

sian political status as a global player. In practical terms integration is not thought through and more based on Russian dominance than on mutual interest in integration. Therefore, the countries of the South Caucasus are not interested in joining the EAU, but at the same time one still has to observe whether the EU is able to

offer a strategic alternative. Setting Russian–EU relations should include new founding principles for Wider Europe, as well as an end to the current rivalry in the joint neighborhood, supplanted by joint cooperation and modernization. Solving the current negative perception of the South Caucasus should be seen as a litmus test.

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Is the South Caucasus a Region?

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Abstract

The South Caucasus is a neighborhood rather than a region because the three countries located there have different threat perceptions, see their wellbeing in varying ways, and have contrasting visions of themselves. Avoiding the temptation to view the South Caucasus as a region will help Western countries develop more effective policies toward the region.

Different Visions

The imperial world was diverse, but simple to grasp all the same, since the number of actors in international affairs was limited to a handful of empires. The post-imperial world produced a multiplicity of independent and newly-created states, but the cold war that followed after the defeat of fascism still divided the world into “politically likeminded” areas. These areas were not necessary geographic but political or ideological, hence all aspects of otherwise normal trade and cooperation were subjugated to supreme political interests.

From the collapse of the Soviet Union until end of the 20th century, most of the countries of the former blocs gained real independence and, in most cases, shed the influence of the former metropolises. In many cases independence was largely defined through differentiation from immediate neighbors. Those that were blessed with sea access aspired to regional integration projects, and those that were landlocked aspired to some kind of balance, or so called “multi-vectoral” foreign policies. The inertia of the 19th and much of the 20th century to deal with smaller countries in certain groupings or regions persists into the 21st century. European and American decision makers still refer to foreign-policy mental maps with big countries and geographic regions. Unfortunately, this convenience often entails wrong assumptions or unrealistic expectations from

those nations that constitute the regions.

The designation of a region often assumes that countries of that particular area share a common vision of the future or that they aspire to interdependency as a prerequisite for stability and economic development. Hence many efforts are directed to “regional cooperation” even in cases when countries of the region are openly in conflict, or have different visions of their immediate or long-term futures.

The South Caucasus is a perfect example. It used to be more than a mere region; in 1918 it existed as the Transcaucasian Democratic Federative Republic—which lasted only one month!

Thucydides describes human motivations as driven by three factors: fear (*phobos*), gain or self-interest (*kerdos*) and common belief (*doxa*). The same motivations are true for countries, which represent a highly organized form of humans, with motivations inherited from humans.

A close look at the three countries of the South Caucasus “region”—Georgia, Armenia, and Azerbaijan—reveals basic differences.

Fear (*Phobos*)

All three countries have different threat perceptions. For Georgia, the primary threat comes from the Russian Federation, which still occupies the two provinces of Abkhazia and Tskhinvali Region/South Ossetia. Having Rus-

sian troops just 40 miles from the capital, Tbilisi, makes this sort of threat assumption very real. Georgia has openly declared its aspiration and policy to join NATO and seeks its security in the North Atlantic Treaty's Article 5. Meanwhile, neighboring Armenia considers as its enemies Turkey (due to the tragic memories of 1915 in the Ottoman Empire) or Azerbaijan, which lost control of Nagorno Karabakh and adjacent territories to Armenia. As long as the Nagorno Karabakh conflict is not resolved, full-fledged military confrontation with Azerbaijan cannot be discounted. As a guarantee of its sovereignty and stability, Armenia hosts a Russian military base and is a member of the CSTO, the Russocentric collective-security organization created to counter NATO. As for Azerbaijan, a threat is still related to the possibility of renewed conflict with Armenia and with active Russian engagement, as well as from Iran, which is becoming increasingly aggressive toward its northern neighbor and which is home to a large population of ethnic Azeris. Azerbaijan recently rid itself of the Russian presence at the Gabala surveillance station, and does not have a declared desire to be a member of any regional security organization. Azerbaijan and Turkey have signed a special agreement (almost modeled after the Russian–Armenian agreement) on military collaboration and security assistance in case of external military confrontation. Azerbaijan also openly employs a policy to match its military budget with the entire state budget of Armenia.

Bottom line—all three countries of the South Caucasus have different threat perceptions and are differently addressing their phobias.

Gain/Self Interest (*Kerdos*)

The three republics of the South Caucasus differently perceive their wellbeing and these differences are surely reflected in their foreign-policy priorities.

Again, Georgia has a clearly declared goal to join the European Union and pragmatic considerations are driven by its belief that, to paraphrase one Baltic diplomat, “if NATO is about life, the EU is about the good life.” Georgia strives to fully exploit its geographic advantage (as a gateway to eight land-locked countries: Armenia, Azerbaijan, five Central Asian countries, and Afghanistan). It seeks to access the European market for its products (especially with politically motivated restrictions from the RF). The Georgian concept of prosperity is very much a European (or American) lifestyle.

