





LA CULTURA VIVIDA  
HOMENAJE AL PROFESOR  
**JAVIER MARCOS ARÉVALO**

La coordinación general de los contenidos del libro ha sido llevada a cabo por Salvador Rodríguez Becerra y Juan Manuel Valadés Sierra.

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LA CULTURA VIVIDA  
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**Salvador Rodríguez Becerra**  
**Juan Manuel Valadés Sierra**  
Coordinadores

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Javier Marcos Arévalo, profesor del Departamento de Psicología y Antropología de la Universidad de Extremadura, antropólogo e investigador de la cultura extremeña y de su patrimonio etnológico es el nuevo protagonista de nuestra colección de "Personajes Singulares".

Un nuevo volumen que, coordinado por Salvador Rodríguez Becerra y Juan Manuel Valadés Sierra, nos presenta un homenaje al amigo, al investigador y al gran profesor, y quizás al mejor conocedor de la cultura tradicional extremeña.

En Fundación CB no tenemos ninguna duda de que Javier Marcos Arévalo es un "personaje singular"; es decir, que es único, extraordinario, raro o excelente. Y por esa singularidad y porque ha sido generoso con nuestra casa le hemos dedicado un libro que será objeto del deseo del mundo de la historiografía sobre los personajes extremeños.

Y hablamos de generosidad sobre la base de nuestra experiencia, grata en todos sus aspectos, con el profesor Marcos Arévalo. Una experiencia que se sustenta, además de esta obra, en la publicación del mejor libro editado sobre los cambios sociales y culturales que ha experimentado la sociedad rural del sur de España, "La Siberia Extremeña en la voz de su gente", y, sobre todo, por su donación a nuestra casa de una colección de cintas magnetofónicas y otra documentación que contienen información sobre todas las poblaciones de Extremadura, en diversos aspectos, y manifestaciones referidas a la cultura e identidad extremeña en general y a la cultura tradicional y popular en particular. Este fondo incluye información sobre la ecología, el uso del medio ambiente, prácticas económicas, sociales, respecto a los estilos de vida, los rituales festivos, las modalidades de asociacionismo, los valores y las creencias de los extremeños, sobre sus prácticas religiosas, etc.

Finalizamos estas palabras con las que le dedica Gonzalo Barrientos Alfageme: "Es osado porque se atreve a ser sincero consigo mismo y con su concepción de la Antropología sin preocuparse por cuestiones formales más o menos académicas. Y es maduro porque hace falta mucha madurez para descubrir en el hombre la extraña ciencia de la vida".

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# **Ethnicity, regional (dis)integration and “borderscapes” in post-soviet South Caucasus**

**Luca Zarrilli<sup>1</sup>**

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## **Introduction**

An area of transition between East and West and a landbridge between the Black Sea and the Caspian Sea, today the South Caucasus (SC) is divided, after the collapse of the Soviet Union, into three independent States: Armenia, Azerbaijan and Georgia. The ethnic mosaic of the SC is most intricate: ethnolinguistic groups belonging to the Caucasian, Indo-European and Altaic families inhabit the region following a territorial distribution that rarely matches borders, while Christianity, particularly Orthodoxy and Gregorianism, and Islam, predominantly Shiite, coexist in a condition of latent conflict.

The SC is considered a strategic area and a geoeconomic crossroads for the trade of goods and hydrocarbons on the East-West route, as well as a geopolitical “fault” and a region “at risk” (Giragosian 2010) because of the instability linked to the ethnic conflicts that broke out after the collapse of the Soviet Union, which led to self-proclaimed Republics backed by Moscow and to the emergence of strategic-military barriers along unstable cease-fire lines.

The situation of the borders, drastically modified in 1991 by the dissolution of the USSR, has since undergone further, dramatic distortions after the ethnic conflicts that involved the three SC States, deeply transforming their territorial composition and demographic structure, hindering their normal functioning

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<sup>1</sup> Prof. Dr. Javier Marcos Arévalo and I know each other since May 2006, when we met at the UTAD (Universidade de Trás-os-Montes e Alto Douro, Portugal) during an Erasmus teaching staff exchange mobility. We soon discovered common scientific interests, even if from different perspectives (anthropological for him, geographical for me). Since then we have had a fruitful academic cooperation, together with a good friendship, which is even more important. Therefore, I’m honoured to give a small contribution to this volume and I would like to thank Javier Marcos Arévalo for inviting me to participate.

and transition to the rule of law and conditioning their sovereignty, today greatly limited both by breakaway entities and the Russian presence, which exerts a military, economic and cultural influence on the region that is very difficult to escape. The old barriers dictated by the Cold War have been replaced by others, less stable and predictable, and, in a way, even more impenetrable.

