

The process of institutionalization of political identity in the South Caucasus amidst ethnopolitical tensions

Timur Zufarovich Mansurov

Kazan (Volga Region) Federal University, Pushkina Street, 1/55, Kazan, 420000, Russian Federation

Abstract. This article examines the characteristics of the institutionalization of the political identity of the South Caucasus. The author analyzes the major stages and internal and external political factors in the institutionalization of regional political identity within the context of ethnopolitical tensions. The article provides potential scenarios for the development of political identification processes in the region. The author examines the role and impact of ethnopolitical conflicts in terms of the formation and development of the political identity of the South Caucasus. The author comes to the conclusion that the future institutionalization of political identity in the South Caucasus region directly depends on the content of the region's outside environment, while internal factors in its development have been put on the back burner for now.

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Introduction

The formation of any state's internal and external policy is closely associated with the issue of national identity. This especially holds true now for young states in the South Caucasus, which emerged in the post-Soviet space and set their sights on building democracy in their countries. After the disintegration of the Soviet Union, Soviet identity has been gradually fading away, while the new identity of Georgia, Armenia, and Azerbaijan has not fully formed yet. Furthermore, loss of identity, as the world's practice indicates, leads to the inability to clearly formulate and assert one's interests, the latter being replaced by "false" ideas and goals [1]. In the South Caucasus countries, this characteristic was manifested in the inability to conduct independent internal and external policy, while being oriented towards large regional and supra-regional states.

The experience of the independent existence of the South Caucasus republics has revealed that loss of national identity leads to a loss of not just value guideposts in the development of society but a large portion of states' national sovereignty [2]. This is attested to by ethnopolitical conflicts in the South Caucasus region, the prospects of resolving which are quite problematic. Let us agree with Russian researcher S.V. Kortunov, who maintains that the outcome of this kind of conflicts "depends on how firm or loose, how uncompromising and tough existing national identities are, on whether they are unreceptive to novelty or, on the contrary, flexible, capable of adaptive change and regeneration without the loss of cultural identification cores" [1]. We believe that the concerted efforts of the government and society, reliance upon rich cultural traditions, and orientation towards democratic values of development

will facilitate the steering of the country's domestic and foreign policy course, which ought to be based on informed and clearly formulated national interests, and the formation of regional identity.

Main part

The institutionalization of the political identity of the South Caucasus is a complicated process content-wise. Its major actors are national states, leading world powers, regional international organizations, transnational corporations, organized criminal groups and terrorist establishments operating in the international arena, and social networks. The political identity of the South Caucasus region is predominantly defined by three national states (Azerbaijan, Armenia, and Georgia) and three unrecognized and partially recognized states (Abkhazia, Nagorno-Karabakh, and South Ossetia). The region is distinguished by enthicultural diversity and is home to twenty-eight peoples. The republics of the South Caucasus share close historical-cultural, social, and ethnic ties.

In the view of Russian researcher O. Dameniya, the formation of the political identity of the South Caucasus is considerably influenced by the following factors: similarities in the natural environment, the formation of a common socio-cultural space by South Caucasian peoples, ethnogenetic propinquity, the commonality of the historical fate of the region's peoples, which is, in large part, defined by the geopolitical situation and dealings with the outside world [3]. Just about the same is the situation in the North Caucasus, but here we are dealing with the all-Russian identity of an internal region.

It should be noted that the Caucasus was divided into the South and North Caucasus after the disintegration of the Soviet Union, a move of, mainly, a political nature. There are a couple of factors in this division: the region's geographical characteristics and the Caucasus mountain range which divides these two regions. Cultural differences between the South and North Caucasus are quite substantial, but they do not hamper the formation of a single Caucasian mindset in people inhabiting the region [4].

We believe that when it comes to the Caucasus region, it is more correct to speak of socio-cultural rather than political identity which presupposes the existence of various political establishments and institutes, as well as regional political-economic associations and organizations. Besides, the Caucasus region is characterized by considerable ethnocultural diversity which somewhat divides the peoples of the South and North Caucasus, in whom their own political identity is formed.

