

# THE ROLE OF SECURITY INTERESTS IN DEVELOPING THE EU'S POLITICAL AGENDA VIS-À-VIS THE SOUTH CAUCASUS REGION

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## **SUMMARY**

*The article discusses the primary security reasons of the increased importance of the South Caucasus region in the EU's political agenda in the early 2000s. The study argues that the EU's security priorities in the South Caucasus trigger shaping and implementation of the EU's integral strategy towards the region.*

**Keywords:** *European Union, South Caucasus, EU strategic interests, Security interests.*

The dissolution of the Soviet Union shattered the bipolar system, resulting in changing of geopolitical reality in the South Caucasus, invocation of new actors in the region, as well as building new independent relations of the South Caucasian states with regional and extra-regional actors.

Yet, for the first decade after the collapse of the Soviet Union, the South Caucasus region has not occupied an important place in the European Union's perceived interests. Clearly, this lack of political interest of the EU vis-à-vis the region had its internal and external reasons.

Authors explain the EU's late-1990s evident neglect towards the region with the distant location of the region, which before the last enlargements of the European Union was not seen as part of Europe and was considered outside the geographical scope of the European initiatives, in both security and neighbourhood programmes. Basically, the lack of knowledge about the region and its identity, and as a result the absence of developed strategic thinking towards the region, the complexity of the regional problems, the lack of internal lobbyists within the EU to catalyse greater interest to the South Caucasus, as well as the overall dominant presence of external actors (Russia, USA, Turkey, Iran) in the region should be outlined as main reasons of the EU's inactivity in that period.<sup>1</sup>

In addition, L. Simão argues, that in the given period the EU's political relations with the South Caucasus states were hampered by the EU's "Russia first" strategy and the fact that Moscow remained the privileged interlocutor for European leaders

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<sup>1</sup> **Lynch D.**, *The EU: Toward A Strategy in The South Caucasus: A Challenge for the EU*, Chaillot Paper no. 65, EU Institute for Security Studies (Ed. by D. Lynch), Paris, 2003, pp. 171-180

while shaping its foreign policy in the post-Soviet space.<sup>2</sup> Among external factors that hindered EU's engagement in the region the Balkan wars and lack of competence to act rapidly and in unison to manage serious crises should be mentioned as well.<sup>3</sup>

At the same time, substantial internal institutional reforms and economic difficulties within the EU, related to Maastricht Treaty, as well as the absence too much of common European Foreign and Security Policy represented significant obstacle for more active EU policies towards the region.<sup>4</sup> According to N. Popescu, it is the appointment of the EU High Representative for Common Foreign and Security Policy in 1999 that provided the necessary institutional framework for consistent external policy action.<sup>5</sup>

However, starting 2003 the South Caucasus has gained increasing attention of the EU, which, after a period of passive observing, declared its clearly defined interests in the region. D. Lynch explains this shift in the EU's policy - to identify its interests and to develop clear strategy towards the region - with the significant change in the EU's foreign policy (which previously was conditioned with the EU accession/not accession scheme) and with intention to play more active political role in the world and in the region in particular.<sup>6</sup> According to S. Cornell and F. Starr, this change of the EU's thinking towards the South Caucasus is also linked with the increasing geopolitical importance of the Caucasus in the world affairs after the dissolution of the Soviet Union, which later combined with the eastward expand of the EU, as well as the EU's newly emerged inter-related interests in the Caucasus including governance, energy and security.<sup>7</sup>

The main purpose of the present research is to investigate the primary security reasons of the increased importance of the South Caucasus region in the EU's political agenda in the early 2000s.

The vast majority of experts explain the EU's enhanced security interests in the South Caucasus with the latter's role in the EU's energy security agenda.<sup>8</sup> Because of the EU's increased energy demand and growing dependence on imported energy the South Caucasus region has gained growing interest in the EU's energy import diversification policy; consequently, the security and stability of the region have got increased importance for Europe.

