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## EVOLUTION OF RUSSIA'S GEOPOLITICAL INTERESTS AND PRIORITIES IN TRANSCAUCASIA

### A b s t r a c t

**T**he author presents his conception of the evolution of Russia's geopolitical interests in Transcaucasia (the Central and part of the Southern Caucasus) caused by a gradual transformation of the military-strategic, political, ideological (including religious) ideas of the Russian elites at different periods. The author relies on a wide range of recent historical and political scientific studies, as well as historiographic surveys and scholarly works of the imperial and Soviet periods, to clarify his conclusions. The very fact of the changes that took place in the past and are still going on today and their vector confirms that Russia's top political leaders have been acting and are acting consistently and logically when dealing with the sovereign countries and other Transcaucasian territories.

The well-substantiated and conceptually novel conclusions can be described as extremely relevant: they are based on an analysis of the processes of the last two

centuries (rather than the last two decades). This means that the author has successfully avoided the political biases suggested by the current situation. Many of his colleagues fell into this trap: they naively believed that state independence of the Central Caucasian countries robbed Russia of its traditional geopolitical presence in the region. The present author is out to demonstrate beyond any doubt that revision by Russia of its geopolitical priorities in Transcaucasia will strengthen the position it lost in the 1990s. In the near future, the regional elites and other power centers will prove unable to stem Russia's mounting influence. In fact, Russia's geopolitical domination in Transcaucasia will merely shift from the military-state to the economic sphere, while Russia's real clout among the local elites and its influence on the electoral preferences of the local population and local economies will remain as prominent as ever.

### I n t r o d u c t i o n

My discussion of the subject outlined above calls for several stipulations of fundamental importance.

- First, here the term "Russia" is applied to all the states that existed at different periods in time in the territory of the Russian Federation and other territories which formed part of the

Russian state prior to 1 February, 1918. In other words, the term is used as a political scientific, rather than a state legal concept to make it easier for European and North American readers to perceive the world, or Eurasian, center of power and geopolitical influence now called the Russian Federation (and its predecessors—the Soviet Union and the Russian Empire).

Despite the different or even mutually exclusive state ideologies of the three Russian states, their geopolitical interests, priorities, and ambitions have retained their strategic continuity. In this sense, the Russian Federation is an heir, in the true sense of the word, of the Soviet Union and the Russian Empire. And this comes as no surprise, since the logic of continued external stability in a state as large as Russia suggests that it should steer the same foreign policy course as its predecessors. However, if it decides to change it (or its geopolitical priorities for that matter), which may not even be possible today, then only in an evolutionary way, keeping in mind the strategic interests of its neighbors.

- Second, I will use the term “Transcaucasia” here to describe the territories of the Central and Southern Caucasus (within the methodology suggested by Eldar Ismailov) which belonged to the Russian Empire, that is, the territories of the sovereign states of Azerbaijan, Armenia, and Georgia, as well as Abkhazia and South Ossetia, partly recognized as independent states, the self-proclaimed Republic of Nagorno-Karabakh, and Artvin and Kars, historical regions reunited with the Republic of Turkey as a result of its War of Independence of 1919-1923. This means that the term “Transcaucasia” is used here in the strictly political scientific rather than regional studies context and is synonymous with the terms “Central and Southern Caucasus” preferred by Azeri and Georgian political scientists.<sup>1</sup> I will continue using the term “Transcaucasia” in the political scientific context and the terms “Central Caucasus” and “Southern Caucasus” when dealing with issues that relate to regional studies.

## Russia's Claims to Geopolitical Hegemony in “Slavic” Europe

Transcaucasia, which includes the Central and Southern Caucasus, is a graphic example of the potential of the changing vectors of Russia's geopolitical interests in this part of the world and the stage-by-stage evolution of Russia's foreign policy. In fact, today Russia is completing a rapid, with respect to the history of world civilization and diplomacy, and very slow, from the viewpoint of the man-in-the-street, rearrangement of its priorities in Transcaucasia. For objective reasons, this demanded and still demands that the Russian political establishment not only discard the centuries-old ideological stereotypes, but also replace them with fundamentally new political and ideological imperatives. They have not been made public and will probably remain unpublished for an indefinite period of time, because neither Russian society nor the international community is prepared to face them. For this reason I will limit myself to the suggestion, underpinned by facts and logic, that there has been a “shift in paradigm” in Russia's foreign policy priorities in the Central and Southern Caucasus.

It was in the last quarter of the 18th century that Russia supplied its claims to the Caucasus, and Transcaucasia as its part, with ideological and military-political arguments. It was at that time that

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<sup>1</sup> See: E. Ismailov, V. Papava, *Tsentrally Kavkaz: istoria, politika, ekonomika*, Mysl Publishers, Moscow, 2007.

the so-called Greek Project elaborated by Chancellor Count Bezborodko on the instructions of Empress Catherine the Great moved to the fore in the Russian system of foreign policy aims.<sup>2</sup> It was presupposed that the large-scale project would be realized in the military-strategic and ideological dimensions. They predetermined the southern vector of Russia's foreign policy for many decades or even centuries, in which the Southern Caucasus was expected to play an important, but not the main, role.

