

European Integration in a Political-Geographical Context: Comparison of the Baltic States and the South Caucasus

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ABSTRACT. After almost three decades of their independence a clear evidence of the positive outcome of the European integration is revealed by the immense difference between those post-Soviet countries which succeeded and became the EU member states and those which remain outside of the EU. Successful accomplishment of the EU integration process is largely dependent on the political will of the ruling elites and the readiness of the population of a concrete state as well as on several geopolitical factors, including the political-geographical location of that very state. An important factor for the successful European integration process is the geopolitical interest of the core members of the EU and coincidence of the foreign policy vectors of a candidate country and its immediate neighbours. In this article the Baltic and the South Caucasus regions are compared from the above-mentioned perspectives. Baltic states which do not have any ethno-territorial claims or border problems with each other, thanks to the consolidated efforts of their political elites, managed to overcome all obstacles as a single region to become the EU member states. In the South Caucasus, which is political-geographically very fragmented and where all the three states of the region have different foreign policy vectors, full-fledged regional cooperation still remains a utopia, which in its turn develops hurdles to the EU integration process. © 2019 Bull. Georg. Natl. Acad. Sci.

Key words: European Union, European integration, South Caucasus, Baltic states, Eastern Partnership, Association Agreement

The European Union started as an idea to create a supranational body aiming at ending the frequent and devastating wars between the European neighbours [1]. The first step in this direction was made in 1950 with the creation of European Coal and Steel Community. Seven years later, in 1957, six countries – Belgium, France, Germany, Italy, Luxembourg and the Netherlands signed the Treaty of Rome creating the European Economic

Community (EEC), colloquially known as "Common Market" [2] determined to lay the foundations of an "ever closer union among the peoples of Europe" [3].

The "Common Market" till 1987 was designed only for circulation of goods. "Free movement of persons, capitals and services continued to be subject to numerous limitations. It was necessary to wait until the Single European Act, in 1987, when

a definitive boost was given to establish a genuine unified market" [4]. This in its turn led to signing the European Union Treaty in 1992.

The success of the European integration became so obvious that the new "post-Communist" and "post-Soviet" countries, emerged in Europe as a result of immense geopolitical shift by the end of the 1980s and the beginning of the 1990s, aimed at joining the EU, making it the main priority of their foreign policies.

The immediate adoption of all countries, which economically and politically were at different, relatively lower, level than the EU member states, could have caused serious economic and political difficulties for the EU. Therefore, the accession criteria, or so-called Copenhagen Criteria were adopted in 1993 [5]. The fulfilment of these criteria still is the essential pre-condition for all candidate countries aiming to join the EU.

In order to prepare the countries for the possible EU integration, the EU prefers to deal with the "regions" – groups of countries, geographically close to each other, e.g. Central Europe, the Baltic States, the Eastern Balkans, etc.

The aim of this article is to review two such regions – the Baltic and South Caucasus ones in connection with the European integration. The Baltic region is an example of success story, where the efforts of all three states were unified and directed towards European integration. To the contrary, the three states of the Southern Caucasus do not have a spirit of solidarity which is one of the reasons (but not the only one as geopolitics plays no less important role) of so far less success on its way towards European integration.

The Baltic States

15 years have passed since the Baltic States gained their membership in the EU in 2004. This act deeply affected the Baltic region's political, security and economic dimensions. Finding themselves placed in the undesirable "Soviet ghetto" [6], the European vector was mentally and

value-wise perceived by these countries as a "return to the Western world" [7]. Although the Baltic states had a strong desire to join the EU, their accession was more uncertain than that of the other aspirant countries, e.g. the Central European "post-Communist" states. The Baltic states were poorer and least known applicants [8]. Only a very focused and steady foreign policy enabled these states to join the EU. The Baltic states joined NATO in 2004 as well.

European integration became a major catalyst for the economic, political and social development of Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania. From 2004 to 2018 their total GDP grew more than twice. In 2018, Estonia's per capita GDP was 22,927 US\$, Lithuania's – 19,089 US\$ and that of Latvia – 18,088 US\$. Just to compare – the same year per capita GDP of Azerbaijan was 4,4211 US\$, that of Georgia – 4,344 US\$, and of Armenia – 4,212 US\$ [9]. Almost three decades of independent existence, different political and economic processes have led to the fact that today the Baltic states are 3-4 times richer than the South Caucasus states and this is reflected in the overall welfare of people. The population of the Baltic states have acquired possibilities of better employment, better education prospects not only in their own countries but throughout the EU. The Baltic states also enjoy better healthcare and social protection systems.

