

The Making of the South Caucasus Region: a Geographical Approach

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Abstract

The region of the South Caucasus bounded by Russia to the north, Iran to the south, and Turkey to the southwest stands at a crossroads of cultural and geopolitical interactions. It is a perceptual region primarily linked by the territorial proximity of three states – Armenia, Azerbaijan, and Georgia, but lacking significant cultural-geographical similarities. Internal economic links are relatively weak. Three states of the region have different, often opposing, geopolitical codes. The region is examined from a historical-geographical point of view and in a wider geopolitical context as it represents certain interest to the closest regional superpowers and the other global geopolitical players farther away.

Keywords: South Caucasus, perceptual region, Russia, Türkiye, Iran

Introduction

A tiny part of the population of world who ever studied geography at school probably knows that on the continent of Eurasia, on the isthmus between the Black and Caspian Seas to the south of the Great Caucasus Range there is a region called "the South Caucasus". But most of the people outside of the South Caucasus, and, maybe the states just bordering it, who ever heard about the latter region would not be able to recall the names of all three states constituting it despite two of them often making headlines in the world media because of a serious ethno-territorial conflict. Most of the inhabitants of the South Caucasus will be

puzzled by the above statement being sure that the composition of their region is "a well-known fact". But if for a comparison a survey had been carried out in the South Caucasus states with a single question to name by heart all the countries constituting much bigger and more important region of South-East Asia, the same prevailing answer of "don't know" would follow. Geographical ignorance has no boundaries!

The name -- "South Caucasus" -- is less than 30 years old: it was invented in the mid-1990s while earlier the region was called "Transcaucasia" for almost two centuries. The latter name is not completely out of use: they still stick to this term in the Russian Federation. Before the name "Transcaucasia" had been introduced in St. Petersburg at the end of the 18th century or the beginning of the 19th century the area had no common name at all.

The South Caucasus is a small region on the world scale (185,000 sq. km, less than 20 million inhabitants by the 2020s) defined by the territorial proximity of its component states. The northern border of the region mostly follows a physiographic feature -- the Great Caucasus range while the southern one was established after military confrontations of regional superpowers – Russian Empire (Russia), Ottoman Empire (Türkiye), Persia (Iran).

A real obstacle to considering the area to the south of the Great Caucasus Range a uniform region is not a controversy of names but the absence of the features that usually make a uniform or formal region, i.e. more or less universal cultural or economic characteristics. Besides, the three states of the South Caucasus have different geopolitical codes. But Armenia, Azerbaijan, and Georgia constitute a perceptual region of the South Caucasus, earlier called Transcaucasia.

During the Cold War era, the region was situated on the confrontation line: the longest border of the Soviet Union with a NATO member state (Türkiye) was in Transcaucasia. After achieving the independence the states of the South Caucasus were not able to find a common foreign political agenda: on the contrary two of them got involved in a prolonged warfare.

The region is of certain interest to the world, especially to the regional superpowers situated around it – Russia, Türkiye, and Iran and world superpowers farther away. A keen

interest in the region is demonstrated by the abundance of publications about it, among the most recent of them to be mentioned [Iskandarov, K. (2019); Yilmaz, S. and Yorulmaz, M. (2021); Neset, S. et al. (2023); Tamzok, N. (2023)].

What type of region is the South Caucasus?

The notion of a region is a basic concept of geography. A region could be defined as an area of land that has common natural (surface, climate, vegetation, etc.) or cultural (language, religion, economy, etc.) features.

A standard geographical text gives the following explanation for the regions:

"Regions may be either formal, functional, or perceptual.

Formal or uniform regions are non-overlapping areas of essential uniformity in one or a limited combination of physical or cultural features... [there are] formal (homogeneous) cultural regions in which standardized characteristics of language, religion, ethnicity, or economy exist.

The functional or nodal region, in contrast, is a spatial system defined by the interaction and connections that give it a dynamic organizational basis. Its boundaries remain constant only as long as the interchanges establishing it remain unaltered.

Perceptual regions are less rigorously structured than the formal and functional regions geographers devise. They reflect feelings and images rather than objective data, and because of that they may be more meaningful in the lives and actions of those who recognize them than are the more abstract regions of geographers" (Fellman et al., 1990)

If we accept the above-mentioned theoretical framework and try to define which type of region is the South Caucasus starting with negation, we will conclude that:

- ✓ it is not an ephemeral "functional or nodal region";
- ✓ from a *physical-geographical* point of view it cannot be regarded as very different from the nearby regions to the south and north because the elements of climate, surface, and biodiversity have a lot in common;

- ✓ from a *cultural-geographical* point of view, it was not (and is not) a "formal, homogeneous region in which standardized characteristics of language, religion, ethnicity, or economy exist".