By 1783, Russia had finally moved into the Crimean Peninsula and the entire continental territory of the Crimean Khanate in the Northern Black Sea area. This not only ensured strategic security of its southern borders along the Black Sea coast and the Dniester as its natural limits, but let it move further in full accordance with the empress' ambitious plans. By that time, Catherine the Great had two grandsons—Alexander and Constantine—on whom she pinned great hopes. She planned to put Alexander on the Russian throne, bypassing the dynastic rights of her son Paul; Constantine, his name being deliberately chosen with the aim of putting the Russian Grand Prince on the Greek throne (at that time, Greece was still part of the Ottoman Empire), was the namesake of Constantine IX Palaeologus, the last Byzantine emperor whose daughter was married to Grand Prince of Muscovy Ivan III of the Rurik dynasty (later replaced by the Romanov dynasty). A young Greek woman Elena was the wet nurse of Grand Prince Constantine, who taught him fluent Greek. The Greek culture was deliberately popularized at the Russian royal court. In her correspondence with Voltaire, Catherine the Great discussed the possibility of reviving an interest in Greek culture in Europe and restoring the Greek state with its capital in Constantinople (Istanbul) by the force of arms and active involvement of Russia's land forces and navy.<sup>3</sup> The military-strategic logic of the Greek project the Russian empress loved so much can be described as a "Slavic Orthodox" Reconquista on the Balkan Peninsula with the intention of detaching it from the Ottoman Empire and restoring Byzantium, or the Eastern Roman Empire, under Russia's control.

This ambitious military-political expansion to the South (in the political scientific sense of the term) required ideological underpinnings in the eyes not so much of European as of Russian society unwilling to live in a protracted or even escalated armed confrontation with the Ottoman Turks: the conquered Crimea and the lands of the former Crimean Khanate had made Russia's borders safe enough. Ideological justification took the shape of the "Moscow, the Third Rome" formula borrowed from the 16th century as a political-religious conception of state legal succession between the Byzantine and Russian empires (the centers of Christian and later Orthodox civilizations had been moved from Rome to Constantinople and then to Moscow). It was the Russian Orthodox Church that promoted the idea in all social groups; at that time it performed the social and political role that now belongs to the media. This meant that the geopolitical Greek Project contained a military-strategic and several cultural and political dimensions.

Restoration of Constantinople as an Orthodox, state, and spiritual center was seen as religious revenge: the "primordial" Orthodox capital should be retrieved from the "infidels" and restored to its previous religious-cultural and civilizational grandeur. Russia's southward movement into the "wild," from the European point of view, Black Sea area looked like a civilizational offensive against the "barbarians." Catherine the Great acted very much in line with the geopolitical designs of first Russian Emperor Peter the Great and competed with his glory in Russia's political history. While in the eyes of his enlightened contemporaries, Peter the Great was pushing "barbarian" Russia toward the civilized West, Catherine the Great marched in front of "civilized" Russia to the "barbarian" East and South under the banner of cultural progress.<sup>4</sup> In fact, in the last quarter of the 18th century, Em-

<sup>2</sup> See: V.S. Parsamov, *Istoria Rossii: XVIII-nachalo XX v.*, Academia, Moscow, 2007, p. 156.

<sup>3</sup> See: V.S. Mirzekhanov, "Ideologia i diplomatia Rossii v epokhu Ekateriny II: historiografia poslednikh desiatiletii," in: *Istoricheskie, kulturnye i ekonomicheskie svyazi mezhdru Turtsiye i Rossii: materialy mezhdunadronogo simposiuma. Stambul, 5 apreliya 2012 g.*, Compiled by O.Yu. Kuznetsov, Turkish-Russian Cultural Center, Moscow, 2012, p. 34.

<sup>4</sup> See: V.N. Vinogradov, *Dvuglavy rossiiskiy orel na Balkanakh. 1683-1914*, Indrik, Moscow, 2010, pp. 78-79.

press Catherine the Great initiated another (tenth or eleventh) European crusade against the Muslims of Hither Asia and the Middle East under Orthodox, rather than Catholic, holy banners.

