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# Challenges Facing the Mountain Peoples of the Caucasus

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**Abstract:** Two geographers report on the current challenges facing the inhabitants of the Caucasus mountains on the borders of Russia and its southern neighbors, Georgia and Azerbaijan. The authors discuss the impacts of new post-Soviet borders and controls as well as unresolved conflicts in Nagorno-Karabakh, Chechnya, South Ossetia, Abkhazia, and the Prigorodnyy district of North Ossetia, which have disrupted traditional ways of life and forced the peoples of the mountains to migrate or adjust their economic activities. Based on extensive field work in 2005–2006, and in the 1990s, they detect some signs of improvement in the new privatized environment after the difficult years of transition. However, the weak infrastructure of the region, combined with the high costs associated with development and modernization of peripheral locations, suggest that resettlement from the high mountains to the cities on the plains and piedmont is likely to continue. *Journal of Economic Literature*, Classification Numbers: I31, J61, O15, Q15. 2 figures, 1 table, 46 references. Key words: Caucasus, Russia, Chechnya, Georgia, Azerbaijan, Armenia, Dagestan, geographic determinism, Ingushetia, North Ossetia, South Ossetia, mountain agriculture, Kabardino-Balkaria, Abkhazia, tourism, Karachayevo-Cherkessia.

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## INTRODUCTION

During the past 15 years, the “mountain of languages,” as the Arab geographers called the Caucasus, has become better known for its violent conflicts than for its widely reputed hospitality. Beginning with the conflict over Nagorno-Karabakh between Armenia and Azerbaijan before the dissolution of the former Soviet Union (FSU), the region has experienced widespread upheaval during transition to a new geopolitical order, with aspiring states and autonomous enclaves fiercely guarding their autonomy and “sovereignty.” In addition to Karabakh, there are four significant conflicts in the principal mountainous chain, namely the ones in Abkhazia, South Ossetia, Prigorodnyy Rayon (between North Ossetians and the Ingush), and finally in Chechnya. Together these conflicts have accounted for the deaths of more than 80,000 people, mainly civilians, and a forced exodus of more than one million migrants and refugees. The first three conflicts, frequently described as “frozen,” are characterized by uneasy ceasefires. While dormant and unresolved, the reasons for the original disputes continue to fuel the antagonisms and recriminations that impede the return of most refugees to their homes. Despite some positive developments, serious local tensions remain, not only in notorious zones of conflict such as Chechnya but also in the adjoining territories.

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The violent conflicts in the Caucasus almost inevitably evoke discourses inspired by geographical determinism. For example, Zayats (2001) observed that “thirteen of the eighteen separatist wars in the contemporary world are localized in mountain areas,” arguing that the geographic characteristics specific to these areas—the presence of enclaves, conservatism and archaisms, low labor productivity, and the “antagonism between ethnic groups of the mountain and piedmont”—tend to explain the predisposition to separatist violence. Geographic determinism is in vogue in the FSU, particularly in Russia where, since the 1980s, many researchers who specialize in ethnology and cultural studies (and even some geographers), uncritically base their arguments on the work of Lev Gumilev—a Russian follower of the theories of late 19th century European naturalists (Laruelle, 2000, 2004; Scherrer, 2003). While the specific character of many Caucasian areas arises from the natural environment, the profound challenges they face today need to be viewed and explained in the context of the historical legacies of the Soviet period, and even legacies dating back to the Tsarist conquest. And, we should note, post-Soviet economic and political reforms and the impact of geopolitical transition within the region also need to be considered.

In this paper, we will attempt to take a different approach that is somewhat inimical to the conventional geographic determinist discourse.<sup>2</sup> More specifically, we propose to examine the impact of the post-Soviet geopolitical transition to a new order by focusing on the high mountainous regions of the Caucasus, rather than on the adjoining piedmont and plains.

The area covered in our paper encompasses ca. 430,000 km<sup>2</sup>, if one takes into account both the north and south slopes of the chain and their piedmonts, located in Russia<sup>3</sup> and in the South Caucasus (Armenia, Azerbaijan, and Georgia). In that large area, the disparities between localities are enormous, and dissimilarities among various nationalities (which often cut across clan or ethnic lines) no less immense.

It is a challenge to present a reliable account of the various economies of the Caucasus because so much of the available statistical data are fragmentary (e.g., see Druzhinin and Kolesnikov, 2000; International Alert, 2004; O’Loughlin et al., 2007). Even in the case of basic population data, the figures are contaminated by multiple distortions that include efforts to conceal the actual number of refugees living in a region, temptations to obscure the exodus of native inhabitants (as in Armenia and Georgia),<sup>4</sup> and attempts to prove “normalization” (as in Chechnya). These institutional and political imperatives seriously compromise the recent censuses in the region. Also, data on the current economic situation are of doubtful validity in states where corruption reigns, and the shadow economies account for more than one half of all economic activity (e.g., see Schneider and Klinglmair, 2004). An additional problem with data is that they usually refer to administrative units that include both mountain and piedmont/plains regions, thus making disaggregation of these areas quite difficult. Consequently, some of our observations and arguments cannot be supported by statistical evidence. Our preference in this paper is to prioritize processes that have occurred after the region began to recover and resume some of its normal activities.<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>2</sup>Among the shortcomings of conventional geographical determinist discourse is the frequent use of the adjective “mountainous” to describe the entire region without qualification or nuance.

<sup>3</sup>Defined as the North Caucasus economic region (of the Soviet period) minus the Rostov Oblast (see Beroutchachvili and Radvanyi, 1998).

<sup>4</sup>For background, see Rowland (2005, 2007).

<sup>5</sup>By the late 1990s, the south Caucasian states and Russia had benefited from some positive economic trends, and we intend to describe how these trends have affected the mountain areas, rather than the capital cities located in the plains and piedmonts.

The paper is divided into two parts. The first identifies and discusses several domains where the new geopolitical order, with its instabilities and limitations, is affecting and transforming the human geography of the region's high mountain areas. The second part enumerates a series of challenges facing these mountain areas across the Caucasus. It should be noted that this paper is largely based on our extensive field work and systematic investigation of the region during the course of many years and as recently as the fall of 2006.

## CONSEQUENCES OF SOVIET UNION'S DEMISE

The restoration of independence in Armenia, Azerbaijan, and Georgia in late 1991 constituted a major political event with many uncertain consequences. For the first time in more than two centuries (except for a brief period between 1918 and 1921), the mountain chain was divided into several discrete states that sought to legitimate themselves as distinctive sovereign polities. Andrey Zubov (2001) observed that, over the centuries, the periods when the Caucasus region was genuinely independent were generally very short. He points out that the Transcaucasian isthmus and the Caucasian mountains were attached to southern empires (Persian or Ottoman) for which the area was no more than a marginal northern outpost of rather limited economic significance. Conversely, since the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, the region's incorporation into the Tsarist empire, for which it has been an essential supplier of agricultural products as well as oil, accelerated the process of regional development (*ibid.*). The transition to a new post-Soviet order in the region produced a series of challenges, some of which we intend to examine.<sup>6</sup>

### Establishing New State Borders: Problems and Consequences

In spite of the Minsk and Alma Ata agreements<sup>7</sup> that created the Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS) and affirmed the inviolability of borders inherited from the USSR, the confirmation of new interstate and intra-state borders raises multiple questions. The old southernmost borders of the USSR are officially not disputed, notwithstanding calls of some Armenians to reconstitute "Greater Armenia" (by incorporating the eastern Anatolian provinces of Turkey) or of Azeri nationalist movements proposing integration with Iranian Azerbaijan—all primarily rhetorical and of little political weight. By contrast, the transformation of administrative borders of the federal republics of the FSU into state borders caused a series of tensions or conflicts.

