



**Round Table Discussion: Georgia's Policy towards North Caucasus**

**Caucasian House**

**Tbilisi**

**2014**

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Centre for Cultural Relations — Caucasian House is a cultural, educational, and peacebuilding organisation which aims to create a platform for ideological and intellectual regional cooperation and peaceful development of the Caucasus.

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# Working Paper #5

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On October 3, *Caucasian House* hosted a round-table discussion about Georgia's Policy towards North Caucasus. Currently, Caucasian House is conducting research about Georgia's policy towards North Caucasus. Over the course of the research, interviews have been conducted with three main target groups: officials from the former as well as current government, experts, and North Caucasian residents.

In the format of the round-table, researchers Tato Khundadze and Levan Kakhishvili presented the preliminary findings and hypotheses. The authors talked about how the respondents view Georgia's policy towards North Caucasus. The experts of the field and government representatives were invited to the discussion. The aim of the meeting was to exchange opinions and recommendations with the audience.

### **Georgia's policy towards North Caucasus before and after the 2012 parliamentary elections**

After the 2008 August war Georgia adopted a systemic approach towards North Caucasus. This policy contained several components: introduction of visa-free regime with North Caucasian peoples (which later spread over all the citizens of Russia), recognition of Circassian genocide, strengthening cultural and educational programmes for North Caucasian students at Ilia State University and Tbilisi State University, establishment of the TV First Information Caucasian Channel (PIK TV).

Since the 2012 parliamentary elections the policy towards North Caucasus changed. Some of the components were abolished while others suspended. At first, due to financial problems the PIK TV was closed, the funds for educational programmes were reduced, the facts of human rights violations while the crossing Georgian border increased, especially during the Sochi Olympic Games.

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Russian citizens, belonging to different ethnic groups in the North Caucasus experienced problems while entering Georgia.

### **Elaboration of Policy – Ontology of the Problem and Defining the Goals**

Analyzing Georgia's policy towards North Caucasus from the perspective of the normalization process of Georgian-Russian relations, creates many questions. The participants of the round table noted that the policy from 2008 to 2012 was controversial. Therefore, analyzing this policy is crucial for strategic planning.

Levan Kakhishvili summed up the views of those respondents who participated in designing the strategy on North Caucasus. According to these views, incorporation of North Caucasus in the political agenda was determined by the war between Russia and Georgia in 2008. It is often argued that the involvement of North Caucasian volunteers in the war against Georgia was a crucial trigger for adopting the policy. The goal was to correct Georgia's image in North Caucasus, which was distorted by Russian propaganda, and in a long run, to avoid further engagement of North Caucasians in possible armed conflicts between Georgia and Russia in the future. Others believed that this policy would lead to creating a buffer zone between Russia and Georgia.

Levan Kakhishvili noted that the “the core problem of the pre-2012 policy was the misperception of the reality and misidentification of problems and challenges by the Georgian authorities”. North Caucasus was perceived as a separate region from the Russian Federation – “Although Georgia has never supported separatism in North Caucasus, Georgia has never openly stated in any strategic document related to the region that North Caucasus was indeed a part of Russia” – points out Levan Kakishvili. Besides, North Caucasians' participation in conflict against Georgia did not only happen in 2008 but this was the case even in 90's.

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Researchers and experts alike, agreed on the idea of creating a buffer zone in North Caucasus by Georgia, lacked “every bit of rational thinking”, due to at least two reasons. First, creating a buffer zone is virtually impossible for Georgia because buffer zones may be created only between two big and powerful states. And second, if the main reason (of creating a buffer zone) is that Russia will have less influence over and control of this territory than it has now, how will Georgia benefit from it? Experts think, that the risks of growing Islamic radicalism, will affect Georgia too, “let’s imagine the scenario where Russian Federation loses control over North Caucasian because of ongoing internal conflicts in the region, we might end up with a new Afghanistan” – said one of the experts.

All in all, discussion showed that any kind of strategy, even if well-structured and technically closely calculated and planned, is impossible to be effective, unless fundamental problems are precisely determined. According to Levan Kakhishvili, above mentioned policy was grounded on the idea that conflict between Georgia and Russia is given and unavoidable. Therefore, Georgian authorities tried to invest in North Caucasus as the latter was viewed as a means for Georgia to be successful in this “unavoidable” conflict.

North Caucasus is often viewed as a resource for Georgia – means for succeeding in the conflict between Georgia and Russia. “Therefore, it seems that Georgia has been fighting against the side-effects of the problem and not the core of the actual problem itself,” – explained Levan Kakhishvili and argued that the challenge is the unresolved conflict between Tbilisi and Moscow.