Just on the opposite -- most of the above-mentioned characteristics peculiar to a homogenous cultural region are absent in this part of the world: languages, ethnicities, and religions are completely different in the three South Caucasus states. The largest ethno-linguistic groups belong to different linguistic families (Altaic/Turkic, Kartvelian, Indo-European) which historically professed different religions -- Shia Islam, Orthodox Christianity, and Armenian Christianity. There are smaller, less prominent, religious, and linguistic groups in the area as well. The region as a whole has (and had) no cultural cohesion of its own.

From the point of view of external relations, the three states of the South Caucasus so far have not only divergent but in some cases, contradictory international perspectives.

There are many other, more uniform, regions of the World, e.g. Latin America, the Middle East, Western Europe, Central Asia, etc. Naturally, the countries constituting any region may have different political interests. But in some regions, they have either common (or related) official languages (Latin America, Arab states), or they are more or less a civilizational whole (Western Europe, Central Europe, Baltic states), or bound by strong political links, e.g. by membership in a single defensive alliance (NATO member states), etc.

Similar characteristics are absent in the South Caucasus which could be defined as a perceptual region.

One may argue that almost every political-geographical region of the world is a perceptual one and its composition is a subject of a dubious consensus. E. g. when discussing the Middle East, which is a recognised region according to worldwide public opinion, even its composition does not look finally established. Such questions could arise:

Why is Türkiye considered a part of the Middle East while it aims to join the European Union and is its long-time candidate for membership?

Why is a part of the island of Cyprus a member of the EU while it is geographically closest to Levant and Türkiye, i.e. the Middle East?

More or less similar questions may arise in the case of the other regions of the world. Nevertheless, they all are regions, at least perceptual ones.

It is of less importance that two countries of the South Caucasus, Georgia and Azerbaijan, possess small territories on the northern slopes of the Great Caucasus Range, i.e. they are partially situated in physical-geographical East Europe while most of the South Caucasus is located in physical-geographical West Asia.

More important is that the majority of the population in all countries of the region now consider themselves culturally closer to Europe than to Asia: that is correct not only for Georgia and Armenia whose population are predominantly Christian, but for contemporary Azerbaijan as well whose population is overwhelmingly Muslim. The peoples of all three states nowadays consider themselves to belong in the so-called Greater Europe which is the idea of extended Europe implying to include countries in its proximity with strong political, economic, or cultural ties with the latter.

The diverse ethnoreligious groups of the South Caucasus got accustomed to being considered "being close enough" from the outside, and the region reflects the feelings and images of the foreign nations that consider the region a holistic one important from an economic point of view as a source of mineral wealth, sales market, transportation corridor, or from political or military-strategical perspectives.

How was the region of the South Caucasus formed?

Historically, before the 19th century, the area of the modern region of the South Caucasus belonged in the Middle East. During the 16-18th centuries eastern parts of the region, with different levels of integration, were incorporated in the Safavid/Qajar Persia, western and south-western parts – in the Ottoman Empire, while parts (mostly mountain) of the area were enjoying almost full independence.

The first time when the area to the south of the Great Caucasus Range found itself entirely under one political umbrella occurred in the 19th century. The Russian Empire began to politically penetrate Transcaucasia after concluding the Treaty of Georgievsk with the Kingdom of Kartli-Kakheti (East Georgia) in 1783: it meant the establishment of a Russian protectorate over that Kingdom. The annexation of the latter by Russia followed in 1801. Russia's territorial enlargement in the area continued with defeating and ousting from Transcaucasia of Persia (1804-1813, 1826-1828 wars) and the Ottoman Empire (multiple wars, especially those of 1828-1829 and 1877-1878) [fig.1].