In present reality we can hardly totally accept the idea, actively promoted by “classical” historical science in Russia, that the Greek Project of Count Bezborodko was nothing but another ideological ruse Catherine the Great exploited for propaganda purposes outside the empire: the Russian empress intended using the noble idea as a smokescreen behind which she would detach, with the use of force, as much Ottoman territory as possible. Her extremely ambitious designs (grandiose political, social, and cultural transformations of the expanses along the North-South axis) stemmed from deliberations about Byzantium as heir to the Greek culture fed by its roots; it brought true faith and enlightenment to Russia, thus making the Russian Empire its legal state and religious heir. Russia took up cultural and religious values from Byzantium, preserving and developing them throughout the centuries, while the Byzantine Empire disappeared under the blows of the Seljuk and Ottoman Turks. Under Catherine the Great, Russia, which had been preserving and multiplying the spiritual values of the Orthodox statehood it received from Byzantium via dynastic marriage (legal and ideological justification of the state-legal and religious-cultural continuity typical of that period), was prepared to return them by restoring an independent Greek state. The Russian empress and her chancellor believed that Constantinople should be restored as a center of Orthodoxy, of which Russia remained the guardian for many centuries, and classical culture. The northwestern vector of the development of the Russian civilization under Peter the Great was replaced with a southern vector; Russia’s geopolitical interests were shifted in the same direction.

In the 18th century, the idea of state religious messianism was typical of the Eastern Slavs (with the Russians as their ethnic core) and of the numerous Turkic peoples who professed Islam and lived in the Ottoman Empire, where the Ottoman Turks were the titular ethnicity. In the 18th century, religious life in both empires was completely secularized, that is, it was administered by the state. In Russia, there was no autocephalous Russian Orthodox Church *de jure*: since 1716 it functioned as part of the state apparatus (the Sacred Governing Synod) or a spiritual administrative structure (*prikaz*); it was headed by the emperor, not by the patriarch as it is today. The emperor represented the highest secular (administrative-state) and spiritual (Church and religious) authority, a system called absolutism in historical science. In the Russian Empire, any ideological religious doctrine belonged to the foreign policy context. In the Ottoman Empire, likewise, the sultan was also the caliph (the spiritual leader of all faithful Muslims irrespective of where they lived). In fact, in the last quarter of the 18th century the two empires were practically identical (classical absolute monarchies) with the exception of one, although very important, religious-political aspect. Russia was seeking domination in the Slavic Orthodox, while the Ottoman Empire wanted control in the Arabic-Turkic Islamic oecumene, their ambitions stretching far beyond the spiritual sphere.

Since the time of Byzantium Orthodox Christians have been living in Southeastern Europe, in the territories now occupied by Moldavia, Bulgaria, Rumania, Greece, Macedonia, Serbia, etc. Under somewhat different names they belonged to the Ottoman Empire and were guided by the Patriarch of Constantinople rather than the Russian Synod. Since the early 14th century, Muslims have been living on the Middle and Lower Volga and in the Northern Caucasus (which belonged to Russia). Therefore, very much in tune with their own political and legal interpretation of Islam, the Ottoman Turks claimed religious and administrative power in Russia’s Muslim regions. To stem the claims of the Ottoman Sultan and quench his ambitions, Russia waged several wars against the Porte and even stipulated in the Kuchuk-Kainarji Peace Treaty signed on 10 (21) July, 1774 that the Sultan renounce his administrative and political power over the Crimean, Kuban, Astrakhan, Kazan, and Volga Tatars, as well as the Nogays, Circassians, and other Muslim peoples of Russia, while retaining, for some time, his religious leadership. Russia’s Muslim peoples became completely autonomous in the religious sphere under the Russian-Turkish agreement of 28 December, 1783 that made the lands of the former Crimean Khanate and the Taman Peninsula part of the Russian Empire and their population,

Russian citizens. This meant that the wars between Russia and the Ottoman Empire in the 18th century were waged not only to gain control over the disputed territories or due to trade and economic preferences, but also to acquire religious and political domination in the Black Sea area, the Balkans, and the Caucasus.

In the last decades of the 18th century, the Greek Project of the Russian Empire pushed it and the Ottoman Empire into a military-strategic confrontation and stiff ideological struggle based on the religious messianism of both sides. This accounts for the protracted and uncompromising geopolitical rivalry in the Black Sea-Caucasian region. An impartial student of Russian-Turkish or Turkish-Russian relations can trace the influence of the Greek Project of Empress Catherine the Great until World War I; it greatly affected the relations between the two countries. It comes as no surprise that this confrontation gradually extended from the Northern Black Sea area to the Caucasus, the Balkans, and Transcaucasia (the Central and Southern Caucasus).

