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98

EXPERT OPINION





საქართველოს სტრატეგიისა და საერთაშორისო ურთიერთობათა კვლევის ფონდი
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The North Caucasus represents one of the vibrant and volatile regions in Georgia's immediate vicinity with its ongoing processes both directly or indirectly also affecting the South Caucasus. The fact that Georgia shares a border with six North Caucasian republics underlines its central geographic location as well as the impossibility of its isolation from these neighbors. Although the North Caucasus is a subject of the Russian Federation, the last three decades have shown that the developments in the region are distinct from mainstream Russian domestic politics. Additionally, it is historically evident that instability in the North Caucasus has the ability to spread beyond its borders and affect its neighbors to the south. Owing to these facts and combined with the geographical proximity and ethnocultural ties between Georgian and North Caucasian peoples, a well-balanced North Caucasian policy is essential for the Georgian state in terms of decreasing any security risks which could emanate from the region.

During the Soviet period, Georgian authorities were politically constrained and unable to pursue national interests in neighboring regions independently from official Moscow. Following its independence, there were several times when the Georgian government attempted to implement a policy oriented towards the North Caucasian peoples. The first was by President Zviad Gamsakhurdia who established good personal contacts with North Caucasian nationalist activists during his dissident years. Among these contacts, the most important was Jokhar Dudayev, the first President of the Chechen Republic of Ichkeria, who even hosted Gamsakhurdia after his exile from Georgia in 1992. Dudayev shared Gamsakhurdia's concept of the 'Caucasian House.' Nevertheless, Gamsakhurdia's concept lacked any far-reaching strategic planning and was based purely on rhetoric and patriotic sentiments. Furthermore, the ethnic clashes between Georgians and Avarians in the Kvareli district undermined Gamsakhurdia's reputation in Dagestan.¹ Gamsakhurdia also did not manage to prevent the influx of North Caucasian mercenaries to the Abkhazian war in 1992-93.

The military coup in 1992 rapidly changed the attitude towards the North Caucasus. President Eduard Shevardnadze's administration perceived the North Caucasian policy as a legacy of Gamsakhurdia and so it was rejected. This skepticism was only reinforced after the participation of North Caucasian foreign fighters against Georgia in the Abkhazian war. However, the war in Chechnya made the interaction with the North Caucasus inevitable and forced official Tbilisi to establish relations with the de facto leaders of breakaway Chechnya. Within the framework of these relations, the leader of Ichkeria, Aslan Maskhadov, visited Tbilisi in 1997 and even met Shevardnadze.² In these years, the Parliament of Georgia created the

Coordination Group for the Relations with North Caucasian People whose primary object was to re-establish relations with the North Caucasians.³ Nonetheless, these measures did not give any tangible results. Instead, Georgia was absolutely unprepared for the arrival of thousands of Chechen refugees in the late 1990s. As the result of this migration, the Pankisi Gorge turned into a hub for transnational jihadi militants and the regional center for drug trafficking and kidnapping. Georgia managed to establish full control over the region in September 2003. Moreover, several cases of extrajudicial extraditions of captured Chechen militants harmed Georgia's image in Chechen public opinion.

Since the Rose Revolution in 2003, Georgia's North Caucasian policy can be subdivided into two phases: before and after the Russian-Georgian war of 2008. Before 2008, Georgia tried to establish a dialog with Ossetian political activists residing in North Ossetia whereas other regions of the North Caucasus were neglected. President Mikheil Saakashvili even responded to Aslan Maskhadov's dovish statement that Georgia does not need a friendship with Chechen insurgents.⁴ The Russian invasion in 2008 and the participation of ethnic Chechen forces such as Vostok and Zapad in the conflict underlined the necessity of Georgia's establishing close relationships with North Caucasian peoples. These events drastically changed the attitudes of the Georgian authorities and drove them to the implementation of various projects oriented at the North Caucasus. Among these projects we find First Caucasian TV (PIK), a visa-free regime for the residents of North Caucasian republics, scholarship programs in Georgian universities for North Caucasian students, creating the Diaspora and North Caucasian Committee in the Parliament of Georgia and organizing several political-academic North Caucasian conferences. Perhaps the most fruitful was an attempt to re-establish relationships with the Circassian people. To this end, Georgia recognized the Circassian genocide on May 20, 2011, created the Circassian Culture Center in Tbilisi and erected a monument in memory of the Circassian genocide in Anaklia. With this initiative, Tbilisi killed two birds with one stone. Firstly, the relationship between Georgians and Circassians improved significantly. Secondly, the Georgian-Circassian rapprochement created a schism between Circassian nationalist activists and Abkhazian separatists. The culmination of this schism was the demonstrative refusal of Abkhazian citizenship by the Circassian veteran of the Abkhazian war, Acumij Hilimi.⁵ Moreover, one of the key field commanders of the Abkhazian war, Ibrahim Yaganov, became a frequent guest in Tbilisi and was even discussing Georgia during talks with Abkhazian nationalist activists.⁶

Following the general election in 2012, the North Caucasian policy no longer remained a priority for Georgia. One of the first measures was closing down PIK TV. The reason for such a move might have been an attempt to normalize relationships with official Moscow and, therefore, rejecting North Caucasian policy as an irritant. On the other hand, the Georgian government did not denunciate the recognition of the Circassian genocide nor close down the Circassian Cultural Center. Moreover, there were some minor symbolic acts such as naming Ingushetia Street in one of Tbilisi's neighborhoods.

