

COMPARATIVE CHARACTERISTICS OF SOUTH CAUCASIAN
ETHNO-POLITICAL CONFLICTS
(1990–2020)*

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Introduction

The collapse of the Soviet Union, which had a huge geopolitical significance in recent history, was a stimulus for the outbreak of frozen ethno-political conflicts in its territory, including in the South Caucasus. The “awakening” of the inherited from the USSR and previously hidden conflicts coincided chronologically with the period of Gorbachev's reconstruction and heated up to the maximum after the collapse of the Soviet Union and after the declaration of independence of three new states in the South Caucasus: Armenia, Georgia and Azerbaijan. In the framework of the formation of the modern world order, the world power centers, in particular the Russian Federation and the USA, and the states with a regional role, were actively involved in the multi-layered vortex of the problems of Nagorno Karabakh, Abkhazia and South Ossetia, and naturally, pursuing their interests, they turned the processes of conflict settlement into important tool for managing the situation. The above-mentioned conflicts also had a great impact on the internal political life of Armenia, Azerbaijan and Georgia: one of its prominent examples is the palace coup in Armenia in 1998, when after President Levon Ter-Petrosyan's famous article, supporters of the slogan “no inch of land”, accusing him of compromise, took over the leadership of Armenia for nearly two decades.

There are many valuable studies¹ on various aspects of the South Caucasian ethno-political conflicts, which served as the basis for the

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¹ Berg. 2009.

comparative analysis of the problems of Nagorno-Karabakh, Abkhazia and South Ossetia within the framework of this article.

Commonalities of the ethno-political conflicts of Nagorno-Karabakh, Abkhazia and South Ossetia

1. Nationalism

There is a national component in all three South Caucasian conflicts. The peoples living in their historical homeland, who were included in the territory of a foreign, historically unfriendly state by the Lenin-Stalin administrative division, could not help but yearn to unite with their relatives and motherland, as in the case of Nagorno Karabakh².

2. Political instability due to the collapse of the USSR

Once upon a time, the slogan "divide and rule" which was aimed at creating basis of instability to have permanent leverage over the union republics, such as the division of the Ossetian people into two parts and the annexation of one part to the Soviet Georgia, or the inclusion of Abkhazia as an autonomous entity within Georgia, when initially they were considered two equal union republics, later became the cause of insoluble ethnic problems. The time showed that this policy became destructive for the Soviet Union itself. The territories of Nagorno-Karabakh, Abkhazia and South Ossetia were annexed to the metropolis (Azerbaijan, Georgia) arbitrarily in the early years of the Soviet Union. After the infamous decision of the Caucasian Bureau, in 1923 the Nagorno-Karabakh Autonomous Region was included in the Azerbaijan SSR, the South Ossetian Autonomous Region in the Georgian SSR in 1922, the Abkhazia Soviet Socialist Republic in the Georgian SSR in 1931. After the formation of independence movements in these units during the collapse of the USSR, Azerbaijan and Georgia, respectively, adopted illegal decisions regarding the dissolution of the aforementioned statuses of Nagorno Karabakh, South Ossetia, and Abkhazia, respectively, on November 23 1991, on December 10 1990 and on July 23 1992³.

3. Internal factors: suppression of minorities, policies of amalgamation (merger policy) and chauvinism.

People's historical past and acquired experience are imprinted in their memory, which is very difficult to give new content and requires years of cooperation. From that point of view, the struggle of the Artsakh Armenians is seen as a struggle against an existential (to their own existence) threat, taking into account the massacres of the Armenian population in Baku (1905, 1918), Shushi (1905, 1920), Sumgait (1988) and again in Baku (1990), as well as the Armenian Genocide in 1915 and Turkey's involvement in the Karabakh conflict. And the infamous thesis of Georgian President Gamsakhurdia,

² Աբրահամյան. 1991, 11–18, Մանասյան. 2005, 7–12, Ավագյան. 2010, 5–10:

³ Барсегов. 2009, 15–20; Захаров. 2010, 85–95; Մանասյան. 2018, 195–200:

“Georgia for Georgians”⁴, was essential for the outbreak of Georgian-Abkhazian and Georgian-South Ossetian ethno-political conflicts, which had further manifestations during the years of power of Shevardnadze and Saakashvili.