## The Caucasus in the Orbit of Russia's Geopolitical Interests

It was by sheer chance that the Central and Southern Caucasus, an area of stiff confrontation between Persia and the Porte which had been going on for a long time with variable success and never outside the region, were caught in the web of Russia's geopolitical interests: the Russian Empire continued to concentrate on the Greek Project. At the early stages of its geopolitical expansion in the Balkans, Russia had no intentions, no strength, no forces and assets, or no resources to open up a "second front" against the Ottoman Empire in the Caucasus or Transcaucasia. External circumstances beyond its control forced Russia to pay attention to this region: in 1768, ruler of the Georgian princedoms Kartli and Kakheti Heraclius II (he inherited the throne from Vakhtang VI who in 1722 concluded a union treaty with Russian Emperor Peter the Great) asked Russia for military support in his struggle against the Ottoman Turks. In 1768-1772, a Russian unit under Lieutenant General Gottlieb Heinrich Totleben, audacious on the battlefield but a man of dubious morals beyond it, was fighting in Georgia. Totleben's military maneuvers and several victories (he captured Kutaisi and besieged Poti) brought Russia practically no political dividends: the crafty general not only quarreled with the Georgian king, but also betrayed him twice: the first time, in the battle of Akhaltsikhe in April 1770 when he deserted the battlefield and, the second, when he sided with the claimants to the Georgian throne.<sup>5</sup> This expedition supplied the Russian military command with detailed information about the terrain beyond the Kura River to be used for future military operations. This was the only tangible geopolitical result of Lieutenant General Totleben's Georgian expedition. In fact, it was thanks to Baron Totleben that Russia began paying attention to the Central and Southern Caucasus, even though they still remained outside the empire's geopolitical scope.

Ten years later, when Kartli and Kakheti invited Russia to discuss its military protectorate over their lands, Transcaucasia and its military-political importance attracted the empire's attention once more. On 24 July (4 August), 1783, the sides signed the Georgievsk Treaty. Without going into details, I will say that the treaty proved to be short-lived. In 1787, under Ottoman pressure, Russia

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<sup>5</sup> See: V.A. Potto, *Kavkazskaia voyna*, in 5 vols, Vol. 1, *S drevneyshikh vremen do Yermolova*, Tsentrpoligraf, Moscow, 2006, pp. 128-132.

pulled out its troops (two infantry battalions) from Eastern Georgia (Kartli-Kakheti) even though it still considered these lands to be its vassal possessions. This is confirmed by the order Empress Catherine the Great sent to General Field-Marshal Count Gudovich, Commander of the Kuban Corps, on 4 September, 1795: "You should support King Heraclius as a Russian vassal against unfriendly attacks with two full infantry battalions in conformity with the treaty"<sup>6</sup> to help him rebuff the onslaught on Tiflis (Tbilisi) of Persian Shah Aga Mohammed-khan Qajar. The Georgian capital was destroyed on 12 September: the order reached General Gudovich on 1 October.

Military protectorate over Eastern Georgia of 1783 and Georgia's accession to the empire in 1801 drew Russia into several wars against two strategic rivals in the Caucasus—the Sublime Porte and Persia; their never-ending armed border confrontation made Russia's task much easier. Between 1796 and 1829, Russia was involved in an aborted march of the Kuban Corps under Colonel-General Count Zubov to Northern Azerbaijan against the Persian troops, which was cut short by the death of the empress, two wars with Persia (in 1805-1813 and 1826-1828), and two wars with Turkey (1806-1812 and 1828-1829). While planning these armed conflicts and fighting them, Russia finally identified its geopolitical interests and aims in the Central and Southern Caucasus; by that time Russia had become their closest neighbor.

These armed conflicts were mainly ignited by the unregulated border problems among Russia, Persia, and the Ottoman Empire in the Caucasus and their drive for domination in all sorts of feudal state units in Transcaucasia: makhlahs, khanates, etc. In the context of a conflict of interests, the three power centers selected the religious sovereignty of the Caucasian peoples as the first step toward a more or less equal balance of power in the region. This is confirmed by the Yassy Peace Treaty of 29 December, 1791 (9 January, 1792) between Russia and the Ottoman Empire, under which the River Kuban served the state border between them, while the Christian peoples of the Caucasus (Ossetians and Eastern Georgians) and their lands became the zone of geopolitical interests of Russia.<sup>7</sup> Neither Persian Shah Aga Mohammed-khan Qajar who twice, in 1795 and 1797, invaded Kartli-Kakheti (Christian Eastern Georgia), nor the Muslim peoples of Western Georgia, who continued their inroads in Kartli-Kakheti and Imeretia, liked this arrangement. This forced Georgy XII, the last independent king of the Georgians, to seek Russia's military and state protection. The political and legal aspects of the process are well known and have been studied in detail,<sup>8</sup> therefore there is no need to discuss them here. On 12 April, 1802, the imperial Manifesto on Georgia joining Russia was officially read in the Sioni Cathedral in Tiflis. This meant that Russia had to identify its geopolitical interests and priorities in the region.

Strategic security of the newly acquired lands was the linchpin of Russia's geopolitical interests in Transcaucasia. Indeed, it had to reach natural borders along which it could delimitate its possessions with the neighbors and organize layered defense. Two rivers, the Arax in the south and the Chorokhi in the west, looked best suited for this purpose. In the first third of the 19th century, Russia waged several offensive wars described above to finally reach the rivers. These and later armed clashes with the Ottoman Empire, accompanied by the sides' territorial claims, are precisely the background against which the place and role of the Central Caucasus in the context of Russia's geopolitical interests and its importance should be discussed.

