 179 
clan 33 
clash of civilizations 43 
clergy, in Iran 22 
Clinton Bill 372 
common state concept 39, 96 
Communism 15, 24, 34 
Communist ideology 33–34 
Confederated Mountain Republic 228 
Confederation of Mountain Peoples of 
Caucasus 208, 221, 251, 267; 
& Abkhazia 159; 
& South Ossetia 157 
Congress of Peoples of Chechnya & 
Dagestan 232 
Congress of USA 360–361 
‘Contract of the Century’ 347 
Cossacks 11, 13, 27, 253–255 
Crimea 29, 62; 
SSR status 135 
Crimean Khanate 11 
Crimean Tatars 170, 304 
CSCE see OSCE 
Cyprus 115, 117, 285–286, 288, 293, 393 
Dagestan xvi, xvii, 3, 11–13, 34, 35, 213, 220–221, 262–272; 
& deportations 189; 
Azeris in 27; 
Soviet elite 263–264; 
& Islam 265–267; 
ethnic relations 267–270 
Dagestani 132 
Dardanelles 16, 350 
Dargins 4, 258, 269 
Dashnaktasutian 57, 106, 295, claims on 
neighbours 58; 
activities in 1905 55–56; 
& Javakheti 167 
Davit Bek, Karabakh ruler, 18th c. 53 
Dayton agreement 113, 121 
decolonization, & Chechnya 226 
Demidov, Nikolai 68 
Demirchian Karen xvi, 103 
Demirel Süleyman 86, 274, 95, 288; 
& Nagorno-Karabakh conflict 285; 
& Turks abroad 278 
Demirkol, Ferman 291 
Denikin, General 13 
deportations 16–16; 
of Meskehtians 170 
Derbent 27, 61, 260; 
Khanate of 21, 53 
Derev, Stanislav 255–256 
de-stalinization 62
Deutsch, Karl 15
Dole, Robert 364
Dolgikh, Vladimir 65
Dudayev, Johar Musayevich 41, 247, 255, 332;
& Turkey 300, 302;
& Estonian nationalism 195;
election to presidency 198;
& opposition 204–206;
death of 216
Dunlop John B. 190
Dzasokhov, Aleksandr 181
Eagleburger, Lawrence 363
Eçevit, Bülent 119, 284
Echmiadzin 56
Elchibey, Abülfez 74, 79, 83, 314, 319, 332, 343, 354;
demise of 85–88
Eliaison, Jan 99
Eliaza, Akaki 173, 348
Erbakan, Necmettin 306
Erekle II 18, 131
Eshera 339
ethnicity 16, 32;
polarization of 41
EU 287
Eurasia 377;
regional alignments 127, 382–95
Euro-Atlanticism 325
Federalism 23
Fergana valley 28;
& Meskhetians 170
Finland 6, 23;
& Nagorno-Karabakh 39, 97, 99, 369, 393
Fizuli, Armenian capture of 84, 90–5
Forest Brothers 174
France, & Nagorno-Karabakh 95, 369
Freedom Support Act section 907(a) 358–364
FSK, & Chechnya 206
Gagauz 304
Gagra 159, 338
Gaidar, Yegor 247, 328
Galazov, Aksharbek 250
Gali 161, 175;
1998 unrest 179;
Georgian refugees from 178
Gamsakhurdia, Konstantin 141
& minorities 150;
& Ossetians 150;
doctrine of ‘guests & hosts’ 150;
& Ajaria 164;
& Armenian minority 167;
rule in Georgia 155;
flight from Tbilisi 157;
return to Georgia 160;
asylum in Chechnya 157, 195, 200;
death of 161
Ganja 19, 85–87, 345;
khanate of 17, 21;
disturbances 1905, 55;
1988 pogroms 70
Gantemirov, Beslan 195, 204–205
Gasimov, Towfig 290
Gaziev, Rahim 83
Gegeshidze, Archil 180
Gekhi 217
Gekhi-Chu 216
geopolitics, in Caucasus 383–391
Georgia 3, 15, 308, 330, 349, 27, 32;
history, 130–136;
adoptions of Christianity 130;
Mongol invasions of 130;
& Safavid Persia 131;
& Czarist Russia 131;
annexation to Russia, 18, 53;
Democratic Republic 23;
sovietization of 58;
demographic composition 128–129;
national revival 136–142;
declaration of independence 56;
