

## **Conflicts of Identities in the South Caucasus and Problems of Integration of the States of the Region into European Structures**

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**Abstract:** This article studies the problem of conflicts of identities in the South Caucasus and its influence on the process of integration of the states of the region into European structures. The main factors of formation and development of conflicts of identities in the region are analyzed. The authors pay special attention to the issues and contradictions of the process of integration of the states of South Caucasus into European structures (EU, NATO), which are mainly caused by the conflicts of identities existing in the region. The conclusion of the article is that the settlement of the conflicts of identities in the South Caucasus region greatly depends on formation of a national idea based on pragmatic approach of the state to national development, which assumes taking into account and supporting cultural, ideological and political versatility.

**Key words:** Identity • Conflicts of identities • Integration • Regional integration • South Caucasus • European Union • Ethnopolitical conflict • Unrecognized state

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### **INTRODUCTION**

Establishment of new national identity, development of political and economic institutions and transformations in the socio-cultural sphere are inextricably connected with the problem of national identity. The ability to permanently undergo changes, which are sometimes even not recognized by the bearers of certain identities, as well as their mutual adhesion can both promote stability, stable and progressive development of the society and the state and cause various contradictions, conflicts and crises [1]. This is especially topical for young South Caucasus countries, which appeared in the post-Soviet space and which oriented themselves to democracy building.

After the destruction of the USSR, sociocultural identities changed in the South Caucasian states. This was caused by radical transformations in the economic and political spheres in these countries. The issues of civic identity and transformation of traditional valuables were actualized and contradictory images of collective identities were created [1]. The national identities of post-Communist Georgia, Armenia and Azerbaijan are formed with account for the previous experience in the situation of opposition of traditional values to liberal and

democratic values [2]. This process took place simultaneously with the arisen ethnic conflicts and conflicts of identities in the social, cultural, economic, political and other spheres. In view if this, there arose the necessity to build cooperation, seek a dialog, coordinate common goals and values, develop ways of peaceful settlement of conflicts, develop integration projects in the region in order to avoid dissipation of the state and to ensure formation of a stable and harmonious society.

Body of the work. The South Caucasus identity is mainly determined by three states (Azerbaijan, Armenia and Georgia) and three unrecognized or partially recognized states (Abkhazia, Nagorny Karabakh and South Ossetia). The South-Caucasian region is distinguished for its ethnocultural versatility – 28 nationalities live in this territory [3]. There are close historical, cultural, social and ethnic ties between the South Caucasus republics.

At the same time, this region has some common peculiar features that hinder any peacemaking processes and explain the permanent state of conflict. According to J. Galtung, a Norwegian scientist, the obstacles for any peacemaking process in Caucasus are the warlike mentality and the mentality of a boss and a victim [3]. Sharing this point of view, we need to add that such

features as hospitality, bounty, brevity, honor and dignity are also typical of the mentality of traditional societies. In view of this, we believe that the factor of permanent proneness to conflicts creates the ground for the identity of South Caucasus.

The conflicts of identities in South Caucasus developed simultaneously with the process of formation of the general regional identity, in which we can distinguish the following stages: the first stage is the formation of the national identity of three national states of the region (Georgia, Armenia and Azerbaijan), which took place against the background of permanent struggle, constant protests and demands for independence by the unrecognized states (Abkhazia, Nagorny Karabakh and South Ossetia). The second stage includes keeping the conflicts frosted (by effort of both regional and extra-regional states), abidance by the agreements on cessation of the conflicts, securing the territorial integrity of the three national republics. At the third stage, two of the three existing conflicts were defrosted in the result of Georgia's military aggression against South Ossetia in August of 2008.