The institutionalization of the political identity of the South Caucasus, just like that of any other region of the world, is a lengthy process time-wise. It consists of several stages. The first stage deals with the formation of the stateness of the region's three national states (Azerbaijan, Armenia, Georgia), which had been taking place amid incessant struggle, constant protests, and demands for independence on the part of the unrecognized states (Abkhazia, Nagorno-Karabakh, and South Ossetia). The second stage is about maintaining the "frozenness of conflicts" (both on the part of regional and supra-regional states), adhering to agreements on ceasing them, and protecting the territorial integrity of the existing national states. The third stage saw the "unfreezing" of two of the three existing conflicts as a result of Georgia's military aggression in South Ossetia in August, 2008 [5].

The making of the stateness of the three independent republics of the South Caucasus had been taking place gradually. The first demands for independence on the part of the union republics started to actively arise at the end of the 1980s parallel to centrifugal processes taking place in the country. The emergence of these demands was facilitated by the policy of perestroika implemented by M. Gorbachev and his followers.

It began with the realization of the principle of glasnost which implied the free expression of one's thoughts, views, stances, public opinion. Constant protests and demands for independence, which over time were getting increasingly large-scale, led to the formation of radical and nationalistic movements and organizations, various associations and parties. National movements, which emerged in all three of the South Caucasus states and were backed by the

republic's leadership, facilitated not only their gaining independence but caused tension in interethnic relations. This was manifested in various sorts of discrimination towards national minorities (Ossetians, Abkhazians, Karabakh Armenians), which, in our view, was behind the emergence of ethnopolitical conflicts in the region.

The situation in the area of interethnic relations grew somewhat complicated after the passage of the USSR Law "On the Procedure for Resolving Issues Related to the Exit of Union Republics from the USSR" on April 3, 1990. Despite the fact that the right of union republics to exit the USSR had been provided in the country's constitution, the law fine-tuned the procedure for the exit of union republics and autonomous formations from the USSR and provided them with certain guarantees of independence. After the law entered into force, union republics and autonomous formations within them received the right of exit based on the free exercise of choice and compliance with the procedure for exiting the union state. Later on, the unrecognized states Abkhazia, South Ossetia, and Nagorno-Karabakh often referred to this law in defining their legal status.

The making of the stateness and the institutionalization of the political identity of Georgia, Armenia, and Azerbaijan was effected under the influence of a number of factors: defining and establishing the legal status of national identification; providing a normative-value and ideological rationale for the purpose and purport of the nation's existence; constructing one's sociopolitical ideal amalgamating the country's past, present, and future.

The formation of the stateness of the three South Caucasus republics was accompanied by the passage of important regulatory acts on the part of the union Center and the authorities of the union republics, which facilitated the establishment of their independence [6]. Despite the fact that the USSR was formally still in existence, the republics held referendums on independence, which were approved of by the population's overwhelming majority in these countries. Based on the results of these referendums, there were adopted acts and declarations on independence, which set the scene for the political-legal "design" of the stateness of the South Caucasus republics and the formation of their national and regional identity.

Parallel to these processes, there was taking place a face-off between union republics and autonomous formations, which was staged not only in the law-making field later dubbed as "the war of laws" but ideological as well. As researcher A. Tsutsiyev has justly put it, "ethnopolitical differences on the cusp of the 1980s and 1990s bring about a high ideological demand for the reconstruction of one's

“original borders” and substantiation of one’s “historical rights” to disputed territories and/or group status positions” [7].

Thus, the emergence of conflicts and afterwards the gaining of independence by the unrecognized republics facilitated the making of a new regional identity. If Nagorno-Karabakh identified itself with Armenia, Abkhazia and South Ossetia gravitated towards the Russian Federation. There were various ways of joining Russia suggested, to Georgia’s autonomous formations becoming a part of Russia. Meanwhile, the formation of the political identity of Abkhazia, South Ossetia, and Nagorno-Karabakh gained momentum as their state institutes were getting established. From this viewpoint, Abkhazia and Nagorno-Karabakh possess the more developed stateness and appear to be more democratic than South Ossetia.

The disintegration of the single Soviet state and the gaining of independence by the South Caucasus republics made them face the issue of the making of a new stateness and building democratic political institutes. The public in these countries, as well as their political elites, keen on liberal-democratic transformations could not but be concerned about issues in national development, the formation of national and the contours of regional identity. Furthermore, these processes were taking place not only against the background of ethnopolitical conflicts that had already broken out but also amid the situation when the country’s single political-legal, social-economic, and cultural space was destroyed, which considerably complicated the process of implementing reforms.

