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Regional Division and Geopolitical Situation in the Area of Caucasus

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ABSTRACT

There is almost no period of history in which there were no wars in Caucasus. This is a strategically important area because it covers a narrow land between the Black Sea and the Caspian Sea. It represents one of the two roads that help people reach the Middle East from the mainland of Europe. During its history, the Caucasus was part of the Russian Empire, the Crimean Khanate, the Ottoman Empire, Persia, or it consisted of a large number of independent states. During the whole of the XIX century on the territory of the Caucasus, the battles were fought in order to obtain the exit to the Caspian Sea. Only in Soviet times there were no conflicts. Some historians claim that this is the result of the correct national policy of the USSR, while others, contrary to them, are convinced that the peace occurred due to a firm socialist regime, which led to an extremely tense situation right after the collapse of the USSR. Also, the Caucasus is one of the few regions of Russia where Islam is the dominant religion. Many times, this fact served as a trigger for conflicts, including the armed conflicts. In this paper, the geopolitical situation of the given territories, mainly after the disintegration of the USSR, is presented with a special reference to the North Caucasus and the South Caucasus (Transcaucasia).

Keywords: Caucasus, conflict, geopolitical situation, ethnic conflicts

1. INTRODUCTION

Today, the Caucasus Mountains are considered to be the border between Europe and Asia, a place where culture has been mixed for centuries and whose history has filled the book pages. This is precisely why this huge area, between the Black, the Azov Sea, and the Caspian Sea, is one of the linguistic and culturally diverse areas on Earth (Sivertseva, 1996).

In political terms, parts of the Caucasus are located within the territory of Russia, Georgia, Armenia and Azerbaijan (Turkey and Iran). In addition to these peoples, there are almost 40 other ethnic groups and religions in this area, so this region makes an ethnically and linguistically complex mosaic. It is precisely why it is considered one of the most turbulent and potentially "most inflammable" regions in the world (Banuazizi, Weiner, 1994). Let's mention only the Russian republic Kabardino-Balkaria (where Elbrus is located), which was under the rule of Mongol, the Persian and Turkish empires, and finally the USSR. During the reign of the USSR, its majority non-Russian population was the victim of ethnic engineering, so, under the charge of co-operating with the Nazis, it was deported to Siberia.

The subject of the paper is the geopolitical situation in the Caucasus area after the disintegration of the USSR, with a special focus on the North Caucasus and the Transcaucasia. The aim of the paper is to examine the current situation on the territory of the Caucasus, with causal relations and with a view to social changes. The task of the paper is the analytical-synthetic investigation of the territory of the Caucasus after the disintegration of the USSR, with special emphasis on the demographic and economic image of the investigated territory, because these elements precisely are susceptible to the changes that have occurred and are still happening in this area.

2. GEOGRAPHICAL POSITION AND GENERAL CHARACTERISTICS OF THE AREA

The Caucasus is a region in Eurasia, which borders with Russia in the north, the Black Sea in the west, Caspian Sea in the east, Turkey in the southwest, and Iran in the south. The Caucasus refers to the Caucasus Mountains and the lowlands that surround these mountains. Often, the Caucasian Mountains are considered to be the border between Europe and Asia, so that the territories in the Caucasus are often taken as being on one or the other continent, or as bicontinental.

The countries that today constitute the Caucasus are the former Soviet states: Georgia, Armenia and Azerbaijan, as well as various parts of Russia. The Russian part consists of the Krasnodar and Stavropol region and the following autonomous republics: Adigeja, Kalmikaja, Karachay-Cherkessia, Kabardino-Balkaria, North Ossetia, Ingushetia, Chechnya and Dagestan. The aforementioned Russian autonomous republics belong to the so-called North Caucasus. In Georgia, the North Caucasus comprises the following regions: Tusheti, Kevsureti and Kevi. Geographically speaking, the North Caucasus includes the northern slopes and western regions of the main Caucasian mountain region, as well as parts of the southern slopes to the west (to the Psou River). Pre-Caucasus steppe is often viewed as a part of the North Caucasus, where the Kuma-Manic depression is considered the northern border of the geographic region. It is surrounded by the Azov Sea in the west and the Caspian Sea in the east.

The Caucasus consists of two separate mountain systems, the Greater and the Lesser Caucasus. The highest peaks are Elbrus (5,642 m) and Kazbek (5,000 m). The origin of Caucasus is associated with Alpine orogenesis (Philip et al., 1989).

The Caucasus Mountains begin with steep sections south of the city of Anapa on the coast of Black Sea and they spread in the southeast direction towards the Apsheron Peninsula, where they end with the Ilki-Dag peak, northwest of Baku on the border with Azerbaijan. The total length of the Caucasus is about 1,500 km.

The general tectonic structure is simple. In the north, there is the southern part of the edge of the Russian plate, in which the part of the Donetsk carbon coal basin penetrates from the west. South of the Don River, from the Azov Sea to the Caspian Sea, the cover of the young Paleozoic orogenesis is covered with thicker younger sediments (Koçyiğit et al., 2001). In the south is the Alpine orogen of the Greater Caucasus, a complex structure. The total peak area of the Caucasus peaks is about 2,000 km², and about 1,400 glacier tongues go down the Caucasus slopes.