Armenia, with its complicated relations with two neighbors, Azerbaijan and Turkey, has limited options for international trade and sees itself differently in the economic mapping of the South Caucasus. Its trade routes are limited to Georgian ports and the narrow Megri corridor to Iran. It is effectively disenfranchised

from the main regional infrastructure projects, like the Baku–Supsa and Baku–Tbilisi–Ceyhan oil pipelines, and the Baku–Tbilisi–Erzurum gas pipelines, as well as from constructing railroads or highways. Its economic hardship is reflected in its rapidly shrinking population. Hence the most popular notion of wellbeing is still related to outside powers: the Armenian Diaspora, remittances, and the possibility to emigrate either to Russia or to the United States, where Armenian communities are well organized and well established.

Azerbaijan's driving engine for wellbeing is surely its hydrocarbon sector. Accordingly, its main concerns are the production and safe distribution of oil and gas. Hydrocarbon revenues make Azerbaijan's the fastest growing economy in the South Caucasus, and robust infrastructure projects inside the country create much-needed jobs for those who are not directly engaged in the oil and gas sectors. Under such conditions, Azerbaijan is not attracted to any regional integration projects and feels comfortable in staying away from institutions that (among other things) may require fundamental revision of income distribution patterns.

Bottom line—all three countries of the South Caucasus have different notions of self advantage and do not necessarily link their well being with regional cooperation, at least within the triangle of Armenia, Azerbaijan, and Georgia.

Common Belief (*Doxa*)

Self-reflection is one of the building blocks of foreign policies of the SC countries. Georgians see themselves as Europeans and the European Union is the logical destination for the Georgian statehood project. There is no internal debate about Georgia's European identity and even those who advocate for better relations with Russia see it as more a European state than an Asian one. Any form of institutional approximation with the EU is not seen as an endgame, but rather just another step toward full integration.

Armenians, due to the abovementioned geographic constraints and historic or political factors, heavily rely on partnership with the Russian Federation and their membership in political or economic projects will almost by default coincide with Russocentric ones, whether the Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS) or the Eurasian Union. Nearly monoethnic, Christian Armenia has very few choices where to seek affiliation, unless something dramatic happens to Russia or Georgian membership in NATO and the EU membership prospect becomes a reality. That may change calculations for Armenia but these developments are not in their hands.

Azerbaijan, the only country in the world with a predominantly Muslim population but entirely secular poli-

tics, is not shying away from any organizations based on Islamic faith (the Organization of Islamic Cooperation, for example). At the same time, for Azerbaijan neither the EU nor the CIS/Eurasian Union represent attractive political or economic integration models. Political self-sufficiency and active international trade are the main heralds of Azerbaijan's foreign policy. History and faith merely serve as useful tools for definition of its self-identity but have no influence on foreign policy priorities, and it should not be surprising that Israel is a significant partner in many areas.

Bottom line—common beliefs, whether religious, historical, or originating from national mythology, drive all three countries in different directions and they seek different places for self-identification.

Conclusion

We conclude that the countries of the South Caucasus have different threat perceptions, see their wellbeing differently, and seek different institutions for self-reflection. All motivating factors differ and one should ask how can we consider the South Caucasus as a political region and how can we expect from these countries the same as we were expecting from the Baltic region, Balkans, Visegrad group, etc.? Wise people say that love is not looking to each other but rather looking in the same direction. Surely countries of the South Caucasus do not share (at least currently) the same vision for their futures.

If the South Caucasus is not a region than what is it and how should it be handled? Of course geography is still the common denominator and it dictates an obvious answer—the **South Caucasus is a neighborhood**. Neighbors may differ in all three motivations but still

remain neighborly. Some will interact closely with each other and some will not.

If we examine how other, external players are treating this “region,” we'll soon discover that it is treated exactly as a neighborhood.

All three countries of the South Caucasus are part of the EU's Eastern Neighborhood Program. The Russian Federation calls the South Caucasus its “near abroad,” basically considering it and (stating it loudly as in some cases) as its backyard. “Transcaucasus” clearly refers to a neighborhood rather than a region.

Turkey still has a declared policy of “zero problems with all neighbors.” So neighbors, again and not a region. Surely Turkey considers itself simultaneously part of Europe and part of Asia, part of the Balkans, the Caucasus, and the Middle East. Hence for Turkey region is a much larger notion than the South Caucasus and neighborhood is the right term.

Of course all these explanatory troubles were aimed at one basic task—to define what kind of policy is relevant for the South Caucasus and what is not. Expecting from countries of the neighborhood robust regional cooperation is a pipe dream often carried out by self-declared wise-man NGOs, whose influence on policy making is close to zero. Western policy toward these NGOs should be to direct their efforts to domestic transformation and creating and debating policy options for domestic and international audiences.

Western policy toward the neighborhood is a subject for a separate article, but the aim here is to avoid the commonly-made “regionalism trap” and to compel new approaches.

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