

Common Identity as the Missing Element in the Construction of Regionalism in the South Caucasus

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Abstract

The understanding of the South Caucasus as a region is a relatively disputable concept. Despite their geographic proximity and common historical and cultural background, the three states of the region (Armenia, Azerbaijan and Georgia) do not perceive themselves in the context of a regional “South Caucasian” identity and do not make any attempts to pursue regional solutions to common problems or develop any economic cooperation on a regional, rather than a bilateral level of relations. Although several attempts were made to create integration projects throughout the history of the twentieth century, all of them failed due to the deep-rooted historical enmity, artificial character of the top-down integration and different visions of threat among the states of the region either during the years of independence in 1918-1920, the Soviet period or in the current days. This article will discuss to what extent the lack of common identity between nations became the main reason of the failure of integration in the South Caucasus and whether there is a potential for the establishment of common South Caucasian identity in the near future.

Keywords: South Caucasus, national identity, ethnic conflict, regionalism, integration.

Güney Kafkasya’da Bölgeciliğin Kurulmasında Eksik Unsur Olan Ortak Kimliğin Tahlili

Özet

Güney Kafkasya’nın bir bölge olarak varlığı görece tartışmalı bir konudur. Coğrafi yakınlıklarına ve ortak tarihi ve kültürel geçmişlerine rağmen bölgenin üç ülkesi (Ermenistan, Azerbaycan, Gürcistan) kendilerini bölgesel bir “Güney Kafkasya” kimliğinin parçası olarak görmemekte; ortak sorunlara bölgesel çözüm arayışına girmemekte veya iki taraflı ilişkilere ek olarak bölgesel ekonomik işbirliği geliştirme girişiminde

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bulunmamaktadırlar. 20. yy boyunca birçok entegrasyon projesi yaratma denemeleri olmuşsa da tümü tarihsel kökenli derin husumetler, tepeden inme entegrasyon projelerinin yetersizliği ve bölge devletlerinin 1918-1920 yılları arasındaki bağımsızlık dönemlerinde, Sovyet döneminde veya günümüzdeki farklı tehdit algılamaları nedeniyle başarısız olmuştur. Bu makale Güney Kafkasya'da entegrasyonun başarısızlığının ana nedeni olarak ortak kimlik eksikliğinin ne ölçüde etkili olduğunu ve yakın gelecekte ortak bir Güney Kafkasya kimliğinin kurulma olasılığını tartışmaktadır.

Anahtar Kelimeler: Güney Kafkasya, milli kimlik, etnik çatışma, bölgecilik, entegrasyon.

Introduction

The understanding of the South Caucasus as a region is a relatively disputable concept. Taking into account their historical rivalries, it is hardly possible to even speak of a common regional identity among the independent states of the South Caucasus (Kuchins and Mankoff 3). Despite their geographic proximity and common historical and cultural background, the three states of the region do not perceive themselves in the context of a regional "South Caucasian" identity and do not make any attempts to pursue regional solutions to common problems or develop any economic cooperation on a regional, rather than a bilateral level of relations. While a big number of experts on the South Caucasus see the source of the regional fragmentation in external factors, such as instable neighborhood and the influence of great powers in the region, others claim on the importance of internal factors and the relations between the states in the context of regional cooperation. Both of the approaches have the basis in the theories of international relations: international factors can be explained through the perspective of a realist theory, while the role of democratic development and the rhetoric of "others" in official propaganda can be best interpreted from the position of liberal and critical theories, respectively. Alternatively, constructivist theory gives an explanation on the role of ideas, such as identity, ideology and historical memory in the formation of the foreign policies of regional states. This approach might also give a clue to the solution of the conflicts and regional fragmentation through the change of attitude, the

reemergence of trust between nations and the search for common values, interests and vision of future.

This article will discuss to what extent the lack of common identity between nations became the main reason of the failure of integration in the South Caucasus and whether there is a potential for the establishment of common South Caucasian identity in the near future. In this regard, the first part of the article will be dedicated to the analysis of the South Caucasus as a fragmented region with distinct geographical boundaries and cultural ties but lacking the important element of common identity. The second part of the article will analyze the historical examples of South Caucasian integration that took place during the twentieth century and the lessons that can be taken from these failures. Finally, the third part of the article will discuss the current situation and the growth of cultural and ideational gap between the nations after the rise of interethnic conflicts and the following collapse of the Soviet Union, as well as analyze whether there is a potential for the reemergence of common identity in the near future.

