



Center for Strategic & International Studies
Washington, DC

*No Peace in the Caucasus:
Mediation Efforts in Karabakh, Abkhazia, and Chechnya*

Tom de Waal
International War and Peace Reporting

Russia and Eurasia Program
Caucasus Initiative

April 17, 2003

The Trans-Caucasus is a region united by thousands of years of history, often punctuated by conquest, war, and relations with powerful neighbors including the Ottoman, Persian, and Russian Empires, and the Soviet Union. Tom de Waal has been reporting on Russia and the Caucasus since the collapse of the Soviet Union, and he spent a year in Armenia and Azerbaijan researching and writing a book about the Nagorno Karabakh conflict entitled *Black Garden: Armenia and Azerbaijan through Peace and War*. He addressed the CSIS Caucasus Initiative on three of the ethnic conflicts that plague the Trans-Caucasus; Abkhazia, Chechnya, and Nagorno Karabakh.

Mr. de Waal began by stating that, in general, there is a gulf between perceptions held among the people of the Caucasus about what the West is capable of and willing to do in the region, and the reality of what the West can or is willing to do. This, in turn, leads to policy decisions being made that rely on more Western support than is forthcoming.

According to Mr. de Waal, there is no consistent or coordinated Western policy toward the three conflicts. The absence of a true policy is primarily the result of three problems dogging Western policy in the region and toward these conflicts in particular. The first is a lack of expertise on the region among Western diplomats. This problem is well on its way to being resolved, but in the early 1990s, when the states of the region achieved their independence from the Soviet Union and the conflicts in question were developing, there was a dearth of regional specialists in the region. This led to great inconsistency in government policies and the "privatization" of Western foreign policy. For example, during the mid 1990s, the Armenian lobby successfully directed the attention of the U.S. Congress to Armenian issues, and eventually convinced Congress to pass Section 907 of the Freedom Support Act, which limited U.S. military assistance to Azerbaijan. Similarly, the U.S. Department of State and energy interests were able to

successfully focus attention on Azerbaijan and Georgia, countries key to the development and export of oil from the Caspian Sea.

This privatization of sometimes directly competing interests had a substantial impact on what Mr. de Waal characterized as the second major problem of Western policy in the Caucasus: inconsistency. The divisions and rivalries already present in the region were exacerbated by different signals coming from the West. For example, in 1997, the U.S. Ambassador to NATO visited Azerbaijan where he made a statement that was incorrectly translated, but widely covered in the local press. The incorrectly translated statement read that Azerbaijan was about to join NATO. It took a long time to dispel the notion that Azerbaijan was about to join NATO.

Some of these misunderstandings arose simply from the fact that the regional countries themselves perceived themselves and their issues as a larger priority in the West than they actually are. Mr. de Waal noted that he has spent time trying to convince people in the region that the West is not as preoccupied with them as they might hope.

The final problem dogging Western policy toward the region is the Western powers' failure to follow up. Particularly in violent conflicts there tends to be a security gap, and thus far the West has not provided peacekeepers to the region. Mr. de Waal stated that most people believe that a peacekeeping mission along the same lines as Kosovo would work in Chechnya, but there is almost no chance of a peacekeeping mission being deployed to either Chechnya or Nagorno Karabakh. In Abkhazia, there is a UN monitoring group (UNOMIG), but its mandate is limited and it relies on CIS (essentially Russian) peacekeepers for protection and security. In 1998, tension broke out in Gali (in Abkhazia) and the United Nations was unable to do anything as thousands fled to Georgia.

The main problem in many of these conflicts, according to Mr. de Waal, is persuading the military victors (the Abkhaz and Armenians) to make concessions on what they gained in war in the interest of peace. One factor delaying the concessions is that neither side wants to make the step from an uncomfortable but predictable status quo and enter the uncertainty of a security vacuum. The most depressing of the three conflicts discussed is Chechnya. The world tends to lose interest, but then the war is rushed to the headlines in a gruesome manner, as occurred during the hostage crisis at a Moscow theatre last fall. Mr. de Waal noted that the younger generations in Chechnya are becoming more militant and desperate, and that more attacks can be expected.

Further complicating the Chechen war is the lack of a strong Western presence in Chechnya, or at negotiations between the Chechens and Russians. The Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe's (OSCE) mandate in Chechnya expired at the end of 2002, at which point, their observers left the country. Not a single Western government has really said anything about it. The Council of Europe (CoE) is now the only Western institution in Chechnya, but their rapporteur on Chechnya, Lord Judd (who did an excellent job and was almost able to bring the Chechens and Russians together for talks in Strasbourg) resigned in protest of the Russian referendum for Chechnya, saying that it is too early for any referendum. Russia is a member of both organizations, but neither the CoE nor the OSCE has thus far been able to effectively influence Russian policy in Chechnya.