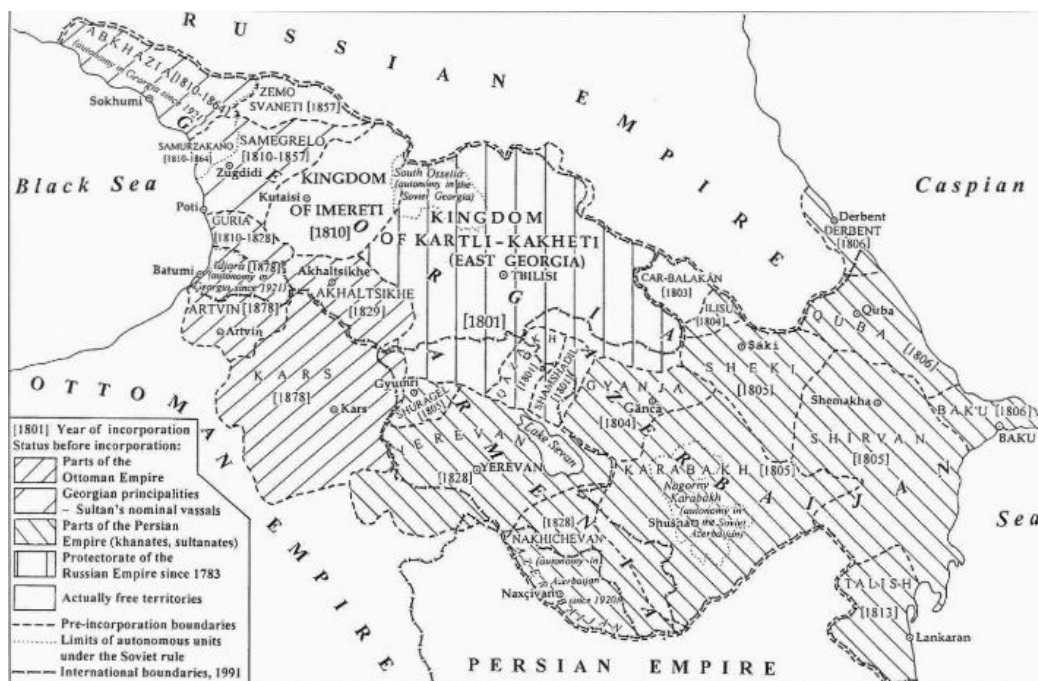


Fig. 1 Incorporation of Transcaucasia in the Russian Empire (1801-1878)

(Source: Gachechiladze, 2002)

The southern limit of Transcaucasia coincided with the changing state border of the Russian Empire. The main physical divider with Persia became the river of Araxes. Due to

Russia's military success in the wars with the Ottoman Empire its state border moved substantially to the southwest in the 19th century.

After the abrupt dissolution of the Russian Empire in 1917 the former imperial border became the state borders of the three nation-states which appeared at the end of May 1918. Almost fully formed nations of Georgia, Azerbaijan, and Armenia established independent republics located between Persia, the Ottoman Empire, and Russia. The new states of Transcaucasia claimed parts of the former Russian Empire as their historical heritage but existence of a few areas with mixed populations led to serious interethnic problems, especially in the case of Azerbaijan and Armenia. While Persia didn't object to the appearance of new neighbours, the Ottoman Empire and its successor state, Türkiye, proved to be less yieldable.

Soviet Russia signed a separate peace treaty with the Central Powers at Brest-Litovsk on 3 March 1918 ending its participation in the World War. According to the Treaty the Ottoman Empire was entitled to return the territory it lost to the Russian Empire after the 1877-1878 war. The newly independent states of Armenia and Georgia had to give up that land albeit for several months as the Ottoman Empire itself surrendered to Entente on 30 October 1918 and had to revert to the borderline existing before 1914.

Another twist of history that could have affected the outer border of Transcaucasia was the Treaty of Sèvres, signed on 10 August 1920 by the Ottoman Empire with Entente and its allies (without Russia, which signed a separate peace treaty with the Central Powers and the USA, which was not a formal ally of Entente, but an "associate state" during the WW1).

By Article 89 of the Treaty of Sèvres, "Turkey and Armenia, as well as the other High Contracting Parties agree to submit to the arbitration of the President of the United States of America [Woodrow Wilson: R.G.] the question of the frontier to be fixed between Turkey and Armenia in the vilayets of Erzerum, Trebizond, Van, and Bitlis, and to accept his decision thereupon, as well as any stipulations he may prescribe as to access for Armenia to the sea" [Hovannisian, 1996, 22-23].

A rather vague promise might have led to almost tripling of the territory of the Republic of Armenia [fig. 2]. However, no practical mechanism was elaborated by Entente to fulfil the promise given to a small and weak state. "Wilsonian Armenia" never materialized.

Theoretically, the implementation of the articles of the Treaty of Sévres might have moved the border of Transcaucasia deep inside Eastern Anatolia. In practice, the Treaty triggered the Turkish-Armenian war (September-December,1920). Türkiye was represented by the Great National Congress led by Mustafa Kemal Pasha with headquarters in Ankara. It brought a combat-ready army to the battlefield which effectively defeated the Armenian forces, captured the pre-1878 Ottoman territory from Armenia and, later, in March 1921, from Georgia as well. The latter had just lost the war to the invading Red Army of the Soviet Russia and was forcefully turned into a Soviet Socialist Republic on 25 February 1921



Fig. 2 Proposed "Wilsonian Armenia" (Source: author's work)

Russia (from 1918 - Russian Soviet Federative Socialist Republic, RSFSR) fearing increasing Turkish dominance in Transcaucasia used military force and hastily installed Communist governments in Azerbaijan (April 1920), Armenia (November 1920), and Georgia as mentioned above. The Russian-Turkish Treaty of Peace and Friendship was signed in Moscow on 16 March 1921 which established the outer borders of the Transcaucasian Soviet Socialist Republics with Türkiye (fig. 3).

The Soviet-Turkish and Soviet-Iranian borders became the southern limit of Transcaucasia from 1921. Fig. 3 does not show a short, 9 km long, state border of Türkiye with Azerbaijani exclave of Nakhichevan, which didn't exist in 1921: it was established in 1932 after swapping of parts of land by Iran and Türkiye along their border [Biger, 1995, 134]. That border is visible on fig. 5.

