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Time to talk about Caucasian self-determination ?

By Marko Attila Hoare, 31st August 2010

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY:

- 1. However cynical and insincere, Moscow's formal recognition of the independence of the break-away Georgian territories of Abkhazia and South Ossetia represents a symbolic abandonment of Moscow's traditional policy of suppressing the independence of the Caucasian peoples, and may prove in the long run to be an own goal.**
- 2. Unlike the EU and US during the break-up of the former Yugoslavia, Moscow has been wholly inconsistent and hypocritical in its application of the principle of self-determination to the Caucasus region, recognising**

the independence of autonomous entities that have seceded from Georgia, while suppressing the independence of those that have attempted to secede from Russia, namely Chechnya.

3. Western leaders should rise to Moscow's challenge over Abkhazia and South Ossetia, by inviting Russia to discuss with us whether a set of principles can be agreed upon to determine whether and on what basis former Soviet autonomous entities such as Abkhazia, South Ossetia and Chechnya should be able to exercise the right to self-determination.

Following Kosovo's declaration of independence in February 2008 and its subsequent recognition by the US and most EU and NATO members, various Cassandras told us that this would provoke an avalanche of copycat independence-declarations by secessionist territories all over the world. This did not occur, so following the International Court of Justice's ruling last month that Kosovo's declaration of independence was not contrary to international law, the Cassandras then told us it was actually this ruling that would trigger the avalanche of secessions. We are still waiting, and I would advise readers not to hold their breath. But there has been one copycat response to our recognition of Kosovo's independence: in August 2008, Russia retaliated by formally recognising the independence of Georgia's two breakaway territories of Abkhazia and South Ossetia. However insincere this recognition of the 'independence' of what are effectively two Russian colonies may be, Moscow has at least formally broken with its traditional policy, pursued since Tsarist times, of suppressing the independence of the Caucasian peoples, as well as with its insistence that the borders of the former members of the Soviet Union should be respected. This may ultimately prove to be rather more of a trigger for further secessions than the case of Kosovo, which was the only such entity of its kind in the Balkan peninsula. Unlike Kosovo, the former autonomous republic of Abkhazia and autonomous oblast of South Ossetia are entities of a kind with the autonomous republics across the mountains in Russia's North Caucasus region. One of these republics, Chechnya, already made a bid for independence in the 1990s that Moscow drowned in blood, and the armed

insurgency that began there has spread to neighbouring North Caucasian territories. Russian Prime Minister Vladimir Putin's bloody-minded attempt to punish the West for Kosovo by formally sanctioning the dismemberment of the US's Georgian ally may yet prove to be a spectacular own goal.

The main problem with the model of 'independence' for Abkhazia and South Ossetia as championed by Moscow is not that these entities should not enjoy the right to independence in principle. A reasonable case could be made that all autonomous entities of the former Soviet Union should be able to exercise the right to self-determination, irrespective of whether they are located in Russia, Georgia, Ukraine, Azerbaijan or elsewhere. The problem is that Moscow only recognises the right for such entities that have seceded from its enemy, Georgia, but not those that have attempted to secede from Russia, or that may wish to do so in future. Such double-standards cannot be justified on any democratic grounds.

The democratic case for Abkhazia's independence is highly problematic, given that the ethnic Abkhaz constituted only 17.8% of the territory's population before the war of the 1990s, whereas ethnic Georgians comprised a plurality of Abkhazia's population of 45.7%, with Russians, Armenians and other smaller groups comprising the balance. On 17 March 1991, Abkhazia's electorate actually voted *against* independence; 52.3% participated in a plebiscite on the preservation of the Soviet Union, of which 98.6% voted in favour. This undoubtedly represented a vote against inclusion in an independent Georgia on the part of the ethnic Abkhaz and of some of the minorities, and a conservative vote in favour of the Soviet *status quo* on the part of some ethnic Georgians, ethnic Russians and others, but it scarcely represented an unambiguous mandate for independence. Since the war of the early 1990s, the ethnic cleansing of ethnic Georgians from Abkhazia, and the emigration of many of the rest of the territory's inhabitants, have reduced the population to 215,972 according to the [last \(2003\) census](#), down from 525,061 in 1989. The number of ethnic Georgians from Abkhazia who remain dispossessed is not much less than the total population remaining in the territory. In such circumstances, whether self-determination can have any meaning is a moot point. Certainly, there can be no possible grounds for

granting self-determination to Abkhazia while denying it to Chechnya – a country with the same former constitutional status (Autonomous Soviet Socialist Republic – ASSR) and two and a half times the population, which in 1991 declared independence on the basis of a solid demographic majority in favour.