It should be said that the Central Caucasus acquired the status of a sub-region in its own right and became a target of geopolitical attention solely because Russia had moved into it. It was formed, acquired a legal basis, and became a political scientific spatial entity because the Russian Empire was

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<sup>6</sup> V.A. Potto, *op. cit.*

<sup>7</sup> See: "A Detailed Description of the Road the Russian Imperial Embassy Extraordinary and Plenipotentiary followed after the Yassy Peace, from Rushchuk via Shumla to Constantinople, in 1793, Complete with Military Descriptions of the Terrain and Methods for Delivering Foodstuffs for an army of 30 to 40 thousand," Notes by N.A. Osokin, *Russkaia starina*, Vol. 21, No. 1, 1878, pp. 100-124.

<sup>8</sup> See: Z.D. Avalov, *Prisoedinenie Gruzii k Rossii*, Montivid Print Shop, St. Petersburg, 1906.

moving into new lands by concluding international treaties with Persia and the Porte: the Treaty of Gulistan of 12 (24) October, 1813 and the Turkmanchay Treaty of 10 (22 February), 1828 with Persia; the Treaty of Bucharest of 16 (28) May, 1812 along with the Akkerman Convention of 25 September (7 October), 1826, the Adrianople Treaty of 2 (14) September, 1829, and the Berlin Treaty of 1 (13) July, 1878 with the Ottoman Empire. Under these international legal instruments Russia joined Daghestan, Kartli, Kakheti, Megrelia, Imeretia, Guria, and Abkhazia; the Baku, Karabakh, Ganja, Shirvan, Sheki, Derbent, Quba, Talysh, Nakhchivan, and Erivan khanates; the entire stretch of the Black Sea littoral from the mouth of the Kuban to St. Nicholas Port with the fortresses of Anapa, Sujuk-kale, and Poti; and the Ottoman provinces Akhaltsikhe, Akhalkalaki, Batum, Kars, Ardahan, and Artvin. From the historical legal point of view these lands should become a target of comprehensive studies as parts of the Central Caucasus, since de facto it was Russia that determined their historical fate.

This means that we can say that the Russian Federation, the Republic of Turkey, the Azerbaijan Republic, the Republic of Armenia, the Republic of Georgia, as well as the partially recognized or unrecognized state units (Abkhazia, South Ossetia, and Nagorno-Karabakh) are all subjects of the Central Caucasus. The political elites of some of the regional countries and, indirectly, certain centers of power outside it which support these elites are actively striving to undermine the influence of Russia and Turkey on the Central Caucasus, and even strike them off the list of subjects to leave Azerbaijan, Armenia, and Georgia as the only Central Caucasian entities.

This cannot be accepted not only because this approach pushes aside historical reality and traditions, but also because it rejects the historical and cultural heritage of its peoples. They are beholden to the ambitions of certain groups of the local political elites and international financial-industrial circles that patronize them. Since the second third of the 19th century, the Central Caucasus has been and remains a zone of Russia's geopolitical interests or even its priorities. In the last two centuries, its policy has been radically transformed, which allows certain trends to form.

As distinct from Southeastern Europe, the Central Caucasus has never been an area of Russia's religious expansion: there was no sense in spreading Christianity as the vehicle of its political domination in the traditionally Muslim areas (after abandoning primitive paganism the local peoples embraced Islam). The areas where Christianity had become widespread since early times and where feudal relations had taken shape by the early 19th century became part of the Russian state and society without much trouble; few people among the local elite felt that their interests were infringed upon.

The traditionally Muslim state-territorial Transcaucasian units had to follow a much more complicated administrative procedure in order to join the Russian Empire; it was fairly logical for the local feudal lords to preserve, during their lifetime, their personal administrative status (even though they lost their political sovereignty); their heirs and close associates became Russian nobles with corresponding property and social privileges. In fact, the Southern Caucasus preserved its traditional social, property, administrative, and economic relations. This explains why the local people remained indifferent to their new status of Russian subjects.

Here is an example: the Russian authorities paid practically no attention to trade in young girls and women from among the local Muslims who were sold to Turkish harems. In the newly acquired territories this trade went on unhampered in Muslim villages; purchase of slaves or serfs was registered with Russian policemen; the corresponding dues went to the state treasury.<sup>9</sup> It should be said that in the Christian part of Russia, serfs were likewise sold and bought; this means that the lifestyle of the ordinary people in the Caucasus and European Russia differed but little: Russian colonization of the Caucasus presented no social or economic problems.