Although the Baltic region borders upon the Russian Federation, which is currently considered to be a sole geopolitical threat to their sovereignty, it is less probable that any aggression will occur from that direction as NATO is the main guarantor of the sovereignty, territorial integrity and security of the Baltic states.

The geopolitical interest of the EU founding members was to create a rich and stable neighbourhood to the east of the Union. This might have achieved through its own enlargement. Otherwise, to the east of Germany or Scandinavian countries there would have existed economically less developed states, which could have become a

source of permanent instability and headache for western European nations. However, it ought to be admitted that the integration of Central and Eastern European countries, among them the Baltic states, became possible through the implementation of a very consistent and firm policy of the respective governments of these countries. The Baltic states, which have no territorial disputes with each other managed to present themselves as a single region.

The South Caucasus States

Already in the last years of the Soviet rule the ethno-territorial conflict erupted between Armenia and Azerbaijan over Nagorno-Karabakh. The conflict, which began in 1988 and has not yet ended, has an enormous impact on the geopolitical state of affairs of these countries and the entire South Caucasus [10]. Armenia and Azerbaijan still do not have diplomatic relations with each other while Georgia maintains normal relations with both of its South Caucasian neighbours. Internal conflicts in two autonomous units of Georgia, Abkhazia and Tskhinvali region/“South Ossetia”, stirred up from outside, affected to a lesser extent the relations between the South Caucasus states but caused very serious problem for Georgia.

From the very first days of independence the foreign policy vectors of the three South Caucasus states were different. For Georgia, which always considered itself as a part of the European family, integration into the western structures (EU, NATO) became the main geopolitical priority.

Political and cultural elites of the Republic of Armenia and a part of its population had more or less similar to Georgia foreign policy orientation in the early and mid-1990s. But Armenia became heavily dependent on the military assistance of the Russian Federation while the integration of Armenia into the Western structures definitely is not in the Kremlin's interest.

The Azerbaijan Republic from the early years of independence relies upon its hydrocarbon wealth and do not display strong interest towards western

institutions. Baku views the EU as an attractive market for selling its oil and gas.

Incompatibility of foreign policy vectors and unresolved conflicts in the region hinder the South Caucasus to be presented in the world as a single region. The role of the Russian Federation which considers the former Soviet republics as the area of its exclusive influence is important as well. Armenia was compelled to become a member of the Russian-led Eurasian Union, Azerbaijan is well balancing in its relations with the West, Russia and the Middle Eastern neighbours, and Georgia became a direct target of the Kremlin's aggression: Russian military bases had been deployed in the occupied parts of Georgia – Abkhazia and Tskhinvali region/“South Ossetia” – since 2008 which had been declared “independent states” by the Kremlin.

By the end of the 1990s, geopolitical situation in the Caucasus and the Middle East, particularly the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict and confrontation between the Islamic Republic of Iran and the West, led transnational corporations to use Georgia's territory as a transit route for oil and gas exports from the Caspian Sea towards Turkey and later – to Europe, avoiding Armenia and Iran. Georgia and Azerbaijan got “united by pipeline” and even by railway but not by the major vectors of foreign policy. Far more advantageous than the pipeline construction – the all-South Caucasus regional cooperation – still remains utopia [11].

Sure, at the early stage of their independence the South Caucasus countries formally were trying to implement a joint policy towards the EU. On April 22, 1996 the Presidents of Armenia, Azerbaijan and Georgia signed partnership and cooperation agreements with the EU. The agreements entered into force in 1999, covering many areas of cooperation, including the approximation to the EU standards and the harmonization of legislation [12].

A step on the EU integration path was made on March 19, 2009 when the European Council

adopted the Eastern Partnership initiative (EaP) as a new format of cooperation with the countries to the east of the EU (Armenia, Azerbaijan, Belarus, Georgia, Moldova and Ukraine). The EaP enabled the countries to enjoy higher level of interaction with the EU. Within the framework of EaP, Georgia and Armenia started negotiations with the European Union in 2010 in order to sign Association Agreement (AA) and its key constituent part – the Deep and Comprehensive Free Trade Agreement (DCFTA). But due to the pressure from the Kremlin, Armenia left the negotiations in September 2013. As for Azerbaijan, from the very beginning it showed less interest towards AA.

