IDENTITIES, IDEOLOGIES AND INSTITUTIONS. A Decade of Insight into the Caucasus: 2001-2011. – Alexander Iskandaryan (Ed.) – Yerevan: Caucasus Institute, 2011. – 232 p.

A strip of land situated between the Mediterranean and the Black Seas, the post-Soviet Caucasus embarked on a painful identity quest at the turn of the third millennium. This – still ongoing – quest involves several daunting choices: between Moscow, Washington and Brussels, between oil and democratic values, and between feudal realities and revolutionary ideals. Throughout the last decade, the Yerevan-based Caucasus Institute has been conducting in-depth research of the conflicting and often subtle trends in the regions' politics. This volume contains a selection of research papers published by the Caucasus Institute since 2001 in Armenian, Russian and English, which best represent the challenges faced by this varied region at this crucial stage of development.

THE SOUTH CAUCASUS: BECOMING A REGION OR TRYING NOT TO BE ONE?[1]

By Alexander Iskandaryan[2]

The South Caucasus is a relatively small region situated between the Black and Caspian Sees, bordering on Russia, Turkey and Iran. The area of the South Caucasus is smaller than that of the United Kingdom, and its population is roughly that of the Netherlands. An isthmus connecting Russia to the Near East and Central Asia to Europe, it has strategic significance for the development of a large and important region lying on the intersection between South-Eastern Europe and the larger Near East.

To understand current developments in the South Caucasus, it is useful to look at the genesis of this region. The notion of the South Caucasus as a cohesive region with more or less clearly defined borders originated fairly recently. Up until the 19th century, parts of the region belonged to the Persian and Ottoman Empires, or to feudalized principalities and kingdoms located between the two empires. People living in the region did not realize they had anything in common, and there was no such thing as a "Caucasian identity." Numerous religious, local and ethno-linguistic identities coexisted and overlapped. A person could identify as a Persian-speaking resident of Shemakha belonging to the Armenian Apostolic Church, or a Georgian-speaking Sunni Muslim resident in Adjaria and subject of the Turkish Sultan. Even the educated people of the time had no idea about living in a common region.

In the early 19th century, the region was annexed by the Russian Empire as a result of several waves of Russian-Turkish and Russian-Persian wars. A name was needed to refer to the new lands in administrative papers. The new name, "Transcaucasia" or "Transcaucasus," was a very natural coinage for parts of the Russian Empire lying on the other side of the Caucasus Mountain Range. After a while, the lands known as the Transcaucasus began to be perceived as a unified region by internal as well as external actors. By its very name, the new region had a natural boundary on the north: the Caucasus Mountains. In the beginning, it did not have a southern boundary. It was the border of the Russian Empire, and later that of the Soviet Union, that be-

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came the southern border of the Transcaucasus. The border changed several times as a result of wars and political developments. Thus, from the 1870s until the 1920s, the Transcaucasus included three regions – Kars, Ardahan and Surmalu – that were at that time in the Russian Empire but have since been parts of Turkey. However, most of the territory of the Transcaucasus – the part of the Russian Empire south of the Caucasus Mountains – gradually merged into a whole by means of economy, transportation routes and cultural policies, and became a unified region.

A common education system, common legislation, increasingly widespread use of Russian as the regional *lingua franca* (interethnic communication language), a road network connecting the region to the centre of the Empire, the state borders on the south, and an emerging common market – all this made people living in the Transcaucasus gradually lose their connections to former parent countries such as Persia or Turkey, and identify themselves with the new region. Their obvious cultural and geographical dissimilarity to Central Russia led to the emergence of a super-ethnic cross-cultural identity of "Caucasians" who began to see themselves as a separate group within the Empire. After the USSR was established in the 1920s, this identity became even stronger because the southern borders were locked, and neighbouring Turkey became as inaccessible for people in the Transcaucasus as geographically distant countries like, say, Sweden, for example. The cultural world of the Soviets was contained within the Soviet borders, so that the cultural ties between, for example, the ethnic Georgians in Georgia and the Laz people in Turkey, or between ethnic Azerbaijanis living in Azerbaijan and Iran, were severed. Meanwhile, the difference between Caucasians and other groups living in the Soviet Union was becoming more significant.

