

Russia and Its Nasty Neighborhood Brawls

By SERGE SCHMEMMANN

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The Big Kid on the Block

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By SERGE SCHMEMMANN

MOSCOW

EVERY time the smoke of a new ethnic brush fire rises on the horizon, anxious glances turn to Russia. The reflex is as involuntary as it is natural: If the flame were ever to spread through the unstable tangle of the collapsed empire, the inferno would be awesome.

So far, the conflagrations along the southern fringe of the old empire — in Moldova, the Caucasus, Central Asia — have been largely contained. But every new flare-up raises new threats and revives old ones. So it was when gunplay broke out this month in the Black Sea town of Gagra between Abkhaz separatists and Georgian militiamen.

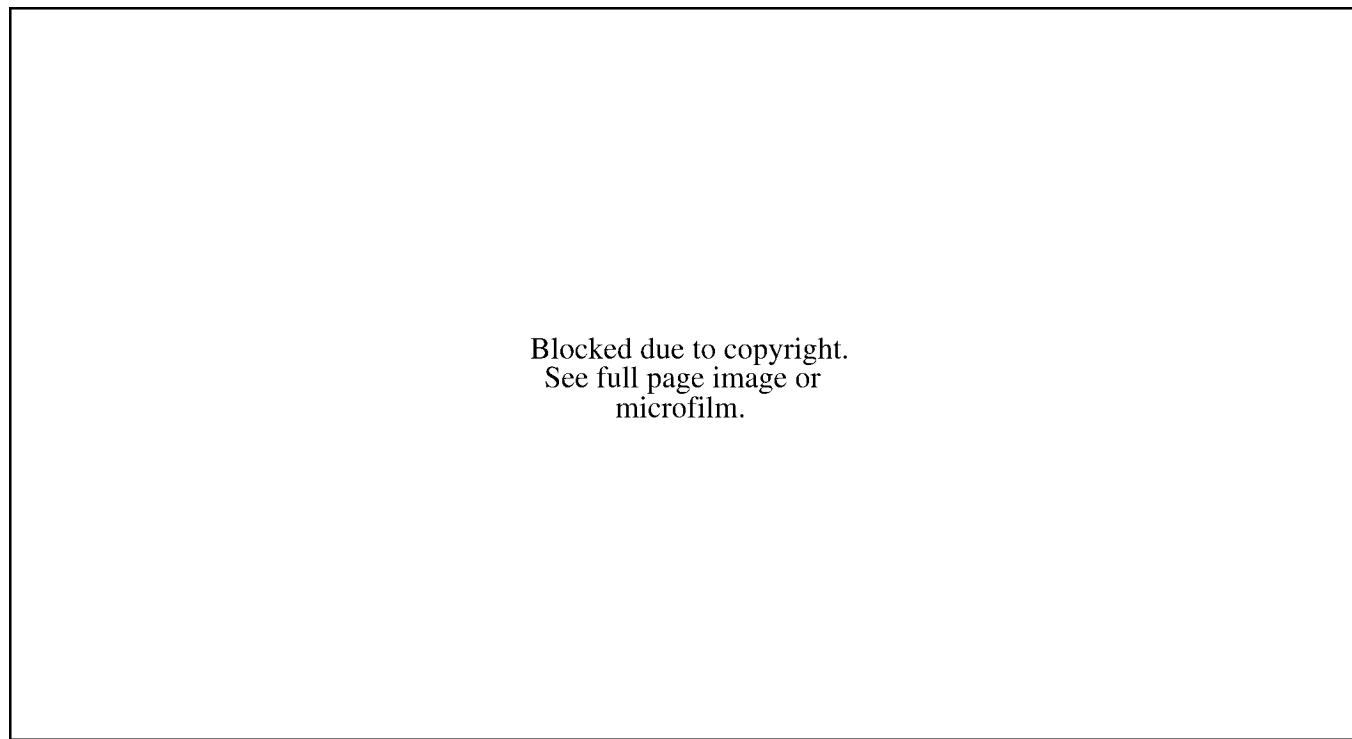
“In principle,” as Russians say when the official version is utterly at variance with reality, this was an internal matter of a sovereign state, and Russia’s only declared interests were to contain the fighting behind the soaring wall of the Caucasus Mountains and to protect Russian citizens and property.