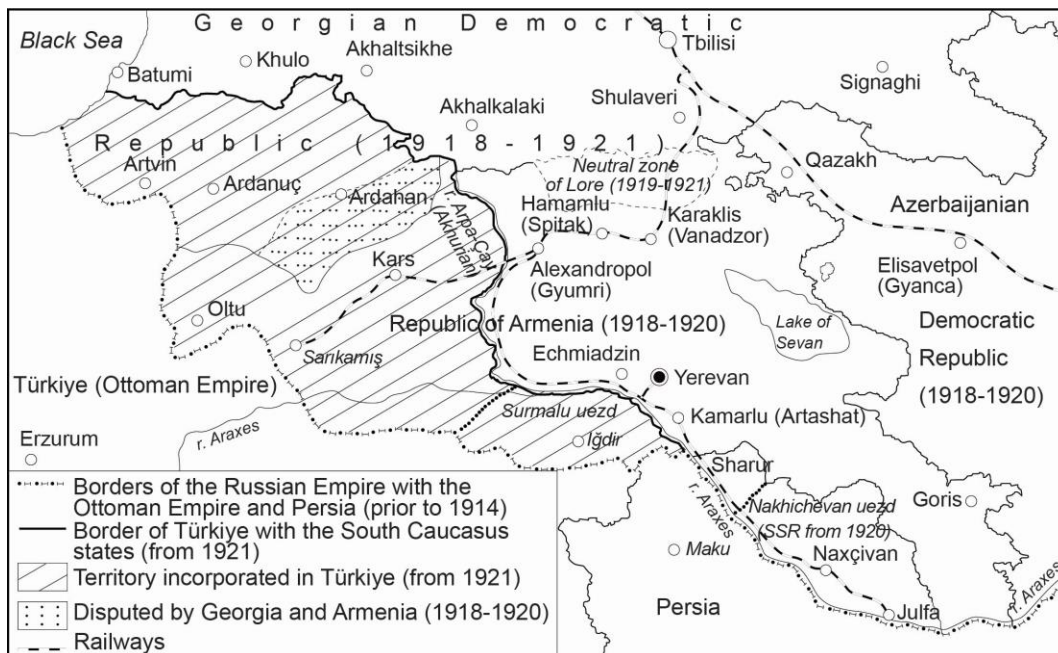


Fig. 3 Border of the South Caucasus republics with Türkiye established by the Russian-Turkish Treaty of 16 March 1921 (Source: author's work)

In the first half of the 19th century, Transcaucasia mattered for the Russian Empire primarily from a strategic point of view. St. Petersburg considered the region an important foothold for further penetration into the Middle East. Economically the region represented less interest to the Empire until the 1860s when Baku oilfields started producing lucrative "black gold". For the next several decades Baku was the world's largest producer of oil. The Black Sea port of Batumi became connected with Baku via railway in 1885 and a pipeline since 1907. During both World Wars Baku and Batumi were considered among the major targets of the belligerent states.

The Sovietization of Transcaucasia (what can be considered as re-incorporation into the Russian state) started in April 1920 with the installation of the Communist government in Azerbaijan given the importance of Baku oil, then virtually the only source of liquid fuel for Russia. The persistence of the Russian delegates during negotiations with Turkey in February-March, 1921 on leaving Batumi a part of the just Sovietised Georgia could be explained by the importance of this port as the terminal of Baku oil [Gachechiladze, 2021].

The newly independent republics of Transcaucasia which emerged in 1918 didn't attract serious interest from the states victorious in WW1, Great Britain, France, or the USA, although US President Wilson tried in vain to persuade the Senate to agree making of the Republic of Armenia an American protectorate (a "mandatory state"). The British who by that time had discovered rich oilfields in southern Persia and northern Mesopotamia, demonstrated marginal interest in the Baku oilfields but completely gave up any attempt to remain in Transcaucasia after Soviet Russia became the master of Baku on 28 April 1920. In July 1920 the last British troops left the region leaving it at the mercy of the Communist Russia and resurging Türkiye.

The Soviet republics of Transcaucasia were compelled by Moscow in 1922 to unite within the Transcaucasian Socialist Federative Soviet Republic (TSFSR) which became a founding member of the Union of the Soviet Socialist Republics (USSR) on 30 December 1922.

The TSFSR was dissolved in 1936 by a simple decision made in Kremlin, i.e. by Stalin, and three Transcaucasian republics had been formally declared the founders of the USSR along with several other Union republics.

Every version of the Soviet Constitution (1924, 1936, 1977) contained a clause declaring each Union republic to be a "sovereign state with the right of free secession from the Union" [Constitution, 1936]. In reality that was a hoax: there existed no mechanism of secession until a very complicated one was introduced in 1990 which was never used in practice.

By the 1980s the importance of the Baku for the Soviet economy diminished after much bigger oil and gas deposits had been discovered in Siberia. The other natural resources of Transcaucasia, e.g. manganese ore of Chiatura (Georgia), or being a rare place in the USSR where subtropical agriculture could have been developed (West Georgia, South-East Azerbaijan), were to some extent beneficial but not vital for the closed economic system of the USSR. In general, Transcaucasian republics were draining resources from the state budget of the USSR and didn't contribute a similar amount to the Soviet economy. But the region mattered for the Kremlin as a strategic foothold in the Cold War with the West.

