Religion as a Factor in Caucasian Conflicts

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The many conflicts that have raged in the Caucasus since the end of the 1980s have often been depicted in media and academia as basically religious in character. The religious differences between parties to conflicts are emphasized and often exaggerated. In particular, the Caucasus has been taken as an example of the 'clash of civilizations' supposedly under way. This article seeks to challenge this perception of the Caucasian conflicts, arguing that religion has played a limited role in conflicts that are actually ethnopolitical and territorial in character. The article argues that seldom are religious bodies of thinking used to legitimize conflict behaviour in this region ¾ there has been no Jihad in the Caucasus, for example ¾ nor has the polarization of the parties to a conflict been underpinned primarily by religious identity or theological perspectives. As such, religious conflict can not be spoken of. Furthermore there has occurred no rallying of outside powers along religious lines; quite to the contrary empirical evidence shows that religion has had little impact ¾ especially when compared to ethnicity ¾ in the international ramification of these conflicts.

The Caucasus has been the scene of five of the eight armed ethnic conflicts that have raged in the Soviet Union since the initiation of *glasnost* in 1986.[1] In part due to this phenomenon, but also because of the restoration of old ties between the region and its southern neighbours, the Caucasus has regained an appellation in some circles as a 'Northern Tier' of the Middle East. And, indeed, the relations of the three Transcaucasian states with the Middle East have rapidly developed, especially in the case of Armenia, which sees itself as a 'second Israel' in the region, and which has no doubt of its identity as a Middle Eastern state.[2] Georgia, however, is eager to promote its European identity, while Azerbaijan is somewhat stuck between the West, Turkey, Iran, and Russia in its search for political and social orientations.

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Much like the Middle East, the Caucasus displays a complicated religious map, beyond the well-known fact of its ethnic and cultural diversity. Varieties of four world religions are present in the Caucasus. The combination of a religious variety and ethnic conflicts has led to many observers drawing an apparent logical link between the two phenomena, arguing hence that religion has indeed been a crucial factor in the conflicts of the Caucasus; that they are in a sense religious conflicts. In particular, advocates of the 'clash of civilizations' proposed by Samuel Huntington have added the Caucasus to the empirical database of conflicts supporting their theory that the world is being divided along civilizational faultlines, the main determining factor of a civilization being religion.[3]

It is the purpose of this article to refute the depiction of the Caucasian conflicts as being controversies based upon religious differences. The argument will seek to prove that religion has played a largely limited role in the conflicts of the region, basically restricted to being one of the determinants of ethnic identity. In this context, it will be argued that the conflicts are in their nature ethnopolitical—that is based upon a politicization of ethnicity, not religion.

RELIGIONS OF THE CAUCASUS

Islam exists both in its Shi'ite version, Ja'farite Shi'a Islam being the majority religion of the Azeris (75%), 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'ite 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 Karachai and Balkars, the Ajars of Georgia, as well as of the minority of Azeris (25%) that are Sunni and the minorities of Ossetians (20-30%) and Abkhazians (est. 35%) that are Muslim.[4]

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 Apostolic Orthodox church. Moreover, the Ossetians are by a large majority Orthodox Christians,5 of the same rite as the Russians, who are also present in the region as settlers (roughly 3% in Armenia, 4% in Azerbaijan, 6% in Georgia, as well as in the North Caucasus.) The Abkhaz are also partly Christian, although the Abkhaz in general are equally weary of both Islam and

Christianity—an interesting instance of the keeping 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.

Judaism is also represented in the form of the indigenous Tat 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 Guba 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".[6] Besides the Tat, there were Ashkenazi Jews living mainly in Baku, of which many have migrated to Israel, more as a result of the general 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 normally not taken as being a part of the Caucasus, but it is not part of any other Russian region and does indeed border the Caucasus. Moreover interaction between Kalmyks and the Caucasian peoples to their south are increasing.

