

Three Dimensions of the South Caucasian Conflicts: Dynamics, Commonalities and Differences

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Abstract: The task of studying conflicts in various parts of the world is of high importance yet at the same time of relatively high complexity. An illustrative example of this is the tangle of tensions in the South Caucasus, which are sometimes approached with a tendency to simplify the picture and focus merely upon recent developments without grasping relatively long-lasting trends, or by contrary, to artificially sophisticate and find illusive roots in ‘deep history’ or add extra variables like bitter religious tensions to the equation (religious factor does matter, yet it translates in a very specific way, which the article demonstrates). Another problem is personal bias and a linear perception, which do not reflect the multifaceted and dynamic reality. Today the conflict configurations in the South Caucasus are not the same as they were in 1990s and the systems of international interactions has experienced substantial changes. Taking into account the state of the discipline and recent developments, this article aims to revise the existing academic perceptions on the South Caucasian conflict dynamics and to advance a new theoretical and methodological framework,

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contributing to the discussion. We suggest that the conflicts in the South Caucasus should be studied by focusing on the local, national and international levels, being the three dimensions with a varying extent of mutual influence in different periods, yet never replacing one another.

Keywords: South Caucasus, conflict dynamics, Armenia, Azerbaijan, Georgia, Abkhazia, South Ossetia

Three Dimensions of the South Caucasian Conflicts: Commonalities and Differences

These days, the South Caucasus has been pushed to the margins of the international agenda and the media narrative by developments in and around Ukraine. However, the importance of geopolitical transformations in this part of Eurasia should by no means be underestimated. Firstly, the internationalization of the post-Soviet space was most active over the first fifteen years of the 21st century just in the South Caucasus. It was here, in August 2008, where a precedent for revising the Belavezha accords was set, whereby the borders between the newly emerged post-Soviet sovereign entities were based on the dividing lines between the former Soviet republics. *De facto*, the process of NATO expansion in this region was halted because of the Russo-Georgian hostilities (Markedonov and Suchkov 2020). Secondly, over the recent years, the South Caucasus entered a period in which the post-Soviet *status quo* is significantly challenged while an alternative regional order is still to be adjusted. The Armenian-Azerbaijani conflict, which became one of the triggers for the collapse of the USSR more than three decades ago, has been internationalized. Today it can no longer be viewed solely as a confrontation between the two former Soviet Transcaucasian republics. Prior to the second Karabakh war of 2020, external actors had influenced the conflict dynamics. Russia played an exclusive role in reaching the ceasefire in May 1994 cementing military and political *status quo* in the region during the period of twenty-six years (Kazimirov 2014). The unprecedented military-political intervention of Ankara in the second and third Karabakh wars of 2020 and 2023 dramatically increased its importance in the processes in the South Caucasus. Moscow's geopolitical leadership in the region has been decisively challenged. Finally, the formats of alliances and partnership having existed unchanged for decades are seriously reconsidered and reshaped. The post-Karabakh *status quo* provoked a large-scale crisis in Russian-Armenian relations, whereas confrontation between Russia and the West mounts just as the Tbilisi-Kiev (as well as NATO-Georgia) strategic *nexus* tends to weaken. Besides, we see a certain re-prioritization of Russia's approaches in the region,

which is expressed in the buildup of Moscow's cooperative ties with Baku and Ankara.

Thus, the conflicts in the South Caucasus are distinct in their complexity and multidimensionality. As of 2024, their configuration is totally different than in 1990s, while conceptual frameworks which not only inform meanings to events but also shape reality (Tishkov 1999), remain the same or, by contrast, suggest new interpretations rebuffing all early developments. This article aims to revise the existing academic perceptions on the South Caucasian conflict dynamics and to advance a new conceptual understanding, keeping in mind that speculative concerns should not be divorced with empirical evidences which there are plenty in scholarly papers.