The dissolution of the USSR at the end of 1991 occurred according to the administrative borders of the Union Soviet Socialist Republics: they became the state borders. The same independent states which existed in 1918-1920/21 reappeared in Transcaucasia and the Soviet-Turkish and Soviet-Iranian borders transformed into Georgian-Turkish, Armenian-Turkish, Armenian-Iranian, Azerbaijanian-Iranian and a short Azerbaijanian-Turkish borders (Fig. 4).

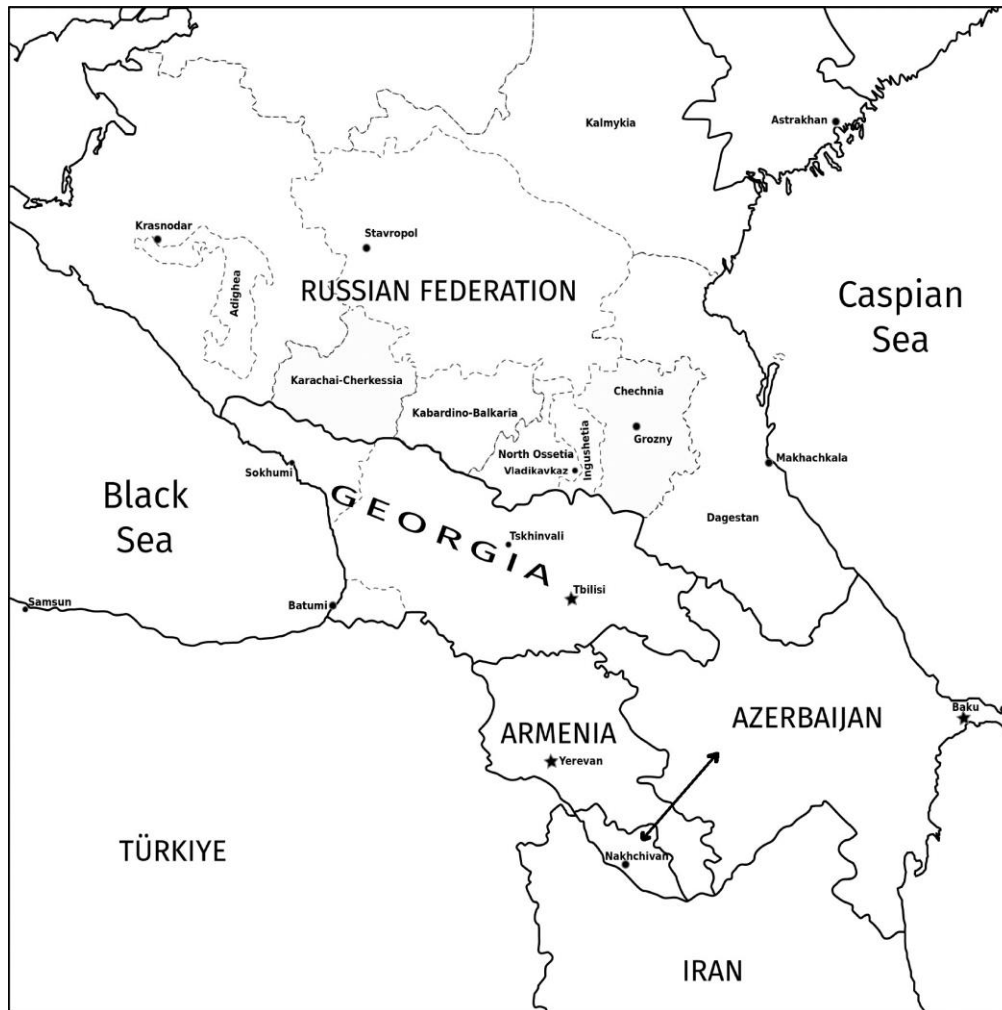


Fig. 4 The South Caucasus in the regional setting (2023)

(Source: author's work)

The South Caucasus in regional geopolitics

During the Soviet times, Transcaucasia didn't matter much to the neighbouring countries as the USSR had closely sealed borders.

It was officially considered to be "the Transcaucasian economic region" located in the European part of the USSR.

A notion of "territorial-production complexes" (TPC) was introduced in the 1970s Soviet economic geography which theoretically would "provide for high productivity of labour and active participation of the regions in the territorial division of labour" [Saushkin, 1980].

A Georgian geographer Alex Rondeli, an Azerbaijani economist Mark Najafaliev, and the current author attempted in 1984 to investigate whether the three Soviet republics of Transcaucasia formed a TPC.