Figure 1. Physical-geographical map of the Caucasus area

Source: www.mapsof.net

Relief differences also reflect on climatic conditions. The northern side is open to the effect of cold air masses from the depths of continental Russia, while the southern side in the shelter is well protected from its influence. Since ancient times, the South Caucasus has been considered one of the cradles of viticulture, while vineyards appear only sporadically on the northern side, along the coast of the Black and Caspian Sea. Soviet planners did not think wrong when they encouraged the cultivation of cereals and sunflowers in the north, and in the south of Georgia, Armenia and Azerbaijan those crops that grow better in warmer climates (vines, tea, citrus fruits, cotton).

As there are differences between the north and the south, there are also differences between the west and the east, above all based on a different amount of precipitation. The western part of the Caucasus along the Black Sea coast receives large amounts of rainfall, up to 3,000 mm per year in the Georgian province of Adjara. On the other hand, the eastern part is extremely dry. In the steppes south of Baku, annual rainfall is less than 200 mm. In the west there are clearly expressed elevation vegetation zones, while in the east, as well as in Dagestan, there is a less complex zonality in the vegetation typical of the arid regions of Central Asia. In the west, forests cover whole slopes all the way to the highland zone, while there are almost no forests in the east.

The lower boundary of the glacier in the west is already at 1,800 m, while in the east it can be found at more than 4,000 m above sea level. Livestock breeding, the basis of the mountain economy, is adapted to the mentioned differences. In the western part of the Caucasus, the breeding of cattle with limited movement between summer pastures and winter valleys for cattle in the villages prevails. In the east of Elbrus, the breeding of sheep dominates, based on seasonal migrations that last for much longer.

3. GEOPOLITICAL SITUATION IN CAUCASUS IN HISTORICAL CONTEXT

The present ethnic mosaic of the Caucasian region is the result of the long migration, invasion and occupation of the region, which was the cause of the argument between the Persians, the Turks and the Russians, not to mention the occasional invasions of the Arabs and Mongols, as well as the interest of the Western powers with the German, Swedish and French companies since the 19th century. The integration of the Caucasus into the Russian Empire began in the 17th century with a series of diplomatic moves, such as the treaties with Persia and the Ottoman Empire on the protection of Georgian and Armenian Christians. Military-agrarian occupation followed, by building the famous fortified castle settlements, which gradually restricted the space of Caucasian peoples (King, 2008).

The peoples living in the Caucasus today belong to different linguistic families: Caucasus (from Georgians in the south to the Adyghes, Kabardians, Circassians, Chechens and even 12 different Dagestan peoples), the Altaic-Turkish (Azerbaijanis, Balkars, Karachays, Kumyks) and indo-European (Russians, but also Ossetians and Armenians).

Ethnic diversity is further blended with religious differences. Russians, Georgians, Armenians and most Ossetians are Christians, while other nations are mostly loyal to Islam. But this seemingly simple division does not show the real picture. Although Orthodox Christians, the Georgians were never subject to the patriarch of Moscow, as well as the Armenians, who have been organized for centuries in their own church. Among the Muslims, however, the differences are greatest among Azerbaijanis, who are Shias of Dagestani and

Chechen Sunnis, much more open to active penetration of radical Islamic ideas and practices (Cheterian, 1997; Bahgat, 1999).

An important feature of the ethnic composition of the Caucasus is the complexity and dynamics of the ethnic identity, which is a consequence of the differences between the national and local levels of ethnic consolidation, acculturation and assimilation. However, it is dependent on the political and economic situation. For example, Andic people, who speak the dialect of the Avar language, and consider themselves to be ethnic Avars, at the same time, often distance themselves from the fundamental Avar identity. Adyghe people, although recognized in several republics as a titular nation, emphasize that they are similar with or different from other ethnic groups (Smith, 1998). The complex relations between ethnic groups make it difficult for activists to use ethnic characteristics as a means of achieving political goals. Taking into account the diverse and overlapping ethnic structure, political and ethno-cultural boundaries were never equal, although Ethnic Engineering in Stalin's time almost equaled them in some cases (Birch, 1995). Before being incorporated into the composition of the Soviet Union, the territory of Dagestan was organized into smaller economic and political entities that were called the jama'ats and did not coincide with natural or ethno-linguistic boundaries. However, they are key to the understanding of today's Dagestan society (Barylski, 1995).

Table 1. Number of inhabitants, area and population density

Population, Area and Population Density of The North and South Caucasus				
Region/Country	Population	Area (Sq. Km.)	¹ Density	Notes
North Caucasus	14 672 000	253 960	58	Nine Russian Provinces, Republics and Territories
South Caucasus	15 872 000	186 043	85	Three Independent Countries
Georgia	4 601 000	69 700	66	
South Ossetia	70 000	3 900	18	Included in Georgia: disputed territory, encouraged by Russia
Abkhazia	180 000	8 600	21	Included in Georgia: disputed territory, encouraged by Russia
Azerbaijan	8 304 000	86 600	96	
Nagorno-Karabakh	138 000	4 400	31	Included in Azerbaijan: disputed territory, allied with Armenia
Nakhchivan Autonomous Republic	398 000	5 363	74	Exclave of Azerbaijan landlocked by Armenia, Turkey & Iran
Armenia	2 967 000	29 743	100	
Geo-political Footnote				¹ People per square kilometer
North Ossetia and South Ossetia	780 000	11 900	66	For reference only. These are not formally combined.
"South Ossetia" is not recognized as a separate country				North Ossetia is a Russian Republic in the north Caucasus

Source: www.pavellas.files.wordpress.com

Unlike the South Caucasus, which was divided into five multi-ethnic areas with an equal population in the 19th century, the North Caucasus consisted of numerous political units of unequal size, where each larger group had a clearly demarcated area at its disposal. Nalchik District became the Kabardino-Balkaria Republic in the Soviet period.



