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Article

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Georgia at a Glance; Abkhazian and South Ossetian Conflict

Zafer SÜSLÜ

Abstract

In modern world ethnic conflict has become one of the biggest problems of the contemporary life. In order to understand ethnic conflict we should understand the difference between nationality and ethnicity. One of the bloody and violent so called “ethnic” conflicts of 20 century were two conflicts on Georgian territory, these were conflicts in Abkhazia and South Ossetia. Solutions must be found in order to avoid the conflicts in the future throughout the world.

Keywords: Conflict, Abkhazia, South Ossetia, Georgia, Nationality, Ethnicity.

Introduction

During the centuries the world was suffering from interstate conflicts, the end of the cold war gave birth to the idealistic dream, according to which the United Nations would finally govern with power and supranational impartiality. This idealist dream however crashed against the rocks of modern ethnic conflict. Genocide and tribal fighting erupted in the conflict regions of Africa, Yugoslavia fell apart with ethnic seems. Ethnic conflicts became the new and far more savage problem for the mankind, as a consequence, ethnic conflict has today become the greatest threat to the stability and security of the modern world. Solutions must be found to resolve these conflicts. With the birth of the ethnic conflict international actors have started seeking the methods of the conflict resolution, but during this kind of management occurred the problem, international actors continued looking for solutions in the wrong direction, they were managing ethnic conflicts the same way they were treating traditional interstate conflicts. One important thing to note is that “neo ethnic conflict”, which arises not so much out of interstate politics as it does out of group psychology and mutual hatreds. Second, those theoretical scientists who have attempted to break tradition and not take traditional assumptions for granted have relied too heavily on only a few of the most prominent conflicts, most notably the conflicts of former Yugoslavia. They fail to recognize many insights that can be found in other conflicts, insights that would help better explain this type of war.

In this article the main goal is to show the situation in one of the most neglected by scientists conflict region in the world, namely transcaucasian region, these conflicts, the conflict between Georgia and the secessionist Abkhaz and between Georgia and South. Ossetia, has been some of the most bloody and violent wars of this decade.

Conflict, Ethnic Conflict, Nationality And Ethnicity

It is impossible to come to real understanding what the ethnic conflict is if we don't understand what the nationality and ethnicity is, what the difference between them is and what should be done in order to make a border between

them.

But before that lets classify the meaning of the conflict itself, here are some observations concerning this aspect:

- Conflicts at every level have very significant common characteristics and dynamics, and, therefore, it makes sense to examine them together and comparatively.
- Conflict is a natural and very typical phenomenon in every type of human relationships, at every level: From intrapersonal (the realm of psychology) to global.
- People get involved in conflicts because their interests or their values are challenged, or because their needs are not met.

Ethnic conflict is different from the conflict, ethnic conflicts very often tend to be the conflicts which never seem to settle to the ending point, usually they are settled for a certain period of time, but then they again start to resettle. It is common that in ethnic conflicts there are always two sides. One side is Majority and another one is Minority. Minority always tries to prove and make others realize their ethnic identity, while the Majority tries to play the role of the dominant and doesn't want to recognize objective or subjective identity of the minority.

One of the problems in Ethnic conflict resolution process may be that the leaders of the conflict relation on both minority and majority side always turn to be more fanatically tuned, in this kind of situation by all means it is very difficult for them to find common language by which they will achieve something to come to.

According to Wikipedia Nationality is, in English usage, a legal relationship existing between a person and a state. The person becomes subject to the state's jurisdiction, even while not on the state's territory; in exchange the subject becomes entitled to the state's protection, and to other rights as well. Nationality must be distinguished from citizenship: citizens have rights to participate in the political life of the state of which they are a citizen, such as by voting or standing for election; while nationals need not have these rights, though normally they do.

On the other hand an ethnic group is a human population whose members identify with each other, usually on the basis of a presumed common genealogy or ancestry. Members of an ethnic group generally claim a strong cultural continuity over time, although historians and anthropologists have documented that many of the cultural practices on which ethnic groups are based are of recent invention.