Thus, the aim of the paper is to take stock of the region's shifting and unstable *borderscapes*, in view of the ongoing geopolitical and geoeconomic dynamics.

## 1. Materials and methods

The analysis was conducted on the basis of the scientific literature elaborated by political geographers, political scientists and contemporary historians, as well as practitioners, officers of governmental and supernational organizations, research institutes and *think tanks*, with particular reference to issues relating to energetic sources in the Caspian Sea and their transportation, Eurasian trade routes, armed secessions and the subsequent creation of *de facto* independent political entities, border dynamics and their territorial settlement.

Furthermore, numerous field missions have been carried out between 2010 and 2017, most of which under the academic agreement between Tbilisi State University (Georgia) and "G. D'Annunzio" University of Chieti-Pescara (Italy).

## 2. The geoeconomic and geopolitical context

**2.1. The SC in the Eurasian scenario.** Since the Nineties, the SC has shifted from being a peripheral area of an "imperial" structure (first czarist, then soviet) to being the *landbridge* between the Black Sea and the Caspian Sea, between post-soviet space and European Union, between East and West: in fact it represents a valid option for trades along the East-West route, especially the transportation of hydrocarbons extracted from the Caspian fields. The Caspian region, and in particular the Absheron peninsula where Baku is located, has, in fact, an old heritage in oil mining. However, the Soviet Union did not have the technology necessary to deeply exploit the underwater oilfields.

Moreover, since the oil resources from Siberia and the Volga region allowed themselves to a much cheaper exploitation, the Caspian resources were not a priority.

All of this has changed with the dissolution of the Soviet Union: as soon as Azerbaijan, Kazakhstan and Turkmenistan - which, along with Russia and Iran, overlook the Caspian Sea - reached independence, hydrocarbons became strategically crucial. For their part, international oil companies and the main powers immediately showed a keen interest in entering this new market, giving birth to what has been defined the contemporary reissue of the nineteenth century's "Great Game". This is not the place to discuss such a complex matter. Suffice is to say that the conflicting views - the western one and the Russian one - from back then, today appear to be quite balanced, even though in a first phase everything seemed to indicate that the former would eventually prevail over the latter, given the western block's economic and technological superiority. This, however, was an underestimation of the neo-imperialist ambitions of Putin's Russia, its regional influence and its ability to direct, by hook or by crook, the local actors' choices. Not to mention the strategic interests of some western countries (Italy and Germany, for instance) and especially China, today more and more present and active in the area.

The transportation of hydrocarbons, however, is not the only reason of interest towards the SC: the region would have attracted the international attention anyway because it is one of the possible routes, and probably one of the cheapest, for trade between the Far East and Europe, that is expected to expand greatly. The first to underline the geoeconomic and geopolitical importance of a transportation route in Eurasia, in view of a general reimagining of the relationship between East and West dictated by the imminent end of the Cold War, was in September of 1990 the then Foreign Minister of the USSR Eduard Shevardnadze. Since that moment the idea began to take form internationally, especially under the impulse of the new geopolitical and geoeconomic conditions that were forming after the fall of the Soviet Union, which made such an option economically enticing and politically viable.

On the base of this strategic view the TRACECA project, acronym of "*Transport Corridor Europe Caucasus Asia*", was born, an EU program aimed at the restoration and adaptation to the European standards of the road, rail and port infrastructures of the new independent SC and Central Asia States (Kazakistan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan) and, subsequently, Bulgaria, Iran, Moldova, Romania and Ukraine. TRACECA also fits

in the broader picture of the international project already known as “New Silk Road”, and more recently as “One Belt One Road” (OBOR). Strongly supported by China, this route will connect - and, to some degree, already connects - the main European and Asian terminals via an infrastructural web without interruptions or bottlenecks. The SC fits in this scenario, although to a lesser extent than in its original formulation (which, unlike today, excluded any and all transit in Russian and Iranian territory). In this regard, we must mention the completion of the Baku-Tbilisi-Kars trail, which organically fits the OBOR, representing an important land segment of the project.