security conception 38;
& Armenia 43, 386;
& Azerbaijan 43;
& Chechnya 43;
& Caspian oil 350;
civil war 157;
& common state approach 105;
GRU (Glavnoye Razvedovatelnaya Upravleniye) Russian military intelligence 329
GUAM (see also GUUAM) 304, 342
Gudauta 159
Gudermes 214
Gukhasyan, Arkady 105, 106
Gulistan treaty 19–21, 53
Guliyev, Rasul 94
Guluzade, Vafa 105, 371, 381
Gumbaridze, Givi 148–149, 154
Gumib 13
GUUAM 390–392
Güres, Dogan 288
Gyumri 338
Gökalp, Ziya 276
Hadj Murat 184
Hai Dat 295
Hamidov, Iskender 83, 290
Hasanov, Hasan 393
Helsinki Final Act 222
HHSh (Hayots Hamazgayin Sharjum) see ANM
Hitler, Adolf 187–188
Hovhannisyan, Nikolay 122, 293–294, 343
Hovhannisyan, Vahan 106, 295
Human rights Watch (HRW) 76, 82
104th airborne Russian regiment, Ganja, 85
Huns 51
Huntington, Samuel R, 43
Husseinov, Surat 85–88, 282, 345–347
Iberia 50
Identity, conflict of 33–37
Ilia Chavchavadze society 146, 152
Imeretia 131
Imnadze, Avtandil 141
India 331;
Nagasis 26
Indian Ocean 16
Ingush 16, 34, 239–252, 393;
deportation of 184–189;
return & rehabilitation 189;
& Chechen nationalism 196–198

& Russian military bases 169;
Abkhaz separatim 142–146;
& perestroika 146–150;
foreign policy 385–386;
peacekeeping 173–175
Georgian Chronicle 141
Georgian Democratic republic, recognition of 134;
territory 134
Georgian kingdom 130
Georgian Military Highway 17
Georgians 3–4;
in South Ossetia 151–152
Georgievsk 131
Geranboy see Shaumian
Germany 16;
& Caucasus in 2nd World War 188;
relations with Georgia 1918 133, 56
ghazawat 11, 34
Giorgadze, Igor 341, 347
glasnost 28, 63–66;
& Islam 265
Gocharli, Armenian claims to 73
Golden Horde 11
Goltz, Thomas 77, 82, 86–87, 125, 291,
339, 344, 360
Goradiz, Armenian capture of 91
Gorbachev, Mikhail 28, 31, 45, 64, 66–67,
70–71;
August coup against 77, 145, 148, 151,
323;
& South Ossetia 154
Gorgosaliani 141
Grachev, Pavel 92 206, 209–210, 212, 288,
332;
& Abkhazia 161, 338
Grey Wolves 223
Great Britain 22;
in 1918 57–58
Greek-Cyprus 117, 393
Greek lobby, US Congress 367
Greeks 4
Gromyko 145
Grozny 16, 218, 349;
battle for 213–214;
1996 Chechen conquest of 217
Ingush Autonomous Oblast 243
Ingushetia 13, 221, 242–252; establishment of 246
internally displaced persons xviii
International Alert 179
International Court of Justice, & Chechnya 226
International Law, & Chechnya 225–227
International Rescue Committee 360
Ioseliani, Jaba 149, 157, 335
Iran 2, 7, 15, 17, 20, 22, 39, 43, 111, 220, 305, 363, 382, 395;
& Armenia 314;
& Azerbaijan 308–315;
& Azerbaijani refugees 90–91;
& Chechnya 224;
& Nagorno Karabakh conflict 95, 317–320;
& Russia 224, 316;
& Turkey 306;
& Tajikistan 306
Iraq 6, 303, 305, 325, 351
Islam 4–5, 11, 13, 33;
& Russia 220–221;
in (Caucasian) Albania 51;
in Ingushetia 242;
in Ossetia 242;
Shi’i form 41
Islamic Army xvi
Islamic identity 33–34
Islamic Nation 232
Islamic Party, Dagestan, 265
Islamic Peacekeeping Army 270
Islamic state 22
Ismail, Shah (1486–1524) 53
Israel 117, 281, 360;
& Caucasus 392
Israeli lobby in US 367, 392
Italy, & Nagorno Karabakh conflict 97
Ivan the Terrible 11
Izrailov, Hasan 187
Izvestiya 66