Figure 2. Ethnic structure of the population in the Caucasus region
 Source: www.freelang.net

The borders of several North Caucasian republics changed until the second half of the 1950s. Shortly before the Second World War, the territories were enlarged so that they encompassed the foothill and plain regions with numerous Slovene populations. Some of the researchers were inclined to interpret the complex governance and territorial structure of the former Soviet Union using the "divide and rule" strategy, but the reasons were far more complicated. Bolshevik champions believed in the power of knowledge in the modernization of the economy and social structure, and the raising of human consciousness. They tried to eradicate traditional institutions and arrange a new territorial division according to studies conducted by leading experts.

4. NORTH CAUCASUS

The southern region (European part of Russia) or the North Caucasus has an area of 355,000 km², with 19 million inhabitants or 53 inhabitants per km². It is the largest population density of all regions, while the share of the urban population is only 57% or significantly less than all regions of the Russian Federation. The southern region has an important geographical position in the European part of the Federation, occupying the far south between the Caspian Sea in the east and the Azov and the Black Sea in the west.

The natural environment of the region is considerably more diverse than the environment of other regions. Lowlands occupy more than the northern half of the region, from the lower course of the Don River to the lower course of the Kuban River. Then, the lowland occupies the northern and eastern part of the Stavropol region up to the middle course of the Terek River and in the east, in the Caspian coast, the northern half of the AR Dagestan.

The Russians, although the youngest population of the region, make up about $\frac{3}{4}$ of its total population. Imperial Russia spread its state to the south and east using the system of free peasants - Cossack soldiers first through Don, then through the Cuban and Tyrek belt. Russian settlements of a rural type are large, usually lowland stations, in contrast to the smaller, fragmented indigenous settlements called auls, in the suburbs and the Caucasus. Only in the western part of the Caucasus, the Russians reached the state border with Georgia. In six autonomous republics, the aging population lives.

4. 1. The post-soviet geo-demographic development

The most fragile "center of instability" is the North Caucasus zone, where there are several Russian federal units in which, apart from North Ossetia or Stavropol, Muslim population prevails or is very present. Entities of the Federation (the Republic of Dagestan, the Chechen Republic, the Republic of Ingushetia, the Kabardino-Balkaria Republic, the Karachay-Cherkessia Republic, the Republic of North Ossetia-Alania, the Stavropol region or the area), which are administratively united in the North Caucasus Federal District, cover about 170 thousand km², which represents only 1% of the total territory of the Russian Federation (Goldenberg, 1994; Murray, 1994).

Of all the listed federal units, the largest security threat for the Russian Federation in the 1990s was Chechnya with its paramilitary formations, which had more than a thousand well armed members. Separatism in Chechnya stems from its ethnic structure, the peripheral geographical position and the heavy accessibility of the Caucasus mountain areas, as well as the strong anti-Russian tendencies among the Chechens (Dunlop, 1998). With the disintegration of the USSR, the small republic (an area of 15.6 thousand km² with about 1.2 million inhabitants) declared its independence from Moscow, tending to become "Caucasian Piedmont", and gather and unite all surrounding highlander nations in the Confederation of the Mountain People of the Caucasus. Chechen "independence" was created in the atmosphere of terrorism, ethnic cleansing (whose main victims were Russians, and today Chechens make up over 90% of the total population of the republic), and complete legal anarchy (Aras, 1998). Gradually, especially in the younger population, the influence of Islamic fundamentalism grew in the republic, which will be institutionalized by the introduction of Sharia law in early 1999. The Russian Federation led two wars to return Chechnya to its legal order. The first war (1994-1996) was followed by the changing luck as well as the incompetent conduct of operations from the Russian side, which ultimately resulted in the Khasavyurt Accord (1996), which symbolized the *de facto* Russian defeat, and enabled the Chechen rebels a three-year break (de Waal, 2010).

For the integrity of the Russian Federation in its Caucasian zone, the year 1999 was crucial and groundbreaking. The political fate of the Russian part of the Caucasus was no longer being settled in Chechnya (it was then temporarily lost to the Russian Federation), but in Dagestan. A year earlier, in the capital of Chechnya, Grozny, the so-called "Congress of the Chechen and Dagestan Peoples" took place, which openly advocated the unification of the two Russian federal units. Dagestan (50.3 thousand km², with over 2.7 million inhabitants)

has a particularly important geostrategic position, both due to its access to the Caspian Sea and, consequently, due to the energy infrastructure crossing its territory. Some of the Chechen leaders were very aware of these facts, and in the summer of 1999, the Chechen paramilitary formations entered the territory of Dagestan, trying to completely reverse the political situation in this republic in favor of the project of the mentioned integration. If Moscow remained indifferent to this process, and only passively observed the developments in Dagestan, its positions in the North Caucasus would be permanently undermined, while centrifugal processes throughout the Russian Federation would receive very strong impulses. At the last moment, the Second Chechen Campaign (1999-2000) was launched, in which the Chechen separatist movement was defeated militarily, though not completely broken. If the Chechen-Dagestan integration project had been realized, Ingushetia, a republic with only 3.6 thousand km² and about 500 thousand inhabitants, in the neighborhood of Chechnya, could hardly resist the "unifying wave" (de Waal, 2010).