In the majority of cases, the borders correspond neither with firm natural boundaries (rivers or watersheds), nor with actual ethnic territories. Generally, their precise demarcations were never achieved. Thus, part of the border between Georgia and Armenia that, according to Soviet texts was fixed "at the upper limit of the forest," caused Armenia to gain ground in the 1930s as a result of widespread tree-cutting, and Georgia to "grow" by virtue of tree planting.<sup>8</sup> Another example is the Inguri power station, whose dam is on Georgian territory whereas the technical equipment and control room are in Abkhazia (Beruchashvili, 1999).

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<sup>6</sup>The location of all settlements and other geographical features mentioned in this paper are to be found in Figures 1 and 2 in the preface to this special issue.

<sup>7</sup>Signed in 1991 and ratified by Azerbaijan and Georgia in 1993.

<sup>8</sup>Such past inaccuracies are raised today in the context of work conducted by border demarcation commissions.

The border between Russia and its neighbors in the south Caucasus largely coincides with the divide of the Great Caucasus. However, that border does not always coincide with the watershed. Several high valleys on the northern slope (the district of Kazbegi, part of Khevsureti, and Tusheti) are on Georgian territory, but Russia disputes control of some of the mountain pastures. Especially, in the Pankisi Gorge on the south side of the main range, Georgian valleys dominate Chechnya. There the Kists, a population related to Chechens live, and the Pankisi Gorge is used as a shelter for refugees and for Chechen combatants.<sup>9</sup>

Just as Russia extends all the way to the southernmost slope near Sochi, Azerbaijan extends across the mountains along the Caspian shore and the northern slope of the Caucasus. Thus the demarcation of the international border with the Russian republic of Dagestan poses several problems. The border does not really coincide with the Samur River, its traditional marker. Until the construction of a new bridge in 2004, several rayons in Dagestan were accessible only through Azeri territory. Moreover, Azerbaijan uses 90–95 percent of the water of the Samur-Davaci canal constructed during the Soviet period, making distribution of water resources a source of interstate tension and an obstacle to the signing of a treaty between the two states. Still further, the Lezghin population (one of the Dagestani peoples), which resides in the region and straddles the border, have advocated the creation of an autonomous area on both sides of the border. This claim was supported by some local strategists and possibly also by Moscow in efforts to exert pressure on Baku during negotiations on the development and transport of oil and gas from the Caspian Sea (Kurbanov and Yusupova, 1996).

In the early 1990s, several other mountain peoples of the area asserted territorial claims for the creation of autonomous entities. Included among them were the Talechis in southern Azerbaijan and the Shapsugs in Russia.<sup>10</sup> Both the Russian and the Azeri governments have refused to create new territorial entities along ethnic lines because many present conflicts are rooted in the ethnic-based territorial engineering undertaken by Stalin during the 1920s.<sup>11</sup> The creation of small entities on an ethnic basis have for a long time supported the notion that a territorial solution (i.e., in the form of distinct administrative entities) represented the only adequate response to claims asserted by the various nationalities. By now, however, there is little doubt that the practical application of such a solution to the Caucasian ethnic mosaic can only lead to unsustainable fragmentation.<sup>12</sup>

### The Ethnic Mosaic and the Conflicts

The ethnic mosaic that characterized the Caucasus at the end of the Soviet period can be traced to lengthy historical processes that shaped the human geography of a region used at various times as refuge, disputed barrier between empires, and privileged and specialized location for commercial exchange and communication. But nearly everywhere, Russian imperial, and later Soviet, power dictated the terms of conquest and control. In order to exert

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<sup>9</sup>Georgian authorities have accused the Russian air force (ostensibly pursuing Chechen insurgents) of bombing an historical heritage village, Shatili (Khevsureti), in Georgia (*Le Monde*, August 27, 2002).

<sup>10</sup>The Shapsugs are a Cherkess group that is pressing for reconstitution of a national district in the Adygey Republic affording access to the Black Sea.

<sup>11</sup>These conflicts, the subject of many studies (e.g., Coppieters, 1996; Malashenko, 1997; Radvanyi, 2006), merit only a few general observations here.

<sup>12</sup>A “federal solution” appears difficult to implement under current conditions for small states without real democratic experience (e.g., Georgia in the context of Ossetia and Abkhazia).

greater control over the permanently hostile mountain dwellers, the Tsarist regime used a variety of inducements to accelerate their movement from mountains to plains.

Stalinist policy refined methods and tactics for resettlement of ethnic groups during the period when many of the autonomous republics were established, favoring, for example, the juxtaposition of villages populated by Caucasians, Russians (old *Stanitsa* Cossacks), and Turkish-speaking peoples within the same autonomous entity.<sup>13</sup> While these allocations had some economic logic (e.g., agricultural land for mountain dwellers on the piedmonts, as in Dagestan), the policy was driven by efforts to control and break the solidarity of small peoples prone to spirited resistance. The deportations in 1944 of several mountain peoples inhabiting the northeast Caucasus (particularly the Chechens and Ingush) represented the culmination of the Stalinist policy whose consequences still resonate to this day. The territorial modifications following the deportations were not entirely invalidated in 1957, when the exiled peoples were given the right to return to their homeland. Essentially intact, they provide the basis for conflicts that erupted between Ingush and Ossetians in the suburbs of Vladikavkaz in 1992 (Prigorodnyy Rayon) and are among the factors fueling the Chechen conflict.

The perverse effects of the systematic manipulation of entire populations in the 1940s are well illustrated by tensions which have occurred between Laks and Chechens on the Dagestani piedmont (Muduyev, 2001; see also Eldarov et al., 2007 [this issue]). In February 1944, several hundred thousand Chechens<sup>14</sup> were deported over the course of a few days to Central Asia. By decree of the USSR Supreme Soviet (of March 7, 1944), the Checheno-Ingush Autonomous Soviet Socialist Republic (ASSR) was dissolved, and parts of its territory attached to Dagestan, Georgia, and North Ossetia. Hardly less tragic was the destiny of the peoples of Dagestan forcibly relocated following the Soviet Government's decision (of March 11, 1944) to repopulate these vacated territories. Sixty-five thousand Dagestani mountain dwellers (Avars, Dargins, and Laks), some 220 entire villages in all, were transferred to the villages emptied of their Chechen inhabitants.<sup>15</sup> The villages of the Dagestan piedmont were thus repopulated by Laks and the former Aokha Rayon quickly renamed Novolakskiy. In 1957, at the time when the rehabilitation of the "punished peoples" was in progress, the reinstated Chechen-Ingush republic recovered a large part of the repopulated districts (including Vedeno). But in Dagestan, Chechens had to settle in mixed neighborhoods beside the Laks who had occupied their villages in the piedmont in Khasavyurt and Babayurt rayons. After 1989, the Ingush and the Chechens renewed their quest for total rehabilitation and territorial independence. The vote by the Supreme Soviet of the Russian Federation, in April 1991, which in principle supported rehabilitation, merely provoked additional tension.<sup>16</sup>

In an effort to ease the tension, Dagestani authorities conducted a comprehensive public opinion poll in Novolakskiy Rayon. The Laks were divided, with some ready to continue living in close proximity with the Chechens, and others (a minority) favoring a return to their native *auls* (mountain villages). To avoid confrontation, the majority acquiesced to a new

<sup>13</sup>E.g., in such "bi-ethnic" republics as Kabardino-Balkaria and Karachayevo-Cherkessia.

