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## **SOUTH CAUCASUS: FROM COLLECTIVISM TO INDIVIDUALISM IN THE FRAMEWORK CHANGING GLOBAL DETERMINANTS**

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Being one of the heterogeneous landscape of the world, the South Caucasus hosts three young states, which recently debuted in the rivalry environment surrounded by regional and global actors. The historic diversity and ethnic conflict legacy of the region are expressed in the foreign policy strategy of the small states and gives an impetus to diminish maneuvering capability in the competitive arena. The article seeks to analyze the roles of the South Caucasus in the bold agenda of regional and global actors, with a particular focus on the individual approaches of the three internationally-recognized states toward the U.S. and the EU.

*Key words:* South Caucasus, regional and global actors, United States, European Union, Russia.

**Introduction.** The South Caucasus region with three independent republics (the region is frequently recalled as Transcaucasia with respect to its boundaries beyond the Caucasus Mountains range, -edit.) is generally interpreted as the impact zone of both regional and global powers, wherein the regional turbulence stems from the clashes of national interests, albeit the region might be accepted the land of provisional stability [2, p. 4]. The heterogeneous ambiance of the slightest integrated region serves a comparative environment to Iran, Turkey, and Russia. Long-lasting Soviet ruling over the region less than a century has widely triggered an appetite for the independence of the South Caucasus trio – Azerbaijan, Armenia, and Georgia. While the region is much of history recognized in the light of Soviet Union due to its historic legacy, the regional states recall themselves simply the independent states of the South Caucasus.

Yearning for independence brought together decentralized foreign policies to the states, and shifted them into restless relief in the context of changing determinants of great actors. The highly-appreciated place of the South Caucasus in the bold foreign policy agenda of super powers after 1991, is generated by three major factors that comprised of a broad spectrum of aspects itself:

– The region is the frontier to Central Asia; ie. the regional boundaries between European and Asian economic corridors reinforces the gravity of South Caucasus in strategic/geographical prisms in most instance;

– The resource-rich countries of the region are the main rationale behind the regional attractiveness in the forward-looking policy of actors underlying European energy concerns, which is mostly matters in energy security agenda;

– The strategic region is the struggle arena of the U.S. and EU, of whose interests are jeopardized by Iran and Russia.

The fragile nature of ceasefire between the conflicted quaternary – Russia and Georgia, Azerbaijan and Armenia – possibility of the escalation of the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict, as well as bloodshed traumas of the region remains the South Caucasus in the center of the regional tension arise from irresistible limbo, and also sketch economic fundamentals of the regional states.

During the independence attained in the last quarter, the ex-Soviet states of the South Caucasus have stepped forward by entering the strong periphery of competing actors, while the region has debuted in the center of strategic/geopolitical struggles of clustering interests which have profoundly draw the contours of the fates of young states. Three frozen conflict legacy – Abkhazia, South Ossetia and Nagorno-Karabakh – have exacerbated by the lack of international vision, attaches a threat to regional cooperation, stability, and integration.

***The South Caucasus republics in a regional context***

The South Caucasus region by its nature squeezed between three regional powers – Iran, Russia, and Turkey – and the regional internationally – recognized republics are making immense efforts for survival in the context of collapsing heterogeneous national interests through the history. Russia, inasmuch as is confident being merited as the inheritor of the former Soviets, is the most engaged power of the region, and any kind of turbulences occurred frontier Transcaucasia, take a place in the bold diary of the federation. Since Russia's internal security is threatened by anti-Russian Islamist and radical alignments, protecting its North boundaries is highly connected with the internal security of the South Caucasus.

Besides any kind of hazardous alignments sheltered in the strategic landscape of the region, the coexistence of the U.S. and the EU in the region and pro-Western aspirations of small states is shaking Russia dominance inter alia regional dynamics. By now, we have observed overwhelming outcomes of collapsing Russian national interests followed by defensive and full-fledged combat in blocking the capability of external actors in the light of Russo-Georgian simultaneous proxy war broke out in August 2008 and in 2014 Crimean annexation. Combustible tension between small states and global powers though does not sound fairly by the ratio of the power, but in a consequence, Georgian pro-Western staunch, yet holds the delicate region in the center of Russian gravity.