The whiff of gunpowder quickly drew the now-familiar bands of self-styled “Cossacks” and mercenaries, along with Muslim gunmen from a shady “Confederation of Caucasus Mountain Peoples.” As usual, there was no shortage of weapons, from the ubiquitous Kalashnikov rifles to state-of-the-art computerized tanks.

Ominous Words

But then there were the troubling charges by Eduard A. Shevardnadze, the Georgian leader who can hardly be dismissed as a paranoid Russophobe, that uncontrolled Russian generals and politicians were fanning the flames in Abkhazia.

There was the Russian Parliament, brazenly warning Georgia against “intervening” in Abkhazia. There were Russian nationalists and Communist revanchists who welcome any disarray in the hated new order, and who harbor deep resentment against Mr. Shevardnadze as the former Soviet Foreign Minister who “gave away”



Vladimir Sichev/Sipa
A family fleeing to Russia in a bullet-riddled car to escape fighting in the Georgian province of Abkhazia.

the Soviet empire.

There was the Russian Defense Minister, Pavel Grachev, warning Georgia against trying to seize former Soviet arms in Georgia. There were the 86,000 Russian residents of Abkhazia, roughly as many as the rebellious Abkhaz themselves.

And there was President Boris N. Yeltsin, declaring that Russia had the right to take “any measures” to

protect its nationals and ordering Russian troops to secure the railroad through Abkhazia, even while calling the two sides for a peace conference.

Russia, in short, was very much at the heart of the matter, whether as neighborhood bully or policeman, meddler or peacemaker. And it was a measure of

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The World

Russia Looks With Interest At the Brawls On Its Borders

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Russia's continuing stake in its former empire that nobody demanded that the Russian Army withdraw from the Caucasus.

On the contrary, an Armenian official called the Russian forces a "stabilizing factor" in the region, and even a cursory survey of the quiltwork of warring tribes and half-hatched states grappling under the ominous shadows of Turkey and Iran showed why there was no great clamor for Russian's exit.

The role of Russia differs from conflict to conflict, of course. The same Russians who are a "stabilizing factor" in the Caucasus are reviled as an "occupation force" in the Baltics or Moldova. Russians who settled in Uzbekistan a decade ago are perceived differently by the local population than Russians who have lived in the Ukraine for generations. And Russian border troops policing the Afghan border with Tajikistan play a far different role than Russian soldiers siding with local Russians against Moldova.

But there are elements in common that make every new clash a potential source of broader violence. Probably the greatest are the 25 million Russians living in the former republics.

Part of the danger is domestic. For Mr. Yeltsin's foes, the outlying Russians are an easily exploitable weapon to undermine the new order and to goad Moscow into interfering in the new states. The motive of die-hard Communists and Russian nationalists is simple: they pine for empire. But even moderate conservatives like Vice President Aleksandr Rutskoi have found in the Russian diaspora a handy political tool.

An Exodus of Russians

The opposition has actively fanned the flames of the Moldovan conflict, and has made much to-do over the 400,000 Russians who have fled to Russia from other republics, feeding popular resentments and prejudices. The exodus is likely to get far larger, even given ideal ethnic relations, simply because the sorts of jobs Russians did will begin to dwindle in the economic crisis. More than 2 million Russians are expected to migrate from Central Asia alone in coming years.

The Russians who stay in the republics are also potential trouble as they resist losing the accustomed role of Big Brother. The Russians who fought to form their own republic in Moldova are the most dramatic example, but even where there have been no clashes, Russians have often resisted the rise of national leaders by backing old and more familiar Communists.

To appreciate the strength of these sentiments, it is enough to recall that the national anthem of Uzbekistan used to be "Welcome, Russian Brother." Even moderate Russians become indignant when Estonians or Latvians label Russian soldiers "occupiers."

Such chauvinism finds ample support in the military. Though Mr. Yeltsin has taken most of the army under his wing, he has yet to establish firm political control over it. Backed by the military-industrial complex, senior officers have tried to maintain a unified imperial army, which some call a "13th republic."

Getting Edgy Around Russia's Edges

Russian minorities often figure in conflicts just across the border. Percentages of ethnic Russians are based on a 1989 census, the latest available.

