

REGIONAL POLITICS

**THE SOUTHERN CAUCASUS:
ROAD TO EUROPE**

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New geopolitical spaces formed by the new sovereign states, some of which are rich in natural resources and others a link in the trans-Asian transportation corridor of strategic importance, have filled the expanse formerly occupied by the Soviet Union.

The Southern Caucasus is one of the key elements in the newly formed geopolitical expanse, therefore its countries, while dealing with the economic and political problems of the transition period, had to address another, no less urgent problem of cooperation with the international community.

All three post-Soviet South Caucasian states are actively working to create mutually acceptable development patterns applied to their integration into the world community. They are all based on their advantageous geopolitical situation; they all want to create a stable system of international cooperation in order to reach political and economic security. In view of this, their foreign policy priorities are better bilateral mutually advantageous relations, stronger multisided contacts within international, European included, organizations and in-

stitutions, and involvement in military, financial, and social programs. Mere statements about their strategic course are not enough to achieve the desired aim—radical structural changes which would meet the requirements of the European Union, NATO, and other international organizations are needed.

It should be said that the West is still treating the South Caucasian countries with a certain degree of doubt, even though they have already covered part of the road leading to democracy. I do not mean human rights, freedom of the press, or economic liberalization issues. Europe is showing a certain cautiousness when dealing with the South Caucasian states because of the mentality problem. It is no secret that not all Western politicians agree that the Pontic coast is part of the old continent, for them it is a distant, or even alien, part of Europe. The road to the European community has been charted, yet it turned out to be a long and difficult one. At the same time, the local countries, which are seeking stronger sovereignty, political stability, and economic growth, have no alternatives.

Georgia

Despite its domestic and foreign problems, Georgia managed to be the first country to set off on the road leading to its integration into Europe. It joined the Council of Europe as a full-fledged member, because it had established a democratic regime at home, achieved freedom of the press, well-protected human rights, political pluralism, etc. It was a sort of a trailblazer, which paved the way for Azerbaijan and Armenia.

The idea of joining Greater Europe was naturally formulated and is being realized by the country's leaders, yet the nation is actively supporting it. The very fact that at the latest presidential elections Mikhail Saakashvili was elected by a vast majority demonstrated that the nation is unanimous about our country's membership in the European structures. During his election campaign, the future president clearly stated that Georgia's future was related to its pro-Western foreign policy and integration with the West. We can agree with those who say that the reasons for the "revolution of roses" are much deeper rooted and less superficial, yet the people were driven into the streets to depose Shevardnadze because of economic stagnation. We can say that the former leaders demonstrated absolute impotence in the face of corruption (or an unwillingness to defeat it); all the progressive reforms that could have helped the country withdraw from the deep crisis were discontinued; and the state structures were weak, while recent appointments inadequate. All this ignited the revolution.

It should be said in all justice that the former president did a lot to strengthen Georgia's independence and realize the revived idea of the Silk Road; he repeatedly stated that his country was prepared to join NATO. His contribution to the trans-Asian transportation corridors (including the oil and gas export routes that cross our territory) cannot be overestimated. This was what finally shaped Tbilisi's pro-Western course. We should not forget that he took a firm stance when it came to the Russian military bases in Georgia. His position was reflected in the Istanbul documents and partly translated into reality (two of the four bases were closed down). There are two other bases still functioning in the republic, and there is no exact date for their withdrawal. Official Tbilisi repeatedly raised the Abkhazian issue in an effort to increase the West's role in settling the conflict. In this way our country acquired more weight on the world arena.

Naturally enough, no one can predict when Georgia will become an EU member, but it will probably follow its NATO membership. Today, 70 percent of its population is living below the poverty level; Georgia is one of the world's poorest countries. The new authorities are working hard to beat corruption, yet its level remains high; the education and health protection system and the country's micro- and macro-economy should be urgently and radically restructured. Better conditions in these and other spheres and a better life for the people are major demands and major prerequisites for our EU membership.

Over time the NATO umbrella will protect the South Caucasian countries, which will thus acquire real security. Georgia is successfully implementing the Partnership for Peace program; it was the only South Caucasian state to be invited to join the Individual Partnership Action Plan (IPAP). The Train and Equip Program (GTEP), paid for by the U.S. government, is being successfully implemented. Four battalions of the Georgian Armed Forces have already been trained; it should be added that for several years Georgia has been receiving the greater part of the aid the United States extends to the CIS countries. However, no matter how great Georgia's progress is in these respects the prospects for its NATO membership are still vague. They will remain vague until Russia removes its bases from Georgian territory. It should be added that recently Russia has been revising its approaches to the "near abroad:" the events in Ajaria (an autonomous republic within Georgia) are the best illustration. There is a Russian military base on its territory, yet the Russian military remained completely neutral while Tbilisi removed pro-Russian Ajarian leader Aslan Abashidze. At the height of the Ajarian crisis, Igor Ivanov, Secretary of the RF Security Council, arrived in the republic to negotiate its peaceful resolution. His positive contribution cannot be overestimated.