The South Caucasus trio much of the independence history, strive to pursue warm relations with regional actors, though the existence a broad spectrum of controversial nuances in the nature of the mutual understanding and experienced conflicts. In these terms, Iran is the unique power of the South Caucasus that has a great stake in entire region. In the context of Russian-Georgian quandary subjected to the worth degree of mutual understanding in the disputable environment and Turkey's closed borders with Armenia due to Armenia-Azerbaijan Nagorno-Karabakh conflict, Iran still remains active regional power which holds mutual partnership with the region. Despite the fact this Islamic State has a close partnership with Shiist Azerbaijan, yet Iran also ties with Russia via Armenia as a part of north-south axes of regional partnership as against east-west axes that connect Azerbaijan and Turkey [6, p. 4]

Turkey's historical-cultural background with the nations of the region and kinship with Turkic population gives a privilege to trace strategic partnership, particularly in expanding energy route inconsistency and transforming into the energy hub. Turkey, maneuvering in the geopolitical scene of the strategic region seats in the crossroads East – West and North-South, underpins its position in regional projects, Baku-Tbilisi-Ceyhan (BTC) oil pipeline and Baku-Tbilisi-Kars railway, for instance, is the obvious mark of Turkey's enlarging impact in the region. Doing so, the regional actor conducts individual strategy toward the republics of the South Caucasus, but yet, Turkish-Azerbaijani mutual relations are still pointedly remaining as the main determinants, which manifest no intention to fall apart in the near future.

Turkey also elaborates deferential partnership with Georgia and Azerbaijan, while being the most important trade partner of them and hosting the large portion of the Caucasian population. Having maintained the redlines, where Russia's direct impact extensively matters, Turkey conducted quasi-sufficient foreign policy during 2008 war and in color revolutions occurred in

Georgia and in Ukraine. Being one of the NATO's member state, Georgia and Turkey came to the same conclusion at encapsulated economic points, and during the Russo-Georgian war, Turkey strived to take the role of mediator (for some, Turkey has supported Georgia by its NATO aspiration) with establishing "Stability and Cooperation Pact (CSCP) in the Caucasus" [9, p. 87]

***Stuck between national and international interests***

The pivotal presence of the Euro-Atlantic blocks in the region dates back in parallel with the independence history of Azerbaijan, Armenia, and Georgia, despite the active involvement of them has fluctuated by the mobility of decisions of administrations in the U.S. and the engaged program of the European Union (EU).

The South Caucasus attractiveness index was exacerbated by global challenges; ending of the Cold war, 9/11 terror attack and the counter-terrorism efforts in the aftermath of the attack, and the 2008 events were the three main pillars of Transcaucasia's attraction by signaling U.S. engagements. The peaceful eclipse flowed-up by 2003 Rose revolution and 2008 war made an affordable ground for the U.S., which was seeking for an applicable path for the long time aiming at to expand its scope in the immediate borders of Russia and Iran [7]. In this context, the active entity of the U.S. in the region positively correlates with the foreign policy conducted by Iran and Russia.

The regional complexity derived by the political, social and economic landscape of the region gives an impetus to the regional quandary and fragile ceasefire. On the contrary, one of the global powers – the U.S. has never shared the equal degree of interest in the different period of time and, fluctuated upon the different patterns of national interests throughout the quarter of the century. Stuck among the regional configurations darkened by the divergent ambition of Russia and Iran, U.S. has largely assisted for amplification the statehood, democratic transition, and integration of the South Caucasus's young republics at the early 1990s.

