THE "OLD" AND "NEW" PLAYERS IN CAUCASIAN POLITICS

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1. The Region on the Threshold of the 21st Century: Sociopolitical Aspect

In the Soviet Union and earlier, in the Russian Empire, the region was divided into the Northern Caucasus and the Transcaucasus (now the Southern Caucasus); the same applies to its geographic, cultural, ethnoconfessional and spiritual aspects. In the early 1990s, as soon as the three Transcaucasian republics gained independence the old geopolitical division based on Russia's ideas about the region changed radically. Today, geopolitical reality presupposes that this socioeconomic expanse consists of the northern, southern, and central parts.[1]

Traditionally, the region includes only the post-Soviet territories (the Northern Caucasus: the autonomous republics of the RF, and the Transcaucasus—Azerbaijan, Georgia, and Armenia). Today, the northwest of Iran (Eastern and Western Azerbaijan) is regarded as the Southeastern Caucasus and the northeastern areas of Turkey (Kars, Ardahan, Artvin, Igdyr, etc.) form the Southwestern Caucasus. Indeed, during the many centuries before Russia came to the Caucasus these lands belonged to a single socioeconomic and ethnocultural expanse peopled by the Caucasian nations; today they can be described as the Southern Caucasus.

Independence has given the South Caucasian republics a chance to unite into an economic union for the sake of their common and individual advance.

As soon as Azerbaijan, Armenia, and Georgia transformed into the entities of world politics it became obvious that the true interests of the Caucasian nations had little in common with what the "old" players (Russia, Turkey, and Iran) wanted, but were very close to the strategic aims of the "new" geopolitical players in the region (the U.K., France, the U.S., and Germany).

[1] See: E. Ismailov, Z. Kengerli, "The Caucasus in the Globalizing World: A New Integration Model," *Central Asia and the Caucasus*, No. 2 (20), 2003.

The political and legal status of the territories of the Northern and Southern Caucasus has remained virtually the same since the 18th century: they were part of Russia, Turkey, and Iran as autonomous or administrative units; they had no chance of arriving on the political scene as independent entities of the regional powers' policies. After acquiring independence as part of the Central Caucasus, the three Transcaucasian republics inherited ethnopolitical conflicts: this does not allow us to hope for full-scale resurrection and regional integration. Indeed, Azerbaijan and Armenia are locked in a territorial dispute caused by the Nagorny Karabakh conflict (which developed from a domestic Soviet conflict into an interstate confrontation of the post-Soviet period). Armenia is to blame for military actions and for the occupation of part of the Azerbaijanian territory. Today, Armenia is partly isolated because communication between Azerbaijan and Armenia was disrupted, and their common borders turned into a frontline, while Turkey extended support to Azerbaijan, its strategic ally. This makes any efforts to start an integration process in the Central and Southwestern Caucasus futile. Georgia, in turn, inherited three autonomous units from the Soviet Union (two republics and one region) and a patchy ethnic and confessional composition. Under these conditions, what started as a domestic political crisis developed into an open bout of hostilities between Tbilisi and Abkhazia and Tbilisi and South Ossetia, which cost the Georgian authorities their control over the rebel regions. Even though the Ajarian Autonomous Republic formally remained within Georgia, Tbilisi did not gain control over it until May 2004. The republic enjoyed real, and fairly wide, rights and freedom of action. In an effort to exploit so-called "Armenian genocide" in the Ottoman Empire in the early 20th century and because of its aggression against Azerbaijan, Armenia has practically no chance of becoming an equal partner in the Caucasian integration process in the near future.

At the beginning of the 1990s, the Southern Caucasus and its policies were still fairly stable—neither Turkey nor Iran experienced political upheavals. Its domestic and foreign policy aims were inevitably affected by the nearly 30 million-strong Azeri diaspora in Iran, Turkey's ethnic and linguistic closeness to Azerbaijan, as well as a fairly large group of people of North Caucasian, Azerbaijanian and Georgian extraction living in the Southwestern Caucasus (Turkey). Neither the Azeris of Iran, nor of Turkey remained indifferent to the bloodshed in Azerbaijan and Georgia that followed the bringing of Soviet troops to Tbilisi on 9 April, 1989 and to Baku on 20 January, 1990.