<sup>14</sup>Including 15,400 Chechen Akkintsoy of Dagestan.

<sup>15</sup>By way of clarification, the Dagestani mountain peoples were relocated not only to villages in Dagestan previously inhabited by Chechens, but also to several rayons of former and present-day Chechnya (e.g., Vedeno). See Eldarov et al. (2007) for additional details.

<sup>16</sup>Around this same time (1992), authorities in North Ossetia assisted in the resettlement of Ossetian refugees on territory (Prigorodnyy Rayon) previously occupied and once again claimed by the Ingush. The refugees were fleeing fighting that arose from claims for independence by the South Ossetian region of Georgia.

displacement, in eight new villages closer to Makhachkala in Kumtorkala Rayon. Although this decision was adopted at the end of 1992, its implementation has been slow and tensions between the two communities have risen following the Chechen incursions into Dagestani territory in 1999.<sup>17</sup>

An initial assessment of this period of disorder, which strongly altered the ethnic mosaic, indicates that some formerly pluri-ethnic areas are practically mono-ethnic today. This is especially the case in the epicenters of the bloodiest conflicts, namely in Nagorno-Karabakh,<sup>18</sup> Abkhazia, and the southern part of Chechnya. In Karabakh and in the neighboring territories, all Azeri inhabitants were driven out. But the Armenians did not occupy the villages which they control, having been satisfied to dismantle the Azeri houses and use the building materials to rebuild their own dwellings or selling them in Iran. Thus, the mountain environment once renowned for its orchards and vineyards is today only partially used, producing cereal grains for the Armenian communities of Karabakh.

In many areas, the ethnic map has been “simplified” by the departure of many of its inhabitants, driven out by enemies or simply from fear of confrontation. In this category are Russian-speakers (ethnic Russians, Ukrainians, or Germans) inhabiting the rural zones. Similarly, “orchestrated” displacements are not entirely rare, as in the case of the Orthodox Old Believers of Javakheti.<sup>19</sup> Installed voluntarily by the Tsarist authorities in 1841–1845 to enhance control of a strategic area, they were invited by the Kremlin to return to Russia at the beginning of the 1990s, even though the Old Believer communities had not been exposed to any serious threat (Radvani, 1998). The Georgian authorities sought to regain control of this area (also coveted by neighboring Armenia), by replacing the departing Russians by Georgian Ajaris (Muslims) whose villages had been destroyed by mud flows. Although implemented over a long time, the resettlement did not alleviate tensions in the area, which remains a potential hot spot.<sup>20</sup>

Unlike the capital cities where Russians have maintained a presence (although their numbers are somewhat reduced), they have practically deserted the rural areas of Transcaucasia.<sup>21</sup> Conversely, a series of areas, especially in the northern Caucasus, have seen their ethnic composition becoming increasingly complex, as they have accommodated refugees from other areas of the Caucasus or Central Asia. Both Krasnodar and Stavropol’ krais thus have experienced appreciable growth within their existing Armenian communities, as well as an influx of large numbers of Georgians, Azeris, and Chechens fleeing fighting in these regions, and of peoples from Dagestan.<sup>22</sup> Included in this resettlement also are the Meskhetian Turks, a small Caucasian population deported from Georgia to Central Asia in 1944, from where it was driven out during the *perestroyka* years of the late 1980s. These flows of migrants revived tensions, prompting anti-constitutional measures by the Russian regional authorities to stem the influx of the migrant peoples, and generally enhancing xenophobia.

The ethnic mosaic, with its migration flows, illustrates again the close connections between the two slopes of the Caucasian chain, with peoples living more or less in equal

<sup>17</sup>For additional details on the displacements, see Belozarov (2000).

<sup>18</sup>However, one can almost say the same about Armenia as a whole (e.g., see Rowland, 2007).

<sup>19</sup>An area in southern Georgia mainly populated today by Armenians.

<sup>20</sup>The recent closing of the Russian base of Akhalk’alak’i in Georgia, a major employer (see Socor, 2006), has not improved the situation.

<sup>21</sup>This pattern of migration and settlement also is in evidence in some of the Caucasian republics within Russia—Dagestan, Chechnya, Ingushetia, and North Ossetia.

<sup>22</sup>People speak openly about a “Dagestanization” of several districts in the eastern part of Stavropol’ Kray.

numbers on both sides (e.g., the Ossetians and Lezghins) or maintaining sizeable communities on the other side (like the Armenians, Azeris and others). But during this period of crisis, the evolution of the area's transportation network has created additional obstacles to transfers and resettlement of population.

### Transformation of Transportation Axes

A third major aspect of the political upheavals that have occurred after the dissolution of the USSR in late 1991 is the reorganization of transportation systems in the entire Caucasian area (Radvanyi, 2002). The main changes have primarily affected the great pathways across the piedmont. The two large axes that during Soviet times provided the main connections in passenger and freight traffic between the areas north and south of the Great Caucasus Range circumvented it on the western side<sup>23</sup> and along its eastern margin.<sup>24</sup> A proposal to build a major east-west vector south of the Great Caucasus, the Trans-Caucasian railway between Georgia and Ingushetia, never materialized. Opposed by nationalists, environmentalists, and Georgian activists who feared its strategic use by Moscow, it remains visible today only in the rudiments of a tunnel near the village of Borissakho in Khevsureti. The western railway, as well as a coastal highway, are now entirely blocked due to the Abkhazian conflict. Provoking criticism from the Georgians, the Russians currently allow limited local traffic to circulate between Sokhumi and Sochi, ensuring a minimal exports of citrus fruit from (and ingress of tourists into) the secessionist republic. Relations between Abkhazia and Georgia are practically nonexistent, apart from smuggling along the road that is haphazardly open and risky. The eastern railway route toward Baku is open but, in addition to the total collapse of exchanges between Russia and Transcaucasia, the traffic has been disrupted since 1991 because of the conflict in Chechnya. The construction of a railway that skirts the republic via northern Dagestan (the same diversion was engineered for the Baku-Novorossiysk pipeline) has allowed some return to normalcy but, as noted by European observers,<sup>25</sup> the entire Caucasian rail network is in need of modernization.

To a certain extent, more direct routes across the mountains have been used as a palliative for the past decade. Since 1994–1996, when Moscow halted all traffic along the Rostov-Baku line for security reasons due to the start of the first Chechen war, they have constituted the only continuous terrestrial link between the two slopes of the mountain chain (most place names are identified in Fig. 2 of the preface to this special issue). But their geographical characteristics limit the use of these roads. Most important for a long time was the Tbilisi-Vladikavkaz road via Ts'khinvali and the Roki tunnel ("Ossetian Military Road"), despite its passage through secessionist South Ossetia. Until the recent decision by President Mikhail Saakashvili of Georgia to reinforce controls between this area and the remainder of Georgia (Georgia, 2006), this "Ossetian Road" exceeded the Georgian Military Road (to the east through Kazbegi) in traffic volume.<sup>26</sup> As a sign of the times, the largest produce market of the region was found in Ergneti in the suburbs of Ts'khinvali, in an area that escaped regulation by Georgian customs authorities until its dismantling in 2005. A more western overland route through the Mamisson Pass is closed today.