Not accidentally, the U.S., following the Soviet dissolution, has purposefully arranged the first official visit of Secretary of State James Baker, giving a tender message on the importance of the region. Shortly after the Soviet break up, the U.S. has opened its embassy in Baku in 1992, directing United States foreign policy to the new horizon of the Post-Soviet space in practice. However, U.S.'s very much active involvement in the region has started from 2005. Though until 2001, the U.S. has displayed an ignorant position to the security concerns of the South Caucasus, which has negatively affected EU's existence in the region and threatened East-West energy corridor, however just after 9/11 terror attacks, the U.S. has totally altered its foreign policy spectrum toward the region aiming to find a partner in counter-terrorism efforts as a military polygon for Operation Enduring Freedom campaign [3, p. 1].

The reset policy initiated by Obama administration at the early stage of his presidency has been echoed 'leaving the front' by the political experts. The U.S.'s regression from Iraq, and fighting against tyranny in Syria, and its presence in Libya has substantially threw away /diversified U.S.'s attention from the region. While the U.S. position slightly weakened in the region in parallel with the 2008 events, the silence of Western block, the lack of attention and stagnancy in delicate situation toward the regional strife, have seemingly damaged the U.S.-South Caucasus relations and undermined bilateral credibility. Georgia's bloody experience in pro-Western and NATO aspirations, which has followed by the open-scale war is a clear mark of the failure of Barack Obama's administration in the regional trajectory.

Nevertheless, in fact, when the Ukrainian and Syrian crisis came to the engaged schedule of the states, his restart policy has been altered by changing determinants of the global processes. Indeed, Obama's reset policy and Pentagon's decision on withdrawal from Afghanistan and Iraq fronts has been perceived as American regression from the game, and in turn has entailed

an affordable path to reinforcing Russian fortress in the region; the range of military exercises in the Caspian sea took place on March 15, 2014, by Caspian Flotilla ships and in Armenia has clearly intensified Russia's growing role in the region.

Since the independence, the South Caucasus republics made a u-turn of the foreign policy toward the superpowers. Despite the fact that Azerbaijan has intensified relations with the EU at the beginning of independence, however from 2011 has embraced Non-Alignment Movement; Armenia mainly conducts Moscow –centralized policy along with recent upwards and downward trends with the EU. As for Georgia, this small state is still jumping beyond in its pro-Western aspirations [11, p. 221].

Georgia is a specific country wherein its ethnic conflicts are interpreted in parallel with its territorial integrity, and has explicitly experienced realpolitik after the 2008 Russo-Georgia proxy war. Georgia's Euro-Atlantic intention made possible the climbing tension in the South Caucasus environment. Though prior to 2008 war Georgia has successfully recovered from its trauma experienced in the Adjara Autonomous Republic, but South Ossetia and Abkhazia conflicts have totally challenged regional scenarios. Despite the odds, Georgian side still indicates no way back in integration with the EU; Georgia's consistence has resulted in Association Agreement with the EU by creation of the Deep and Comprehensive Free Trade Area in 2014 [1, p. 4].

Moreover, Georgia's insistency toward Pro-Western aspiration has yielded visa-free agreement with the EU in 2015, and the Georgian Prime-Minister Giorgi Kvirikashvili is recognized as the first passenger benefited visa-free regime, who flew from Tbilisi to Athens, and it is widely considered as a triumph of EU-Georgia bitter integration marathon. Georgia is also actively merging its efforts for NATO; 2008 Bucharest summit holds an open door for Georgia toward being NATO member state once the country meets NATO requirements, and by now in 2014 (Wales Summit) and 2016 (Warsaw Summit) NATO has adopted the range of measures on supporting Georgia's efforts toward a full membership.

Azerbaijan has started its independence journey with long-lasting national concussion after the escalation of the Armenia-Azerbaijan Nagorno-Karabakh conflict, and the loss of 20% its territories was the last curtain of Armenia-Azerbaijan intensive confrontation until four days war broke out in 2016 in the line of contact (LoC). Though energy-rich Azerbaijan crushed between the collapsing interests, but the young country has managed maneuvering among Russian dominance and pro-Western aspiration. Considering Azerbaijan's unprecedented vitality in the region, Zbigniew Brzezinski, the U.S.'s National Security Advisor to the President of the United States (1977–1981) has hailed Azerbaijan as 'geopolitical pivot' of the Caspian region, attaching a particular interest to the country. Not accidentally, Republican Senator Richard Lugar and the head of the Senate Foreign Relations Committee noted Azerbaijan America's sole friend on the Caspian basin.