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<sup>2</sup> **Simão L.**, *EU-South Caucasus Relations: Do Good Governance and Security Go Together?*, *Political Perspective*, Vol. 5 (2), 201, p. 43

<sup>3</sup> **Cornell S. and Starr F.**, *The Caucasus: A challenge for Europe*. Central Asia-Caucasus Institute. Silk Road Program, 2006, p. 11

<sup>4</sup> **Sierra O.**, *Life is a dream: EU governance in the Southern Caucasus*, *Dynamiques internationales*. Numero 6, Février 2012, p. 1

<sup>5</sup> **Popescu N.**, *ENP and EaP: relevant for the South Caucasus? in South Caucasus –20 Years of Independence*. Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung. ISBN 978-9941-0-3793-1, p. 318

<sup>6</sup> **Lynch D.**, *The EU: Toward A Strategy*, pp. 173-174

<sup>7</sup> **Cornell S. and Starr F.**, *The Caucasus: A challenge for Europe*, pp. 11-15

<sup>8</sup> **Wisniewski J.**, *EU Energy Diversification Policy and the Case of South Caucasus*, *Political Perspectives*, Vol. 5 (2), 2011; **Cornell S. and Starr F.**, *The Caucasus: A challenge for Europe*.

However, the increased security interest of the EU vis-à-vis the region has also another explanations.

Being a frontier of European Security area, currently the South Caucasus region is being considered as a specific buffer zone along the line of the XXI century global issues, such as terrorism, proliferation of weapons of mass distraction, drug trafficking, uncontrollable migration, human trafficking, etc. This is even more essential after the EU's last rounds of enlargements, given the increased proximity of the South Caucasus to the EU, when Georgia shares a Black sea border with the EU. Therefore, the EU is strongly interested in a modernized, stable, and secure South Caucasus as a part of the European neighbourhood, as the adverse effects of the instability and crisis in the region can have spill-over effect on Europe itself, including migration flows, humanitarian crisis, spread of organized crime, growth of Islamic radicalism, etc.

As S. Cornell and F. Starr claim, after September 11 events, given the complications in using Iranian and Russian airspaces, the South Caucasus appeared indispensable for western military operations and the provision of peacekeeping in the heart of Asia. At the same time the uncertain international situation in the Middle East put the South Caucasus in the most prominent position regarding the critical security issues of the day.<sup>9</sup>

Undoubtedly, these circumstances make the regional states an important partner in searching common solution ways against the new security issues, especially taking into consideration the terroristic threat coming from the Islamic State.<sup>10</sup>

In general, the lack of security in the South Caucasus is determined by:

First of all, unresolved regional conflicts - Nagorno-Karabakh, South Ossetia and Abkhazia - represent the most important issue for regional security, as they may have implications not only for stability in the South Caucasus region itself, but also for wider international community and Europe in particular. In this regard, the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict is considered to be the most complicated and destructive for the regional security, because of yearly increasing danger of resumption of active hostilities.

In addition, as T. German argues, the conflicts undermine any efforts to boost regional co-operation, hampering economic development and further destabilizing the region.<sup>11</sup> This makes perfect sense, as continued instability and possible escalation of the regional conflicts eliminate any attempt of the EU to create fully integrated regional networks among the three countries and hamper comprehensive regional cooperation, which is of great importance for the European Union.

The importance of urgent resolution of the regional conflicts was recognized by

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<sup>9</sup> **Cornell S. and Starr F.**, *The Caucasus: A challenge for Europe*, pp. 21-22

<sup>10</sup> *Also known as the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant, the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria or the Islamic State of Iraq and ash-Sham - ISIL or ISIS.*

<sup>11</sup> **German T.**, *Corridor of Power: The Caucasus and Energy Security*, *Caucasian Review of International Affairs*, Vol. 2, Spring 2008, p. 71

the EU in the European Security Strategy, where unresolved regional conflicts were considered as a great threat not only to the South Caucasus' stability but Europe itself.<sup>12</sup> This shift in the EU's politics and importance to take stronger and more active interest in the problems of the South Caucasus was highlighted also in a Communication from the European Commission to the Council and the European Parliament. The document stressed the necessity for the EU to play more active role in peaceful resolution of regional conflicts, given the risks of "producing major spill-overs for the EU, such as illegal immigration, unreliable energy supplies, environmental degradation and terrorism".<sup>13</sup>

Secondly, transnational criminal activity – because of its strategic location on a crossroad of East and West the South Caucasus can easily become a transit route of drugs, arms, nuclear smuggling and human trafficking. A number of factors contributing to the growth of organized crime in the region include economic decrease and political instability in the region, weakness of state structures, failure to safeguard border control, as well as geographical aspects. Besides, the uncontrolled territories of the region have significant impact on the spreading of transnational threats.<sup>14</sup>

Along with the above-mentioned transnational criminal activities, terrorism is identified as one of the major threats facing Europe.<sup>15</sup> September 11 events resulted in a redefinition of the strategic importance of the wider Black Sea region, and the South Caucasus accordingly. Serving as a buffer zone and hindering the penetration of terrorist threats to Europe, the region starts to play even more significant role in the European security agenda.