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<sup>9</sup> See: N.M. Emelyanova, M.Kh. Ekzekov, "Torgovye i kulturnye svyazi Rossiskoy, Osmanskoy imperiy i narodov Kav-kaza v pervoy polovine XIX veka," in: *Istoricheskie, kulturnye i ekonomicheskie svyazi mezhdru Turtsiy i Rossiyey*, pp. 45-47.

During the first decades of Russian colonization, the local Muslims offered no political or religious resistance. This is best confirmed by the fact that at the height of the Russo-Turkish war of 1828-1829, four cavalry corps (720 cavalymen in each) and a cavalry division, the Cavalry Ky-angerly for the Russian Separate Caucasian Corps, were formed in the newly acquired lands of contemporary Azerbaijan. Fighting against the Ottoman Turks, their co-religionists, on the battlefields in Eastern Anatolia they looked much better than the Russian units.<sup>10</sup> After the war, a special Transcaucasian Muslim Cossack Army in the territory which is now called the Southern Caucasus was contemplated. The project was first postponed because the forces and assets allocated for it were used to suppress the Polish uprising of 1830-1831<sup>11</sup> and then buried in the 1840s when the mountain peoples led by Shamil rebelled in Daghestan and Chechnia. This means that the problem of religious affiliation surfaced in multinational and poly-confessional Russia only at times of disturbances among its subjects.

## The “Armenian Question” as an Instrument of Russian Geopolitics in the Caucasus

The so-called Armenian Question was the only dissonant sound in Russia’s policy in Transcaucasia; this was the only aspect of Russian colonization of the Central Caucasus which upturned the otherwise logical geopolitics in the region. I should say that this was a religious-confessional rather than a national issue since until February 1914 (when a new law on the freedom of religion was passed) there had been no idea of “nationality” as an element of the formal legal description of the individual. Its role belonged to the description of the individual’s confessional or religious affiliation. There was no Armenian Question, from the state legal point of view, in Russia. This issue is even better described as the Armenian Gregorian Question.

In the Russian Empire, the Armenian Gregorian religious affiliation was a social and legal attribute of the Armenian ethnicity. The inadequately developed Orthodox theology of the time created the impression in the state political establishment that the Armenian Gregorian Church was canonically related to Orthodoxy because of similar rituals and attributes. In fact, the Armenian Apostolic Church is one of the Ancient Eastern Orthodox churches; it did not attend the IV Ecumenical Council, never accepted its decisions and, therefore, relies on the dogmas of the first three Ecumenical Councils and follows the Non-Chalcedonian Christology of St. Cyril of Alexandria who preached One Nature of God the Logos Incarnate (miaphysitism). As distinct from the Orthodox dogma, the Armenian-Gregorian teaching rejects the idea of the Holy Trinity which brings its adepts closer to the Judaists and followers of all sorts of pseudo-Christian sects of the Judaizers (the Dukhobors, Molokans, etc.). From the viewpoint of contemporary Christian theology (Catholic, Orthodox, and Protestant), the Armenian Gregorians are not Christians in the full sense of the word. The Russian military administrators in the Caucasus never went too deep into the theological subtleties: the followers of the Armenian Gregorian Church were Russia’s allies in the Southern Caucasus when it came to implementing military and political plans and ambitions. In fact, by the second quarter of the 19th century, the Armenian Question had developed into a linchpin of Russia’s geopolitics in Transcaucasia and retained its role for at least two centuries until the early 21st century.

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<sup>10</sup> See: *Utverzhdenie russkogo vladychestva an Kavkaze: k 100-letiyu prisoedineniya Gruzii k Rossii*, in 5 vols., ed. by V.A. Potto, Vol. 4 (Part 2), Tiflis, 1909, pp. 415-416.

<sup>11</sup> See: F.F. Nagdaliev, *Khany Nakhichevanskie v Rossiiskoy imperii*, Novy argument, Moscow, 2006, pp. 93-98.



Throughout the several decades Russia needed to detach the Central Caucasus from Persia and Turkey, the Russian Empire actively moved Armenian Gregorians from Persia and the Porte to the newly conquered Transcaucasian lands as stipulated both by the Turkmanchay Peace Treaty with Persia and the Adrianople Peace Treaty with the Sublime Porte. The process was realized on a mass scale: according to the official Russian figures, between the fall of 1829 and the spring of 1830, up to 15 thousand Armenian families were moved from the Ottoman Empire to Russia (between 90 and 100 thousand people). They arrived from the Erzurum and Kars regions.<sup>12</sup> Two years earlier, approximately the same number of people was moved from Persia, and another 30 thousand from the Trabzon area. In fact, in less than three years, the Armenian population of the Southern Caucasus increased by a third of a million. This fast and massive movement of Armenians sanctioned, organized, and funded by the Russian administration can be described as the most convincing illustration of Russia's geopolitics in the Southern Caucasus.

