

FRAGMENTED FUTURES: DIFFERENT POLITICAL PATHS AND FOREIGN POLICY ORIENTATIONS IN THE SOUTH CAUCASUS

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Introduction

The South Caucasus, which includes Armenia, Azerbaijan, and Georgia, is a region of both great geopolitical importance and internal heterogeneity. Despite their geographical proximity and shared Soviet experience, the three nations have followed radically different political trajectories since gaining independence. These differences are also evident in their foreign policies: Georgia has sought Euro-Atlantic integration, Azerbaijan pursues a pragmatic balanced foreign policy, and Armenia has historically had close ties with Russia. Accordingly, this area is characterized by the existence of serious obstacles to the promotion of regional cooperation and institutional regionalism.

The aim of this article is to examine how the prospects for regionalism in the South Caucasus have been diminished by the divergent foreign policy decisions taken by Georgia, Azerbaijan, and Armenia. Using the theoretical concepts of liberalism, constructivism, and realism, the historical and strategic foundations of each nation's orientation are explained. As a result, the article argues that institutional regionalism in the South Caucasus will continue to be limited unless political and security perspectives are more closely aligned.

Theoretical Framework

The divergent foreign policy directions of Armenia, Azerbaijan, and Georgia can be better understood through international relations theories, particularly realism, liberalism, and constructivism. These frameworks help explain not only the strategic choices each state makes, but also the failure of regional cooperation.

Realist thinking explains why each nation in the South Caucasus prioritizes its own security alliances over regional integration. Realist calculations, driven by threat perceptions, past conflicts, and attempts to maintain sovereignty in an unstable neighborhood, are evident in Georgia's bid for NATO membership, Azerbaijan's security ties with Israel and Türkiye, and Armenia's reliance on Russia th-

rough the Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO) (German, 2012).

On the other hand, according to liberal perspectives, the South Caucasus lacks strong regional institutions that can mediate disputes or promote economic integration. The possibilities for regionalism are further reduced by the three countries' limited economic interdependence, weak democratic institutions, and the dominance of elite-led foreign policies (Jafalian, 2012). Furthermore, the tendency to engage external actors such as the US, Russia, and the EU on a bilateral basis undermines multilateral regional frameworks.

Constructivism emphasizes how threats, historical memory, and identity influence foreign policy (Wendt, 1999). National narratives, often based on sacrifice, resistance, or civilization, influence both domestic and foreign policies in the South Caucasus. Identity-based foreign policy decisions can be seen in Azerbaijan's focus on Turkish solidarity, Georgia's focus on Euro-Atlantic identity, and Armenia's focus on the ties with Russia (Ismailzade, 2005). The lack of a common South Caucasus identity reduces the possibilities for shared regionalism.

Divergent Political and Foreign Policy Trajectories

Georgia, Azerbaijan, and Armenia have all pursued different political trajectories and external alliances since achieving independence in the early 1990s. Each nation's past experiences, perceptions of threats, and goals for international collaborations influence these various paths. The potential for a unified regional framework in the South Caucasus is prevented by their divergent foreign policy philosophies.

Azerbaijan pursues a multi-vector, balanced foreign policy. The country, with strong ties to Israel and Turkey, has limited but strategically important ties to Russia and the West. Azerbaijan's energy resources, thanks to pipelines such as the Baku-Tbilisi-Ceyhan and the Southern Gas Corridor, connecting it to European markets and bypassing Armenia, have enhanced its international status and sovereign-

nty (Guliyev, 2009). The Nagorno-Karabakh conflict, in addition to playing a role in security and military modernization, has also affected Baku's foreign policy, which has historically limited trust-based relations with Armenia (Cornell, 2011).

Georgia, on the other hand, is a strongly Western-oriented country. The country has implemented liberal reforms and has prioritized NATO and EU integration since the Rose Revolution of 2003 (Welt, 2010). In addition to strategic objectives, Georgia's pro-Western stance also reflects a change in identity, as it sees itself as belonging to Europe rather than the post-Soviet world (Kakachia & Lebanidze, 2013). This trend was enhanced by the 2008 conflict with Russia, which has fueled anti-Russian sentiment and strengthened security cooperation with the West (Cheterian, 2009). Georgia's regional policy often deviates from Russian-dominated institutional frameworks, such as the CSTO or the EAEU. Furthermore, its departure from Russian-led frameworks has reduced prospects for trilateral platforms with Azerbaijan and Armenia, further isolating it in terms of institutional cooperation (Kapanadze, 2016).