Meanwhile, Soviet Russia was building up its military potential in Armenia and encouraging deportation of the Azeris, thus turning Armenia into the only monoethnic state in the Caucasus: it is populated by Armenians and has Russian military bases on its territory.

As part of the Russian Empire, the Northern Caucasus was a troublesome area, but under Soviet power it became much calmer. Tension flared up as soon as the Soviet Union fell apart—the North Caucasian calm turned out to be fragile. Chechnia was the seat of the longest and bloodiest conflict. Started in 1991 under former Soviet general turned president Johar Dudaev, it developed into a full-scale war with no end in sight. Against this bloody background, the conflict between Ossets and Ingushes in the Prigorodniy District of Vladikavkaz (as a result of which the Ingushes were deported from the district) remained unnoticed. Tension mounted in the Krasnodar Territory: the local people objected to massive Armenian migrations from Armenia and Azerbaijan. The revived Cossack movement, which for many centuries has regarded itself as the guard of Russia's borders in the Caucasus, vehemently objected to the Armenian inflow: at first this discontent resulted in fights and quarrels; later, by the early 1990s, it developed into a large-scale phenomenon. The Program of the All-Kuban Cossack Troops drawn up on the eve of the elections to the territorial legislative assembly (October-November 1994) said in part: "The Kuban Area is home to one hundred nationalities who have been living in harmony and peace here. It has been a hospitable home, but guests should not behave like masters in it. We favor strict migration policies—all illegal migrants should be deported to their historical homeland."[2]

[2] A. Osipova, "Krasnodarskiy kray: migratsia, natsionalizm i regionalistskaia ritorika," *Kavkazskie regional'nye issledovania,* No. 1, 1996.

The Assembly of the Mountain Peoples of the Caucasus set up in Sukhumi in 1989 (transformed into the Confederation of the Mountain Peoples of the Caucasus in 1991 and into the Confederation of the Peoples of the Caucasus in 1992) drove the tension even higher. Its founders described unity of all Caucasian peoples as their aim. Created with the active support of Johar Dudaev, it was dominated by Chechens, while its fighters fought along with Abkhazians against Georgia in Nagorny Karabakh and in the Northern Caucasus.

The Ethnoreligious Factor

In different historical periods the Caucasus was dominated by different powers that brought their own religions to the Caucasian mountains: Zoroastrianism, Christianity, and Islam. Persian, Arabian, and Ottoman conquerors, as well as Timur's armies, are responsible for the different Islamic trends now in evidence in the region. It was from Byzantium that the local peoples received Christianity; the Georgian, Abkhazian, and Osset churches were independent organizations, while the Armenian Gregorian Church was not only independent, but also very active. It followed Armenian migrations until in 1441 its center reached the Echmiadzin on the Azeri lands. Later, in the mid-18th century, the Azeri Muslim Erevan Khanate appeared. Echmiadzin, as the center of the Armenian Church, has set up a fairly wide network of churches and controls the large Armenian diaspora; it is actively involved in the everyday life of the Armenians, and in shaping their political and spiritual environment and even foreign policy goals. It should be added that although part of the Armenian Apostolic Church, the Catholicosate of Cilicia is politically independent.

The Armenian Church played an important political role during the early stages of the Karabakh conflict when Catholicos Vazgen I was actively consolidating the nation for the war against Azerbaijan. The 1993 Law on Freedom of Conscience pointed to the importance of Echmiadzin and said in its preamble that the Armenian Apostolic Church enjoyed priority in the republic.[3] Its important role was confirmed by the fact that in the summer of 2001, President Bush personally received Catholicos Garegin II during his American visit—neither Ilia II, head of the Georgian Church, nor Allahshukur Pasha-zadeh, head of the Spiritual Administration of the Muslims of the Caucasus, were given this honor.

As distinct from the Armenian Church, which has been functioning as a supra-state structure, the Georgian Church was mostly involved in social and spiritual, rather than political development and issues of state importance. It has stayed in the background, in the shadow of state and political leaders. This is also true of the post-Soviet period when all nations were seeking their religious identities—a process in which the Georgians were also involved. This can be explained by its relative isolation and the absence of a rich diaspora ready to pour money into religious education. This became obvious during the 2003 parliamentary elections when politicians, rather than the Church, negotiated President Shevardnadze's resignation.