Georgia signed AA with the European Union on June 27, 2014. That raised relations between Georgia and the EU to a higher level. Armenia also had signed AA with the EU on November 24, 2017, but without DCFTA and its AA is more of a declaratory nature [13]. It may be assumed that Russia does not consider this sort of agreement a threat to its own interests as Yerevan had not heard an official rebuke from Moscow.

Georgia went further in terms of the EU integration and after several years of intensive negotiations reached the agreement with the EU on visa liberalisation [14].

Consequently, Georgia is the only country in the South Caucasus which stands firmly on the path of the EU integration. However, as it was already mentioned, the incompatibility of foreign policy vectors with other countries of the South Caucasus

and unresolved internal conflicts significantly complicates its task.

Conclusion

From the comparison of the Baltic and South Caucasus regions it is evident that external geopolitical interests and the political-geographical location of these regions were crucial for the European integration process.

In the case of the Baltic states very important was their proximity to the core of the EU, their civilizational closeness, and relative similarity in historical development.

On another hand political-geographical location could serve as a certain negative factor in the process of European integration for the South Caucasus. The latter has no direct border with the European Union (EU has no direct border with its insular member states Cyprus and Malta either, but this is another issue); geopolitically the South Caucasus is very fragmented: three states pursue different foreign policies and have small, if any, common foreign policy interests. The South Caucasus countries have to deal with a factor of Russia, whose geopolitical ambitions strongly influence all the Eastern Partnership countries. All these factors hinder the EU's aim to tackle the South Caucasus as a single region and hamper the South Caucasus states to achieve more sustainable results, which could be a precondition for the economical welfare and political stability of these countries. At the moment Georgia strides alone on the path of European integration.

პოლიტიკური გეოგრაფია

ევროპული ინტეგრაცია პოლიტიკურ-გეოგრაფიულ კონტექსტში: ბალტიის ქვეყნებისა და სამხრეთ კავკასიის შედარება

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ევროინტეგრაცია რთული და წინააღმდეგობრივი პროცესია, თუმცა მისი პოზიტიური შედეგი ეჭვს არ იწვევს. ამის დასტურია ის თვალსაჩინო სხვაობა, რომელიც არსებობს ევროკავშირში უკვე შესულ და არაწევრ ყოფილ „პოსტ-საბჭოთა“ ქვეყნებს შორის მათი დამოუკიდებლობის თითქმის სამი ათწლეულის შემდეგ. ევროინტეგრაციის წარმატებაზე გავლენას ახდენდა და ახდენს როგორც ცალკეული ქვეყნების პოლიტიკური ელიტების ნება და მოსახლეობის მზადყოფნა, ისე გეოპოლიტიკური ფაქტორები, მათ შორის, პოლიტიკურ-გეოგრაფიული მდებარეობა. ცალკეული ქვეყნის ევროინტეგრაციისათვის გადამწყვეტი მნიშვნელობა ჰქონდა და აქვს დიდი სახელმწიფოების გეოპოლიტიკურ ინტერესებს და იმავე ქვეყნის საგარეო პოლიტიკური ვექტორის ერთგვარ თანხვედრას მისივე მეზობლებთან. ამ თვალსაზრისით სტატიაში შედარებულია ბალტიისა და სამხრეთ კავკასიის რეგიონები. ბალტიის ქვეყნებმა, რომლებსაც არ აქვთ ერთმანეთთან რაიმე სასაზღვრო ან ეთნო-ტერიტორიული დაპირისპირება, პოლიტიკური ელიტების კონსოლიდირებული ძალისხმევით შედეგად, როგორც ერთიანმა რეგიონმა, მიაღწია და გახდა ევროპული კავშირის წევრი. სამხრეთ კავკასიაში, რომელიც პოლიტიკურ-გეოგრაფიულად ფრაგმენტირებულია და რეგიონის სამივე ქვეყანას განსხვავებული საგარეო პოლიტიკური ვექტორი აქვს, სრულფასოვანი რეგიონული თანამშრომლობა დღემდე უტოპიად რჩება და ევროინტეგრაციას სირთულეები ექმნება.

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Received August, 2019