The region of the North Caucasus is still a "focal point of instability," because all three republics (Ingushetia, Chechnya and Dagestan) are still the target of frequent terrorist attacks in which local security forces are killed, as well as numerous innocent civilians. Official statistics point to significant unemployment, poverty and a sense of hopelessness, pushing the younger population towards Islamic extremism and terrorism. However, it is difficult to get a true picture of social conditions in this part of the Russian Federation due to the so-called "gray economy" and criminal profit-making activities (Blandy, 1999). There are, on the other hand, several factors that contribute to the stabilization of geopolitical circumstances in the North Caucasus. Central government, determined and uncompromising in terms of the integrity and sovereignty of the Russian Federation, is the main guarantor of preserving the constitutional order in that region. In recent years, it has provided significant financial resources to this area, which maintains relative social peace and "buys" political stability. In addition, traditionally strong tribal and clan relationships and rivalries, and unusual ethnic diversity in Dagestan (officially as many as 14 languages are used), impede the geopolitical consolidation and homogenization of the North Caucasian Muslim peoples only on a religious basis. At present, in the region and beyond, there is no foreign state or a military-political alliance that would engage in confrontation with the Russian Federation, in order to support the secessionist aspirations of certain ethnicities in the Caucasus area. Nevertheless, despite all the positive aspects of the political situation in the North Caucasus, it is realistic to expect that this region will be the "focal point of instability" in the coming decades.

The modern demographic history of the North Caucasus can be clearly divided into two periods. The first took about 150 years, from the beginning of the 19th century until the beginning of the 1960s, and it was determined by the relocation of the Russian, i.e. the Slovene, the originally non-Caucasian population. Initially, this process was linked to the development of agriculture and colonization in the foothill region. Industrialization, and associated modernization that followed in the Soviet era, required the migration of skilled labor and bureaucracy, usually Russian population, from various parts of the country (Krag, Funch, 1994).

The second period, which began in the 1960s, was marked by a decrease in the number of Russians, both in some republics and in the North Caucasus as a whole. The population of originally Caucasian origin entered the process of demographic transition later than the Russian population, especially in Chechnya and Dagestan. In Dagestan, a steady decline in birth rates was recorded only in the early 1990s. Natural increase remained at a high level of

10 per mile, although in the Soviet period it was halved. In the same period, the traditional "Russian" areas in the North Caucasus experienced a demographic crisis much later than other parts of the European part of Russia. But even in these areas, by the early 1990s, death rates exceeded the birth rate (Colarusso, 1995b).

Accordingly, in the North Caucasus, there are significant differences in the natural dynamics between different ethnic groups. The surplus of labor in the "ethnic" parts was visible already in the Soviet era, and part of the male population was forced to seek employment in seasonal jobs in construction and other activities. Sheep farming in the "Russian" regions of the North Caucasus was maintained exclusively due to settled Chechen or Dagestan shepherds. They first lived in provisional, seasonal settlements, and then settled down with their families.

After the collapse of the Soviet Union, there was an economic crisis, which resulted in an increased share of the Caucasian population in the labor market in the neighboring Russian regions, as well as in Russia as a whole. Furthermore, violent clashes, especially the Chechen war, increased the emigration from the North Caucasus: many Chechen communities were created not only in Moscow but in most of the big cities. A large number of refugees from Chechnya still live in refugee camps, located mostly in Ingushetia (Zürcher, 2007).

After a partial recovery of the economy after the crisis in 1998, in a large number of Russian cities, there was a lack of labor, and especially a lack of educated workers in construction, animal husbandry and industry. On the other hand, in the culture of the Caucasian peoples, the tradition of industrial labor has never been rooted. Market processes and structural transition of the Russian economy resulted in a decline in employment in industry and an increase in the number of jobs in trade and service activities marked by large investments and profits. Using these benefits, many immigrants from the North Caucasus were hired in these activities, in trade and services, from restaurants to automobile workshops.

Immigrants from Chechnya, Dagestan, Armenia and other parts of the North Caucasus settled in the rural areas of the "Russian" regions where land and houses became available to them because of the demographic decline of the Russian population. The change in the ethnic composition of those until then ethnically homogeneous Russian settlements encouraged the younger cohorts of the Russian population to leave them. In a short period of time, the ethnic composition of the entire area has changed so much that the term "derusification" has entered the political discourse (de Waal, 2010).

If the emigration from the ethnic republics served to temporarily or permanently solve the problem of labor surplus and significantly reduce population growth rates, it had different effects in the "Russian" regions. In these areas, the arrival of migrants is compensated with high mortality rates in the post-Soviet transition period. Krasnodar and Stavropol region with mild climatic conditions were the most attractive destinations for migrants. These areas were flooded by Russians emigrants from the former Soviet republics (especially from Kazakhstan and Central Asian republics), as well as from parts of the Russian Federation, including Chechnya and the rest of the North Caucasian republic.