In 1922, a short-lived attempt was made to establish proto-statehood in the region, called the Transcaucasian Federation. By the mid-1930s, the initiative was abolished in full accordance with the modernization paradigm of Soviet nation-building. The federation was dispersed, and the Soviet Republics of Armenia, Azerbaijan and Georgia were directly included in the Soviet Union. Some artefacts remained, though, including the Transcaucasian Economic Region and a variety of festivals, culture days and student exchange programs that survived until the disintegration of the USSR. The Transcaucasus had, thus, become a region inside the USSR, both in external and domestic perceptions. Breakup into regions was happening all over the USSR: Central Asia and the Baltic also became regions of their own, in many ways contrary to history and cultural heterogeneity. However, the differences or even contradictions that existed between Lithuania and Estonia, Tajikistan and Kyrgyzstan, Armenia and Azerbaijan, did not prevent the emergence

of a common identity, based on a number of markers by means of which the "Caucasians," "Central Asians," and "Baltic people" distinguished themselves from other people living in the USSR.

According to Benedict Anderson's theory, imagined communities actually exist in public perception. By the mid-twentieth century, the Transcaucasus certainly began to exist as a meta-ethnic multicultural region; it was no longer just a geographical name. People identified with it; it had clearly defined borders and internal economic links (nowadays often overstated).

The administrative borders within the USSR were drawn using a *Matryoshka*, or nesting-doll, approach. There were three Soviet Socialist republics in the South Caucasus: Armenia, Azerbaijan and Georgia; each included autonomous formations of various levels (autonomous republics and autonomous districts). Some ethnic groups became the "title nations" of two administrative units at various levels in the taxonomy (for example, Armenians in the Armenian Soviet Socialist Republic and in the Autonomous District of Nagorno-Karabakh), and others, of only one (like the Abkhazians in the Autonomous Republic of Abkhazia). Some autonomous units were not based on an ethnic principle: for example, Adjaria was a Georgian-populated autonomous republic inside Georgia, and Nakhichevan, an Azerbaijani-populated autonomous republic inside Azerbaijan. At the same time, there was no autonomy in many cases where numerous representatives of an ethnic group lived compactly in an administrative unit named after another ethnic group (e.g. hundreds of thousands of Azerbaijanis living in Soviet Georgia, about two hundred thousand Lezgins living in Soviet Azerbaijan etc.).

In Soviet legislation and practices, various levels of autonomy corresponded to various levels in the cultural and administrative hierarchy. For example, a Soviet Socialist republic would have its own Academy of Science, its Central Committee of the Communist Party, and an opera and ballet theatre. Autonomous republics had none of the above, but they could manage to get permission to open a university (Abkhazia did), something autonomous districts could not do, so that there were no universities in Nagorno-Karabakh or Southern Ossetia. Nevertheless, all autonomous formations were perceived as ethno-national structures, in a way, as embryos of national statehood. In the capitals of Soviet republics, autonomous republics and autonomous districts alike, elites were forming. Semi-undercover national discourses were born, mythologies emerged, and potential claims to the Centre and to neighbours gradually accumulated. This topic deserves focused research; it is worth mentioning here that in the entire multiethnic Transcaucasus with its numerous interethnic tensions, the only conflicts that lead to armed hostilities after the disin-

tegration of the USSR were the ones that existed in the "official" autonomous formations (Abkhazia, Nagorno-Karabakh and Southern Ossetia). Tensions in other areas densely populated by ethnic minorities did not lead to wars, although the size of the minority groups in some of them were even larger than in the official autonomous formations. For example, Georgia had more Armenians than Abkhazians and Ossetians put together, but armed controversies only happened in Abkhazia and Southern Ossetia. It is probably the formalization of ethnicity and the institutionalized emergence and concentration of elites that pave the way to politicization of ethnicity after external constraints are removed.