<sup>23</sup>The railway from Krasnodar to Tbilisi, which skirts the Black Sea via Sochi and Abkhazia.

<sup>24</sup>The railway Rostov-Baku via Grozny and Dagestan's Caspian Sea coast, currently not operating.

<sup>25</sup>Within the framework of the TRACECA (Transport Corridor Europe-Caucasus-Central Asia) project.

<sup>26</sup>The latter road is often closed due to storms, snow drifts, and military checkpoints.

The people of the mountains have hardly benefited from these changes. The flow of freight traffic remains modest—a few dozen heavy trucks per day on each of the two axes, known for their physical insecurity (high risk of accidents or closures) as much as for the “human toll.”<sup>27</sup> In fact, the service roads of the entire mountain chain have been neglected for a decade. Many of the regular bus lines have disappeared, replaced by more expensive private operators providing a kind of “shared” taxi service consisting of minibuses that depart when all seats are occupied. The situation is particularly catastrophic in Georgia: regular air service, such as that between Tbilisi and Mestia (Svanetia), has become erratic or terminated entirely, such as that serving Omalo (Tushetia). This void is hardly compensated by the few KAMAZ trucks that cross the mountains on badly-maintained roads. Moscow’s initiative to introduce visas between Russia and Georgia (as of January 2001) further reduced transport options, strongly impeding local activities and constituting a major annoyance.

Despite the high altitudes of its passes,<sup>28</sup> the High Caucasus has never constituted an insuperable barrier. Exchanges on both sides of the chain were always substantial and constant. Thus shepherds of the Georgian district of Kazbegi engaged annually in transhumance with their herds of sheep, moving toward the winter pastures in the Nogay district in northern Dagestan (Radvanyi and Thorez, 1977). Due to security concerns (with respect to the traditional routes through Chechnya), as well as visas, high costs, and deteriorating relations between Russia and Georgia, this traditional transhumance has been abandoned, with deep and perverse effects on the agricultural activities of the area. Irrespective of the Chechen border, customs and border controls between Russia and its two southern neighbors, Georgia and Azerbaijan, were substantially reinforced, making traditional exchanges problematic and forcing their abandonment. Paradoxically, increased monitoring has been accompanied by increased smuggling of illegal drugs, tobacco, weapons, alcohol, and clandestine migrants, as the profitable traffic flows freely upon payment of the necessary bribes. Smuggling is no longer limited to main roads.<sup>29</sup> Klukhor Pass,<sup>30</sup> formerly only frequented by groups of hikers, is now used by traffickers, just like the old passageways between Georgia and Dagestan. The appearance of these clandestine flows is directly related to the weakening of political controls in secessionist or disputed territories. Since 2002, in conjunction with Putin’s campaign against international terrorism and the deterioration of relations with Georgia, Russia has reinforced its controls along its entire border, forcing these traffic flows to effectively disappear.

Overall, and with the notable exception of the northwestern quarter of the chain (Krasnodar Kray), the Caucasian road network in the mountains has deteriorated since 1991 and its poor condition is among the major factors contributing to the economic crisis in the region. However, in some areas (Dagestan and North Ossetia), new roads and bridges are being constructed.<sup>31</sup> This infrastructure, built to reinforce borders on the south and with Chechnya, also became a major factor in efforts to open up the isolated mountain districts.

<sup>27</sup>More specifically, payment of bribes to the customs officials and frequent armed robberies.

<sup>28</sup>The lowest pass, *Krestovoy pereval* (the Pass of the Cross) on the Georgian Military Road has an altitude of 2379 meters.

<sup>29</sup>Such as those favored by the Turkish alcohol tankers between Georgia and North Ossetia during the late 1990s.

<sup>30</sup>The pass is situated at an elevation of 2783 m, along the old Sokhumi Military Road between Teberda and high Abkhazia.

<sup>31</sup>Among the new are those between Makhachkala and Botlikh, between Izberbash and Levashi, and along the Samur River.



## MOUNTAIN PEOPLES TODAY: CONTROVERSIES AND REALITY

We believe that a thorough investigation of the mountain dwellers in the Caucasus needs to be undertaken at two very different levels. The traditional perspective focuses on the number of inhabitants and description of their activities. But during the past few years, this mundane form of geographical analysis has been extended to probing the relevance of geographic determinism. An entire mythology has grown up to explain the lives of these mountain peoples, dating back to the 19th century (and noted in writings of Lermontov and Tolstoy), which combines positive elements (traditions of honor, hospitality, and mutual aid) with negative stereotypes (banditry, cruelty, and absence of scruples). This recurring mythology now is increasingly taken for granted, and even reinforced by the recent conflicts which include attempts (similar to those near the end of the Tsarist period) to establish a "Republic of Mountain-Dwellers."

### Myths and Realities

After an inaugural meeting in August 1989, representatives of 12 peoples (Abaz, Abkhaz, Avars, Adyges, Shapsugs, Dargins, Kabardins, Laks, Ossetians, Cherkessians, Chechens, and Chetchens-akkintsi) resolved on November 2, 1991 in Sokhumi (Abkhazia), to recreate the "Confederation of the Mountain People of the Caucasus" (CPMC)<sup>32</sup> as the "legitimate heir of the Mountain Republic" (*Gorskaya respublika*) constituted on May 11, 1918. This resuscitated nationalist activity, promoted by several groups in the region, coincided with the beginning of secessionist rebellions in Abkhazia and Chechnya.

The renewed discussion over the uniqueness of "mountain peoples" raised passions in the early 1990s in many political and intellectual circles in the northern republics of the Caucasus as well as in Georgia. There, the first post-Soviet President, Zviad Gamsakhurdia, evoked the spirit of a common family of the Caucasus,<sup>33</sup> forswearing ethnic hatred and conflicts as alien to peoples who share a historical destiny.

Some ethnologists and other social scientists who probe the region occasionally theorize about a common social capital derived from traditions and close historical solidarity. They point to the mountain environment as a strong factor in forging a way of life resistant to pressures imposed by Tsarist and Soviet governance. In contrast, the Russian press portrays a quite different image of the Chechen mountain dwellers and even Caucasian nationals as terrorist gangsters or "Islamist wolves" poised to devour Russian blood (Ministry of the Interior, 1995).

We think it useful to refocus the reader's attention on post-Soviet cultural and naturalist theories that attempt to simplify explanations of a complex reality. The first such explanation, a purely geographical one, is an apparent fallacy. The large majority of individuals belonging to nations classified as "mountain" have not lived there for many decades, due to the systematic policy of relocating mountain residents to the plains and piedmonts, which commenced even prior to the Bolshevik Revolution. Such relocation was to some extent a natural process leading the people to better economic opportunities (e.g., see Eldarov et al., 2007 in this issue). In fact, a significant part of the adult population and their descendants were born on the plain. Today the majority is urban, with exposure to the mountains largely

<sup>32</sup>It later became the Confederation of the People of the Caucasus.