It should be noted, however, that a “regional” *tout court* approach to the geopolitical and geoeconomic analysis of the SC risks being misleading or wrong (Palonkorpi 2015). As we will see later, the three Countries mainly follow alternative directions, which in some cases turn out to be incompatible. The situation is well exemplified, for instance, by Armenia (Zarrilli 2004), which, at the moment, is cut out of the aforementioned East-West trades, for reasons that will be made clear later. On the other hand, Armenia is present, although as a crossing territory, in an alternative trade route, which could be defined as a North-South route regarding basically the exchanges between Russia and Iran. Thus, the geoeconomic scenario in which the SC is immersed turns out to be extremely complex, and the term “crossroads”, also sometimes used to define the SC, appears as fitting as “landbridge”.

**2.2. “No peace no war”:** the unsettled conflicts in the SC. The origins of the conflicts involving the SC since the Eighties are due to the soviet *divide et impera* policy, consisting in the territorial division of the various national groups in order to weaken them and make them dependent on Moscow. When the USSR collapsed, national belonging became the answer to a need of identity generated by the empty space left by its disappearance. At the same time, it became possible for new political currents to emerge without fear of repression. Liberal and democratic ideologies were developing, but only among the intelligentsia, while nationalism took the place of communism as the dominant ideology. In the Caucasus, considering the complexity of the ethnic context, nationalisms developed unrestrained and encouraged the use of weapons. Here again, an exhaustive examination of the genesis and dynamics of the conflicts would exceed the purpose of this paper. Therefore, only brief mentions will be made, so as to gain an overall updated impression of the situations that have emerged on the field.



Nagorno Karabakh (NK), a former autonomous province (*oblast*) with an Armenian ethnic majority within the Azerbaijan Soviet Socialist Republic (SSR), proclaimed its independency after the dissolution of the Soviet Union (Zarrilli 2000, 2000a, 2001). Between 1991 and 1994 the NK was home to a bitter conflict (around 20.000 victims and over a million IDPs) between Azerbaijan and the Armenian secessionists supported by Armenia and Russia, which established its *de facto* independence. Outside NK territory, the secessionists also occupy some areas on the border with Armenia, which would be returned entirely or partially to Azerbaijan in case of resolution of the conflict. Since May, 1994 an armistice has been in force and a difficult peace process is under way, under the aegis of the OSCE. The negotiations are stalling since 2009, while in April of 2016 there was a particularly intense escalation along the “cease-fire” line, with tens of casualties even among civilians, according to reports from Azerbaijani sources. Finally, it should be reported that in February, 2017 a referendum was held to modify the name of the breakaway entity in “Republic of Artsakh”, historic Armenian toponym of the region.

During the Soviet period, Abkhazia and South Ossetia, both bordering Russia, had the status of autonomous Republic and autonomous *oblast*, respectively, within the Georgian SSR. In 1991 the two regions proved to be hostile towards Tbilisi proclaiming their own independence and giving birth, with Russia’s support, to armed secessions which secured their *de facto* independence (since 1992 for South Ossetia, since 1993 for Abkhazia). A particularly serious resurgence of the conflict for South Ossetia took place on the occasion of the Russian-Georgian war of August, 2008, also called the “five-day” war (8-12 August, 2008). There is no agreement about the causes that sparked the “five-day” war with Russian military aggression on Georgia’s territory, but it is certain that it caused a reinforcement of the separatism and a fortification of the Russian presence within the SC, which would suggest the hypothesis of a strategic plan by Moscow. Furthermore, as a result of the conflict, Russia and a few more States<sup>2</sup> officially recognize the independence of the two breakaway entities.

Caucasian conflicts have similar characteristics: although numerically much smaller, the separatist minorities have managed to achieve military victories and establish a *de facto* independence (Pavković & Radan 2007; Blakisrud & Kolstoe 2008; Berg 2018). As already stated, such victories have been

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<sup>2</sup> Nicaragua, Venezuela and few insular micro-States of the Pacific Ocean.

achieved thanks to Russia's military support in the first place, but Armenia's intervention in the NK conflict has been crucial. The consequences are similar, too: besides economic and human disasters, the conflicts have seriously damaged the political context of the States involved. The situation of conflict, in fact, represents an obstacle to the development of democratic life, as well as an excuse for the reinforcement of authoritarian policies in the name of internal security and stability. Furthermore there is, in the cases of Georgia and Azerbaijan, the presence of hundreds of thousands of IDPs (internally displaced persons) expelled from the regions controlled by secessionists. In conclusion, none of the conflicts has been resolved, nor there are signs that they will be shortly: they all remain "frozen" *sine die*, in a condition that has been defined "no peace no war" (Zarrilli 2000a) along *de facto* militarised borders, which represent almost insuperable barriers for the mobility of people, goods, ideas.