The features of the migration into the "Russian regions" changed over time. The highest level of migration was reached in 1994. Between 1991 and 1995, the migration surplus in three Russian regions (Krasnodar and Stavropol region, Rostov region) amounted to 775,000 inhabitants. In addition to the number of Russians, the number of Armenians has increased significantly, mostly due to the immigration of those who left Azerbaijan after the violence in Baku and Sumqayit in 1989 and 1990, then the Nagorno-Karabakh, but also Armenia itself

after the 1988 earthquake and the deterioration of the economic situation. Armenian migrants rely on the help of Armenian communities that had previously existed in the cities of the wider northern Caucasus area (Archer, Jonson, 1996).

Between 1991 and 1995, the migration flow (especially Azerbaijanis, Chechens and Dagestans) to the Russian regions was continually decreasing and could no longer compensate for the population loss caused by mortality. At the same time, there has been a change in the main factor of migration, because economic reasons have come to the forefront instead of political ones. After 2000, the number of inhabitants increased only in Dagestan and Ingushetia, as well as in Chechnya (de Waal, 2010).

Using data for cities and regions from censuses conducted between 1970 and 2002, V. Belozorov noticed two main trends characteristic of the ethnic republics of the North Caucasus. On the one hand, it is a decrease in the share of ethnic Russians and an increase in the number of members of Caucasian ethnic communities, and on the other hand it is ethnic homogenization of mountainous areas in ethnic republics. Furthermore, the migration of the population from mountainous to lowland areas was also observed. For example, in Dagestan, more than 200,000 people were displaced through deportation and "organized migration," which resulted in the creation of 75 new village centers with a mixed population. In the last decade of the 20th century, the North Caucasus republic, especially Dagestan, experienced "explosive urbanization". Makhachkala has become the fastest growing city in Russia, and its metropolitan area has reached a population of 700,000, which is one third of the total population of Dagestan. New settlements and cities are rapidly turning into unique ethnic "melting pots" in which traditional ethnic habits gradually become loose or even disappear (Chenciner, 1997; de Waal, 2010).

Also, there has been a decrease in the prevalence of Russian language in the North Caucasian republics, especially among young people in isolated mono-ethnic communities. According to the 2002 census, as much as 15% of Avars, 13% of Dargins and nearly 20% of Chechens cannot communicate in Russian. On the other hand, Russians rarely speak autochthonous Caucasian languages. After the discrediting of the communist ideology and the breakdown of the old Communist Party, an ideological vacuum emerged. There was also a decrease in the level of communication among the population, and the spatial mobility of scientific, technical and administrative staff was also lower than before (Zürcher, 2007). But, despite the dramatic cultural and religious reconstruction in the Caucasus area, the heritage of the past is still strong. The Russian language is also the main mean of communication. The centuries-old experience of ethnic coexistence, especially from the Soviet era, remains a powerful factor of unity in the North Caucasus political area. Unity is also contributed by the joint higher education system, as well as the dominance of federal television programs that easily reach the furthest mountain corners. The mass migration of labor to central Russia also contributes to interethnic influences.

5. SOUTH CAUCASUS (TRANSCAUCASIA)

The Caucasus includes the post-Soviet space south of the Caucasus Mountain, where at the end of 1991 three independent states were formed, i.e. until then Soviet republics of Georgia, Armenia and Azerbaijan. The process of relativisation and bringing into question the *de jure* of the existing borders of the former Soviet republics, today independent states,

throughout the post-Soviet space, has progressed mostly in Transcaucasia, where the disputed internationally recognized borders both Georgia and Azerbaijan are in question. In the case of Georgia, it is about Abkhazia and South Ossetia, and in the case of Azerbaijan, it is about Nagorno-Karabakh. In particular, the process of separating Abkhazia and South Ossetia has far removed. After armed conflicts involving Georgian and Russian military forces, Abkhazia and South Ossetia strengthened their independent position by defeating the Georgian army of the Saakashvili regime, and then by recognizing their independence by official Russia (MacFarlane, 1997).

5. 1. Georgia

The Republic of Georgia is located in the area south of the Caucasus mountain range, more precisely, in the area of Transcaucasia. In the north of Georgia, there is a long border with Russia, in the west there is an exit to the Black Sea, Turkey in the southwest, and Armenia in the southeast, while in the east, there is a border with Azerbaijan. If we count in Abkhazia and South Ossetia, which do not recognize the Georgian authorities, the territory that Georgia encompasses in is much larger (Chervonnaya, 1994).

Due to the fall under the rule of various nations, during the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, Georgia, with the help of Russian Empire, liberates itself from the Turkish slavery and enters the composition of Romanov's Russia. Within the Soviet period, Abkhazia and South Ossetia had an autonomous status within Georgia, which at that time had the position of the Soviet republic. South Ossetia relies on its compatriots from North Ossetia, which is an autonomous republic within Russia (Aves, 1991).

On the eve of the Second World War, the beginning of the conflict between Georgia and Russia was initiated, when Stalin, by nationality Georgian, carried out border revisions, allocating Abkhazia and South Ossetia to the Georgians, his fellow countrymen. Abkhazia has an exceptionally large exit to the Black Sea, almost half of Georgia's exit to the sea, but a relatively small area. South Ossetia is inhabited mostly by Orthodox Christians, Ossetians, who are thus separated both politically and territorially from their compatriots, who found themselves in North Ossetia (Akhaltaki, 1996).