The South Caucasus as a broken region

Situated at the one of the world's key strategic crossroads, the South Caucasus occupies an important place in the international geopolitics. Despite its small size and relatively small population of seventeen million people, the region attracts the world's attention for its advantageous location and rich energy resources, thus becoming an arena of conflict of interests for global rivals. The strategic importance of the region is hard to overestimate, as it is located at the crossroads of the European, post-Soviet and Middle Eastern world connecting Caspian and Black Sea and bordering the regional powers of Turkey and Iran and global power of Russia. Historically torn by the confrontation between the Ottoman, Persian and Russian empires, the region was formed under the influence of different cultures, religions and mentalities, leading to the confrontation between the local nations as well. During the last two hundred years Russian and Soviet influence played a significant role in the region's history by leaving both positive and negative legacy for the South Caucasus in terms of its political, economic and social development as well as relations prevalent between the local states.

Totalitarian methods of control over the society as well as the seeds of future confrontation that were covered under the official ideology of “the friendship of the peoples” during the Soviet times transformed into authoritarian regimes, corruption, lack of business cooperation culture, and most importantly, open interethnic conflicts that keep the region disintegrated, vulnerable and weak. This is the reason why today bilateral relations prevail over regional cooperation and integration both for the local states and international actors involved into the regional politics. At the same time, there are elements that can serve as the basis for the integration and at the final stage the establishment of a security community in the region. These elements include the commonality of “Caucasian” culture, potential complementarity of local economies, as well as some positive examples of the common postcolonial legacy that are still present (although decreasing) in the local societies, such as the traditions of secularism, usage of Russian as a *lingua franca* and others. In other words, there is a big potential for the formation of a common regional identity, but the current situation in the region and the unresolved status of the interethnic conflicts keep the states disintegrated and their national identities hostile.

In the analysis of the necessary components of regionalism the majority of international relations scholars define the geographic element to be basic in defining the concept of a region. Indeed, the territorial proximity and interconnectedness of the states is one of the most important factors in defining the countries’ historical development; on the other hand the distance traditionally played one of the most significant roles in identifying the security threats, as “among the cluster of threats most would be territorially based” (Buzan and Wæver 44). However, geography alone fails to give a full picture in defining the characteristics of the region. As Paul (4) defines it, “a region is a cluster of states that are proximate to each other and are interconnected in spatial, cultural and ideational terms in a significant and distinguishable manner... In other words, people and states in a region ought to perceive themselves as belonging to this entity, although they need some level of physical and cultural proximity to do so.”

Finally, according to Barry Buzan and Wæver (22), a region is a “geographically clustered subsystem of states that is sufficiently distinctive in terms of its internal structure and process to be meaningfully differentiated from a wider international system or society of which it is part.” Both of these definitions imply that there is a lacking element in the regional structure of the South Caucasus.

The South Caucasus has clearly distinctive geographic borders, which separate the region from the rest of the world with the Black Sea in the west, Caspian Sea in the east, Great Caucasus range in the north and Araxes river in the south. Geography was also one of the most significant reasons in differentiating the South Caucasus from the North Caucasus: the Russian word of “*Zakavkazye*”, Ottoman “*Mavera-yi Kafkas*” and British term of “*Transcaucasia*” refer to the territories of modern Azerbaijan, Georgia and Armenia as a separate region while the lack of appropriate roads to connect the mountain range between the North and South Caucasus put a big obstacle to the communication between them in different periods of history. Later, the introduction of administrative borders passing along the mountain range between the republics of North and South during Russian and Soviet times promoted further stratification in the political, historical and cultural developments of the two parts of Big Caucasus. At the same time, for each part of the Caucasus the two seas and mountains make them tightly interconnected. This specific of the region plays a dubious role as although it can make the local states codependent on each other in terms of complementarity of their economies, it also affects the states in a negative way too, as during the Georgian-Russian war in 2008 the blockade of Georgia affected the Armenian and Azerbaijani economies due to the closed mutual border together with a sealed Turkish-Armenian border and extreme dependence on the Georgian route. On the other hand, the potential war in the Nagorno-Karabakh might affect the whole region as it will involve the territories where the regional project of BTC and BTE pass. In this regard, the South Caucasus can be called a “negative” region, as there is some interdependence between the states, however this interdependence is caused by enmity and does not lead to cooperation between nations (German, Regional Cooperation 25).