The second stage in the institutionalization of the regional identity of the South Caucasus deals with maintaining the “frozenness of conflicts” (both on the part of regional and supra-regional states), adhering to agreements and accords on ceasing them, and protecting the territorial integrity of national states. If at the first stage in the institutionalization of the regional identity of the South Caucasus, the republics were busy with processes of national self-identification, the second stage now saw the emergence of the so-called orientation models of conduct [8]. These were aimed at the formation of integration processes inside the region and an orientation towards some external power (e.g., Russia, the US, Turkey, or the West as a whole). Note that the orientation could be false or could undergo considerable changes depending on the dynamics of domestic processes in those countries. At the same time, the existence of ethnopolitical conflicts in the region made the international community faces a complex dilemma: which of the two principles of international law – territorial integrity or the right of

nations to self-determination – to go by in defining the political-legal status of the unrecognized states.

Note that if the unrecognized states saw the legitimacy of their actions in the principle of nations’ right to self-determination enshrined in international law, the policies of Georgia, Armenia, and Azerbaijan were dominated by the principle of territorial integrity and border inviolability. The latter was upheld by regional (Russia, Turkey, and Iran) and supra-regional (the US, the EU, and China) actors, which feared the resumption of armed conflicts and an uncontrollable chain reaction of multinational states disintegrating. The world’s major states were prepared to have a dialog with semi-free countries rather than unstable and poorly controlled regimes.

The third stage in the institutionalization of regional identity saw the unfreezing of two of the three existing conflicts (Georgia-Ossetia and Georgia-Abkhazia) as a result of Georgian military action in South Ossetia aimed at bringing constitutional order in the republic.

Georgia’s “Five-Day War” in South Ossetia in August, 2008, tangibly changed the situation in the region. It was here that the first precedent was set in terms of reconsidering the borders between the republics, which once formed part of a single union state. The Caucasus saw the emergence of the first partially recognized states, whose independence has been denied by the international community but is recognized by Russia, which is a member of the “nuclear powers” club and a permanent member of the UN Security Council. The recognition of the two separatist territories means dire consequences for Georgia in terms of forming an all-national identity. In the view of famous Georgian politologist G. Nodia, “the August war with Russia endangered the very prospect of Georgian stateness – during the war, many drew parallels not with the 1992-93s, when the wars in Abkhazia and South Ossetia had been waged, but with 1921, when Georgia lost its independence as a result of the Russian intervention” [9].

A few other important events occurred after the August war. The UN and OSCE missions were terminated in the zones of the Georgia-Ossetia and Georgia-Abkhazia conflicts. Consequently, all agreements concluded under the aegis of these organizations in 1992-1994 became inoperative, and Russia changed its peacekeeper status to become the military-political guarantor of security in those two regions. The Georgia-Abkhazia and Georgia-Ossetia tensions as a result of known events were settled (although the international-legal status of Abkhazia and South Ossetia remains uncertain), and the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict continues to remain in a “frozen” state.

Another no less important outcome of the August war was the conclusion that it is impossible to resolve conflicts of this kind militarily. This conclusion was made by all the states in the region and other countries in the post-Soviet space. More specifically, the South Ossetia events tangibly lessened the willingness of the Azerbaijani leadership to settle the Karabakh conflict through hard power.

According to Lebanese researcher O. Geukjian, a crucial outcome of the war was the “new format of the South Caucasus as a region in terms of relations between Russia and the South Caucasus” [10]. Indeed, despite all the complexities of Russia-Georgia relations, Russia viewed the South Caucasus in the “Azerbaijan-Armenia-Georgia” format plus the “unrecognized Abkhazia, Nagorno-Karabakh, and South Ossetia”. At present, Russia does not have political-diplomatic relations with Georgia – this format has virtually disappeared, and Russia-Georgia relations have shifted to a different plane, beyond the boundaries of the South Caucasus, and are now considered within the frame of a face-off between Russia and the West rather than South Caucasus policy. Two other entities within this space – Abkhazia and South Ossetia – have in point of fact (but not juridically) become part of the South Caucasus format of Russian policy (South Ossetia to a greater degree, Abkhazia – to a lesser).

After the August war, we have seen the bolstering of the identity of these two partially recognized states, which are oriented towards the Russian Federation politically, economically, and militarily [11]. At the same time, the loss of the two autonomous formations lets one speak of a Georgian identity proper forming in Georgia today, despite the Adjarians, Mingrelians, etc., living in its territory.