<sup>33</sup>Edward Shevardnadze of Georgia and Russia's President Boris Yel'tsin also occasionally referred to a common "Caucasian home."

limited to brief stays in native *auls* during family festivals. With the possible exception of some communities in Dagestan, all principal economic, demographic, and cultural developments are animated by urban processes originating on the piedmonts and other lowland areas. These processes did not destroy the prevailing ethnic or local solidarities, but the benefits accruing to clan members in each *aul* of the Dagestani mountains emanate from activities that hardly strengthen ties to the mountains. The mountains, never a priority of Soviet planners, have been similarly neglected since Russia's independence.

A second series of explanations (or observations) extends the preceding one and relates to habits and traditions. Overall, commonly cited examples drawn from everyday life appear to reflect the acculturation of the mountain peoples since the Russian conquest more accurately than their original traditions and rites, aptly described by Charachidzé (1998).<sup>34</sup> He maintained that the original Caucasian traditions were modified by the mid-19<sup>th</sup> century, and were irremediably severed during the Soviet period. The weakening of clan structures, so specific to the Chechen clans (*Teyps*) during the course of Sovietization and especially during the deportations in 1944 and exile through 1957, is one of the fundamental factors explaining the divisions within that society, the susceptibility of younger generations to new influences (especially to radical Islam from the Middle East), and the loss of credibility by traditional clan leaders.

Additionally, it is necessary to place the historical experience of the Caucasian people in its proper context. At the end of the 1980s, the traditional bond (identified by nationalist activists as the major unifier of people in the eastern Caucasus) was their alleged common opposition to Russian colonialism. However, attitudes toward Russian power varied considerably. Some groups (e.g., Chechens) fought almost without interruption in an effort to gain their freedom, whereas for others (e.g., some Georgians, Ossetians, and Kabardins) the quest for independence was little more than an intangible hope. Today, some of these differences are still evident. For example, the Confederation of the Caucasian people failed to resolve the disagreement between the militant Chechens and the Abkhazians who, in order to escape the influence of Georgia, did not hesitate to side with the Russians.<sup>35</sup>

Among the other conflicting objectives confronting the Confederation was the Chechen proposal urging it to endorse the creation of an Islamic republic extending from the Black Sea (Abkhazia) to the Caspian (Dagestan). The Chechens even advocated a more geographically restrictive version of such a republic, by seeking to exclude the Georgians and the mainly Orthodox Christian Ossetians.<sup>36</sup> But while Islam is the religion of the majority inhabiting the North Caucasus (e.g., see Heleniak, 2006), it is not inevitably a unifying factor within the broad context of the Confederation. Thus, when the radical Islamist Chechens and Dagestani leaders (supported by Arab mercenaries) proposed to institute a state *shariat* that

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<sup>34</sup>Charachidzé insisted, *inter alia*, that the relationship with the mountains was very different for Circassians (Caucasians living in the northwest, whose way of life was also deeply integrated with the steppe) than for the peoples of Dagestan.

<sup>35</sup>They even petitioned for integration with the Russian Federation.

<sup>36</sup>The strategic location of the Ossetians in the heart of the northern Caucasus has not escaped Moscow's attention, which traditionally considered them as Russia's valuable ally. In addition to the Georgians and Ossetians, another non-Islamic group warrants brief mention, namely the Cossacks of the Kuban and the Terek. On the one hand, these ethnic Russian groups are faithful allies of Moscow actively engaged in the struggle against new Caucasian migrants in Krasnodar and Stavropol' krais. But on the other, they (and especially Ataman Cossacks) share many habits reflecting long cohabitation with mountain peoples, whose traditions they have appropriated. The ethnic diversity of the area's population is further evident in the relative multiplicity of ethno-linguistic families (Caucasian, Slavic, as well as Iranian and Turkic).

**Table 1.** The Population of Selected Rayons in Mountainous Areas of the Caucasus, 1989–2005

Rayon	1989	1995	2002	2005	Pct. change	
					1989–2005	2002–2005
Georgia						
Kazbegi	6,376	6,200	5,260	4,900	–23.1	–6.8
Mestia	14,800	14,000	14,250	14,100	–4.7	–1.1
Oni	16,202	13,400	9,270	8,900	–45.1	–4.0
Lentekhi	11,411	9,200	8,990	8,800	–22.9	–2.1
Dagestan						
Gunib	19,300	19,800	25,200	25,040	+29.7	–0.6
Kulinskiy	11,057	11,000	10,760	10,600	–4.1	–1.5
Lakskiy	9,100	9,100	12,382	12,155	+33.6	–1.8
Tlyaratinskiy	22,208	20,400	22,700	22,536	+1.5	–0.7
Karachayevo-Cherkessia						
Karachayevskiy <sup>a</sup>	25,177	26,100	26,265	25,380	+0.8	–3.4
City of Karachayevsk	34,203	34,600	37,493	35,840	+4.8	–4.4
City of Teberda	8,900	8,000	7,700	7,628	–14.3	–1.0
City of Dombay	1,600	1,500	400	390	–75.6	–2.5
Kabardino-Balkaria						
El'brusskiy	39,100	35,700	35,968	35,424	–9.4	–1.5
City of Tyrnyauz	31,100	28,600	20,800	20,539	–34.0	–1.3

<sup>a</sup>Karachayevskiy Rayon does not include the city of Karachayevsk.

Sources: Compiled by the authors from *Chislennost'* (various years and volumes) and Rowland, 2006.

would join together Chechnya and Dagestan in September 1999, they encountered almost unanimous resistance from the peoples inhabiting Dagestan (Radvanyi, 2006).

## DEMOGRAPHIC PROCESSES

Except for the inhabitants of the Chechen mountains, where dozens of villages have been bombed (sometimes out of existence) during the two wars, the population of the mountain districts has continued to increase for many years, although the growth rates have recently tended to slow. This overall population increase in the mountains, however, is now trending toward reversal (Table 1) and masking several contradictory trends. The growth has primarily been due to high rates of natural increase among the rural populations, whose traditional ways of life (generally associated with Islam) have resulted in consistently high rates of fertility. Nonetheless, specific administrative and economic relationships also play an important role. For example, in Dagestan, one must take into account the effect of land allocation between the mountains and lowlands. During the period from 1930 to 1950 sections of the plain were allotted to mountain *kolkhozy*, which only nominally were in control of the land. Thus, some inhabitants who generally reside on the plains sometimes are recorded as living in the native *auls* (mountain villages)—one of the probable reasons for overestimating the number of people inhabiting the mountains.



**Fig. 1.** The ski resort of Dombay (elev. 1800 m, Republic of Karachayevo-Cherkessia) below the Alibek (elev. 3909 m). The Soviet-style hotels and “tourbases” are being modernized and many new, small, private hotels or accommodations are under construction to house tourists from Moscow and other parts of Russia. The upgrading and renovation of the resort is expected to reverse the steep population decline experienced since 1989. Photograph by Jean Radvanyi, September 2005.

The abrupt increase in the population of certain mountain rayons in the northern Caucasus at the time of the 2002 census in Russia can be related to statistical manipulations designed to secure additional economic aid and higher state subsidies,<sup>37</sup> as well as opportunities relating to land privatization. Since the 2002 census, the mountain population figures show a steady decline due to aging and immigration to the plains (often permanent) of young villagers after graduation from secondary school.