It is not my intention to cast doubt on the fact that Armenian Gregorians have been living in Transcaucasia from time immemorial. It cannot be disputed, however, that the huge wave of Armenian settlers from Persia and Turkey which engulfed the region at the turn of the 1830s radically changed the settlement structure of the Armenians in the newly acquired territories. Before that, the Armenian Gregorians never lived in compact groups in any of the feudal states of Transcaucasia and were never in the majority (the Erivan Khanate being no exception). The 1830 campaign of resettlement from Eastern Anatolia created compact Armenian settlements where they were in the majority. This is best illustrated by settlement in the environs of Gumr (now Gumri) and the Lori Valley<sup>13</sup> organized by the Russian Caucasian Administration for Armenian settlers from the Ottoman Empire. Later they became the core of national statehood of contemporary Armenia.

This means that Russia selected Armenian Gregorians (with no special services to the empire except for similar religious rites and attributes) as the main national and religious instrument of its geopolitics in the Southern Caucasus rather than the Azeri Muslims or Georgian Christians, who had many times demonstrated their loyalty to Russia and its geopolitical interests on the battlefield. The reasons lie outside the scope of this article; here I will limit myself to facts without plunging into the depths of explanations.

Throughout the 19th and early 20th century, the Armenian vector determined Russia's geopolitical priorities in the Southern Caucasus; this is further confirmed by the directions in which Russia moved its troops when fighting Turkey in Transcaucasia. Highly doubtful from the military-strategic point of view, they were fully justified in the military-political context. In the last four wars with the Ottoman Empire (1828-1829, 1853-1856, 1877-1878, and 1914-1918), the Russian generals invariably selected Erzurum (rather than Trabzon or Sinop) as the direction of the main thrust and final point of their offensive, even though the two ports would have made deliveries to the Russian troops fighting in Anatolia much easier. The Turkish Black Sea coast did not figure as a strategic aim in any of these wars: the Russian Empire was obviously determined to detach several regions of dubious military-strategic and economic importance with a large share of the Armenian Gregorian population from Turkey. This meant that for several centuries, the Armenian Project (which was never openly admitted) was on a par with the Greek Project.

In the absence of reliable and well-documented information, we cannot tie together Russia's Armenian Project and the Project of Greater Armenia, a state structure to be set up in the Ottoman territories Russia occupied during World War I under the Armistice of Moudros of 30 October, 1918 and the Sevres Peace Treaty of 10 August, 1920 between the Entente and the Ottoman Empire. The very fact that it was intended to transfer the Turkish territories earlier occupied by Russia (after it had withdrawn from the war under the Peace Treaty of Brest-Litovsk of 3 March, 1918) to Armenian

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<sup>12</sup> See: *Utverzhenie russkogo vladychestva na Kavkaze...*, Vol. 4 (Part 2), pp. 453-454.

<sup>13</sup> See: *Ibidem*.

nationalists confirms that the Armenian Project, which Russia and France had lobbied together, remained relevant even after Russia suffered a military and political defeat. The victory of Mustafa Kemal Atatürk and his supporters over the Allies in the War of Independence of 1919-1923 (of which the 1920 armed conflict with Armenia was a part) buried the Armenian Project. The future Republic of Turkey restored its sovereignty over the territories of Eastern Anatolia occupied first by Russia and then by Armenian armed units.

The Armenian Project echoes in Russia's contemporary foreign policy: in the 1990s, with the Soviet Union no longer on the stage, the Russian Federation actively supported the Armenians in the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict. I will not go into the details of this choice suggested by the subjective preferences of certain people: it is not for a historian to comment on the positions of living people, yet I deem it necessary to say that there is an Armenian lobby in Russia's political establishment. Recently it has been losing its clout: its members are growing old and can no longer shape Russia's geopolitics in the Central Caucasus.

## Russia's New Geopolitical Priorities in Transcaucasia

Today, Russia is gradually shifting its geopolitical priorities in Transcaucasia to fundamentally new principles and in accordance with current reality: ideological determinism with its obvious national and religious hues is being replaced with pragmatic approaches to foreign economic and foreign policy issues in the Central Caucasus. For objective reasons, a foreign policy U-turn in this extremely important sector will take time: the momentum created over the span of two centuries is too strong; it requires strength, time, and political will to be overcome. Recently, it has become clear that there is enough political will even though the political elites of the Central Caucasian states delighted with the first more or less significant date—20 years of national statehood—prefer to ignore this to remain in the habitual system of geopolitical coordinates.

Throughout the two post-Soviet decades, Russia regarded Armenia as its natural ally in Transcaucasia, the most stable and predictable in the military and political respects. In the 1990s, against the background of Armenia's and Armenians' consolidated determination to dominate in the Central Caucasus, Georgia and Azerbaijan torn apart by clan wars looked like, or even were for a while, territories of permanent chaos. Today, the situation has changed dramatically, which means that Russia should look for new partners for conducting its course in Transcaucasia and Hither Asia (of which the region is geographically a part). Armenia is too weak economically; throughout the recent history of its national statehood it has been and remains a recipient of Russia's financial assistance and that of the Armenian diaspora. It can hardly develop into Russia's strategic ally in the Central and Southern Caucasus. For political or national-religious reasons, which cropped up in a series of unfriendly foreign policy moves in relation to Russia, neither Georgia nor Azerbaijan can occupy the still vacant niche of Russia's geopolitical partner in Transcaucasia. They are not in a position to drop, at short notice and unilaterally, their earlier obligations to the other world power centers.

