

**HE Ambassador Heidemaria GÜRER**, Head of Department, Eastern Europe, Western Balkan, South Caucasus and Central Asia, Federal Ministry for European and International Affairs, Austria

I always like to start conferences about the Southern Caucasus with trying to illustrate the in so many aspects complicated mosaic or set-up of the Southern Caucasus. After the break-up of the Soviet Union three Union Republics became independent states – Armenia, Azerbaijan, Georgia. Within Georgia we had also the Autonomous Republic of Abkhazia (population also Moslem, speaking a Caucasian language, though from a different group than Georgian) and the Autonomous Republic of Adjara (predominately Moslem Georgians which was thus the first case of a territorial entity based on religion in the former Soviet Union) as well as the Autonomous Territory of South Ossetia linked to the bordering North Ossetia in Russia, being of Iranian ethnicity and language, but at the same time being Orthodox. Incorporated into Azerbaijan we have the Autonomous Territory of Nagorniy Karabakh, populated by majority Armenians but not linked with Armenia and the Autonomous Republic of Nakhichevan, populated by Azerbaijanis and administered by Azerbaijan but without any geographical link to it, today only accessible for Azerbaijan through Iran or Armenia. We thus had on the small territory of the Southern Caucasus three Soviet/independent republics, three autonomous republics and two autonomous territories which represents the most complicated border/boundary limitation on the territory of the former Soviet Union and thus conflict prone (sometimes the situation is interpreted as have being created deliberately). On the language side we are also confronted with a mixture of Indo-European (Armenian), Turkic (Azerbaijani) and Caucasian (Georgian and other minority languages) as well as Iranian (Ossetian) languages. When it comes to religion we have two Orthodox communities (Armenians, Georgians) and Moslems (whereas Azerbaijan is predominately shia Moslem and not Sunni like Turkey).

We also have to consider the wider geography of the Southern Caucasus bordering Russia in the North (the South Caucasian “mixture” finds its prolongation in the adjacent Northern Caucasus), Iran and Turkey in the South and the EU via the Black Sea in the West as well as Central Asia via the Caspian Sea in the East. All these neighbours try to influence the Southern Caucasus in one or the other way, energy playing a primordial role. Russia sees the Southern Caucasus still during the prisma of “motherland”, Iran through a more ideological lens (not to forget the about 20 millions Azerbaijanis living in Iran), Turkey as a field of further engagement after solving her Armenian problem (just to remind the Turkish idea of a Caucasus Platform after the Georgian-Russian war in 2008 and the myriad of “Caucasian” minorities in Turkey making Turkey especially in the case of Georgia an interested broker). Europe’s interests in the Southern Caucasus are primarily in the field of stability, democracy and energy/transit ( just to mention some of the energy routes passing/planned through the Southern Caucasus like Tbilisi-Ceyhan, Tbilisi-Erzurum, Blue Stream, TANAP, Nabucco etc.). Thus the Southern Caucasus has become a focal point of global and strategic (energy) politics creating foreign policy rivalries that could in short be summed up as North-South and East-West axes – North-South: Russia (supporting Abkhazia, South-Ossetia, Nagorniy Karabakh), Armenia and eventually up to Iran, whereas the East-West axes could be characterized by Azerbaijan, Georgia, Turkey direction Europe/US/NATO.

What are the policies of the EU towards the Southern Caucasus? The EU speaks out for the respect of the territorial integrity of the three independent states in the region while at the same time also for the right of self-determination of peoples – a difficult mix to be solved. As the Southern Caucasus is part of Europe the EU has a primordial interest in a stable, prospering, democratic Southern Caucasus with secure energy routes, but without exploding conflicts. The EU concluded with all the three countries (as with the other CIS members) “Partnership and Cooperation Agreements” that, after their expiration, have been transformed into “Eastern Partnership Agreements” (as with Belarus, Ukraine and Moldova as well), also based on the “more for more principle” in the framework of which Georgia can be considered a front runner. Also mentioned should be the energy and communication agreements TRACECA and INOGATE.

EU representatives were also always present in the most important international organisations in the region dealing with the conflicts, to-day just the rather small EUMM is functioning.

Which kind of conflict solution instruments were used so far?

For the Abkhazia conflict the following was undertaken:

- Appointment of a UN-Secretary General Special Representative in 1992
- Installation of UNOMIG in 1993 as the first UN PKF (Peace Keeping Force) on the territory of the former Soviet Union
- Creation of a "Group of Friends of Georgia/Friends of the UN Secretary General in 1993"
- Installation of a CIS PKF in 1994 that led to a very unique and first of its kind cooperation with UNOMIG
- UN/OSCE human rights office in Sukhumi since 1996
- Georgian - Abkhaz dialogue on NGO-levels, especially the so-called "Schlaining-process" with the Austrian Peace University

The most difficult questions to be solved have been status related and concerning the return of IDPS (immediately before the outbreak of the civil war the Abkhaz population was by majority Georgian and not Abkhaz).

For the South Ossetia conflict the following was undertaken:

- PKF comprised of Russia, Georgia, South and North Ossetia since 1992, leading to a Common Control Commission comprised of the mentioned PKF forces plus UNHCR and OSCE
- OSCE long term mission for South Ossetia in Tbilisi since 1992
- OSCE office in Zchinvali since 2007
- Georgian - South-Ossetian expert negotiations/dialog on NGO levels, especially also the so-called "Schlaining" process with the Austrian Peace University

The most difficult questions to be solved are status related and in connection with the Georgian enclaves in South Ossetia.

The developments were such that the UN was mainly dealing with the Abkhaz conflict whereas the OSCE with South Ossetia.

Unfortunately almost all of these mechanisms do not exist anymore since the Georgian-Russian war of 2008 and have therefore more or less failed. As of to-day the instruments we dispose of are more or less only the EUMM and the Geneva talks which reached already their 21<sup>st</sup> round.

Without wanting to go into methodological details about reasons of the conflicts and their existence or non-existence I think it nevertheless important to continue or re-engage in confidence building measures, especially on the people-to-people level. Geography is unchangeable, neighbours cannot be chosen; we all prefer to have neighbours with which we can engage, are friendly towards us and have some kind of common language. Some of the most important features in this respect, to my mind, are contacts/confidence building measure on the level of youth, women, journalists, scientists etc.

I would like to conclude on an Austrian footing: The so far only Austrian female Peace Nobel laureate, Berta von Suttner, spent 10 years of her life in Georgia, especially in Kutaissi and Zugdidi (to-day on the boundary line with Abkhazia). Let the title of her book, "Lay down the Arms", be the motto of our deliberations and the future of the Southern Caucasus.

The article reflects the personal opinion of the author.