4. Various protests and mass peaceful actions took place during all three conflicts, which were accompanied by appeals to the leadership of the Soviet Union, decisions and letters of labor collectives, starting not with Gorbachev's reconstruction, but from the 1950s-1960s. Peaceful demonstrations took place in Nagorno-Karabakh and Armenia in 1967, 1977, 1987–1990, in South Ossetia in 1988–1991, in Abkhazia in 1957, 1967, 1977, 1989–1992⁵.

5. In the case of all three conflicts, in response to peaceful protest actions, Azerbaijan and Georgia, committed mass violence, respectively, against the population of Nagorno-Karabakh, Abkhazia and South Ossetia, used disproportionate force, using police and national guard units. Moreover, in 1988 in response to peaceful rallies and legal demands for the realization of the right to self-determination of the Artsakh Armenians, mass massacres of Armenians were organized by Azerbaijani gangs in Sumgait (February 27–29), Baku (January 13–20, 1990) and other cities on the instructions of the Azerbaijani authorities, as the result of which more than 60 civilians died, more than 300,000 people became refugees. The Supreme Council of Soviet Armenia On December 1, 1988, responded positively to the application of the Nagorno Karabakh Autonomous Region Council, which was the state unit of Artsakh Armenians, to rejoin the Motherland, which was unprecedented in the history of the Soviet Union and was one of the most important features of the national movement, which adopted classical and various modes of struggle and democracy. This was followed by the successful defense of Nagorno-Karabakh, provoked by Azerbaijan, in 1991–1994. In parallel, in 1991–1993 as a result of Georgia's instigation of military operations, Georgian special units entered the territory of South Ossetia. Starting from August 1992, the Georgian side carried out anti-Abkhaz operations, military clashes took place, after which a 3,000-person unit of the Georgian National Guard was deployed in Abkhazia.

6. Declarations of independence were adopted in the case of the above-mentioned three conflicts: Abkhazia-on August 25 1990, Nagorno Karabakh-on September 2 1991, South Ossetia-on May 29 1992.

7. Large-scale military operations took place during all three conflicts. In the case of Nagorno-Karabakh, the aggression by Azerbaijan was realized by the first (1991–1994) and second (2020) Nagorno-Karabakh wars, as well as the 2016 April armed conflict. Georgia started military operations in South Ossetia in 1991–1993, as well as in 2004 and 2008. And the military clashes

⁴ Shirinyan. 2018, 67–80.

⁵ Жоржалиани, Тоидзе, Лекшвили. 1995, 67–69; Закареши-вили. 2008, 25–29, *Историко-филологический журнал*. 2017 ш, 35–38:

in Abkhazia in 1992–1993 turned into a war, which was repeated in a unique way in 2008⁶.

8. In all three conflicts in question, cease-fire agreements were signed to stop hostilities, in which a number of countries and organizations participated: with Nagorno Karabakh in 1994, 2016 and 2020 (all with the mediation of the Russian Federation), in the case of South Ossetia in 1994 (Sochi agreement between Russia and Georgia) and in 2008 (with the mediation of EU-France), in the case of Abkhazia, in 1994 (UN, OSCE, RF) and in 2008 (with EU-France mediation). Moreover, the protocol signed in Bishkek on May 5 1994 about the cease-fire of the first Karabakh war and the agreement signed in Baku, Yerevan and Stepanakert from May 9 to 11 is the only one among the cease-fires related to the end of the military operations of the ethno-political conflicts in the South Caucasus, which was signed by the legitimate authorities of the three parties directly involved in the conflict: the representatives of Azerbaijan, Armenia and Nagorno-Karabakh.

