NATION-BUILDING PROCESSES IN THE REPUBLICS OF THE SOUTH CAUCASUS: MAIN FACTORS AND TRENDS OF DEVELOPMENT[1]

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ABSTRACT

Following the collapse of the USSR, the states of the post-Soviet space underwent intensive nation-building processes. At the present stage, these processes are also being stimulated by transformations in the world order. The republics of the South Caucasus have not remained untouched by these developments; in each of them, a distinct nation-building policy is unfolding. The aim of this article is to identify the principal factors influencing the transformation of national identity and nation-building policies in the republics of the South Caucasus. Attention is drawn to a number of factors, including the ethnic and confessional composition of the population, the role of traditional institutions, the cultural and linguistic factor, foreign policy orientation, the level of development of civic culture, the influence of centers of power, and the presence of ethnopolitical conflicts, among others.

Keywords: South Caucasus, nation-building, identity politics, national identity, transformation of identities

Introduction

In various social and humanities disciplines, interdisciplinary identity studies are becoming increasingly relevant. On the one hand, this is due to the intensive processes of development taking place in different spheres of social life; on the other, it reflects the transformation of the existing world order. The concept of identity has also become popular in socio-political discourse, occupying an important place in the lexicon of political actors: some speak of an identity crisis, others advance a discourse on the preservation of national identity, while still others emphasize the need for its systematic development. In this article, we examine certain aspects of the transformation of national identity in the post-Soviet space within the

context of an emerging new world order. Our point of departure is the assumption that studying transforming identities forms the basis for effective and pragmatic domestic and foreign policy. We proceed from a moderate constructivist methodology, considering nation-building as an ongoing process and a form of policy in which the state is the primary actor [1]. At the same time, we adopt the perspective of a group of Russian scholars [2], who, in order to avoid the pitfalls of radical constructivism (i.e., understanding the nation merely as an artificial construct "assembled" by the state), propose instead the term identity politics. In this view, the state does not so much "build" or artificially construct the nation as it shapes it, purposefully guiding the process of its development. The article also draws on empirical data obtained through in-depth interviews conducted with Armenian, Azerbaijani, and Georgian experts within the framework of the project "Transforming Identities as a Problem of Political Science Research (The Case of the South Caucasus States)".

Main Study

After the collapse of the USSR, a process of state formation unfolded across the post-Soviet space, in which nation-building developed in parallel with state-building. We agree with the assertion that these two processes did not always complement one another, but at times even competed [3]. This is largely because the emergence of new states took place in an environment marked by the flourishing of ethnonationalism - sometimes moderate, sometimes aggressive. This meant that the primordialist conflation of the nation with ethnicity inevitably came into conflict with the political (state-driven) project of the nation as a civic community. Moreover, most of the people in this region either had no prior experience of statehood or had lost it several centuries earlier. In our view, this applies to the South Caucasus states as well. Although Armenia and Georgia did have relatively long experiences of statehood, they were unable to realize the project of creating a modern nation-state. As a result, both became part of the Russian Empire and later the Soviet Union. Following the declaration of independence, these states were faced with the challenge of reconciling narrow ethnonational interests with the broader ambitions of civic state-building. In the case of Azerbaijan, the central challenge was the construction of a shared civic national identity in the context of significant ethnic and confessional diversity.

The ethnonational character of Soviet peoples was, to some extent, the result of the USSR's deliberate constructivist nationalities policy. Once independent, post-Soviet states began systematically reforming this image. With the spread of ethnonationalism, what might be termed a "postcolonial syndrome" emerged: the Soviet period came to be portrayed as a time of colonial oppression, leading to a stance of distancing from, or even opposition to, Russia. The clearest example of such a policy in the South Caucasus is found in Georgia. For many post-Soviet

countries, distancing from Russia has taken the form of a pronounced pro-Western orientation, often expressed in the aspiration to "return to Europe." Claims to a "European identity" are particularly evident in Ukraine, Moldova, and, in the South Caucasus, in Georgia. In Armenia, by contrast, where until recently the importance of strategic partnership with Russia - especially in the field of security - was widely recognized, much of the population viewed the Soviet past in a generally positive light. Azerbaijan occupies a more moderate position, officially declaring a stance of neutrality. At the same time, however, it engages in intensive cooperation with Turkey, emphasizing its Turkic identity, actively lobbies for its interests in Islamic organizations, while simultaneously presenting itself as a fully secular state.