Autonomy As A Source Of Conflict

Before going farther discussing separately Abkhazia and later South Ossetian example I would like to stop on the following issue: what is the role of autonomy role in the conflict process. May it be the real source of ethnic conflict. First of all it should be said that since the 1950s, ethno political conflict has grown as a source of concern in the international arena. It culminated after the cold war with the eruption of conflict in the former Soviet Union and Yugoslavia. Some conflicts also broke out between ethnically defined social groups in Africa and Asia, in the post communist states of Eastern Europe and Eurasia, as well as in Western Europe. The reigning assumption that ethnic conflict was a vestige of the primitive past was revised and eventually abandoned, particularly in view of the

spread of ethnic conflict to less developed regions. This led to increased media coverage and public awareness of ethnic issues; more importantly, academic research on ethnic conflict and its resolution mushroomed. The mobilizations among minority groups in multiethnic states has often led to demands to territorial autonomy for outright session. It is especially characteristic in defined geographical areas where the minorities are compactly settled and the creation of a separate state is a feasible goal and territorial control becomes a chief issue of conflict. In situations in which ethnic groups live in overlapping settlement patterns, such demands are less feasible and are made more infrequently, making control over or influence in the central government the most contentious issue. Nowadays it is considered by many theorists that solutions involving regional autonomy are effective in dealing with ethnic conflict.

Abkhazian conflict

On 14 August of 1991 year the conflict in Abkhazia broke out, but the latent discors emerged long before violent clashes occurred. Georgian and Abkhazian sides today argue much about the historical interpretations of the conflict. Georgians claim that Abkhazians of modernity differ from the settlers who lived on the territory before, it is stated in Georgian sources that they migrated from the Northern Caucasus in the late mid-century.

On the other hand Abkhazians launch the arguments on “historical legitimacy” of their “homeland” and don't agree with the Georgian interpretation. However, most of the historical sources claim that Abkhazians and Georgian have the history of peaceful and normal coexistence and Abkhazia is cited as a part of Georgia like other ancient Georgian kingdoms, such as Megrelia, Imereti, Kartli etc

So the historical pretext to the present conflict should be found not in the depth of the centuries but in the recent period, late nineteenth and early twenties centuries when the relations of Georgians and Abkhazs vividly started to deteriorate, mostly because of the Russian politics towards the entire Caucasian region.

Westerners call the conflicts (the ones like in Abkhazia) “ethnic conflict”. However the parties never accept the word “ethnic” or “conflict”. For Georgian this term is not acceptable as they believe that it implies a kind of anti-Georgian prejudice. It is not an ethnic conflict but a *political* conflict, they insist.

The same may be said about the Abkhazians, they are no happier with it than the Georgians. What do Georgians mean by juxtaposing these two terms (“political” and “ethnic”) and resenting the term “ethnic conflict” №

The Georgian preference for calling the conflict “political” implies that the conflict is about statehood, and more particularly, about the independence and territorial integrity of the state. Georgia is fighting not specific ethnic societies but “separatists”-those who are challenge its territorial integrity, regardless their ethnic origin.

For Abkhazians the conflict is about self-determination about their right to define their political status and stand up to those who want to deprive them of their land, their ethnic home. The Abkhazians see the Georgian state as “imperialists”

and invader who have usurped the power to make decisions about the fate of the Abkhaz people.

Abkhaz dislike Georgians not because of their ethnic entity but because they see them as invaders, while Georgians see the concrete groups in Abkhazia as a “separatists” who want to take something that is legitimate part of Georgian Territory.

It is clear that both Georgians and Abkhazians would proudly support the one who will take their side, for example if any Abkhaz denounces the Abkhaz separatism he will be “good” for Georgians and any Georgian who supports the Abkhaz cause would be “good” for Abkhazians.

From the mentioned it could be said that it is more political interests for both sides than ethnic.