9. The three conflicts have in common the involvement of peacekeeping forces. Until 2020, 44 -Day War no peacekeeping forces were deployed in the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict zone, although their arrival after the status referendum was included in the document named “Madrid Principles” adopted in 2007. But after war in 2020 Russian peacekeeping operation was deployed to Artsakh. In the case of South Ossetia in 1992, peacekeeping forces were deployed in the border zone, which included Russians and Georgians, and then, based on the Sochi agreement, also soldiers from North Ossetia. In 1993–2009, the UN observation mission was operating, and since 2008 only Russia, which guards the border of South Ossetia, has been carrying out peacekeeping activities. In 1993 UN peacekeeping forces were deployed in Abkhazia, in 1994–2010 such activities were carried out by the CIS peacekeeping mission consisting mainly of Russian military forces. In 2009, Russian border guard forces were deployed in Abkhazia⁷.

10. The ethno-political conflicts of the South Caucasus have commonalities in terms of the involvement of the conflict parties in the negotiation process. The representatives of Artsakh were included in the negotiation process within the framework of the OSCE Minsk Group until 1998. And representatives of Abkhazia and South Ossetia participated in the negotiations in the 1990s and in 2008 after the Russian-Georgian war, getting involved in the Geneva process. The study of international experience shows that in order to settle conflicts and achieve long-lasting peace, it is important to involve all parties of the conflict in negotiation processes with the right to equal voice.

11. One of the commonalities of ethno-political conflicts in the South Caucasus is the issue of choosing formats for negotiation processes. In the

⁶ Цыганов. 2008, 65–68; *Թրքիստան*. 2012, 55–57:

⁷ Macfarlane, Sabanadze. 2013, 609–627; Czachoe. 2015, 151–163.

cases of Abkhazia and South Ossetia, the Geneva format⁸ of conflict settlement, and in the case of Nagorno Karabakh, the Minsk Group format was used. It is an unprecedented phenomenon in the international practice of conflict resolution when a special structure was created for the solution of the given conflict (Artsakh-Azerbaijani) and three of the 5 members of the UN Security Council joined it: the USA, France and the Russian Federation, who are the co-chairs of the Minsk Group.

Specificities of the ethno-political conflicts of Nagorno-Karabakh, Abkhazia and South Ossetia

1. One of the differences of South Caucasian ethno-political conflicts is that only Nagorno Karabakh had a special status. From January to November 28 1989, by the decision of the Supreme Council of the USSR, the powers of the Nagorno-Karabakh Autonomous Region Council were canceled, instead a special management committee was created (by which the Nagorno-Karabakh Autonomous Region was actually brought out of the control of Azerbaijan) under the direct leadership of Moscow. The committee was headed by A. Volsky. Unlike the Federal District of Columbia in the USA, this was the first unprecedented decision in the history of the Soviet Union. By the way, that step testifies to the uniqueness of the Nagorno-Karabakh problem, as this ethno-political problem was initially regulated by the decisions of the state bodies, the regional and the Supreme Council of the ASSR. Much later, on October 20 1990, and after the decisive steps taken by the Armenian side towards the Union, only the decree of the Presidency of the Central Committee of the USSR restored the state and party power bodies of the autonomous region, although the official Baku did not fulfill that order⁹. The activities of the Artsakh Special Management Committee are undoubtedly reminiscent of the only federal district of the USA, Colombia, which is under the direct authority of the central, federal government.

2. One of the features of the ethno-political conflicts in the South Caucasus is that if Abkhazia and South Ossetia, as the homelands of the Abkhaz and Ossetian peoples with a historical past, were annexed to Georgia also with a historical background, then the Azerbaijan place name and a state entity, Azerbaijani people never existed in Transcaucasia, which was once part of the Russian Empire (they were known as the Caucasian Tatars), to which Bolshevik Russia annexed Nakhichevan and Nagorno-Karabakh in 1921. In the context of all that, in the sense of presenting themselves as separate state associations, the cultural orientations, priorities and goals of both sides of the more than 100-year-old Artsakh-Azerbaijani conflict (started in 1918 as the infamous precursor to the 1905–1907 mass atrocities committed by Caucasian Tatars against Armenia incited by Tsarist Russia),

⁸ Popescu. 2007, 1–25.