A distinctive manifestation of the above-mentioned positions of the South Caucasus states is the extent of their involvement in integration projects unfolding in the post-Soviet space, most of which are initiated by Russia: Georgia does not participate in them; Azerbaijan is a member of the CIS; Armenia participates in the CIS, the CSTO, and the EAEU.

A special place in the nation-building policies of post-Soviet states is occupied by the politics of memory. Nearly all post-Soviet republics share a certain segment of common historical experience. However, different states interpret this past in different ways. At each stage of its development, every state interprets history in ways that serve its own interests: "The modern state, especially the national one, attaches enormous importance to the official version of history and seeks by all means to impose it on its citizens [4]." The reinterpretation of historical facts in line with contemporary interests, and the construction of distinct historical narratives by different states, have given rise to the so-called "memory wars." Equally important is symbolic politics, which is closely tied to the politics of memory.

The processes of nation-building have been influenced not only by internal factors of societal and state development but also, naturally, by external ones, shaped by the transformation of the global order. The bipolar world, based on the antagonism between the capitalist and socialist systems (with their respective ideologies and values), which – time has shown – was rather effective with its rigid mechanisms of deterrence, collapsed along with the disintegration of the USSR and the socialist bloc. It then seemed that a unipolar world, dominated by Western liberal-democratic values, was taking shape. It is in this context that the processes of state- and nation-building in the post-Soviet space of the 1990s must be understood. In some cases, claims were made to an original European essence; in others, to ancient traditions of adherence to democratic values [5]. As a result, hybrid identities emerged, characterized by a peculiar blending of Western liberal-democratic values - aspiring to global status - on the one hand, and narrow ethnonational values on the other.

Yet the illusion of a unipolar world with a single value-ideological system did not last long. Today it is evident that a new polycentric world order is taking shape.

This process can be considered natural, given the fact of civilizational diversity. A polycentric order is being legitimized as an alternative to neo-colonialism. The contours of this emerging order remain uncertain and blurred. Accordingly, attempts at its theoretical description are also uncertain, reflected in the semantic vagueness of several new concepts: "Global South," "world majority," "global multipolarity," and others. What is clear, however, is that at the current stage of development there is an intense struggle for the status of a global or regional center of power within this new order. In this struggle, contenders for such a status employ both hard and soft power. Soft power essentially consists of spreading one's own ideals and values across other societies and states. In this context, identity - as a set of values and ideals - becomes a key resource for the development of centers of power in both domestic and especially in foreign policy: "States aspiring to the status of centers of power project their ideological and value-based agenda beyond their national borders, seeking to cultivate an attractive image of themselves as leaders of the international community" [6]. In our view, this factor is one of the defining elements in the transformation of identities, including in the post-Soviet space. As one Azerbaijani expert (A) observed: "Powerful external forces inject certain narratives into the public consciousness of the peoples of the South Caucasus, which in the end are meant to serve the realization of their political goals."

An important factor influencing the transformation of identities in the South Caucasus is the foreign policy orientation of the state. As Azerbaijani expert B noted, it "is a crucial factor in shaping identity, since it directly affects domestic politics by subordinating national values and interests to the tasks of external orientation, becoming a powerful means of delineating 'us' versus 'them,' and shaping 'legitimate' forms of self-expression and interpretations of the past, present, and future."