The Academic Literature on the South Caucasian Conflicts: A Critical Overview

The existing perceptions on the South Caucasian conflicts have much in common. Not being deprived of certain merits, nevertheless they have enough typical flows. To begin with, though the personality and the convictions of a researcher cannot be completely separated from the results of their works, which in other words are not supposed to be totally objective, some scholarly papers are explicitly biased. For instance, in the case of Armenian-Azerbaijani conflict non-constructive behavior, such as unwillingness to compromise (see Tüysüzoğlu 2014; Yavuz and Huseynov 2020), or atrocities against civil population like ethnic cleansings (see Yavuz and Huseynov 2020) are attributed only to the Armenian party, while staying oblivious to symmetric actions undertaken by their opponents. Reversely, some papers tend to focus upon the tragic events of 1988 and 1990, being blind to the expulsion of the Azeri population from Nagorno-Karabakh and the adjacent territories (see Minasyan 2010). Nevertheless, there are academic works with a more impartial stance which show that violence against civil population was used by both sides (massacres in Sumgait and Khojaly) (de Waal 2013) as well as maximalist postures which hindered the negotiation process were mutually held (Kazimirov 2014). A similar approach was adopted by some Georgian (Gamakhariya 2012) and Abkhazian (Lakoba 2001; Marykhuba 2004; Bgazhba and Lakoba 2007) authors, whose papers are abundant in vivid details of the rival party's war crimes. Yet a universal center of criticism attraction is Russia which is blamed in nearly every occasion, though not being a direct party to the conflict. An illustrative example is the article written by Hakan M. Yavuz and Vasif Huseynov who claim that Russia as a 'major cause of instability in the Caucasus' manipulated Armenians and

Azeris by fueling ethnic tensions in the pursuit of its 'imperialist' ambitions; in addition, they characterize Russian peacekeeping as 'oxymoron' implying its destructive role in peace regulation (Yavuz and Huseynov 2020).

Here we move on to the next moot point, which is the estimated role of regional or global powers and direct parties to the conflict. Some studies like the aforementioned work (Yavuz and Huseynov 2020) tend to focus upon regional or global powers, referring to competition between them as a basic explanation for the conflict dynamics, for instance, Turkish-Russian relations against Nagorno-Karabakh conflict (see Nanlohy 2024). In this context some scholars tend to overestimate Russia's role in the South Caucasian conflicts. As a result, the subjectivity of the direct parties to the conflict is diminished to the degree that all explanations of conflict dynamics and even the causes of ethnic grievances (Yavuz and Huseynov 2020), including the 2020 escalation, are boiled down to Russia's influence, starting from that it is Russia who indirectly triggered Georgian-Abkhaz and Georgian-Ossetian conflicts by supporting ex-autonomies in their desire to separate (Bishku 2022) and finishing by provoking Turkey to pursue a more assertive foreign policy in the Caucasia by posing a threat to its interests in the Black Sea region (Levaggi and Donelli 2021). Another extremity is to nullify Russia's mediation role by concluding that it is the huge losses suffered by the parties to the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict that forced them to sign the ceasefire agreement (Mooradian and Druckman 1999) or by claiming that it 'never sought solution to the conflict' (Yavuz and Huseynov 2020). Contrary to this approach, David Lynch (Lynch 2002) as well as John O'Loughlin, Vladimir Kolossov and Gerard Toal insist that both internal and external factors do matter (O'Loughlin, Kolossov, and Toal 2014) when analyzing conflict dynamics in the post-Soviet space.

Another moot point is the linearity. For example, Russia is attributed to unilateral and unequivocal support for Georgia (Lakoba 2001) or Abkhazia and South Ossetia (Gamakhariya 2012; Kukhianidze 2012; Souleimanov 2017) or Armenia (at least until recently) (Souleimanov 2017; Kurt and Tüysüzoğlu 2022), with the relations of the latter with Russia being conceptualized as 'patron-client' (Nanlohy 2024) or even 'vassal' (Yavuz and Huseynov 2020). This linearity tends to be approached with towards not only Russia but also Iran, who is claimed to perceive Azeri identity as national 'threat' (Tüysüzoğlu 2014) and to be part of Russo-Iranian-Armenian axis (Souleimanov 2017). However, other studies show that things are not so simple. For instance, Ronald Suny and Michael Kambeck show that Armenian foreign policy has never been unilateral; for instance, it flirted with NATO at times and even hosted their military exercise in 2003 (Suny 2010; Kambeck 2014). Russia, in

turn, has produced arms transfers to Azerbaijan since early 2000s (Barabanov at al. 2018). Thus, both Russia and Armenia, being allies, developed military cooperation with other states, yet never replacing their partnership (at least until recently). Speaking about Iran, Rovshan Mammadli as well as Javad Heiran-Nia and Mahmood Monshipouri consistently prove that its stance cannot be described in terms of unequivocal support for Armenia in 1990s as well as by 2023 (Mammadli 2023; Heiran-Nia and Monshipouri 2023). By contrast, Iran shares intimate cultural and historical ties with Azerbaijan (Heiran-Nia and Monshipouri 2023) and contains Azeri minority by its borders, thus it has little wiggle room for opposing Turkey-Azerbaijan alliance as well as Israeli influence (Mammadli 2023). In addition, Russian and Iranian interests in the region are not fully compatible, especially in the construction of Zangezur Corridor (Heiran-Nia and Monshipouri 2023). Moreover, both countries may be viewed as a sort of rivals, though they have something in common, namely a tendency to balance (Heiran-Nia and Monshipouri 2023).