To preserve its strategic influence in the Central and part of the Southern Caucasus, Russia has to look for allies outside the region. The choice is limited to the Islamic Republic of Iran and the Republic of Turkey. The former is ill-suited to the role of a strategic partner in Hither Asia because of its highly specific and unpredictable foreign policy and its dependence on the religious messianism of the political religious elite in the Islamic (Shi'a in the first place) world. From this it follows that Turkey looks like the most probable candidate for the role of Russia's geopolitical partner in Hither Asia, as well as in the Central and Southern Caucasus. Recently, state, political, economic and hu-

manitarian relations between the two countries have been developing by leaps and bounds. Today, there is an obvious trend toward new Russia's geopolitical priorities in Transcaucasia and Hither Asia: the failed Greek and Armenian projects are being replaced with a Turkish project, a fact that all Caucasian countries should bear in mind.

The strategic economic union of Russia and Turkey, which is daily acquiring new organizational traits, will inevitably deprive the sovereign Caucasian states of strategic political impact not only on a global, but also on a regional scale. This means that they will no longer be able to obtain any type of technical support directly from other world or regional power centers. During the August 2008 South Ossetian armed conflict, Turkey's passive assistance to Russia demonstrated to the world that its establishment was prepared to exchange its geopolitical weight in the Caucasus for raw material and other economic preferences. In recent years, the political and economic partnership between Russia and Turkey has been moving toward the mutually advantageous ideology of Eurasianism actively promoted in both countries at the political and academic level. This will soon lead to a mutually advantageous ideological concept of Slavic-Turkic Eurasian unity that will leave no room for the politically independent national, state, and ethno-religious interests of the Caucasian peoples.

In the mid-term perspective, Azerbaijan will profit more than its Central Caucasian neighbors from Russia's new foreign policy vector. Baku, however, has done nothing to tap the favorable potential. Moreover, in the last twelve months Azerbaijan has been exposed to a campaign that propagandizes an ideology hostile to Russia geared toward the idea of "two centuries of genocide of the Azeri people" allegedly carried out in the Russian Empire. It is most graphically presented in the Russian-language printed matter published by the Azeri diaspora in Russia (on the pages and in the electronic version of the *IRS-Nasledie* journal and the *Azerbaidzhanskiy kongress* newspaper in the "200 Years of Genocide" column). This is obviously aimed at Armenia and its idea of the "genocide of the Armenians" during World War I. Baku, which funds these publications, and the Azeri diaspora prefer to ignore the fact that the year 2013 will mark the 200th anniversary of the Gulistan Peace Treaty between Russia and Persia which allowed the Azeri ethnicity, subjugated by the Persians, to develop into a nation. However, this process can only unfold if the Russian state demonstrates tolerance toward all of the peoples and confessions present in its territory. This made the Azeris a state-forming nation. On the other hand, the Azeris of Iran, who have been trying to acquire their statehood in Southern Azerbaijan for nearly 100 years, have not yet accomplished this.

## Conclusion

Today we are watching, and are involved in global transformations of Russia's geopolitics in the Central and part of the Southern Caucasus. We have a good chance of seeing with our own eyes whether the Turkish Project will replace the Armenian and Greek projects in the next ten years. My first conclusion about Russia's geopolitics in Transcaucasia is that there is a geopolitical idea of Eurasian Slavic-Turkic unity in which Russia and Turkey are jointly involved. The Turkish project is one of Russia's objective foreign policy imperatives, the realization of which will strongly affect the situation in the Central Caucasus.

In any case, the independent states and self-proclaimed state units in the Central Caucasus will have to take the changed geopolitical context in the Black Sea-Caucasian region into account. The European Union and NATO (which the ruling elites of some of the Central Caucasian countries regard as their natural allies) are losing their grip on the region. The shift in the power centers of Caucasian regional geopolitics will inevitably deprive the political elites of Azerbaijan, Armenia, and Georgia of their continued opportunity to exploit the conflict of interests among stronger

and more responsible political players, since some of them are joining forces for the sake of their own corporate interests, thus contradicting the corporate interests of the Central Caucasian political elites.

In the next ten years, the Caucasus will live through serious transformations designed to promote its further integration into the world system, which has so far been impossible because of regional conflicts. The world around the Central Caucasus has undergone qualitative changes, and it is up to its local political elites to decide how they will adapt to these transformations.

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