The same can be said about Azerbaijan: Soviet power gradually reduced to naught the role of religion. (Baku, a city with a two-million-strong population inherited two mosques from Soviet times.) Despite the efforts of certain Islamic states, primarily Iran, to fill in the ideological vacuum left by the Soviet Union by "bringing the Azeris back to their religion," this never happened. Today Islam has a certain role to play in the republic's spiritual life, yet it has not developed into a real political force. Russian academic A. Polonskiy has the following to say on this score: "To a certain extent religion has become desacralized. Islam has no important role to play in any of the socially important spheres. It is respected, it is practiced, but is never used for guidance."[4] This opinion is shared by many analysts, even if their assess-

[3] See: G. Avakian, "Armianskaia apostol'skaia tserkov, ee mesto v sovremennom armianskom obshchestve," *Tsentral'naia Azia i Kavkaz,* No. 2 (3), 1999.

[4] S. Polonskiy, "Islam v kontekste obshchestvennoy zhizni sovremennogo Azerbaijana," *Istoria,* No. 28, July 1999, pp. 10-13.

ments of all sorts of religious foundations working in the country differ. From time to time the media accuse them of spying or even terrorist activities. It is commonly believed that they are promoting radical Islamic ideas.

To a certain extent its religion shapes Azerbaijan's foreign policy. Heydar Aliev, founder of the Azerbaijanian statehood who created geopolitical prerequisites of regional integration, never concealed his special treatment of all Muslims. President Ilkham Aliev follows in his father's footsteps. In June 1994, during his visit to Saudi Arabia, the common Islamic foundation of the relations between Azerbaijan and one of the leaders of the Muslim world was stressed by giving the president of Azerbaijan access to Kaaba, the main Islamic sanctuary, open to the faithful once a year during the massive pilgrimage to Mecca.

Still, all analysts agree that religion has no important role to play in the republic's foreign and domestic policies.[5] Our leaders are dedicated to the ideas of democracy and international legal norms, which has been amply confirmed by the republic's participation in the counterterrorist campaigns in Afghanistan and Iraq, whereas the majority of the Muslim states refused to send their troops there.

Without going into details about the role of the Muslim factor in the Southern Caucasus, we can say that the Islamic Republic of Iran turned religion into its state policy, thus giving it an important role to play in the country's social and economic life. While declaring its dedication to the principles of Islamic solidarity, Iran is extending full-scale support to Christian Armenia in its aggression against Muslim Azerbaijan. In Turkey, where religion was separated from the state, supporters of Islamization are fairly strong, which was confirmed by the recent shifts in the power structures. At the same time, in its foreign policy, Ankara has been never guided by confessional affiliation: it is an ally of Israel and the United States.

In different constituencies of the Southern Federal Okrug of the RF, religion plays different roles. In the past four to five years, analysts all over the world concluded that the Northern Caucasus (Chechnia, to be more precise, and from time to time Daghestan) had developed into a center for spreading political, or "state," Islam. Early in the 1990s, Johar Dudaev introduced the Shari'a into his republic. Later events (escalation of the conflict between Ichkeria, as the Chechens prefer to call their republic, and the federal center) demonstrated that neither the Kremlin, nor the North Caucasian republics were prepared to accept the Islamic model for the Northern Caucasus. The world community proved reluctant to do this as well. We can even say that the North Caucasian religious and ethnic patchwork is ill-suited to accepting Islam as the cornerstone of the region's future.

In post-Soviet times there were practically no religious conflicts in the Caucasus, despite the fact that the Muslims are in the majority there. Religion has not developed into a politically dominant factor responsible for the region's future: it helped shape a new identity; those who supported sovereignty and favored foreign influences used Islam to channel foreign policy in the desired direction.

The post-Soviet ethnic-territorial conflicts took place along the line where the Northern and Central Caucasus met—along the state borders of Azerbaijan and Georgia with Russia and along the Azerbaijanian-Armenian border. This pushed Baku and Tbilisi onto the Caucasian political scene; for the same reason, both republics have opted for stage-by-stage integration into the world community of developed democratic states. The shared historical, sociocultural and ethnoconfessional factors that tied together the Caucasus in the past have not completely disappeared: they are still influencing the local developments, despite the fact that the Central Caucasus has already been turned into an independent regional structure. Its historic mission is to create a new political map of this vast region.