Despite the strategic partnership with the U.S. fixed during George W. Bush administration U.S.-Azerbaijan relations have embowered during the 2008 Russo-Georgian war for the first time, and the second one was tested during the 2014 Crimean annexation by Russia. Though the echo of broken relations with the adoption Section 907, was gradually forgotten by George W. Bush's statement on the importance of Azerbaijan in Afghanistan war, on the contrary, during the Obama presidency Section 907 rhetoric has been reborn with intensive efforts American-Armenian lobbyist groups. Official Baku's disconnection with the Obama administration is analyzed in the context of Obama's arduous task to salvation America from the crisis and to end up the large scale of war in Iraq and Afghanistan.

To some extent, Obama administration has attempted for restoring broken ties with Azerbaijan, by calling president Ilham Aliyev to Istanbul Summit in 2009. But, President Aliyev's reject for attending to the conference was another downward trend in normalization of interstate relations.

All these negative spots launched after Barack Obama request on normalization Turkey-Armenia relations with opening the closed borders, which were closed during the Nagorno-Karabakh war. The immensity of the dissatisfactions has further followed by a delayed arrangement of ambassador Mathew Bryza to Azerbaijan, and the most important broken point of the chain is the U.S.'s unproductive efforts/failures in the mediation efforts under the OSCE umbrella.

It is worth to mention that Obama's reset policy changed at the second term of his presidency. With this regard, the appointment of the special envoy on the Caspian region was an indication of modernization of South Caucasus approach [4, p.8]. Recently, the U.S.-Azerbaijan bilateral relations are going ahead with development trends during the Trump presidency. President Trump has recalled Azerbaijan as a valued partner in his letter to his counterpart Ilham Aliyev in 2017, and he has addressed a congratulatory letter upon president Aliyev's victory in presidential elections took place on April 11, 2018.

Landlocked Azerbaijan sought to find a balanced and meaningful position in a very much geostrategically delicate region surrounded by Iran, Turkey, and Russia, while it is actively evolving mutual partnership with Israel. From this perspective, the proximity of the region entails further expansion of bilateral ties with the U.S. with a particular focus to access to the Middle East through the South Caucasus. Despite the fragile nature of U.S.-Azerbaijan relations with Obama's reset policy, Azerbaijan positioned at the list of beneficiary countries under the Generalized System of Preferences program of the U.S. inking the investment treaty in 2008, and the trade turnover between two countries is estimated \$2,8 billion in 2011.

In the aftermath of the Russian-Georgian war in 2008, the regional states have reviewed their foreign policy with the highest accuracy in the scene of changing the balance of the powers. Awkward stagnancy of the U.S.'s demonstrated on the war, EU's semi-active role to its important anchored in the region – Georgia in 2008, led to Armenian slide to Russia, given a priority to the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict. Armenia's Russia-centralized policy has been reaffirmed during the visit of ex-Russian president Dmitri Medvedev to Armenia in 2010. Russia has pledged for being as a guard for Armenia's security, and extend selling defensive weapons to the country inking an agreement in this sphere.

Armenia has strategic partnership/hostile relations with its natural neighbors Turkey, Iran, Azerbaijan. With the Obama pressure, Turkey was convinced to sign Turkey-Armenia protocols in 2009 calling the sides to open embassies in the capitals, to sit around the negotiation table on opening the common border and mutually investigate the archive materials on "Armenian genocide". The soccer diplomacy conducted by former Turkish president Abdullah Gul has entailed switching the cold relations into a new phase countering *road map* of the relations. However, the signed protocols on *Establishing Diplomatic Relations*, and on *Development of Bilateral Relations* date to October 10, 2009, were not welcomed by political figures in Azerbaijan. [5, p. 8].