The detailed consideration of the conflicts of identities in the South Caucasus region assumes analysis of the main factors that contributed to their occurrence. One of the most important factors is the fact that we can currently observe the crisis of national identities in the three South-Caucasian republics. Since the collapse of the Soviet Union, the Soviet identity has been gradually fading away and the new identity of Georgia, Armenia and Azerbaijan has not yet finally formed. At the same time, as the experience of development of a series of countries shows, the loss of identity leads to the inability to precisely state and protect national interests and to their substitution with false ideas and goals. This peculiarity manifested itself in the countries of South Caucasus through the inability to conduct independent domestic and foreign policy and orientation to large regional and extra-regional states.

Another equally important factor of the formation of conflicts of identities in South Caucasus is the existing contradictions between the values and standards of the Western and Eastern cultures. South Caucasus, like other regions, is located at the intersection of the Western and Eastern cultures. In some spheres of life activities and by some values, these nations can be closer to the Eastern culture and in other spheres and by other values – to the Western culture. For example, the South-Caucasian nations whose religions are Christianity and Islam have spiritual commonality with the Eastern nations. At the

same time, other traits make them closer to the Western culture. These are the social values – freedom, equality and justice. The principles of independence, decentralization in political governance, incentive of individual initiative and responsibility are also typical of them [4].

An important factor of the development of conflicts of identities is the dependence of formation with the population of the South-Caucasian republics of the feeling of belonging to the civil community on finding the optimal form of national and regional integration in the sphere of political and economic life. The currently existing ethnic conflicts in the region cause mixed views on the perspective of the South Caucasus development, as the horizontal socio-economic, cultural and educational ties have been broken. All this hinders the process of development of the South-Caucasian nations based on their own socio-cultural foundation and the process of their active involvement in the economic and socio-political interaction within the regional community. At the same time, as it seems to the authors, an adequate national policy, development of democratic institutions, intensification of relations between the countries of the region in various spheres of the society life would promote the settlement of the conflicts of identities as well as the formation of regional political and economic institutions, which would further ensure closer integration of the countries of the region into the international community.

One of the significant factors of the conflicts of identities in the region is that the establishment of national identities in the South-Caucasian states takes place in the circumstances of two oppositely directed trends: on the one hand, the process of globalization of various spheres (culture, policy, economics, etc.) and, on the other hand, the growing trend of ethnic self-consciousness development in various forms. On the state level, the processes of globalization inevitably encounter the national identity as an obstacle to their development. There occurs the threat of dilution of the national identity, which includes the traditional, accumulated during centuries and therefore very strong self-perception of various ethnic communities. The tendency of growth of ethnic self-perception manifests itself in the activity of national minorities on defending their rights impaired in various spheres (political, socio-economic, cultural, linguistic, educational and other spheres) as well as in unsettled ethnopolitical conflicts in the region. To our opinion, in order to reduce the negative manifests of the two mentioned trends, it is necessary to

determine precisely the basic values and the goals of national development, around which the national consent will gradually be achieved, which is necessary for stable and dynamic development of the country and the whole region.

One of the peculiar features of the development of national countries in South Caucasus is the issue of interaction of the state-related, civic, ethnic, socio-cultural and religious identities [5]. To our opinion, this is another factor of the development of conflicts of identities. It manifests itself in overlapping and intersection of different identities in the states of the region (civic and state identity, national and religious, ethnic and political, etc.). If there are no conditions and principles of their co-existence, conflicts of identities can appear, which will concern various spheres of the society life. As an example, we can provide the problem of separated people in Azerbaijan (Lezgians, Tsakhurs and Azerbaijanians in the north of Iran) or conflicts of civilian and state identities caused by impairment of rights of ethnic minorities in political, economic, cultural, educational and other spheres (the problem of Armenians of Samtskhe-Javakheti and Azerbaijanians of Kvemo-Kartli in Georgia, or Talyshes in Azerbaijan). There are also conflicts of religious and national identities in the region of South Caucasus, which are caused by the problem of interaction of certain branches of traditional religions and interrelation between the latter and the so-called new religious movements.