Turning to the conflict over Abkhazia between the Abkhaz and Georgians, Mr. de Waal acknowledged that there are hopeful signs, but that they are coming from Russia rather than the international community or the parties to the conflict. In March, Russian president Vladimir Putin sponsored a meeting in the Black Sea town of Sochi between the unrecognized president of Abkhazia, Gennady Gagulia, and President Eduard Shevardnadze of Georgia. They discussed sensitive issues of the conflict including the return of Georgian Internally Displaced Persons (IDPs) to Abkhazia and the reopening of railway ties between Abkhazia and Georgia. Although Russia has leverage over the Abkhaz and thus might be able to make progress in resolving the conflict over Abkhazia, one must recognize the Russian agenda, and that a peace forged by Russia may be problematic but, nonetheless, better than no peace at all.

Lastly, Mr. de Waal discussed the Nagorno Karabakh conflict, which has significant Western involvement through the OSCE sponsored Minsk Group, co-chaired by France, Russia, and the United States, but little progress has been made since the Minsk Group was formed. Cooperation between the co-chairs of the Minsk Group is, however, better than it was a few years ago, as Russia has modified its approach to be more in line with that of France and the United States. Although 2001 may have been a watershed year in the Nagorno Karabakh peace process, Mr. de Waal noted that for both Armenia and Azerbaijan, pressure for peace is stronger from without than from within.

Although both Armenians and Azerbaijanis blame international mediators for the continuing status of their conflicts, Mr. de Waal disagrees. He has observed widespread feelings of heroism and martyrdom within the Armenian and Azerbaijani societies, respectively, and as time presses on these feelings only harden. The leaders of both countries continue to espouse maximalist positions in speeches, and neither President Aliyev of Azerbaijan nor President Kocharian of Armenia has begun preparing his population for the concessions it will take to reach a peace agreement. Furthermore, an entirely new generation is now being raised learning a biased history of their country's relationship with the other side. In Armenia, this is happening not just with respect to Azerbaijan, but also vis-à-vis Turkey, which also has no diplomatic relations with Armenia.

The discussion after Mr. de Waal's presentation focused on Russia's involvement in these three conflicts, U.S. policy in the region, and the specifics of the conflicts themselves. Russia, it was observed, tends to compartmentalize conflicts and does not give much thought to precedent setting. For example, Russia considers Aslan Mashkadov a terrorist, while Gagulia is warmly received in Moscow, despite the fact that the political agendas of the two men actually are very similar. This may be because the Russian military and political establishment appears to hold a grudge against Georgian president Shevardnadze, who was foreign minister of the Soviet Union when the country collapsed.

U.S. policy in the region was also called into question. Throughout much of the 1990s, the United States exerted great efforts to ensure that the Baku-Tbilisi-Ceyhan oil pipeline would be built. Some participants felt that the pipeline is emblematic of the problems that Mr. de Waal attributed to the Western policy approach to the Caucasus. The pipeline will pass within 30 kilometers of Armenia, which was excluded from the routing of the pipeline, because the pipeline must originate in Azerbaijan and end in

Turkey. It was the opinion of some participants that if war were to break out again over Nagorno Karabakh, the BTC pipeline would likely be attacked.

When discussion turned to the Chechen war, a seminar participant remarked that the UN rejected a resolution on human rights abuses in Chechnya authored by the CoE. Russia is a member of the CoE (and of the OSCE), and the mandate of these organizations specifically allows for influencing the policy of member states, but they have not yet been able to achieve a change in Chechnya. Their inability to affect change may weaken the legitimacy of these organizations when their criticism of Russian policy does not produce any change in Russian policy.

It would be a mistake, however, to think of Russia as a monolith. Many people in Moscow have misgivings about what is happening in Chechnya, and others are benefiting economically from the war. Furthermore, another misconception about the war in Chechnya is that most of the IDPs live in tents. The most recent figures of IDPs in Chechnya are 150,000, and only a fifth or perhaps a quarter of them live in tents.

As discussion turned to Nagorno Karabakh, some seminar participants wondered whether or not there was an issue of ethnic incompatibility at play between the Armenians and Azerbaijanis. This was dismissed, however, as a possible cause of friction between the two nations for several reasons. First, during the Soviet era, Armenians lived in Baku and Azerbaijanis frequented Yerevan. Even Armenian president Robert Kocharian is known to have had close Azerbaijani friends before the collapse of the Soviet Union. It was suggested that Armenians and Azerbaijanis actually have more in common through their shared history as people of the Trans-Caucasus than one might assume given the wide gulf currently separating them. One explanation offered for how a historical friendship could have ended so suddenly was that Armenians and Azerbaijanis were caught up in the struggles between the Ottoman and Russian Empires for domination of the Trans-Caucasus during the nineteenth century. This theory follows that Azerbaijanis sided with the Ottomans, while the Armenians felt more akin to the Russians.

Discussion of the Karabakh conflict also touched on the plight of the IDPs and refugees affected by that conflict. Some in Armenia have charged that Azerbaijan purposefully has prevented Azerbaijani IDPs and refugees from being integrated into the country's social fabric. This, they contend, helps keep the issue alive and provides Azeri officials the opportunity to "show off" the refugees to visiting diplomats. Seminar participants acknowledged that Azerbaijan probably does use the IDPs and refugees for political purposes, but that most of the IDPs are from occupied areas of Azerbaijan and not from Karabakh, and that completely reintegrating these IDPs into Azerbaijan would be tantamount to accepting Armenian occupation.

Summarized by Dan Steingart