To our mind, this linear perception stems from presenting Russia, Iran, Armenia and others as monolith actors. Meanwhile, Ted Hopf, for example, convincingly proves that ‘there is no one Russia,’ as in 1992 – 1993 president Boris Yeltsin, defense minister Pavel Grachev, minister of foreign affairs Andrey Kozyrev shared contending positions towards the Abkhazian issue (Hopf 2006). Moreover, the actions undertaken by the central government diverged with that on the ground. For example, Russian soldiers deployed in the region acted on their own, in other words without any order delivered by the minister, by combatting on the Abkhazian side. The similar situation was witnessed when Russian central government imposed sanctions on Abkhazia, while certain regions like Krasnodar did not always comply. Similarly, in 2008 when decision to intervene was adopted, there was no unanimity on it among the ruling elite (Matsuzato 2023). Still, some authors even keeping in mind such facts state that it is not important, as all these actors represent one state, that is Russia (King 2001). Similarly, Iran also does not act as a united actor, as in 2020, for instance, ayatollah Khamenei spoke in the support of Azeri Muslims in order to calm growing protests among the Azeri ethnic kin, while the military elite sent a signal of caution to Azerbaijan, perceiving the growing influence of NATO member Turkey and Israel, the US ally, as a threat (Mammadli 2023).

Therefore, the tangle of interactions in the South Caucasus is to be described in other theoretical frameworks rather than in cold war bipolar system of alliances. This raises another discussion issue, namely the attempts of certain authors to evaluate regional and global powers’ approaches towards South Caucasian conflicts in terms whether they comply with the so called liberal international

order and whether they are compatible with the liberal paradigm of mediation and diplomacy (Lewis 2022). No matter if such approaches are efficient, liberal paradigm and the liberal international order are by default perceived as values *per se*, thus any efforts to resolve conflicts which contradict them are presented as wrong, using such concepts as ‘coercive diplomacy.’ In some cases, it becomes absurd, like in citing Russia’s not inviting women to the negotiation table with Taliban as an example of illiberal approach to peace regulation (Lewis 2022). ‘Coercive diplomacy’ and the contestation of the liberal world order are attributed both to Russia and Turkey (Lewis 2022; Aydin 2021; Kutlay and Öniş 2021; Levaggi and Donelli 2021). Meanwhile, we suppose that the more actors are involved in peace regulation, the more difficult it is to find a solution due to the necessity to take into account the interests of numerous mediators. Thus, multilateralism as an integral feature of liberal approach towards peacemaking does not necessarily lead to better results.

In the context of liberal world order and Turkey’s contestation of its norms, some authors draw link between such ‘shifts’ and ‘democratic backsliding’ (Aydin 2021; Kutlay and Öniş 2021; Levaggi and Donelli 2021). The problem is that what they often perceive as ‘shifts,’ referring to 2016 in the context of the attempt of coup d’état in Turkey and Donald Trump’s electoral victory (Levaggi and Donelli 2021), could have been witnessed earlier. This is not only the case of Turkey, but also Armenia which is supposed to conduct multilateral foreign policy since ‘so recently’ (Tüysüzoğlu 2014) or whose loss of Karabakh in 2020 – 2023 with more active intervention by Turkey is attributed wholly to Nikol Pashinyan and his reckless rhetoric which angered both Azerbaijan and Turkey (Yavuz and Huseynov 2020). Meanwhile, Suny reasonably notes that back in 2006 Ilham Aliiev’s speeches manifested consciousness of the time running out for him (Suny 2009). Since the second half of 2000s Azerbaijan has been consistently importing arms (SIPRI 2024), while Turkey has been training Azerbaijan’s military since 1990s (Barabanov et al. 2018; Barri et al. 2021). Both states have been preparing for military solution to the Nagorno-Karabakh issue for at least two decades. Here we cited these examples in order to demonstrate one extremity, which is inability to fix relatively long-lasting trends and to focus upon only recent developments.