Within Georgia, the Russian minority was not numerous and amounted to less than 10% of the population, and in recent years it has increasingly moved to Russia, and in Georgia the desire for independence has increasingly been expressed. As rarely any other member of USSR, Abkhazia and South Ossetia had the status of an autonomous republic or autonomous region within Georgia, and immediately after the dissolution of the USSR, they declared independence, and then they also succeeded to defend themselves from the Georgian armed forces. According to the then-effective USSR Constitution, Georgia, as well as other federal republics, had the right to self-determination to independence, but they had that right in the case of the secession of Georgia and its two autonomous republics, Abkhazia and South Ossetia (Colarusso, 1995a).

They could choose whether to remain in the composition of Georgia in case of its independence or leave it. It is believed that most of the tensions that are created during the last decade and a half between Tbilisi and Moscow officials due to the fact that Russia was benevolent about aspiration of Abkhaz and South Ossetians to maintain their independence relative to Tbilisi, but it has never publicly supported their plebiscitary desire to join Russia. While the president of Georgia was Shevardnadze, there were fair relations between Moscow and Tbilisi, Georgia was a member of the Commonwealth of Independent States (in which

Russia played a dominant role). Significant changes came in 2003 when Mikhail Saakashvili was brought to power. At the beginning of his mandate, Saakashvili restored Georgia's sovereignty over the southern province of Adjara, where the Muslim population of Georgian national origin lives. As this move was recognized by the Turkish (Adjara borders with Turkey, unlike Abkhazia and South Ossetia, which rely on neighboring Russia when it comes to geography, economy, culture and traffic), Saakashvili more eagerly started the process of "reintegration" of Abkhazia and South Ossetia into the state-legal framework of Georgia. These moves only further deteriorated the relations on the Georgia-Russia route.

During the summer of 2008, conflicts broke out on the borders between Georgia and South Ossetia and Abkhazia. At the end of August 2008, Russia recognized the *de jure* independence of Abkhazia and South Ossetia.

As for the remaining minority population in Georgia, it is now mostly loyal. This refers to Adzharia on the coastal South (which is contributed by the political position of Turkey, which in principle supports the current regime of Georgia), and the majority Armenian population in the province towards the border with Armenia (for which the correct attitude of the official Yerevan towards Georgia as a whole, mostly guided by the transport route through Georgia, is favorable), as well as other minority groups. On the other hand, a hundred thousand Ossetians, who lived in Georgia outside South Ossetia, mostly fled to Russia (predominantly in North Ossetia) or South Ossetia. There are almost no ethnic Abkhaz in Georgia. The number of ethnic Georgians who fled from Abkhazia and South Ossetia to Georgia after the August 2008 conflict increased further, and they represent a new obligation for the strained Georgian economy and society (de Waal, 2010).

5. 1. 1. The position of the Abkhazia after the conflict in august 2008

Abkhazia covers some 9,000 km², with about half a million people living in it. It is especially important that it encompasses a very wide exit to the Black Sea, which earned the title "Soviet Riviera". The population of Abkhazia was ethnically divided, but after the conflict in the early 1990s, it was reduced to mostly Abkhazian, as the part of ethnic Georgians was expelled. In addition, there are significant minorities of the Russians, and a smaller number of other Caucasian peoples. According to the religion, Abkhazians are divided into Muslims and Orthodox Christians.

On the military front, on September 17, 2008, Russia signed an agreement with Abkhaz on defending its borders and creating military bases. At the end of March 2009, two countries agreed that Russia would get the mandate of defending the external borders of Abkhazia. Before the 1990s conflict, the Georgian population in Abkhazia was numerous, almost as much as Abkhazian, with the existence of a large number of other nations, such as the Russians, North Caucasian nationalities, etc.

During the 1990s, most of the national Georgians from Abkhazia were expelled, although they are still the majority population in the Gaul area in the south of the country. It is estimated that there are close to 40,000 people there, but their number decreased after the August 2008 conflict.

Thus, in the Kodori Gorge, which was recaptured by Abkhazia with the help of the Russian army, only thirty Georgians out of 2,500 are now left. In the area of Gaul, Georgian population complains that even education is made difficult to them (de Waal, 2010).

5. 1. 2. Southern Ossetia after the august 2008 conflict

South Ossetia suffered significant material and human losses during the August 2008 conflict and a large number of residents were temporarily displaced. South Ossetia is a far less important area compared to Abkhazia in terms of the "hard power" elements, as these factors are seen in international relations. It covers about 4,000 km² with only about 70,000 inhabitants. Unlike Abkhazia, which includes a wide exit to the Black Sea and which is morphometrically located in the plains and hinterland sector, South Ossetia encompasses the mountainous continental area. South Ossetians are mostly Orthodox Christians who aspire to unite with Russia. Over the last few years, through the Caucasian transit, Russia has built a special branch of the gas pipeline that is supposed to supply South Ossetia, which in this way becomes independent of the influx of energy products from Georgia. In addition to the Ossetians living in South Ossetia, about 100,000 Ossets lived in other parts of Georgia before the wars. Their number is now smaller, as some Georgians who lived in South Ossetia retreated to Georgia. Russia has been conducting a defense shield for South Ossetia since the end of March 2009, along with Abkhazia.