They concluded that "the process of the economic integration of the region is incomplete. The formation of inter-republican (within the limits of the region) linkages is slow. Industry and agriculture of each republic remain more orientated on the all-Union market" than on the markets of neighbouring Transcaucasian republics [Gachechiladze et al., 1984]. In other words, a TPC in the Soviet Transcaucasia was rather weak. Economic cohesion within the region was not strong enough.

The editorial board of a British journal "Geoforum" considered the article a piece of work that didn't follow the traditional Soviet clichés and published it. Naturally, neither the authors of the article nor the editors of the journal could envisage the independence of the three republics of Transcaucasia after less than a decade.

Perestroika, i.e. reform of economic and, inevitably, ideological cornerstones of the Communist state, started in 1985 and ended dramatically for the Soviet Union: it dissolved in December 1991, fortunately without bloodshed in most parts of the former superpower. Only the South Caucasus (the new name of Transcaucasia used from the mid-1990s) and some other areas (Moldova, Tajikistan) could not avoid the tragedy of interstate and civil wars.

The newly independent states, former Union republics, became legitimate members of the international organizations and subjects of international law. The Russian Federation recognized 14 former Union republics and signed bilateral treaties with all of them, but its Duma (lower house of Russia's parliament) didn't ratify one treaty, that signed with Georgia in 1994.

Nothing started brightly for the three independent states of the South Caucasus. Armenia and Azerbaijan got involved in protracted warfare which had been triggered by the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict which began in 1988. The military actions were accompanied by the total cleansing of peoples of opposite ethnicities, i.e. Azerbaijanians in Armenia, and

Armenians – in Azerbaijan. Armenia and Azerbaijan so far have no diplomatic or economic relations with each other. The third state of the region, Georgia, got involved in civil wars on its territory which led to the appearance of multiple internally displaced persons (IDPs).

The economic ties of the independent states of the South Caucasus still are rather weak, predetermined mainly by political reasons.

Georgia is the only state in the region to maintain normal diplomatic and economic relations with the other two. Azerbaijan and Armenia have the opportunity to use Georgia's Black Sea ports of Batumi and Poti. Georgia provides ways of terrestrial economic contacts of Azerbaijan with Türkiye and that of Armenia – with Russia. There are a lot of elements of economic interdependence between Azerbaijan and Georgia as the latter's territory was used to construct oil and gas pipelines to export the Caspian hydrocarbon resources towards Türkiye and Europe. But still, the economic contacts of each country of the region are much stronger with the states and economic blocs outside of the South Caucasus.

Despite the efforts of the international community, especially those of the EU, to amalgamate the South Caucasus into a certain regional entity, the three states remain disunited, first of all from a political point of view. Each South Caucasus state develops its foreign political agenda, which often contradicts that of the closest neighbour's.

Independent *Georgia* demonstrated its willingness to join the EU and NATO which became more intensive since 2004. Georgia is the most active of the three states of the South Caucasus in the Eastern Partnership of the European Union. In 2014 Georgia joined the Deep and Comprehensive Free Trade Agreement (DCFTA) which entered into force on 1 July 2016, providing Georgia with access to some sectors of the European single market, as well as visa-free travel to the EU. On 3 March 2022, Georgia submitted an EU membership application and expects to become a candidate state. Almost all political parties in Georgia declare their pro-Western orientation.

Georgia's proclaimed attempts to integrate into Western alliances are causing a bitter reaction from Moscow.

Azerbaijan under President Heidar Aliyev (1993-2003) managed to attract serious interest in its hydrocarbon resources from an international consortium of oil companies in the mid-1990s. The oil and gas pipelines were constructed from Azerbaijan, via Georgia, towards Türkiye and opened in 2006. Baku became attractive to Western oil companies and other businesses. The geopolitical attitudes of Baku are to rely on Türkiye, less on the West or Russia. Because of the conflict with Armenia for a long time Azerbaijan was building its army and buying Russian armament at market price. Having substantial revenue from the export of oil and gas, Baku started purchasing Israeli and Turkish weaponry in the first decades of the 21st century.

Armenia was considered to be the most "pro-Russian" in the region, although until the early 2010s officially it followed a policy of complementarity. Up to September 2013 Armenia even worked in parallel with Georgia to join DFCTA with the EU, but was compelled by Kremlin to give up the idea and join instead the Russia-dominated "Eurasian Economic Union".

The problem of the *Nagorno Karabakh autonomous oblast* (NKAO) appeared to be the major contributor to the disarray of the intraregional relations in the South Caucasus. NKAO, a part of the Azerbaijanian SSR, which according to the Soviet Constitution had no right to change its affiliation, unilaterally decided to secede from Azerbaijan in 1988. Armenia militarily supported Nagorno-Karabakh but didn't officially recognize it as an independent state. Up to 15 percent of Azerbaijan's territory came under the control of the Armenian forces. All the local Azerbaijanian population (over 600,000) had to leave that territory and become IDPs. That was the cause of a serious humanitarian problem.