Despite the specified conflicts of identities, the maximum danger for the development of the society and the state in the republics of South Caucasus is posed by the conflicts of identities caused by the existence of ethnic confrontation in the region. The conflicts of identities take place not only within the *unrecognized state establishments*<sup>1</sup>, but also between them and the state, from which they have separated. To our opinion, the further dynamics of conflicts of identities in South Caucasus in the context of ethnic confrontation will depend on the following factors:

- Prospects for settlement of ethnic conflicts (the efficiency of the negotiation process, mediation, plans for peaceful settlement).
- The process of formation of the national identity and economic development of the *unrecognized state establishments*.

- Peculiar features of the political systems of the unrecognized states and the extent of their democratism.
- Existence or absence of real prospects for integration of the *unrecognized state establishments* into the states, from which they have separated.
- The possibility of existence of Abkhazia, South Ossetia and Nagorny Karabakh as independent states.
- The possibility and intention of outer forces to change or preserve the status of an *unrecognized state establishment*.

It is necessary to note that certain (yet insignificant) influence on the occurrence of conflicts of identities is exerted by the policy of Europeanization of the unrecognized states. It can result in confrontation of various identities in the region and interests of certain states. At the same time, this policy promotes integration of the unrecognized republics into European structures and adoption by the population of western values and standards. Currently, the policy of Europeanization of the unrecognized states in South Caucasus is pursued in several directions.

First of all, it is the settlement of ethnopolitical conflicts in the region, which is pursued within the framework of the negotiation process, the mediation efforts and the implementation of various programs of aid to the parties of the conflict.

Secondly, it is the development of entities and forms of European integration in the unrecognized states (mass media, social organizations, education systems (involvement in educational and training programs), easing visa restrictions, access to the European market, etc.).

Thirdly, it is the development of external relations of the unrecognized states.

Fourthly, it is the implementation of programs of financial aid in social, cultural, linguistic spheres, the sphere of education, etc.

The policy of Europeanization in the South Caucasus region is oriented not only to the territories, the political status of which currently remains uncertain, but also to the states, which are the sovereign entities of the international law – Georgia, Armenia and Azerbaijan. Europeanization of the latter is carried out in various spheres, including such projects as the European

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<sup>1</sup>Within this article, the concept *unrecognized state establishment* by its essence is identical to such concepts as *unrecognized state*, *unrecognized territory*, *unrecognized republic*, etc.

Neighborhood Policy, the Eastern Partnership, the Black Sea Synergy and other programs and strategies of development of the states of the region and their interaction with the EU countries. In particular, the European Neighborhood Policy, which was adopted in 2003, is oriented to stabilization and democratization of the southern and eastern neighbors of the EU by means of closer economic integration and cooperation with the EU. Representatives of the EU repeatedly declared that their goal was to share everything with their neighbors except for institutions [6]. In order to implement this concept, the EU offered Georgia, Armenia and Azerbaijan its action plans for implementation of the EU regulations in various sectors, from respect for human rights and election procedures to phytosanitary standards [6].

Another quite interesting project on stage-by-stage integration of the South-Caucasian countries into European structures is the Eastern Partnership program. It offers a massive base for cooperation between the EU and South Caucasus and sets ambitious goals for itself. The Eastern Partnership is oriented to supporting stability by means of the EU's contribution into settlement of conflicts, creation of free trade areas and provision of financial support as well as into assistance in setting contacts between people through programs of easing visa issue procedures and through educational programs. The Eastern Partnership program also assumes making changes of institutional nature and adoption of a considerable part of the EU regulations [6]. The considered areas are supposed to facilitate modernization of economic systems and democratization of the countries of the region.

Another project of the EU, the Black Sea Synergy, looks quite amorphous. This project is oriented to intensification of interaction between the EU countries and the states of the Black Sea region. It is mentioned in a series of the EU publications that one of the objectives of the Black Sea Synergy program is the assistance in settlement of the frosted conflicts in the region. For example, it is noticed that "the Black Sea Synergy is the EU's initiative and a tool for intensification of regional cooperation in the Black Sea region, which cooperation is oriented to encouragement of democratic and economic reforms and assistance in settlement of conflicts in the region", or "the Black Sea Synergy is oriented to correlation of the regional development along with settlement of the frosted conflicts in Georgia, Moldova and between Armenia and Azerbaijan" [7].