### 3. Results and discussion

**3.1. Territorial fragmentation and regional (dis)integration.** External players, such as the EU or academic bodies, often regard the SC as an integrated region, with institutions and representations organized accordingly. But this regional approach, as previously stated, does not reflect the situation on the field, which is characterized by a high level of territorial fragmentation instead. The most evident manifestation of this is the hostility between Armenia and Azerbaijan due to the NK, and the continued lack of diplomatic relationships between the two countries represents the foremost obstacle to integration. Georgia's failure in keeping the two separatist regions represents a further level of fragmentation. Finally, the embargo - and the resulting closing of the borders - which Turkey and Azerbaijan imposed on Armenia (again as a consequence of the conflict for the NK) excludes the latter from any perspective of integration in the infrastructural projects mentioned above.

One of the reasons of such reduced or lacking cooperation are the political, ideological and strategic differences that exist among the regional actors: Armenia, Azerbaijan and Georgia took separate roads, as a result of different political orientations (Palonkorpi 2015). Georgia is manifestly oriented towards the West, as shown by its participation to some NATO missions, and it is the only country in the region to have signed an Association Agreement with the

EU, including the “Deep and Comprehensive Free Trade Area” (Cappucci 2015). Armenia is deeply linked to Russia by political-diplomatic, military<sup>3</sup> and economic relations, being a member, the only one in the region, of the Economic Eurasian Union (EEU), of which Russia is clearly the “senior partner”. Azerbaijan, instead, with its oil revenues can afford the luxury of “juggling” between opposite views and even of seeking an individual role on a regional level.

**3.2. Border (re)organization.** During the Cold War, the borders dividing the Soviet Union from Turkey and Iran, although difficult to cross, were stable and well defined. Since 1991 this is no longer true: the fall of the Soviet Union, the birth of three new independent States in the SC and the reorganization of borders that followed put an end to a long period of relative regional stability and low intensity of international relations.

From the point of view of external borders, Georgia and Armenia replaced USSR in its border with Turkey (not considering a 18 km section that marks the border between Turkey and the Azerbaijani exclave of Naxçivan), Armenia and Azerbaijan in that with Iran.

**3.2.1. Open State borders.** These are open and functioning borders between sovereign States, characterized by a degree of operation that is commensurate with the post-soviet standards, that is, those of a geopolitical space that does not shine for its free circulation of people and goods, but nonetheless fall within the canons of “normality”. Borders belonging to this category are those between Georgia and Azerbaijan, Georgia and Armenia, Georgia and Turkey, Azerbaijan and Russia, Azerbaijan and Iran, Armenia and Iran. An interesting case, and one relatively close to western standards, is that of the Sarpi point on the Turkey-Georgia border on the Black Sea, characterized both by an intense crossborder trade exchange and a high circulation of people, in both directions: Georgian workers that cross the border every day and Turkish tourists, to which are added Russian tourists headed to Turkey (Fig. 1).

**3.2.2. Closed State borders.** This is mostly the case of the borders that Armenia shares with Turkey and Azerbaijan, which were closed after the

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<sup>3</sup> Armenia joins the “Collective Security Treaty Organization” (CSTO).

embargo imposed on Armenia as a reprisal for the support given to the NK “compatriots”<sup>4</sup> (Fig. 2). This situation, as already stated, represents a major impairment for Armenia, which is excluded from the current infrastructural projects for the transportation of goods and hydrocarbons. Moreover, it constitutes the main obstacle to a real perspective of regional integration. Strictly speaking, the Russia-Georgia border falls into this category as well, but it is actually more correct to include it in the next one, given its less-than-full closure.



1. Georgia-Turkey border (Sarpi, Georgia). Photo: L. Zarrilli

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<sup>4</sup>Turkey backs Azerbaijan because of the cultural affinity and a deeply rooted anti-Armenian feeling.