Although it is difficult to say with certainty that the aforementioned conflict was planned by the Communist government in Moscow, the post-Soviet Russian Federation didn't hesitate to get maximal benefit from the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict which gave it an excuse to retain its military presence in the South Caucasus. Armenia, having no political relations with either Azerbaijan or Türkiye had to rely upon Russia not only economically but militarily as well, becoming a member of the Moscow-led Collective Security Treaty Organization

(CSTO), founded in 1992 and reorganized in 2002, signing a military treaty with Russia and giving for free its territory for a huge Russian military base in the city of Gyumri and, partially, in Yerevan. Armenia could purchase weaponry from Russia for a reduced price being its ally.

Armenia's "pro-Russian" image started to change after the Second War of Karabakh of 2020 in which Russia didn't interfere using as an excuse that the warfare was going on the territory of Azerbaijan and not in Armenia proper: Russia had no formal obligation to help Nagorno Karabakh which finally got defeated by the Azerbaijanian army. The popular feeling in Armenia started to change not in the favour of Russia. That change in political attitude is becoming more evident after Azerbaijan's success in its lightning operation on 19-20 September 2023 to disarm the local militia of Karabakh Armenians [Ertl, 2023]. As the consequence most of the ethnic Armenians left Azerbaijan which caused another humanitarian problem.

It became clear already in 1992 that post-Soviet *Russian Federation* despite rhetoric about commitment to liberal values and respecting the independence of the former Union republics still considered the latter as its backyard. Russia didn't give up its goal to have the upper hand in the South Caucasus and temporarily achieved success in that direction. E.g. the outcome of the secessionist war in the Georgian province of Abkhazia (1992-1993), which ultimately had been cleansed of the ethnic Georgians, could not have occurred without the interference of the former metropolis. Kremlin provoked Tbilisi in another Georgian province -- Tskhinvali region ("South Ossetia") by supporting secessionism there. A Russian army invaded Georgia in August 2008 and the Kremlin soon recognized the Georgian provinces of Abkhazia and Tskhinvali region (former "South Ossetia") as "independent states". The major reason for the Russian military intervention in Georgia in 2008 was to block the latter's steps toward NATO membership: Georgia got unresolved territorial problems, which impede the NATO membership accession.

After the Russian invasion of Ukraine in 2022, Russia's grip on the South Caucasus became weaker, although the grip didn't disappear. The other geopolitical actors also stepped

in. Political experts were discussing the possibilities of geopolitical shifts in the South Caucasus, especially because of Armenia-Russian relations, which were deteriorating as Yerevan expected more support from its long-time ally – Moscow, in dealing with Armenia's relations with Azerbaijan [Caucasus, 2023].

Türkiye carefully but persistently is increasing its influence in the South Caucasus, mainly through the linguistically closest Azerbaijan. The major beneficiary from possible geopolitical changes in the South Caucasus seems to be *Türkiye*. Its most serious opponent, Russia, with whom it had a common border for almost two centuries and from whom it suffered several military defeats in previous centuries was no more its immediate neighbour: Georgia plays the role of a "buffer state" between *Türkiye* and Russia. The friendly relations between the current Russian and Turkish presidents are a sort of "marriage of convenience".

A huge market opened for Turkish agriculture and industry in the "post-Soviet space", the South Caucasus included. Stability in the South Caucasus is of utmost importance to Ankara. It has strong relations with Azerbaijan and Georgia and attempts to establish normal relations, including diplomatic, with Armenia.

Israel sells its hi-tech weaponry to Azerbaijan, as the latter is considered not to be on good terms with Iran, an arch-foe of Israel.

Iran, another ancient master of a large part of the South Caucasus, was less successful than *Türkiye* in its efforts to economically dominate the region: the economic sanctions imposed by the West are a real problem for Iran. Iran shares cultural and historical connections with the region, particularly with Azerbaijan: northern Iranian *ostans* (provinces) bearing the names "West Azerbaijan" and "East Azerbaijan" have a large population speaking the same language as that spoken in the Azerbaijanian Republic -- to the north of the river Araxes. Tehran suspects Baku of supporting a certain irredentism. Iran has concerns about its shared border with Armenia.

An Azerbaijanian author wrote recently:

"For Iran, the "encroachment" of external players into the South Caucasus is inadmissible...The Russia-Ukraine war complicated the region's geopolitics for Iran, as the European Union (EU) and the United States have increased their influence by strengthening their mediating role in the Armenia-Azerbaijan peace process... Tehran also views Azerbaijan's and Türkiye's plans to launch a transportation corridor via the southern Armenian territory as a threat, as this would allegedly cut off Iran's borders with Armenia and deal a severe blow to Iran's regional standing" [Huseinov, 2023].

The author meant a short, some 40-45 km-long, strip of land in Armenia along the border with Iran which during the Soviet times served to connect western parts of mainland Azerbaijan with the latter's exclave Nakhichevan. Since the early 1990s the railway passing in this area became not operational and the motorway was closed for Azerbaijan and its exclave. The interest in these transportation facilities increased after the "Second Karabakh War" of 2020 when Azerbaijan's sovereignty over the borderland to the south of the former NKAO was restored (fig.5).

