

Statehood, Religion and Strategic Europeanization in the Southern Caucasus

The Southern Caucasus is a region replete with seemingly insurmountable challenges. The three small nations that form this mountainous region are not only confronted with the enormous burdens which other former communist countries face such as economic stabilization, democratization, and the (re-)establishment of civil society, to name just a few. Georgia, Armenia and Azerbaijan are also plagued by additional daunting obstacles specific to their geographical position. These include, most prominently, the multiple unsolved armed conflicts within their borders, the often unwarranted Russian and Iranian influence, and their immediate proximity to northern Caucasian separatist conflicts. Both in the present and past, the region has been a political football of the grand powers seeking to strengthen their foothold over the geopolitically as a bridge between Europe, Asia and the Muslim world. In view of the lacking immediate prospect of EU membership as a stabilizing reform catalyst, the Southern Caucasian countries are – to a large extent – forced to cope with the manifold ethnic, religious, linguistic tensions on their own. The future of the region thus remains highly uncertain and domestic stability is further endangered by the dire economic situation and widespread poverty.

Contrary to many previous western analyses, which have focused primarily on major international events affecting the Caucasus – the Russo-Georgian War of 2008, the conflict in Nagorny-Karabach, the Abkhaz conflict – this issue of *Euxeinos* aims to delve deeper into the fabric of the Armenian, Georgian and Azerbaijani societies. Specifically, the authors and editors aim to convey a deeper appreciation of the ongoing and by no means complete processes of state-building and identity construction against the background of their diverse ethnic and religious heritage, but also the

more recent processes of Europeanization and “westernization”. Despite their highly fragile traditions of statehood, these three countries are characterized by a very strong sense of collective identity, bolstered by century-old religious and cultural traditions. In the past two decades, Armenia, Georgia, and Azerbaijan have also taken far-reaching efforts to stress their sense of belonging with the West in political, religious and cultural terms. Thus, the Caucasus is torn between continuity and change in nearly every conceivable aspect of life and therefore stands out as a particularly fascinating, yet still poorly understood region.

With this in mind, the authors seek to convey a greater understanding of the histories and contemporary domestic developments of the three Caucasian countries. The essays by Rasim Mirzayev and Michael Dobbins focus on recent events in Azerbaijan and Georgia and in particular external influences on the development of statehood. In his article, **Rasim Mirzayev** explores the complex interplay between Islamization and Europeanization in Azerbaijan. He observes a growing potential for the radical Islamization of the country – despite the generally highly secular attitude of the overwhelming majority of Azerbaijanis. The author explains this paradox on the basis of both historical developments as well as more recent developments after the collapse of the Soviet Union. He argues that the lack of political leeway for democratic and pro-western parties and the simultaneous western support to the ambitions of the Aliyev government have resulted in widespread social discontent and thus provided a “window of opportunity” for Islamic extremism. Thus, closer ties with the West due to energy resources may have actually increased the potential of Islamic radicalism in Azerbaijan.

Michael Dobbins also looks at very recent political events in Georgia. In his essay he outlines how the redesign of Georgian political institutions after the Rose Revolution was largely driven by the power-seeking strategies of the new elite, who transferred “pseudo-European” political institutions to the country. This ultimately strengthened authoritarianism behind a democratic façade. However, he argues that this strategy has recently backfired and – in view of the new power-sharing arrangement between Mikheil Saakashvili and Bidzina Ivanishvili – may have “accidentally” contributed to the democratization of Georgia if both men and their political allies prove capable of working together.

In her essay, **Anush Yeghiazaryan** explores the meaning of statehood for Armenia and sheds light on the cultural foundations, which shape the collective symbolism of the Armenians. She stresses, in particular, the adoption of Christianity as the state religion in the 4th century as well as the development of the Armenian alphabet and the Armenian territory itself as the central cornerstones of Armenian identity. In this regard, Armenia is very much like Georgia, in which the troika – fatherland, language, faith – is crucial for identity formation. Along similar lines, **Yusuf Özcelik** also delves deep into the past to outline the development of the political identity of the Republic of Azerbaijan, by examining the evolution of the written language, the varying names of the country as well as the country’s flag. Against this background, he provides critical insights into the unsteady history of the Azerbaijanis within and outside the spheres of influence of various external powers. Both authors show that Azerbaijan and Armenia have undergone long-winding and difficult processes of nation and identity building, which are still ongoing.

We hope very much that the essays broad-

en the readers’ depth of understanding of this uniquely complex region.

Mariam Parsadanishvili (Konstanz)
Michael Dobbins (Konstanz)

About the editors:

MARIAM PARSADANISHVILI, born in Telavi, Georgia, studied Slavic and Germanic literature and History in Telavi, Konstanz and Warsaw. She is currently completing her doctoral thesis on the topic “Georgia and Russia: Processes of disintegration since 1970”. The thesis is part of her research project funded by the Cluster of Excellence “Cultural Foundations of Integration” at the University of Konstanz. She also works as a freelance translator and trainer for intercultural communication. She is the author of the book “Pasternak und die georgische Dichtung: romantische Tradition und die Dekolonisierung der Poesie im 20. Jahrhundert” (Pasternak and Georgian Poetry: The Romantic Tradition and the Decolonization of Poetry in the 20th century), Saarbrücken: VDM Verlag, 2008. Additional publications: 2010. Georgiens konfliktreiche Abkopplung von Russland: Hegemoniale Ansprüche Moskaus und Verirrungen des georgischen Nationalismus. In: Vogt M. T. et al. ed., 2010. *Der Fremde als Bereicherung*. Schriften des Collegium PONTES. Band V. Bern, Berlin etc.: Peter Lang, pp. 323-332. e-mail: mariam.parsadanishvili@googlemail.com

MICHAEL DOBBINS is a graduate of political science and Slavic studies at the University of Konstanz and also studied at the Universities of Warsaw and Rutgers. He completed his doctoral degree with a thesis entitled “Comparing Higher Education Policies in Central and East-

ern Europe” in Konstanz. During his doctoral studies and afterwards he worked as a research fellow at the Chair for Comparative Public Policy and Administration (Prof. C. Knill) at the University of Konstanz and at the Collaborative Research Center “Transformations of the State 597” within the project “Internationalization of Education Policy” at the University of Bremen. In January 2012 he joined the Chair of Political Science, Policy Analysis and Political Theory (Prof. M. Busemeyer) at the University of Konstanz. His main areas of research are education and higher education policy, policy-making in the EU, policy-making in the USA, transformation processes in central and

eastern Europe, as well as the domestic and foreign policies of Caucasian region countries. Recent publications: Dobbins, M., Tosun, J. 2012. A differential approach to energy policy? Explaining the prevalence of market-based energy policy instruments in Central and Eastern Europe. In: Morata, F., Solorio I. eds., 2012. *European energy policy: an environmental approach*. Cheltenham: Edward Elgar Publishers; Dobbins, M., 2011. *Higher Education Policies in Central and Eastern Europe: Convergence towards a common model?* Basingstoke: Palgrave.
e-mail: Michael.Dobbins@uni-konstanz.de