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# Glasnost faces its biggest test

**W**elcome to Lebanon North. That's what I have taken to calling the Soviet Union's increasingly troubled Caucasian republics. On Wednesday, another blow-up occurred there that's straight out of zany Mideast politics.

Nagorno-Karabakh, readers may recall, is an Armenian ethnic enclave in the Moslem republic of Azerbaijan. Armenians and Azeris are not good neighbors and have been cutting off each other's heads for centuries. Over recent months, both sides have been rioting, striking and causing a devil of a row — not to mention giving Mikhail Gorbachev a Mt. Ararat-sized headache.

On Wednesday, angry Azeris learned that the treacherous Armenians were going to build an aluminum plant smack in the middle of a battlefield where heroic Azeris had won an important, historical victory. Riots broke out in Baku and other towns in Azerbaijan. Three soldiers, who were trying to keep order in the ever-more disorderly Caucasus, were killed.

Next-door, Armenians are furious that Moscow has not handed over Nagorno-Karabakh to their republic and are threatening more violence. There is wild talk in the Caucasus of crusades and jihad (holy war).

As if this fracas was not bad enough, steamed-up Georgians have loudly announced there's no way they will accept Moscow's just-announced plans to take powers away from the republics. Georgians are marvelous fighters, epic drinkers and have wicked tempers. Josef Stalin was a Georgian. They are now mooning the Muscovites and shaking their fists at the neighboring Armenians — who are also old foes of the Georgians.

Unrest is also reported growing among other mountaineers of the rugged, snowcapped Caucasus. I suppose this is what happens when you eat too much yogurt.



## Eric ARGOLIS

By now, Mikhail Gorbachev must be getting a sore neck. One minute he's looking up north at the Baltic whose tiny, but very feisty republics are pretty close to slipping Moscow's leash. Next moment he has to look south to the rioting Caucasus. The Soviet Union's smallest republics are causing the biggest trouble.

Conservatives in the huge Russian republic are watching this nationalist rumpus with mounting impatience and dismay.

"How much more impudence and disorder are we expected to take, Mikhail Sergevitch?" they are asking. Three years ago such things would have been impossible. Gorbachev, to his credit, has been fending off his critics by saying that the drive for autonomy in the Baltic and at least some of the uproar in the Caucasus is good, healthy, red-blooded glasnost and perestroika.

Let our nationalities blow off a century of pent-up steam, says Gorbachev who gets very hot under the collar whenever anyone refers to the Caucasus and Soviet Central Asia as the last great colonial empire of the 19th century. Well, nobody can accuse Gorbachev of the chronic timidity that afflicts so many of our western leaders. He seems ready to risk the coherence of the Soviet state, an amalgam of over 100 small and large nationalities, in order to revitalize society.

Remarkably, when Estonia declared virtual independence from Moscow, the central leadership's response was to urge the Estonians to calm down, think twice and talk things over. In the recent past, the KGB would have dealt swiftly with such "anti-state activity."

But while Moscow temporizes, more pots are boiling. Recently, a sizable underground Ukrainian organization was broken up and arrested by the KGB and Polish security police. Its okay to let a few Baltic people make noise, but when the heartland of the Ukraine starts to simmer, Moscow is not so understanding.

The Polish minority in the western Soviet Union is also growing restive. And, of course, there's the spectre of pan-Turkism that haunts Moslem Central Asia. Hard-liners in Moscow are demanding action. They are probably warning, "If you let Estonians, Latvians and Lithuanians go their own way (in the direction of western Europe), what happens if Hungarians, Czechs or, Marx forbid, the Poles, try the same thing?"

Surely, Moscow can't deny its supposedly independent East European "allies" the same rights as its own national groups? And what might happen if the peppery Armenians get so mad at Moscow and the Azeris that they say to the devil with the USSR and proclaim independence? Can anyone doubt that cries for "Independent Georgia" or "Long Live Islamic Azerbaijan" would not follow?

So it's going to be quite fascinating watching how the adroit Mikhail Gorbachev spins, dodges and weaves through the USSR's ethnic mine fields. If anyone can do it, he can. But the big question is, will ethnic hotheads give him a chance? If they don't, their next caller may be the KGB.