It must also be taken into account that the processes unfolding in the region, including nation-building, have been affected by the existence of interethnic conflicts as well as unrecognized and partially recognized states. Interestingly, interethnic conflict itself has also been used as a tool of nation-building policy, serving as a powerful means of societal mobilization. As Azerbaijani expert B stated: "The Nagorno-Karabakh conflict became a trigger for consolidating the nation around the idea of territorial integrity, serving not only as a geopolitical challenge but also as a key element of the national narrative that gave meaning and purpose to the project of Azerbaijani statehood." However, an even more significant instrument of Azerbaijan's identity politics has not been the conflict with Armenia over Nagorno-Karabakh itself, but rather the complete demonization of Armenians as the image of the "Other." Azerbaijani society is consolidated through this opposition. Azerbaijani expert A, who takes an oppositional stance toward the current government, observed that Armenophobia is "one of the resources of the Azerbaijani au-

thorities that enables them to maintain power, to disregard human rights, the constitution, and the basic principles of democracy – because there is a dangerous and frightening enemy next door against whom it is necessary to mobilize and always be ready to resist."

The Soviet period had already contributed to laying the foundations of Azerbaijani identity.

As M. Zolyan notes: "During the Soviet years, various forms of identification (religious, tribal, regional), which had been dominant among Turkic-speaking Muslims in the pre-revolutionary period, gave way to national identification as Azerbaijanis" [7]. This was facilitated, first, by the policy of korenizatsiya (indigenization), which strengthened the positions of "titular nations" in the Transcaucasian republics. As a result of this policy, "throughout the seventy years of Soviet power in the South Caucasus, there was an ongoing exchange of populations and consolidation of the national character of the republics" [8]. Second, the Soviet policy of atheism played a significant role in weakening the religious identity of the population. Nevertheless, compared to the two other Transcaucasian states, national identity in Azerbaijan was much more amorphous by the time independence was achieved. Thus, Azerbaijan faced the dual task of carrying out two projects: the project of establishing Azerbaijani statehood and the project of creating an Azerbaijani nation [9].

Azerbaijan has sought to maneuver between the concepts of "Turkism" and "Azerbaijani-ness." In domestic politics, the officially declared project is that of "Azerbaijani-ness," which allows for the integration of the ethnically and confessionally diverse population into a unified model of a pan-Azerbaijani identity: "The ideology of Azerbaijani-ness, formulated by Heydar Aliyev, attempts to unite all ethnic and religious groups of the country within a framework of loyalty to the state, while at the same time, for various reasons, preserving the ethnic priority of the Turkic element" (Azerbaijani expert B). The ruling elite recognized that an emphasis on Turkism would lead to separatist movements; therefore, the national ideology had to be Azerbaijaniism, grounded in the principles of multiculturalism and tolerance, which, moreover, contributed to the internationalization of the country's positive image [10] . In foreign policy, however, the project of "Turkism" is often invoked, allowing Azerbaijan to claim the status of a regional power center, with aspirations of becoming the center of the Turkic world.

Thus, nation-building policy in contemporary Azerbaijan is directed toward constructing a pan-Azerbaijani civic identity, based on efforts to level religious and ethno-tribal differences on the one hand, and on opposition to the Armenian factor on the other. It must be acknowledged that identity construction through antagonism yields significant results in the short term, but it cannot serve as the foundation for a long-term nation-building strategy. Any potential normalization of Armenian-

Azerbaijani relations may deprive the Azerbaijani authorities of an important resource for national mobilization. Whether a new constructive nation-building project in Azerbaijan will prevail, or whether anti-Armenian sentiment will remain the underlying basis, is something only the future will reveal.

