

ON THE SOUTHERN CAUCASUS' PERSPECTIVES OF BECOMING A EURO-CAUCASUS

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Taking into consideration the popular opinion that the European Union will slow down its enlargement after the year 2007, and that according to various estimates such tacit moratorium may last for 10 to 20 years, it becomes clear that Southern Caucasus countries have about two decades to bring their own state and public life closer to the European requirements prior to submission of valid arguments for EU membership. 20 years! Is it a long time? For the southern temperament, it is an eternity. On the other hand, it is an instant for the Caucasus mentality, which took thousands of years to form.

After long considerations, the European Union suggested that Azerbaijan, Armenia, and Georgia deal with Europe as kind neighbours, at the same time ignoring the fact that the region may hardly be called an oasis of inter-state neighbourliness. How strong are the wish and the real opportunities for neighbourliness between Europe and the Southern Caucasus? Each of the three countries has its own resources and arguments for active engagement in the process of European integration.

For Georgia, this first of all means a cultural and mental self-identification with the European civilisation, as well as a firm desire to belong to the European family. No one in Georgia has ever doubted that the Black Sea, rather than dividing, connects their country with Europe, and that the geopolitical resources of the country have not been fully appreciated by the Old Continent.

For Armenia, this is a historical reality of having constant kinship and business relations with the large Armenian Diaspora in Europe, which are not indifferent to the destiny of their historical homeland and which represent a considerable intellectual and material resource for European integration.

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Regardless of its significant cultural differences with Western Europe, Azerbaijan has nearly one hundred years of experience in serious business partnerships with the West and a traditionally close relationship with England. The country boasts the most dynamically developing economy, is rich in natural resources and, one has to admit it, is the most attractive Southern Caucasus neighbour for Europe in geostrategic terms among other things.

What are the alternatives to European integration for these countries?

It is plausible to believe that Azerbaijan has the widest choice, and it is here that the Asian Bank and the Kuwait Fund are more active than the European Bank and the International Monetary Fund. And if the impact of religious factors on politics continues to increase significantly, at some point in time one might see an abrupt turn of the integration vector to the East or to the South. If Europe remains passive and the Russian factor becomes more attractive or more violent, the Western vector might lose power and the Northern one may become stronger.

For Armenia, a viable alternative to European integration might be a strategic partnership with Russia, perhaps even an involuntary partnership, if Armenia, in the long run, remains a victim of its own victory in Karabakh.

Georgia seems not to have any voluntary alternative to European integration.

Everyone knows that the Karabakh conflict represents the main obstacle to the restoration of civilised trilateral inter-state relationships in the region. For the last two decades, all types of co-operation in the Southern Caucasus have taken place in only two bilateral directions: Georgia - Armenia and Georgia - Azerbaijan.

When long-lasting peace talk processes of various formats are viewed by the parties simply as futile procrastination in problem-solving, the situation in place can hardly be called "frozen conflicts", as some neutral or interested diplomats and conflictologists would like to imagine. At the same time, the population driven away from these zones of conflict as well as their many sympathisers consider themselves to be in the state of an "unended war", whereby failure to act may not be endless. The above-mentioned also refers to zones of long-lasting conflict between Russia and Georgia in Abkhazia and in the so-called Southern Ossetia.

Russia's role in the development of political and economic processes in the Southern Caucasus still remains very important. Potentially, Russia may act as both a warrantor of stability in the region and as an initiator of destabilisation leading to bloodshed. As far as politics in present-day Russia is concerned, unfor-

tunately one can talk about the desire to restore the hegemonic position on the international arena and of Stalinism in the country itself. As a state with imperial interests in the Caucasus, Russia is especially unpredictable today since it has not yet managed to accept the loss of its "senior brother" status and is ready to eagerly assume the status of a "mafia boss" in the Caucasus who dictates what others ought to do and punishes the disobedient in the manner he likes, starting with prohibitions on importing their fruit or wine and ending with impudent annexation of their territories.

Here, the late US president Ronald Reagan comes to mind, who succeeded in demolishing the "Empire of Evil". Alas, he did not consider it opportune to destroy the chips of the empire on the entire former territory of the empire. He probably did not imagine that those fragments would be able to regenerate in some places. If those fragments of the empire are not done away with internally in due time, the international community will have an acute need for a person called Ronald Reagan II! It is well known that according to real renewal logic, if there is demand, then supply will follow.