Another extremity is the artificial ‘antiquization’ of the disputes like the Nagorno-Karabakh one, which according to some authors has ‘lasted for centuries’ (Derluguian 2005; Kurt and Tüysüzoğlu 2022), while such states as Armenia and Azerbaijan emerged only in the beginning of the 20th century. Some other researchers complexify the South Caucasian problems by adding extra variables to the grievances like the religious factor (Kurt and Tüysüzoğlu 2022),

which, on the contrary, was not salient here as the majority of both Georgians and Ossetians are Christians, with the world outlook of the latter and their pace of life stemming from a peculiar combination of Muslim and Christian as well as pagan faiths and ancient traditions, which organically coexist in one society (Tsallagova and Chibirov 2023). Similar situation was witnessed during the armed conflict in Abkhazia in 1992 – 1993, where ethnic contradictions rather than religious ones nurtured the grievances between Georgians and the Abkhaz. The latter, influenced by intense migration flows, developed their unique world vision and lifestyle which combined Christian, Muslim and pagan beliefs and traditions (Anchabadze and Argun 2012). When it comes to Armenia and Azerbaijan, the source of grievances is also rooted in ethnic and cultural rather than religious differences. The religious factor, slightly visible in 1990s, surfaced in 2020 Armenia-Azerbaijani conflict, though in a very specific manner. In addition, some papers over-accentuate the regional and global power's energy interests (Kakachia 2011). They do play a certain role, yet the local developments do not boil down to this aspect.

Therefore, the analysis of the academic literature demonstrates that there is a tendency to simplification, linearity, or artificial complexification in scholarly papers dedicated to South Caucasian conflicts. The knowledge reflected there is often fragmented and barely related to the context. We see that this stems from three fundamental problems. The first one is the distant character of research, in this case scholars from post-Soviet space have an evident advantage (Kolsto and Blakkisrud 2023) as they learn common history at schools and witness the developments by their own eyes as well as master local languages, Russian in particular. Though sometimes it transforms into a second problem, that is personal bias, especially for those researchers who represent societies directly involved in the conflicts. The third problem is the absence of a clear theoretical and methodological framework. So, our task is to propose one which would allow to paint a nuanced picture while analyzing the conflict dynamics in the South Caucasus.

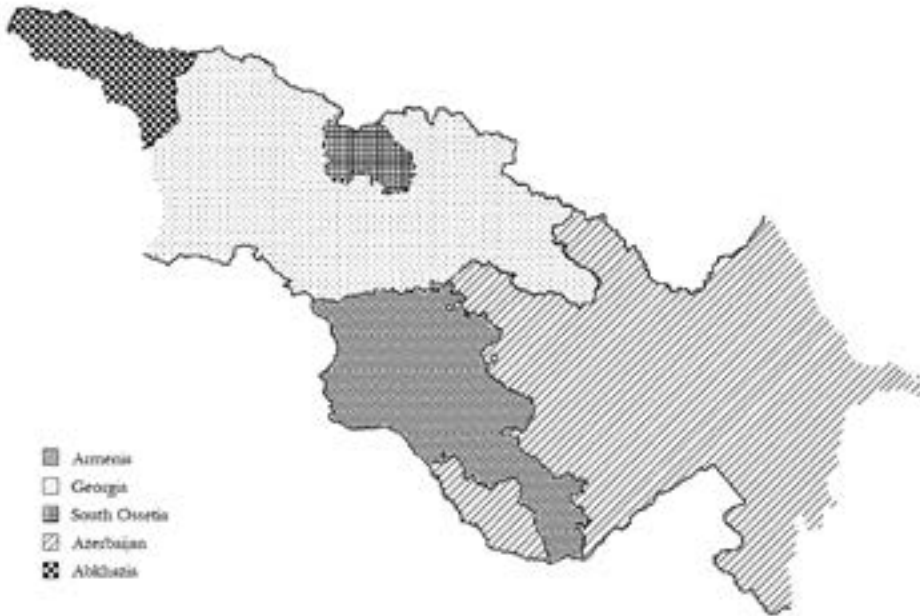
Towards a New Theoretical and Methodological Framework

The conflicts under the study have a number of common features. Firstly, they take place in the South Caucasus as post-Soviet and post-imperial space. It is characterized by ethnic heterogeneity and a rich conflict legacy (especially in the period of the first national republics' existence in 1918 – 1921); a significant conflict potential, the resettlement policy during the previous historical periods, as well as national policy in the USSR (Brubaker 1994) – all being additional

prerequisites for its accumulation. Secondly, identity contradictions are the source of conflict, while separatism (secessionism in the case of Abkhazia and irredentism in the cases of South Ossetia and Nagorny Karabakh) is the goal of autonomies within the former union republics. Thirdly, in all cases the contradictions actualized in the 'first' or ethno-political wave of the post-Soviet conflicts as a result of inconsistent and short-sighted policy of the center during 'Perestroika.' In the wake of USSR dissolution, the contradictions translated into open armed clashes with the formation of *de-facto* states. Finally, beginning as local ethno-political in nature, the conflicts in the South Caucasus have subsequently obtained their geopolitical dimension.

