

Hot Spots Flare in Russia's 'Near Abroad'

by Rachel Douglas

In Russian parlance the Near Abroad comprises countries that were formerly part of the Soviet Union. The Balkans region is not in the Near Abroad, but it, especially Serbia, is a traditional area of Russian interest—a factor that British and Venetian geopoliticians played on to embroil Russia in Balkan wars in the 19th Century and in 1912-14, on the eve of World War I.

Russian government officials, parliamentarians, and media are currently paying great attention to the situation in the Near Abroad, where several of the region's so-called frozen conflicts have flared into hot spots. The Belarus Presidential election is on March 19, and Ukraine votes for Parliament one week later, but those are not the only focal points. Here are the current situations:

Belarus: Stepan Sukhorenko, head of the Belarusian KGB, announced on March 16 that he had evidence of an American-backed plot to overthrow President Alexander Lukashenka's regime during the Presidential election, through "bombings and arson to sow chaos." Sukhorenko showed a



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Zbigniew Brzezinski, one of the principal architects of the geopolitical “arc of crisis” policy for surrounding Russia (or formerly, the Soviet Union) with hostile powers, is shown here in Washington on March 16, 2006.

video of a man he said had been trained in the Republic of Georgia, with American instructors present, to bomb schools. He also accused staff of the Georgian embassies in Lithuania and Ukraine of being involved. This escalation came after ten days of arrests of opposition candidates and/or their staff coordinators, for holding unauthorized demonstrations and on other charges. The regime prepared the election in heavy-handed fashion; equally heavy-handed are calls from Project Democracy circles for Lukashenka to be overthrown, as “Europe’s last dictator.” On March 16, a delegation of election observers from the European Parliament was denied visas to enter Belarus.

Transnistria/Moldova: In a statement issued March 9, the Russian Foreign Ministry charged Ukraine and Moldova with “blockading” the Transnistria region of Moldova. New customs regulations require all cargoes moving from Transnistria into Ukraine, mostly en route to Russia, to have an official Moldovan customs stamp, for the stated purpose of curbing smuggling. Transnistria, a narrow strip of territory along the left bank of the Dniestr River in Moldova, borders Ukraine. Its population is mostly Russian ethnic. Russian forces have patrolled the area since fighting there in the early 1990s, and the local authorities do not answer to the Moldovan government in Chisinau. The Foreign Ministry statement, as well as a resolution passed the next day by the Russian State Duma, accused Ukraine of threatening the pop-

ulation of Transnistria with a “humanitarian disaster.” As of March 14, Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov said that the measures remained in effect, as a result of which “the social and economic situation in Transnistria is deteriorating.”

Ukraine: Victor Yanukovich’s Regions of Ukraine party is far ahead in all election polls, with President Victor Yushchenko’s Our Ukraine facing opposition also from several former allies. But Regions of Ukraine will not win a clear majority, and its vote will tend to be concentrated in eastern Ukraine. As one Ukrainian analyst told *EIR*: “It’s set up for ungovernability, with Ukraine’s fate then to be determined by outside forces.”

Meanwhile Russian state TV on March 12 aired an edition of its Special Correspondent program, which charged that the Makarov-1 military garrison in the Kiev Region was being used by U.S. special forces as a concentration camp for prisoners from various countries, and that this was arranged with Yushchenko by U.S. Director of Central Intelligence Porter Goss last Summer. On March 13, Ukrainian General Staff Chief Sergei Kirichenko categorically denied the Russian report.

Latvia: Police in Riga forcibly stopped a march to commemorate Latvian Waffen SS Legionaires’ Day, and also arrested anti-fascist counterdemonstrators, on March 16. A showdown over this commemoration takes place almost every year on this date, but these police actions were played up as a dramatic event, on Russian state TV. The Russian Foreign Ministry denounced the march, saying that it ran counter to recent UN resolutions against inciting racism and xenophobia.

Georgia: Organizations from the heavily Armenian ethnic Javakheti region in southern Georgia have petitioned President Michael Saakashvili to be granted autonomy, according to a March 10 Caucasus Press report monitored by RFE/RL. Saakashvili is already battling to restore Tbilisi’s control over South Ossetia and Abkhazia, which border the Russian Federation.

Kosovo: The situation in this Balkans hot spot has implications for Russia’s Near Abroad. As talks continue on the status of Kosovo within (or independent of) Serbia, Russian officials, including President Vladimir Putin, have drawn a parallel with potential developments in Near Abroad, like Transnistria in Moldova and the autonomous regions in Georgia. Asked during his Jan. 31 press briefing, what would happen if Kosovo independence were recognized, Putin said, “Principles have to be universal, otherwise they cannot inspire trust in the policy we are pursuing. . . . If someone believes that Kosovo can be granted full state independence, then why should we refuse the same to the Abkhazians or the South Ossetians? . . . I don’t want to say that Russia will also immediately recognize Abkhazia or South Ossetia as independent states, but such precedents exist in international life.”