Three independent Central Caucasian republics added two new trends to the factors described above: an interest displayed by world capital in developing the Caspian hydrocarbons and the Caucasus' transportation and communication role (from time immemorial the Caucasus has been a stretch of the Great Silk Road connecting Europe and Asia). These trends created the region's new geostrategic identity.

[5] See: T. Swietochowski, "Azerbaijan: The Hidden Face of Islam," *World Policy Journal,* Fall 2002, pp. 69-76.

2. Oil—The Main Confrontation Factor

Oil, or to be more exact the energy factor, is behind the power poles in the Caucasus. It is probably the most important element of the region's geopolitical significance.[6] In the 1990s, local gas and oil reserves invited the attention of not only the EU and the APR, which badly needed energy fuels, but also the Arab states, the resources of which are even larger.

The largest Central Caucasian oil and gas reserves developed by more than 15 of the world's largest oil companies belong to Azerbaijan. The potentially huge profits are leading to a clash of interests in the region. In the mid-1990s, Russian analyst Iu. Fedorov wrote: "Azerbaijan has a chance of becoming one of the largest oil exporters, comparable to Oman, for example."[7] Transportation of hydrocarbons to the world markets was another problem that involved the interests of neighboring states and certain geopolitical aspects and called for the diplomatic skills of President Heydar Aliev and much effort from the Georgian leaders. Together they managed to make Georgia a transit country, through which oil would be transported from Baku to Ceyhan in Turkey. In 1994 Russia, which had started to build another pipeline across the Northern Caucasus to Novorossiisk, failed to convince world investors and Baku that it should become the main pipeline for big Caspian oil. Out of the two countries involved in the pipeline rivalry, Turkey and Iran, the former won. It should be added that the political consideration (American support for the Baku-Ceyhan line, in particular) prevailed over the economic consideration: it was the cheapest and the safest cross-Iranian route, which was pushed aside under strong outside pressure.

The Caspian status was another stumbling block for the states that tried to divide the marine oil reserves. Certain circles in Russia and Iran tried to use the issue to put pressure on Azerbaijan. Moscow first raised this question in 1994 and insisted that the status should have been determined before the coastal states started developing oil and gas reserves. On 27 April, 1994, the Russian Foreign Ministry sent a note to Brian Fall, British Ambassador to Moscow, in which it protested use of the term, "the Azerbaijanian sector of the Caspian," in the Memorandum on Cooperation in the Energy Sphere signed by Baku and London in February 1994. The note said that any project related to the development of oil resources in the Caspian and its transportation to Europe would be legally null and void if all coastal states did not give their consent, because of the Caspian's integrated ecological system and because of the absence of relevant legal acts. None of the Caspian republics received similar notes.[8] Later events proved, however, that Russia was more inclined to compromises than other states. Active consultations among the Caspian states carried out in 2001-2003 led to a stage-by-stage signing of bilateral agreements in 2003 on dividing the Caspian into national sectors. Today, such agreements have been already signed by Russia and Azerbaijan, Russia and Kazakhstan, and Azerbaijan and Kazakhstan.

Iran is stubbornly opposing a compromise: it wants to divide the sea into equal sectors in order to receive 20 percent, instead of the 12 percent of the sea bottom it can get today. The latter figure was determined by the median line method accepted by Astana, Moscow, and Baku. This shows that in the near future the Caspian issue may affect the situation in the Southern and Northern Caucasus to the same extent as other social-political and economic contradictions. The form of the relations among the coastal countries of the Southern, Central, and Northern Caucasus and the methods and rates of their intensification will depend on the final settlement of the Caspian problem.[9]

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[6] The region's proven oil reserves amount to 3.635 billion tons, of which 535m tons are found in the Northern Caucasus and Russia's Caspian shelf (see: Information about the reserves and development of hydrocarbons in the Russian part of the Caspian basin [www.strana.ru] dated to 23 May, 2001); in the Central Caucasus (Azerbaijan)—1billion tons (BP-Oil section [www.bp.com] dated to 26 February, 2004); in the Southeastern Caucasus (Iran)—2.1 billion tons (possible reserves), 350m tons—proven ([http://www.petros.ru/nik/country4.asp]).