Hence it is clear that the Caucasus is a highly religiously diversified area. At the same time, it is a region with numerous actual and potential conflicts between ethnic groups. The five armed conflicts that have plagued the Caucasus since the end of the 1980s have been: the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict between Azerbaijan on the one hand and Armenia and the Armenians of Nagorno-Karabakh on the other, erupting in late 1987; the Abkhaz-Georgian conflict, starting in 1988 but hostilities erupting only in 1992; the South Ossetian-Georgian conflict emerging in 1989; the Chechen-Russian conflict initiated in 1991 but escalating to war only in late 1994; and finally, the Ingush-North Ossetian conflict of October and November 1992.[7]

Of the five conflicts in the area, the most serious ones have been the ones in Nagorno Karabakh and Chechnya, trailed closely by Abkhazia. Mass media in the west, when referring to at least the first two of these conflicts, have seldom failed to define them as 'the conflict between the Christian Armenians and Muslim Azerbaijanis' or between 'Muslim Chechens and Orthodox Russians'. These statements, typically in the introduction to an article or in the last paragraph background sum-up of news reports, often seem to take the place of an

explanation to the roots of these conflicts. The existence of religious differences, in other words, is taken as enough an explanation for the occurrence of armed conflict. As a result, theorists of civilizational clash such as Samuel Huntington have happily used the case of the Caucasus, especially the Nagorno Karabakh conflict and now Chechnya, as an example of violence-prone faultlines between civilizations.

At first sight, indeed, facts seem to lend credence to these interpretations of the conflicts: Of the five conflicts, three display clear religious differences; the fourth less pronounced so; and the fifth, none at all. The three first cases are Nagorno Karabakh, pitting Armenian Orthodox Christians against Shi'a Muslim Azeris; Chechnya, involving Russian Orthodox Christians and Sunni Muslim Chechens; and the Prigorodniy conflict, between (primarily) Orthodox Christian Ossetians and Sunni Muslim Ingush. The case of Abkhazia falls in the middle, as it pits Georgian Christians against the Abkhazians, who are partly Christian, partly Muslim, in both cases with heavy Pagan influences. Finally, the conflict between South Ossetia and Georgia displays no religious differences, both peoples being Orthodox Christians.

In this context, it seems difficult to argue that religion has had no role in these conflicts. That is not the aim of this paper, either. However, the aim is to challenge the view of religion as a catalyzer of these conflicts, of these conflicts having a discernible religious character. This argument will be proved empirically by considering the observations that follow.

CHARACTERISTICS OF A RELIGIOUS CONFLICT

In order to describe a conflict as religious in character, it is not enough that the two communities in conflict share different religions. 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 are fulfilled.

(1) That at least one party refers to a religious body of thinking to legitimize conflict behaviour;

(2) That the polarization of parties is underpinned *primarily* by religious identity and/or theological perspectives.[8]

THE CAUCASIAN CONFLICTS

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 the control over territory. Four of the conflicts consist of an ethnically based autonomous area of Soviet times trying to wrest off its respective central government's control. All took the opportunity of the fall of the Soviet Union and the ensuing constitutional vacuum to proclaim independence at the same time as the fifteen union republics. Only the Prigorodniy case differs by being 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.[9] A short history of each conflict is in place in order to understand the dynamics of conflict in the region better.

Nagorno-Karabakh

The conflict which has presented the greatest risk for international security has consistently been the one over Nagorno-Karabakh, due to its numerous dimensions, it including an intra-state (Nagorno-Karabakh vs. Azerbaijan) as well as an inter-state dimension (Azerbaijan vs. Armenia), and a potential for regional escalation possibly including Turkey, Iran, and Russia. Nagorno-Karabakh must be termed an exceptional case in Soviet nationality policy. It was virtually the only autonomous unit whose titular nationality was also the holder of a union republic. In other words, there were two Armenian political entities in the Soviet Union: the Armenian SSR and the Nagorno-Karabakh AO, something which did not occur elsewhere. For example, Armenians in Georgia received no autonomy, neither did Azeris in Georgia or Dagestan, or for that matter Russians in Kazakhstan. It is also significant that the name of the entity is geographical rather than ethno-national in character, also a unique phenomenon.