In any case, two trends were manifest during the Soviet era; the first was the creation of a meta-ethnic Transcaucasus region; the second, the emergence of a proto-nationalist paradigm amongst the "title nations" of ethno-national formations inside the region. Both trends were signs of modernization; the first, because a multicultural meta-ethnic community was formed whose basis was cultural identity not imperialism. People were not brought together as subjects of a Sultan or Shah but as a cultural entity differing from other subjects of the Tsar (or later of the Communist Party). The second trend consisted, in practice, in the emergence of diverse national identities within the borders of the USSR. It was quite similar to processes that unfolded in Eastern Europe in the 19th and early 20th centuries, when ethnic movements and ethnic identities born inside the Austro-Hungarian Empire became the foundations for new nation-states formed after the disintegration of the Habsburg Monarchy in 1918.

Ironically, the two trends coexisted and did not necessarily contradict one another. For example, in modern Europe, Latvian nationalism does not contradict the Latvians' European identity and often serves to enhance it; likewise, Georgian nationalism coexisted with and was even fostered by the Caucasian identity of the Georgians back in the 1970s.

However, the formation of ethnopolitical identities follows a logic of its own, described in the work of Miroslav Hroch. The result was inevitable: with the weakening of communist ideology and of the legitimacy based on this ideology, new opportunities opened for free expression of opinions and claims. At this point, political activity began and ethnic issues soon became politicized. There was ample ground for politicizing ethnicity. Sufficient numbers of educated activists were prepared to produce ideologies, become political actors and organize various groups and parties, thus increasing opportunities for public participation and becoming the leaders of newly emerging movements. Marxist, or Soviet, ideological legitimacy was by that time too weak to glue the Empire together any more. The only way the Empire

could have been preserved was using its repressive machinery, also weakened by that time. Liberalization during Perestroika increased opportunities for free expression, thus further loosening the Empire and launching the process that led to disintegration of the USSR.

In many parts of the Soviet Empire, the disintegration took the shape of revolutions, requiring large-scale mobilization of the population. Mobilization required popularly comprehensible ideologies that would generate the required amounts of social energy. In all parts of the USSR, there were short-lived attempts in 1986-1987 to mobilize the masses based on social, democratic or even environmental ideologies. However, national or even nationalist ideologies began to emerge very soon, first coexisting with the rest and then engulfing them all. What is more, a nationalist component was present from the start even in environmental or social ideas, phrased as "THEY are destroying our environment and THEY are taking away our resources to the Center". Nationalism proved to be the most basic, comprehensible and universal basis for solidarity; the emerging political elites were well aware of this fact.

It was quite natural that ethnic nationalism was chosen above civil nationalism. The way to this was paved in the long history of pre-Soviet and Soviet modernization. People did not solidarize as potential citizens of independent Georgia or Armenia etc. but as ethnic Georgians, Armenians, Ossetians etc. Territories were perceived as ethnic domains, even in cases like Abkhazia, where the title ethnic group amounted to less than 20% of the population. What mattered that Abkhazia was for the Abkhazians and Armenia for the Armenians as ethnic groups. This approach was distilled in a widely quoted saying by Georgia's first President, former Soviet dissident Zviad Gamsakhurdia, "Georgia for the Georgians"; it was also Gamsakhurdia who invented the concept of Georgia's ethnic "hosts" and "guests." No kind of meta-cultural unity proved stronger than ethnic solidarity. Unlike the time when the Russian Empire was disintegrating in the early 20th century, this time no efforts were made to build a Transcaucasian state. Then again, the 1918 project of a Transcaucasian Seim (parliament) just survived a few months. In the 1990s' turmoil of nation building, Caucasian solidarity was marginalized; the mainstream ideology was the establishment of nation-states based on a European model dating back the Wilson era, and the transition from planned economies to free markets was also understood as a foundation for national prosperity.