Simultaneously, however, the urban population of the central Caucasus also has decreased. According to Simaguine (2001), it decreased in the Russian Caucasus (as a whole) from 152,000 in 1991 to 121,000 in 2000, a decline of 20 percent. Urban places depending on mining (such as Tyrnyauz, which lost over one-third of its inhabitants since 1989 [Table 1]) and tourism have suffered from the national economic crisis and the effects of regional conflicts. Teberda, an important medical spa town with many sanatoria, lost ca. 15 percent of its residents, whereas Dombay, somewhat higher in elevation and a ski resort (Fig. 1) lost over 75 percent. It is worth noting that, as a city like Tyrnyauz is depopulated, changes in its legal status are bound to occur. In the Russian Caucasus, eight settlements of urban type (*poselok gorodskogo tipa*) were reclassified as rural villages after discontinuing certain (nonagricultural) economic activities and losing a number of inhabitants. Thus some of the increase in the (official) rural population counts may be due to administrative reclassifications. People also gravitate to larger urban places (e.g., to Karachayevsk) in the quest for better living conditions, employment opportunities, and transportation. Accordingly, the total number of urban settlements continues to decrease, while their average size increases, due in part to migration from smaller urban centers and the abandonment of some isolated *auls*.

<sup>37</sup>Predominantly based on the number of inhabitants.

The demographic change is even more pronounced in the South Caucasus. The mountains of Georgia continue to be depopulated in tandem with a severe economic depression. And in Armenia, massive emigration to other states (but chiefly to Russia and the European Union) is due to avoidance of conflicts as well as to an economic crisis (Rowland, 2007). The situation in mountainous areas of Georgia is particularly difficult because the civil war (1991–1993), followed by a period of civic and economic disorder, seriously damaged the country's infrastructure. Many bridges were destroyed, power lines entirely dismantled, and tourist facilities such as those in Svanetia totally obliterated. Many roads are in a deplorable state of disrepair. And, apart from mobile telephone networks that function almost everywhere, there is a dearth of conveniences and facilities that might have discouraged migration. Since about 2002–2004, some private initiatives, occasionally assisted by local authorities or by NGOs supported by international organizations, have managed to introduce improvements.<sup>38</sup> But the state of decay in Georgian provinces continues to be alarming, and mountain areas still do not seem to merit due attention of the authorities in Tbilisi. Far from attempting to stop the exodus, the government seems content to direct the migrants (e.g., Svans) to areas in southern Georgia where they are likely to replace Greeks and Armenians linked to local unrest (International Crisis Group, 2006; see also Rowland, 2006, 2007).

## CRISIS AND RESISTANCE IN THE MOUNTAINS

### A Depressed Economy

The High Caucasus area has never been overly populated or developed to include an important city, primarily due to the morphology of the chain, which is devoid of large valleys or intra-montane basins. For centuries, the principal human activity has remained pastoralism. The more humid western regions conducive to cattle breeding differ from the semiarid central and eastern parts dedicated to sheep raising. Traditionally, the former region features the so-called “small mountain” livestock husbandry, in which cows climb to mountain pastures above the villages in the valley in the summer; in contrast, sheep-raising depended on long transhumance movements between the mountains and lowland steppes, often implying a multiplicity of habitat levels. In Dagestan, there are three such levels: (a) a mountain summer pasture in the highlands; (b) a place for wintering in the plains; and (c) a central village located at intermediate elevation. The latter plays a pivotal role, thanks to diversified activities including terrace cultivation and craft industries (bayonets, pottery, carpets) that together support a relatively dense mountain settlement. The piedmonts of the south, which benefit from favorable climatic conditions due to their sheltered position, very early developed rich and intensive patterns of agriculture (viticulture, fruit orchards, and mixed farming). The southern slope of the High Caucasus, narrower than the northern, is sparsely populated and considerably less urbanized (unlike the lateral chain of the north).<sup>39</sup>

The Russian conquest prompted the development of resort towns specializing in hydrotherapy as early as 1810.<sup>40</sup> Later came lead and zinc mining in North Ossetia, developed

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<sup>38</sup>Most prominently in traditional sectors such as tourism, production of cheese and honey, growing medicinal plants, and viticulture.

<sup>39</sup>The narrow valleys of the northern slope served as refuges for the Caucasian peoples from Adygeya to Dagestan (UNEP, 2002).

<sup>40</sup>Early records, dating as far back as 1810, refer to officers of the Imperial army who spent their holidays around the mineral waters of the Caucasus (Kavkazskiye Mineral'nyye Vody), Yessentuki, and Kislovodsk (Belozarov, 1997).



**Fig 2.** The city of Tqibuli (elev. 800–1000 m) was the main coal extraction city of Georgia (population of 22,000 in 1989, declining to 12,000 in 2006). Practically all mine pits and infrastructure are now abandoned. Photograph by Jean Radvanyi, August 2006.

between 1839 and 1846. These urban (non-agrarian) activities were later intensively developed during the Soviet period, so that by 1991 Simaguine (2001) counted 3 cities and 29 urbanized districts in the mountainous areas of the northern Caucasus. The most common type of urban settlement is the mining town, of which Tyrnyauz, in Kabardino-Balkaria, represents the principal site on the northern mountain slopes. A molybdenum and tungsten deposit began to be mined here as early as 1934, but operations have now ended. Also no longer active for the most part are operations extracting polymetallic ores in North Ossetia (Sadon, Fiagdon, Alagir) and settlements based on extraction of building materials (e.g., gypsum in Psebay etc.).

Another category of urban settlement is the resort/tourism-oriented town, typified by Teberda and the boroughs of Dombay and Arkhyz in Karachayvo-Cherkessia, as well as El'brus and Verkhniy Baksan in Kabardino-Balkaria. The third urban type includes administrative centers (Karachayevsk) and settlements identified with diverse activities, such as processing of forest products in the western part of the Caucasus (Adygeya), hydroelectric power generation in North Ossetia and Dagestan, and traditional handicrafts (e.g., silver-smithing of knives in Kubachi, Dagestan).

The same types of cities, although fewer in number, can be found on the southern slopes of the High Caucasus. For example, the mining cities of Chiat'ura (manganese) or Tqibuli (coal) in Georgia (Fig. 2), and rayon administrative centers like Mestia (Svanetia) or Kazbegi on the Georgian Military Road, maintain their population levels thanks to local employment opportunities in food processing (mineral water, dairy products), tourism, and administrative functions. But in the south, as well as in the north, the reforms and changes occurring since the demise of the Soviet Union have adversely affected many of these activities, so that the very existence of certain communities is sometimes in question.

## Near Disappearance of Industry

Several factors contribute to what appears to be the beginning of de-industrialization in the mountains. Initially, the trend may be traced to the depletion of mineral deposits exploited since the 1930s, like those of Tyrnyauz (molybdenum-tungsten) or Sadon (lead-zinc).<sup>41</sup> The closure of mines has left devastated landscapes and a legacy of environmental degradation that cannot be easily reversed (Fig. 2). Aggravating the situation is the fact that the few industrial diversification programs undertaken during the 1960s and 1970s to rejuvenate towns located at intermediate elevations or near the piedmont are now questionable in economic terms.<sup>42</sup> At the same time, the general economic crisis of the 1990s also undermined an entire series of capital-intensive programs such as construction of new hydro-electric power stations in Dagestan and North Ossetia.