Hostilities between Azeris and Armenians first erupted in 1905, during the first Russian revolution, and have re-emerged at all times of weakness of the Russian/Soviet state.[10] Hence between 1918 and 1920 the brief period of Transcaucasian independence was plagued by conflict.[11] Again after 1987, the relaxation of pressure from the center led to buried tensions re-escalating.[12] In the lightened atmosphere of Perestroika, the claims reemerged as popular demonstrations as well as political struggle, which led to an escalating spiral of violence. Areas where Armenians and Azeris were in contact subsequently

became the ground for mutual ethnic cleansing. In February 1988, the local Soviet of Nagorno-Karabakh petitioned to the Azerbaijani, Armenian and USSR Supreme Soviets to be transferred to the jurisdiction of the Armenian SSR; this request was declared null and void both by the Azerbaijani and USSR authorities, and led to violent outbursts between the population groups in Karabakh itself which provoked the 'pogrom' of Sumgait, where Armenians were the target of ethnic violence led by the newly arrived Azeri refugees from Armenia.[13]

The years 1990-91 were characterized by escalating although unorganized guerrilla warfare in and around Karabakh as well as along the Azerbaijani-Armenian border areas.[14] In this context both parties, but notably the Armenian side, started arming themselves and before long heavier weapons were introduced.[15] By the time of the August 1991 hard-liner coup in Moscow against Mikhail Gorbachev, the situation had deteriorated considerably, and the ensuing collapse of the Soviet Union meant that the common authority over Azerbaijan and Armenia was disappearing rapidly, internationalizing the conflict with the independence of the two countries—leading to full-scale war. In the following two years, Armenian forces managed to secure control over Nagorno-Karabakh, but also over the areas to the west and south of the enclave which were Azeri-populated and part of Azerbaijan proper, hence leading to a refugee flow of over 800'000 people.[16]

A cease-fire was reached in 1994, which has been holding since then with only minor skirmishes taking place, despite the fact that there is no peace-keeping force separating the belligerents. International negotiations have failed to bring the parties closer to a solution despite at times intensive mediation efforts on the part of the OSCE Minsk Group, which has the international mandate for the search for a solution to the conflict.[17]

Abkhazia

Of the conflicts that have plagued Georgia since before its independence, the war with Abkhazia has clearly been the most severe and the most intractable. Before Georgia's independence, Abkhazia was an Autonomous Soviet Socialist Republic (ASSR). The Abkhaz, while being Georgia's arguably most troublesome minority among the over 80 ethnic groups living in the country, was by no means any of the numerically most important. The Abkhaz numbered only 95'000 in Georgia, out of a total population of 5,4 million. Abkhazia was Sovietized after a period of Menshevik rule in March 1921 as the Abkhaz Soviet Socialist Republic

(SSR), a signatory to the Soviet Union in its own right, and recognized by Georgia's revolutionary committee—one of the grounds on which the Abkhaz base their claim to a right to independence.[18]

The existing tensions, which had boiled over in some occasions during Soviet rule, most notably in 1978, were exacerbated by Perestroika, as both Georgians and Abkhazians found opportunities to 'revindicate their respective claims to independence'.[19] In June 1988 sixty leading Abkhazians signed a letter to the Soviet leadership enumerating their grievances with Georgia.[20] 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 mean 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.[21] In August 1990 the region's Supreme Soviet proclaimed Abkhazia a full union republic, hence seceding from Georgia.

The main catalyzer of conflict was nevertheless 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, positive towards the preservation of the Soviet Union, organized the referendum and voted overwhelmingly in favour of it. As Abkhazia reinstated its 1925 constitution which defines it as independent but 'united with the Soviet Socialist Republic of Georgia on the basis of a special union treaty',[22] it in practice declared its independence, while nevertheless keeping a door open for federation with Georgia.[23]

The Georgian reaction came on 14 August, in the form of military action by paramilitary groupings vaguely controlled by the state. At this point the retreating Abkhaz forces found support from the North, as North Caucasian volunteers, mainly Circassians and Chechens, came to their rescue. In a matter of weeks, the Georgian forces were pushed back, with the assistance of rogue Russian military units, particularly air force units supporting the Abkhaz.[24] The war continued until winter, when fighting temporarily died out.

In March 1993, the Abkhaz resumed their offensive from their stronghold in the north of the region and in September, during another bout of intra-Georgian turmoil, recaptured the capital Sukhum, forcing Georgian president Shevardnadze himself to escape from the city. As a result, Abkhazia's whole territory came under the control of the Abkhaz government.[25] Most Georgians that lived on the territory of Abkhazia were forcibly evicted in a systematic campaign of ethnic cleansing, and UN observers have concluded that all sides were guilty of

substantial human rights violations.[26] The UN, which has been the main mediator in Abkhazia, has failed to achieve a solution to the conflict despite several rounds of shuttle and conference diplomacy. The tensions remain high, and fighting re-erupted in May 1998 in the Gali region of southern Abkhazia, bordering Georgia proper, which meant a sever setback for any hopes for a forthcoming solution.