The problem of relationships with Russia is relevant for the entire civilised world, and the success of many democratic processes in the world, including the success of European integration, depends on the common principle-based policies excluding double standards in inter-state relationships.

Another issue faced regularly is as follows: how consistent are the leaders of the Southern Caucasus countries in their aspirations regarding European integration? Today the leaders of each of the states of the region can demonstrate many facts proving their success on the way to European integration and proving their readiness to sign the European neighbourliness documents agreed upon with Brussels. One may only wish God helps them in their strivings! However, such facts can hardly attract too much attention from the society, especially the European society. Usually what is remembered are the specifics, which stand out from the routine flows of information. It might be dared to say that the result of some official information does not help in the creation of a positive image of integration-related processes of the countries of the region, if seen through the eyes of the so-longed-for European neighbours.

For instance, it was a great surprise to discover the appearance of the name of the Azerbaijani president along the names of Vladimir Putin and Fidel Castro,

who congratulated the third-time president of Belarus on God only knows what. One should not then be surprised if the European Union decided to impose sanctions on all countries of the Southern Caucasus in that relation, if one recalls that in the autumn of 2005 due to assignment of the flight from Baku to Northern Cyprus the European Commission twice postponed the dates of discussions regarding the European neighbourhood program not only with Azerbaijan, but also with Armenia and Georgia.

Not long ago, on the EuroNews the Armenian president expressed his personal opinion regarding European integration. He said the following: "The European Union has not taken a final decision concerning the boundaries of Europe yet; therefore, formulation of Armenia's policies with regards to the European Union is the task of the next generation of Armenian politicians." Upon hearing those words one can only feel sorry for the present-day Georgian politicians who do not know that their present attempts to knock on the European door are in vain, since regardless of the EU's oral assurances about individual consideration for each country, practice shows something totally different. It seems that Brussels continues to view the countries of the Southern Caucasus as "the indissoluble union of free republics" which can try to achieve their objectives only if they are united.

Perhaps nothing bad lies in the fact that brothers from different marriages are forced to consider themselves twins, yet in this case a threat exists that the united "march on Europe" can be hindered by Georgia as well. The president of Georgia, while assuring the population of accession into the EU in the nearest future, at the same time, for example, may calmly accept the abnormal judicial system of the state, which just like a notary who has been threatened, verifies every prosecutor's caprice by the seal of the supreme justice. If one believes that such courts can help one to become member of a union, it will not be the European Union, but rather the Soviet Union once again.

How can one revive and intensify the long-term European neighbourhood process? How can one both show oneself in a better way and see others better? The differences and similarities of the processes taking place in the countries of the Southern Caucasus, the presence of unended conflicts, and the variety of attitudes, methods and time schedules applied on the way to European integration make it logical for one to suggest that the European Commission adopt the notion of a "step-by-step asymmetrical integration" as a mechanism for assessment and encouragement of individual successes, as well as for reacting to possible fai-

lures of each individual country in the process of implementation of the New Neighbourhood programme as the main institutional instrument of the long-term process of European integration.

The contours and conditions of the step-by-step asymmetry may be defined by the European Commission on the basis of clearly pre-set criteria such as the level of democracy in the country concerned, the level of protection of human rights, transparency and validity of elections, positive results in the process of solving of territorial conflicts and conflicts between different nations, independence and professionalism of the judicial system, adequacy and successfulness of reforms, adherence to the principles of market economy, adequate conditions for the development of businesses and investment-related activities, etc. Depending on the achieved results each country could come closer to or further away from the ultimate integration goal, could have an opportunity to become a member of individual European structures or lose its membership. The countries could learn from the success and mistakes of others.

And, finally, about the most important things. It is clear that the European integration, unlike Socialist integration, may not be imposed from above by applying stick and carrot policies. It must become a natural and conscious need of the people, which is able to make the authorities move in the required direction. Such integration would be based on the common European values, whereas any integration imposed from above more often than not may be viewed by people as representing pragmatic interests of the authorities.

A special role in the process of the European integration belongs to the civil societies of the three Caucasus states. People of the three countries must feel that the process of integration is becoming stronger, is moving in a positive direction, and seems feasible for them too and not only for politicians. Thus civil society may become the most efficient accelerator of such processes. A developed civil society (and civil society alone!) can be the initiator and creator in their Caucasian Home of a restructuring which is a common value, is unique in terms of volume, is unprecedented in terms of technology, and is able to turn the Southern Caucasus into a Euro-Caucasus.