5. 2. Armenia

Armenia is not bordering directly with Russia, since eastern Georgia and western Azerbaijan extend between these two countries. In the airline, the distance between the two nearest points of Russia and Armenia is below 100 km. Armenia is located on a high plateau, in a relatively isolated traffic position, but strategically very important, bearing in mind that there is a view on the part of the Near and Middle East. At the same time, Armenia prevents the physical touch of Turkey with Azerbaijan, as well as other turkophonic peoples of the North Caucasus located in the south of Russia. Armenians like Georgians and Ossetians belong to traditional Russian allies in the wider region of the Caucasus. Unlike Georgia in the past few years, Armenians are still strategic allies with Russia. The problem of Nagorno Karabakh is a nucleus of conflicts of interest between Armenians and Azerbaijanians in that area. The Armenians were in a multicultural conflict with the Turks that culminated in the genocide against Armenians committed by the Turks in the late 19th and early 20th centuries. The Armenians have traditional connections with the Kurds (we assume blood connections as well), so they can be a very important link in a coalition that would curb neo-Ottoman Turkish projections in the future (Ataöv, 1997).

Armenia is a small republic with modest economy and resources. Exceptions are only some exotic subtropical cultures that thrive on its soil and for which the Russian market might be interested. On the other hand, Russia's interest in Armenia is primarily of a political nature, and Armenia from Russia can expect both economic and political gain. The truth is that through a small territory of Armenia, there is a pipeline of oil pipelines and gas pipelines, which can be hypothetically significant for Russia in case it rely on strategic cooperation with the Armenian southern neighbor Iran. This should also add to the real impact of numerous emigrants throughout the world, especially in the United States and the New World countries. Finally, thanks to the strategic alliances with Armenia in the long run, Russia can expect some pressure on both Georgia and Azerbaijan in terms of further political options and the two Caucasian states. Armenia is a small republic with modest economy and resources. Exceptions are only some exotic subtropical cultures that thrive on its soil and for which the Russian market might be interested.

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5. 2. 1. The problem in the region of Nagorno-Karabakh

Since the late 1980s, there are tensions between Azerbaijan and Armenia over the Azerbaijani province of Nagorno-Karabakh, in which the majority of the population are Armenians. The conflict broke out when Armenian MPs voted in the National Committee of Nagorno-Karabakh to unify the region with Armenia in 1988 (Fraser et al., 1990). The fighting in Nagorno-Karabakh escalated after Armenia and Azerbaijan gained independence. The local Armenian population inhabited in Nagorno-Karabakh held a referendum in December 1991, after which the independence and establishment of the Republic of Nagorno-Karabakh was declared not internationally recognized (Asenbauer, 1995; Cornell, 1997b).

Since the earlier Soviet proposal that envisaged greater autonomy for Nagorno-Karabakh within Azerbaijan was not satisfactory to any party, a war broke out between Armenia and Azerbaijan. Armenia in 1992 and 1993 defeated Azerbaijan and won not only Nagorno-Karabakh but also 20% of the surrounding territory. The cease-fire agreement was reached in May 1994 under the auspices of the so called OSCE Minsk Group (consisting of Armenia, Azerbaijan, Czech Republic, France, Germany, Italy, Russia, Sweden, Turkey and the United States) (Aivazian, 1998).

After the collapse of the USSR, the conflict has grown into an international problem from the internal one and is therefore subject to interpretation from the point of view of international law. Every request for joining Nagorno-Karabakh to Armenia is a violation of the territorial integrity of Azerbaijan. On November 12, 1993, the UN Security Council adopted Resolution 884 relating to the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict (United Nations, 1993). This resolution confirms the sovereignty and territorial integrity of the Republic of Azerbaijan and other countries in the region. In addition, the inviolability of internationally recognized borders has been pointed out and the ban on the acquisition of territory by force was imposed (Cornell, 1997a).

In Resolution 1416, adopted in 2005 by the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe, it is stated that a significant part of the territory of Azerbaijan is occupied by the Armenian forces, and that the separatist forces control the Nagorno-Karabakh region. The Resolution further warns that the occupation of the foreign territory represents a serious violation of the obligations Armenia has as a member of the Council of Europe (Council of Europe, 2005).

The Council of Europe called on the self-proclaimed authorities in Nagorno-Karabakh to refrain from calling elections, recalling that due to the armed conflict, a significant part of the population of the region was forced to leave their homes in the period from 1991 to 1994. The European Union also gave clear support to the territorial integrity of Azerbaijan and provided significant economic assistance for the rehabilitation of the conflict zones, as well as for assisting internally displaced persons. In the mid-nineties bilateral agreements on

partnership and cooperation with Armenia and Azerbaijan were signed. Thus, the legal basis for the regular political dialogue between EU and these countries has been created, which also predicts the obligation of respecting international peace and security and, in accordance with that, a peaceful settlement of international conflicts. The European Union pointed out the fact that the unresolved status of Nagorno-Karabakh has significant negative consequences, both for Azerbaijan and Armenia, as well as for the situation in the whole region, in the framework of the European Neighborhood Policy and in the principles of Eastern Partnership policy (Mouradian, 1990).