Recently we hosted a Russian-Georgian economic forum, after which the Georgian government offered privileges and broad rights to the Russian capital. The withdrawal of the Russian bases issue, which until recently was a linchpin of bilateral relations, lost its urgency and a great deal of its political importance. Today it is a purely technical issue. A Novorossiisk-Supsa oil pipeline across Abkhazian territory is being discussed. Later it can be joined to the Baku-Ceyhan pipeline. There are plans to restore the Moscow-Tbilisi railway that crosses Abkhazia.

The relations between the two states should be improved for the sake of better economic conditions in both countries. No matter how close their interests are they cannot alter Georgia's foreign policy course. The Georgian nation has resolved to join the EU, it is dedicated to Western ideological values; it remembers only too well our common "communist past." By voting for Mikhail Saakashvili, the Georgians voted for their future as part of united Europe.

Azerbaijan

For Tbilisi cooperation with Baku is of strategic importance: Azerbaijan exports its oil to Europe across Georgian territory and uses its Black Sea ports. While Georgia is the most democratic state in the Southern Caucasus, Azerbaijan is the most politically stable state in the region, hence its economic success. The recent change of power never affected its domestic and foreign policies, even though the local opposition responded with rallies to the allegedly falsified results of presidential elections. I should say that the nation is all behind the present political course: this is what the late Heydar Aliev achieved as president. Continuity of the country's political course is the main guarantee of the country's oil exports, which, in turn, attracts the West, the interest of which is heightened by the current Gulf instability and the skyrocketing oil and oil product prices. Europe is attracted by the relatively cheap Caspian hydrocarbons.

The republic lives on its oil revenue, therefore its relations with the West are vitally important. This explains why Azerbaijan is seeking integration with the European community and its structures, as well as NATO membership.

It should be said that the country has a long way to go to create a civil society, achieve freedom of the press, protect human rights, and plant other Western norms and principles in its soil.

At the same time, this is the only state that managed to remove the Russian bases from its territory and preserve warm relations with Moscow—an example Tbilisi should emulate. Azerbaijan's rational policy allowed it to reach balanced relations with Russia, while successfully looking after its own interests. The country on the Caspian shores looks forward to joining the European structures and embracing democratic values.

In the military sphere, Azerbaijan is successfully cooperating with NATO within the Partnership for Peace program; recently it announced that it was ready to join the IPAP program. Like Georgia, Azerbaijan is a member of the antiterrorist coalition: both countries opened their air space and land corridors to the coalition forces during the war in Afghanistan and after it; and they both dispatched limited contingents to Iraq.

Like Georgia, Azerbaijan has to cover a long and tortuous road before it finally reaches the EU.

Armenia

Unlike its South Caucasian neighbors Armenia looks to Russia and is actively involved in the CIS. The Commonwealth of Independent States is Moscow's brainchild, set up to replace the disintegrated Soviet Union with the soul aim of keeping these states together under its control. Its main goal

is to prevent complete disintegration of the old ties among the republics. Armenia is a member of the Collective Security Treaty along with Russia, Belarus, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, and Tajikistan, which envisaged close military-political cooperation. Georgia and Azerbaijan have chosen to remain outside it: they are convinced that stronger military contacts with Russia add to the region's militarization. The numerical strength of the Fourth Army of the RF deployed in Armenia is no less than twenty thousand. Erevan regards it as a guarantee of its security and as protection of its interests in the Karabakh conflict.

The Karabakh confrontation differs from the situation in Abkhazia and South Ossetia: it is an ethnic conflict between two states. Because of it Armenia found itself completely isolated; its border with Turkey remains closed because of the well-known events that took place in the Ottoman Empire early in the last century. The only land route that connects Armenia with the world crosses Georgia, which cannot use its transportation and transit potential to the full because of the conflict with Abkhazia. (So far, it has no railway connection with Russia.) Recently, the idea of resuming transport communication has been discussed; this will promote Armenia's development and increase its geopolitical value. In the southeast is Iran, which, while not favoring the West, remains Russia's partner.