The instability in the North Caucasus poses several risks for the Georgian state. The most important threat is international terrorism. The first Chechen war led to the proliferation of jihadi ideology all over the North Caucasus. Furthermore, according to Russian officials, several thousand residents of the North Caucasus participated in the conflict in Syria and Iraq.⁷ The risk for Georgia is twofold. Firstly, the transit of North Caucasian militants through Georgia could undermine Georgia's international reputation and lead to armed clashes between militants and armed forces. The skirmish in the Lopota Gorge in August 2012 and the clash with Akhmed Chatayev's group in a Tbilisi neighborhood are clear illustrations of such a risk. Secondly, the jihadi groups in the North Caucasus are capable of radicalizing Georgian Muslims. For instance, the participation of foreign fighters from the Pankisi Gorge in the Syrian conflict is the result of their long interaction with North Caucasian insurgents that began in the early 2000s. Moreover, Georgia's involvement in the ISAF mission in Afghanistan could expand the range of potential targets. In addition to these, Russia could use the transit of North Caucasian insurgents through Georgia as the pretext to interfere in Georgia's domestic politics.

Another challenge is that Russian propaganda in the North Caucasus has been inciting hatred towards Georgia in order to utilize North Caucasians against the country. In the context of hybrid warfare, Russia is capable of mobilizing North Caucasian mercenaries against its military opponents in the same manner as was done in Georgia, Ukraine and Syria. Moscow has also been lobbying separatist regimes in Abkhazia and the Tskhinvali region by North Caucasian political and national activists. For instance, the leaders of North Caucasian republics have been frequently visiting the two breakaway regions and expressing their support for the "new states."

Finally, the conflicts in the North Caucasus have the ability to expand across borders as has been seen throughout history. The potential conflict in the North Caucasus could cause an influx of refugees to Georgia which would significantly undermine Georgia's economy and stability. In a similar

fashion, the instability in the North Caucasus can have a negative impact on the North Caucasian ethnic minorities residing in Georgia such as the Kists in Pankisi and the Avarians in Kvareli.

What should Georgia's priorities in the North Caucasus be? We must remember that the North Caucasus is not a sovereign state but a part of the Russian Federation. Therefore, Georgian authorities must skillfully balance Georgian regional interests and a non-violation of Russia's territorial integrity. The overarching objective of the Georgian state should be a diplomatic marginalization of Abkhazian and Ossetian separatists by their isolation from North Caucasian nationalist activists. No one denies that cutting off all ties between separatists and their North Caucasian partners is a highly difficult task, but Georgia can significantly damage the image of separatists among various Caucasian peoples. Equally important is the dialog with the predominantly Chechen and Circassian North Caucasian diaspora in Turkey and the Middle East which could significantly lead to a decrease in foreign support for de facto leaders of breakaway regions. Georgia's good relations with the respective countries make for favorable conditions for dialog.

Another important direction is the cultural and academic sphere. Since the Soviet period, many members of the North Caucasian academic or cultural elite have been alumni of Georgian universities. Programs such as scholarships, academic conferences, folklore festivals or exhibitions could significantly improve people-to-people relationships. Furthermore, the effectiveness of Georgia's North Caucasian policy highly depends on human resources. Therefore, Georgia needs more professionals with an in-depth knowledge of Caucasian languages, politics and culture. Georgia also has the potential to be an academic center for Caucasian studies and attract scholars from all over the world.

Russia's pro-active informational war against Georgia also requires the implementation of a clear informational policy in the North Caucasus. Creating a positive image of the Georgian state in the region is crucial. More precisely, Georgia must have efficient TV, radio and websites oriented to the North Caucasian peoples. Apart from debunking negative myths about Georgia, the Georgian media can allow North Caucasian activists to cover facts of human rights violation in their regions which will increase the role of Georgian media resources.

Finally, one of the key components of Georgia's policy in the North Caucasus is the economy. Currently, many residents of this region are visiting Georgia for business purposes or medical treatment. The development

of the mountainous regions bordering the North Caucasus, such as the Kazbegi (Stepantsminda) municipality, can boost economic relations with the region. The improvement of the transport communication with the North Caucasus can be beneficial for economic relationships. Georgia's airports should work on starting direct flights from Georgia to major North Caucasian cities such as Grozny, Makhachkala or Nalchik. Additionally, Georgia could attract investment from the affluent Caucasian diaspora in Turkey and the Middle East. Overall, North Caucasian economic activities in Georgia can significantly boost relationships between peoples and turn Georgia into a logistical center for the region.

In conclusion, the North Caucasus is a vital region for Georgia. Although history has witnessed the emergence and disappearance of many states in Georgia's proximity, the North Caucasus has always been an important local factor. Therefore, Georgia needs to have its short and long-term strategy designed to increase its presence in the region and eliminate the potential threats coming from our northern borders.

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