Through economic and security organizations such as the Eurasian Economic Union and the CSTO, Armenia has historically sided with Russia. Both constructivist influences based on a shared Orthodox-Christian cultural affinity and historical reliance on Russia, as well as realist concerns about geographic vulnerability and regional isolation, are reflected in this foreign policy (Giragosian, 2019).

However, the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict in 2020 was a turning point here. Many Armenians have questioned Russia's security guarantees, and new diplomatic signals indicate a growing desire to balance relations with the US and the EU (Ter-Matevosyan, 2023). Nevertheless, Yerevan's flexibility is still limited by its strong institutional ties with Russia.

Conclusion

This article argues that the failure of South Caucasus regionalism is directly related to the different foreign policy orientations of each state. Azerbaijan's ambitious yet balanced diplomacy, Georgia's alignment with the West, and Armenia's dependence on Russia have created a fragmented strategic environment. These differences have deep historical, identity, and security roots.

Using constructivism, liberalism, and realism, the article shows how institutional flaws, identity narratives, and power dynamics work together to maintain regional divisions. As a result, efforts at multilateral cooperation remain weak, and existing regional institutions are incapable of overcoming interstate distrust. Unless these states develop at least some degree of common interests, regionalism will continue to be more idealistic than practical.

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SUMMARY

This article explores the reasons why regionalism in the South Caucasus is still weak, despite having a similar geography and a shared Soviet past. It makes the case that different political philosophies have produced obstacles to regional cooperation, focusing on the foreign policy paths of Georgia, Azerbaijan, and Armenia. Conflicting strategic visions have resulted from Georgia's Western orientation, Armenia's reliance on Russia, and Azerbaijan's practical multi-vector diplomacy. It draws on constructivism, liberalism, and realism to illustrate how identity narratives, security concerns, and weak institutions perpetuate this fragmentation. Constructivism demonstrates how national identity influences foreign policy, liberalism emphasizes the region's institutional shortcomings and limited economic interdependence, and realism emphasizes competition and threat perception. The results suggest that regionalism has failed due to divergent worldviews as well as unresolved conflicts. Without a shift toward shared priorities and more robust multilateral frameworks, cooperation in the South Caucasus is likely to be underdeveloped and driven by external forces.

Keywords: *Regionalism, Foreign Policy, South Caucasus, Geopolitics, National Identity.*

XÜLASƏ

Bu məqalə Cənubi Qafqazda regionalizmin hələ də zəif qalmasının səbəblərini araşdırır. Oxşar coğrafiyaya və ortaq sovet keçmişinə malik olmasına baxmayaraq, fərqli siyasi yönümlər regional əməkdaşlığa maneələr yaradıb. Məqalədə Gürcüstan, Azərbaycan və Ermənistanın xarici siyasət yollarına diqqət yetirilərək, bu fərqliliklərin qarşılıqlı strateji baxışların formalaşmasına necə təsir etdiyi izah olunur. Gürcüstanın Qərbyönlü siyasəti, Ermənistanın Rusiyaya arxalanması və Azərbaycanın pragmatik, çoxşaxəli diplomatiyası bu parçalanmanın əsas səbəblərindəndir. Məqalədə konstruktivizm, liberalizm və realizm nəzəriyyələrindən istifadə olunaraq, kimlik təsəvvürləri, təhlükəsizlik narahatlıqları və zəif institutların bu vəziyyəti necə möhkəmləndirdiyi göstərilir. Konstruktivizm milli kimliyin xarici siyasətə təsirini, liberalizm regionun institusional çatışmazlıqlarını və məhdud iqtisadi qarşılıqlı asılılığını, realizm isə rəqabət və təhdid qavrayışını ön

plana çıxarır. Nəticədə, regionalizmin uğursuzluğunun yalnız həll olunmamış münaqişələrlə deyil, eyni zamanda fərqli siyasi baxışlarla bağlı olduğu qənaətinə gəlinir. Ortaq prioritetlər və güclü çoxtərəfli mexanizmlər formalaşmadığı təqdirdə, əməkdaşlığın inkişafı zəif və əsasən xarici güclər tərəfindən yönləndirilmiş olaraq qalacaq.

Açar sözlər: *regionalizm, xarici siyasət, Cənubi Qafqaz, geosiyasət, milli kimlik.*