

*Taking responsibility
for our own problems
and our own solutions*

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Abstract

This article focuses on the problems that the Caucasian states have faced during last 20 years, following the dissolution of the Soviet Union. The article emphasizes that mentalities and behaviors do not change at the same rate as laws and regimes in countries; the implementation of very good laws is often hampered by the inability of those responsible for the execution of these law to fully internalize the spirit of the laws and what such laws intended to achieve. The article also calls for the republics to take responsibility for the future of the region.

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On this, the 20th anniversary of the independence of the South Caucasus republics, it is most constructive to consider the following questions: How did we understand the processes of the break up of the Soviet Union? What terminology did we use to articulate that worldview? And, what are the consequences of those perceptions?

It was clear from the beginning that the three republics would face major challenges when they became independent. Yet it does not appear that the spectrum and depth of the challenges and the interrelationship between these challenges were fully recognized, either by those pursuing independence, or those watching it happen.

Indeed, the very tricky but widely used term “transition” ostensibly covered all these challenges, covering them so well that the term “transition,” having been invested with both descriptive and prescriptive powers, became a misnomer. And just as in the good old times of the Soviet period, for most of the states involved, terminology concealed more than it revealed. This teleologically loaded term, in fact, covered up the complexities of the transition process. It was difficult and possibly inconvenient to fully recognize the number and types of revolutions that were needed to make that difficult – and in some cases, seemingly impossible – transition possible.

Twenty years constitute a short period of time in a region where tragic events that might have occurred 50, 100, 1,000 years ago occupy more space in collective memories than the longer periods of coexistence, if not friendship.

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tory and many versions of it within seconds, and on your home computer screen—and that search engine may look decrepit and old and antiquarian within a few months. But for us in the region, we look at those events of the past as more important determinants of our future than the larger challenges we are all facing on a regional and global level today.

The multiplicity of revolutions needed for a successful transition, and the difficulties of imagining and implementing a strategic plan for these revolutions are complex enough. But even more challenging than the adoption of legislation, the drafting of constitutions and the establish-

ment of institutions to implement those legislative initiatives and constitutions was the slow change in the patterns of behavior and mentalities of those who were both the promoters of the new laws and constitutions, and their executors. Laws can be reshaped overnight; people cannot be.

At the start of their independence and to replace the lost ideology of communism the three republics had two choices. They could have opted for legitimacy of government based on the concept of civic statehood, on citizenship and constitutionally based relations between citizens and the state; or for the legitimization of statehood based mainly on ethnicity and nationalism. We ended up with very mixed results. At the end, or at present at least, nationalism seems to have become more dominant. And the more governments moved toward authoritarianism and lost their legitimacy, the more they relied on nationalism for the legitimization of power.

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Other than citizenship, we had a very important couple of terms that became key words. One of them was

“conflict resolution,” which became central to contemporary discourse, and generally fostered a good amount of grant-writing and grant-giving - and that’s the story of another term that tells the story of a region trying to get out of a bankrupt and, by this time, a toothless empire.

Conflict resolution was a Western term with serious implications of its own. Sometimes I had the feeling that Western based conflict resolution meant, “you guys provide the conflict; we’ll provide the resolution.” We certainly provided those conflicts. There were plenty of mediators, including in the West, who used these conflicts as a means of pursuing their own geopolitical and strategic interests, regardless of the fact that actual conflict resolution was not achieved.

In this respect, I should say that I do not think it is a matter of who wants peace, which country opposes it and which country supports the continuation of the conflict. Rather, it has been a question of whose peace it will be. What if a peace, with its underlying conditions, poses a threat to one of the major mediators? There is a certain kind of peace that threatens the interests of some and increases the influence of others. It seems to me that, broadly speaking, after 20 years, there are good peaces and there are bad peaces, just as, apparently, there are good wars and bad wars, rather than good countries and bad countries.

These conflicts have cost these republics and peoples much more than the large number of lost lives, lost limbs, lost opportunities and displaced peoples on all sides. These conflicts have produced swollen military budgets, increased militarization of societies, and securitization of state policies that have distorted state spending, undermined the promise of independence and made progress and democratization, including human rights, easier to disregard.

In this process, it is not just the local conditions that have produced elites that now have an interest in continuing the conflicts – elites, sometimes political, that acquire economic leverage, or economic elites that buy up or become political elites. We are facing a very dynamic situation where the interests of major countries adjust to the dynamics of the local elites and vice versa.

Now that we have studied the multifaceted nature of the challenges facing the new states and political entities that emerged 20 years ago in the Caucasus, we can see that the challenge was not just to these republics, but also to their more powerful neighbors and the international players; these “big” players too needed to rethink radically their perceptions of the region. An even bigger challenge for the big players was to imagine the region as an integral part of a genuinely “New World.” In this task, they failed altogether, much as the local

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players failed, at the end, to face their own challenges. The big players were unable to envisage the region without the assumptions that made the Cold War possible. For the US and Russia, specially, strategies regarding this region were based on a zero sum game, and the strong starts made by all three republics were marred by their perceived need to deal with threats to national security or territorial integrity.

By and large, the burden for these abortive transitions has been placed entirely on the three republics. Yet, for the transition to have had a chance to succeed, it was critical that the major powers, regional and international, did themselves transition into a new mode of thinking.