South Ossetia

The disturbances in South Ossetia which came to a point in 1989 developed within a relatively short period of time. Since 1987, the Georgian political atmosphere was becoming increasingly nationalistic and chauvinistic, in particular with regard to relations with Georgia's minorities. In November 1988, a law strengthening the position of the Georgian language in the entire territory of Georgia was enacted.[27] This could be seen as the preparatory stage in a 'war of laws' between the central government and the autonomous regions which began in its earnest in the fall of 1989.[28] Meanwhile, the newly formed Ossetian popular front, *Ademon Nykhas*,[29] expressed its support for the Abkhaz secessionist claims, and sent a petition to Moscow asking for the unification of North and South Ossetia.[30] On 10 November, the South Ossetian Supreme Soviet unilaterally upgraded the status of the entity to that of an ASSR. The Georgian parliament immediately revoked the decision, and the Georgian leadership organized a march on Tskhinval under the pretext of defending the Georgian majority population of the city.[31] An armed clash was prevented only by armored forces of the Soviet ministry of interior. The outflow of Georgians was accompanied by a flux of Ossetians to North Ossetia, variously estimated at between 30'000 to 100'000 people. These mainly included those Ossetians that lived in Georgia proper, outside the South Ossetian Autonomous Region.[32]

By mid-1991, the Georgians were bombing the South Ossetian capital with artillery, in a way intending to force the population to flee. In November, a series of hostage-takings took place, and Tskhinval was surrounded by Georgian troops, which seemed poised to 'resolve' the question once and for all. As North Caucasian volunteers were ready to intervene and Russia openly took the Ossetian side, the gravity of the situation and the possibility of the escalation of this hitherto localized conflict to a larger Caucasian war poising Georgia against Russia was instrumental in engineering a rapprochement between Shevardnadze, who had only recently come to power after the ouster of nationalist president Gamsakhurdia, and Boris Yeltsin. On 22 June 1992, 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 cease-fire nevertheless came into effect on 28 June, and a peace-keeping force composed of Russians, Georgians, and Ossetians was set up. On 14 July the first peace-keepers were deployed, and the cease-fire has held ever since.

Chechnya

Historically, the Chechens have been the Caucasian people which have been most reluctant to accept Russian overlordship. They are also the ones to have rebelled against Russia more often and longer than any other people, and have consequently suffered from Russian repression more than their neighbours.[33] When the cavalcade of sovereignty declarations took place in 1989-90, the Chechens' reaction took on an entirely different dimension than that of the Volga Tatars, for example, or even of the neighbouring republics. The Chechen national movement became much more radical, much more emotionally laden than other 'popular fronts' in the Soviet Union. Furthermore, the Chechens had the demographic strength of no other nationality in the North Caucasus, with close to a million people. This fact coupled with the determination of the Chechens, and the fact that the Chechen national movement immediately came to be dominated by radical forces in Chechen society, paved the way for a conflict with Moscow.

In November 1990 an all-Chechen National Congress was held in Grozny, which quickly came to be dominated by Jokhar Dudayev's charismatic personality.[34] The August 1991 coup was the starting signal for Dudayev, who convened the national congress and condemned the coup, which Chechnia's official leader, Doku Zavgayev, had silently supported. In September the Supreme Soviet of the republic was forcibly disbanded, faced with popular demands and a raid against it conducted by Dudayev's forces.[35] Dudayev announced presidential elections for 27 October, and was duly elected president before declaring independence on 2 November. A Russian attempt to subdue the separatists backfired, and Chechnia was for all practical purposes left alone for three years. [36]

However, from the middle of 1993 Russia increasingly started funding and encouraging armed opposition to Dudayev. In December 1994, when Russian involvement became obvious, Russia decided to intervene directly instead of by proxy. Russian forces invaded Chechnia on 11 December 1994, apparently in the belief that Chechnia would be easily subdued in a matter of days. As is widely

known, this did not happen. Instead, the Chechens put up a successful resistance movement. The war continued with various pauses until the Summer of 1996, with Russia occupying most of the Chechen lowlands but never being able to enter the mountains, from where the rebels organized their resistance.