Most enterprises still functioning in the food processing, tanning, and textile industries are small, obsolete units that remain in operation solely due to subsidies initiated in Soviet times.<sup>43</sup> Their revival would depend on significant investments required to enable them to compete effectively with imported products and larger-volume producers in central Russia. A successful local example is the piedmont company Merkuria, which produces mineral water and vodka exported to Moscow. It developed in recent years in Cherkessk on a production site equipped with modern German and French assembly-line equipment. But this type of investment is rare in the area and limited largely to more populated and accessible piedmont towns. Small crafts based on wool, leather, and wood continue to supply the local tourist market. Some craft industries developed during Soviet times probably could survive if quality standards were maintained, although many local shops already sell wool products imported from Asian countries.

## Contradictions of Mountain Tourism

With the notable exception of Abkhazia (a center of Soviet spa tourism) and Tbilisi, the major centers of Caucasian tourism were not significantly affected by the armed conflicts. Pitsunda, Gagra, and Novyy Afon in Abkhazia are now operating, although Sokhumi remains closed to tourists. But the impact of tensions and violence in the area is clearly evident in the reduction in the frequency of tourism, even in zones quite remote from the sites of military engagement. The famed, and reportedly calm resort community of Mineral'nyye Vody in the piedmont saw its visitor numbers collapse in the mid-1990s to less than 400,000 visitors in 1996 (from 1.3 million a decade before). The most recent figures indicate a substantial increase to ca. 800,000–900,000 visitors in 2005.<sup>44</sup>

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<sup>41</sup>For background on the development of polymetallic ore deposits in the North Caucasus, see Shabad (1969, 146–147).

<sup>42</sup>E.g., efforts to diversify by building subsidiaries of electronics enterprises or expanding the military-industrial complex encounter very high energy and transport costs within the framework of a market economy.

<sup>43</sup>During Soviet times, high-mountain dwellers received material benefits and additions to their salaries for service under harsh conditions, similar to the incentives for employment in Russia's northern territories (i.e., compensation for exposure to difficult natural conditions). Although such incentives still exist in Russia, and the North Caucasian republics are heavily subsidized by federal funds, the main flows from the federal budget are directed to the piedmont, where they remain and largely benefit the capitals of the republics.

<sup>44</sup>Authors' interviews in Kislovodsk in September 2006.

Even if foreign tourists have disappeared almost entirely,<sup>45</sup> local and regional authorities are convinced that the sector will survive. Believing that tourism is an essential activity for the region's future development, they have prioritized maintenance of the existing infrastructure, and in several instances embarked on diversification. A recent visit by the authors to several principal sites (e.g., Sochi, Dombay, Arkhyz, Mineral'nyye Vody) disclosed that the authorities have partially succeeded. And even if the level of infrastructure remains quite low (when compared to that in similar European areas), the conditions for recovery are now in place.

Caucasian tourism has always been primarily oriented toward the piedmont, especially favoring the spas in the two "rivieras" located on the Black seacoasts of Russia and Georgia and the Caspian littoral of Russia. Tourists or convalescents partaking of spa cures often participated in short excursions to mountain valleys prompting the development of facilities at high altitudes (mountain hydrotherapy as well as alpine and cross-country skiing). Still modest, they have an exceptionally high potential due to the favorable natural environment of the Caucasus; the sector is now fully privatized and open to competition. Most Soviet regulations relating to construction, rental of lodging, trade, and services have now been abandoned, so that the landscape of small and larger sites has begun to change.

The impressive transformations on the Black Sea riviera in Sochi is evident in the wide variety of accommodations ranging from luxury hotels to modest private boarding houses. Services of all kinds, from kiosks to Aquapark facilities, are similarly available. And weak echoes of a revival in the mountains are evident as well. Krasnaya Polyana, benefiting from its proximity to Sochi (approximately 50 km) is now the site of the first luxury hotels (at higher elevations) and dozens of small shops and service providers.<sup>46</sup> Important elements of tourism infrastructure (access roads, chairlifts, and a cable car) are planned there (despite unpredictable snowfall) in an effort to support Sochi's bid to host the Winter Olympics in 2014. The road from Sochi to Krasnaya Polyana was recently reconstructed and includes a mountain tunnel inaugurated by President Putin. More or less similar observations can be related about the other ski resorts on the northern slope (Teberda-Dombay, El'brus, Arkhyz) as well as in Georgia. The ski resort of Gudauri (approximately 100 km from Tbilisi), initially developed by Austrian and Georgian corporations, caters primarily to Western residents of the Georgian capital.

The oversized Soviet hotels, which housed large groups, are finding it increasingly difficult to fill their room and bed capacities and otherwise compete with smaller establishments offering accommodations of reasonably high quality. The latter are financed by banks, private companies, and often by large corporate investors such as Gazprom and major oil companies, or even by municipal treasuries such as that of Moscow. But the most prominent new feature is the proliferation of family-run operations, such as bed and breakfast inns and small restaurants at altitude, which provide new sources of income for local inhabitants. It is not unusual for members of the same family to share tasks, whereby the older generations continue to be engaged in traditional occupations (sheep raising and crafts oriented toward the tourist market), while the young people open small coffee stands in the valley or along intermediate stations of the ski chair-lifts. At the same time, the tourist customers have changed,

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<sup>45</sup>During Soviet times, the Caucasus had attracted a significant number of organized tours from Eastern as well as Western Europe.

<sup>46</sup>The multi-million dollar project (which also includes a conference center) is being financed by Gazprom (Kramer and Myers, 2006).



from organized groups of Soviet workers to individuals or families booked by travel agencies in large cities.

However, it will take several years in both Russia and Georgia before the promising tourist sector can measure up to the somewhat unrealistic expectations of regional leaders. The fact remains that tourists avoid areas associated with conflicts and terrorism such as Svanetia, Dagestan, North and South Ossetia, and of course Chechnya and Ingushetia, where tourism is almost completely non-existent.

### **New Trends in Agriculture**

Mountain and hill farming remain without doubt the principal activities in the Caucasus, occupying the bulk of the economically active population. But as noted above, it is difficult to present a reliable statistical assessment of the sector. Today, the main agricultural activities are in private hands (albeit in co-operative structures, at least in Russia), making it easier for most farmers to conceal the sources of their income.

Officially, animal husbandry in the Southern Federal District (as in all of Russia) is in free fall. According to official Goskomstat sources, the number of sheep fell from 24 million in 1991 to 10.5 million in 2004, while production of wool decreased from 115,000 tons in 1990 to 31,700 tons in 2004.<sup>47</sup> Such drastic declines are attributed to the paucity of investments in modern technology and increases in material, transport, and fuel costs, which inflicted a heavy burden. But it may be remembered, however, that in the south of the FSU (certainly in the Caucasus) farmers have long had to rely on antiquated and poorly maintained equipment, which tends to explain the many local contradictions. Except in areas destroyed by warfare (Chechnya and South Ossetia) or by natural disasters (mudslides and avalanches affecting old villages in Svanetia), Caucasian peasants have made significant adjustments. Faced with economic and political uncertainties, most have limited their activities, taking refuge in subsistence farming and producing a surplus only under favorable conditions for sale in regional markets. Such sales are only possible when access to transportation is reliable.<sup>48</sup>

Generally, Caucasian mountain people have demonstrated remarkable resilience during a difficult period of transition. The sheepherders of Kazbegi, accustomed to the traditional ways of transhumance to Dagestan, abandoned sheep breeding and shifted to raising cattle (many had always raised a few milk cows to provide for their own consumption). Elsewhere in Dagestan and Georgia, local food processors, encouraged by the authorities, began to invest in small facilities producing fruit preserves, less perishable cheeses, and more elaborate dairy products. In many villages, local peasants have in recent years accumulated savings enabling them to enlarge and renovate their houses. Their ranks have recently been augmented by a new breed of “private” farmers attracted by the possible benefits accruing from land privatization and liberalization of the agricultural sector.

