

SECURITY, DEMOCRACY AND DEVELOPMENT

In the Southern Caucasus and
the Black Sea Region

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Introduction

This is a book about a very difficult though diverse and fascinating region, the Southern Caucasus. This part of the world is also viewed as part of the larger Black Sea area. Why would we consider it a “difficult” region? Do not all countries or regions, including those that are usually considered relatively successful and orderly, face critical problems? For instance, do not the European Union’s multiple crises of recent years make Europe a “difficult region”?

Undoubtedly. Yet the Southern Caucasus, which emerged as a region in its own right in the early 1990’s from the debris of the Soviet Union, stands out for the variety and intensity of conflicts (including violent conflicts), instability, and economic hardship. The rest of the world therefore often sees the South Caucasus as a source of disorder and problems that sometimes require urgent intervention (as, for instance, in August 2008, when a war broke out between Georgia and Russia). It is a region that always needs attention, support and preventive action so that problems do not get out of hand and spill over into neighbouring countries and regions. There are, of course, other, more positive reasons to be interested in the South Caucasus. One can easily be attracted by its diverse cultures, ancient history, spectacular landscapes, rich cuisine, heart-warming hospitality, and even sometimes economic opportunity. Nevertheless, for people outside of and unfamiliar with the region, conflict and disorder are usually the first things that come to mind when they hear the word “Caucasus”.

For inquisitive minds, which social scientists are supposed to have, there is also good news: the Caucasus may be a difficult region, but it is never a boring one. Its extremely deep and painful social, political and economic transformations require careful analyses and understanding, both in order to relieve the pain and increase chances of success for those countries and peoples but also for increasing our general knowledge about deep transformations, how they fail and succeed, how conflicts flare up and are (sometimes) resolved. This is what this book is about.

Young social scientists from both within and outside the region are the contributors. One of the multiple problems of the Southern Caucasus (should it be considered among the key ones?) was that it was isolated from the intellectual mainstream of the contemporary world. The myths of salvation inherent in dogmatic Soviet Marxism were replaced with romantic mythology of national awakenings intertwined with an extremely simplistic understanding of popular sovereignty and free-market mechanisms. Only relatively recently have young scholars from countries in the Caucasus started to conceptualize complex processes of development in their own countries through the prism of contemporary theories and methodologies – however imperfect the latter may be. On the other hand, an increasing number of researchers in leading universities around the globe have become interested in the region. Transformative processes that take place there become a source of intellectual inspiration for their research projects. The result is that local and foreign scholars engage in a much wider and richer scholarly conversation. Its results may be fruitful and interesting for those people who do not necessarily specialize in those countries but may draw lessons from work on these countries for comparative research. This book presents a glimpse of the state of that conversation, and of what the global social science community can learn from developments in the Caucasus.

This collection includes the best papers from a conference “Security, Democracy and Development in the Southern Caucasus and the Black Sea Region”, financed and organized by the Academic Swiss Caucasus Net (ASCN) in October 2012 in Istanbul. ASCN is funded by Gebert R f Stiftung and has been working for several years to increase the quality of social research on the Southern Caucasus and provide new forums for a lively and professional debate on genuinely fascinating topics related to developments in these countries. The present publication has been made possible thanks to the generous support of Gebert R f Stiftung and its ASCN programme.

The table of contents of this book is in itself a source of information about the region. By choosing topics for their research, the community of scholars prioritizes events and developments. That judgment, like any other, may be contested, and there is always an element of contingency here. Still, what does this table of content tell us about the issues that the Southern Caucasus faces?

In a nutshell, there were several basic and deeply interconnected problems that the new states of the Caucasus (and they are new even though many of them boast of very ancient history) faced in the early 1990's, when the seemingly stable Soviet order abruptly collapsed. These nations had to define what they are, which meant determining on what basis their polities had to be kept together, along which lines their spatial borders had to be drawn, and where they belonged in the contemporary international political order. Having at least notionally rejected the Communist system, they had to build new formal or informal institutions of governance. And, having left the unified and rigidly regulated world of Soviet economics, they had to figure out how they were going to sustain themselves in an increasingly competitive world economy.

Arguably, none of those problems can be considered "solved": borders, political regimes, international alliances are still contested. However, enough time has passed for us to discern major trends of development: who the major actors are and what their interests, visions and strategies are; what structural problems, advantages and disadvantages they have to deal with; what are the lasting outcomes of supposedly "temporary" solutions; how the region fits in the changing world of international relations.

Territorial conflicts are the most conspicuous expressions of the unfinished state of the national projects in the South Caucasus. Whatever theories of state formation or international relations each of us may prefer, we – at least those who live outside of the boundaries of the European Union – still find ourselves in a Westphalian world of nation states. Certainty about state boundaries is the most basic starting point for formulating and solving problems of political, social or economic development and those borders remain the most potent factors of social construction. Yet this is exactly the issue that has remained unresolved in the Southern Caucasus.

The simplest question – "what are the countries that constitute the Southern Caucasus?" – defies clear answers. A politically correct answer that most of international community is willing to accept reads: Armenia, Azerbaijan and Georgia (to stay out of trouble, alphabetical order is used). We also encounter so-called "unrecognized" or "de facto" states of Abkhazia, South Ossetia and Nagorno-Karabakh. They have been around since the early 1990's with the more-or-less stable institutional frameworks that states are supposed to have. Nevertheless, it would also be rather misleading to say that those are genuine states that only lack international recognition in order to be considered "normal". Certainly, they are genuinely

independent, and increasingly sealed, from those states of which they are supposed to be integral parts by international law: Azerbaijan in case of Nagorno-Karabakh, and Georgia for Abkhazia and South Ossetia. Yet their independence from what can be called their patron states (Armenia for Nagorno-Karabakh, Russia for Abkhazia and South Ossetia) is rather questionable, and it is quite difficult to imagine their existence beyond that patronage.

Whatever happens with and within the unrecognized states, there is a divergence between the mental maps of their own countries that citizens carry in their heads and the real though not internationally legitimate boundaries that regulate movements of people and goods in effect. These boundaries have emerged based on supposedly temporary ceasefire agreements after wars (signed in 1992 in the case of South Ossetia, 1994 in the cases of Abkhazia and Nagorno-Karabakh, and then 2008 again for South Ossetia and Abkhazia), but they have become the most stable feature of the political geography of the region. This divergence – and recognition of this divergence as something temporary and abnormal – has become a stable feature of political, social and mental lives of these countries.

It may be a symptomatic feature of this volume that none of the articles presented deal with the core reasons of these conflicts, or prospects for their solution. Important as those issues are, a certain fatigue surrounds them: a lot has been said and written on this already, and there is certain fatalistic recognition that there is no improvement in sight. Quite the opposite, in each of the cases risks of deterioration appear to be greater. So, it appears more promising to research what the lasting and apparently insurmountable divergences between legal and effective boundaries do to the institutions and lives of people.

One of the most important of permanently temporary solutions for the South Caucasus conflicts is the fate of internally displaced persons (IDPs) and refugees: people who lost their homes and livelihoods as a result of ethnic cleansings that constitute part and parcel of postcommunist ethno-territorial conflicts. The experience of forceful expulsion (that occurred between 1989 and 1994 for the most, or as recently as in 2008 for some) is tragic enough; but in addition, these people have become hostage to those quasi-temporary solutions. Because solutions are temporary, the IDPs and refugees are supposed to return – and this is something many of them really aspire to – but this prevents them from putting their tragic