In the beginning of August 1996, Russian disregard for cease-fires and shelling of Chechen positions led to a major response. The Chechens launched a massive attack on Grozny and other major towns of Chechnia, and secured control over the city just as Yeltsin was being sworn in as Russian president.[37] As a result, negotiations were undertaken which led to a peace agreement on 28 August 1996.[38] From the point of view of this research, the interesting point of this agreement is that it did not include any solution on the contentious issue of Chechnia's status vis-à-vis Russia. As Russia refused to accord Chechnia independence, and Chechnia refused to stay within Russia, the negotiators agreed to postpone this issue for five years, pending reconstruction and reconciliation.

The Chechen side has taken this as a victory and interpret it as a step towards Russian recognition of Chechen independence. Russia, however, refuses this interpretation and argues that Chechnia has no right of secession under international law, a point on which most western observers agree although a few, including the present author, have argued that there is legal basis for Chechen independence.[39] Whatever the case, no state has so far recognized Chechnia and it is very unlikely that anyone will unless Russia does so itself. However, Chechnia has *de facto* acquired a level of self-determination which is noticeably larger than Tatarstan, and in any case beyond autonomy. Chechnia has its own popularly elected government, its own army controlling its borders, all crucial elements of an independent state. In fact, Russia seems to have no administrative control over Chechnia—nor can it enforce federal law there—and the peace treaty which was formalized in May 1997 can actually be interpreted as Chechnia standing outside of the Russian Federation.[40] As Paul Goble has noted, the Russian and Chechens may be able to tacitly agree, for the time being, to a formula where Chechnia is independent in everything except in name.[41]

The Prigorodniy

There are no records of specific historical conflict between Ingush and Ossetians. Mutual suspicion may have existed to as the Ingush, just like all other indigenous Caucasian peoples, are highlanders, whereas the Ossetians are so-called 'foothillers', people that live in the hills or in the plains, at lower altitudes. Further, the Ingush are indigenous whereas the Ossetians settled in the region in

the sixth century AD. The two peoples speak unintelligible languages, and share different religions, the Ingush being Sunni Muslims and the Ossetians overwhelmingly Orthodox Christians. 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.[42] Most importantly, the Prigorodniy *raion* (district) of the city 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.[43]

When the Chechen-Ingush ASSR was reinstated in January 1957, the Prigorodniy *raion* remained within North Ossetia, and the returning Ingush found Ossetians living in their homes and were not allowed to return to their homes.[44] However by 1989, many Ingush had managed to return to the Prigorodniy legally or illegally, and formed large majorities in certain parts of the *raion*. With *perestroika*, the Ingush made the return of the Prigorodniy district to Ingush control the focus of their political activities. Boris Yeltsin initially showed favour for the Ingush demands, and a commission investigating the affair found that the Ingush claims were well-founded.

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.[45] 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".[46]

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 fourteen wounded Ingush. In October 1992, the spark of a young Ingush girl overrun by a North Ossetian tank was enough to catapult the district into a bloody but short civil war, which is estimated to have killed over 600 people. Russian forces took the Ossetian side while intervening to end the conflict, and evicted the Ingush of the Prigorodniy *raion*. Negotiations have not resulted in any agreements either on the status of the district or the repatriation of refugees, and tensions seem to be re-escalating again since 1996, and the conflict is simmering at low fire.

THE CHARACTER OF THE CONFLICTS

The five conflicts described above can readily be classified as ethnopolitical conflicts. They have no ideological component, and economics are involved at best only as contributing factors. The reason why the two communities in the respective cases do not agree to 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, fueling and directed against each other, and scarcely able to develop without each other. One could most readily define these conflicts as ethnopolitical—based on politicized ethnicity.

