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Central Caucaso-Asia: Toward a redefinition of post-Soviet Central Eurasia

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The disintegration of the Soviet Union not only resulted in the rise of a group of new independent states but in their integration into newly defined geopolitical areas. In recent years, the term Central Eurasia, which refers to Azerbaijan, Armenia, Georgia, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan, and Uzbekistan, has been attracting attention as a distinct geopolitical area.

There are at least two ways to think about the Eurasian continent in geopolitical terms. The first one focuses on its European and Asian geographic dimensions in its geopolitical vision of the continent (e.g. Brzezinski 1997). The other approach, which arises from a Eurasianist conception of the region, drawing mainly on geography (Bassin 1991, p. 14), equates Russia with Eurasia (Lewis and

Wigen 1997, p. 222; also Hauner 1994, p. 217), an idea that has become popular and much debated in the post-Soviet period (Hauner 1994, p. 222).

The Russian geopolitical school's vision of Eurasia thus embodies Russia's old imperial ambitions, and consequently, those who speak about Central Eurasia in terms of Azerbaijan, Armenia, Georgia, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan, and Uzbekistan leaving aside such territories like Afghanistan, Northern Iran, the Northern Caucasus, Northwestern China, Cashmere, and the Tibetan Plateau are reflecting a Russian understanding that others have disputed (Weisbrode 2001, pp. 11-12).

Some geopolitical studies still follow the Soviet tradition and define Central Asia as including only five former Soviet republics: Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan, and Uzbekistan, a definition that leaves out Afghanistan, Mongolia, and adjacent areas (Naby 1994, pp. 35-36). Another term, Greater Central Asia, is sometimes applied to the five former Soviet republics plus Afghanistan (Starr 2005).

"The Caucasus" as a geopolitical term appeared when Russia conquered the region. It was divided between "the Trans-Caucasus," the area south of the main Caucasus ridge, and "the North Caucasus," the area to the north of the ridge. The North Caucasus is now part of the Russian Federation, whereas the Trans-Caucasus is the portion south of it to the edge of Russian imperial expansion. After the USSR disappeared, the term "Trans-Caucasus" was replaced with the more correct "South Caucasus," with Russian writers alone using the former.

Viewed from a non-Russian perspective, the Caucasus includes not only Armenia, Azerbaijan, Georgia, and the Russian North Caucasus but also northeastern Turkish areas (the iles of Agri, Ardahan, Artvin, Van, Igdyr, and Kars) and the northwestern parts of Iran (the ostanha of eastern Azerbaijan – Ardabil, Gilyan, Zanzan, Qazvin, Hamadan, and Western Azerbaijan) (Ismailov and Kengerli, 2003). That division reflects the reality that all these regions have been populated by Caucasian peoples from time immemorial.

From this it follows that the Caucasus region consists not of two parts as the Russians insist but of three: the Central Caucasus (made up of three independent states – Azerbaijan, Armenia, and Georgia); the Northern Caucasus (consisting of Russia's autonomous units bordering on the Caucasus), and the Southern Caucasus, which covers the iles of Turkey bordering on Azerbaijan, Armenia, and Georgia (the Southwestern Caucasus), and northwestern ostanha of Iran (the Southeastern Caucasus) (Ismailov and Kengerli, 2003).

If we proceed from the fact that the eight countries discussed here form two sub-regions – the Central Caucasus and Central Asia – the larger region, which includes both sub-regions, should be called the Central Caucaso-Asia (in Russian, Kavkazia), as this preserves the term "Central" as the key one for both regions, while the new term "Caucaso-Asia" (or "Caucasasia") (Papava 2008).

The newly coined term "Central Caucaso-Asia" reflects a conceptual idea of the interests of strengthening the local countries' state sovereignty, which, in principle, contradicts the spirit and idea of Russo-centric Eurasianism. And this implicit pro-Western vector better suits the interests of these countries for stronger sovereignty, greater democratization, and the expansion of a market economy.

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