Moscow's double-standard over South Ossetia represents a still more interesting case. Its population of just under a hundred thousand in 1989 was split mostly between ethnic Ossetians and ethnic Georgians roughly 2:1 in favour of the former, giving it a respectable demographic majority in favour of independence, though in terms of viability, a rather weaker case than Abkhazia, Chechnya or Kosovo (the South Ossetians are a community approximately one thirtieth the size of the Kosovo Albanians, and smaller than the Bosniaks/Muslims in Serbia or the Albanians in Macedonia). However, Moscow is paradoxically recognising the right to independence of the autonomous oblast of South Ossetia, but not of the Autonomous Republic of North Ossetia – Alania within its own borders – despite the fact that North Ossetia has a higher constitutional status (autonomous republic as opposed to autonomous oblast) and a population of ethnic Ossetians that was five times as high as South Ossetia's in 1989 and possibly as much as ten times higher today. It is as if the US and its allies would recognise the independence of the Albanians in Macedonia, but not of Albania itself.

This represents a degree of hypocrisy simply inconceivable for democratic Europe. The international community did not exactly cover itself in glory in its reaction to the break-up of Yugoslavia. Nevertheless, under the leadership of the EEC/EU, it applied the principle of self-determination consistently. Thus, in the early 1990s, the right to independence was recognised for all the republics of the former Yugoslavia (and for the former Soviet Union and Czechoslovakia) equally. The recognition of Kosovo in 2008 meant that the right was extended to all the former members of the Yugoslav federation; in most respects, Kosovo possessed all the rights of the former-Yugoslav republics, therefore recognition of its independence was ultimately a matter of consistency. And in contrast to Kosovo, which was a member of the former Yugoslav federation, Abkhazia and South Ossetia were not members

of the former Soviet federation, therefore Western leaders are not being hypocritical in rejecting any parallel between the two cases.

For all Moscow's opportunistic attempts at equating its support for Abkhazia and South Ossetia with the West's support for Kosovo, there really is no parallel. In contrast to the Western alliance's reluctant acceptance of the break-up of Yugoslavia and reluctant intervention in the conflict, Russia's constant intervention in the Caucasus since the 1990s has represented the efforts of a colonial power at retaining at least some grip on its former colonies, and at punishing one of them – Georgia – for its rejection of Russian colonial rule. Moscow's support for Abkhazian and South Ossetian nominal 'independence' is a figleaf for its policy of limiting as much as possible the real independence of the entire region. Meanwhile, its colonisation of the two countries is **proceeding rapidly**. Those looking for a parallel in the West's own neo-colonial past should not look to the former Yugoslavia, but rather to the policies that France has sometimes pursued in parts of Africa, or that the US sometimes pursued until recently in Latin America. US collusion in the Guatemalan genocide in the 1970s and 80s, or French collusion in the Rwandan genocide in the 1990s, represent episodes of a shameful legacy that we should continue to repudiate. And we have every right and reason to expect Russia similarly to abandon its own colonial legacy in the Caucasus.

Rather than allowing Moscow to paint us as the hypocrites vis-a-vis Kosovo, Abkhazia and South Ossetia, it is time for Western leaders to call Putin's bluff; to show that, unlike the Putin-Medvedev regime, we stand for the consistent application of universal principles. Let us state, loudly and clearly, that the principle of self-determination for the peoples of the Caucasus, and for the former Soviet autonomous entities, cannot be selectively applied. Let us invite Moscow to discuss with us whether a set of principles can be agreed upon to determine whether and on what basis these entities should be able to exercise the right to self-determination. But this would require that all such entities be treated on an equal basis, irrespective of whether they are located within the borders of Russia, Georgia or any other former member of the Soviet Union. In principle, there is no reason why we should fear such a

discussion, provided it is held without prejudice to the final outcome, and the voices of all interested parties are heard – including both the existing post-Soviet independent states, their autonomous entities – whether they are currently attempting to secede or not – and representatives of any refugees.

Such a discussion could consider recognising the right of all such entities to full independence, or other options that fall short of this, such as granting them the right to complete autonomy – virtual independence – within the borders of their parent states. The latter option, indeed, would not amount to a very great departure from the *status quo*, in which Tbilisi has lost control over Abkhazia and South Ossetia and Moscow has effectively ceded control over Chechnya to its president and despot, Ramzan Kadyrov. Were Moscow to agree to such a discussion, it would open the door to a solution of the remaining national conflicts in the European and Caucasian parts of the former Soviet Union – including the Armenian-Azerbaijani conflict over Nagorno-Karabakh. But if, as seems inevitable, Moscow rejects such a discussion out of hand, its hypocrisy over Abkhazia and South Ossetia will be exposed for all to see.

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