Peaceful settlement of the Karabakh conflict will allow Armenia to open its borders with its closest neighbors—Turkey and Azerbaijan—and to join global transportation projects.

Armenia has remained outside GUUAM, an organization several post-Soviet states set up to ensure their security and promote economic cooperation. This is another sign of its alienation; the lack of interest in this structure can probably be explained by the fact that Moscow sees GUUAM as an encroachment on its undivided domination over the post-Soviet expanse. At the same time, Armenia has not rejected the possibility of its membership. The Great Silk Road and TRACECA are among GUUAM's goals. Armenia's membership could strengthen regional security.

Armenia is the only South Caucasian state that has never expressed a desire to join NATO; at the same time, Erevan is contemplating integration into Europe and the European structures. (Despite its close cooperation with Moscow, Erevan is looking at the West with heightened interest.) To secure its political aims, Armenia often enlists its huge and influential diasporas all over the world—their assistance is invaluable.

On the domestic front, Armenia faces the same problems and difficulties as its regional neighbors: low economic indices, a high level of corruption, and an unfavorable social background. Like in the neighboring countries, in Armenia the opposition called the people to depose the leaders, it accused the president of falsifying the election results. It is hard to say whether the entire nation supports the opposition; one thing is clear: the republican leadership survived the test.

Obviously, in Armenia, like in its neighbors, civil society is still undeveloped, human rights are violated, and there is still a dearth of alternative political ideas, even though society has recognized the value of Western democratic principles.

C o n c l u s i o n

The South Caucasian states regard themselves as part of Europe and associate their future with their membership in the EU and the European structures. This is what the presidents of the three states express and what is confirmed by the three nations which fully approve of pro-Western orientation.

The three South Caucasian countries have to cope with the economic and political problems of the transition period. On top of this, from the very first days of their independence, they had to concentrate on ethnic issues, which Russia tried to exploit in the early 1990s to preserve its political and military presence. Its attempts to revive its power and hegemony failed; they caused ethnic conflicts in Abkhazia, South Ossetia, and Nagorny Karabakh, the main sources of regional instability. They interfere with regional cooperation and do not allow the South Caucasian states to be fully involved in international or-

ganizations and institutions, which, in turn, creates considerable problems when it comes to closer regional contacts.

The uneven economic and political development of the three states is caused by their unequal opportunities to develop and export the Caspian's natural resources. Armenia does not participate at all in the trans-Caucasian oil and gas transportation routes (where the key positions belong to Azerbaijan and Georgia). This has created social and economic imbalance in the region: regional integration is based on economic factors. Political stability alone, built on a firm economic foundation, may bring considerable advantages. We should bear in mind that Europe needs the states that have demonstrated their ability to cooperate, especially in their own region.

I regret to say that there is a deficit of mutual confidence and a shared understanding of democratic values. At the same time, it is impossible to fully integrate into the European community while paying lip service to the Western principles of civil society and violating them in practice. In the Southern Caucasus, civil society should be built in conformity with the local political, economic, historical, and cultural traditions and realities. This explains why democratic changes and economic reforms are proceeding at different paces. Their foreign policies differ, therefore no complete cooperation is possible so far. Tbilisi and Baku are looking to the West, while Erevan looks to Moscow. This means that there is no common Caucasian policy and that no shared political development pattern is possible.

Europe is developing its regional contacts, rather than establishing ties with individual states. The West is looking at the Southern Caucasus as a single whole—it prefers to ignore the foreign political and domestic specifics of each of the states. This approach is making EU membership an even more distant prospect, because it presupposes full-scale cooperation with the candidate rather than with its neighbors. If the EU concentrates on cooperation with each of the states separately, all the local states will become aware of their responsibility for complying with the demands the EU imposes on the candidates. Georgia has provided a relevant example: it joined the Council of Europe and helped Azerbaijan and Armenia join it. NATO, too, is widely using programs of individual cooperation because only two out of the three regional countries have expressed their desire to join it.

In summing up we can point to several important factors that make the prospect of EU membership dimmer: the different speeds of democratic development and different foreign policies; the region's conflict-prone nature; no economic cooperation and no prospects for economic integration; and Europe's inability to cooperate with each of the local states individually.

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The South Caucasian nations have chosen the West, its democratic pluralism, liberal economy, and free civil society as best suited to their security requirements. Europe should recognize that it will profit from admitting the local states into its large family, because this will strengthen its security.

Before all the South Caucasian and European states set off on the road of integration, the negative factors enumerated above must be eliminated. Obviously, the South Caucasian countries will be unable to cope with this task single-handedly; the West, and the EU, should be more actively involved in regional developments.