⁹ Պետրոսյան. 2017թ., 12–13, Մանասյան. 2018, 195–200:

the value system professed by the Armenian and Azerbaijani peoples, the psyche and national peculiarities, the traditions in relation to foreigners and demonstrated political behavior, as well as the path taken cannot but reflect on the resolution of the Artsakh problem.

3. During the Georgian-Abkhazian and Georgian-South Ossetian armed confrontations, Russia participated in military operations and supported the Abkhazians and Ossetians. At the same time, this support was absent during all the wars aimed at protecting Karabakh from Azerbaijani attacks. And if the military operations in Abkhazia and South Ossetia took place only in the conflict zones, then during the first Karabakh war, mass violence and military operations against Armenians also took place in all Armenian-populated areas of Azerbaijan, and in April 2016 also along the borders of Armenia, and in 2020 during the 44-day war, Azerbaijani guerrilla groups penetrated the territory of Armenia.

4. One of the peculiarities of the ethno-political conflicts in the South Caucasus is that the independence of Nagorno Karabakh has not been recognized by any state, though in 2008 after the August war, the Russian Federation recognized the independence of South Ossetia and Abkhazia, after which some UN member states also recognized their independence. Russia is the main political, military and financial-economic donor of Abkhazia and South Ossetia and protects their interests in the international arena. Unfortunately, the Republic of Artsakh does not have external support of this scale.

5. One of the fundamental differences between South Caucasian ethno-political conflicts is the nature of these conflicts. The conflicts of Nagorno-Karabakh and South Ossetia are so-called self-determination conflicts, the legal basis of which is the right of nations to self-determination. Independence referendums were held in both Nagorno-Karabakh and South Ossetia, respectively, in 1991 and 1992 (in South Ossetia, "Referendum on the question of independence and (or) reunification with Russia"), by which the absolute majority of the population that participated, more than 99%, expressed their support for independence. On October 3 1999, a referendum on the attitude towards the Constitution of Abkhazia also was held, based on the results of which the Declaration of Independence of Abkhazia was adopted on October 12 (87.6% of votes were in favor). Nevertheless, since the Abkhazians did not form a majority in Abkhazia, and the results of the referendum are too close to the minimum necessary, the question of the nature of the Abkhazian conflict in terms of being considered a so-called self-determination conflict is controversial.

6. The specificities of the ethno-political conflicts of Nagorno-Karabakh, Abkhazia and South Ossetia are also remarkable from the point of view of the documents adopted by international organizations, especially in terms of predetermining their future statuses. The UN Security Council adopted 4 resolutions on the Nagorno Karabakh conflict in 1993, 30 resolutions on South Ossetia during 1995–2009, and 6 resolutions on Abkhazia in 1993.

Moreover, the resolutions adopted in 1995–2009 concerning South Ossetia also refer to the events in Abkhazia (about 20 resolutions). It is noteworthy that in the aforementioned resolutions adopted by the UN Security Council, the issues related to the right of self-determination of South Ossetia and Abkhazia are not mentioned. Moreover, they stated that the Georgian-Abkhazian and Georgian-South Ossetian conflicts should be resolved exclusively within the framework of the territorial integrity and sovereignty of Georgia. And the four resolutions of the UN Security Council adopted in 1993 do not propose a clear format for the settlement of the Karabakh problem, but call for pursuing the settlement process implemented within the framework of the PACE, without expressing any approach regarding the status of Nagorno Karabakh. PACE made a number of decisions about Nagorno-Karabakh, the most important of which was the Item 9 of the resolution N 1416 adopted on January 25, 2005. It also touches the issue of the future status of Artsakh and states that the independence and secession of Nagorno Karabakh can be achieved only in a legal and peaceful way. Also the joined statements¹⁰ of the Minsk Group co-chairs from 2009–2013 are important for the future settlement of the NK conflict. Concerning the conflicts of Abkhazia and South Ossetia, in PACE resolutions, they were referred to for the first time in 1999. Those and later adopted resolutions called for resolving these conflicts exclusively within the framework of the territorial integrity and sovereignty of Georgia¹¹.