Adaptation to the transition from the planned economy proceeded more rapidly in vegetable production, including potatoes,<sup>49</sup> especially at the beginning of the 21<sup>st</sup> century. Even

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<sup>47</sup>These figures are for the entire federal district, and include Astrakhan', Rostov, and Volgograd oblasts, Kalmykia, and Krasnodar and Stavropol' krais, as well as the ethnic republics.

<sup>48</sup>The average farm in Armenia, Georgia, and Azerbaijan sells slightly over 40 percent of its output commercially, but it should be noted that the majority of such commercial farms are not located in mountainous areas, and problems relating to transportation are less restrictive (see Lerman, 2006, pp. 118–119).

<sup>49</sup>In Dagestan, the most mountainous of the republics, the production of potatoes increased from an annual average of 21,300 metric tons in 1986 to 102,900 tons in 1998 to 293,200 in 2004 (*Regiony Rossii*, 2006).

during the years of *perestroyka* producers had organized themselves into fruit and vegetable distribution networks serving the markets of central Russia. In Dagestan, entire districts at intermediate elevations specialize in truck farming managed by local entrepreneurs, whose trucks deliver produce to most cities of European Russia and even to Siberia. However, the relative isolation of the mountainous areas and difficult operating conditions have limited the profits of Dagestani growers, so that rural out-migration has not subsided (Magomedov, 2002). Moreover, elsewhere, privatization reforms have led to quite different results, as we have observed in adjoining districts on either side of the Samur River. Thus the apple orchards cultivated at intermediate elevation on the Azerbaijani side have been quickly privatized, enabling many families to earn a living locally. Conversely, the large orchards that brought fame to the Dagestani rayons of Akhty and Dokuzparinskiy have now been completely abandoned because satisfactory laws for the division of lands set aside for growing have not been enacted.

### CONCLUSIONS

We conclude our overview of the challenges facing mountain peoples of the Caucasus, by offering several reflections and observations. To begin with, most authors who purportedly analyze “the Caucasus” are actually writing about the piedmonts, unaware of reality in the mountains proper. In fact, in most cases (especially with regard to Dagestan) it is necessary to separate the mountain communities from those of the piedmont, where the “rules of the game” are quite different in 2007.

The Caucasus is now a divided area, and a vision of another, much broader division is invoked from time to time in Russia and elsewhere. Voiced by Islamist activists and a few Russians as well, it visualizes a set of dominos falling after Russia’s withdrawal from Chechnya. This vision would detach from Russia the main mountain range located south of a Krasnodar–Pyatigorsk–Kizlyar line<sup>50</sup> (the piedmonts to the north would remain Russian), whereupon the mountain peoples, free of Russian control, would develop a rapprochement with their counterparts in the South Caucasus. Some proponents even seem to believe (or hope) that traditional Russian xenophobia and disdain for the *natsmen*,<sup>51</sup> the barriers obstructing integration of Muslim minorities into Russian society (*Rossiyskoye obshchestvo*), and fear of Islamic terrorism would eventually persuade the powers in Moscow to “let those people go.” But the vision is far from realized. The evolution of the conflict with Chechnya hardly implies today (early 2007) that a broad regional exit from Russia is in prospect. Among the many reasons is the apparent reluctance among the overwhelming majority of the Caucasian peoples to secede from the Russian Federation (Kolossof and Toal, 2007).<sup>52</sup>

We must, of course, note that the Caucasus is deeply divided today along the line that separates Russia from the South Caucasus. Although this separation is a completely new one for the former uniformly Soviet population of the area, it nonetheless appears to be “set in stone.” In fact, most if not all Western media portray Russia as a kind of external observer of Caucasian affairs (here viewed only as the South Caucasus). This geopolitical simplification

<sup>50</sup>See Figure 1 in the preface to this special issue.

<sup>51</sup>Perjorative term commonly used in Russia to refer to members of the predominantly Muslim nationalities of the FSU. The term frequently also embraces Armenians, Georgians, and most Ossetians, who are Christians.

<sup>52</sup>In a recent survey of 2,000 inhabitants of 82 rayons/cities in the North Caucasus, only 3 percent indicated that giving rebels the opportunity to leave (secede from) the Russian Federation would be a viable response (*ibid.*, p. 220).

appears premature, however, because of the numerous interactions between the two slopes and Moscow's active involvement in the affairs of the three South Caucasian countries. The events of the winter of 2005–2006, marked by disarray in the Transcaucasian energy supply, and the ensuing deterioration of the geopolitical relationship between Russia and Georgia once again demonstrated Moscow's continued focus on this part of the Near Abroad.<sup>53</sup>

On both sides of the chain, the mountain areas continue to be regarded as marginal territories. With the exception of North Ossetia, none of the regions or states have developed legislation or programs adapted to these areas. We believe, however, that the mountain areas of the Caucasus have a realistic potential for further development. The assets include splendid picturesque landscapes, good natural and climatic conditions for tourism and mountain agriculture, a fascinating ethnic mosaic and cultural diversity, and other similarly attractive features. Many initiatives have been launched in the recent past to help local and regional authorities overcome the effects of the conflicts (Coppieters, 2001; Vaux and Goodhand, 2002). But these attempts have been largely focused on "conflict resolution," and only marginally addressed economic issues.<sup>54</sup> The federal authorities in Moscow have thus far been unable to control the investments and subsidies earmarked for the development of the mountain republics, because a large part of the flow bypassed the population on the way to the coffers of local elites. More recently, however, there is some evidence that President Putin has given the need for new economic investment in the region his personal attention (Kolossoff and Toal, 2007). All told, albeit somewhat too briefly, economic revival in the mountains may have to await a return to durable peace and stability.

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<sup>53</sup>In January 2006, four suspicious explosions in southern Russia downed power lines and destroyed two natural gas pipelines supplying Georgia and Armenia downstream (Chivers, 2006a, 2006b), plunging much of Georgia into a power blackout for over a week. This was followed in March by a ban in Russia on imports of Georgian and Moldovan wine and a suspension of transport (air, road, rail, and sea) linkages with Georgia in October following the expulsion from that country of four Russian military officers whom Georgian authorities accused of espionage (Myers, 2006). Most recently (early 2007), Georgia finessed Russia's broader policy objectives in the region (and disregarded Armenia's) by involving Turkey and Azerbaijan in a new railway project that would link the Caucasus with Europe (Hanging Together, 2007, p. 50).

<sup>54</sup>The European experience in successful development of mountain areas could provide useful insights, if local authorities could be persuaded to consider development programs not previously used in the Caucasus.

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