5. 3. Azerbaijan

Azerbaijan is a Caucasus country that has an access to the Caspian Sea and a burning history, intersected with numerous empires - Persian, Turkish, and Russian. Each of these empires has imprinted its seal on the formation of what Azerbaijan is nowadays, a country which, gained full independence from the USSR in 1991 and turned itself to national and every other development. However, the interweaving of cultures and civilization ideas gave a special charm to the "Earth of Fire".

Thus, in the capital, Baku, one can find remains of the communist era, as well as Persian monuments right around the corner, which testify to the impermeability of the golden era of Shirvan shah and his even more famous dynasty. This Shirvan shah is also known for laying the foundations for the emergence of the Azerbaijanis state. However, when history is concerned, the father of the nation is definitely Heydar Aliyev, a man whom everyone in Azerbaijan loves and whose name, portraits and busts can be found at every step. Azerbaijanis will proudly tell you that he, after gaining independence, brought peace, stability and prosperity to the country, and turned this Caucasian-Caspian jewel into a state worthy to be mentioned in an international vocabulary (Altstadt, 1992).

The Republic of Transcaucasia was formed in 1918, and Georgia, Armenia and Azerbaijan entered it, but already in 1922 three separate republics were formed from it. The reason for the dissolution of these three republics and the formation of separate states is that the nations, above all the relationship between Armenians and Azerbaijanis, had extremely bad inter-ethnic relations. During the First World War, Armenians suffered terrible genocide in Turkey. Given that the Azerbaijanis are a turkophonic nation, the relationship between Armenians and Azerbaijanis has become worse. The reasons for the deterioration of interstate relations have steadily increased.

During the demarcation, the USSR gave Ataturk's Turkey an area of Kars which was predominantly inhabited by the Armenians, while official Ankara escaped the establishment of an independent or at least autonomous Armenia in its part of the territory around Lake Van and Trabzon, which was otherwise provided for in the Treaty of Sèvres, which resulted in the practical abolition of the Armenian trail in Turkey. Of course, Nagorno-Karabakh belongs to Azerbaijan, and is mostly inhabited by the Armenians, while the Nakhchivan enclave (without territorial contact with Azerbaijan) belongs to Azerbaijan, and not to Armenia, which primarily geographically surrounds it. After the Second World War, Azerbaijan began to develop both culturally and economically, and 10% of the country's population had a large role in that.

These were mostly highly educated people, experts and clerks. Nearly as much Armenians lived in Azerbaijan, but they were mostly forced out (apart from the compact region of Nagorno-Karabakh, where they made a huge majority) at the end of the 1980s at the

time of a series of ethnic conflicts between the two nations. At the beginning of the 1990s this resulted in an ethnically homogeneous Azerbaijan, with only a few percent of the Russian-speaking population concentrated in the most unoccupied cities and the Armenian compact group in Nagorno-Karabakh (Atabaki, 1993).

When it comes to domestic politics, Azerbaijan has an autocratic regime, with a fairly developed economy that relies on the exploitation of the remaining (almost already exhausted) oil reserves. Oil is one of the main reasons contributing to the economic strengthening of Azerbaijan's long-standing Oriental backwardness. The Azerbaijanis are of Turkophonic origin and Muslim faith in an inconvenient geopolitical position between Russia in the north, Georgia and Armenia in the west and Iran in the south. Iran is a traditional opponent of Azerbaijan, and it has good relations with Russia on this issue.

The negative side of Azerbaijan is that it does not border directly with either Turkey or the Turkophonic countries of Central Asia. However, for Azerbaijan, the exit to the Caspian Sea (sea), favorable subtropical (modified) climate and the existence of spacious plains in the eastern part of the country are of great importance. It has already been mentioned that a major problem for Azerbaijan is the separation of Nagorno-Karabakh inhabited by the Armenians, as well as the Azerbaijani enclave Nakhichevan with which there is no territorial corridor through the Armenian territory.

The Azerbaijanis inhabit the majority of the far northwest of Iran so they are a majority on both sides of the Aras River - both in Azerbaijan and in the neighboring province of Iran. Although Russia is an ally of the Armenians and has a strategic interest with Iran, there is a possibility that in future Azerbaijan will find a way to build good cooperation and favorable relations. The neighboring Russian provinces of Dagestan and Chechnya are inhabited by mostly Turkophonic peoples. In the Russian interest, it is not excessive to tighten the relations with official Baku.

6. CONCLUSIONS

In the perspective, therefore, this region is significantly affected by the overall development of socio-economic and political trends in the world and in the region. The point is that even though the area we are talking about is not too important on a world scale because of the current natural resources (such as oil and gas) and other strategic raw materials - which are scarce (even Azerbaijan is no longer the first-class oil producer) Caucasian zone has first-rate geopolitical significance. It's enough to look at the map of Eurasia to see that the Caucasian region represents an intersection between the Middle East, South Russia and Central Asia. Hence, it is probably an even more important element of a global geopolitical board than our Balkan "gun barrel".

Those who control the Caucasus have a serious advantage in the whole area from Asia Minor to China. Again, the ethnic and religious mix of the people of the Transcaucasia and the North Caucasus, with the often negative historical heritage that burdens them, and the unresolved current problems that are even larger generators of tension, provides great internal conflict potential. Some forces, despite the fact that they are full of stories about "human rights" and "progress", misuse this situation without even thinking about the real consequences their dangerous combinations have on people living in the region.

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