In these ethnopolitical conflicts, religion often takes a place 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 separate histories and historiographies, as well as in most cases a long history of mutual suspicion toward each other. As far as Chechens and Russians, Armenians and Azeris, Ingush and Ossetians are concerned, moreover, the belonging to different religions doubtlessly has been an additional factor increasing 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 taken its place among other determinants of ethnic identity. For example, Georgia 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 except for their religion seems to have been a factor preventing the outbreak of violence. On the other hand, South Ossetians are Orthodox Christians and the Abkhaz are partly Christians, whereas all other determinants of ethnic identity separated them from the Georgians. Despite this fact, the severity of the conflicts of the central government with these territories can not be underestimated. The war is Abkhazia, although periodically

showing signs of approaching a solution, at times also looks as intractable as the Chechen and Nagorno-Karabakh conflicts. Indeed Abkhazia is the only one of the 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, save 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 behaviour. 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 Chechnia, the predominance of Adat, or customary law, over Islamic law is striking according to many observers.[47] Whenever religion has been used, it has been as a political tool rather than for its own aims. As Anatol Lieven quotes Jokhar 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.[48]

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.[49] He also appeared on Armenian Television, supporting the claims.[50] At roughly the same time, high priests appeared in the rallies in Yerevan campaigning for the annexation of Nagorno-Karabakh.[51] Later in 1988, the Ayatollah Allah-Shukur Pashazade, Sheikh-ul-Islam of the Transcaucasus, entered 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'ites, Pashazade issued a condemnation of 'the enemies of Islam' and called for 'the mobilization of the faithful'.[52] Vazgen I issued another declaration in 1989, where he confirmed his belief in the self-determination of Nagorno-Karabakh.[53]

Nevertheless, 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 fervour against the enemy. Moreover they actually met in order to discuss the conflict and jointly distanced themselves from violence.[54] For example, in 1994 Vazgen I, 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.[55] 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 to the contrary, urging 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* on 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.'[56]

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

RELIGIOUS RALLYING

In terms of religious rallying, there exists a picture in the Caucasus, just like 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 Kosova 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 Georgia, 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;[57] but it was in the Baltic states and Poland that support for the Chechen rebels was the strongest.[58] 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. For a variety of reasons related at the bottom 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 Azerbaijani is the only sizable state with a twelver shi'ite majority population just like Iran.[59] Within the Transcaucasus, the best bilateral relations today exist between Azerbaijan and Georgia, whereas certain Armenian officials have stated that had Armenia not been at war with Azerbaijan, it would have been at war with Georgia, presumably over the issue of the large and compact Armenian minority in the Akhalkalaki region of Georgia, bordering Armenia.[60]

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 in with a Russian analyst to 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'.[61] 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 under the Chauvinist Gamsakhurdia regime. In the same context, Huntington adds in support of 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.[62] This is correct enough, and Chuvashia was indeed one of republics protesting 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 substantive 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.[63]

The predominance of this kind of thinking led to a difficulty of understanding in particular the Georgian-South Ossetian conflict, 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 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 in any case a heavy exaggeration. The depiction of these conflicts, 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. In any case,

the fact is that western countries showed a surprising laxity towards instances that can be described without exaggeration as wars of aggression of peoples happening to be Christian against peoples happening to be Muslim, as in Bosnia, Kosova, Nagorno Karabakh, Chechnya, or Ingushetia. Serb ethnic cleanisng in Bosnia was too close to Europe to be simply disregarded and too obvious to be distorted or misconstructed. By contrast, events in Nagorno Karabakh, including the ethnic cleansing of over 600'000 Azeris from Armenian-occupied territories in Azerbaijan, were swept under the carpet, as can be said of the tremendous violations of all rules of war and human rights in Chechnya. The predominance of prejudice and simplistic explanations of conflicts in 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.

CONCLUSIONS

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 utility in a conflict situation for the purpose of rallying the faithful, is related to the legacy of seventy years of Soviet Atheism which obviously seems to have reduced the role of 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 *has* 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 Chechnia'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.

NOTES

[1] The three other are Transdniestria, Osh (Kyrgyzstan) and Tajikistan. None of these conflicts primarily include belligerents of different religious traditions and only the Osh Uzbek-Kyrgyz conflict is actually and ethnic conflict.

