

U.S. Helsinki Commission to Hold Briefing on Conflict in the Caucasus

“Conflicts in the Caucasus: Prospects for Resolution”

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Briefing Notes by Thomas de Waal, Senior Associate, Carnegie Endowment for International Peace.

Thank you for inviting me here today to brief your commission.

We are currently marking the 20th anniversary of the end of the Soviet Union, when the three conflicts we are discussing, Abkhazia, South Ossetia and Nagorny Karabakh were already breaking out. That they are still unresolved 20 years on shows how intractable and complex they are. It is worth recalling that they all began *before* the Soviet Union ended, which makes it even harder to resolve them. The residents of the three conflict regions have never experienced life in independent Azerbaijan or Georgia, only in their Soviet-era predecessor republics. Generations are growing up, ignorant of one another.

It is important to stress an obvious point in our title. These are *conflicts*, with conflicting sides and narratives. I do not see a moral bias in them towards one side or the other. The Georgian side basically started the war in South Ossetia in 1990 and in Abkhazia in 1992, but both sides did terrible things in those two conflicts and the vast majority of displaced people from the conflicts are ethnic Georgians.

For both sides, conflict has been a huge national trauma. Consider that the Abkhaz lost around four per cent of their entire ethnic population in the war of 1992-3. And that around 80 per cent of Georgians living in Abkhazia before the war are still displaced.

When it comes to Nagorny Karabakh, the Armenians emerged the victor on the ground of the 1991-4 war but both sides paid a heavy price. Both sides have a long list of “black dates” commemorating what is in effect the attempts of each to destroy the other.

The Armenian side recalls the pogroms in Sumgait and Baku, deportation of Armenians from Azerbaijan, the shelling of civilians in Stepanakert, the massacre at Maragha. Azerbaijanis recall the deportations of Azerbaijanis from Armenia, the massacre at Khojaly, the expulsion of half a million Azerbaijanis from the seven territories around Karabakh in 1992-4.

So there are no angels here and it would be a mistake for the United States to assert the morality of one side over the other in any of these conflicts.

A few words about the situation with Georgia's conflicts after the war of 2008. Recognition as independent states by Russia has obviously dramatically changed the situation in Abkhazia and South Ossetia. From their point of view a Russian military presence means protection from Georgia. But it also has meant de facto annexation by Russia, which makes many people in Abkhazia in particular resentful.

The trajectories of the two territories are also diverging. South Ossetia is barely viable as a self-governing territory, let alone a state, having a population of barely 30,000 people. Abkhazia is more viable, with a population of more than 200,000, has working institutions and media. But it obviously lacks legitimacy, if only (as also in S Ossetia) because of the issue of its "missing" Georgian population.

That means that the policy of non-recognition of Abkhazia and South Ossetia is definitely the right one. But within that framework I would urge greater pragmatism. The current residents of these territories are not "second-class human beings." Their aspirations and insecurities are genuine, if not their sovereignty. They will not go away—and by their power status are basically holding hostage the fate of the Georgian IDPs.

South Ossetia is both more isolated and more liable in the future to do a deal with Georgia. It was part of Georgia's economic space up until 2004. Simply opening the border would be a catalyst for normalization. Abkhazia is more complex. People there are more aggressive in asserting their independence, but also genuinely seek engagement with the world beyond Russia and Georgia. A deal with them will be a very long-term process. Pragmatic status-neutral ways of allowing young Abkhaz to travel and study abroad and engage with the outside world would be a win-win arrangement for all. The current Georgian strategy on engagement, despite promising much, has failed to deliver that.

A more pragmatic strategy on elections would also be beneficial. In April 2010, the United States congratulated "Mr. Dervis Eroglu for his victory in elections held to select the leader of the Turkish Cypriot community." What is right for one unrecognized entity should be right for others: recognition of Abkhaz, Ossetian and Karabakh Armenian leaders as *local* governments is a good step, which will increase engagement and leverage. If Western governments had taken that approach with South Ossetia, they would now be able to exert leverage to voice support for the candidate there who has popular backing but whose election has been stolen, Alla Jioyeva.

When it comes to Nagorny Karabakh, the situation gets harder and harder. There is a small but growing risk of renewed conflict. In large part this is because of a growing problem of perception.

Armenians believe they have built a de facto state on the ground in NK, that a new generation is growing up that has never met an Azerbaijani and there is no going back. The recognitions of Kosovo, Abkhazia and South Ossetia give them hope that their turn may come in the future. Azerbaijan by contrast, sees that its economy is six times bigger than in the 1990s, that it now spends more on its military than Armenia does on its entire government budget and that it is now an international player which will be a member of the UN Security Council in January.

All this makes it much harder to forge a peace than a decade ago.

There is nothing wrong in principle with the Minsk Process and the mediation of three important global actors, France, Russia and the United States. But it also lacks the authority it had in the 1990s, when both sides were much weaker.

Changing the Minsk Group format would be a distraction. It would not change the nature of the problem. Content is more important than form and it is defined by the two presidents, who are the conductors of the process. Currently they basically prefer the status quo to the risk of changing it.

A few basic problems:

- The presidents prefer a closed process that does not involve societies. This means that the two societies are still stuck in a no-compromise mentality and the presidents have no “peace constituency” supporting them if they want to do a deal. Important players with a stake in the outcome of negotiations, for example the Karabakh Armenians (and their elected authorities) and Azerbaijani IDPs, also do not have a proper voice in the process.
- The discourse on the conflict is dominated by two aggressive competing Armenian and Azerbaijani narratives. A “third narrative” of peace, compromise and peaceful co-existence is not being expressed or heard, either locally or internationally.
- The conflict is a second-order priority for the international community, which is reluctant to invest major resources in it, without an obvious hope of a good result. Compare this situation to the crisis in the Balkans in the 1990s, when the EU and the US could not ignore it.
- There is a lack of clarity as to who will provide peacekeeping and post-conflict reconstruction when peace is finally agreed. This makes the parties even more cautious.

A final overall recommendation for the peace process:

The Minsk Group co-chair countries should offer both less and more.

I mean by this that the mediators must stress that they alone cannot solve the conflict and it is fundamentally up to the parties on the ground. This means that they should encourage Armenians and Azerbaijanis to take greater “ownership” of their own conflict and the search for a mutually acceptable deal through bilateral negotiations. The mediators can emphasize that they are

available for advice and support, and will still keep up their ceasefire monitoring function, but will take a step back and give more responsibility to the parties in crafting the actual nature of the deal.

Simultaneously, the mediators, supported by other international bodies such as the EU, UN and World Bank, should pledge more by more publicly asserting that they will provide the necessary resources, in terms of peace-keeping, policing and reconstruction, to under-pin a peace settlement.

Thank you.