Another aspect of geography is related to the population inhabiting the region and in this regard it is important to delineate the outer borders of the region according to the political, but not ethnic borders of the states as the territories inhabited by the ethnic Georgians, Armenians and Azerbaijanis in Dagestan, Turkey or Iran might misleadingly expand the geography of the South Caucasus to the north, west and south (German, Good Neighbors 138). Finally, the idea of considering the South Caucasus as the part of the Middle East was first discussed in the West in the “Soviet Middle East: a Model for Development” book by Alec Nove and J.A. Newth’s and later was expanded by several other scholars: according to them, the political connections between the regional states and the Middle East have been restored since the 1990s, while their historical and cultural ties are undeniably strong with the big ethnic minority of Azerbaijanis living in Iran and Armenians living in Turkey, Iran, Syria and Lebanon (Bishku 90-91). However, one should not forget that the Russian and in particular the Soviet period of history with its closed borders and strict methods of secularization and persecution of any type of nationalism had a significant impact on the social and cultural structure of the region. As Thomas de Waal (Broken Region 1711) puts it, “the post-Soviet Azerbaijanis in their secularized way of life have more in common with the post-Soviet Armenians than they do with either Turks or even Iranian Azerbaijanis”. In this regard, despite the cultural and religious differences between the Muslim Azerbaijanis and the Georgians and Armenians belonging to different branches of Christianity, the influence of the center in Petersburg (during tsarist) and Moscow (during Soviet period) brought certain standardization in the social structure and created a common mentality of the local people. Notably, the Russian language played a significant role there serving as the *lingua franca* of the region (Smith 3). Today, one can see both positive and negative commonalities uniting the region as well the most of the post-Soviet countries: in this regard, one can add secularism and bilingualism of the people at the social level and authoritarian regime, corruption and human rights violations at the state level.

Still the third, ideational element of the region is lacking, as it is hard to imagine the existence of any common identity for the

republics of the South Caucasus, two of which are involved into an interethnic conflict. Despite the similarity in culture and common legacy of the past, today the region is divided politically with each country having different security priorities without any interest in regional integration and de-securitization. The current situation serves as the basis to the claims of the authors who do not consider the South Caucasus as one region that might have any potential to be united in the framework of a common identity. According to them, there is nothing more than postcolonial legacy that unites the three states. Indeed, the countries of the region historically developed under the influence of Persian, Ottoman and Russian empires, but followed different interests and searched for different allies. Particularly, in the last two hundred years the Russian empire, and in the following years the Soviet Union played a crucial role in the formation of the three nations and their national identities. However both in the times of the Empire and in the Soviet times the center was trying to integrate the regional states not in the framework of the region but in the framework of the empire; additionally, it used artificial top-down methods, without any bottom-up initiatives. The result was counterproductive: as Mkrtychyan and Petrosyan (67) note, although the Soviet ideology formed a degree of “artificial homogeneity and a superficial Caucasian identity”, it could not remove the ethnic differences between nations. During the years of independence in 1918-1920/1921 and later, since the period of *glasnost* and restoration of independence in the late-1980s-early 1990s the ethnic differences and historical enmity expressed itself in the most tragic way.

At the same time, despite the difference in language and religion, there is cultural proximity uniting the three republics of the region, as the three peoples were historically separated from the rest of the world and developed in their own way. Broers (153) underlines the cultural similarity between nations, but sees it as insufficient for the construction of a common identity in the near future. The Caucasian traditions and the specifics of the culture, such as local hospitality and family relations, music and cuisine are especially evident to visitors and foreign experts. Ironically, many of the local specialists agree that the region exists only in the eyes of the foreigners

witnessing similarities that remain unattended by the three nations themselves (Asatiani). One of the reasons lying behind this paradox is the lack of any positive experience from integration, either during the pre-Soviet or the Soviet period, so that the cultural closeness of the nations never matured into a common Caucasian identity (Mkrtchyan and Petrosyan 63). At the same time, the analysis and understanding of the mistakes made during this experience can help prevent them in the future and serve as a starting point for the reevaluation of the national self-image in the context of a common regional identity.