[2] See William Ward Maggs, "Armenia and Azerbaijan: Looking towards the Middle East", in *Current History*, January 1993.
[3] Samuel P. Huntington, "The Clash of Cvilizations?", in *Foreign Affairs*, Summer 1993. The thesis was expanded in Huntington's *The Clash of Civilizations and the Remaking of World Order*, New York: Simon & Schuster, 1996.
[4] Alexandre Bennigsen and S. Enders Wimbush, *Muslims of the Soviet Empire: A Guide*, London: Hurst & Co., 1985, pp. 127-222.
[5] 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. On Ossetian Paganism, see Sebastian Smith, *Allah's Mountains ¾ Politics and War in the Russian Caucasus*, London: Tauris, 1998, pp. 80-83.
[6] See Inga Saffron, "The Mountain Jews of Guba", in The Philadelphia Inquirer, 21 July 1997, reprinted in *Azerbaijan International*, vol. 6 no.2, Summer 1998.
[7] See the author's forthcoming book, *Small Nations and Great Powers ¾ A Study of Ethnopolitical Conflicts in the Caucasus*, Richmond: Curzon Press, 1999 for a comprehensive analysis of these conflicts. Also for an assessment of these conflicts' present condition, see Svante E. Cornell, "Peace or War? The Prospects of Conflicts in the Caucasus", in *The Iranian Journal of International Affairs*, vol. 7 no. 2, Summer 1997; "The Unruly Caucasus", in *Current History*, vol. 96 no. 612, October 1997.
[8] See Kjell-Åke Nordquist, "Religion and Armed Conflict: Some Observations", in *States in Armed Conflict 1989*, ed. Karin Lindgren, Uppsala University Dept. of Peace and Conflict Research, Report no. 32.
[9] See Svante E. Cornell, "Conflicts in the North Caucasus", in *Central Asian Survey*, vol. 17 no. 3, Fall 1998.
[10] Tadeusz Swietochowski, "The Problem of Nagorno-Karabakh: Geography versus Demography under Colonialism and in Decolonization", in Hafeez Malik, ed., *Central Asia*, Basingstoke: MacMillan, 1994, pp. 143-158, here at p. 145.
[11] See Stephen Blank, "The Transcaucasian Federation and the Origins of the Soviet Union", in *Central Asian Survey*, vol. 9 no. 4, 1990; Haidar Bammate, "The Caucasus and the Russian Revolution (from a Political Viewpoint)", in *Central Asian Survey*, vol. 11 no. 4, 1991.
[12] See Stéphane Yérasimos, "Caucase : Le Retour de la Russie", in *Politique Étrangère*, no. 1, 1994; Stuart J. Kaufman, *Ethnic Fear an Ethnic War in Karabagh*, paper presented at the International Studies Association, Minneapolis, March 1998; Svante E. Cornell, "Undeclared War: The Nagorno-Karabakh Conflict Reconsidered", in *Journal of South Asian and Middle Eastern Studies*, vol. 20 no. 4, Summer 1997, pp. 1-23.
[13] For further details see Cornell, *Small Nations and Great Powers*, op. cit.[7], chapter 3, "The Azerbaijani-Armenian Conflict over Nagorno-Karabakh".
[14] See, eg., *Current Digest of the Post-Soviet Press*, vol. 42 no. 22, p. 10.
[15] See, eg., *Current Digest* vol. 42 no. 34, p. 14.
[16] On the refugees, see Josep Zapater, "Réfugies et Personnes Déplacées en Azerbaidjan", in *Cahiers D'Études sur la Méditerranée Orientale et le Monde Turco-Iranien (CEMOTI)*, no. 20, 1995, pp. 285-306.
[17] See Svante E.Cornell, *Conflict Theory and the Nagorno-Karabakh Conflict: Guidelines for a Political Solution?*, Stockholm: Triton, 1997; John J. Maresca, "Lost Opportunities in Negotiating the Nagorno-Karabakh Conflict", in *International Negotiation*, vol. 1 no. 4, 1996; and Rexane Dehdashti, "Nagorno-Karabakh: A Case-Study of OSCE Conflict Dispute Settlement Mechanism", in Michael Bothe and Natalino Ronzitti (eds.), *The OSCE in the Maintenance of Peace and Security*, Hague: Kluwer Law International, 1997, pp. 459-478.