SWOT Analysis of Nation-Building Policies in the Azerbaijan:

Strengths	Weaknesses
- Deliberate nation-building policy - Victory in the Second Karabakh War - Promotion of the ideology of "Azerbaijani-ness" and the value of Azerbaijani statehood - Position of formal neutrality - Self-presentation as a secular state - Strong lobbying of interests, carried out both at the state level and through non-state actors - Public diplomacy system and national branding aimed at creating a positive image of Azerbaijan	- Lack of a strong tradition of independent statehood and national development, as well as an original cultural tradition - Multiethnic population (ethnic amorphousness) - Religious heterogeneity - Authoritarian clan-based governance mechanisms under conditions of weak democratic institutions - Weak civil society - Artificial construction of history, often descending into falsification - Excessive dependence of nation-building policy on the demonization of Armenians
Opportunities	**Threats**
- Using the factor of victory in the Second Karabakh War to mobilize the population around the idea of Azerbaijani statehood - Using revenues from energy exports for modernization of the Azerbaijani state and society - Taking advantage of its strategic geopolitical location - Using resources from Turkey - Using resources from Israel	- Risk of interethnic conflicts - Risk of interconfessional conflicts - Excessive growth of Turkish influence and the spread of Pan-Turkist ideas (Turkification) - Growth of radical Islamist influence (Islamization) - Risks originating from Iran: the Shiite factor, the issue of Southern Azerbaijan, and the factor of Azerbaijan's alliance with Israel - Possible sanctions due to strengthening authoritarian rule and anti-Armenian chauvinism

In Georgia, an extremely ethnonationalist project unfolded in the early 1990s, followed by a transition to the liberal-democratic Western model of a civic nation. The origins of this model, however, date back to the late 19th and early 20th centuries, when Georgian writer and publicist Ilia Chavchavadze articulated the "three

pillars" of Georgian identity (homeland, language, religion), and the nationalist organization Sakartvelo advanced the slogan "Georgia for Georgians" [10]. This principle is sometimes referred to as the Georgian "national project," which was implemented by the First Georgian Republic (1918-1920) and continues to exist today in latent form.

At the present stage, there is an attempt to implement a more moderate project aimed at synthesizing traditional ethnonational and Western civic values. As Georgian expert A notes, the authority of the Georgian Church in society is so strong that "any political force coming to power seeks to establish ties with the Church in order to secure an electorate." At the same time, however, the conservative values of the Church and its interpretation of Georgian identity often conflict with another contemporary vector of Georgian identity construction - Western integration and the aspiration to present itself as a European country with liberal-democratic values.

It is often assumed that Zviad Gamsakhurdia's policy of ethnic nationalism was replaced by state nationalism under Mikheil Saakashvili, within the framework of his declared democratic and liberal values [11]. In reality, this is not entirely the case. For example, during Saakashvili's rule, the intensive emigration of Armenia's population from Georgia continued. Another indication is the excessively ethnonationalist model of history officially supported at the state level and presented in school textbooks, where the role of national minorities in the formation and development of Georgia is minimized, and all controversial issues are interpreted from the standpoint of narrow Georgian nationalism. The fact that many representatives of national minorities nonetheless consider Georgian citizenship and Georgian statehood to be special values reflects, on the one hand, certain successes in the field of nation-building, and on the other, serves as an indicator of their accelerating assimilation. Paradoxically, while constructing a civic nation, Georgia is at the same time advancing the goals of an ethnonational project.

SWOT Analysis of Nation-Building Policies in the Georgia:

Strengths	Weaknesses
- Ancient history - Rich culture - Respected ancient church - Deliberate policy of constructing a civic-state identity - Declaration of democratic values	- Ethnic diversity: presence of national minorities and sub-ethnic groups - Long absence of independent statehood - Discrepancy between the actual level of development of civil society and public institutions and the declared democratic values - Weak security system - Latent conflict between ethnic and civic nationalism

Opportunities	Threats
- Synthesis of tradition and civic values - Modernization of society - European integration - Strategic geopolitical location enabling balancing - NATO membership as a security guarantee	- Outbreak of interethnic and interconfessional conflicts under conditions of intensifying ethnonationalism - Clash between traditional and declared liberal-democratic values - Strengthening Turkish-Azerbaijani influence - Confrontation with Russia - Unresolved conflicts in Abkhazia and South Ossetia - Potential clash of interests between the state and the church

As for Armenia, in conditions where a cultural-confessional model of the nation predominates, there has essentially been no targeted identity (nation-building) policy [12]. This position was justified by the argument that the population of the Republic of Armenia is monoethnic. Yet ignoring the need for a nation-building policy on the basis of Armenia's monoethnic composition means that the nation is understood exclusively in ethnic terms. Meanwhile, the development of statehood and the aspiration to establish a national state presuppose, above all, the intensive development of the civic-state dimension of national identity, which ought to be a distinct component of nation-building policy.

