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**NATO:CAUCASUS IN THE CONTEXT OF PARTNERSHIP FOR PEACE**

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During most of this century, the republics of the South Caucasus included that region of the Soviet Union which had a direct border with the NATO member country, Turkey. Being an important flank of one of two superpowers meant having distinct, specific and deliberate politics in the region.

In the Cold War period there was no chance for the political élite of the region to have or even intend to have any genuine co-operation with the countries of the NATO bloc or with the West in general. Those scientific and cultural contacts, which hardly could be called ‘co-operation’, were closely monitored by ‘competent’ institutions (as people called the intelligence services here) and these had the final word to say on everything as the highest expert available. Moreover, the West, and especially Turkey, was considered as just an enemy and the entire military machine—missiles and missiles carrying nuclear weapons among them—were directed towards the south.

The end of the twentieth century was an undeniably real turning point for the entire region. As the Soviet bloc and the USSR itself (fortunately) collapsed, the gates of the road to co-operation between the countries of the region and the West became open and the panorama observed through them has been most welcoming. This revolutionary transformation stimulated the start of fundamentally new relationships between the countries of the region and the West. There is no field, no aspect of life left unaffected by those changes. All this time we are witnessing a true race of innovations implanting themselves into our everyday lives and, more essentially, into our system of values.

Security is the major field covered by the co-operative trends described above. Relationships in this most important sector were launched from the very beginning of the changes that took place in the region. This basic domain of confrontation has turned into a major arena of co-operation. In essence, co-operation in the area of security itself serves for securing co-operation in other fields.

The basic document that institutionalises the above-mentioned co-operation is the Partnership for Peace (PfP) agreement. The agreement was signed by all three Caucasian states very soon after its announcement. The fact that such early attention was given to the matter shows the importance that the parties give to this issue. Although there were doubts about the viability of this approach, for the time being it appears that the PfP framework is the best agreement, providing the most favourable environment and means for successful co-operation, in this extremely important area, that of security.

Nevertheless, the development of the security environment in the region has not been taking place as smoothly as it might seem from the above narration. There have been and still are lots of obstacles to

overcome, misunderstandings to discuss, unknown aspects to study and enemies to defeat.

Attitudes towards the concept of Partnership for Peace vary among the countries of the region. Georgia has developed relationships with the Western security structures, especially within the PfP framework, better than others have done. The reasons might be different but the development of democratic institutions that support this trend could be a major factor of influence. It is also important that there are several conflict zones in the region. This fact inevitably has a huge impact on the authorities and their political will as well as space for manoeuvres and reforms. In these circumstances, the ruling élite is more interested in military enhancement today, rather than in transformation of the defence system and having benefits years after. At the same time, reforms always mean some transitional period and, consequently, a rather low level of stability. It is always a painful process and there are lots of those who have lost and few of those who have won.

There are players on the scene that can hardly be considered member-states of the region but that still have a major impact on the processes there. Russia is the most important of those. Despite the crash of the communist bloc (first the Warsaw Pact and then the Soviet Union itself), Russia, which was the core of this ‘pole’, has not changed considerably its attitude towards the West, as well as towards the new-born states that had been under her control. This trend becomes more and more evident if one observes Russian foreign policy during recent years. In fact, Russia is trying hard to present herself as a new, modern ‘force pole’ and to re-establish a ‘post-Yalta World Order’. The imperial mentality is still largely present in Russian society as well as in ruling circles. Russia has not adjusted to new realities, including new realities inside herself, and still uses old methods to promote her ambitions and to keep military influence outside of her borders. Russia still tries to force Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS) whom she perceives as her dominions, to be involved in various strategic alliances and forms formal structures for re-establishing close legal and institutional bindings for them. A bright example of this is Russian efforts to support and strengthen the CIS joint security systems, ie. the CIS air defence system. As Russian strategists suppose, these military-political-economic entities should serve as a counterbalance to the West and, especially, the North Atlantic Alliance. Most vigorously, Russia opposes NATO’s eastward enlargement and perceives that process as a direct threat to her strategic interests. Moreover, Russia’s highest officials keep warning that they will not allow even a dream of incorporation of the post-Soviet states into NATO.

Likewise, Russia perceives the PfP agreement and activities within its framework in the same context. Despite a special accord—‘Founding Act’—signed by NATO and Russia, she is still extremely cautious and does not take the initiative seriously. Russian participation in PfP is minimal and rather formal.

In this regard it should be stressed that if Russia reappears as a ‘force pole’ it will serve only the interests of the aggressive Russian establishment and this aggression will be directed mostly against the former Soviet republics. We should always be careful in relations with Russia and remember that Russian imperialism still exists.