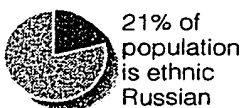
MOLDOVA

Hundreds of people were killed in fighting this year as Slavs making up the majority in the Trans-Dniester region, backed by Russian troops, rebelled over fears that Moldova's Romanian majority would unite with Romania. (The former Soviet republic was formed from territory largely annexed by Stalin from Romania during World War II). Five months of fighting subsided in August as Russia and Moldova agreed to a joint peace force.



UKRAINE

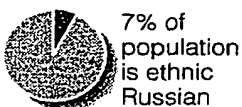
After Russia and Ukraine exchanged threats over ownership of the Black Sea naval fleet in the spring, they agreed in August to postpone carving it up until 1995. Meanwhile, Ukraine has protested Russia's takeover of a naval school in Sevastopol and accused Moscow of dispatching warships toward troubled Abkhazia in western Georgia.



Crimea: The peninsula, transferred from Russia to Ukraine by Nikita S. Khrushchev in 1954, has an ethnic Russian majority. Its Parliament declared independence in May and proposed to confirm the decision through a referendum. But the vote was postponed indefinitely after Ukraine offered autonomy to defuse tensions.

GEORGIA

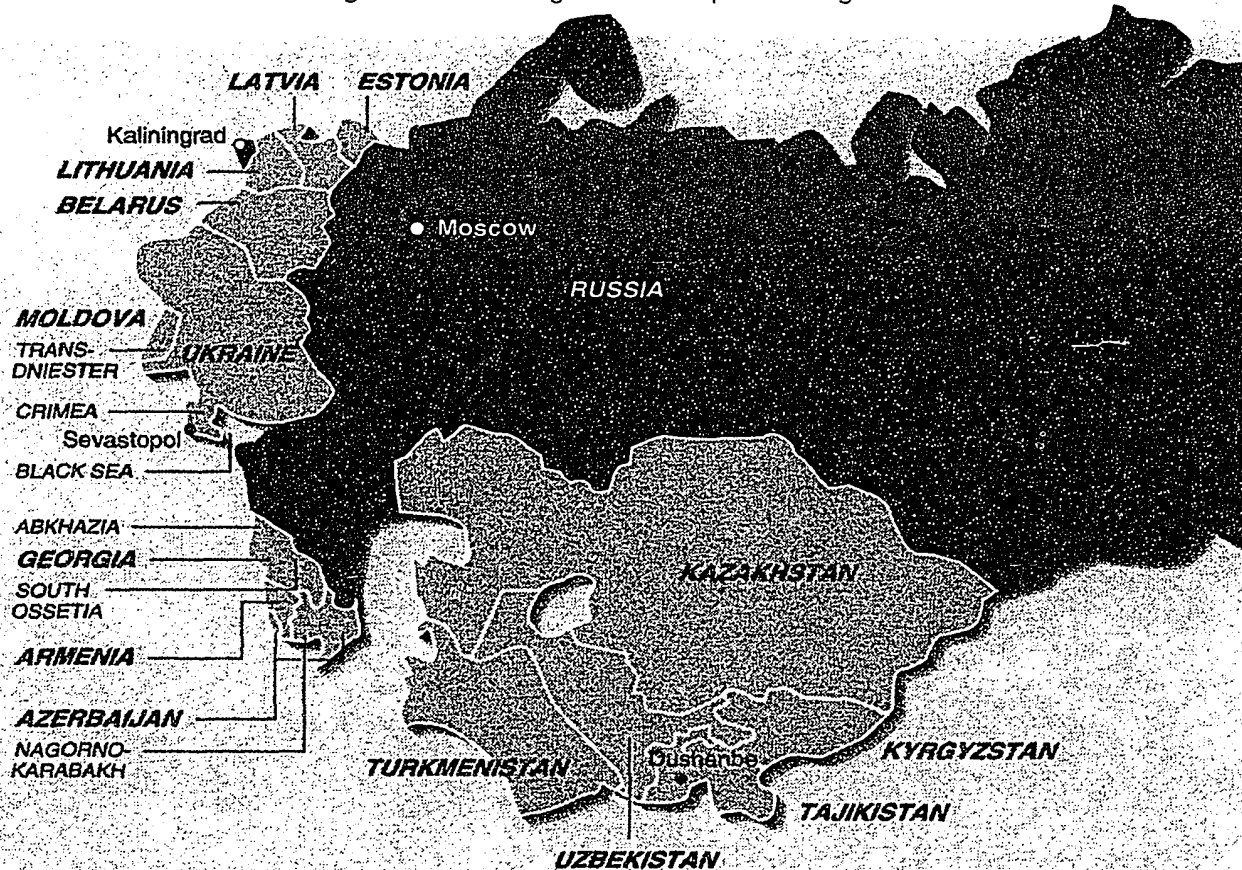
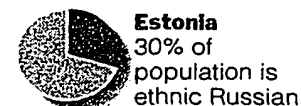
Abkhazia: The Abkhazians, an ethnically and linguistically distinct group making up 18 percent of the population of this autonomous region, are fighting to secede from Georgia. Caucasian militias on the Russian side of the border support the Abkhazians. Georgia accuses Russia of collaborating with the separatists and demands that Russian troop units leave Georgia.