Jalalians 52
Jamagat 254
Japan 363
Javahal, Ravshon 93–94, 290–291, 347
Javakheti xvi, 43, 56, 166–170, 342, 354, 380;
& Armenia 167
Javakhk organization 168–169
Jebrail 346;
Armenian capture of 89–90
Jihad 11
Johar-Gala see Grozny
Jones, Stephen 134
Judaism 5
Juppe, Alain 223
Kabala 347
Kabardino-Balkaria 3, 27, 192, 252–258
Kabardins 26, 252–258
Kafan 68;
Azerbaijani shelling of 91
Kalasuri river 161
Kapitonov, Ivan 144
Karabakh Committee 66, 71
Karabakh National Council 77
Karabakh, Khanate of 17–19, 21
Karachai & Balkar 35
Karachai 16, 26, 184–186, 252–258
Karachai-Chehksesia xvi, 3, 27, 192, 252–258
Karadagly 81
Karamanoglu, Altan 290
Karyalçin, Murat 290–291
Karimov, Islam 354
Kars 293–294, 297, treaty of 61, 292
Kartuli 130
Kartvelian languages 128
Kutusev A. 65, 67
Kayburo 59
Kavsadze, Alexander 338
Kazakh (Azerbaijani district) 76
Kazakh, Khanate 53
Kazakhstan 186, 263, 349–350, 355, 366, 390, 392;
& oil 316–317
Kazan 11, 325
Kaziev, Iskander 258
Kelbajar 83, 97, 113, 287, 345
Kelbajar, Armenian capture of 84
Kemalism 285, 297
KGB 327
Khabibullaj, Jibrail 268
Khachen 52
Khachilayev, Nadir 269–270
Khaibakh 186
Khajiev, Salambek 200, 205
Khanees 17–18, 21, 33
Khankendi see Stepanakert
Khanjar 75–76
Khasavyurt 232
Khasavyurt agreement 228, 230
Khasbulatov Ruslan 194, 335;
& Chechen revolution 196–197;
& opposition to Dudayev 205–209
Khasbulatov, Ruslan 157, 267
Khattab 233, 235, 270
Khazar 51
Khadiabani, Sheykh Muhammad 310
Khiza, S. 249
Khojaly, massacre in 80–82, 284;
& Russia 343–345
Khorezm SSR 135
Khubiev, Vladimir 255–256
Kipchak 4
Kipling, Rudyard 11
Kitovani, Tengiz 157, 335, 337, 346;
assault on Abkhazia 159
Kizlyar 222, 264
Kocharyan, Robert 85, 109, 126;
ascent to presidency 1116–118;
&Turkey 295–296
Kodorirgorge 161
Kokov, Valery 257
Komis 33, 195
Korenizatsia 26, 34
Kosovo 43;
& Georgia 375;
& Azerbaijan 375
Kostava, Merab 141
Kozhokin Evgeni 337
Kozyrev, Andrei 223, 325, 326, 339, 346
Krasnodar Krai 2
Krasnoyarsk Krai 230
Kremlin 65
Krunk 66
Krushchev, Nikita 62;
& destalinization 139;
& rehabilitation of deported nations 186, 189
Kuba khanate 53
Kulikov, Anatoly 230
Kulumbegov, Torez 154
Kumyks 4, 242, 258, 269;
political demands of 267–268
Kura river 49, 50
Kurds 19, 128;
in Azerbaijan 4, 34, 259;
evicted from Kelbajar 84;
in Iran 311
Kutaisi 130, 132, 157, 169, 340
Kyrgyzstan 186, 390, 392
Labazanov, Ruslan 198, 204
Lachin 59, 70, 106, 110, 113, 119, 121–
122, 124, 343;
Armenian conquest of 82–83
Laks 4, 189, 251, 267, 269;
resettlement of 190
Lausanne, treaty of 20, 297
Laz 130
Lebanon 19, 263, 267, 269
Lebed, Alexander 215–216;
& end of first Chechen war 217–219;
dismissal of 228;
& apartment bombings 234
Lenin 26, 59, 133, 136;
nationality policy 9
Lenkoran 49
Lezgins 4, 20, 29, 49, 128, 113, 258–262
L’Humanité 64
Libaridian, Gerard 111, 126–127, 293
Libya 325
Ligachev, Yegor 64
Lisbon principles (Nagorno- Karabakh conflict) 105
Livingston, Bob 367
LUKOil 349
Lunev, Stanislav 329
MacFarlane, Neil, 38, 127
Madari, Shariat 311
Magomedov, Magomedali 269
Maikop 252
Makhachkala 260
Malgobek 187
Malybeili 81