The history of integration initiatives and the construction of common identity

Although there were several periods in history when the South Caucasus was under the control of one system of governance (including its occupation by the Ottoman and Persian Empires), it would be correct to discuss the history of regional integration from the period of Russian occupation that coincided in timing with the process of nation building that started in the early 19th century. Indeed, it was the Russian Empire that had most success in creating a unified region in the South Caucasus. During this period, the region came together both in its administrative unity and in other ways such as the usage of Russian as a common language, development of transport networks and standardization of social structure of the region (Smith 3). With the Bolshevik revolution of 1917 and the involvement of the region into the First World War the leaders of the three nations realized the necessity of the creation of a united political and military front in order to resist the hostile outside forces. In this regard, the Transcaucasian Federation was created in April 1918 and was the only serious initiative at integration that came from within the region (Smith 3). After lasting for only a month, it collapsed because of the ethnic conflicts within the South Caucasus, nationalistic policy of the ruling elites and their orientation to the cooperation with international actors rather than with each other. In the time when the World War had not yet ended it was a premature project as for the region “faced with predatory neighboring big powers, a small power needed the support not of other small powers, but of another big power”(Smith 4). Additionally, the process of nation building was not finished in the three states of the South

Caucasus and the rise of nationalism caused a series of interethnic wars (Armenian-Georgian war of 1918, Armenian-Azerbaijani war of 1918-1920, Armenian-Turkish war of 1920), which facilitated the invasion of the Red Army in the region with the following establishment of the national socialist republics in 1920-1921.

The next attempt of integration, the Transcaucasian Soviet Federal Socialist Republic (TSFSR) of 1922-1936 remained rather an artificial unit created by the center in order to prevent the region's disintegration in the first years after the establishment of the Soviet government taking into account the region's isolation from Russia as well as the territorial disputes and the high level of violence between the local nations. In this regard, TSFSR was functioning only as an "interim mechanism ensuring more efficient governance by the center of a turbulent region" (Ismailov 6). At the same time, the artificial character and dependence of the system on particular personalities made it gradually disappear with the appointment of its main supporter Sergo Orjonikidze to Moscow and the following rise of influence of its opponent Lavrenti Beria who quietly abolished the TSFSR in 1936. After the dissolution of TSFSR the republic leaders lost any kind of formal institutions where they could coordinate their regional policy; instead the system of hub-and-spoke relations was developed, where the local elites were maintaining closer ties with Moscow rather than with their neighbors and it turned into a competitive rivalry, which became especially obvious after Stalin's death.

While the Soviet propaganda was promoting the ideology of the "friendship of the peoples", the South Caucasian nations and their leaders had far from close and friendly relations with each other. One of the most notable clashes at the leadership level happened between the first secretary of the Communist Party of Armenia Karen Demirchian and his Azerbaijani counterpart Heydar Aliyev in the 1970s, when Aliyev lobbied for the construction of a federal highway across the Armenian province Meghri to the Azerbaijani exclave of Nakhchivan and Demirchian blocked the project despite the obvious benefits it could bring to both republics (De Waal, Black Garden 135). One of the reasons behind this rivalry laid in little regional economic cooperation due to the absurdity of central planning, when the

government-controlled factories were linked to the factories located far away from the region in order to keep the economy of all the Soviet republics interdependent.

Another factor was the ethnic animosity that was to some extent caused by the lack of legal system that could guarantee the rights of national minorities in the Soviet Union and the South Caucasus in particular. The strategies of assimilation, deportation and forceful movement of population within the national borders took place in each of the three republics. The policy of forceful movement of the people changed the ethnic diversity of Tbilisi: while in 1921 the percentage of Armenians living in the city was as many as the percentage of Georgians, by 1991 it was an overwhelmingly Georgian city. In Azerbaijan, the policy of assimilation led to the decline of Armenian population to 1% in Nakchivan. Meanwhile, the mass deportations of Azerbaijanis from Armenia several times throughout the 20th century made this country the most homogeneous republic of the Soviet Union: while according to the Russian census of 1897, 43% of Erivan's population was Armenian and 42% was Azerbaijani (or the so-called "Caucasian Tatars"), by 1989 the Azerbaijanis made up only 0,1% of Yerevan's population (First General Census). Notably, the biggest deportation of the Azerbaijanis took place after the Armenian government pushed through the adoption of a special decree of the Council of Ministers of the USSR on the "resettlement of collective farmers and other members of the Azerbaijani population" from Armenia to the lowlands districts of Azerbaijan. The decree was adopted in 1947, on the rise of Stalin's plan to initiate the war against Turkey, however as the archive documents show, the appeal to resettle the Azerbaijanis came from the Armenian leadership (Shafiyev 182). In the following years the Armenians claimed for the unification of Nagorno-Karabakh with Armenia several times during the Soviet times by appealing directly to Moscow and refusing to deal any negotiations with Baku. When in 1945 the first secretary of the Armenian Communist Party Grigory Arutyunov addressed a letter to Stalin requesting the transfer of the Nagorno-Karabakh Autonomous Oblast (district) to Armenia, the letter was forwarded from Moscow to Arutyunov's Azerbaijani counterpart Mir-Jafar Bagirov with the request to respond to this

proposal. Bagirov rebuffed the Armenian territorial claims and put forward a counter-argument for transferring regions of Armenia, Georgia and Dagestan populated predominantly by the Azerbaijanis to Azerbaijani SSR. Bagirov's response showed that "the territorial changes could open a Pandora's box of redrawing borders among Soviet ethnic groups" (Shafiyev 183), so the Soviet leadership ignored the issue until the rise of national movement made Moscow's interference inevitable in the late 1980s.