Another reason why Caucasian solidarity was marginalized was that the chosen course of development inevitably led to ethnopolitical conflicts. Politicized ethnicity in a region where ethnic groups lived dispersedly and administrative divisions

were based on a nesting-doll principle could not but lead to a situation where some territorial projects overlapped or competed against each other. For example, both Armenians and Azerbaijanis could claim the Armenian autonomy inside Azerbaijan as their own, and both Ossetians and Georgians laid claims to Southern Ossetia. Although simplistic explanations are often published in the press, the ethnic conflicts in the Caucasus were not isolated phenomena or random occurrences or evil doings of individuals. They were part of the region's nationbuilding process, similar to conflicts over Alsace and Lorraine in European history. Some of the conflicts were not purely secessionist but involved irredentist movements, similar to the Italian Unification, *Risorgimento*, and to the syndrome manifest during the disintegration of some parts of Austria-Hungary, when Transylvania did not become independent but joined Romania, and Polish Silesia joined Poland.

What is striking about the disintegration of the USSR is not that the building of ethno-national identities led to conflicts, but that the conflicts were so few. Controversies between various subjects of politics thus made ideas of a unified Transcaucasus increasingly unpopular. Perhaps the only successful project in this sphere was the change of the region's name from Transcaucasus to South Caucasus. The new name expressed conscious rejection of a Russian perspective and, thus, served to distance the South Caucasus from Russia. However, the name change was purely mechanical: no attempts were made to reinvent the region, and it continued to exist by inertia.

This inertia of unity continues to exist in various dimensions. The first dimension is cultural unity: common cultural codes, Russian as the language of interethnic communication, elements of Soviet culture (including both "high culture" and lifestyle), nostalgia and other consequences of having lived within the unified Soviet space that are better preserved in the older age groups but visibly diminishing in younger generations. The second is the pressing need for economic cooperation; based on geography, this need is often fulfilled by the construction of transit gas pipelines and the like. However, similar economies have little to offer each other; in reality, all countries aspire to integration with Europe and not with one another. The third dimension consists in the countries' profound lack of confidence in their own ability to build successful states and economies, which leads to the idea of combining efforts. All aspects of unity are further strengthened by external demand – this time coming from Brussels instead of St Petersburg or Moscow – to create a unified region that would be easier to integrate into Europe.

The region's understandably sincere urge to become part of Europe is thus strengthening all existing tendencies for the creation of a unified South Caucasus

region. However, it could happen that the very same reasons – wanting to join Europe, lack of self-confidence – may lead to a quest for a new regional identity (for example, as part of the Black Sea region) if there is hope that in this way the desired results could be achieved more quickly. The main obstacles to integration trends are still the conflicts. In the current political reality, it is impossible to imagine any sort of realistic integration project between Armenia and Azerbaijan, Abkhazia and Georgia etc. Inertia peters out, and nostalgia disappears together with the generations that felt it. Ethnically mixed populations disappear as a result of ethnically motivated migrations; as a result, people no longer speak the languages of other ethnic groups, and so on.

There are thus two trends manifest in the region: the trend for integration and another for mutual isolation. Theoretically, if it resolves its conflicts, the South Caucasus can remain a unified region. However, it can stop being a region, or fail to become one, and turn into several neighbouring countries. All of these countries can form part of a wider region, or several regions, for example, Azerbaijan can be part of the Caspian region, Georgia of the Black Sea region, and Armenia, of the Mediterranean region. One thing is clear: it is impossible to predict the fate of the South Caucasus solely on the basis of the inertia of the Russian Empire or of the Soviet Union. The inertia serves to mitigate the disintegration of the region, but it is not a foundation upon which one can build. The emergence of new national identities can go hand in hand with the emergence of a regional identity, but it cannot grow out of history alone. The region must become a project for the future.

In order for this to happen, the region needs to be understood as a current reality and not as historical legacy. It should not be "reconstructed" or "recreated"; for one, this is not feasible. The project of building the region needs to be designed and linked to a particular terrain. Such a project might succeed. It might also fail. Then we shall know for sure which of the trends wins: the one for integration, the one for isolation, or both.