7. Unlike Nagorno-Karabakh, Abkhazia declared its independence after the collapse of the Soviet Union (1991) in 1999, despite the fact that on March 30, 1991 on the referendum to withdraw from the USSR, the Abkhaz population which was minority in Abkhazia voted against leaving the union state. And in the case of South Ossetia, the ethnic factor of North Ossetia and the desire of the Ossetians to unite with their brothers in that region is of key importance. In the case of the Georgian-Abkhaz conflict, despite the ethnic difference with the Georgians, Georgia considers it a political conflict, and Abkhazia, as a matter of ethnic identity, self-determination of nations, and sees the reason for the conflict with Georgia not in ethnic conflicts, but in politics, calling Georgians invaders.

8. One of the differences with Nagorno-Karabakh conflict is Russia's policy towards South Ossetia and Abkhazia. Russian Federation issued Russian passports to the population of these unrecognized states (in Abkhazia it started in 2002 and in South Ossetia in 2004), the purpose of which was to legitimize the Russian presence in Abkhazia and South Ossetia and to protect the interests of those who became its citizens, which became one of the justifications for Russia's involvement in the August war in 2008¹². Abkhazia has no other state inhabited by its relatives and is a neighbor only to Georgia

¹⁰ *Ushakidze J. 2022, 147–148:*

¹¹ Bartuzi. 2008, 1–8; Gerrits, Bader. 2016, 297–313.

¹² Абдулатипов. 2008, 55–57.

and Russia, and in South Ossetia there has always been an aspiration to unite with their brothers in North Ossetia, which is perhaps possible to be included in Russia and in the form of a unified formation called North Ossetia-Alania as a federal unit of the Russian Federation. Unlike the aforementioned, Artsakh was violently separated from the Motherland, joining which is a completely natural and legal requirement.

Conclusion

Thus, the comparative analysis of the South Caucasian ethno-political conflicts shows that they have certain commonalities and features, which is important for explaining the genealogy, history and chronology of the problems of Nagorno-Karabakh, Abkhazia and South Ossetia and for revealing the ways for the resolution of these ethno-political conflicts. These three conflicts remain unresolved, becoming a tool in the hands of the superpowers to serve their geopolitical interests. Experience shows that for the establishment of lasting peace in the South Caucasus, a balanced composition of mediating states is needed so that they can more easily form impartial and fair solutions, the full participation of all parties involved in the conflicts, their constructive and proactive behavior, as well as commitment of all actors to solve the existing problems through cooperation. In the case of the impossibility of such conditions, it is necessary to refer to the norms of international law, clarifying the responsibility of the aggressor, the states violating the laws of war, and those organizing violence against the civilian population. It is also necessary to distinguish the NK conflict from other ethnic problems in the South Caucasus, because in the case of the latter, there is a political and territorial component, and there is no clear international legal basis that would prove the threat to the existence of the given ethnic group.

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**ՀԱՐԱՎԿՈՎԿԱՍՅԱՆ ԷԹՆՈՔԱՂԱՔԱԿԱՆ
ՀԱԿԱՄԱՐՏՈՒԹՅՈՒՆՆԵՐԻ ՀԱՄԵՄՏԱԿԱՆ ԲՆՈՒԹԱԳԻՐԸ
(1990 – 2020 թթ.)**

ԼԻԼԻԹ ԴԱԼԼԱԿՅԱՆ

Ա մ փ ո փ ու մ

Բանալի բառեր՝ Հարավկովկասյան էթնոքաղաքական հակամարտություններ, Լեռնային Ղարաբաղ-Արցախ, Հարավային Օսիա, Աբխազիա, ազգերի ինքնորոշման իրավունք, վրաց-աբխազական, վրաց-հարավ օսական, ռուս-վրացական, ռազմական գործողություններ, շովինիզմի քաղաքականություն, խաղաղապահ ուժեր, միջազգային իրավունք:

Հարավկովկասյան էթնոքաղաքական հակամարտությունների համեմատական վերլուծությունը ցույց է տալիս, որ դրանք ունեն որոշակի առանձնահատկություններ ու ընդհանրություններ, ինչը կարևոր է Լեռնային Ղարաբաղի (ԼՂ), Աբխազիայի և Հարավային Օսիայի հիմնախնդիրների ծագումնաբանությունը, պատմությունն ու ժամանակագրությունը լուսաբանելու և այդ էթնոքաղաքական հակամարտությունների հանգուցալուծման ուղիները բացահայտելու համար: Այս երեք հակամարտությունները մնում են չլուծված՝ դառնալով գերտերությունների ձեռքում գործիք՝ իրենց աշխարհաքաղաքական շահերի սպասարկման համար: Փորձը ցույց է տալիս, որ Հարավային Կովկասում տեական խաղաղության հաստատման համար անհրաժեշտ է միջնորդ պետությունների հավասարակշռված կազմ՝ անկանխակալ և արդարացի լուծումների ձևավորման համար, բախումներին ներգրավված բոլոր կողմերի լիարժեք մասնակցություն, նրանց կառուցողական ու նախաձեռնող գործունեություն, ինչպես նաև՝ բոլոր դերակատարների՝ առկա խնդիրները գործակցությամբ լուծելու մղում: Նման պայմանների անհնարինությունը պարագայում հարկավոր է անդրադառնալ միջազգային իրավունքի նորմերին՝ հստակեցնելով հարձակվողի, պատերազմի օրենքներ խախտող պետությունների և խաղաղ բնակչության դեմ բռնություններ կազմակերպողների պատասխանատվությունը: Անհրաժեշտ է նաև տարբերակել ԼՂ հակամարտությունը մյուս էթնիկ խնդիրներից՝ Հարավային Կովկասում, քանի որ վերջիններիս դեպքում առկա է քաղաքական ու տարածքային բաղադրիչը, և չկա այն հստակ միջազգային իրավական հիմքը, որը կապացուցի տվյալ էթնիկ խմբի գոյությունը սպառնացող վտանգը:

Լիլիթ Դալլաքյան – ԵՊՀ միջազգային հարաբերությունների ֆակուլտետի քաղաքական ինստիտուտների և գործընթացների ամբիոնի հայցորդ: Գիտական հետաքրքրությունները՝ հարավկովկասյան էթնոքաղաքական հակամարտությունները ՌԴ-ԱՄՆ աշխարհաքաղաքական շահերի, ինչպես նաև՝ տարածաշրջանա-

լին դերակատարների մրցակցութեան համատեքստում: Հեղինակ է 5 հոդվածի:
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СРАВНИТЕЛЬНАЯ ХАРАКТЕРИСТИКА ЮЖНОКАВКАЗСКИХ ЭТНОПОЛИТИЧЕСКИХ КОНФЛИКТОВ (1990 – 2020 гг.)

ЛИЛИТ ДАЛЛАКЯН

Резюме

Ключевые слова: южнокавказские этнополитические конфликты, Нагорный Карабах – Арцах, Южная Осетия, Абхазия, право наций на самоопределение, грузино-абхазские, грузино-югоосетинские, российско-грузинские военные действия, политика шовинизма, миротворческие силы, международное право.

Сравнительный анализ этнополитических конфликтов Южного Кавказа показывает, что они имеют определенные различия и общие черты, что важно для объяснения генезиса, истории и хронологии проблем Нагорного Карабаха, Абхазии и Южной Осетии и выявления путей их разрешения. По сей день эти три конфликта остаются неразрешенными, став инструментом в руках сверхдержав, служащим их геополитическим интересам. Опыт показывает, что для установления прочного мира на Южном Кавказе необходим сбалансированный состав государств-посредников, для формирования беспристрастных и справедливых решений, полноценное участие всех сторон, вовлеченных в конфликты, их конструктивное и активное взаимодействие, а также стремление всех акторов решить существующие проблемы посредством сотрудничества. В случае невозможности таких условий необходимо обратиться к нормам международного права, разъясняющим ответственность государств-агрессоров, нарушающих законы войны и организующих насилие против гражданского населения. Также необходимо отличать Нагорно-Карабахский конфликт от других этнических проблем на Южном Кавказе, поскольку в случае последних присутствуют политическая и территориальная составляющая, а четкая международно-правовая база, которая бы доказывала угрозу существованию данного этноса, отсутствует.

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