[7] Iu. Fedorov, "Kaspiyskiy uzel," *Mirovaia ekonomika i mezhdunarodnye otnoshenia,* No. 4, 1996, p. 82.

[8] NIA Habar service, 7 June, 1994, Bulletin No. 904, p. 1; 21 June, 1994, Special Issue, p. 2.

[9] There is the opinion that the agreements concluded by three out of five Caspian states on the division of the Caspian Sea into national sectors with different jurisdictions of the seabed, water and surface have already determined approaches to the issue and supplied them with legal support. This proves that bilateral agreements have priority over agreements signed by the five Caspian states.

3. The Caucasus— Self-Regulating West-East and North-South Crossroads

At all times the Caucasus has been part of the world communication network; as part of the Soviet Union, a "closed" society, it lost the planetary role as a transportation corridor between the West and the East and between the North and the South.

Disintegration of the Soviet Union revived this role: the Caucasus is most important for Eurasia. No wonder Europe wanted to restore this function with the help of the TRACECA project being implemented within the TACIS EU program. The project is of huge commercial, cultural, and historic importance. There are several other international projects, such as the TransAsiaEurope (TAE) fiber optic cable project designed to strengthen the role of the Caucasus as a link between the West and the East. Several international structures (the Black Sea Economic Cooperation Organization, GUUAM, and others) are already working on the project.

Since the late 1990s, Russia and Iran have been actively developing the North-South project to revive and intensify communication between the two countries via Azerbaijan. Tehran has already allocated tens of millions of dollars to restore the highway and railroad between Astara and Baku; three bridges will be built on the Azerbaijanian-Iranian border; more customs offices will be opened on the border between Azerbaijan and Russia (Daghestan); and a communication system, which in future will allow the three countries to unify energy networks, is also planned. These projects are being implemented along the Caspian coast, which is providing the opportunity to use the sea to strengthen North-South contacts. Azerbaijan has confirmed its readiness to join the projects in anticipation of large profits.[10]

This activity of the world centers and the desire of the South, North, and Central Caucasian republics to develop transport communications and related economic projects, as well as an awareness of their huge importance for the entire region, add attraction to the projects, which stand a great chance of being finally implemented. This is what makes them different from idle declarations of certain political leaders of regional and neighboring states.

The complicated geopolitical context in the Caucasus should be taken into account. Its new division into the Central, Northern, and Southern parts is prompted by the social-political realities and the regional balance of power. Azerbaijan's 30-million-strong population concentrated in the east of the Southern Caucasus, the Baku-Tbilisi-Ceyhan oil pipeline, and the gas pipeline going from Baku to Erzerum in Turkey via Tbilisi across the Central Caucasus and the western part of the Southern Caucasus have made the region's southern fringe an independent political unit. These units are acting within the recognized state borders of Turkey and Iran, but playing their own game, which sometimes differs from what the center is doing. In Iran, local Azeris are uniting into NGOs to defend their political, social, and cultural rights. The north of Turkey is acting independently of Ankara by establishing contacts with the border areas of Azerbaijan (the Nakhichevan Republic), Armenia, and Georgia. Contrary to the official statements coming from Ankara that the border with Armenia is closed and will remain closed until the Karabakh conflict has been settled, the northern districts of Turkey are actively trading with Armenia: in 2003 trade turnover carried out through Georgia reached $150 million. Ajaria, an autonomous republic within Georgia, developed its relations with Turkey until May 2004 in a direction unacceptable to Tbilisi. Aslan Abashidze, the republic's leader at that time, never tired of reminding everyone that under the 1921 Moscow Treaty Turkey was appointed as a guarantor of Ajaria's territorial integrity.

The newly acquired sovereignty has allowed the three Central Caucasian republics to draw up their domestic and foreign policy priorities independently. The transport and oil and gas projects being actively implemented have already brought Georgia and Azerbaijan closer together. Armenia remains outside

[10] See: *Eni Azerbaijan,* 20 February, 2004.

the integration process, yet no real integration of the Central Caucasus can be achieved without it; likewise, without Armenia this integration structure will never acquire real influence; it will never be able to pursue an independent and clear policy. In fact, Erevan's present destructive stance with respect to Baku, Ankara, and partly to Tbilisi is detrimental to the region's security.