[18] See Gueorgui Otyrba, “War in Abkhazia—the Regional Significance of the Georgian-Abkhazian

Politique Internationale, no. 67, 1995, pp. 107-119. See also Soili Nystén-Haarala, "Does the Russian Constitution Justify and Offensive against Chechnia" in *Central Asian Survey*, vol. 14 no. 2, June 1995. For arguments defending the Russian position, see Tarcision Gazzini, "Considerations on the Conflict in Chechnia", in *Human Rights Law jounral*, vol. 17 no. 3-6, 15 October 1996. See also Christian Altmann and frank Nienhuysen, *Brennpunkt Kaukasus: Wohin Steuert Russland*, Bergisch Gladbach: Bastei Lübbe, 1995, pp. 140-144.

[40] See Francis A. Boyle, "Independent Chechnya: Treaty of Peace with Russia of 12 May 1997", in *Turkistan Newsletter*, vol. 97:1/50, 15 September 1997.

[41] See Paul Goble, "How Independent is Chechnia", *Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty Report*, 11 September 1997. (Reproduced in *Turkistan Newsletter*, vol. 97:1/50, 15 September 1997).

[42] See Alexandr Nekrich, *The Punished Peoples: the Deportation and the Fate of the Soviet Minorities at the end of the Second World War*, New York: Norton and Co., 1978, p. 91.

[43] See Julian Birch, "Ossetia: a Caucasian Bosnia in Microcosm", in *Central Asian Survey*, no. 1, 1995, p. 43-74, here at p. 53.

[44] See Human Rights Watch/Helsinki, *The Ingush-Ossetian Conflict in the Prigorodniy Region*, New York: Human Rights Watch, 1996., p. 12.

[45] Formerly the North Ossetian Autonomous Socialist Soviet Republic, recently changed to the Republic of North Ossetia-Alania.

[46] See Vadim Ogoyev, "The Ossetians' 'Loyalty' to Socialism as a Crisis of National Self-Awareness", *Nezavisimaya Gazeta*, 8 July 1992, in condensed form in *Current Digest of the Post-Soviet Press*, vol. 44 no. 27, 5 August 1992, p. 26.

[47] See Anatol Lieven, *Chechnya: Tombstone of Russian Power*, New Haven: Yale University Press, 1998; Carlotta Gall and Thmas de Waal, *Chechnya: A Small Victorious War*, Basingstoke: Pan Books, 1997.

[48] Lieven, p. 364, quoting Moscow Times, 22 November 1994.

[49] See Girair Libaridian, *The Karabakh File*, Cambridge, Mass: Zoryan, 1988, pp. 101-102.

[50] See A. Mansurov, *Bielye Piatna Istorii i Perestroika*, Baku: Yazíçí, 1990, pp. 162-163.

[51] See Amir Taheri, *Crescent in a Red Sky: The Future of Islam in the Soviet Union*, London: Hutchinson, 1989, p. 171.

[52] Ibid., p. 171.

[53] See V. Guroian, "Faith, Church, and Nationalism in Armenia", in *Nationalities Papers*, vol. 20 no. 1, 1992.

[54] See Svante E. Cornell, Conflict Theory and the Nagorno Karabakh Conflict: Guidelines for a Political Solution, Stockholm: Triton, 1997; Arie Vaserman and Rami Ginat, "National, Territorial or Religious Conflict? The Case of Nagorno Karabakh", in *Studies in Conflict and Terrorism*, no. 4, 1994.

[55] *BBC Monitoring Service*, 20 April 1994.

[56] *The Sunday Telegraph*, 1 March 1992, p. 19.

[57] See Taras Kuzio, "International Reaction to the Chechen Crisis", in *Central Asian Survey*, vol. 14 no. 1, 1995, pp. 97-109.

[58] See Svante E. Cornell, "International Reactions to Massive Human Rights Violations: The Case of Chechnia", in *Europe-Asia Studies*, vol. 51 no. 1, January 1999.

[59] See Svante E. Cornell, "Iran and the Caucasus", in *Middle East Policy*, vol. 5 no. 4, January 1998.

[60] See Philip Petersen, "Security Policy in Post-Soviet Transcaucasia, in *European Security*, no. 1 1994. Georgia has a 500'000-strong Armenian community.

[61] See Samuel P. Huntington, *The Clash of Civilizations and the Remaking of World Order*, New York: Simon & Schuster, 1996, p. 278.

[62] Huntington, p. 277.
[63] See “Taras Kuzio, “The Chechnya Crisis and the ‘Near Abroad’”, in *Central Asian Survey*, vol. 14 no. 4, 1995.