### The different components of North Caucasian Policy: Perceptions and Assessments

There are varied perceptions among the respondents from the North Caucasus regarding the PIK TV and educational programs. The graduates of Master programmes provided positive feedback about educational opportunities in Georgia. One of the students noted: “The program was of European standards; the methodology was good and literature diverse.” However, a degree is somewhat irrelevant and inapplicable in the North Caucasian context. One of the respondents from Dagestan noted “It does not matter whether you have a degree or not, it is important to have a person, who will help you in getting a job.”

Further, Tato Khundadze summed up perceptions in the Russian elite on the educational programmes as described by the interviewed Russian experts. One of the respondents from Russia notes that the fact that the students from North Caucasus are introduced to the alternative history to what Kremlin provides causes irritation among the Russian political elite. Besides, another Russian expert notes, the problem was that Ilia State University was making a propaganda that Russia is an empire, which wanted to destroy the North Caucasian people.

The respondents from the north Caucasus emphasise the problem of the lack of alternative news channels in North Caucasus. However, some of them argue that the PIK was no solution due to the elements of propaganda. “Respondents mention that PIK TV was an instrument of Georgian propaganda and noted that the channel only covered negative information about North Caucasus.” – said Tato Khundadze. Besides, there were technical problems related to broadcasting.

The participants of the discussion agreed on the importance of educational and cultural programmes. “Certain contacts were established with the Circassian

diaspora and these contacts should be maintained. Unfortunately, now we see that these contacts are being lost” - stated one of the experts. Additionally, such educational programmes should be free from political influences.

Scepticism about the PIK TV was recurrent among the participants of the discussion. There are several reasons for this: first, it is costly to keep a competitive and high quality TV station on public finances. Besides, the expenditure on PIK TV was too high compared to its aim and what it achieved. “Is spending 45 million Lari relevant to the aim? The aim was destructive, while we have to find a way for constructive relations and be oriented on finding a common ground for cooperation.”- said one of the guests. Another expert noted that it is important to have Russian-language television and the audience will be not only the residents of North Caucasus but also Russian-speaking people in Georgia.

The experts as well as the respondents from North Caucasus were unanimous in positively assessing the introduction of a visa-free regime. People living in the region were given the opportunity to travel and learn about the changes that took place in Georgia, to build economic ties and to see the contrast between Georgia and Northern Caucasus.

How the Circassian community views the Georgia’s decision to recognize the Circassian genocide is vague, because, as Tato Khundadze notes, there is no public space where citizens can articulate their opinion. According to one of the respondents from North Caucasus, locals of Circassia mostly positively assessed Georgian government’s recognition of the genocide. However, another respondent noted, that a part of the local population was dissatisfied as they realize that the Georgian Authorities instrumentalised the decision on recognition of the genocide in their political struggle against Russia.

One of the participants of the round-table explained, that Georgian government's strategy towards North Caucasus is reactionary and the grounds for this course can be seen in the Russian policy towards Georgia. For example, "The abolition of visa regime for North Caucasus was a reaction on introduction of visa regime for Georgian citizens by Russia, the recognition of Circassian genocide followed the discussion about Ossetian genocide in Abkhaz and Ossetian societies, the creation of the PIK TV was an answer to Russian media propaganda about Georgia."

### **North Caucasus, as a component of normalization of relations with Russia**

The experts and the authors of the research discussed what the basis of Georgia's policy towards North Caucasus should be. Additionally, an optimal strategy on North Caucasus was also discussed as well as the changes in the policy that took place after the 2012 elections. There was a disagreement among the experts whether Georgia has a policy towards North Caucasus currently. Some experts argued that the policy does not exist, while the other maintained that this cautious attitude is in itself a policy.

One of the more important issues discussed was the possibility of implementing a certain policy towards North Caucasus in parallel to the normalization of relations with Russia. As the discussion showed, experts view the normalization process differently. According to one of the respondents, "We have an ambivalent picture: on the one hand, we hear the statements from the Ministry of Defense demanding the deployment of the NATO defensive missile system in Georgia. On the other hand, these statements are quickly denied by the Prime Minister." Consequently the experts argued about the need for designing a constructive and coherent vision of relations with Russia, which will be based on the "deconstruction of the image of the enemy" as well as on more pragmatic calculations.

The experts were split on the issue whether the policy towards North Caucasus can be a constitutive component of Georgian-Russian relations in the framework of the normalization process. Those in favour of combination of the two policies emphasized the common interests and challenges of Russia and Georgia. One such issue is the rise of radical Islamism, which one expert presented as a “big challenge for Georgia” against the background of the Islamic State mobilizing followers in various countries.

The experts emphasized that there is the lack of intellectual resources and academic knowledge about North Caucasus. Without the necessary human capital, it will be extremely difficult to design and pursue a rational policy towards the region. “There is a problem that no academic resource exists among the youth who will answer the question of what Caucasus is,” – noted one of the experts, underlining the need to raise a new generation of experts on the whole Caucasus.

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