2. Armenia-Turkey border (Margara, Armenia). Photo: L. Zarrilli

**3.2.3. “Partially open” State borders.** Despite the prolonged hostility between the two Countries, exacerbated by the events of August, 2008, in March of 2010 the Kazbegi (Georgia) - Verkhny Lars (North Ossetia) checkpoint along the Caucasus range (Dariali Gorge) was reopened (Fig. 3). This decision was due to economic, more than political, reasons: the total closure of the Russia-Georgia border, following the 2008 conflict, had seriously penalised the transit on the North-South route, with major inconvenience not only for Armenia but also for the exchange between Russia and Iran. Even from the Georgian point of view the opening of the checkpoint represented an opportunity: besides the income deriving from trade, it opened the possibility to benefit from a tourist flow heading for Georgian or Turkish tourist areas. Considering this, the Georgian government, surprisingly enough given the mood of its relationship with Moscow, introduced a *no visa regime* for Russian citizens.



3. Russia-Georgia checkpoint (Kazbegi - Verkhny Lars). Photo: L. Zarrilli

**3.2.4.** Administrative borders turned into “iron curtains”. The former administrative borders of Abkhazia/South Ossetia and NK towards, respectively, Georgia and Azerbaijan, are today small “iron curtains” that separate the breakaway regions from the parent States (Fig. 4). Juridically, they are “cease-fire” lines, heavily militarized and constantly guarded. In fact, they are considered by separatists as fully-fledged State borders, very difficult to trespass but not necessarily static: the “cease-fire” line between Georgia and South Ossetia has been several times moved forwards by separatists, who in this way have incorporated more strips of Georgian territory,<sup>5</sup>.

<sup>5</sup> “The Russian Army, stationed within the territory of separatist South Ossetia, is used to take over significant areas of the Georgian territory, as a result of a “wild demarcation”. In the recent period, more attempts of shifting the demarcation line were made, through labelling the areas close to the Tsitelubani village (Gori area) with the “border signs”. Due to this operation, a small portion of the strategic Baku-Supsa pipeline which transfers the crude oil between the Caspian Sea and the Black Sea (between Asia and Europe) has been located within the territory of Ossetia.” ([www.defence24.com/georgia-russian-army-shifted-the-border-taking-over-a-fragment-of-the-strategic-pipeline/](http://www.defence24.com/georgia-russian-army-shifted-the-border-taking-over-a-fragment-of-the-strategic-pipeline/)).



4. Georgia, barricade along the “cease-fire” line with South Ossetia. Photo: L. Zarrilli

**3.2.5. State borders turned into “gateways”.** Conversely, the segments of the Russia-Georgia and Armenia-Azerbaijan State borders that are under the control of separatists do not exist as such. The author of this paper has had several times the opportunity to cross the “border” between Armenia and the Azerbaijani territories under the control of the NK separatists: at the checkpoint no particular formality is required for the citizens of the Republic of Armenia, while “tourists” simply have to bring a paid entry visa, easily purchased. The crossing of the checkpoints of Russia, on one hand, and Abkhazia and South Ossetia, on the other, is probably not as simple<sup>6</sup>, but certainly possible. Essentially, instead of State borders, that would likely be closed because of the bad relationship among the States involved, we find what we might define as more or less comfortable “gateways” to and from Russia or, in the case of NK, to and from Armenia.

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<sup>6</sup>It was not possible to verify personally, but this is what emerges from various on-line reports.



## Conclusions

In the absence of significant turning points, the regional scenario seems condemned to a constant condition of instability and lacking integration, which contributes to strengthen the “barrier effect” already inherent in the border trim, as shown in the paragraph above. Thus, it seems that the SC is in a sort of vicious circle: the political fragmentation prevents regional integration; the lack of regional integration consolidates the political fragmentation. In fact, the few forms of integration that exist today always exclude at least one of the three Countries, which ends up accentuating diversities and fueling the aforementioned vicious circle.

It would not be excessive to assert that a “multi-layered” condition of conflict is in place in the region, in which each layer ends up reinforcing the unrest of the others: among sovereign States (Armenia vs Azerbaijan; Armenia vs Turkey; Georgia vs Russia); among sovereign States and breakaway regions (Georgia vs Abkhazia; Georgia vs South Ossetia; Azerbaijan vs NK); among regional organizations (EU vs EEU; NATO vs CSTO); between political leanings (Western-oriented, i.e. Euro-Atlantic vs Russian-oriented, i.e. ‘Russian World’).

The benefits of a regional integration are obvious and the conditions for a change of route, although difficult, might be created if there was the political will to do so (Caspersen 2008), but the forces that work against that, both internally and externally (nationalisms, authoritarianism, ancestral hostilities, Russian interferences), are still very powerful, nor the international scenario seems today oriented towards a spirit of collaboration and openness.

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