

The Phenomenon of Quasi-states

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The Caucasus

The demise of the two federal communist states, the Soviet Union and Yugoslavia, was the major cause of the appearance of a new kind of state entity, unheard of since the end of feudalism in Europe. While the 15 Union Republics of the Soviet Union became independent from the old center (Moscow) as well as detached from each other, some ethnically different or mixed parts of the newly independent republics, deprived of federal protection, felt uncomfortable within the new framework and emerged as separate or detached entities. It should be remembered that this separatist movement predates the disintegration of the Soviet Union and is parallel to Gorbachev's 'perestroika'. In the Trans-Caucasus, the separatist forces within the republics began to act as soon as Moscow loosened its grip and the national republics began to assert themselves. The half-hearted and limited use of force by Moscow in order to prevent the disintegration of the Soviet Empire (in Baku, Tbilisi, Vilnius) succeeded no better than attempts by individual republics to stop separatism within their own borders. Georgia and Azerbaijan were most affected, with several 'quasi-states' appearing within their borders: Nagorno-Karabagh in Azerbaijan, Abkhazia and Ossetia in Georgia. With the direct support of the Armenian republic and covert Russian assistance, the Armenian majority in the former Nagorno-Karabagh Autonomous Region split from Azerbaijan, expelled the Azeri minority, occupied a substantial chunk of Azeri territory, and created a 'state' of its own. The Abkhazian minority (less than one-fifth of the total population), with Russian assistance, split Abkhazia from Georgia, expelled the Georgian majority, and established its own 'state'. South Ossetia declared itself a 'sovereign republic', while Adjara and parts of Georgia proper became practically independent from Tbilisi. Political mistakes and chauvinist acts on the part of the Azeri and Georgian Popular Front governments that initially came to power contributed to local separatism.

Moscow's methods varied from region to region, but by their very conception and aim contributed to the initial appearance and continued existence of quasi-states.

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Thus with regard to the three republics of the Trans-Caucasus, Moscow resorted to the old tsarist policy of stirring ancient ethnic quarrels and relying on Armenia, historically distrustful of all its Turkic neighbors, as a Russian lynchpin. Moscow was fearful of strong nationalist feelings in the region, which led to the initial removal of Soviet-era apparatchiks from power. It was aware that Russian settlers in the area were few, financial means limited, western attraction potent, and open intervention politically impossible. It thus reverted to the ancient policy of *divide and rule* in order to remain the indispensable arbiter between conflicting parties, and to keep both sides dependent. In the early 1990s, Russia supported the irredentist movements among Georgia's minorities (especially in Abkhazia and in Ossetia), as well as the Armenian separatist movement in Azerbaijan's High Karabagh, a stand endorsed by almost all of Russian public opinion. The same goes for Moscow's policy of opposing inroads made by western oil companies in the Caspian Sea basin as well as Turkish interests in the Trans-Caucasus (while favoring Russo-Turkish commercial relations in general).

One might argue that Moscow's policy in the area was not always consistent, and that attempts were made to be more even-handed, but the goal remained clear: to prevent all parties concerned from escaping Russia's grip. During Yeltsin's era Moscow had a hand in leadership changes in Georgia and Azerbaijan, changes that failed to bring the expected results because the new leaders (Aliiev and Shevardnadze) turned out to be quite independent-minded. However, the Transcaucasian republics were taught a lesson about the danger of ignoring Russian interests. With time, under the impact of events in Chechnya, Moscow became more cautious about stirring irredentist movements, but remained less than helpful in bringing peace to these areas. Russia was moved to use force against Chechnya, a separatist autonomous republic within its own borders, out of fear of losing its grip on the Northern Caucasus and its influence in the Trans-Caucasus. The first Russian intervention (1994–6) did not succeed, and Chechnya remained de-facto independent for a few years (between 1996 and 1999 roughly). Moscow, however, did not allow a Chechen (or any other) quasi-state to establish itself within the territory of the Russian Federation. The federal forces re-conquered the republic by turning the area into a virtual no-man's land and establishing a puppet 'autonomous republic' administration.

