

## **Thomas Kunze; Henri Bohnet: Between Europe and Russia: On the Situation of the Renegade Republics of Transnistria, Abkhazia, and South Ossetia**

If the citizens of those countries had their way, the UN would soon have three new member states: The people in Transnistria, Abkhazia, and South Ossetia, three conflict-laden regions belonging to the former Soviet Union and situated in the immediate vicinity of the EU, are pressing for independence. Not only the Europeans and Russians but also the international community should join in the search for solutions, although they might differ from case to case: While the most sensible solution for Transnistria would be to achieve autonomy within Moldavia, and for Abkhazia to obtain independence, it is still too early to predict the future of South Ossetia.

In September 2006, 97 percent of Transnistria's people voted for independence from Moldavia and a free association with Russia. In 1812, Moldavia passed to the Russian Empire, from which the western part of the country broke away again after 1917. In 1918, it was decided to unite with Romania, until Stalin established the Moldavian Autonomous Soviet Republic east of the river Dniester in 1924. This was followed by the foundation of the Moldavian Socialist Soviet Republic in 1940, not including one part which fell to the Ukrainian Soviet Republic. When Moldavia became independent in 1991, the people of Transnistria feared that a resurgence of Moldavian nationalism might lead to the region becoming part of Romania again, and declared their independence. What followed was a short but bloody armed conflict which, in turn, resulted in the international community endeavouring to induce both parties to enter into negotiations.

Largely Russianised at the time of Soviet rule, Transnistria is populated by people of Romanian extraction, Russians, and Ukrainians. Not only does the government of the authoritarian president, Igor Smirnov, export steel and spirits, experts say it also makes money out of illegal drug trafficking and the re-export of agricultural products. To put a stop to the latter, and to secure a transparent Moldavian border regime, the EU launched its 'EU Border Assistance Mission' (EUBAM) late in 2005 which so far has been quite successful. Not only politically but also economically, Transnistria is dependent on Moscow, which supplies the region with cheap gas and has recently announced that it will introduce an accelerated procedure for issuing Russian passports.

The '5+2 talks' between Moldavia, Transnistria, Russia, Ukraine, the OSCE, the EU, and the USA set up to solve the problem are proving difficult. Societal forces would have to be involved in confidence-building measures, and economic pressure groups induced to engage themselves across regional borders. Another objective would be to promote media independence in Moldavia. A democratic and economically successful Moldavia would certainly be attractive to Transnistria. However, this communist country is plagued by poverty, the absence of domestic reforms, and corruption. To avoid a confrontation between Russia and Transnistria on the one hand and Moldavia on the other, Russia would have to be induced to change its attitude towards the problem.

On the other side of the Black Sea, the situation is equally unstable. In the South Caucasus, a region beset by numerous problems, you find the Georgian regions of Abkhazia and South Ossetia whose current status pleases only Russia, and the 'frozen conflict' about Nagorno-Karabakh. In the two renegade republics, the majority of the people have spoken out in favour of becoming independent of Tbilisi, relying on help from the international community: While Georgia is hoping for the support of the EU, NATO, and the USA, Abkhazia and South Ossetia are counting on the regional hegemon, Russia.

Given the constantly deteriorating Russian-Georgian relations, a solution of the conflict is not to be expected in the near future. The Rose Revolution of the winter of 2003/2004 caused relations between the two countries to start cooling, reaching their first low at the end of 2006, when Russia imposed an import and export embargo on Georgia. This step was Moscow's reaction to the arrest of several Russian officers in Georgia who were suspected of being spies. After imposing the embargo, Russia started to expel Georgian citizens: Cafés and restaurants owned by Georgians had to close down; occasionally, Georgian patients were refused medical treatment. Most Russians approve of the measures taken against their brother nation of the Soviet era.

So far, the Kremlin has rejected negotiation offers by the Georgian president, Mikheil Saakashvili, and an end of the Russian embargo is nowhere in sight. In the meantime, Washington is reacting: The US Congress, for example, has offered to speed up the NATO accession of Georgia, which itself threatens to veto Russia's accession to the WTO. However, since Georgia is also a member of the CIS, its NATO membership would plunge the West into a new conflict, confronting it with a security-policy risk of global relevance.

When in October 2006, the majority of Abkhazians spoke out in favour of independence from Georgia, approaching Russia for an official acknowledgement of the referendum, Russian media immediately called for the accession of the republic to the Russian Federation. While the Abkhazian leadership in Sukhumi quite welcomes Russia's help, it rejects accession to the Russian Federation since it does not intend to lose its longed-for independence. It seems that Moscow is playing a double game: On the one hand, it practices 'annexation on the sly', generously handing out Russian passports to the people of Abkhazia and South Ossetia; on the other, it still does not acknowledge Abkhazians as refugees, although they fled to Russia many years ago.

In the regional capitals of Abkhazia and South Ossetia as well as in Moscow, the US-assisted rearmament of the Georgian army is regarded with unease. Given the conflict between Moscow and Washington as well as the frigid relations between Moscow and Tbilisi, a solution of the territorial question without international, especially European, involvement seems to be impossible at the moment.

In November 2006, the majority of South Ossetia's population voted for retaining their independence. Having held two separate elections, the country now has two competing presidents. In the elections that were barred to South Ossetians with a Georgian passport, president Eduard Kokoity officially obtained 95 percent of the votes, while the elections indirectly organised by Tbilisi were won by Georgia-friendly Dmitri Sanakoyev. The West criticised the two referendums as 'unfair, unnecessary, and unhelpful', dismissing both. However, South Ossetia's separatist leaders not only demand independence but also reunion with North Ossetia, which belongs to the Russian Federation. As in the case of Abkhazia, Moscow again supports the population of the country: South Ossetians not only receive free medical treatment and schooling from Russia, they are also allowed to use Russian cellular-phone networks.

Whenever they need something to legitimise Abkhazia's and South Ossetia's endeavours to obtain independence, Russia's president, Vladimir Putin, and the separatist leaders in the two renegade regions like to cite the example of Montenegro and the Kosovo. However, the two cases are hardly comparable: While Montenegro was at least granted its right to self-determination by Serbia, Transnistria, Abkhazia and South Ossetia have not yet been acknowledged by any state – not even by Russia itself. President Saakashvili in Tbilisi has meanwhile realised that his confrontational line is not very helpful. Consequently, he repeatedly

assured Moscow of his readiness to negotiate and accorded both territories a status within Georgia that is to a large extent autonomous.

The strategy of the Kremlin appears paradoxical: On the one hand, it supports all three regions in their endeavours to secede; on the other, it has not yet acknowledged them as states. However, the goal of Moscow, which after the fall of the Soviet Union may possibly have made too many concessions to the West, is well-defined: It intends to secure its influence in its neighbouring countries, the 'Russian citizens' living in the republics serving as a tool in the same way as its extensive economic aid.

There is no way around involving Moscow in the solution of the problem. At the same time, the EU, to which political stability, a democratic society, and market-economy structures are as important as an alternative transport corridor for energy, must define its interests. When the European Union admitted Romania and Bulgaria to membership, it became a neighbour of the Russian Federation in the region of the Black Sea. Thus, like it or not, the EU is Russia's most important partner when it comes to solving the conflicts in Transnistria, Abkhazia and South Ossetia.