An interesting corollary of the war the fact that Russia failed to get support for its actions from any major state in the world and any of the countries of the post-Soviet space. As we know, the independence of Abkhazia and South Ossetia was, apart from Russia, recognized by just four states (Venezuela, Nauru, Nicaragua, and Tuvalu). Note that even Belarus refused to do it, let alone Russia’s other strategic ally, Armenia. Russia failed to ensure the recognition of the new states in the South Caucasus within the frame of regional organizations, such as the SCO, CUS, and CSTO. In this regard, we believe, the bottom-line was that Russia had no partners prepared to sacrifice their interests for the sake of the interests of their strategic ally. In our view, Russia needs to change the way it goes about its relations with countries whose support it would like to rely on.

One of the aspects of the analysis of the process of the institutionalization of political identity in the South Caucasus is the examination of possible

scenarios for its development. The author of this article believes that there are four possible designs for the transformation of the political identity of the South Caucasus over the next decade. The first one is “pushing out” Russia; the second is “pushing out” the West; the third is reaching a compromise through concessions and partnership among global and regional actors; the fourth is making Abkhazia and South Ossetia part of the Russian Federation and geopolitical face-offs involving NATO, the CSTO, GUAM, the leading world powers behind them, the three national states, Karabakh, etc. [12].

Let us clarify a couple of points concerning the gist of these scenarios. In our view, it is possible, if partially, to “push” Russia out of the South Caucasus. At present, Russian has Armenia as its strategic ally in the South Caucasus, is a Co-Chair of the OSCE Minsk Group engaged in the settlement of the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict, and is developing a full-scale partnership with Azerbaijan. Although Russia is virtually unable to exert political influence on Georgia, it has considerably shored up its positions in Abkhazia and South Ossetia. In the mid-run (10-15 years), Russia’s losing the positions it has gained seems unacceptable and hardly possible due to a number of internal and external factors in the country’s development. The situation is similar with Western countries, which have their own interests and spheres of influence in the region, which they are not willing to relinquish.

The fourth scenario seems to be the most probable. There also is the possibility of a synthesis of the third and fourth scenarios, when reaching compromises and developing a partnership will alternate with periods of confrontation between major world and regional powers and international organizations. Furthermore, making Abkhazia and South Ossetia part of the Russian Federation over the next decade does not seem possible. That will be considered the annexation of these territories, which is fraught with serious negative consequences for Russia in the international arena.

Inferences

Today, the South Caucasus, in terms of the number of peoples inhabiting the area, is quite a unique region with considerable ethnocultural diversity. It differs politically, socially, economically, historically and culturally from other regions in the post-Soviet space. After the gaining of independence by Georgia, Armenia, and Azerbaijan, just like other republics of the former USSR, what has become a pressing issue is the issue of the need for forming one’s own stateness, democratic political institutes, national and regional identity. Every time a new head of the government took office, these republics were

getting distanced increasingly farther from their Soviet past and Soviet identity was getting erased from the consciousness of their citizens, while the making of a new national identity was complicated by issues in domestic development.

A considerable obstacle in forming the political identity of the South Caucasus are ethno-political conflicts in the region, which are caused by territorial differences and were not resolved in due time. If Abkhazia and South Ossetia initially strived to boost their state-legal status back under the USSR to that of a union or autonomous republic, respectively, the demands of Nagorno-Karabakh Armenians were, first and foremost, about splitting off from Azerbaijan and joining Armenia. At the same time, these processes were taking place against the background of the struggle of Soviet republics for independence and after the disintegration of the USSR amid the formation of independent states. The lack of capacity, political will, and willingness to meet the other party halfway and make concessions put existing conflicts in a “frozen” state.

An analysis reveals that the formation of the political identity of the South Caucasus is affected by various factors. Regional powers and major states of the world are implementing independent policy in the region, pursuing particular interests, and acting as intermediaries in settling the Georgia-Abkhazia, Georgia- South Ossetia, and Nagorno-Karabakh conflicts. This tangibly affects the formation of the domestic and foreign policy of the South Caucasus states. The future formation of the political identity of the South Caucasus greatly depends on the content of the region’s outside environment, while factors in the institutionalization of regional identity have been put on the back burner for now.

Corresponding Author:

Dr. Mansurov Timur Zufarovich
Kazan (Volga Region) Federal University
Pushkina Street, 1/55, Kazan, 420000, Russian Federation
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