In order to explain further the importance of co-operation between the West and South Caucasus region it is unavoidable to mention one particular point of global interest in the region—Caspian oil and gas. The issue includes two vital aspects: first, the creation of a secure environment to conduct exploration and commercial use of oil fields and, second, ensuring safe excess of Caspian energy to world markets.

Furthermore, alongside the development of Caspian energy resources, there is another equally important and ambitious endeavour taking place in the region. It is European Union Project of Transportation Corridor connecting Europe and Asia (TRASECA). This is a revival of the ancient Silk Road and serves to create new links between these major and most important continents on the globe. The volume of trade via this route already seems to have become rather significant, taking into consideration the interest of the West in the riches of Central Asia and the interest of the latter in Western goods and services.

Bearing in mind the Russian stance, it becomes crucial to build a transportation system that bypasses Russia, which, on her behalf, fiercely pushes forward and uses every opportunity at her disposal to build pipelines and get other cargo shipments through her own territory, as that provides an additional tool for exercising political pressure on the countries of the region.

Thus the development of Caspian energy resources and transportation routes is directly linked to the security of the South Caucasus. It should be noted that the PfP contributes into this directly or indirectly by providing some training to our security structures and by increasing the level of co-operation with Western institutions, particularly NATO—the only real power pole of the world. In addition, it might be stated that here we have a partner with very similar interests—Turkey. Turkey's interest in the construction of the Baku-Tbilisi-Ceyhan oil pipeline can not be overestimated.

One more, new and important point for the security of the South Caucasus region is the fact that neighbouring territories to the north today belong to the Russian Federation. Developments in this part of the region do not give food for optimism. On the contrary, recent outbursts of violence in the Northern Caucasus raise concern for danger coming from there. Indeed, these trends threaten first of all the territorial integrity of Russia, but certainly have influence on the security environment on the Southern slopes of Caucasian mountains.

Obviously, countries of the South Caucasus are closely monitoring the processes of conflict resolution that take place all around the world. But most interesting to us are those activities conducted by the North Atlantic Alliance. The desire and inspiration of NATO's help in settling conflicts in Europe is highly evaluated and respected in the Southern Caucasus. The participation of only one state in solving the existing ethnic conflicts turned out to be counterproductive. My country, Georgia, has learned this through a painful history of civil war and the CIS (in fact, Russian) peacekeeping mission in Abkhazia. Russia's willingness to be the mediator in regional conflicts is just a means to increase its influence and keep her military presence in the region. That's why the countries of the region try to change the format of conflict resolution and actively involve in this process the European security structures: the OSCE, Euro-Atlantic Partnership Council (EAPC) and, hopefully, in some not very far future, NATO.

Military build-up processes are under way in the South Caucasian region. In this regard, the practical experience that countries receive from the PfP is of great importance. The process of our involvement is developing in a dynamic way. While it started with participation in seminars, workshops and courses, currently the countries of the region are involved in common planning, standardisation, policy-making processes and joint military exercises. Special importance is given to consultations in the framework '16+1', providing the newly independent states with a chance to co-ordinate their security policies with the new partners. In this context, involvement in the Planning & Review Process (PARP), a new approach to co-operation that is run within PfP framework, should

be mentioned. Gaining the experience in this field is extremely important for Caucasian states, which had not possessed their own military structures in former times and do not have proper experienced personnel in defence planning under the conditions of market economy.

It should be noted that the problem of experienced personnel is more serious. Most of the military staff has a Soviet background, education and professional skills. Another quite small number of them has a paramilitary background. Lack of the modern knowledge that is required in current circumstances and an inability to adapt to new realities is common for both categories. This predicament gives even more support to efforts directed towards increasing co-operation with NATO. And the basic tool used for this is, indeed, the PfP agreement.

Of the same importance is the problem of standardisation and interoperability of defence structures between NATO and partner countries. The movement of our defence processes towards using modern NATO standards and not following the Soviet style army is considered as an extremely important trend.

Although, as noted before, the attitudes of the countries of the region to the programme are rather different, still the PfP is considered in the South Caucasus as a means to increase co-operation with NATO and to achieve results that are vital to these states' existence and development. With this process going on it will be easier to modernise our armed forces, adopt European standards, and to prepare and change people. Ultimately the main goal, purpose and rationale is to become a member of the North Atlantic Treaty Organisation. This will provide a significant security umbrella and guarantee of independence, sovereignty and democratic development for the countries of the South Caucasus.

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