Meanwhile, the ideology of the center was constructing a common Soviet identity in the whole USSR with the elements of common culture and lifestyle that was later described in the Western literature as the identity of a "*homo Sovieticus*". At a regional level, Moscow was promoting the image of friendship between the Caucasians, and the terms such as "brotherly Georgians / Azerbaijanis / Armenians" were necessarily to be used in the daily language. Literature and popular culture played their own role in highlighting the link between the three nations. The mutual visits and concerts in the region were strongly supported by the Soviet leadership (Asatiani). At the same time, the building of a regional friendship was not only promoted by the leadership, but also had its roots in the popular support of the ordinary people. The similarity of culture and music preferences made the Azerbaijani singers extremely popular in Armenia (as, for example, Zeynab Khanlarova, a popular music singer of Azerbaijan who was awarded the title of "People's Artist of Armenia" in the 1970s, while her songs are being listened in modern Armenia despite the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict), and vice versa (as the songs of Boris "Boka" Davidyan, the Baku Armenian singer of *blatnyak* music, became an inseparable part of restaurant and wedding music in the whole Caucasus, including Azerbaijan) (Leupold). Also, despite the negative cases of plagiarism and "musical" disputes, Azerbaijani-Armenian musical traditions have a history of creative unions of Armenian and Azerbaijani musicians that were famous all over the Soviet Union. One example is the cooperation of Armenian composer Andrey Babayev and Azerbaijani singer Rashid Behbudov, both from Karabakh; another is the Arno Babajanyan-Muslim Magomayev creative tandem that was

considered to be a "golden standard in the entire post-Soviet space" (Babayan).

Still, the Soviet and South Caucasian commonality had to be swept away by the rising national identity soon after the softening in Moscow's national policy during the "Khrushchev thaw" of the 1960s. This process was inevitable as the occupation of the South Caucasian states in 1920-1921 the Soviets also interrupted the natural maturing and transformation of nationalism freezing its discourse at a given level of development (Suleymanov 11). The softening of the center's policy led to the restoration of the national traditions that were forbidden before leading to the solidification of the national identity. The opening of the Tsitsernakaberd Memorial Complex dedicated to the victims of the 1915 events in Yerevan in 1967, the first since the occupation by the Soviets public celebration of Novruz holiday in Azerbaijan the same year, as well as the liberalization of the national policy of the Soviets with the restoration of national traditions and culture, more liberal position on the coverage of national history and heroes in the local media, movies, literature and music – all of this contributed to the formation of cultural nationalism under the Soviets in the late 1960s-mid 1980s.

At the same time the model of ethnic federalism that was practiced in the Soviet Union led to the development of ethnic institutions that together with the policy of cultural nationalism created the basis for the rise of nationalist movements in the Soviet periphery (Shcherbak 867). The Soviet identity was swept away by the national identities of union republics. The process was catalyzed with the *glasnost* policy of the late 1980s, which revealed the truths on the crimes committed by the former leaders and discredited the Soviet government in the eyes of the citizens. For the South Caucasus the rise of nationalism had the most violent and devastating consequences, as the growing claims over Nagorno-Karabakh led to the rise of confrontation between two nations and caused the destabilization of the whole region; moreover the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict was one of the factors that instigated nationalistic movements in other parts of the empire and as the result caused the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991.