Only after the defeat in the Second Karabakh War (2020) and the exodus of Armenians from Karabakh (2023) did the authorities begin to advance the project of the "real Armenia," which entails the deconstruction and "modernization" of certain traditional foundations of Armenian identity. It must be emphasized that this is taking place under conditions of foreign policy reorientation, shifting regional power configurations, and intense pressure from Turkey and Azerbaijan - factors that generate particular risks and threats.

SWOT Analysis of Nation-Building Policies in the Armenia:

Strengths	Weaknesses
- Ancient history - Ancient and rich culture - Ancient and authoritative church that played an exceptional role in Armenian history - Synthetic character of culture and civilization - Monoethnic population - Large diaspora	- Lack of strategic development projects - Absence of a systemic nation-building policy and its components: identity policy, memory policy, symbolic policy - Defeat in the Second Karabakh War and identity crisis

- Participation in integration unions	- Demythologization of national consciousness - Centuries-long absence of statehood - Atomization of society - Low level of political, civic, and state culture - Underdeveloped cultural and public diplomacy - Amorphous nature of the diaspora - Lack of a unified system of communication between diaspora communities, and between the diaspora and Armenia - Traumas of national consciousness (e.g., the Genocide)
Opportunities	**Threats**
- Development of civil society and democratic institutions - More effective use of diaspora networks - Role as a geopolitical and civilizational bridge - Participation in integration projects and balanced foreign policy - More effective use of cultural and public diplomacy resources	- Degradation of diaspora communities (disappearance of traditionally strong communities) - Intensifying assimilation processes in diaspora communities - Excessive ethnonationalism, which may lead to isolationism - Permanent domestic protests hindering consolidation and mobilization of resources - Unstable national security system, risk of new war - Regionalization

Conclusion

Thus, the development of national identity in the republics of the South Caucasus is determined both by the internal logic of societal and state development and by processes associated with fundamental transformations of the world order. This gives rise to certain challenges and risks. In this context, state identity policy acquires special significance. Such a policy can be effective only if it is based on scientific analysis and foresight. Therefore, the study of transforming identities is a prerequisite both for constructive domestic policy - aimed at the ideological and value-based mobilization of society under conditions of global, regional, and national change - and for the implementation of effective foreign policy.

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ПРОЦЕССЫ НАЦИЕСТРОИТЕЛЬСТВА В РЕСПУБЛИКАХ ЮЖНОГО КАВКАЗА: ОСНОВНЫЕ ФАКТОРЫ И ТЕНДЕНЦИИ РАЗВИТИЯ

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АННОТАЦИЯ

После развала СССР в государствах постсоветского пространства развернулись интенсивные процессы нациестроительства. На современном этапе эти процессы стимулируются также трансформирациями миропорядка. Это не обходит стороной и республики Южного Кавказа, в каждой из которых развертывается своеобразная политика нациестроительства. Исследовательской целью данной статьи является выявление основных факторов, влияющих на процессы трансформации национальной идентичности и политику нациестроительства в республиках Южного Кавказа. Обращается внимание на ряд факторов: этнический и конфессиональный состав населения, роль традиционных институтов, культурно-языковой фактор, внешнеполитическая ориентация, уровень развития гражданской культуры, влияние центров силы, наличие этнополитических конфликтов и др.

Ключевые слова: Южный Кавказ, нациестроительство, политика идентичности, национальная идентичность, трансформация идентичностей.