It should be emphasized that the Georgian-Abkhazian, Georgian-Ossetian and Armenian-Azerbaijani cases had similar initial factors, influencing the tensions, namely geographical localization (South Caucasus, mountainous terrain), historical background (imperial and Soviet), ethnicity, and separatist aspirations. All of them can be taken into account when analyzing the conflicts dynamics. In addition, considering the conflicts from the power balance perspective, it can be noted that they were asymmetric in their nature (Deriglazova and Minasian 2011). In other words, the hostilities were fought by the central government against the armed groups of the secessionist territory, which, by their capabilities were presumably unequal. However, the current state of the conflicts is significantly different (see Figure 1) – the conflicts in Abkhazia and South Ossetia 'froze' in 2008 – 2009 and *de facto* (from 2008 – partially recognized) states, despite had been regarded weaker than Nagorno-Karabakh (Lynch 2002), continue to exist. At the same time, the Armenian-Azerbaijani conflict, even after the reintegration of the *de facto* state territory, cannot be considered as finished and remains 'protracted.' In this regard, it is reasonable to conclude that not only internal factors play a significant role (which were similar in all the cases under study), but their combination with external factors. That is why we find it necessary to approach the South Caucasian conflicts from three perspectives (or levels / dimensions), that are local, national and international. The influence of each dimension varies in different cases and historical periods but is never equal to zero; they never displace each other but rather complement, leading to a particular conflict configuration.

Figure 1. The Current Political Configuration in the South Caucasus



Source: authors.

The methodology adopted by the authors draws upon the social conflict paradigm (Dahrendorf 1958; Coser 1961; Coser 1964; Azar 1990) but goes beyond it, combining knowledge from ethnic political science, comparative politics and international relations theory. Thus, our study represents an attempt of multidisciplinary research united by constructivism (Wendt 1992; Brubaker 1994; Tishkov 1999; Brubaker 2006) in social, political as well as IR studies. The analysis of warfare is not the priority goal of this article. However, tracing the evolution of the South Caucasus confrontations in the post-Soviet period we find asymmetric conflict approach especially valuable. It allows us to study ethnopolitical conflicts in Eurasia as a multi-actor confrontation that goes beyond the struggle of national states or geopolitical rivalries (Mack 1975; Deriglazova and Minasian 2011).

The local skirmishes of 1990s

To begin with, the USSR dissolution was not ‘peaceful.’ In this regard, Andrus Park conceptualizes the inception of the process as a ‘cold civil war’ (Park 1991). In 1990s local rather than national or international factors dominated the conflict dynamics in the South Caucasus.

By the time armed clashes began neither Georgia nor Azerbaijan nor Armenia had got any national army due to the presence of the Soviet military bases that provided security in the South Caucasus, so the 'governmental forces' involved in military operations against Karabakh (1990), South Ossetia (1991) and Abkhazia (1992) neither excelled in fighting skills nor demonstrated high morale. By contrast, the ex-autonomies' military formations, *de facto* constituting militia shaped in the wake of the general mobilization, perceived the armed conflict with 'parent states' as an existential threat, thus being extremely motivated and ready to bear high costs.

The manforce in the dyads were almost equal in number, with North Ossetians from the Russian Federation combatting on the South Ossetian side, 'mountain people' from Russian North Caucasus supporting the Abkhaz on the battlefield, and combatants from Armenia fighting for the sake of Nagorno-Karabakh. Which is more, the ethnic Georgians (Megreles) inhabiting Abkhazia joined 'governmental forces' while some Russian soldiers deployed in the region supported separatists on their initiative. It is noteworthy that the military actions against South Ossetia (1991 – 1992) and Abkhazia (1992 – 1993) were actually fought amidst a violent internal political confrontation on the territory of Georgia (in fact, a civil war between supporters of Zviad Gamsakhurdia and governmental forces), while Azerbaijan witnessed change of power (Heydar Aliyev succeeded Abulfaz Elchibey in 1993) in the midst of the first Karabakh war. Russia in turn faced a constitutional crisis in 1993.