In effect, while supporting a “New World Order,” the big players sustained a mini-Cold War in this region and in others. The West—specifically the US—spoke as if Russia was now to be seen as a partner, but acted as if the idea was to make Russia sub-

servient; some in Washington insisted on destroying it, just as Germany was treated after World War I.

The new war, thus defined, certainly lacked the ideological ardor of the simpler and more comfortable justifications for the previous global antagonism: “communist and enslaved” versus “democratic and free.” Yet it was almost as ferocious, because now it entailed the involvement of Western economic forces in the name of national and energy security, that could be deployed in order to achieve strategic goals, or to formulate relations of strategic interest in a manner that prioritized energy interests.

Now Baku, Tbilisi and Yerevan were starting to look to Brussels and Washington as well as Moscow for solutions to their problems – indeed, for salvation. More often than not, they acted as if they were guests in the region--waiting to be served up proposals by the OSCE and others for the resolution of their problems, rather than realizing that (i) each was in the region to stay; (ii) so were their neighbors; and, therefore, (iii) it was necessary to find ways to accommodate each other and each other’s interests.

It is true that conflicts continue for reasons other than their initial causes. But, ultimately, these are local problems. It is up to Azerbaijan, Armenia, and Georgia to find solutions to the problems of their region.

Governments continue to find solace in the principles of international law and thereby connect to the larger community for whom such conflicts are, at best, diversions, and at worst, excuses and means to project themselves into the region.

Given the recent political and financial developments in Europe, the Middle East, and the U.S., we must recognize that we need to take greater control of our policies as Caucasian states, and assume responsibility for concessions and compromises that are necessary and unavoidable. The so-called international community will be absorbed in domestic problems and urgent problems in other regions of the world for a long time to come with increasingly fewer resources, time, and concentration invested in the region except, possibly, by the regional big powers with immediate local interests.

There are some steps we need to take to get out of this situation. We need to change our rhetorical focus from war and polarized positions to the need and possibility of peace, and work toward the legitimization of the position of compromises on all sides. We need to change the course we have taken in the teaching of so many separate and opposing narratives of our own histories, particularly as we educate the next generations.

We need to start thinking of ways to develop a sense of the region itself.

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As far as the governments in the region are concerned, we currently have a geographic political area, but not a mental and intellectual framework that imagines the region. While it is unlikely that the independent status of these states will disappear, we have already seen an erosion of the degree of independence. That erosion will continue without the development of a regional outlook. The lessons of the first republics should teach us something. And if that's not enough, we should look at the 2,000-year history of the region and see how it has been governed throughout history, to see that unless you decide you are a region and act as such, then you will be taken apart, bit by bit.

I have done two experiments since leaving my position in Armenia that have some relevance to this discussion. The first was when I traveled to Istanbul, Yerevan, Baku, Tehran, Tbilisi, and gave the same lecture on conflicts, focusing on the Karabakh conflict. The repetition was boring, so in each city, I was more critical of the policies of that particular government and kinder to the others. The interesting thing for me was the questions I was asked. There were all kinds of questions.

But at the end, in each city, there was inevitably one question that came up when I insisted on my critique of the policies of the government of that particular country. And that question was, "But sir, don't you see what neighborhood we are living in?" Turks looking at the neighborhood said, just look at Iraq, Syria, Armenia, Georgia, Iran, etc. And then the Iranians would say, look at those Azerbaijanis, Armenians, Turks, Arabs, etc. And so with Azerbaijanis, Armenians and Georgians. Every one of them thought the neighborhood was bad, but they thought it was bad essentially because of the others.

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The second experiment was in Istanbul, where I had invited mid-level officials from Armenia, Azerbaijan and Georgia to meet. We had prepared, with Turkish colleagues, a series of questions on foreign policy; the only issue we left out was the Karabakh conflict. The positions of the three republics were about 90 percent overlapping in their policies on the rest of the issues – 90 percent, if not more.

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And this fact has not been appreciated. Despite this overlapping, there has not been a single document on foreign policy issues signed by the three republics.

We need to rethink the one conflict that pits entities within the region against each other, and that's the Karabakh conflict. We have to get out of certain mindsets. Azerbaijani policymakers should drop the illusion that by strangling Armenia's economy with the help of Turkey through blockades, the Armenian side will have to make concessions that it will not otherwise make. And the Armenian side will have to drop the illusion that diasporan investments will be equivalent to investments in Azerbaijan in the hydrocarbon resource sector. This course is best described as mutually assured destruction.

Ultimately, we must also relinquish our reliance on the abstracted principles of international law, such as self-determination, territorial integrity, principles the international community doesn't seem to care much about, and respects only sporadically and selectively. We have to stop using terms like autonomy, territorial integrity and independence as starting points for negotiations. State-

ments of principles and reliance on the moral high ground—and who cannot formulate one to justify his position?—do not amount to negotiations. Negotiators who think the international community—as a whole or otherwise—will determine its position or positions on these conflicts on the basis of one or the other principle of international law must reevaluate their approach, in view of the developments over the past decade. And those who think “pragmatically” but also insist time is on their side must

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realize what they are losing as time passes. In every frozen conflict, the new generations no longer remember that their enemies were their neighbors of yesterday. The “enemy” is dehumanized; hatred, at that point, becomes possible, indeed inevitable, given the nationalist rhetoric that has overwhelmed the discourse. The consequences of this process, currently under way, have not yet been measured.

We have to start imagining our own solutions and take responsibility for our own future in the region.