

Andreas Gross on conflicts and possibilities in the Caucasus

Andreas Gross, member of the Swiss National Council, member of the Parliamentary assembly of the Council of Europe and political scientist visited Åland recently. Kamala Ramazanova, volunteer at the Åland Island Peace Institute, had the opportunity to interview him about the conflicts in the Caucasus region.

• How do you assess the situation in North Caucasus? Is the North Caucasus still an unstable region?

I think that the situation in Northern Caucasus was at its worst as it was two years ago. But there are still huge problems: the recent attacks in Ingushetia; the tension created by the fact that Kadirov wants to take over the control of the whole region; the fact that there is so much violence as well as the fact that nobody can challenge Kadirov. And I think Moscow is not handling the North Caucasian region in a good way. They can't rely on Kadirov, not only for Chechnya but for the North Caucasus as a whole. Moscow has to change its politics, because Kadirov is not working in a way which respects either the Moscow interest or the interest of the people in North Caucasus.

An interesting aspect is that the government of Azerbaijan positively learned from the Georgian –Russian war that there can't be any military solution of the Nagorno-Karabakh problem. Some people in Azerbaijan were playing with the idea that there could be a military solution. The Georgian-Russian war showed that this is not a viable option. Maybe this is the one positive effect that this war had. So, I am looking very much forward to hear about what did happen in the last meeting of the Armenian and Azerbaijan presidents concerning the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict. What is difficult: there has to be a compromise as a solution and for this you have to prepare the people in both countries. Until now you do not see any preparedness for a compromise.

• In whose interest is it to create such tension in the North Caucasus, is it the interest of someone particular?

I cannot say that nobody has interests. Perhaps, Kadirov and his team. Because he gets a lot of money from Moscow and he can pay the people to be loyal to him. But everybody, even Kadirov, knows, or should know, that it is not good for the future of Chechnya. A positive development is that Kadirov seems to have been talking to Zakayev. But the fundamentalist part of the dissidents immediately excluded him from the opposition movement. For Moscow this is also dangerous. The Russian authority and Russian legitimacy is undermined by violence, which comes out of Kadirov's way of governing the region. I don't think it is in anybody's real interest. It should be in Moscow's interest to start a reconciliation process where different republics keep their self –determination within the Russian federation but where they get more liberty, freedom and can overcome the violence. But it is very difficult. I

would like to go there with Swiss politician and expert Dick Marty. It's our duty to try to solve this situation. There have been so many mistakes made and we should try to find a compromise! Not with the violent fundamentalist, who have no future, but with all the others.

• Do you think that it is possible that the terrorist attacks that frequently occur in the North could also spill over to the South?

I think that is a good thing now that Turkey and Armenia come together and that they want to create a good neighborhood. In a condition where you have understanding of the good neighborhood relations and especially if Armenia and Azerbaijan can solve the Nagorno -Karabakh issue with the help of maybe Russia and Turkey, then I think the terrorism can't spill over to the South Caucasus. Of course Dagestan is full of terrorists and they could move from Dagestan to Azerbaijan. But I think it can't be when Armenia and Azerbaijan solve the Nagorno –Karabakh conflict with a mutual compromise and especially if they both respect human rights and become more democratic. Democracy and human rights is a good protection against terrorism. So, I do not think there is real danger that terrorism will spill over from North to South.

• Do you believe that a normalization of Turkish and Armenian relations will contribute to the solving of the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict? And is it possible for Armenia to forget the so called genocide issue when normalizing their relations with Turkey?

Absolutely, normalization of relations will assist in solving the Nagorno –Karabakh issue peacefully. This is a clear positive development. It cannot be in the interest of Azeri people that Armenia and Turkey do not have good relations. When they have good relations it can contribute to finding a compromise about Nagorno-Karabakh. Now Turkey is positively and constructively involved in the normalization of relations. After long discussions Armenia and Turkey agreed to create an international historical commission. I think it will give people a chance to do their work and to get any result in this matter. It is so positive that Turkey after two years of negotiation accepted such an international commission. And you can see a similar progress in Turkish-Kurdish relations. I am quite optimistic that the Turkish government is on a positive track. The history commission will also tackle the genocide issue in a way which serves to establish historical truths and help the Armenians to reconcile and the Turks to face their historical responsibility.

• Can you see that there is a progress or positive track in the resolution of the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict?

Of course I see it. But the most positive progress is that both sides have learned from Georgia that military resolution of the conflict is no option. Perhaps there are different opinions inside

of Armenia. There are different interests. People in Nagorno Karabakh may be more radical. But Armenia knows that they are too weak to win militarily. They are also forced to make a political compromise. From the Åland example you can learn that political compromise means that noone gets nothing, everyone gets something, but nobody gets what he really wants most. Of course people did not accept the Åland solution at the time. That is why people have to be prepared. They have to make use of the example of Sweden and Finland. It is so interesting that Sweden and Finland accepted the compromise before knowing what the League of Nations was going to give them. The League of the Nations solved the Åland case with a compromise. Nobody was happy but everybody got something. This solution was not accepted by the majority of the concerned people at the time but today everybody is happy with the solution.

- **How you see the future of Nagorno-Karabakh?**

This depends of course on the way the compromise will be designed. I cannot say this myself in advance. What is certain is, that it will not be easy to digest the compromise for all people involved; reconciliation between peoples opposed to each other for a long time will always be difficult and hard, but there is no alternative to this process and we can support it with economic help which shows to the people that they have a future, if they are open to the reintegration and reconciliation process.

Kamala Ramazanova, October 2009

In 2003 Andreas Gross wrote a report on positive experiences of autonomous regions as a source of inspiration for conflict resolution in Europe. He used some examples in the report and one of them is the case of the Åland Islands.

You can see the full report from this link

<http://assembly.coe.int//main.asp?link=http://assembly.coe.int/documents/WorkingDocs/doc03/EDOC9824.htm>