It is needless to say that those processes were characterized by spontaneity and lack of centralized control. In addition, up to the mid-1990s Western countries paid little attention to the regional developments, so Russia played the role of a unique mediator in the South Caucasus conflicts. It is due to its diplomatic efforts three basic ceasefire agreements were reached. The analysis of the agreements shows that the most 'regulated' conflict in 1990s was Georgian-Ossetian mediated exclusively by Russia in 1992, while the Georgian-Abkhazian conflict preceded by negotiations under the UN auspices in 1993 was a lesser one, and Nagorno-Karabakh conflict mediated by the Minsk Group consisting of eleven members turned out to be the most intractable and did not 'freeze' even after the ceasefire agreement of 1994 brokered with leading role of Russia. Perhaps the lack of internationalization benefited the aforementioned cases, though some authors would claim such an approach 'illiberal.'

Moving forwards to the remake of the 'Cold War' (2008)

The interwar period witnessed further moves towards the internationalization of the Caucasian conflicts, which may be divided into two groups. The first one is the continuing diplomatic efforts and the second one is unilateral support delivered to the parties by external actors, which helped improve their military capabilities.

Growing international diplomatic efforts met two fundamental obstacles. The first one was unwillingness of the parties to compromise, which was described by Russian diplomat Vladimir Kazimirov (Kazimirov 2014). The second one was the omittance of local internal factors, which can be demonstrated *via* two examples concerning the Abkhazian issue. In 1997, Evgeni Primakov took a personal initiative to resolve the Georgian-Abkhazian issue by organizing a meeting between Vladislav Ardzinba and Edward Shevardnadze in Tbilisi following shuttle diplomacy in 1996 – 1997. The key idea proposed by Russia was the 'common state' formula (instead of the 'territorial integrity of Georgia'), which in fact boiled down to the creation of a confederate state. However, this plan was not accepted by the parties to the conflict, which may be explained by not taking into account the multidimensionality of the conflict, in other words public opinion. In this context two statements by the direct participants to the negotiations are noteworthy. The first was made by Shevardnadze who noted the removal of the heaviest 'psychological barrier' as the main result of the meeting, while the second belongs to the first Abkhazian president Ardzinba (Abaza-TV 2022), who claimed that back in Abkhazia he was advised to restrain from travelling to Tbilisi for security reasons. Moreover, after this trip Ardzinba's health deteriorated, which gave rise to speculation that he could have been poisoned in Georgia. Thus, a seemingly positive initiative only increased the distrust of one side towards the other. Primakov's peace initiative eliminated the 'psychological barrier' only between the leaders, staying oblivious to that between individuals and societies. Ardzinba and Shevardnadze were supposed to understand it and failed to reach an agreement due to the fears of losing their legitimacy if bargaining with the 'devil' before reframing public discourse and social perceptions of the 'enemy.'

In 2008 Frank-Walter Steinmeier presented his plan concerning the regulation of Georgian-Abkhazian conflict. The Germany's neutral status stemming from previous non-intervention gave an important advantage to his initiative. At the same time, it was not without flaws, in particular it lacked a deep understanding of the conflict's nature. A distinctive feature of the plan was that it implied three phases: 1) the nurturing of prerequisites for restoring direct dialogue between

the parties to the conflict, 2) socio-economic reconstruction of the region and 3) the determination of Abkhazia's status. The plan also was supposed to provide for the return of Georgian (Megrelian) refugees to Abkhazia at the first stage of peaceful settlement. Nevertheless, this idea would be difficult to implement in practice, since many of these people took part in the armed confrontation on the side of Georgia, which could not be forgotten by the Abkhaz. In addition, the resettlement policy of the Russian Empire, and later the USSR, led to a shift in the demographic balance in Abkhazia, becoming a constructed historical trauma for Abkhazia. For this reason, the return of Georgian refugees was hardly possible to be accepted by the Abkhaz side due to the fear of finding themselves in the minority in the territory they regard as their own. Therefore, had the Abkhazian leader signed the agreement, he would have been hardly able to guarantee its implementation at the social level of the conflict.

These examples demonstrate the necessity to take into account the internal, social factors that influence conflict dynamics, when analyzing it. It is not only international efforts or national leaders' will that determine the conflict's configuration but also the situation on the ground and local perceptions. Moreover, it is crucial not to underestimate the breakaway communities' subjectivity. As it was shown, Vladislav Ardzinba did not concede to Russia's urges to compromise with Georgia, despite being claimed a 'Moscow's puppet.'