As for the frosted conflicts in the South Caucasus region, it is worth noting that the text of the EU program contains a provision that the EU will pay special attention to promoting the trust measures in the region, including programs of cooperation specifically oriented to uniting separated parts [8]. However, to our opinion, this wording is quite artificial and unexecutable in practice, as the EU structures have not elaborated any sequential scheme of implementation of the measures of trust and cooperation between the parties of the conflict. Thus, we can state the prematurity of any plans and strategies of stage-by-stage settlement of the existing ethnopolitical confrontations in the region.

Thus, despite the variety of tools and general principles of cooperation between the EU and the South-Caucasian countries and Europeanization of the latter, the EU is still far from achievement of its goals, namely the achievement of stability, democracy and prosperity in the neighboring countries, including South Caucasus. The South Caucasus republics show progressive development in the direction of building national identity and improvement of their welfare; however, the EU influence on this development is very limited. Though, the relations between the EU and South Caucasus develop in such vital spheres as policy, economics, security and management, they often remain tenuous [9].

While provision of security, settlement of conflicts, protection of sovereignty and economic development are the vital issues for the countries of this region, the existing projects of the EU offer them just technical and poorly financed assistance in the form of, for example, adoption of legal regulations of the EU in certain sectors of the economy [10]. Furthermore, the financial aid of the EU is often insufficient and not so efficient.

Having considered some contradictions of the policy of South Caucasus' Europeanization, we find it necessary to identify factors that hinder integration of the states of the region into the European and Euro-Atlantic structures. These factors are:

- Unsettled ethnopolitical conflicts (the conflicts between Georgia and Abkhazia and between Georgia and South Ossetia and the Nagorny Karabakh conflict).
- Substantial difference in the domestic structure of the South-Caucasian republics (primarily, in the political and economic spheres).
- Oppositely directed foreign policy of the states (the pro-Western orientation of Georgia and the multiple-vector policy of Azerbaijan and Armenia).

- Integration of Georgia, Armenia and Azerbaijan into regional organizations that have appeared in the post-Soviet space (CIS, EurAsEC, CSTO, SCO, GUAM), some objectives and goals of which contradict to those in the European and Euro-Atlantic structures (EU, NATO).
- The moderate rate of democracy development in the South-Caucasian states.
- The low level of economic development and the absence of prospective branches of industry and raw material sources (except for Azerbaijan).
- The recent crisis developments in the economy of the European Union, which have decreased the attractiveness of the EU's model of economic development to some extent.

**Summary:** Thus, as the analysis shows, there are versatile conflicts of identities in the South Caucasus region, which concern not only separate spheres of the life of society, but also various levels of the state. Their causes are also versatile and include among others unsettled territorial issues. The latter add to fragmentation of the identities of both the internationally recognized states of the region and the *unrecognized state establishments*. The Europeanization-oriented policy of Georgia, Armenia and Azerbaijan, which, on the one hand, is oriented to their integration into European structures and adoption of the Western values and standards and, on the other hand, leads to collision of interests of certain players represented in the region (Russia, the USA and the EU), also adds to the dilution of their national identity.

To our opinion, the settlement of the conflicts of identities in the region greatly depends on the formation of a national idea based on pragmatic approach to national development by a state, which assumes taking into account and supporting cultural, ideological and political versatility. In order to combine the national and ethnic identities, a state must build a system of interrelations based on mutual understanding. In the countries where Georgians, Armenians and Azerbaijanians are the dominating majority, the formed national identity will be based on the ethnic identity of the majority. Therefore, in order to make the civic identity attractive for other peoples, its visions, symbols and values, which are associated with a certain South-Caucasian state, must correspond to their interests and values, as well. We believe that only in this case the formed identity will promote solidarity, integration and harmonious development of the society.

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