Mamedov, Yaqub (‘The Mule’) 83
Mamodayev, Yaragi 195, 205
Manis 69
Mansur, Sheikh, 11
Manukyan, Vazgen 103
Mardakert 345
Maresca John J. 99, 120
Mari 33
Marneuli 129, 166
Maronites 19
Marshal Bagramian battalion 166, 174–175
Marx, Karl, 12
Marxism 24;
nationality 23; 325
Mashots, Mesrop 49
Maskhadov, Aslan 216–217, 231;
election to presidency 236
Megreli 130
Megri, Azerbaijani shelling of 91
Meliks 52–53
Mensheviks 133;
in Georgia 56, 57
Merab Kostava society 154
Meskhetian Turks 170–171
Middle East 390, 392–393
Mikoyan Sergo 38, 371
Milli Istihbarat Teskilati (MIT: Turkish intelligence service) 290
Milliyetçi Hareket Partisi (MHP: Nationalist Movement Party) 284
Milne, George, British general 1918, 58
Mingrelia 21, 33–34, 128, 159, 348
MinskGroup 96–101, 112, 369, 394, 397
Mthradates of Pontus 49
Mkhedrioni 149
Mkrtchian Levon 295
Moldova 24, 28, 354;
& common state approach 105
Mongol rulers 52
Moscow, treaty of 60, 292
Mosul 285
Mountain Republic 196, 243
Mountainous Karabakh xvi
Mozhdok 213
murids 13
Murov mountains 82, 84
Musavat Party 56
Mutalibov, Ayaz 86, 88, 93, 282, 343, 347–348, 358
Mzhavandze, Vasili, 140
Nadir Shah 20
Nagorno-Karabakh 8, 28–29, 39–40, 175,
305, 384, 394, 398;
early history, 45–52;
allocation to Azerbaijan by Britain, 58;
struggle for during sovietization 58–60;
demographic changes 54;
1989 special administration 71;
proposal to upgrade to ASSR 64;
abolishment of autonomous status 77;
relations with Armenia 78
Nagorno-Karabakh Autonomous Oblast,
creation of 59–62;
Soviet of 65, 70
Nagorno-Karabakh Conflict, in 1918 57;
religion in 41–41;
casualties from 45;
& Israel 392;
nearl territory proposal 123;
Cyprus model 122;
Tatarstan model 123;
associated state model 123;
territorial swap suggestion 121.
Nakhchivan 22, 86, 106, 111, 315, 318,
360, 387;
Khanate of 17–18, 21, 53;
disturbances 1905 55;
& Turkey 278, 284;
Armenian claims to 58;
Armenian Embargo on 74;
demographic changes 63;
Nakhchivan Autonomous Socialist Soviet Republic, creation of 59–62
Naqshbandi tariqat 11, 265
Narimanov, Nariman 59
Nassibli, Nasib 310
National Democratic Institute 360
nationalism, in Armenia 63;
Azerbaijani & Armenian 78–80
NATO 286, 299, 353, 386, 389;
& Caspian region 374–375
Nazarbayev, Nursultan, & Turkey 280;
mediation in Nagorno-Karabakh 77
Nekrich, Aleksandr 187–188
Neo-Eurasianism 325
New Economic Policies (1920s) 136
New Zealand 123
Nicaragua, Miskitos in 26
Niue lands 123
Niyazov, Saparmurad 369
Nogai 4
Nolyain, Igor 67
North Caucasus 2, 330, 349, 382
North Korea 351
North Ossetia xviii, 18, 34, 40, 129, 191, 336;
creation of ASSR 136;
& South Ossetian conflict 157
North Sea 372
Novolaksky rayon 233, 267, 271
Novorossiysk 230
Nuri Pasha, Turkish general 57

Ochamchira 160, 339
oil politics, & Chechnya 210–213, 220
Oktarybrskoye 246
OMON, Azerbaijani interior forces 76, 93
Operation Ring 76–77
Orthodox Church, Russian, 41
Orzhonikidze 135
OSCE 114, 126, 361, 369, 393, 394–395, 397, 28;
& NagornoKarabakh, 95–101
Oskanian, Vartan 295
Ossetians 17, 62, 239–252;
division of 136;
history in Georgia 136;
religion among 41