South Ossetian conflict

South Ossetia occupying 1/6 of Georgia's territory lies on the southern foothills of the Caucasian Mountains along the central part of Georgia border with Alanaia (Russian Federation) . From the south, east and west the region is surrounded by Georgia proper territory. Unlike former Abkhazia ASSR distinguished with its high economic potential and well-developed infrastructure, South Ossetia Autonomous Oblast (SOAO) was not the area of outstanding significance in this sense. The marginal allocation of industrial resources from Moscow centre ensured marginal self-sustainability and employment of local labour force.⁵

The South Ossetians belong to the same ethnic group as their neighbouring North Ossetians and are descendants of Scythian and Alan tribes that migrated to the Caucasus in early Middle ages from Persia, and are also closely related to Sarmatians, Roxolans or the, so called, Sarmatian tribes. It is widely contested when and how the Ossetians have settled in the region.⁶ Georgian sources mostly reiterate 17-19th centuries as the period of mass migration of Ossetians to the territory of Georgia from their 'historical homeland' on North Caucasian Mountains. Ossetian language is different from Georgian and belongs to the Indo-European group. More specifically, it is related to Persian (Farsi) but uses Cyrillic alphabet with some modifications.

The first violent clashes between the Ossetians and Georgians occurred in November 1989 and turned into wider-scale open hostilities lasting with interludes until the July 1992 ceasefire.

The conflict was initially portrayed as an internal affair by Georgian officials, as Tbilisi increased its armed presence and overall engagement in South Ossetia to carry out the anti-smuggling operation that closed the Ergneti Market.

However, by mid-summer 2004, the Saakashvili administration began to emphasize wider causes. The president elevated the dispute to an interstate level, depicting it as one between Georgia and Russia. At an 11 July rally he said, "crisis in South Ossetia is not a problem between Georgians and Ossetians. This is a problem between Georgia and Russia."⁷ Once the conflict was perceived as

international, Tbilisi turned to its external partners in the hope they would put pressure on Russia. In particular, efforts were made to increase the role and presence of the OSCE inside the zone of conflict and beyond.

Conclusion

As already mentioned modern ethnic conflict is a growing concern for the world. The modern conflict themselves are different than traditional state conflicts in many ways. The conflict resolution in the theory for ethnic conflict should take these differences into consideration.

For Georgia, like other regions or countries that strive for secession from a larger political unit, on the grounds of ethno-national distinctiveness the question of how to deal with its own minorities emerges. The 'Georgia for Georgians' campaign or euphoria can be seen as a logical consequence of the process of separation from Soviet/Russian influence.

It should be clear for the reader that the so-called ethnic conflict between Georgians and South Ossetians and Abkhazians cannot be explained by the mere fact of ethnic differences or the renewal of runaway old ancient hatred after the repressive lid of Communism have been removed. The conflict should rather be seen as a product of a complex set of interacting circumstances. Both due to the Soviet legacy, specifically the Soviet nationality policies and the hierarchical structure of the Soviet Federal Union; to the collapse of this system and the following decline and absence of central power and authority; to the Georgian 'exclusionist' ethno-nationalist policies in pursue of independence; and due to the specific circumstances of the South Ossetian minority, possessing an autonomous unit and an ethnic elite, and their 'fragmentize' ethno-nationalist response to the Georgian strive for independence.

It should be mentioned that the biggest resource of Georgia is innovative and imaginative well-educated people. Seeing the improvement in the managerial system, people's positive thinking and behavior, in addition to a stabilizing political climate, will attract more investment to supplement the lack of resources. So, addressing the above mentioned issues will directly impact on the fourth problem.

The question is what form the new development will take in Georgia, and how it will affect social conditions and human security in particular. The present declared strategy, which is to create, by means of fiscal, legal and structural reform, a suitable environment for free enterprise to flourish, provides only a very general and partial answer. To make the world safe for private enterprises does not in itself constitute a strategy of development, nor do public pronouncements or the proposals of the international organizations shed much light on the future. Imaginative and far-sighted strategies and scenarios are needed so that the requirements of human and economic development can be accommodated jointly. It is to be hoped that the Georgian people and the government will continue efforts that will lead them towards integration into the developed world. Georgia still has a long way to go.