Putin's coming into power only strengthened Russian determination to support quasi-states within Georgia and Azerbaijan, while preventing similar entities from emerging within the Russian Federation. Despite cooperation with Washington post-September 11, 2001, Moscow did not change its attitude on how to deal with the new regimes (and their leaders) in Baku (Aliiev jr.) and Tbilisi (Saarkashvili). The quasi-states of South Ossetia, Abkhazia and Nagorno-Karabagh still benefit from Russian sponsorship and protection. Only the semi-detached entity of Adjara, where Mafia-style separatism lost all attraction, had to be sacrificed.

Ukraine and Moldova

Outside of the Caucasus, Moldova was the republic most affected by Moscow's post-Soviet policies. With tacit Russian blessing, a separate Russian-speaking entity emerged at the border with Ukraine on the left bank of the Dniestr river – the so-called Transnistria, with a Russian and Ukrainian majority – which opted for de-facto independence. A Russian army stranded in the area (separated from Russia proper by the totality of Ukraine) played a significant role in allowing the Tiraspol regime to fend off Kishinev's attempts at reuniting the country. The separatists played on the fear of the local Slavic population that Moldova might rejoin Romania, an option unattractive in the early 1990s given the poor state of the Romanian economy. Separatism also profited from some untimely moves by the Moldovan (Romanian) majority. During the same period, the ethnic Gagauz area in the south of Moldova settled for informal separation.

Ukraine was lucky to escape the Moldovan fate. It narrowly avoided losing Crimea, a peninsula ruled by local ethnic Russian authorities, who tended to ignore orders from Kiev, and even attempted to declare independence in 1992. In fact, Crimea historically was never Ukrainian: it was transferred from Russia to Ukraine by Nikita Khrushchev in commemoration of the 300th anniversary of Ukraine's 'eternal' union with Russia. Fortunately, national borders have been respected and open conflict avoided, with no recourse to force on either side, and tensions appear to be healing.

During the 2004 presidential elections in Ukraine, Russia did its best to support a candidate who seemed more pro-Russian than his opponent. In the course of the campaign, and of its unusual three rounds of elections, the threat of separatism was brandished several times by the Putin-backed camp. It could have involved the mainly Russian-speaking eastern and southern part of the country, the area which prior to Catherine the Great was not part of historic Ukraine, but a stretch of steppe under the control of the khans of Crimea. Fortunately, the prospect of establishing (with Moscow's support) a Ukrainian variant of 'Transnistria' remains remote.

The case of Yugoslavia

Yugoslavia has fared worse than the Soviet Union. The disintegration process has been generally bloody (except between Serbia and Montenegro), with Serbia initiating several conflicts aimed at arresting the process. In comparison, the dissolution of the former Soviet Union went rather smoothly. Separatist conflicts took place only within the former Union Republics which became independent, and not between them. The Chechen conflict notwithstanding, Russia showed much more restraint than Serbia, the leading nation of the formerly federated Yugoslavia.

Following the Soviet pattern, Yugoslavia split into five separate states (the former component republics), with the sixth (Montenegro) loosely connected to Serbia. As in the former USSR, quasi-states made their appearance on the map: the Muslim-Croatian entity and the quasi-state of Republika Srpska within the formally united Bosnia, as well as the mainly Albanian Kosovo within Serbia itself. The latter, a pre-

viously autonomous province within Serbia, emerged after the NATO intervention intended to stop the ethnic cleansing of Albanians. However, the new state of affairs resulted in the exodus of Serbs and in the violation of the accepted premise about the inviolability of existing state borders. NATO found itself in the unusual role of sponsoring a quasi-state involved in ethnic cleansing – a situation no better than the one which it tried to remedy. Moreover, the north-western corner of Macedonia already looks like a detached entity and may turn into a de-facto quasi-state of local Albanians, opening the road (if combined with Kosovo) for a union with the republic of Albania and the creation of a ‘Greater Albania’ – something nobody in the Balkans can possibly welcome.

In contrast with the former Soviet Union, where all the existing quasi-states rely on Russian support, among the quasi-states of former Yugoslavia only Republika Srpska depends on Belgrade’s assistance – the others have emerged from the victory of anti-Serb forces.