It is believed that the seeds of the conflicts were left by the legacy of the Russian and Soviet empires. The center applied a questionable demarcation creating potential seeds of conflicts on each of the intra-regional border leaving Azerbaijani and Armenian population in the districts of Kartli and Javakheti respectively in Georgia, Azerbaijanis in Zangezur district of Armenia, Georgian monastery of David Gareji in Azerbaijan, and Nagorno-Karabakh with the Armenian population in Azerbaijan. Moreover, with the creation of autonomous republics in Abkhazia, South Ossetia and Nagorno-Karabakh that could appeal directly to Moscow above and beyond Tbilisi or Baku the Soviet government found a temporary measure to keep the region under control without solving the contradictions between the nations and creating an ambiguous status for the national minorities in the region. At the same time, in the retrospective analysis of the region's interethnic conflicts, one can see that they did not emerge in the Soviet times, as the first clashes between Armenians and Azerbaijanis started in 1890-1910s and reached its peak during the 1918-1920 war; similarly the Georgian-Ossetian and Georgian-Abkhazian conflicts first emerged in 1918-1920 during the years of the first independence of the Caucasian states. The decision of the Soviet government to keep protesting districts as autonomous republics under the Azerbaijani and Georgian control can be interpreted two-sidedly: on the one hand, it can be described through the prism of "divide and rule" policy as it did not solve the territorial dispute but left the seeds of confrontation that re-emerged into open ethnic conflicts in the late 1980s (Cornell, Small nations 28). On the other hand, the decision of the Soviet government could be motivated with economic reasons as in terms of infrastructure and communications Nagorno-Karabakh was more connected to the surrounding Azerbaijani towns, than to Armenia, and South Ossetia could benefit more from staying a part of the more developed Georgian economy.¹

¹ In case of Abkhazia, the advantageous location of the region could provide it with economic independence; however, although Abkhazia was granted the status of a Soviet Socialist Republic "united with the Soviet Socialist Republic of Georgia on the basis of a special union treaty" according to the 1925 Constitution, after the intervention of powerful

At the same time, the origins of the conflicts lie in the establishment of ethno-centric autonomies in the multiethnic states such as Georgia and Azerbaijan where the autonomies turned into over-emphasized focal points of identity politics and the whole ethno-territorial administrative system created a wide range of opportunities for the “ethnic entrepreneurship” (Suleymanov 12). Additionally, despite the official policy of condemning nationalism, the Soviet system was putting quotas on the ethnic representations in employment and education; for that reason since 1974 information on nationality was compulsory to be filled in the 5th article of the Soviet passport. These issues together with the ethnic connotation of the word “nation” in Russian language created the perception of a nation-state as the one based on the ethnic rather than civic notion, which in its turn led to the rise of nationalistic governments with low level of tolerance and no protection of national minorities in the first years of independence.

After the decades of lost national identity, the events of the late 1980s-early 1990s became an inevitable wave and “a necessary “outlet” for suppressed nationalist sentiments” (Suleymanov 15). In the multiethnic states such as Georgia and Azerbaijan the nationalistic rhetoric of Zviad Gamsakhurdia, the radically nationalistic leader of the Society of Saint Ilia the Righteous, and the nationalist party of Popular Front with its leader Abulfaz Elchibey were too divisive and destructive for the local societies, causing mass emigration of the Russian-speaking population in Baku and the rise of separatist movements in Georgia’s minority regions in the late 1980s. In Armenia, the popularity of the “Karabakh Committee” and the claim for the so-called *miatsum* (the Armenian term for the unification of Karabakh with Armenia) caused the rise of ethnic hatred leading to the deportation of the last Azerbaijanis from Armenia. These actions had a “domino effect” as the refugees from Armenia instigated similar actions in Azerbaijan and as the result by the end of 1990 two main national minorities of Azerbaijan and Armenia were almost totally evicted from their homes.

Georgians like Stalin and Beria in the 1930s, Abkhazia was forced under Georgian rule in 1931 (Cornell, *Autonomy and Conflict* 175).

Soon after the collapse of the Soviet Union, at the peak of nationalistic sentiments in the local societies, the communist regimes were replaced with popular nationalist parties in all of the South Caucasian republics. In Armenia, the “Karabakh Committee” grew into a dominant political force with the election of the leader of All Armenian National Movement, Levon Ter-Petrosyan in 1991; the radical nationalist Zviad Gamsakhurdia won the elections in Georgia the same year; and in Azerbaijan, the nationalists of the Popular Front became the ruling party with the election of Abulfaz Elchibey in 1992. Their nationalistic regimes did not stay long as the understanding of the devastating effect of ethnocentrism consolidated the local political forces of Azerbaijan and Georgia around former Deputy Chairman of the Council of Ministers of the USSR Heydar Aliyev, and former Minister of Foreign Affairs of the USSR Eduard Shevardnadze, both experienced politicians that could conciliate the confronting powers within societies and lead more balanced and well-calculated foreign policy. In the following decade their presidency established a basis for a strong bilateral partnership with the cooperation in GUAM as well as bold initiatives with the attraction of big foreign investments that were implemented under next presidents Aliyev Jr. and Saakashvili. As for the Armenian leadership, although Ter-Petrosyan stayed in power until 1998, his efforts to build pragmatic relations with Turkey and search for a compromise with Azerbaijan led to his resignation and the rise of the former leader of the Karabakh separatists Robert Kocharyan. The 1999 assassination of leading opponents to power left no alternative to Kocharyan regime and defined the structure of the Azerbaijani-Armenian relations for the next twenty years.