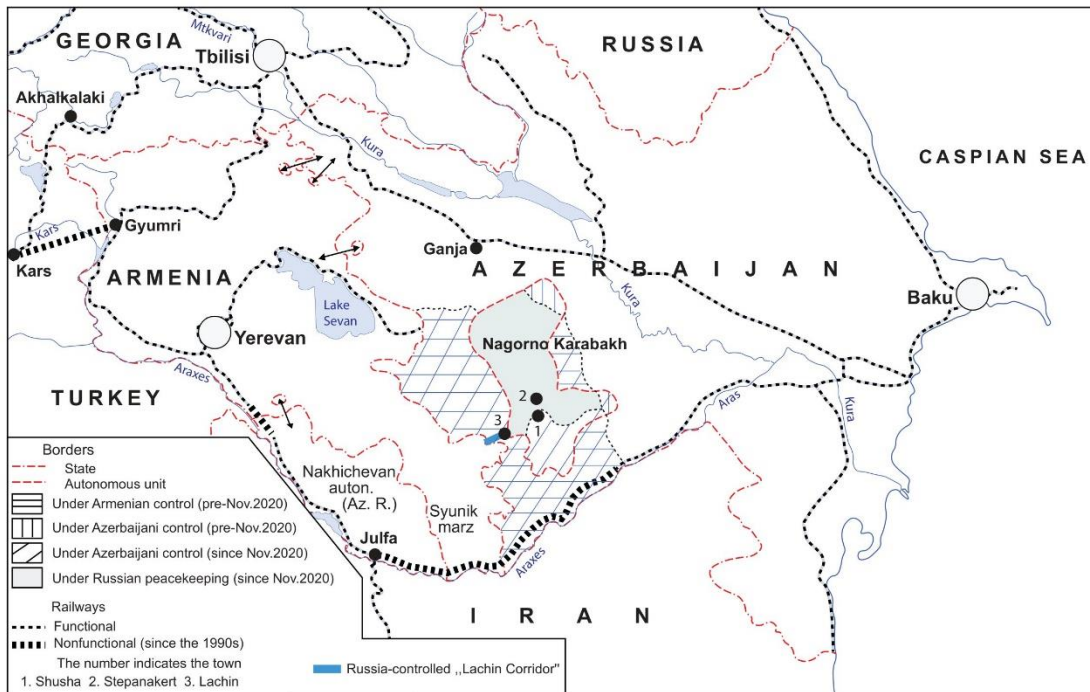


Fig. 5

Political-geographical situation in the South Caucasus in 2020-2022

(after the "Second Karabakh War")

(Source: author's work)

The revival of the idea of the "Middle Corridor" (a version of the so-called "Silk Road") linking *China* with Türkiye and Europe via Kazakhstan, Azerbaijan, and Georgia is a certain indicator of the interest of China in the South Caucasus. The idea of the "Middle Corridor" is that the key beneficiaries in the East and West would prefer not to rely entirely on the Russian routes of transportation.

But the capacity of the said corridor is limited. According to a study by a Georgian author:

"Because the route features several more border crossings than the Russian route, as well as the need for multimodal transfers to cross the sea, it costs more and is slower... The main problem with the corridor is that it involves slow and costly ferry legs to cross first the Caspian Sea and then the Black Sea from Georgia to the ports of Romania or Bulgaria or else utilize an underdeveloped rail route through Turkey... [Gabrichidze, 2022].

But, in spite of some limitations, the "Middle Corridor" and other projects mean more involvement of the South Caucasus states in the international economic relations and could be profitable to the whole region.

The South Caucasus matters for its closest neighbourhood and even for a faraway China. And the region is not forgotten by the West as well. Western powers, *the European Union* and *the United States* have already engaged in the region with interests in energy transit routes and stability. The EU and the US interests are more visible in Georgia which has a clear pro-western orientation with its population overwhelmingly supporting the idea of joining the EU and NATO. Armenia's public opinion seems becoming more pro-western as well, but the geopolitical situation of this country is complicated. Azerbaijan has a clear pro-Turkish stance.

Conclusion

The South Caucasus is a perceptual region less rigorously structured than a uniform, formal region. It was formed during the 19th century and had undergone serious political-geographical changes during the 20th century when three states appeared there based on ethnic lines. Culturally and even economically the region lacks coherence.

The geopolitical landscape of the South Caucasus reveals overlapping interests of the local, regional, and global players. Russia, the old master of the region in the Tsarist and Soviet times is still active but looks not as effective as it used to be. Türkiye seems becoming more influential, especially in Azerbaijan, which is its major ally in the region. Iran is more interested in the region, mostly because it fears a possible domination of Türkiye in the area.

Perceptual regions have a chance to get more consolidated, at least from an economic point of view, in case a political situation inside and around them becomes less confrontational.

The region of the South Caucasus may find its place, maybe a small place, in the world economy and politics, especially if peace prevails there.

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