There is irony in the fact that the appearance of the European Union and its expansion has inadvertently encouraged separatist trends elsewhere in Europe by rendering unnecessary the intermediary role of former mother-states. In this the European Union seems to assume the old role of the Roman Empire of Germanic Nations, gathering large and small states of Europe within its umbrella, diminishing the importance of existing state units, and encouraging the appearance of quasi-states.

Other areas

Another post-communist division of an existing state, namely of Czechoslovakia into two units, was a peaceful affair: the separation between the Czech Republic and Slovakia created no additional conflicts.

Outside of former communist countries, only one quasi-state appeared in post-war Europe – the Turkish Republic of Northern Cyprus, established in 1975 by Turkey in order to prevent the threat of Greek Cypriots seeking unification with Greece. This Turkish quasi-state has not been recognized by any other country except Turkey, and may disappear if negotiations for the reunification of Cyprus succeed in the future. But in 2004, while the Turkish side of the island, eager to join the European Union, showed willingness to compromise, the Greek side rejected that option, prolonging the existence of the Turkish quasi-state on the island of Cyprus.

If one looks outside of the old Communist bloc and outside of Europe, more examples of quasi-states can be found. Two Kurdish autonomies in northern Iraq, established after the first Gulf war under allied protection (one ruled by the Kurdish Democratic Party, the other by the Patriotic Union of Kurdistan), are still de-facto separate from Baghdad – even though the US army is present in both places. The Tamil separatist area in Sri Lanka and the Christian separatist region of southern Sudan, both created through armed struggle against ethnically alien central governments, are still in existence, despite recent peace initiatives.

Common trends

All the quasi-states share the following common characteristics:

1. They became detached from their home-states because of ethnic or religious conflicts or state disintegration.
2. Faulty policies by the newly independent former home-states contributed to the split: ethnic cleansing by Serbia, Georgian attempts to reduce the existing autonomy of Abkhazia and Southern Ossetia, a pogrom of Armenians in Azerbaijan, untimely romanization in Moldova, and so on.
3. There was always an outside protector who took advantage of the situation and later continued to extend support to the quasi-state. Thus Turkey still backs Turkish Northern Cyprus; Armenia supports Armenian-ruled Nagorno-Karabagh; Russia lends its support to separatist Abkhazia, Northern Ossetia and Transnistria; NATO protects separatist Kosovo; Serbia helps Republika Srpska in Bosnia; prior to the war in Iraq the US and Great Britain protected Kurdish autonomy; and the Christian southern Sudan counted on covert support from the United States.
4. Quasi-states are not officially recognized as independent states by the United Nations or by more than one other state (the Turkish Republic of Northern Cyprus is recognized only by Turkey; Nagorno-Karabagh independence is recognized only by Armenia; Transnistria, Abkhazia and Southern Ossetia are recognized by nobody).
5. Their need for outside support notwithstanding, all the quasi-states function like real mini-states, from administering and policing their territories to funding schools and health services. Their economies, currencies included, are connected with the sponsor-countries. They keep their own armed forces and maintain their own foreign contacts.

The dangers of quasi-states

The existence of de-facto 'quasi-states' within the borders of internationally recognized states presents obvious dangers for the peace and stability of the neighboring regions. A quasi-state survives because of tension between its protector and the state from which it was detached. But at some point in the future, either its independence must be recognized, or it has to reintegrate with the state from which it became detached, or it has to be absorbed by its protector. Political difficulties can prolong the existing situation.

Abkhazian separatists, for example, refuse to re-join Georgia and wish to join Russia, but Moscow, comfortable with the existing status quo and fearful of breaking the principle of inviolability of pre-existing borders between the former Union Republics, has not yet decided to grant this wish. Azerbaijan and Armenia cannot find a mutually acceptable formula to solve the Karabakh problem, while Russia is

quite happy with the issue remaining unresolved. Kosovo and Bosnia are prevented by NATO forces from officially splitting along ethnic lines and joining up with their patron neighbors.

By nature, quasi-states are temporary entities requiring, at some point, a definitive solution. Stretching their existence beyond reasonable time limits destabilizes the geopolitical situation of the entire region in which they are located.

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