Meanwhile the international actors' role in the conflicts did not limit to negotiations efforts, as they bolstered the growth in the parties' military capabilities by providing financial support, arms transfers and training programs. For instance, back in the early 2000s the international partners, USA above all, as well as Germany, France, Greece, a number of Eastern European countries and even China started to train Georgian military (Barabanov et al. 2010). In addition, a number of states such as Ukraine, Czech Republic and the USA exported arms there (Barabanov et al. 2010). The peak of Georgian military capabilities growth was reached under Michael Saakashvili, who nevertheless underestimated the possibility of Russia's involvement in the conflict. Thus, by 2008 the internationalization of Georgian-Ossetian and Georgian-Abkhazian conflicts became evident. The national and international levels were most salient there as the clashes took place with regular military formations controlled by central governments, in the Georgian case trained and equipped with the help of third parties. Still, the local level should not be omitted as military formations did not include only ex-autonomies' armed forces but also volunteers. Due to the significant role played by the USA and European partners in the preparation of Georgian armed forces for the attempt to military reintegrate the breakaway territories as well as Russia's direct involvement to the conflict for the sake of

the opposite side we conceptualize the events of 2008 as the remake of the ‘Cold War.’

Despite since 2008 the conflicts has been again ‘frozen,’ the situation remains dynamic. We witness some signs of the attempts to pragmatize the relations between Russia and Georgia (for instance, direct flights between the two countries have been renewed (Interfax 2024)), while Georgia’s integration in the EU has been suspended (Faustine 2024). In addition, today the external factors influence domestic politics in Georgia.

1994 – 2023: from Russia’s ‘near abroad’ to post-Soviet Middle East

The developments in the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict differed dramatically from those in the Georgian-Abkhazian and Georgian-Ossetian conflicts. Firstly, its negotiation process with the leading role of Russia was more ‘internationalized’ as the Minsk Group members numbered eleven. Yet, contrary to the latter cases, the confrontation between Russia and the West was less salient here. Secondly, the clashes in fact took place simultaneously between two states, that are Azerbaijan and Armenia, and between the ‘parent state’ and the breakaway community supported by the ‘patron state’. Thus, from the very beginning Armenian – Azerbaijani tensions presented not just local skirmishes but also interstate conflict.

The main partner of the ‘parent state’ were not Western countries, but Turkey who assisted Azerbaijan with military training and arms supplies (Barabanov et al. 2018; Barri et al. 2021). Another important actor is Israel who has imported a substantial amount of arms to Azerbaijan from the second half of 2000s (SIPRI 2024), provoking anxiety in Iran. When it comes to Russia, its role was aptly characterized by Laurence Broers, namely ‘enabler and spoiler but no decider,’ meaning Russia’s double-sword role as mediator and simultaneously arms exporter for both Armenia and Azerbaijan (Broers 2015).

The article by Laurence Broers in 2015 concluded that ‘underlying sources of intractability are to be found in the interactions at the interstate, domestic, and decision-maker levels of the rivalry, rather than in external / systemic factors. The latter enable, rather than determine, Armenian-Azerbaijani rivalry’ (Broers 2015). These implications were correct, yet already by 2016 the situation has changed dramatically as in 2004 – 2014 Azerbaijan has substantially increased arms imports (World Bank), which changed the balance of power in the region, predetermining the partial *status quo* breakdown in 2016, and finalized in 2020 – 2023. The direct involvement of Turkey in 2020, whose soldiers are claimed to operate drones in the Second Karabakh War (Barri et al.

2021) as well as instructors present in Azerbaijan on a regular basis (Barabanov et al. 2018) are supposed to have taken part in the elaboration of the military operation plan, has significantly affected the situation on the ground for the 'parent state's' benefit. The implication to be made is that external factors have gradually become more salient in the regional developments, with Eastern rather than Western actors obtaining more influence. That is why we assume that some transformation of South Caucasus perceptions has occurred from Russia's 'near abroad' to post-Soviet 'Middle East.' However the local factors should not be underestimated. Armenia who has consistently spent a substantial percent of GDP on military expenditures (World bank) commensurate with that of Israel and whose military personnel since 1994 has exceeded 2.5 – 3% of labor force (World bank) is sure to have experienced social fatigue from the intractable conflict.