Today South Caucasus is a broken region with shallow network ties and weak regional identities. Zero-sum thinking is prevailing in the society and the state leadership, most acutely obvious in the relations between Azerbaijan and Armenia, where the sides are not ready to any kind of compromise despite the problems this intransigence causes for their own country (De Waal, *The Caucasus*). The position of Georgia keeping friendly relations both with Azerbaijan and Armenia might be an exception, but as it does not solve the contradictions lying in the basis of this disintegration

process, it also fails to promise a stable regional cooperation in the long-term perspective. As for the relations of Georgia either with Azerbaijan, or with Armenia, the absence of any open conflict did not lead to stable integration, although the energy and infrastructure projects implemented in the 2000s were crucially important both for Azerbaijan and Georgia. In terms of security each of the states is seeking for the alliances with the international actors, whose political interests in the region do not always overlap. Because of the different perception of threat and lack of vital challenges that could have united the three states the region is destined to stay disintegrated.

At the same time, despite the conflicts tearing apart the region, the idea of building a “Caucasian Home” was raised several times at the state level, mostly among the leaders of Georgia. The majority of the projects were suggested in the 1990s, most of them implied the creation of a common platform together with the nations of the North Caucasus. One of the first ideas of forming the “Caucasian Home” came from Zviad Gamsakhurdia jointly with the first President of Chechnya Dzhokhar Dudayev; as the project was initiated in the times of the rising secessionist movement in the North Caucasus, it had an anti-Russian orientation, thus it was rejected by Russia’s main allies in the region, namely Armenians and Ossetians. In 1992 “Confederation of the Caucasian Peoples” was suggested with the participation of Georgia, Azerbaijan and a number of movements in the North Caucasus. Eduard Shevardnadze and the President of Chechnya Aslan Maskhadov discussed the establishing of Organization for Security and Cooperation of the Caucasus with the foundation of a united Caucasian Parliament. Finally, in 1996 the presidents of Georgia and Azerbaijan signed the Tbilisi Accord that implied the creation of the “Caucasian Home” within the borders of the South Caucasus.

All of those initiatives were declarative in their character and could not overcome the main obstacle to the integration, namely the interethnic conflicts of the region (Mkrtchyan and Petrosyan 62). It was the reason why in the following years there was no such initiative coming from the Caucasian republics, but there were two projects suggested by the Turkish leaders, namely “Caucasus Stability

Platform” suggested by President Suleyman Demirel in 2000, and Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdogan’s “Caucasus Stability and Cooperation Platform” presented in 2008. Still, in his speech at the General Assembly in UN in 2010, the President of Georgia Mikheil Saakashvili suggested a new approach on the issue of the Caucasian integration, when he announced about “the necessity of promotion a vision for a free, stable and united Caucasus that had to start with projects in energy, education and cultural fields” (Saakashvili). The last two directions implied the projects that would stimulate communications between the countries, change the attitude of the local societies towards each other and as a final goal, overcome the differences that had evolved during the twenty-eight years of independence and be the basis for the formation of a new “Caucasian identity”. Instead, the identities of the local states are still in the process of formation, to a big extent influenced by their historical legacy and visions of threats, and as the time interval between the demise of the Soviet integration project and modern day grows, the cultural and ideational gap between the societies widens as well.

The decrease of postcolonial legacy and the growth of gap between nations

As the national self-image of each of the states in the South Caucasus developed, the influence of the postcolonial (Russian and Soviet) legacy on the political and social life of the region decreased. The clash of national identities became the main reason of the rise of ethnic conflicts in late 1980s; it also affected the intransigence of conflicting sides in the negotiation process that continued in the following years. For Azerbaijan, the unresolved status of Nagorno-Karabakh and the memory of the conflict that erupted several times throughout the last century have a big influence on the Azerbaijan’s modern self-consciousness. According to the 2018 survey held by International Alert, not only in Azerbaijan, but also in Armenia the majority of the populations recognize Nagorno-Karabakh conflict as a part of their national identity (Envisioning Peace). It also became “a source of national unity, given the shared sense of injustice at the Armenians’ occupation of Azerbaijani land” (De Waal, *Why the Long Conflict*). As the result, current hostile relations with Armenia