Ottoman empire 18;
1918 Caucasus offensive 53, 133
Öcalan, Abdullah 286, 303
Özal, Turgut 95;
& Azerbaijan 279

paganism, in Ossetia & Abkhazia, 242
Pahlavi dynasty 310
Pakistan 331, 351, 379
Pan–Turkism 294–295
Parthia 49

Partnership For Peace 371
Partya Karkeren Kurdistan (PKK: Kurdish
Workers’ Party) 220, 224, 276, 286;
& Russia 302–303
Pashazade, Allahsukur, Sheikh-ul-Islam 41
Pastukhov, Boris 104
Patiashvili, Jumbar 145, 148
perestroika 18, 71, 141
Perry, William 374
Persian empire 48–49
Persian Gulf 6, 351–352, 364, 373
Persian language 21
Pervomaiskoye 264
Peter 18, 53
Phoenicia 49
Picco, Giandomenico 378–379
Pogosyan, Henrik 66, 71
Poland 43;
& Chechnya 225
Politburo 45, 65–66
Poti 160, 340
Prigorodniy xviii, 35, 40, 178, 190, 208,
239–252, 267, 393, 398
Primakov, Yevgeny 104, 317, 332
Pulikovsky, General 234
Pulucci, Philippe 16
Putin, Vladimir 233–234, 258

Qadiri tariqat 242, 252, 265
Qubati, Armenian capture of 90–91

Raduyev, Salman 231, 264
Raşanjani, Akbar Hashemi 313
Ramazanov, Nariman 259, 261
Razumovsky, Georgi 65
Realpolitik 43, 370, 386
Red Army 22, 58
refugees, from Nagorno-Karabakh
conflict, 70, 84;
Azeri from Armenia 64–65;
Ossetians in North Ossetia 154;
South Ossetian in North Ossetia 245–246
rehabilitation, of deported nations 189
religion, role in conflicts 39–43
Riga 75
Riyadh 315
Rokhlin, Lev 353
Romania, & Caspian oil 350
Rondeli, Alexander 334, 396
Russia 7, 32, 39, 388;
conquest of Caucasus 9–23;
territorial integrity of 38;
foreign policy 323–328;
& Prigorodniy conflict 247–250;
& Caspian oil 348–350;
& Nagorno-Karabakh 98, 342–348, 395;
& Georgia 299–300;
& Abkhazia 159, 331–342;
& South Ossetia 157, 335–336;
& Javakheti 169;
& Iran 351;
& Israel 326;
delivery of weaponry to Armenia 126;
involvement in 1993 coup in Azerbaijan 88;
support for minorities in South Caucasus 32
Russian Armed Forces, & Prigorodniy conflict 248
Russian Revolution 1905, 54–56
Russians, in Chechen-Ingush ASSR, 190–191;
in Kazakhstan 62;
in Ukraine 62
Rustaveli society 147
Rutskoi, Aleksandr 157, 197, 335
Rwanda 398
Rybklin Ivan 230

Saatli refugee camp, Azerbaijan 45
Sadarak 106
Sadval, Lezgin Democratic Union 259–262, 345
Safavid Persia 20, 52–53
Salafism 235
Samegrelo 132
Samtskhe-Javakheti 161
Samur river 258
Samurzakano 143
SANLC (South Azerbaijan National Liberation Committee) 312
Sardarabad 56
Sarkisian, Aram 295
Sarkisian, Vazgen xvi, 102
Sarkisian, Ara 168
Sarkisian, Serzhik 102
Saroyan, Mark 80
Sassanid dynasty, Persia, 49–50
Saudi Arabia 6;
& Chechnya 224
Schaumian, Stefan 59
Scowcroft, Brent 363
secularism 22
security complex 5–7, 382–384
seim 133
Seleucid empire 49
self-determination 31
Seljuks 51
Semenov, Vladimir 255–256
Senaki 157
Sestanovich, Stephen 106, 367
Sevres, treaty of 20, 60, 276
Shafi’i school of Islam 260
Shah Fath Ali 19
Shakhrai, Sergei 207, 209
Shali 214
Shamba, A. 179
Shamil, Imam 11–15, 262
Shamshadil khanate 53
Sharia 13, 41
Shaumianovsk region 73, 75, 114 124;
Azeri conquest of 83
Shekikhanate 21, 53
Sheripov, Mairbek 188
Shevardnadze, Eduard 94, 129, 140, 147, 179, 296, 333–335, 341, 354, 358, 380, 388;