Drawing parallel between South Caucasus and the Middle East, one should keep in mind an important difference, namely that religious tensions in the former are not severe, contrary to the latter. Since 1990s religious factor has had slight impact on the conflict dynamics and has manifested itself in very specific ways. For example, the relations between the Russian Orthodox Church and Christian churches in Georgia and Abkhazia (Matsuzato 2008): the latter was not recognized, while the interaction between Russian and Georgian churches left room for informal communication between the two states. When it comes to the Armenian – Azerbaijani conflict neither Christian-Muslim nor Sunni-Shia cleavages were pronounced back in 1990s. Yet, some shifts became evident in 2020. Firstly, the demographic changes in Azerbaijan, namely the growing percentage of Sunnies (with a still significant share of Shiites), has contributed to its rapprochement with Turkey. Secondly, the participation of mercenaries, sharing radical Islam ideologies, in the military actions of 2020 has sparked particular preoccupation among bordering states. Still, whether their numbers and impact were not exaggerated in public discourse for political reasons remains an open question.

The developments of 2020 - 2023 have affected the system of interactions in the region. Armenia which already flirted with NATO previously, yet not prioritizing it over military cooperation with Russia, has doubted the desirability of security partnership with the latter. Iran, whose foreign policy in the South Caucasus used to be rather passive (Golmohammadi and Azizi 2022), has dedicated more attention to regional developments with the growing influence of Turkey and Israel (who in particular delivered drones to Azerbaijan between 2004 and 2014 (SIPRI 2024) which were later used in the Second Karabakh War). Moreover, if in 1990s – 2000s the negotiation process was

led by primarily Russia and Western countries, namely France and USA, while Turkey's say was rather minor, from 2020 it is more about Russia's and Turkey's 'competitive partnership.' In addition, there is no doubt that the events of 2020 and 2023 have influenced not only regional power balance but also internal politics in Armenia and Azerbaijan. The community of the first is frustrated and disappointed, while of the second one is inspired by the military victory, providing for Ilham Aliiev's re-election.

Though in 2023 an important variable, that is Nagorno-Karabakh, was removed from the equation, the tensions between Armenia and Azerbaijan cannot be assumed exhausted as there is a number of other territorial disputes and demarcation issues to be resolved. Moreover, as Valery Tishkov notes, until the problem of refugees is resolved, any conflict is far from being considered regulated (Tishkov 1999).

Conclusions

To conclude, we argue that the conflicts in the South Caucasus involve a tangled knot of contradictions and interactions. Thus, the situation in the region cannot be 'frozen' once and for all. The systems of alliances and partnerships are dynamic, for instance Armenia considered Russia's most reliable partner is drifting away, while Georgia, regarded as one of the most belligerent post-Soviet republics, strives to pragmatize its relations with Russia. The role of Azerbaijan has also undergone serious transformation. If in the early 1990s, it was perceived as the most problematic partner of Russia in the region, now it demonstrates the growing potential for partnership with Moscow especially after the Russian peacekeeping contingent's withdrawal from the Nagorno-Karabakh (de Waal 2024).

We insist that the prerequisites for the dynamics are to be traced more meticulously, like Azerbaijan's military cooperation with Turkey for some two decades and drone imports from Israel since 2004. The researcher's task is not to focus on the simultaneous events but to see beyond them, while not going to another extremity that is plunging into a deep history. In addition, we believe that the conflicts in the South Caucasus have three dimensions that are local, national and international. The sources of grievances are rooted in the local level and in history, and may influence the (non)implementation of the decisions made at higher levels. In some cases, the influence of external factors may be immense, yet they do not fully replace the influence of the local ones.

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Три димензија конфликта на Јужном Кавказу: динамике, сличности и разлике

Сажетак: Истраживање конфликта у различитим деловима света је у исто време веома важно али и сложено. Илустративан пример су тензију у Јужном Кавказу, којима се некада прилази са тенденцијом да се поједноставе избегавајући истраживање трендова који имају дугу историју, или да се повезују са верским тензијама у региону (верски фактор јесте важан, али у посебном значењу). Други проблем су личне предрасуде, које често занемарују веома динамичну реалност у региону. Данашњи сукоби у овом региону нису исти као што су били 1990-тих, а и међународни односи су суштински различити. Овај чланак има за циљ да ревидира постојеће академске перцепције у вези конфликта у Јужном Кавказу и да допринесе новим теоријским и методолошким оквиром. Предлажемо да се конфликт у Јужном Кавказу мора истраживати са фокусом на међусобне утицаје локалног, националног и међународног нивоа, јер се ове три димензије и њихов утицај мења током времена, али никада није без утицаја сва три нивоа.

Кључне речи: Јужни Кавказ, динамика конфликта, Јерменија, Азербејџан, Грузија, Абхазија, Јужна Осетија