As part of Russia, the Northern Caucasus should be treated as such: when shaping its domestic policy in the south and its foreign policy to the south of its southern borders, Moscow nearly always bears in mind the local North Caucasian specifics.

4. The "Old" and "New" Geopolitical Players in the Caucasus and Their Role in its Integration into the World Community

When looking at the situation as a whole we should bear in mind that Azerbaijan, Georgia, and Armenia (the Central Caucasus) are directly involved in local developments along with Russia, the southern part of which, between the Caspian and the Black seas, has been always called the Northern Caucasus, and the northern parts of which, along with Iran and Turkey, geographically, historically, and culturally form the Southern Caucasus. All of them, irrespective of their domestic and foreign priorities and goals, are involved (voluntarily or otherwise) in these processes, each with a role of its own.

The newly acquired sovereignty of the Caucasian republics boosted the interest displayed by the "old" players (Russia, Turkey, and Iran) and attracted "new" players (the U.S., some of the European countries, the APR, and the Middle East).

In fact, the past, filled with struggle among the "old" players for domination in the Caucasus or its parts, repeatedly demonstrated that any change in its political status attracted "new" actors. This happened early in the 20th century when the Russian Empire fell apart. The short period of independence of the Transcaucasian (Central Caucasian) republics in the 1920s pulled the leading European countries and the United States to the region; and restoration of their independence in the early 1990s showed that this interest was not dead. In fact, it became even greater—this is testified by all sorts of successfully implemented geopolitical and militarist projects. This partly explains the great number of protracted and bloody conflicts Georgia and Azerbaijan have to deal with, as a result of which parts of their territories are either occupied or uncontrolled by the legitimate authorities. Georgia and Azerbaijan are actively cooperating; they have formed the core of Caucasian integration; they are consistently harmonizing their positions on many aspects of social, economic, and political development. These efforts have been reflected in their efficient and mutually advantageous cooperation in extracting and transporting Caspian hydrocarbons, as well as in their closer contacts with NATO and gradual integration into European and other international structures. They are strengthening their democratic institutions and increasing their role on the international arena. The world community and the "new" actors (the leading European countries, the United States, and Turkey) have approved of these efforts.

Armenia was left outside the process, which was basically of its own doing, since it was and remains openly aggressive toward Azerbaijan and Turkey and less openly toward Georgia. Numerous attempts of international organizations to defuse the situation failed: Erevan does not want to de-block its borders and accept a positive solution to the Karabakh problem. Recently, the Armenian leaders refused to evacuate Armenian troops from some of the occupied Azerbaijanian districts, thus depriving Armenia of the opportunity to be involved in the TRACECA project.

Two of the "old" players (Iran and Russia) are actively supporting Armenia: they do not want another regional power pole represented by Turkey, Georgia, Azerbaijan, and the "new" players

(America and West European countries) helping the new independent Caucasian states integrate into the world community. The academic community has repeatedly stated that Russia and Iran want to preserve the local conflicts in order to develop the North-South line, as opposed to the East-West one, and to control the Eurasian communication corridors. Today, Russia, which has always claimed the role of a transit corridor between Europe and Asia, is losing the battle to the West. This is amply confirmed by the TRACECA project, as well as the Baku-Tbilisi-Ceyhan pipeline, which will by-pass Russia. At the same time, Azerbaijan and Georgia need stable relations with Russia and Iran; Baku supported the North-South project designed to connect Russia and Iran. This was clearly stated in the Moscow Declaration signed by Russian President Putin and leader of Azerbaijan Ilkham Aliev during his Moscow visit in February 2004. Russia's military bases in Armenia and Georgia, Moscow's reluctance to put pressure on Erevan and the separatist regimes in Nagorny Karabakh, Abkhazia and South Ossetia, and the Kremlin's passive position on many conflict-related issues can be interpreted as the desire to put pressure on Azerbaijan and Georgia in order to prevent integration in the Central Caucasus. Iran, in turn, is helping Armenia; it is strengthening their political and economic contacts and trying to put pressure on Azerbaijan in order to divide the Caspian Sea into national sectors according to its plan.

