

## **THE BORDERS IN CAUCASUS**

(A Geopolitical and International Discourse)

The Caucasus is a region which, after more than two centuries within the boundaries of the Russian (Soviet) empire, is again turning into a frontier space marked by changes, confrontation and multiple problems. The collapse of the Soviet system is creating the vacuum and reviving the instability that delineates the new contours of global and regional confrontation. The end of the bipolar model, based on ideological opposition of the two superpowers (the USSR and USA), is leading to the beginning of a basically new phase in the international relations. Each state-legal modification, particularly the one with the Soviet Union, predetermines new geopolitical parameters in the global space. The numerous international entities that emerged on the territory of the former USSR form the new component of the international world – the post-Soviet space (save for the Baltic countries).

The disintegration of the bipolar model updates accents and problems that largely determine the substantial characteristic of modern-day international relations. The issue of borders and their legal institution and regulation is turning into a basis for processes, which determine the specifics of post-Soviet space. Territorial-ethnic and confessional disputes are becoming a permanent component of division by borders. Attempts at revising or changing the existing borders and territories are becoming an excuse for local conflicts to develop into interstate confrontation. Acute clashes on territorial-ethnic grounds are a constant phenomenon predominantly in the Caucasus region.

The Caucasus region is a typical example of the transformations that accompany the fragmentation of post-Soviet space. The sovereignty crisis of the Caucasus states created after the disintegration of the Soviet Union is in direct

link with the borders delineating present-day Caucasus; therein political, economic, clan and ethnic-national problems are intertwining. They are part of the restored 'big game' of global and regional players in the Eurasian region following the departure of Middle (Central) Asia and the Caucasus from the unitary state-political system of the Russian (Soviet) Empire.

Borders are a term cognitively linked with geopolitics which, at the end of the 20 and the turn of the 21<sup>st</sup> century is becoming one of the leading streams in the theory of international relations. Land expanses bound with numerous and diverse communication networks is being transformed into a geopolitical space that takes the shape of an active subject and object of public and political relations. The politics of the space itself, where political events are taking place, poses the necessity of describing the space proper. The conception of geopolitics as a change in the understanding of geographic space and politics is the result of a modification in the cognitive conception of the world.

Borders in the post-Soviet space are one of the major segments of international regulation. It is in immediate connection also with the issue to what extent the frontier as a concept and essence is part of the dynamic processes in the Caucasus region and to what extent the common or different between them defines the specifics of processes in the Caucasus area. Each of these notions has its own characteristic and specific parameters which, applied to the object of study, create an opportunity for adequately presenting geopolitical and international aspects of the problem.

From geopolitical (the border and its versions) and historical (the frontier) viewpoint each of the two notions determines both the parameters of the space it limits and the various degree of unstable equilibrium within and around it. The possibilities of asserting or expanding the existing borders are in direct dependence on the strength and capabilities of power structures and their

standing among the border population. Both the frontier and the border create conditions for the formation of societies with their own laws and rules which, in conformity with the realities connected with their internal and external factors, succeed in confirming or not the goals set for realization. A case in point is the Caucasus region in which, following the disintegration of the Soviet Union and the creation of the CIS, attempts to establish, redraw and assert the borders, are turning into its basic characteristic.

Complex and multi-layer processes, which characterize the transition to post-Soviet fragmentation, are realized within the wide spectrum of irredentist and secessionist acts. Soviet federalism in its hybrid form is relevantly manifested in the disintegration actions of Caucasus players. The immanent contradictions of the Stalinist-national-administrative division are revealed in full size in the interstate and intrastate confrontations.

The Caucasus space is individualized into two independent subjects – the Northern Caucasus within the framework of the Russian Federation, and the Southern Caucasus (Transcaucasia) – with three sovereign factors – Georgia, Armenia and Azerbaijan. Irrespective of the legal individualization of the two geopolitical zones problems and processes are passing through them enhancing the symbiosis of national-ethnic and political-economic segments. The Southern Caucasus is individualized as a special territory that focuses the attention and actions of regional and global players. Passing into the sphere of independent international subjects the states of the region are entering their system of dynamic confrontation.

Attempts at applying complete and shared sovereignty in the Caucasus region have traditionally ended in military conflicts, contact groups and permanently expanding presence of the international factor in their legal solution. The striving to active re-federalization of the Black Sea-Caspian area,

accompanying the disintegrating Soviet system, remains unrealized. The inertia of state-political traditions, perennial accumulation of nationalistic tension and the absence of a centralized power vertical predetermines both the ethnic-territorial conflicts and the preservation, to stronger or weaker degree, of federalism as major form of state-political sovereignty in the South Caucasian region. The absence of real state integrity in Georgia and Azerbaijan is *de facto* determining the degree of conflict character, but not the legal characteristic of the existing state system.

Following L. Thompson's thesis about the parameters of frontier in its Caucasian version 'as a space where inter-penetration of societies is taking place', there inevitably arise several inferences. To a certain extent they correct the basic postulates of the pithy characteristic of the notion used by the American scholar.