inevitably distance Azerbaijan from the Caucasian region. In contrast for Armenia, the shadow of the tragic events of 1915 played a significant role in the rise and development of the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict. At the same time, today the Armenian national identity is shaped not only with the memory of “victimhood” of the early 20th century, but also the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict as the symbol of victory of the late 20th century (De Waal, Black Garden 140). At the same time although interethnic conflicts played a substantial role in the ideational disintegration of the region, the collapse of the Soviet Union made this process inevitable due to the totalitarian methods of implementation of the Soviet social projects and the lack of their support among ordinary people. Today, the elements of Soviet culture and Soviet lifestyle, most obviously seen in the usage or understanding of Russian and secularism can still be traced in the modern societies of the South Caucasus, however these elements are fading away both under the influence of time as well as the policy implemented by local governments.

Due to the difference in the national languages of the South Caucasus, the region needs a common language as a tool for communication between the nations. While Russian used to be the *lingua franca* of the region for almost two hundred years since the occupation of the South Caucasus in the early 19th century, still the role of Russian is decreasing in the region. It is caused by several factors, such as political and economic orientation of countries, pro-Russian or anti-Russian sentiments in the local societies, influence of Russian and other national minorities, as well as usage of other (namely Turkish) language as a foreign language. While Turkish is popular in Azerbaijan due to its affinity with Azerbaijani, it is hard to expect the usage of Turkish in the region on the level of Russian language. As for English as a language of international communication, although it is taught in most of the schools of the region either as mandatory or as selective course, it will take decades until it overcomes the legacy and popularity of the Russian language.

The South Caucasus is fragmented in religious context as well, as the three nations of the region belong to different confessions: Shia Islam for Azerbaijan, Orthodox Christianity for Georgia and Armenian Apostolic and Catholic Churches for Armenia. Although there are

examples of regional integrations with the diverse religious identity of its member states (e.g. ASEAN), adherence to different religions and high level of religiosity of societies can pose a threat to the regional peace by leading to the discrimination against religious minorities or instigating interreligious confrontation. In this regard, despite the difference in the confessions three main nations of the South Caucasus belong to, religion does not play a significant factor in the political relations between the countries. The conflicts in the South Caucasus had an ethnic rather than a religious background. At the same time, the growth of religious influence in Armenian and Georgian societies gave rise to several clashes that might cause interethnic conflicts in the future. In Georgia the rise of religiosity in the society and its support by the government led to the rise of discrimination towards the national minorities, namely the Azerbaijanis living in Kvemo-Kartli and the Armenians living in Samtskhe-Javaheti (Guliyev 24). Similar situation can be traced in the clash of the Armenian Apostolic Church and the Orthodox Church of Georgia over Norashen Church in Tbilisi and other Armenian temples of Georgia while Christian-Democratic Movement of Georgia demands the return of several Georgian churches in the north of Armenia (Guliyev 24). In this regard, the involvement of state leadership and protection of the religious and ethnic rights of the national minorities might be a big step forward to the prevention of potential interreligious conflicts in the region. In this regard, the rise of religious clashes does not only impede the construction of a common South Caucasian identity, but also might serve as the reason for future serious confrontations and lead to the deeper fragmentation of the region.

Conclusion

The South Caucasus remains to be a divided region. Despite the geographic proximity, common historical legacy and cultural ties, the states of the region do not perceive themselves as the inhabitants of a common unit and fail to provide the South Caucasus with the third, ideational component of the region. Although several attempts were made to create integration projects, all of them failed due to the deep-rooted historical enmity, artificial character of the top-down integration and different visions of threat among the states of the

region either during the years of independence in 1918-1920, the Soviet period or the current days. Today the ethnic and religious diversity of the region, as well as the postcolonial legacy of incorrectly demarcated borders with big groups of ethnic minorities left behind each of the border show the vulnerability of the region and the necessity of the local governments to coordinate a wise policy on national minorities and consolidate the joint efforts in order to prevent future interethnic conflicts in the region. At the same time the postcolonial legacy of common language, policy of secularism and other measures that were aimed at the establishment of peaceful coexistence and “friendship of the peoples” left the potential that can be used for the future cooperation and construction of common regional identity. In this regard, the understanding of this potential can be the first step in the establishment of the South Caucasus as an integrated and prosperous region.

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