Thirdly, geopolitical competition of the Great Powers and the neighbouring states in the region - it is common knowledge that the clash of interests between Russia, USA, the EU, Turkey and Iran in the South Caucasus, accompanied with tense relations of the three South Caucasian states within themselves and their direct neighbours, increasingly hampers stability and security of the region.

In addition, the diversity of security orientations and mechanisms to guarantee stability of the South Caucasian states and the region as a whole also deepens insecurity and dividing lines in the region. In this regard, Armenia, expecting threat from Turkey and Azerbaijan, mainly counts on Russia; Azerbaijan expecting threat from Iran and Armenia mainly relies on Turkey's military assistance; Georgia, regarding Russia as a

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<sup>12</sup> *A Secure Europe in a better world. European Security Strategy. Brussels, 12 December 2003, p. 3*

<sup>13</sup> *Communication from the Commission to the Council and the European Parliament on strengthening the European Neighbourhood Policy, COM (2006) 726 Final, 4 December 2006*

<sup>14</sup> **Cornell S.**, *The growing threat of Transnational Crime in The South Caucasus: A Challenge for the EU, Chaillot Paper no. 65 (Ed. by D. Lynch). EU Institute for Security Studies, December 2003, pp. 23-37*

<sup>15</sup> *A Secure Europe in a better world. European Security Strategy. Brussels, 12 December 2003, p. 3*

main source of threat, counts on U.S.'s and the EU's support.

And finally, civil and political conflicts – particularly, weak sovereignty, bad governance, immaturity of civil society and democracy institutions, inefficient border control, as well as imperfect legal field can cause a real threat to regional security.

Thus, it can be inferred that due to the fact that the South Caucasus has become a significant component in the EU's energy security agenda, consequently the security and stability of the region have gained increased importance for Europe, as unresolved security issues might impede the EU's access to energy reserves, threaten the security of energy resources supply. In general, the lack of security in the South Caucasus is determined by: unresolved regional conflicts, transnational criminal activity, geopolitical competition of the Great Powers and neighbouring states in the region, as well as civil and political conflicts. Over time it has become apparent that security issues within the South Caucasus can no longer be regarded as extraneous to the security of the EU, as unsolved security issues in the South Caucasus have a direct negative influence on the EU's security interests, as far as they may produce spill-overs for the European security such as terrorism, illegal migration, arms and drug smuggling. Along with this, the EU has got extremely interested in stability and security in the South Caucasus, as the unresolved security issues eliminate any attempt of the successful implementation of EU integration programmes in the region. In this respect, the EU has been chiefly interested in urgent peaceful resolution of the regional conflicts to strengthen regional security and stability, to improve energy security, and, eventually, to enable comprehensive regional cooperation that is of great importance for the EU.

For all these reasons, beginning early 2000s Brussels has started taking more active steps in developing an integral strategy towards the region, institutionalised in the European Neighbourhood Policy and later the Eastern Partnership.

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## **РОЛЬ БЕЗОПАСНОСТНЫХ ИНТЕРЕСОВ В РАЗРАБОТКЕ ПОЛИТИЧЕСКОЙ ПОВЕСТКИ ЕС VIS-A-VIS ЮЖНО-КАВКАЗСКОГО РЕГИОНА**

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### ***АННОТАЦИЯ***

*В статье рассматриваются основные причины безопасности, связанные с возросшей значимостью региона Южного Кавказа в политической повестке ЕС в начале 2000-х годов. В исследовании утверждается, что приоритеты безопасности ЕС на Южном Кавказе инициируют формирование и реализацию интегральной стратегии ЕС в отношении региона.*

***Ключевые слова:*** Европейский Союз, Южный Кавказ, стратегические интересы ЕС, интересы безопасности.