South Ossetia: Stalin divided the mostly Muslim Ossetians between two republics, Georgia and Russia. The 162,000 Ossetians in Georgia seek unification with Northern Ossetia, just over the Russian border, or independence, but are opposed by the Georgians. Scores have been killed in fighting since 1989. A Russian-Georgian peace force was deployed in July under United Nations auspices, and since then the region has been quiet.

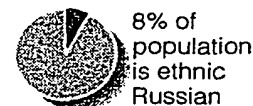
THE BALTICS

Russia has agreed to withdraw the remaining 20,500 troops from Lithuania by the end of August 1993. No similar pledges have been made to accelerate the withdrawal of Russian troops in Estonia and Latvia; Moscow accuses those republics of discrimination against large Russian minorities. Reliable current figures for remaining Russian troops in the region are unavailable.



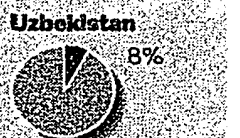
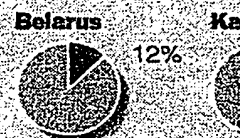
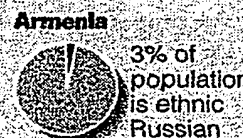
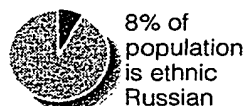
AZERBAIJAN

Christian Armenians claim the Armenian-dominated region of Nagorno-Karabakh but are opposed by Shiite Muslim Azerbaijanis. Hundreds have been killed and thousands forced to flee in recent years. Although Soviet forces supported Azerbaijan early on, and former Soviet arms have fueled the conflict, the fighting does not threaten Russia's vital interests, so Moscow is unlikely to get involved.



TAJIKISTAN

The Government of acting President Akbarsho Iskandarov is fighting forces loyal to the former Communist President, Rakhmon Nabiyev, who was ousted on Sept. 7. The Tajiks, who are ethnically Iranian, have embraced Islam, which was suppressed under Soviet rule. Russian troops are on guard on the Tajik-Afghan border to halt arms smuggling from Afghanistan, and many Russians live in the capital, Dushanbe.



Mr. Shevardnadze has never detailed his charges against Russian generals in Abkhazia. But there is ample evidence that units of the 14th Army participated in the Moldovan conflict, and Defense Minister Grachev has independently declared his readiness to defend threatened "Russian-speakers" in other republics.

The army's imperial behavior is not entirely nostalgia or chauvinism. Of the former republics, only the

Baltics have demanded the exit of all former Soviet troops, and only Ukraine has laid claim to all soldiers on its territory. Other republics have been satisfied to maintain a Russian military presence, both for local stability and for strategic security.

Against this backdrop, Mr. Yeltsin has managed to contain the brush fires and keep Russia and the army in check. The President was instrumental in arranging

cease-fires in South Ossetia and Moldova; he has resisted using force against secessionists in Chechnya; he struck a compromise with Ukraine to share the Black Sea Fleet, and he has blunted the chauvinism of his foes.

But it might be years, if not decades, before the post-Soviet order gains something resembling stability. Until then, every new plume of black smoke on the horizon will trigger alarms to Moscow and beyond.

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