EU-Armenia relations continued with the round of Association Agreement and its inclusive part of Deep and Comprehensive Trade Area (DCFTA), while the Partnership and Cooperation Agreement with the EU is still interpreted as embryos of progressive bilateral ties. The opened range of opportunities with the EU has entailed a path for signing European Neighborhood Policy and the Eastern Partnership Program and as an inclusive part of the Association Agreement (AA). But, Armenia surprisingly, has changed its rudder in the favor of Russian-led Eurasian Economic Union (EEU) preferring national security concerns, which have been pledged for protecting by Russia.

Former Armenian Foreign Minister Edward Nalbandyan has explained the rationale behind the rejection of AA while mentioning that Armenian decision toward EEU will not cease the negotiations, and Armenia will conduct a partnership in different spheres with the EU, for

example, the EU-Armenia Agreement on Visa Facilitation is noted as a milestone in bilateral relations. In 2015, Foreign Affairs Council together with European Commission has initiated a broad spectrum of negotiations with Armenia by replacing EU-Armenia Partnership and Cooperation Agreement. As for U.S.-Armenia relation, the country is the Partner of Peace of NATO since 1994, and in the aftermath of 2008 war, Armenia gave a path for NATO exercises in the South Caucasus region. The U.S.-Armenia relations were intensified with Barack Obama's pressure on Turkey for signing the protocols in 2009. Up to date, Armenia has benefited \$2 billion from the United States, in the framework of previous programs and Freedom for Russia and Emerging Eurasian Democracies and Open Markets (FREEDOM) Support Act [8, p. 8].

**Discussion and Conclusion.** EU, while seeking the new alternative paths to avoid Russian dependency, has launched a strategy supporting economic and development aids to the region, and resettlement of war-torn conflicts. Once the EU decided to engage in the regional arena EU's European Neighbourhood Policy (ENP) and Eastern Partnership (EaP) came to the agenda as the inclusive part of this decision. During the visit Federica Mogherini, the European Union's High Representative of for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy to the South Caucasus in 2016, the importance of settlement of the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict was highlighted once again. The 2008 war occurred in Georgia was the lesson learnt from the past for the EU, and just after the war, this global actor has founded Monitoring Mission (EUMM) in Georgia.

But the fortress of the EU was fortified by adopting Eastern Partnership (EaP) in 2009, Association Agreements including Deep and Comprehensive Free Trade Areas (DCFTA), and visa facilitation/liberalization action plan (VLAP) [10,p.203-206]. In addition, the EU's position doubled during the 2016 parliamentary elections and Saakashvili's foreign policy based on pro-Western aspirations, at the final stage, the EU has managed to sign AA/DCFTA with Georgia in 2014. On the contrary, Azerbaijan and Armenia denied signing AA/DCFTA; while Azerbaijan refused the agreement proposing Strategic Partnership Agreement; however, Armenia denied ratification of AA/DCFTA in favor of EEU, which came into force in 2015, prioritizing national security at the first place in national agenda.

The states are not capable to change their neighbors; as the South Caucasus signs differentiated foreign policy strategies while struggling to survive, but in fact, the collapsing interests of the neighbors along with external actors define the regional determinants.

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### **ПІВДЕННИЙ КАВКАЗ: ВІД КОЛЕКТИВІЗМУ ДО ІНДИВІДУАЛІЗМУ В РАМКАХ ЗМІНИ ГЛОБАЛЬНИХ ДЕТЕРМІНАНТ**

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Будучи одним з гетерогенних ландшафтів світу, Південний Кавказ має у своєму складі три молодих держави, які нещодавно вступили в середу суперництва, оточену регіональними і глобальними акторами. Історичне різноманіття й етнічна конфліктна спадщина регіону виражаються в зовнішньополітичній стратегії малих держав і дають імпульс для зменшення можливостей маневрування на конкурентній арені. У статті розглядається аналіз ролі Південного Кавказу в сучасному порядку денному регіональних і глобальних суб'єктів з особливим наголосом на індивідуальні підходи трьох міжнародно визнаних держав в США і ЄС.

*Ключові слова:* Південний Кавказ, регіональні і глобальні суб'єкти, Сполучені Штати, Європейський Союз, Росія.