- ✓ The present in the Caucasus region revives the past. The principle of historical right, which preserved its latent form during the Soviet period, is revived during the 90's with the primary goal of disintegration and assertion of the right of independent existence of its own ethnic entity. The administrative assertion of new borders for the post-Soviet independent subjects inspires ethnic and confessional conflicts in the region.
- ✓ The diversity of national minorities and religions in the region expands the perimeter of unpredictability in achieving specific targets. The integrity sought by Georgia and Azerbaijan is passing through conflicts, war defeats, international actions and weakening of the national and regional security. The ethnically monolithic Armenia, enclosed within the geopolitical belt of Turkey and Azerbaijan, is blazing its trail to Europe and Russia through militarization of its society and moderate relations with Georgia.

- ✓ The lack of unification in the terminological and conceptual apparatus of international organizations, the Russian Federation and the Caucasian region makes difficult the solution of the numerous problems of ethnic, confessional, political and social-economic aspect. The diverse support on the political, economic and military plane by prestigious international institutions and organizations that have passed through the filter of Caucasian interests and plans as a whole, hardly helps to resolve the problems in the long term, yet it asserts foreign presence and weakens the chance for independent solution of conflicts by the regional players.
- ✓ During the post-Soviet period of its existence the Caucasus is again turning into a space in which state borders *de jure* confirmed at the beginning of the 90's of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, are *de facto* turning into an object of confrontation and aspiration to their modification (Abkhazia, South Ossetia, the Nagorno Karabkh Republic, Armenia) or to preservation of the status quo (Georgia and Azerbaijan).
- ✓ Both historical reminiscences and present-day accents of state-political and ethnic-confessional processes in the Caucasian region are yielding no arguments in favour of the solution of the multiple regional problems. What is more, fragmentation is enhancing and deepening the confrontation. The integrity of Georgia or Azerbaijan will hardly stimulate the processes of consolidation in the region or strengthen their positions in the region, the post-Soviet space or on the global plane. More likely is the possibility that, if this plan of theirs is realized, there will be an increase of their dependence on the regional or global players stronger than them (Russia, USA, EU, Iran or Turkey).
- ✓ Following L. Thompson's thesis about the frontier, its closure is realized 'after the unified power has established political and economic dominance

over them'. This was realized by the Russian Empire in the 18-19<sup>th</sup> century and continued during the Soviet era. There remains open the major question when and who will be the next international player that would repeat Russia's realized goals or would modify the consolidation plan, which remained in history?

At the beginning of the 21<sup>st</sup> century the Caucasus is turning into a kind of barometer for the positions of the global and regional players in the international stratification outlining the dynamism of processes in the Eurasian area. This phenomenon is particularly intensifying after the 'revolution of the roses' in Georgia late in 2003, whereby the so-called 'second disintegration' of the Soviet Union started. The attempt for a radical change in some of the post-Soviet republics, such as Georgia and the Ukraine through the replacement of the political elite, is transforming the political vocabulary but is leading to no drastic results. This, however, is expanding the possibilities and alternatives for new configurations in the Caucasian buffer zone. In the times of increasing dependency on strategic raw materials and the growing importance of the Black Sea-Caspian space in the plans of regional and global factors, the participation models are multiplied through the prism of motivated, yet depending on the current situation, ambitions. Each player in the Caucasian patience game is participating with its own goals outlining the boundaries of its strategies. They, however, are subordinate to two basic interdependent factors determinant of the current accents of Caucasian presence in geopolitical and geo-strategic projections – the disputed integrity of South Caucasian states and control over the deposits of energy resources and their routes of transportation.

Caucasian alternatives are bound with the interests, stronger or weaker, manifested by the global and regional players in this area. Geographic parameters of the thematic binding of interested parties are not changing the fact

that problems in the Black Sea-Caucasian region in their pure form are limited to the energy resources and to their transportation, whereas the ‘non-recognized states’ case is a comfortable function allowing any motivated presence in the Caucasus and an active participation in the various committees, commissions, seminars and sessions.

The time limits of Caucasian alternatives are passing through the prism of a familiar scenario which, over the past centuries, has been repeating itself over again. The struggle for power concentrates well-known subjects, new accents, but also predictable reference points.

Russian and the USA are repeating a situation from the 18 – early 19<sup>th</sup> century. Therein England (instead of the USA) united the states of the ‘European Concert’ in the fight against the Russian Empire for influence over the ‘sick man at the Bosphorus’\*. Then, like today, Russia is the hated enemy/partner needed for the temporary configurations, energy plans and regional scenarios.

The main contradiction that divides and determines in the long run the strategy of each participant in the Black sea-Caspian area are the corridor borders having a multicolor nuance. The black borders (oil), the green borders (Islam), the blue borders (sea ports and military bases along the Black sea coast of the Caucasus) outline the numerous problems of diverse nature. They will continue deepening instead of solving the processes of confrontation that abound in the region.

The time parameters of their overcoming is shaping not so much the chronological border than the international-legal and social-cultural parameters of the problems. The process of disintegration in the Caucasian buffer zone proves the inefficiency of this form of existence. A time solution of the reverse process is only possible after the global issue of the international world order is

determined. Who will be the decisive world factor – one state or a multi-polar diversity?

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\* the Ottoman Empire – *Author's Note*