Sociological studies carried out by the US company Intermedia in 2004 give one some reasons for being optimistic: 82% of Georgians, 63% of Azerbaijani, and 62% of Armenians have a positive attitude towards the possible accession of their country to the European Union. It should be noted that no such similarity

of opinion-related indicators in Armenia and Azerbaijan is found on any other issues, be it the attitude towards Russia, the USA, the neighbouring countries or NATO membership. This leads to the idea that the role of the EU in mediating conflicts in the Southern Caucasus might become more important and more efficient.

Together with the overall positive attitude towards European integration, people have come up with the following questions addressed to their authorities and the EU leaders:

- What is more important for our country - EU and NATO membership or the solving of our own territorial problems first of all?
- At which stage of European integration will the problems regarding the territorial entirety of Georgia and Azerbaijan be solved?
- What can be demonstrated by the example of Cyprus, which was accepted into the EU disregarding its internationally recognised borders?
- Is the EU planning to apply the status of Kosovo to the unrecognised territories in the Southern Caucasus?
- Will energy-dependent Europe be able to ensure the energy independence of the region? Etc.

Unfortunately, the authorities do not encourage any dialogue with the public on such important issues and only give out their own monologues about successful mutual visits. Furthermore, as Armenian political analyst Stepan Grigorian noted in one of his interviews, Armenian and Azerbaijani people are practically separated from the process of negotiations regarding the Karabakh problem, and "ignorance leads to doubts and suspicions in relation to both the intermediaries and the authorities themselves."

Various-formatted regional civil dialogue, including dialogue with the authorities of one's own country on problems of regional and European development, is indispensable as an instrument of re-creation of mutual trust in the region based on common values and the increased responsibility of the authorities for the results of their actions in the process of European integration.

The participation of representatives of the European community in the Caucasus dialogue will be of great help. People in the Southern Caucasus are looking forward to receiving help from Europeans in spreading the tolerance virus in the Caucasus, where everyone is so different yet so intelligent! It would be a great idea to "contaminate" the hearts of the Caucasus people with some of Françoise Sagan's wisdom by convincing them of the truthfulness of her words: "Accepting others' shortcomings is easy, if you do not aim at correcting them."

The people of Caucasus would benefit from regular communication with representatives of former Socialist European countries, which have only recently become members of the European Union. The people of the two regions spent nearly half of a century fighting against their common illnesses and learned to read between the lines and to understand each other without words. For the countries of the Southern Caucasus the then Socialist countries of Europe were the only "available Europe" where Caucasians could somewhat satisfy their thirst for communication with a more civilised world.

Unfortunately, after the dissolution of the USSR the European Union has not considered it opportune to introduce at least one instrument of co-operation between the countries of Eastern Europe and the Caucasus, and thus drove the latter somewhat further away from Europe. With the introduction of the New Neighbourhood policy the situation has begun to improve, yet there are some serious reasons for concern. Among the instruments of implementation of the new EU policy one once again sees the absence of programs of inter-regional co-operation, which could help to share experience and promote European integration of the states of the Baltic and Black Seas.

The solution to the problem could be as follows: following a successful institutionalisation of inter-regional political relations based on the Lithuanian formula 3+3 we should actively form stable inter-regional public and professional relations taking into consideration the above-mentioned formula.

Confidence in the need for implementation of such methods was the stimulus to found a new non-governmental organisation in Georgia, the European Integration Forum, which is supposed to initiate a civil dialogue between various civil society groups in the Baltic and Black Sea regions. The European Integration Forum suggests holding the first inter-regional civil dialogue in such a format in the autumn of 2006 in Tbilisi and hopes that this initiative will be supported by

the initiators of the Vilnius meetings of intellectuals, youth and non-governmental organisations.

In conclusion, one might remind what the English writer and philosopher Oliver Goldsmith told back in the middle of the eighteenth century: "In order to free ourselves from shortcomings we should first of all talk about them loudly." On the contrary, a Russian proverb states that "We should not wash our dirty linen in public." One may consider oneself true European if one believes that by talking about one's shortcomings aloud today one is not washing one's dirty linen in public, since mother Europe itself makes part of this public... The Southern Caucasus is seeking to become part of this public, and one has to be positive that sooner or later a European Caucasian table will also be set in the European home!