The "old" and "new" players are doing their best to influence the Central Caucasian countries in order to guide their foreign policies and shape their economic priorities, thus making them part of their own geopolitical and geoeconomic interests. America and Europe want the Caucasus to become a zone of peace and stability and a link between the West and the East; at the same time, they want the Caucasus to promote their interests in the Middle East and Asia. To make this possible they are actively helping the republics to strengthen their statehoods and establish regimes close to the Western ideas of democracy. For example, it was with the help of the United States that the "Revolution of Roses" became possible in Georgia in the fall of 2003 when President Shevardnadze was removed from office and the newly elected parliament disbanded. The "old" players are displeased with NATO's U.S.-encouraged efforts to open its military bases in Georgia and Azerbaijan: Russia and Iran are stubbornly opposing these plans. The visits of President of Azerbaijan to Moscow in February 2004 were very eloquent in this respect. The popular Russian-language newspaper *Ekho* published in Baku referred to an anonymous source in the U.S. State Department when it reported that the opening American military bases in Azerbaijan had been put on hold. Russia's staunch opposition was described as the main reason behind this.[11] At the same time, despite the official assurances that Georgia would never allow other countries to deploy their military bases on its territory, during his February visit to Washington, new Georgian President Saakashvili agreed to open a FBI bureau in Tbilisi, which could be described as another step toward closer military cooperation with Washington.

Japan, China, Pakistan, and other APR countries can be described as the "newest" players. Their attention is riveted by Azerbaijan's oil wealth; while agreeing that the Caucasus is a link between the East and the West, these states do their best not to clash with the "old" players and to avoid diplomatic and political demarches. Being very much interested in the Caucasian transportation corridor, however, they tend to increase their presence in Central Caucasian economy; in fact, the interests of the "newest" and "new" players are mainly identical, which helps to implement many joint projects, especially in the transportation sphere.

The Islamic Mid-Eastern states have certain plans in the region; they rely on Azerbaijan and try to exploit the Islamic solidarity factor: they insist that Baku should demonstrate more restraint in its relations with the United States, Europe, and Israel in the first place. The Saudi ambassador to Azerbaijan never tires of insisting that his country takes sides with Baku in the Karabakh conflict and that his country has no intention of opening its embassy in Armenia as long as part of Azerbaijanian territory remains occupied by Armenia. Between 1993 and 2003, the International Islamic Relief Organization alone, a Saudi foundation, extended humanitarian aid of over $12.5 million to Azerbaijan.[12] Saudi Arabia obviously wants

[11] See: *Ekho,* 17 February, 2004.
[12] *International Islamic Relief Organization, Azerbaijan Office,* Baku, 2004.

to acquire instruments for putting pressure on Azerbaijan, which is the key factor when it comes to extracting and transporting Caspian hydrocarbons to the world markets. Caspian oil will undoubtedly affect the Arab countries' political weight, which depends on their domination in the world's oil sector. They frown on Azerbaijan's contacts with Israel; the Arab countries are employing every means at their disposal to limit them, ranging from recognizing Armenia as an aggressor, which was done by the OIC, to fairly large humanitarian projects being implemented in Azerbaijan. At the same time, contrary to what they are preaching, certain Arab countries (Syria, Lebanon, and Palestine) maintain contacts with Armenia. This fact puzzled the Azerbaijanian public and caused disillusionment.

By way of a summary it should be said that integration is going ahead in the region as a whole and mainly in the Central Caucasus (Azerbaijan and Georgia) and Southwestern Caucasus (Turkey). Integration outside the political sphere, in the transportation sphere to be more exact, already involves the Northern (Russia), Central (Azerbaijan) and Southeastern (Iran) Caucasus within the North-South project, which is taking clear shape. Armenia is the only Central Caucasian country poorly represented in these integration projects. Significantly, Azerbaijan and Georgia, burdened with unsettled territorial conflicts, fully realize the importance of joining the world community. The Central Caucasus is a key link in the Eurasian integration expanse—in fact, this integration cannot succeed without it. The Caucasus will traditionally remain a bridge between the East and the West; and as such it has its own role to play in globalization and has the opportunity to become a planetary player. To reach these aims some of the regional countries must shift their positions, establish good relations with their neighbors, and achieve peace in the region. In other words, confrontation must give way to cooperation.