arrival to power 157;
assassination attempt against 173;
Abkhazia 340;
& resolution of South Ossetian conflict 180–181;
& Zviadists 157
Shipko, Vazlav 339
Shirvan khanate 17, 19, 21, 51
Shirvanshahs 50–53
Shoniya, Valter 226
Shukhur-Saada 53
Shusha 53, 121, 124, 343;
disturbances 1905, 55;
Transcaucasian Federation 1917, 56–56; dissolution of 133, 136
Transcaucasian Federative Socialist Republic 62
Transdniestria 28, 104
Treaty of Adrianople 167
Tribalism 20
Tskhinvali, March on 154
Tsymbal, Nikolay 214
Turkestan 23
Turkey 7, 15, 27, 84, 220, 330, 343, 349, 382, 387–388; creation of republic 277; 1918 invasion of Caucasus, 56–57; relations with Bolsheviks 277; role in 1920s national delimitation 60–61; & Abkhazia 296–297; & Armenia 128, 292–296; & Nagorno-Karabakh conflict 91–92; & Azerbaijan 281–287; popular support for Azerbaijan & Chechnya, 43; & 1993 Baku coup 86, 282–283; & Central Asia 274–276; & Chechnya 223; & Georgia 296; & Israel 367; & North Caucasus 300; & Northern Iraq 286; & Syria 286; & Russia 287; & Ukraine 304; & Moldova 304; & Caspian oil 304–305; & Kosovo mission 375
Turkic peoples, North Caucasus 27; arrival in Caucasus 50
Turkish Cypriots 117
Turkmanchay, treaty of 9, 21, 54, 167, 308
Turkmen tribes 52
Turkmenistan 316, 362, 366, Tuva 23
Türkes, Alparslan 284–286
Ubykh 12
Udmurt 33
Udugov, Movladi 231, 232, 270
Ukraine 23, 325, 339, 354; & Caspian oil 350; & peacekeeping in Abkhazia 175; & Crimea 29
United Nations 28; Security Council 84; & Nagorno Karabakh conflict 95
United States of America 8, 84; & Chechnya 222–223; & Nagorno-Karabakh 369–369; & Turkish policy in CIS 279; policy goals in Caspian region 357; Aliyev visit to 102
UNOMIG 174–175, 361
Urmia, Lake 49
Urus-Martan 204
USSR, Supreme Soviet 70
Utik 49
Uzbekistan 349, 354, 371, 391–392
Uzbeks, in Tajikistan 62
Vainakh 27, 221
Vainakh Democratic Party 193
Vakhtang IV 18
Van, Lake 49
Vedeno 216
Vezir, Abdulrahman 70
Vazgen I, Catholicos of all Armenians 41
Vladikavkaz 190, 213, 243
Volsky, Arkady 70–73
Vorobyov, Eduard 218
Wahhabism 235
Walker, Christopher 81
Washington 355
Washington Post 68
White Legion 174
Wilson, Woodrow 61
Yakutia 262
Yalkhoroi 186, 194
Yandarbiyev, Zelimkhan 193–194, 202, 207, 216, 236
Yazov, Dimitry 75
Yeltsin, Boris 84, 204, 322, 325, 328–329, 365;
  mediation in Nagorno-Karabakh 77;
  & Abkhazia 336;
  & Chechen revolution 196–199;
  & negotiations with Grozny 209;
  & Prigorodniy 244, 250
Yerevan 70;
  khanate of 17–18, 21, 53;
  1905 disturbances 55;
Yermakov, Viktor 246
Yervandunis 49
Yevlah 86;
  Armenian possible plans to seize 92
Yezidi Kurds 3
Yılmaz, Mesut 284, 286, 291, 299
Young Turks 56, 276
Yuzhniy 246

Zakatalo region 136
Zangezur 52, 57, 69, 111, 119–120;
  Armenian claims to 58;
  Armenian capture of 90–91
Zavgayev, Doku 193, 207, 221, 228;
  & 1991 coup 196–197, 205
Zhirinovsky 381
Zhordania 133
Zhvania, Zurab 146, 167
Znamenskoye 204
Zoroastrianism 49
Zugdidi 173
Zulfugarov, Tofiq 109–110
Zviadists 157, 171–173, 337;
  & conflict with govern- ment 160–161;
  & 1998 Kutaïsi rebellion 169
Zyuganov, Gennady 365